Internal Marketing as a Strategic Lever for Customer Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Employee Engagement and the Moderating Role of Organizational Culture

Muniza Syed
Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Nazeer Hussain University, Karachi, Pakistan

Shah Salman
Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Nazeer Hussain University, Karachi, Pakistan

Aisha Saqib
Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Nazeer Hussain University, Karachi, Pakistan

Einas Azhar Siddiqui
Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Nazeer Hussain University, Karachi, Pakistan

Osama Ahmed
Lecturer, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Nazeer Hussain University, Karachi, Pakistan
Corresponding Author: * Muniza Syed munizasyed@nhu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how internal marketing practices influence customer satisfaction, focusing on the mediating role of employee engagement and the moderating role of organizational culture in service-sector organizations in Pakistan. In an increasingly competitive and service-driven environment, many firms struggle to convert internal initiatives such as communication, training, empowerment, and rewards into consistently higher customer satisfaction. Drawing on internal marketing theory, employee engagement literature, and the organizational culture perspective, this study proposes and tests a model in which internal marketing directly enhances customer satisfaction and indirectly affects it through employee engagement, while organizational culture strengthens these relationships. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, using standardized scales to measure internal marketing practices, employee engagement, organizational culture, and customer satisfaction among employees in Pakistani service organizations. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that internal marketing practices have a positive and significant direct effect on customer satisfaction. Employee engagement is found to significantly mediate the relationship between internal marketing and customer satisfaction, indicating that internal initiatives are most effective when they translate into higher vigor, dedication, and absorption among employees. Furthermore, organizational culture positively moderates the relationship between internal marketing and customer satisfaction, suggesting that supportive, service-oriented cultures amplify the impact of internal marketing efforts. The model demonstrates substantial explanatory and predictive power, highlighting internal marketing, engagement, and culture as strategic levers for improving customer outcomes. The study contributes theoretically by integrating psychological and contextual variables into internal marketing frameworks and offers practical guidance for managers aiming to enhance customer satisfaction through stronger internal practices and culture-building efforts.
Keywords: Internal marketing practices, employee engagement, organizational culture, customer satisfaction, mediation, moderation, Pakistan service sector

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive and service-driven global marketplace, organizations increasingly recognize that long-term customer satisfaction is directly connected to the quality of employee–customer

interactions. As services continue to dominate major economies and customer expectations become more sophisticated, organizations must rely not only on external marketing strategies but also on internal strategies that strengthen employee motivation, competence, and commitment (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This shift has led to a growing emphasis on internal marketing, a philosophy that treats employees as internal customers whose needs must be met for them to deliver superior service experiences (Grönroos, 1994; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

Internal marketing aims to ensure that employees understand organizational goals, feel valued, receive adequate training, and are empowered to create meaningful service encounters (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). The central premise is that satisfied and engaged employees are more capable of satisfying external customers, leading to improved service quality, stronger customer relationships, and higher organizational performance (Lings & Greenley, 2010). As organizations invest in internal marketing practices such as effective communication, employee development, supportive leadership, and reward systems, the psychological state of employees becomes a critical mechanism that connects internal actions to customer outcomes.

Among the various employee-related factors, employee engagement has emerged as one of the most influential mediators in the internal marketing–customer satisfaction relationship. Employee engagement reflects the extent to which employees feel emotionally invested, cognitively focused, and behaviorally involved in their work roles (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engaged employees are more energetic, dedicated, and willing to go beyond formal job requirements, which significantly enhances service quality and customer satisfaction (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Internal marketing initiatives directly influence engagement by addressing employees' internal needs, strengthening workplace relationships, and fostering emotional attachment to the organization (Bansal et al., 2001). However, the extent to which engagement mediates this relationship is still underexplored in many developing economies.

Another key factor shaping internal marketing effectiveness is organizational culture, which serves as an underlying system of shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations. Organizational culture influences how employees interpret internal marketing efforts and shapes their motivation to engage in customer-centric behaviors (Schein, 2010). A strong, service-oriented culture enhances communication, reduces ambiguity, and aligns employees with organizational objectives (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). When the culture supports learning, empowerment, and collaboration, internal marketing practices are more likely to foster high levels of employee engagement. Conversely, in rigid, hierarchical, or unsupportive cultures, the impact of internal marketing practices may be significantly diminished (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). Therefore, organizational culture may play a moderating role, strengthening or weakening the influence of internal marketing practices on employee engagement and ultimately on customer satisfaction.

Despite the growing interest in internal marketing, several gaps persist in the literature. First, most studies have examined the direct relationship between internal marketing and organizational outcomes while overlooking the psychological mechanisms through which these effects occur (Lings, 2004). The mediating role of employee engagement has not been sufficiently analyzed, particularly within service industries in emerging markets. Second, while internal marketing is inherently influenced by an organization's cultural context, very few studies have empirically tested organizational culture as a moderator, especially in South Asian regions where cultural norms differ from Western organizational structures (Hofstede, 2001). Third, customer satisfaction although widely studied—has not been fully integrated into frameworks linking internal marketing, employee engagement, and culture within developing economies such as Pakistan.

Given Pakistan's rapidly growing service sector—comprising banking, telecom, retail, hospitality, healthcare, and education—customers increasingly demand high quality, personalized, and reliable services. However, many organizations face challenges related to employee disengagement, communication breakdowns, weak cultural support, and inconsistent service delivery. These issues highlight the need to investigate how internal marketing practices can be strategically utilized to enhance employee engagement, thereby improving customer satisfaction. Moreover, understanding the moderating impact of organizational culture is essential for identifying whether internal marketing efforts are effective in culturally diverse and hierarchical organizational structures common in Pakistan.

Therefore, this research seeks to examine:

1. how internal marketing practices influence customer satisfaction;
2. whether employee engagement mediates this relationship; and
3. how organizational culture moderates the link between internal marketing and employee engagement.

By addressing these dimensions, the study not only contributes theoretically by integrating psychological and cultural variables into internal marketing frameworks, but also offers practical guidance for service organizations seeking to enhance customer satisfaction and competitive advantage. The findings are expected to help managers design internal marketing strategies that foster engaged employees, cultivate supportive cultures, and strengthen organizational performance.

Background of the study

In the contemporary business landscape, particularly within service-driven economies, organizations face increasing pressure to deliver superior customer experiences to maintain competitiveness, brand loyalty, and long-term sustainability. As customer expectations evolve, firms must ensure that the frontline employees who interact directly with customers are well-equipped, motivated, and aligned with organizational goals. This recognition has contributed to the growing importance of **internal marketing,** a strategic approach that treats employees as internal customers whose satisfaction and engagement serve as prerequisites for delivering high-quality external service (Grönroos, 1994; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

Internal marketing is fundamentally based on the idea that organizational success begins from within. By implementing practices such as effective internal communication, employee training and development, empowerment, leadership support, and fair reward systems, organizations create an environment where employees feel valued and capable of contributing meaningfully to service delivery (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Scholars argue that internal marketing fosters employees' understanding of organizational vision, enhances role clarity, and promotes a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for consistent and high-quality customer interactions (Lings & Greenley, 2010). As a result, organizations increasingly acknowledge that internal marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping customer outcomes, especially in sectors where customer happiness is closely tied to employee behavior.

One of the major outcomes of effective internal marketing is **employee engagement,** a psychological state that reflects employees' levels of enthusiasm, energy, and commitment toward their work roles (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of dedication, customer orientation, and discretionary effort, enabling them to deliver exceptional service experiences (Saks, 2006). Research shows that internal marketing practices directly influence employee engagement by satisfying intrinsic needs, enhancing job meaningfulness, and strengthening interpersonal relationships

within organizations (Bansal et al., 2001). When employees are engaged, they are more likely to exhibit positive customer-oriented behaviors, which in turn enhance customer satisfaction, perceived service quality, and loyalty. This makes employee engagement a key mediating mechanism through which internal marketing practices influence customer outcomes.

Another important dimension in the internal marketing–engagement–customer outcomes relationship is **organizational culture,** which defines the shared values, norms, and behavioral expectations that shape employee attitudes and behaviors (Schein, 2010). A strong organizational culture that supports communication, teamwork, empowerment, and service excellence reinforces internal marketing efforts by creating an environment aligned with customer-centric goals (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). Culture determines how internal marketing initiatives are interpreted and applied in practice. For instance, in organizations with a collaborative and learning-oriented culture, employees are more receptive to training, open communication, and empowerment initiatives. Conversely, in rigid, hierarchical cultures, internal marketing may fail to create meaningful engagement, weakening its impact on customer satisfaction.

The significance of studying internal marketing, employee engagement, and organizational culture is particularly relevant in developing countries like Pakistan, where service industries such as banking, telecom, hospitality, education, and retail are rapidly expanding. Despite this growth, many organizations struggle with high employee turnover, low morale, inadequate internal communication, and inconsistent service qualityfactors that negatively affect customer satisfaction. Furthermore, cultural characteristics such as high power distance, hierarchical structures, and limited employee empowerment may influence the effectiveness of internal marketing initiatives (Hofstede, 2001). This highlights the need to understand how internal marketing practices operate within culturally diverse and evolving organizational environments.

Although internal marketing has been widely explored in Western contexts, the mechanisms through which it influences customer satisfaction—particularly through employee engagement and under the moderating effect of organizational culture—remain under-researched in developing economies. Existing studies often fail to integrate psychological (engagement) and contextual (culture) variables into a unified framework. This gap is significant because customers' service experiences are shaped not only by organizational systems but also by employees' emotional states and the cultural environment within which they work.

Therefore, investigating the impact of internal marketing practices on customer satisfaction, the mediating role of employee engagement, and the moderating influence of organizational culture offers valuable insights for both theory and practice. Understanding these relationships can help service organizations design internal strategies that foster engaged employees, strengthen cultural alignment, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and organizational performance.

Problem Statement

Although organizations widely acknowledge the importance of employees in delivering superior service quality, many firms struggle to translate internal marketing efforts into enhanced customer satisfaction. Prior studies have examined the link between internal marketing and organizational outcomes, yet the mediating role of employee engagement remains underexplored (Bansal et al., 2001; Lings, 2004). Many organizations implement training and communication practices, but they fail to understand how these initiatives foster employees' emotional and cognitive connection to their work.

In addition, organizational culture—despite being recognized as a critical contextual factor—has not been sufficiently analyzed as a moderator. A supportive culture may strengthen the relationship between internal marketing, engagement, and customer satisfaction, but empirical findings are inconsistent across industries and regions (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000).

In Pakistan's competitive service sectors, customer dissatisfaction continues to rise due to poor service experiences, disengaged employees, and inconsistent cultural environments. Therefore, a comprehensive study investigating how internal marketing practices influence customer satisfaction through employee engagement, moderated by organizational culture, is necessary to fill existing empirical and contextual gaps.

Research Gap

Despite the growing importance of internal marketing in service organizations, the existing body of literature reveals several critical gaps that justify the need for this study. First, although internal marketing has been widely explored in relation to organizational performance, job satisfaction, and service quality, very few studies have examined its direct and indirect impact on customer satisfaction the ultimate indicator of organizational success (Lings, 2004; Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003). Most existing studies focus on internal outcomes (e.g., employee attitudes, retention), leaving a limited understanding of how internal marketing practices influence external customer experiences.

Second, the mediating role of employee engagement remains underexplored in the internal marketing domain. While prior research suggests that internal marketing enhances employee commitment and satisfaction (Bansal et al., 2001; Lings & Greenley, 2010), only a handful of studies have attempted to explain *how* or *why* internal marketing affects customer outcomes through employees' psychological states. Employee engagement—a critical factor influencing service quality, organizational citizenship behavior, and customer loyalty—has been acknowledged as a key mechanism (Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). However, empirical studies specifically linking internal marketing → engagement → customer satisfaction are scarce, particularly within non-Western service contexts.

Third, organizational culture a well-established determinant of employee behavior and service delivery has rarely been tested as a moderating variable in this relationship. Although scholars acknowledge that organizational culture shapes how internal marketing initiatives are perceived and applied (Schein, 2010; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000), there is insufficient empirical evidence demonstrating whether different cultural environments strengthen or weaken the effectiveness of internal marketing practices. Studies that have examined culture often focus on leadership or innovation outcomes rather than customer satisfaction, leaving a contextual gap in understanding the cultural contingencies surrounding internal marketing.

Fourth, the majority of internal marketing research has been conducted in Western or developed economies, limiting its relevance to developing nations such as Pakistan. Emerging economies exhibit distinct organizational characteristics including hierarchical structures, high power distance, limited employee empowerment, and diverse cultural norms—that may influence the effectiveness of internal marketing (Hofstede, 2001). Service organizations in Pakistan face persistent challenges related to employee disengagement, inconsistent service delivery, and customer dissatisfaction. However, empirical studies integrating internal marketing, engagement, culture, and customer satisfaction within the Pakistani context remain extremely limited.

Finally, very few studies offer a holistic framework capturing the combined effects of internal marketing, employee engagement, and organizational culture on customer satisfaction. Existing research tends to examine these constructs in isolation, resulting in fragmented insight and limited understanding of how they interact to shape customer outcomes. There is a clear need for a comprehensive model that explains both the *mechanism* (mediator) and the *contextual boundary* (moderator) through which internal marketing improves customer satisfaction.

Therefore, this study fills these gaps by:

1. Linking internal marketing directly to customer satisfaction.
2. Testing employee engagement as a mediating variable.
3. Examining organizational culture as a moderating variable.
4. Contextualizing the model within Pakistan's service sector.
5. Developing an integrated framework offering new theoretical and practical insights.

This integrated investigation addresses the shortcomings in prior studies and contributes to a deeper understanding of how internal marketing can enhance customer satisfaction through employee engagement under different cultural conditions.

Purpose of Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how internal marketing practices influence customer satisfaction in service organizations, with a focus on understanding the mechanisms and contextual conditions that shape this relationship. Although internal marketing has been widely recognized as a strategic tool for improving employee performance and organizational outcomes (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Lings & Greenley, 2010), its impact on customer satisfaction remains insufficiently explored particularly within developing economies such as Pakistan. This study aims to fill this gap by examining not only the direct effect of internal marketing on customer satisfaction but also the mediating role of employee engagement and the moderating role of organizational culture.

Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether internal marketing initiatives—such as training, internal communication, empowerment, and leadership support enhance customer satisfaction through their influence on employees' psychological engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Saks, 2006). Employee engagement is considered a crucial mechanism that may explain how internal marketing motivates employees to deliver superior service experiences, which ultimately shape customer perceptions of satisfaction and service quality.

Furthermore, the study aims to assess how organizational culture influences or alters the strength of the internal marketing–engagement relationship. Organizational culture, characterized by shared values and behavioral norms, has been shown to shape employees' interpretations of internal practices and their willingness to engage in customer-oriented behaviors (Schein, 2010; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). Therefore, understanding its moderating effect is essential for identifying the conditions under which internal marketing efforts are most effective.

By integrating these components, the study aims to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains both *how* and *under what conditions* internal marketing contributes to customer satisfaction. This research also intends to generate practical insights that service organizations can apply to improve internal

strategies, enhance employee engagement, and foster customer satisfaction in culturally diverse environments such as Pakistan.

In summary, the purpose of this study is to:

1. Examine the direct impact of internal marketing practices on customer satisfaction.
2. Investigate the mediating role of employee engagement in the internal marketing–customer satisfaction relationship.
3. Analyze the moderating role of organizational culture in shaping the influence of internal marketing on employee engagement.
4. Provide empirical evidence from Pakistan's service sector to address existing contextual gaps in internal marketing research.

This integrated approach provides both theoretical advancement and managerial relevance, strengthening the understanding of how internal marketing strategies can cultivate engaged employees and satisfied customers.

Research Question

1. How do internal marketing practices affect customer satisfaction?
2. Does employee engagement mediate the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction?
3. Does organizational culture moderate the relationship between internal marketing practices and employee engagement?
4. How can organizations design internal marketing practices that improve customer satisfaction?

Research Objective

- To examine the impact of internal marketing practices on customer satisfaction.
- To investigate the mediating role of employee engagement in the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction.
- To analyze the moderating role of organizational culture on the relationship between internal marketing practices and employee engagement.
- To develop a conceptual framework explaining how internal marketing improves customer outcomes in service organizations.

Hypothesis

H1: Internal marketing practices have a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction.

H2: Employee engagement mediates the relationship between internal marketing and customer satisfaction.

H3: Organizational culture positively moderates the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction, such that the relationship is stronger when organizational culture is supportive and service-oriented.

Conceptual Framework
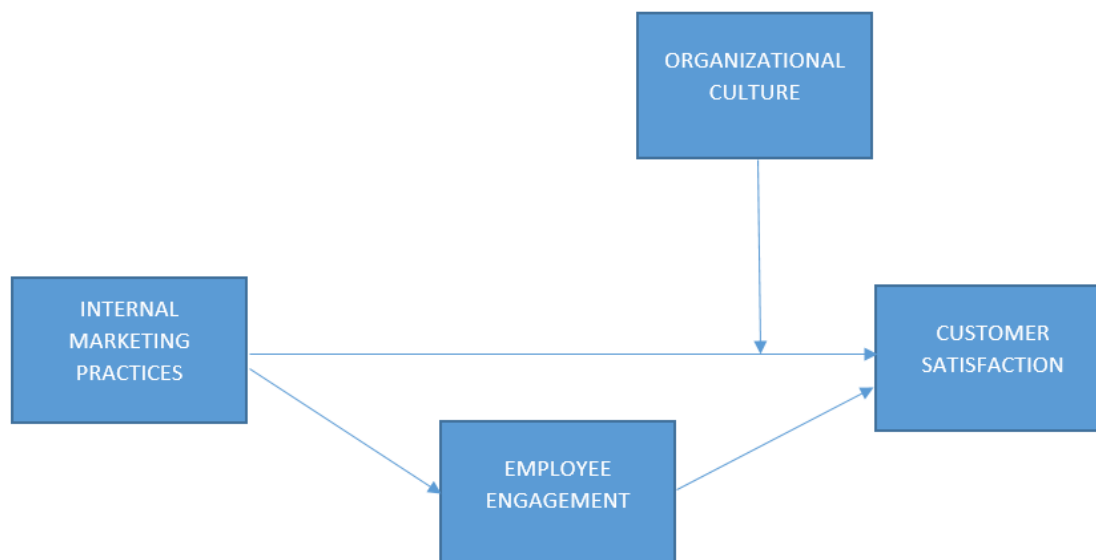
LITERATURE REVIEW

Internal marketing has become a foundational concept in service management, emphasizing that employees must be treated as internal customers whose satisfaction and motivation directly influence service quality and customer outcomes. Grönroos (1994) describes internal marketing as a strategic approach that aligns employees with organizational goals and ensures they are well-equipped to meet customer expectations. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) argue that internal marketing uses marketing-like techniques—such as communication, empowerment, training, and reward system to enhance employee commitment and performance. These practices are particularly critical in service industries where employee–customer interactions shape the customer's perception of service quality. Effective internal communication, for instance, ensures that employees understand customer expectations and service standards, enabling them to deliver accurate and consistent service (Lings & Greenley, 2005; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993). Similarly, training and development programs equip employees with the skills and confidence needed to manage customer interactions, resulting in improved responsiveness, empathy, and problem-solving abilities (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Empowerment further enhances customer satisfaction by allowing employees to make swift decisions during service encounters, reducing delays and improving service recovery (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996). Reward and recognition systems motivate employees to adopt customer-centered behaviors, increasing their willingness to exert discretionary effort that enhances service experiences (George, 1990; Yee et al., 2010). Empirical studies consistently support these theoretical claims, showing that internal marketing improves service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty across sectors such as banking, hospitality, healthcare, and retail (Tsai & Tang, 2008; Tansuhaj et al., 1998). The Service-Profit Chain model reinforces this connection, suggesting that internal service quality enhances employee satisfaction, productivity, and ultimately customer satisfaction (Heskett et al., 1994). Therefore, based on theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, internal marketing practices are expected to have a direct and positive impact on customer satisfaction, as

employees who are motivated, skilled, empowered, and informed are more capable of delivering exceptional service performance.

H1: Internal marketing practices have a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

Employee Engagement as a Mediator

Employee engagement has become one of the most influential psychological constructs in organizational behavior research. Defined by Schaufeli et al. (2002) as a state of vigor, dedication, and absorption, engagement reflects the emotional and cognitive connection employees feel toward their work. Saks (2006) suggested that engagement arises when employees perceive that the organization provides meaningful resources, support, and opportunities conditions that are heavily influenced by internal marketing practices.

Internal marketing strengthens engagement by creating a supportive internal environment. Regular communication fosters transparency and trust, training enhances competence, rewards reinforce effort, and leadership support builds psychological safety (Lings & Greenley, 2010). Bansal et al. (2001) noted that when employees experience positive internal treatment, they reciprocate through higher levels of engagement a concept grounded in Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Engaged employees demonstrate enthusiasm, persistence, and discretionary effort, all of which are critical for effective service delivery.

The relationship between employee engagement and customer outcomes is well established. Engaged employees are more attentive, proactive, and emotionally present during customer interactions, which enhances service quality and customer satisfaction (Salanova et al., 2005). In the service industry, where emotional labor and customer contact are high, engagement directly influences the customer's experience (Harter et al., 2002). Engagement also increases employees' customer-oriented behavior, empathy, and problem-solving capabilities, leading to higher satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth.

Despite the strong conceptual link, empirical studies integrating internal marketing → engagement → customer satisfaction remain limited, especially in developing economies. Existing research often examines engagement in isolation or as an outcome of HRM, overlooking its mediating role in marketing-employee-customer frameworks. There is a need to establish engagement as a psychological mechanism that channels the impact of internal marketing practices toward customer satisfaction.

H2: Employee engagement mediates the relationship between internal marketing and customer satisfaction.

Organizational Culture as a Moderator

Organizational culture refers to shared values, norms, beliefs, and behavioral expectations that guide how employees perceive their roles and responsibilities (Schein, 2010). Culture provides a social context that shapes how internal marketing initiatives are interpreted and enacted. A strong, positive, service-oriented organizational culture reinforces customer-centered values, teamwork, open communication, and commitment to service excellence (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). When internal marketing practices are implemented in an organization with a supportive culture, employees perceive these practices as genuine, consistent, and aligned with organizational values. For instance, in a culture emphasizing empowerment, internal marketing efforts related to autonomy and decision-making are more effective (Ogbonna &

Harris, 2000). Similarly, cultures that encourage learning and collaboration enhance the value of training and communication efforts. In contrast, hierarchical or rigid cultures may weaken the impact of internal marketing because employees might resist empowerment or feel disconnected from organizational goals (Hofstede, 2001). Several scholars have highlighted the role of organizational culture in shaping employee behavior, job performance, and customer-oriented outcomes (Hartnell et al., 2011). In service industries, strong cultural emphasis on customer service strengthens employees' motivation to meet or exceed customer expectations, regardless of day-to-day challenges. Thus, culture acts as a boundary condition that determines whether internal marketing practices are effectively transformed into positive employee and customer outcomes. Although past research acknowledges the importance of culture, very few studies have empirically tested culture as a moderator between internal marketing and customer satisfaction. The existing literature tends to examine culture as an antecedent or outcome, leaving a gap in understanding how culture interacts with internal strategies. In developing countries such as Pakistan, where organizational structures may be characterized by high power distance and hierarchical norms, understanding culture's moderating role is particularly critical.

H3: *Organizational culture positively moderates the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction, such that the relationship is stronger when organizational culture is supportive and service-oriented.*

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a **quantitative research methodology** to examine the impact of internal marketing practices on customer satisfaction, with employee engagement as a mediating variable and organizational culture as a moderating variable. A quantitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to test theory-driven hypotheses, identify causal relationships among variables, and generate generalizable findings. This approach also enables objective measurement of perceptions across a large sample, which aligns with recommendations by Creswell (2014) for studies focusing on behavioral constructs and organizational outcomes. The study uses a **deductive research strategy,** beginning with established theories from internal marketing, employee engagement, and organizational culture literature, and subsequently testing these predictions empirically through structured data collection.

The research adopts a **cross-sectional survey design,** collecting data from participants at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are widely used in organizational behavior and marketing research because they allow efficient data collection from large groups and are suitable for studies examining current attitudes, perceptions, and workplace practices (Saunders et al., 2019). The unit of analysis for the study is individual employees working within service-sector organizations in Pakistan, including banking, telecom, hospitality, and retail sectors. These industries were selected because employee customer interactions are intensive, making internal marketing highly relevant to customer satisfaction outcomes.

Data were collected using a **structured questionnaire**, which is recognized as the most suitable instrument for quantitative studies involving psychological and behavioral constructs. The questionnaire comprised five major sections measuring internal marketing practices, employee engagement, organizational culture, customer satisfaction, and demographic information. All items were adapted from established, validated scales from prior research to ensure reliability and content validity. Internal marketing items were adapted from Lings and Greenley (2005), employee engagement was measured using the scale developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), organizational culture items were adapted from Schein (2010) and Homburg and Pflesser (2000), while customer satisfaction items were based on scale indicators from Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Oliver (1997). All items were measured using a **5-point**

Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), which provides adequate sensitivity for capturing variations in participants' perceptions.

The target population for this study includes employees of service-sector organizations in major cities such as Karachi. A **probability-based convenience sampling technique** was employed due to the practical challenges of accessing respondents across multiple organizations. Convenience sampling is commonly used in organizational and marketing research, especially when participants are dispersed or when the researcher has limited direct control over employee access (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample size was determined using the rule-of-thumb for multivariate analysis suggesting that at least ten responses per indicator are required for structural equation modeling (Hair et al., 2019). Based on this guideline, a minimum of 250 responses was required; however, the study aimed to collect at least 300 to ensure sufficient statistical power.

Before full data collection, a **pilot test** involving 30 respondents was conducted to assess the clarity, reliability, and appropriateness of the instruments. Feedback helped refine the wording of items and confirm internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). Prior to analysis, data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. Cases with excessive missing data were removed, while mean substitution was used for items with minor missing responses. The final dataset was deemed suitable for further statistical analysis.

The study employed **Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)** using SmartPLS software to test the measurement and structural models. PLS-SEM is appropriate for this study because it is suitable for models involving mediation and moderation, works effectively with complex models, and does not require strict normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis was conducted in two stages: first, assessment of the **measurement model**, followed by the **structural model.** The measurement model evaluated reliability and validity through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was assessed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio.

After confirming measurement adequacy, the **structural model** was examined to test the direct, mediating, and moderating hypotheses. Path coefficients, t-values, and p-values were obtained through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples, as recommended for robust parameter estimation. Mediation was tested using the bootstrapping procedure proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008), while moderation was examined by creating an interaction term between internal marketing and organizational culture. Model explanatory power was assessed using R^2 values, predictive relevance using Q^2, and overall model fit using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR).

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was ensured, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the survey. No personal or organizational identifiers were collected to maintain confidentiality. The methodology adopted in this study ensures an empirical, rigorous, and ethically responsible investigation of how internal marketing practices enhance customer satisfaction through employee engagement and under varying organizational culture conditions.

Data Analysis Technique

Measurement Model Assessment

To evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this study, a comprehensive measurement model assessment was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The assessment included internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019). Internal consistency reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability (CR), all of which exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.793 to 0.942, indicating strong internal consistency among the indicators of each construct. Similarly, composite reliability values were well above the minimum criterion (0.70), with values between 0.862 and 0.956, confirming that the constructs demonstrate high reliability. The rho_A values also fell within acceptable limits, further supporting the internal reliability of the scales.

Convergent validity was assessed through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which reflects the amount of variance captured by a construct relative to the variance due to measurement error. All constructs reported AVE values greater than the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating acceptable convergent validity. Specifically, internal marketing practices demonstrated the highest AVE (0.813), followed by employee engagement (0.733), customer satisfaction (0.667), and organizational culture (0.610), suggesting that more than 50% of the variance in each construct is explained by its respective indicators. These findings align with the visual structure presented in Figure 1, which reflects the robustness of the measurement model.

Discriminant validity was examined using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). According to the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Table 2), the square root of each construct's AVE was higher than the correlations between constructs, indicating that each construct is more strongly related to its own indicators than to other constructs. For example, the square root of AVE for customer satisfaction (0.817) exceeded its correlation with employee engagement (0.522), internal marketing practices (0.490), and organizational culture (0.790). Although customer satisfaction and organizational culture showed a relatively higher inter-construct correlation, their AVE square roots remained higher, satisfying the discriminant validity condition. The organizational culture construct also met this requirement, with a square root of AVE at 0.781, greater than its correlations with the other constructs.

The HTMT results (Table 3) further confirmed discriminant validity. All HTMT ratios remained below the conservative threshold of 0.85 and the liberal threshold of 0.90, as recommended by Henseler et al. (2015). The highest HTMT value observed was between organizational culture and customer satisfaction (0.899), which is marginally below the critical threshold of 0.90, indicating acceptable discriminant validity. The HTMT values for other construct pairs, such as internal marketing practices and employee engagement (0.533), were comfortably within the accepted limits, demonstrating that the constructs are empirically distinct from one another.

In addition to reliability and validity assessments, the model's explanatory power was evaluated using R^2 values. Table 4 shows that customer satisfaction achieved an R^2 value of 0.647, indicating that internal marketing practices, employee engagement, and organizational culture collectively explain 64.7% of the variance in customer satisfaction—representing substantial explanatory power according to Hair et al.'s (2019) benchmarks. Employee engagement exhibited an R^2 value of 0.239, demonstrating that internal marketing practices and organizational culture account for 23.9% of the variance in engagement, which is

considered moderate. These results collectively demonstrate that the measurement model is robust, reliable, and valid, providing a strong foundation for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 1Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.836	0.842	0.889	0.667
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	0.879	0.884	0.917	0.733
INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES	0.942	0.943	0.956	0.813
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	0.793	0.814	0.862	0.610
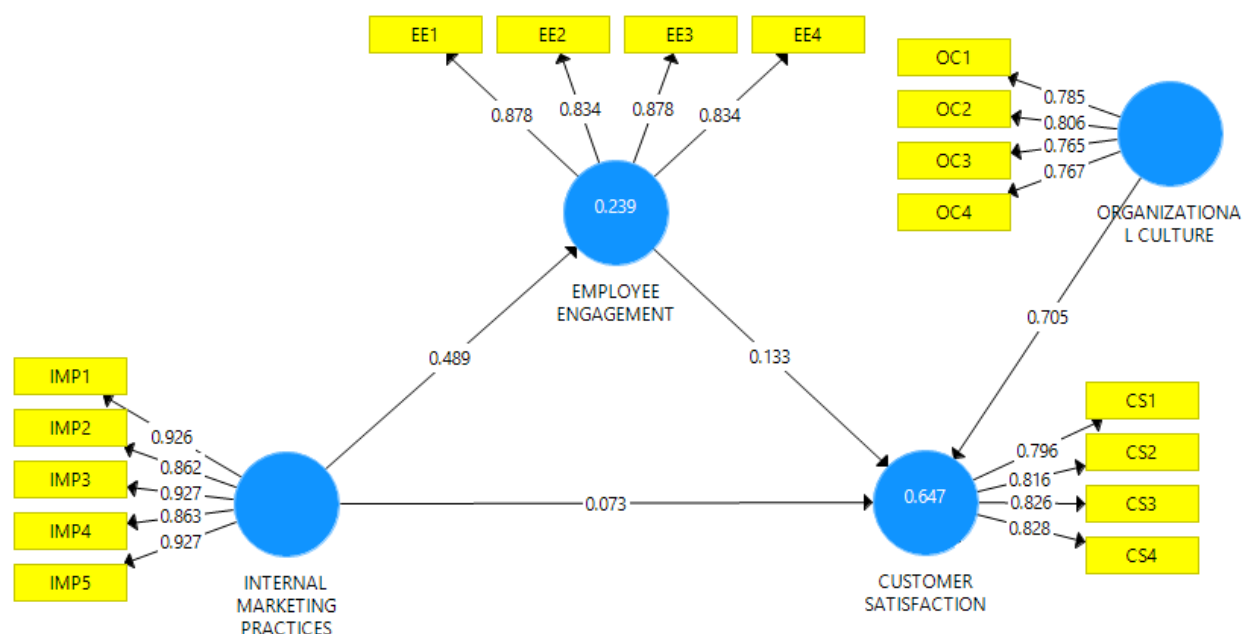
Figure 1 Measurement model

Table 2 Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	CS	EE	IMP	OC
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.817			
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	0.522	0.856		
INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES	0.490	0.489	0.902	
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	0.790	0.529	0.534	0.781

Table 3 heterotrait monotrait

	CS	EE	IMP	OC
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION				
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	**0.607**			
INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES	**0.547**	**0.533**		
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	**0.899**	**0.630**	**0.617**	

Table 4 R2

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.647	0.646
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	0.239	0.238

Structural Model Assessment

Following the establishment of a reliable and valid measurement model, the next step involved assessing the structural model to evaluate the hypothesized relationships between internal marketing practices, employee engagement, organizational culture, and customer satisfaction. The structural model assessment was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of Hair et al. (2019), focusing on the magnitude and significance of path coefficients, indirect mediation effects, moderation effects, and the predictive relevance of the model. Figure 2 illustrates the structural model, depicting both direct and indirect relationships among the latent constructs.

The direct effects were first examined using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. As shown in Table 5, internal marketing practices exhibited a positive and significant direct impact on customer satisfaction, with a path coefficient ($\beta = 0.071$), a t-value of 2.610, and a p-value of 0.009. Although the effect size is modest, the statistically significant result supports Hypothesis 1, indicating that stronger

internal marketing practices lead to improved customer satisfaction. This finding is consistent with prior literature emphasizing that employees who receive adequate organizational support and communication are better able to deliver superior service experiences.

Next, the indirect (mediating) effect of employee engagement on the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction was examined. The results indicate that internal marketing practices significantly influence customer satisfaction through employee engagement, with an indirect path coefficient of $\beta = 0.065$, a t-value of 4.601, and a p-value of 0.000. The strength and significance of this relationship support Hypothesis 2, confirming that employee engagement functions as a meaningful psychological mechanism that transmits the positive effects of internal marketing to customer outcomes. This demonstrates that employees who feel engaged, motivated, and psychologically connected to their roles are more likely to perform customer-oriented behaviors that enhance customer satisfaction.

The moderating effect of organizational culture was also tested through the interaction term (OC*IM → Customer Satisfaction). The results show that the interaction between organizational culture and internal marketing practices has a statistically significant effect on customer satisfaction, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.075$, a t-value of 3.622, and a p-value of 0.000. This confirms Hypothesis 3, indicating that organizational culture strengthens the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction. In other words, internal marketing efforts yield stronger positive outcomes when implemented within a supportive, service-oriented cultural environment. Such cultures reinforce organizational values, encourage employee cooperation, and ensure that internal marketing initiatives are interpreted positively by employees.

Beyond hypothesis testing, the model's predictive relevance was assessed using Stone–Geisser's Q^2 values derived through the blindfolding procedure. As presented in Table 6, customer satisfaction demonstrated a strong predictive relevance with a Q^2 value of 0.412, indicating that the model has substantial predictive accuracy for this construct. Employee engagement showed moderate predictive relevance with a Q^2 value of 0.172, reflecting the model's ability to explain meaningful variance in engagement levels based on internal marketing and organizational culture. As expected, reflective exogenous constructs such as internal marketing practices and organizational culture reported Q^2 values of zero because they are predictor rather than outcome variables. Overall, the Q^2 results confirm that the structural model possesses adequate predictive power, further strengthening the credibility of the hypothesized relationships.

Taken together, the structural model results confirm that internal marketing practices significantly enhance customer satisfaction both directly and indirectly through employee engagement, and that organizational culture serves as an important contextual factor that amplifies these effects. The combination of significant path coefficients, mediation and moderation results, and strong predictive relevance indicates that the proposed theoretical framework is robust, empirically supported, and valuable for understanding how internal practices and cultural conditions drive customer satisfaction in service organizations.
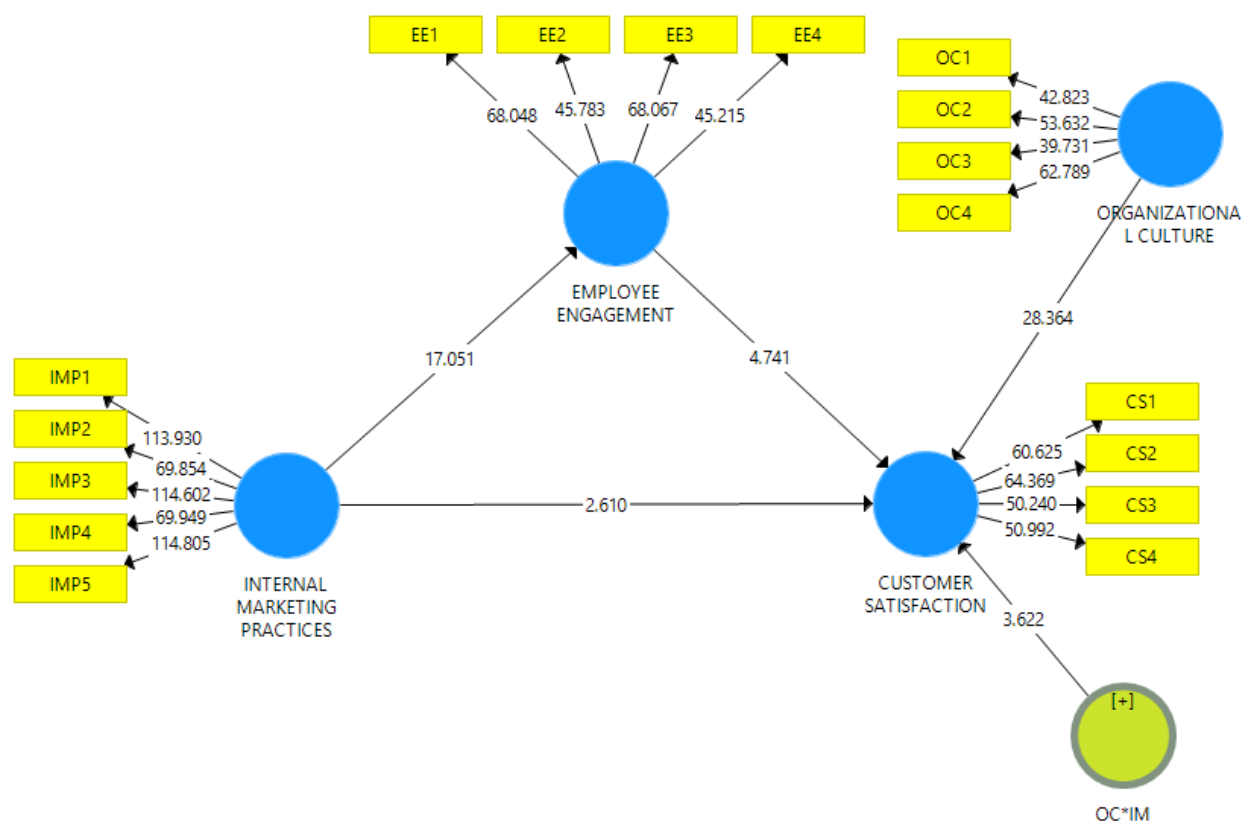
Figure 2 Direct and indirect effects

Table 5 Direct and indirect effects

HYP	PATHWAYS	BETA β	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Results
H1	INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES -> CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.071	2.610	0.009	ACCEPTED
H2	INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES -> EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT -> CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.065	4.601	0.000	ACCEPTED
H3	OC*IM -> CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	0.075	3.622	0.000	ACCEPTED

Table 6 Q2

	SSO	SSE	Q² (=1-SSE/SSO)
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	3672.000	2158.555	0.412
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT	3672.000	3042.180	0.172
INTERNAL MARKETING PRACTICES	4590.000	4590.000	
OC*IM	918.000	918.000	
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	3672.000	3672.000	

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence supporting the theoretical model that internal marketing practices significantly influence customer satisfaction both directly and indirectly through employee engagement, with organizational culture strengthening these relationships. The results reinforce long-standing assumptions in service management literature about the critical role employees play in shaping customer experiences. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 was supported, showing that internal marketing practices have a positive and significant direct effect on customer satisfaction. Although the path coefficient ($\beta = 0.071$) is modest, the relationship is statistically meaningful ($p = 0.009$), indicating that when organizations communicate effectively, provide adequate training, empower employees, and create supportive internal environments, customers perceive higher levels of satisfaction. This finding aligns with the Service-Profit Chain framework (Heskett et al., 1994), which posits that internal service quality drives employee satisfaction and subsequently improves customer outcomes. The result also supports prior research by Grönroos (1994) and Lings and Greenley (2010), who argue that internal marketing acts as a critical antecedent of organizational service excellence.

The second major finding relates to the mediating role of employee engagement, which was found to significantly mediate the relationship between internal marketing and customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.065$, $p = 0.000$). This supports Hypothesis 2 and highlights the psychological pathway through which internal marketing practices influence customer outcomes. Employee engagement characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption—acts as a mechanism that converts internal support into superior customer interactions. The significance of this mediation aligns with the principles of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), suggesting that when employees receive support, resources, and recognition from their organization, they feel obligated to reciprocate through greater effort and commitment. This finding is consistent with studies by Saks (2006) and Salanova et al. (2005), who emphasize that engaged employees are more attentive, proactive, and emotionally invested in customer service roles. The strong indirect effect indicates that empowerment, training, and communication alone are insufficient unless they translate into heightened engagement. Therefore, employee engagement represents the psychological bridge connecting internal strategies to external results.

The third key finding provides evidence of the moderating role of organizational culture. The interaction between internal marketing and customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.075$, $p = 0.000$) demonstrates that organizational culture strengthens the effectiveness of internal marketing practices. This confirms Hypothesis 3 and underscores the importance of a supportive, service-oriented culture in translating internal marketing initiatives into meaningful customer outcomes. When organizational culture promotes collaboration, open communication, innovation, and customer-centered values, employees are more likely to embrace internal marketing efforts and convert them into performance-enhancing behaviors. Conversely, in rigid or hierarchical cultures, internal marketing may lose potency as employees may resist empowerment or feel disconnected from organizational goals. These findings align with Schein's (2010) conceptualization of culture as a deep-seated system of shared values that shapes how employees interpret managerial actions. The results also support Homburg and Pflesser's (2000) view that a strong service culture enhances employees' commitment to customer satisfaction.

The structural model's predictive accuracy further validates the importance of the variables studied. The R^2 value for customer satisfaction (0.647) indicates substantial variance explained by internal marketing, employee engagement, and organizational culture, demonstrating the strong predictive relevance of the model. The Q^2 values for customer satisfaction (0.412) and employee engagement (0.172) confirm that the model has meaningful predictive ability, reinforcing the robustness of the theoretical framework.

These outcomes highlight that internal marketing practices, when embedded within a supportive culture and translated through engaged employees, can significantly enhance customer experiences.

Overall, the findings confirm that internal marketing is not merely an HR or communication strategy but a strategic organizational imperative that shapes customer satisfaction through psychological and cultural mechanisms. The results contribute to the literature by empirically validating a comprehensive model that integrates direct, mediating, and moderating effects—an approach rarely examined in developing economies. In the context of Pakistan's service sector, where employee morale, customer expectations, and organizational structures often present challenges, the findings highlight the transformative potential of strong internal marketing, vibrant organizational culture, and deeply engaged employees. By demonstrating how these variables interact to drive customer satisfaction, this study provides a holistic understanding that can inform managerial decisions, improve service delivery, and enhance organizational competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of internal marketing practices on customer satisfaction, with employee engagement serving as a mediating variable and organizational culture acting as a moderating factor within Pakistan's service sector. The results provide strong empirical support for the proposed theoretical framework, demonstrating that internal marketing has both direct and indirect effects on customer satisfaction. Internal marketing practices—such as communication, empowerment, training, and reward systems—positively influence customer satisfaction by equipping employees with the necessary skills, motivation, and confidence to engage in high-quality service behaviors. The findings further revealed that employee engagement plays a significant mediating role, emphasizing that internal marketing must translate into psychological involvement for employees to deliver superior customer experiences. Moreover, organizational culture significantly moderates the relationship between internal marketing practices and customer satisfaction, indicating that supportive and service-oriented cultural environments amplify the effectiveness of internal marketing initiatives.

Taken together, these findings highlight that customer satisfaction is not solely the outcome of external strategies or marketing campaigns but is deeply rooted in the internal organizational environment. The study reinforces the notion that employees are the primary drivers of customer experience, and their engagement and cultural context shape their ability to serve effectively. The integrated model used in this research provides a holistic view of how internal organizational mechanisms influence external customer perceptions, making significant contributions to both marketing and organizational behavior literature.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it extends internal marketing literature by empirically demonstrating its direct influence on customer satisfaction—an area where existing research remains limited, as prior work has focused more on internal outcomes such as employee satisfaction or organizational commitment. Second, by establishing employee engagement as a mediator between internal marketing and customer satisfaction, the study advances theoretical understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which internal practices influence customer outcomes. This supports and extends Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) by illustrating how employees reciprocate organizational support through enhanced engagement and service behaviors.

Third, the study makes a novel contribution by testing organizational culture as a moderator, demonstrating that cultural values and norms significantly condition the strength of internal marketing efforts. This extends the work of Schein (2010) by showing how culture not only shapes organizational processes but also strengthens the link between internal and external performance outcomes. Finally, the study adds contextual knowledge by providing empirical insights from Pakistan's service sector an under-researched setting in internal marketing literature thereby enhancing the global applicability of internal marketing theories.

Practical Implications

The findings offer several meaningful implications for managers and policymakers in service organizations. First, the significant impact of internal marketing on customer satisfaction highlights the need for organizations to treat internal marketing as a strategic priority rather than an HR or administrative function. Managers should invest in systematic communication, ongoing training, empowerment initiatives, and recognition programs to create a supportive environment that encourages employees to exceed customer expectations. Second, the mediating role of employee engagement underscores the importance of fostering psychological commitment among employees. Organizations must prioritize engagement-building initiatives such as job enrichment, leadership support, fair reward systems, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Third, the moderating role of organizational culture emphasizes that internal marketing interventions are most effective within supportive cultural environments. Managers should reinforce shared values related to teamwork, customer service excellence, and open communication. Cultural alignment ensuring that organizational values match internal marketing messages is essential to avoid mixed signals that can weaken employee motivation. Additionally, leaders must role-model customer-oriented behavior to embed these values into the organizational culture. Overall, organizations that strategically align internal marketing, engagement, and culture will achieve greater customer satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research employed a cross-sectional design, limiting the ability to establish long-term causal relationships. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how internal marketing, engagement, and culture evolve over time. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to response biases such as social desirability or common method variance. Although steps were taken to reduce such biases, future studies could incorporate multi-source data, such as customer evaluations or supervisor ratings.

Third, the study focused on service organizations within Pakistan, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other sectors or cultural contexts. Different industries or countries with distinct managerial structures may exhibit different patterns. Fourth, the model examined only one mediator and one moderator; however, internal marketing and customer satisfaction can be influenced by other factors such as leadership style, job satisfaction, employee motivation, and service climate. Including additional variables may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the internal mechanisms affecting customer satisfaction.

Future Research Directions

Building on the limitations, several future research avenues are recommended. First, longitudinal research designs would allow researchers to examine causality and the long-term effects of internal marketing and engagement on customer satisfaction. Second, future studies could expand the model by incorporating additional mediators such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological empowerment, or service climate to provide a more nuanced view of the internal dynamics shaping customer outcomes.

Third, cross-cultural comparative studies could examine whether the moderating role of organizational culture varies across different national or regional contexts. This would help determine how cultural norms, power distance, and societal values influence internal marketing effectiveness. Fourth, future research could employ mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to capture deeper insights into employee perceptions and organizational practices. Lastly, examining different industries—such as manufacturing, healthcare, or education could reveal sector-specific differences and broaden the applicability of the theoretical framework.

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