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Article

Emotional Intelligence and Employees' Commitment: Analyzing the Role of Brand Image and Corporate Social Responsibility Among Lebanese SMEs

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Abstract

The importance of emotional intelligence cannot be neglected when it comes to employees' behavioral outcomes in the workplace. When organizations deploy corporate social responsibility initiatives that improve their image, they can foster an atmosphere where employees develop loyalty and commitment towards their roles and organizations. This can be more vivid for the case of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) where modern and sustainable strategies are embedded in the strategy to improve social, economic, and environmental domains of the society they serve to. The current research examines how emotionally intelligent employees can leverage brand image and corporate social responsibility as dynamics that improve their commitment to their roles and their organizations. This leads to better service provision, ultimately improving the company's reputation, performance, and competitive longevity. Using Smart-PLS software, and Partial Least Squares – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a total of 184 SME employees were surveyed across forty two firms operating in Lebanon. The findings suggest that SMEs can establish mechanisms which, under the lens of emotional intelligence, attachment, and sustainability oriented theories, yield positive work outcomes among employees while facilitating a sustainable competitive edge and improved image both internally and externally.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; employee commitment; SME sector; Lebanon; brand image; CSR; sustainability

Introduction

The dynamic business and industrial setting of the world requires a high level of intelligence from employees that is backed by the corporate mechanisms for improving performance, brand image, and sustainable outcomes. In this sense, emotional intelligence is essential for ensuring employees can exhibit positive work behaviors that can aid the firm in gaining and/or maintaining competitiveness in their market. For the case of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), this becomes pivotal as institutional dynamics should be optimized to achieve success (Al Maalouf et al., 2023). The current study focuses on the link between emotional intelligence of SME employees and their commitment to their roles in the workplace. In the Lebanese context, SMEs face various social, political, and economic restraints which increases the need for new solutions, innovative means, and sustainable initiatives that can solidify the brand in the market (Alhamad et al., 2024). Employees who possess emotional intelligence (EI) are characterized by their visible ability to perceive and manage their emotions, which enables them to better prepare for challenges in the workplace while establishing an affective bond with their organization (Farmanesh et al., 2025). In a similar vein, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices are designed to contribute to the image of a brand to build trust with external stakeholders while improving the morale of internal assets (i.e. employees' commitment). The current study focuses on the dynamics in Lebanese SMEs that lead to higher commitment levels among employees, particularly the indirect effect of CSR as a leverage and bridging element for

employees to create a deeper bond with their roles and subsequently organizations. This can shed light on strategic initiatives that can aid SMEs in Lebanon in their endeavor towards sustainable competitive advantages and enhanced reputation.

SMEs face a rapidly growing business atmosphere that highlights the importance of psychological and emotional dimensions of employees on the performance outcomes of their firm (Alhamad et al., 2024). EI encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Singh, 2004), which is found to be vital for behavioral and commitment outcomes in institutional settings (Alhamad et al., 2024; Farmanesh et al., 2025). Considering the resources available or lack thereof for the context of Lebanon, SMEs should shift their focus on improving the capabilities of their employees via initiatives such as CSR as strategic tools. While EI and its effects under CSR has been assessed in the literature, the SMEs across the Middle East and especially Lebanon remain underexplored, which drives the conduct of this study. With the growing number of aware and sensitive individuals towards recent topics, brand activities and sustainability measures, SMEs can use CSR practices to significantly improve the perception of their employees towards the brand, leading to positive behavioral work outcomes (Khan & Fatma, 2023).

In addition, the current study explores the indirect role of employees' brand image with regard to their perception and actions towards their jobs (i.e. commitment). While previous studies have addressed this linkage in similar contextual settings (e.g. De Silva & Lokuwaduge, 2021; Schwaiger & Zehrer, 2022), the current research embeds brand image as a bridge between EI and employees' commitment to their roles in SMEs, where solution-finding, creativity, quick action, and quality of service are vital for business performance (Al Maalouf et al., 2023). Brand image can be described as a perception towards a certain firm derived from individuals' memory association with the said brand (Afolashade et al., 2024). Based on these associations, individuals shape feelings and behaviors towards brands which is compared to other alternatives available in the memory (Wei & Nasruddin, 2024). Individuals also evaluate the brand based on their attributes, social cues, and other elements (e.g. symbolism) (Khan & Fatma, 2023). Arguably, for SMEs to improve the internal brand image metric among their employees, the employees should possess certain characteristics (i.e. EI) and have a workplace that strategically improves their image of the brand by initiating in ethical, sustainable (economic, social and environmental), and personal/professional training courses which can be integrated into CSR practices.

Furthermore, by incorporating the socio-economic environment of Lebanon with various restraints and challenges, where SMEs are vital for employment and economic development, the current research seeks to contribute to the understanding of this subject. To achieve this, emotional intelligence theory, attachment, theory, and sustainability-oriented theory of the firm are embedded in the development of the current causal model (see Figure 1). This theoretical framework enables the research to develop hypotheses that are solid and can contribute to the discourse regarding both theoretical and practical strategies for SMEs in smaller economies (e.g. Lebanon). Long-term benefits for employers, employees and society can be obtained through strategies that focus on employees' mental state while providing a positive workplace that encourages commitment. Accordingly, the research aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a direct influence on SME employees' EI and their commitment level?
2. Can CSR initiatives of SMEs in Lebanon mediate the EI – Commitment relationship for their staff? And
3. Does brand image mediate the relationship between EI and commitment in this context?
4. The following sections provide a detailed outlook, covering theories, hypotheses, methods and procedures, analysis and results, and the conclusions obtained in this research. The final sections entail theoretical and practical implications that can benefit both scholars and SME managers in Lebanon and perhaps neighboring countries. Limitations and recommendations for future studies are also highlighted.

Hypotheses and Theories

To answer the previously noted research questions, the current study embeds three theoretical frameworks which are distinct but have complementary parameters that support the foundation of our proposed hypotheses. These are namely, attachment theory (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012), emotional intelligence theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), and Sustainability Oriented Theory of the Firm (Lozano et al., 2015). Attachment Theory can be categorized as a dependency on identity and a bond which is an individuals' understanding of being connected to a certain brand (Hinson et al., 2019; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). This attachment manifests as individuals conveying their commitment or loyalty to the said brand through emotional and recognition links (Elliott et al., 2024; Hinson et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that attachment theory can be applied for understanding the contextual setting of organizations and the psychological dimensions of employees (e.g. Deb et al., 2023; Mura et al., 2021; Trofimov et al., 2019). However, the majority of studies focus on other regions while calling for the need of empirical studies to advance the discourse (Elliott et al., 2024; Farmanesh et al., 2025). This further drives the current research and highlights its potential contributions.

Emotional Intelligence Theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) suggests that a collection of abilities to perceive, understand and regulate one's emotions when interacting with others describes emotional intelligence (EI). Numerous studies have shown the relevance and adequacy of this theory for understanding the mechanisms that shape behavioral outcomes of individuals when considering EI (e.g. Deb et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2021). Literature implies that EI renders individuals more adept at managing conflicts, stress, anxiety, and using available resources to improve their job satisfaction and commitment towards the organization (Mura et al., 2021). For the case of SMEs, it has been observed that EI is an essential determinant of various outcomes both organizational and individual related such as, job satisfaction in Korea (Kim & Kim, 2021), organizational commitment in Zimbabwe (Mapuranga et al., 2021), and firm performance (Deb et al., 2023). This further demonstrates the need for empirical research addressing psychological mechanisms that are linked to sustainable outcomes for SMEs (i.e. commitment), especially for the Lebanese context.

Sustainability Oriented Theory of the Firm is regarded as an integral part for organizational strategic vision that entails sustainable practices including environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Lozano et al., 2015). This strategic approach creates resilient firms that can develop competitive advantages in high extents of rivalry (i.e. SMEs) (Farmanesh et al., 2025). SMEs can adopt such strategies to not only improve their reputation with customers but also have value-driven frameworks for the employees to encourage positive performance outcomes such as commitment. SMEs in Vietnam showed enhanced performance and competitiveness when sustainability and innovative measures were embedded in their strategies (Le & Ikram, 2022). This is while such orientations were shown to be influential on performance of SME employees in emerging markets (Akomea et al., 2023).

CSR is not merely compliance, but a strategic tool that can transform the image of a brand when deployed correctly (Tan et al., 2023). It has been noted in the extant literature that CSR can improve perceptions of employees and customers alike (Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022). As ethical conduct, environmentally friendly, socially appropriate, and economically viable enterprises have become more vital, CSR initiatives can nurture both external reputation and internal loyalty (Al Maalouf et al., 2023). When CSR initiatives are implemented strategically, they can enable employees to benefit from these resources through sense of community and a supportive workplace environment. Under sustainability-oriented theoretical setting, CSR can be highly beneficial for driving positive work outcomes among SME employees. Employees can establish bonds with their organizations through the lens of attachment theory as it pertains to the internal conceptualization similar to that of consumers (Hinson et al., 2019). The strategic approach that was described can further trigger attachment and positive emotional responses towards the organization, leading to a better image among employees and driving loyalty, commitment, trust and job satisfaction (Akomea et al., 2023). The combined premises of these theories provide a sufficient foundation for developing a set of

hypotheses that address the research questions. This theoretical framework explains the mechanisms within which SMEs can leverage their internal capabilities and external practices to improve their performance, sustainability, and workplace outcomes. This is due to the notion that highly committed employees are prone to outstanding performance and exemplary outcomes particularly when equipped with high EI (Valeri, 2023).

Emotional Intelligence and Employees' Commitment

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is considered a pivotal element that can determine organizational outcomes especially regarding interpersonal behavior, motivation and decision-making efficiency (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Built upon this early description, Goleman (2001) characterized EI into self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Dimitrova & Tomova, 2025; Herut et al., 2024). According to the scale derived from Singh (2004), these dimensions can be described as 1) self-awareness is the recognition and understanding of one's emotions, moods, and their drivers and influences on others through a realistic assessment of sense; 2) self-regulation entails the ability to redirect or control disruptive impulses and mood swings to facilitate rather than interference of emotions with goals (e.g. trustworthiness, adaptability to change and control over outbursts); 3) motivation is described as an internal drive to achieve goals with persistence regardless of challenges and setbacks, and a desire to achieve and commit to specific targets; 4) empathy addresses one's understanding of other people's emotions and ability to attune feelings and perspective of others by actively concerning for their needs; and 5) social skills encompass various abilities that enable an individual to build networks, manage relationships and interactions while being proficient in inducing positive responses (e.g. conflict management, influence, leadership, communication prowess) (Afolashade et al., 2024; Farmanesh et al., 2025).

When employees have a high sense of awareness, are empathetic, and adept at managing their own emotions as well as others in social interactions (e.g. within the workplace), they are more likely to be aligned with organizational goals by exhibiting commitment towards the firm (Johar & Shah, 2014). Organizational commitment in the current research is described as the psychological bond connecting an employee to their firm which entails an emotional attachment and sense of identification and involvement in the said organization (Afolashade et al., 2024). Employees who are highly committed are highly likely to exhibit exemplary performance, resilience, quality and consistent service, and a visible contribution to company success (Mura et al., 2021). Self-awareness enables employees to understand their values and align their sense of belonging and commitment. This is while with strong self-regulation, employees are more prone to effective emotional management which supports them when facing workplace situations with resilience and no negative emotions. Motivated employees exhibit internal desire towards achievement. This intrinsic drive leads to a higher level of commitment as an aspiration linked to success (Al Maalouf et al., 2023; Mekdessi et al., 2021). Empathic staff in the context of SMEs where formalities of HR systems are lower can respond to colleagues and managers' emotions effectively, fostering a supportive workplace while increasing their attachment and subsequently, organizational commitment (Hinson et al., 2019). Lastly, employees who possess strong social skills are successful in building networks within the workplace through collaboration and resolution which further contributes to fostering a positive work atmosphere that encourages a sense of connection and harmony (Singh, 2004). SME staff are faced with an overlapping organizational and personal identity which further amplifies the importance of EI under the lens of attachment theory to reinforce commitment. Accordingly, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Emotional Intelligence among SME employees can directly influence their organizational commitment.*

Mediating Role of Brand Image

Brand image is a construct that has both consumer and employee orientations entailing their perceptions and behaviors (Low & Lamb, 2000). Employees develop perceptions towards their firm which can include reputation, innovation, ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability measures, leading to sense of identity, commitment, and confidence (Schwaiger & Zehrer, 2022). Through empathy, social skills, awareness and regulation of self, employees with high EI can internalize the values of their organization more easily and actively contribute to its improvement and promotion (Barros-Arrita & Garcia-Cali, 2021). Under the lens of attachment theory, this relationship can be better explained as individuals with stronger psychological bonds will have a more consistent sense of identity with the firm (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012; Wei & Nasruddin, 2024). As brand image is derived from associations in memory (Ramesh et al., 2019) and comparison with alternatives, individuals develop positive image when the values, messages, actions and activities of the brand is perceived superior to others (Khan & Farma, 2021). This shows the influential role of brand image in shaping positive mindsets and behavioral outcomes (i.e. commitment) (Khan & Fatma, 2023). Employees with high EI are better equipped to detect dissonance or alignment of personal and corporate values, which furthers the bridge between their personal abilities and the organizational aspects that drive commitment.

This can also be linked to the premises of emotional intelligence theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) which explains how individuals with efficient perception, understanding, management and utilization of emotions can better maneuver complex scenarios that occur commonly in SME context (Khan & Farma, 2023) where direct and frequent interactions are routine. Such competencies can merge with the employees' perception of their brand, and yield strong organizational bonds (Ghorbanzadeh & Rahehagh, 2021; Singh, 2004). The specific context of Lebanese SME with its socio-political instabilities (Alhamad et al., 2024) having EI among staff and ensuring positive strategic approach to improve brand image can result in highly engaged and committed workforce. This establishes a long-term and sustainable benefit for both employees (personal and professional improvement) and the organization (competitive advantages and superior quality and consistency of service). These psychological elements are rooted in the SMEs context through attachment theory which links affective attachment to consistent and emotionally positive interactions with the organization (Hinson et al., 2019; Wei & Nasruddin, 2024). In smaller firms, personal identification and alignment of values becomes highly crucial which further implies the importance of affective bonds, emotional investment, sense of belonging and organizational commitment (Haris et al., 2022). Following this logic, the current research posits the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *Brand Image mediates the relationship between EI and SME employees' commitment in Lebanon.*

Mediating Role of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in this research is contextualized under the premises of sustainability-oriented theory of firm (Lozano et al., 2015) which entails social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Tan et al., 2023). CSR is pivotal for obtaining legitimacy among customers and employees alike. For the case of employees as internal stakeholders, commitment can be achieved through contributions to societal wellbeing. This also can be complemented by ethical standards and compliance of the firm to ethics (Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022; Raza et al., 2024). The predisposition of employees with high EI towards the value of CSR practices is significant due to their empathy, social skills, and understanding of emotional cues to interpret organizational activities as a reflection of their moral code of conduct (Alhumoudi & Alfarhan, 2024). Under the premises of Lozano et al. (2015), sustainable practices of a firm can ensure long-term benefits through cohesion, legitimacy, and internalized values among staff. CSR can act as a major strategic tool that goes beyond activities by entailing emotional anchors. For SMEs, such strategic approaches can exhibit resilience, and

stewardship which are essential for sustainability pillars (i.e. economic, social, and environmental) (Farmanesh et al., 2025).

CSR in the context of SMEs is operationalized through the lens of sustainability pillars namely, economic, social and environmental aspects (Tan et al., 2023) with the support of attachment theory that links self-awareness and empathy to perception and internalization of CSR as authentic expressions of business strategy and organizational values (Hinson et al., 2019; Theron et al., 2024). This sustainable orientation emphasizes integration of growing concerns among societies regarding business strategies and value creation while considering resource usage and efficiency. Engaging in CSR activities can create a sense of community and emotional security for employees that can be extended to their social groups and linked to their personal values. This will further attachment and deepen their commitment to their organizations (Cheema et al., 2020; Jalil et al., 2023). When employees are engaged with CSR activities, they perceive organizational support that cares for the wellbeing of society, which increases their affective commitment by satisfying meaning, justice, and sense of identity for employees (Husasin et al., 2023; Kim & Lee, 2022). It can be interpreted that EI enables SME employees to emotionally connect with CSR initiatives, leading to a stronger sense of commitment (Orazalin, 2020). Accordingly, the current research poses the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: *CSR initiatives mediate the EI – Employee Commitment link in the Lebanese SME sector.*

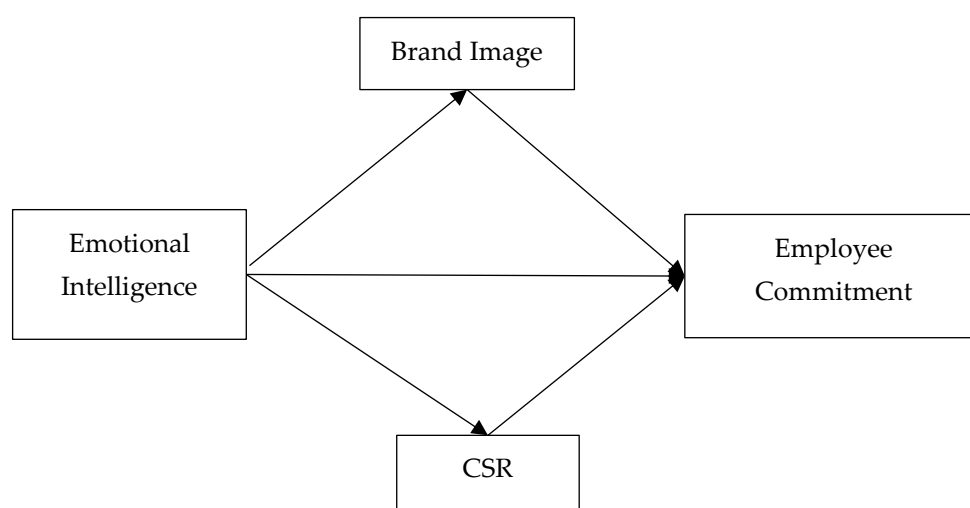


Figure 1. Research Model.

Sampling Procedures

The research employs a quantitative approach and through a cross-sectional survey that measures the parameters included in the research model (see Figure 1). This deductive approach allows research to use the theoretical setting to test its hypotheses (Casula et al., 2021). A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the SMEs in Beirut and Tripoli where the management confirmed their focus on recruiting emotionally intelligent employees (e.g. having EQ assessments); and have CSR activities in place that are entirely or partially sustainable. Upon this stage and having the necessary permissions granted, the employees of forty two (42) different SMEs were deemed to be qualified under this selection criteria (approximately 5 employees per organization). A convenience sampling method was used to collect data from employees based on their willingness to participate, and availability. Surveys were given to the management of each SME to share with their staff on a two-week return date. Using G*Power software (statistical power = 90%; effect size = 0.15;

$\alpha = 0.05$) and the recommendations of Hair et al. (2017), the required sample size was calculated 157. A total of 195 questionnaires were distributed from which 184 qualified for final analysis (after removing incomplete responses). Participants were given information regarding the purpose of the study, data confidentiality and anonymity, and a written consent form approved by the university.

Measurements

To design the survey, several measurement scales from the existing literature were employed. In this sense, Emotional Intelligence and its dimensions (i.e. self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills) are derived from the works of Singh (2004) and Alhamad et al. (2024) (e.g. “I am aware of my emotions as I experience them” and “ I listen carefully to understand others’ points of view”). Each dimension is addressed by three questions, reflecting EI as the independent variable. Corporate Social Responsibility and its sustainability-centered dimensions (social, economic, and environmental) are addressed by 9 questions (3 for each dimension) (Tan et al., 2023) (e.g. “Profit-making is aligned with ethical business operations”). The questions about brand image were derived from Low and Lamb (2000) with five questions (e.g. “The company is known for its reliability and trustworthiness”). Lastly, employees’ commitment was measured by five questions (Tan et al., 2023) (e.g. “I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization”). All questions were designed on a 5-item Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree. It is also important to note that age, gender, education level, and marital status were included in the survey as demographic questions that are regarded as control variables due to their potential impact on the dependent variable (employees’ commitment) (Farmanesh et al., 2025). The demographic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Respondent’s Demographics.

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	31	16.85
31-35	65	35.32
36-40	72	39.13
+40	16	8.70
Gender		
Male	103	55.98
Female	81	44.02
Education		
Diploma/Bachelor	123	66.85
Masters/PhD	61	33.15
Marital Status		
Married	131	71.20
Single	53	28.80

Analysis and Results

The research employs Partial Least Square – Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique as the model includes latent effects that disregard normality of distribution while dealing with a relatively small sample size (Hair et al., 2017). Table 2 shows the results of reliability and validity of the parameters and items of the survey through measurement model assessment. The values of outer loadings are between 0.7 and 0.9 (Hair et al., 2017); Rho A, alpha, and composite reliability (CR) are showing satisfactory calculated values (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012; Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2019; Jöreskog, 1971). This is also supported by the values of average variance extracted (AVE) which are above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017), stating a satisfactory convergent validity for the measurement model.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment.

Factors	Dimensions	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Alpha	Rho A	CR	AVE
Brand Image	—	BI1	0.741	0.811	0.788	0.846	0.711
		BI2	0.734				
		BI3	0.752				
		BI4	0.762				
		BI5	0.733				
Employee Commitment	—	EC1	0.721	0.833	0.810	0.829	0.701
		EC2	0.725				
		EC3	0.744				
		EC4	0.759				
		EC5	0.753				
CSR	Social	CSS1	0.762	0.816	0.801	0.818	0.674
		CSS2	0.753				
		CSS3	0.733				
	Economic	CSE4	0.731	0.814	0.774	0.805	0.688
		CSE5	0.744				
		CSE6	0.735				
	Environmental	CSG7	0.728	0.807	0.788	0.806	0.693
		CSG8	0.736				
		CSG9	0.741				
Self-Awareness	Self-Awareness	SA1	0.744	0.811	0.817	0.807	0.671
		SA2	0.759				
		SA3	0.747				
Self-Regulation	Self-Regulation	SR1	0.731	0.813	0.816	0.786	0.706
		SR2	0.766				
		SR3	0.712				
Empathy	Empathy	EP1	0.759	0.794	0.773	0.771	0.677
		EP2	0.763				
		EP3	0.731				
Motivation	Motivation	MT1	0.741	0.788	0.762	0.782	0.703
		MT2	0.744				
		MT3	0.755				
Social Skills	Social Skills	SS1	0.761	0.805	0.788	0.811	0.710
		SS2	0.770				
		SS3	0.748				

In addition to what is reported in Table 2, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) values in Table 3 show that the parameters are adequate in terms of their validity and reliability measures as values are below 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT).

	SA	SR	EP	MT	SS	CSS	CSE	CSG	BI
SR	0.684	-							
EP	0.563	0.572	-						
MT	0.611	0.623	0.637	-					
SS	0.612	0.644	0.651	0.667	-				
CSS	0.622	0.614	0.650	0.661	0.677	-			
CSE	0.549	0.563	0.613	0.611	0.594	0.619	-		
CSG	0.577	0.544	0.610	0.579	0.588	0.579	0.596	-	

BI	0.572	0.549	0.589	0.586	0.603	0.594	0.547	0.610	-
EC	0.593	0.588	0.579	0.601	0.589	0.602	0.613	0.608	0.610

SA = Self-Awareness; SR = Self-Regulation; EP = Empathy; MT = Motivation; SS = Social Skills; CSS = Social-CSR; CSE = Economic-CSR; CSG = Environmental-CSR; BI = Brand Image; EC = Employee Commitment.

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is examined as the research includes reflective-formative variables. The values of VIF remain below 3, stating that there are no concerns regarding multicollinearity as shown in Table 4 (Henseler et al., 2009).

Table 4. Reflective-Formative Assessment.

Construct	Items	Convergent Validity	Weights	VIF	t-Statistics
EI	Self-Awareness	0.715	0.342	1.923	3.011
	Self-Regulation		0.333	1.880	3.024
	Empathy		0.341	1.865	3.029
	Motivation		0.338	1.844	3.022
	Social Skills		0.340	1.829	3.018
CSR	Social	0.719	0.337	1.944	2.814
	Economic		0.344	1.938	2.822
	Environmental		0.336	1.933	2.819

The results in Table 5 show support for the hypotheses of the study as the structural model assessment shows satisfactory value. In this sense, both model fit indices are within the acceptable values for a good model fit as Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is below 0.08 (0.033) and Normal Fit Index (NFI) is above 0.90 (0.925) (Hair et al., 2015; Henseler et al., 2013). The PLS-SEM results also show that both predictive power (R²) and predictive relevance (Q²) are evaluated, where Employees' Commitment (EC) shows the highest explanatory power (R² = 0.729) implying a high level of prediction power regarding variance accounted for in the model. This is followed by CSR with R² = 0.577 and Brand Image (BI) with R² = 0.565. Similarly, the predictive relevance of the constructs is ranked by EC (Q² = 0.563), CSR (Q² = 0.558) and BI (Q² = 0.533) (Shmueli et al., 2016; Hair et al., 2019) from highest to lowest. For error metrics, both Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE) and Mean Absolute Error (MAE) are acceptable for the constructs as values remain close to 0 (Nasution et al., 2020; Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021), stating a robust prediction of the current model.

Table 5. Structural Model Assessment.

Effects	Relations	β	t-statistics	p-Value	Hypothesis
Direct					
H1	EI → EC	0.343	3.433**	0.001	Supported
Mediation					
H2	EI → BI → EC	0.307	2.877*	0.009	Supported
H3	EI → CSR → EC	0.312	2.985*	0.009	Supported
Control Variables					
	Gender → EC	0.122	2.114*		
	Age → EC	0.116	2.133*		
	Education → EC	0.119	2.096*		
	Marital Status → EC	0.121	2.122*		

$$R^2_{EC} = 0.729 / Q^2_{EC} = 0.563 / RMSE = 0.663 / MAE = 0.512$$

$$R^2_{CSR} = 0.577 / Q^2_{CSR} = 0.558 / RMSE = 0.664 / MAE = 0.538$$

$$R^2_{BI} = 0.565 / Q^2_{BI} = 0.533 / RMSE = 0.661 / MAE = 0.564$$

$$SRMR: 0.033; NFI: 0.925$$

The findings in Table 5 show that the *first hypothesis* is supported, which implies that EI positively affects the commitment level of SME employees ($\beta = 0.343$, $t = 3.433$). This aligns with the foundation of emotional intelligence theory (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) as employees who possess EI in high levels can better manage their emotions as well as those of others, which paves the path towards developing positive mindset towards the organization, manifesting as commitment and engagement. This is in line with the existing body of knowledge (e.g. Dimitrova & Tomova, 2025; Herut et al., 2024), showing consensus with literature. SMEs organizational climate is comprised of direct interactions and relationships due to the small number of individuals which further highlights the vitality of having emotionally intelligent employees who can navigate their behaviors (e.g. self-awareness and self-regulation) while aligning others' emotions (e.g. empathy, social skills, and motivation). Such traits lead to trust-building, attachment and emotional bonds with colleagues, managers, and the organization as a unit (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). When employees have high EI levels, managing work-related stress becomes easier (Afolashade et al., 2024; Farmanesh et al., 2025) and they can better perceive support from their organization (Deb et al., 2023; Ramos et al., 2021) and develop psychological bonds with lowered turnover intentions (Querdian et al., 2021; Zeidan, 2020). Therefore, SMEs in Lebanon can focus on attracting, recruiting, and training employees' emotional intelligence to achieve greater performance, and sustainable economic outcomes.

The *second hypothesis* of the research is also supported in Table 5 ($\beta = 0.307$, $t = 2.877$), suggesting that brand image poses a mediating influence, bridging EI and employee commitment. This result underscores the link between perceptions of organization among employees as an internal matter that can have implications for their external branding. In other words, when employees have a good image of their organization, they can show positive behaviors at work which can improve the performance of the firm, leading to lasting benefits. Under the premises of sustainability-oriented theory of firm (Lozano et al., 2015), a strong brand image can create a sense of pride and identification (Khan & Fatma, 2023; Wei & Nasruddin, 2024). To extend, this can also create a sense of psychological security for employees, linking the premises of attachment theory as a strong bond is established between the individual and their organization when social values are integrated in the strategic approach (Elliott et al., 2024; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). As emotionally intelligent employees are better equipped to perceive and interpret company attributes, their internalization process is rendered more effective and efficient when the brand is sustainable and shares core values that are designed to benefit society, economy, and the environment, leading to higher commitment levels. While the direct context remains the contribution of this study, similar reports have been seen across the literature suggesting that there is a consensus in this regard (e.g. Purwanto et al., 2023; Schwaiger & Zehrer, 2022). Recent studies similarly recommend that adequate communication and a positive image can improve branding both internally and externally (Alhamad et al., 2024; Haris et al., 2022) especially for employees through triggering their pride and belonging (Purwanto et al., 2023). The current findings show that when employees possess EI, they can have a better internalization process regarding brand image which contributes to their sense of identification and attachment, leading to higher commitment levels. This is a vital aspect for SMEs in developing countries such as Lebanon as it establishes long-term stability and performance outcomes. It can also be stated that internal branding is a critical component for improving the mechanisms through which the workplace can foster positive employee behaviors (i.e. organizational commitment).

Lastly, the *third hypothesis* of the research was supported as can be observed in Table 5 ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 2.985$) which implies that CSR can act as a mediator for the EI – EC link. The results highlight the profound importance of ethical and sustainable practices (social, economic, and environmental) on employees' work outcomes which is in line with the premises of sustainability-oriented theory of

firm and attachment theory (Tan et al., 2023; Theron et al., 2024). This is due to the vast benefits of CSR practices that can link and translate the efforts of the organization regarding the wellbeing of society, which fosters ethical conduct, sense of purpose, green initiatives, and genuine care for employees, people and environment. This is in consensus with the existing literature which supports the notion of CSR being a bridge for SMEs to create and share value, build rapport with local communities, and improve reputation (De Silva & De Silva Lokuwaduge, 2021; Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022). CSR practices when deployed effectively, can meet the psychological needs for safety, attachment, and identification which drives the employees towards positive work outcomes as a response to their attachment, particularly when their EI is high (Alhumoudi & Alfarhan, 2024; Shafiat & Huang, 2023). The nature of CSR activities is designed to engage employees and involves internal communication aspects that further provide meaning and information while encouraging confidence, creativity and involvement (Farmanesh et al., 2025; Khan & Fatma, 2023). It can be implied that as a tangible action of care and value, CSR initiatives can be a leverage for emotionally intelligent employees to internalize and align with sustainable development goals and values of the organization. Commitment is the manifestation of internalization process in this context. Participation of employees with high EI in CSR activities can contribute to the effectiveness of these programs while promoting engagement, active involvement and commitment.

Conclusions

To summarize, the findings of this research highlight how Lebanese SMEs can focus on emotionally intelligent employees (e.g. recruitment and training) due to small number of staff (approximately five per firm). Furthermore, implementing strategies that specifically focus on improving brand image (internal and external outlooks) along with CSR initiatives that align with the society, economic, and environment in terms contributions can translate into better performance from employees, leading to a sustainable and integrated dedication, approach, and brand stewardship. validation and focus on these interconnections is the highlight of the current results and contribution to this context for improvement of sustainable practices among Lebanese SMEs.

Theoretical Implications

The current research affirms the adequacy and relevance of *emotional intelligence theory* (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) by showing both the direct and mediated impacts on employees' commitment in the Lebanese SME context. The ability to understand and manage one's emotion in a small workplace can yield strong bonds in the firm due to its cultural and economic context (Alsughayir, 2021; Pellitteri, 2021). As this theory is commonly applied in Western and corporate settings, the current research extends this aspect to contribute to its current understanding in the Middle Eastern region. Furthermore, the research applies *attachment theory* (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) which is empirically supported by the results showing the robustness of how brand image and CSR practices can trigger psychological and emotional components that drive commitment. Robust CSR activities can shift the firm into a secure base for employees which brings emotional safety and stable workplace atmosphere as they meet innate needs for belonging (Deb et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2024). Importantly, this study focused on sustainable SMEs where *sustainability-oriented theory* of the firm demonstrates how non-monetary activities and strategies (brand image and CSR) can yield enhanced human capital and organizational competitiveness (Al Maalouf et al., 2023; Akomea et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2015). As this theory is relatively new (Farmanesh et al., 2025), this research contributes to its application in context-specific Lebanese SME setting. The sustainable orientation of SMEs in developing economy of Lebanon can be a significant benchmark that addresses long-term benefits to society, economy, and environment of the country that faces various challenges and instability. Thus, sustainability-oriented SMEs can have a major impact on wellbeing of Lebanon if branding and CSR activities are effectively implemented.

Practical Implications

In addition to what was noted, there are a number of practical implications derived from the current findings that can be used by SME managers across Lebanon and to extension, neighboring countries due to cultural and institutional similarities. Firstly, it is essential to recognize the importance of having emotionally intelligent employees, which should be considered in the recruitment process. Specific assessments and evaluations can be implemented to ensure this matter. Secondly, training and development programs should be employed to further improve the attributes of employees and the internal branding of the firm. These programs should focus on emotional regulation, empathy, and social skills. This will empower employees' dispositions towards sustainability through higher commitment. Thirdly, managers should consider employees as viable internal marketing targets, and a source of branding by building identification, pride, connection, and social, economic, and environmental values. Having modern and technological communication channels (e.g. project management systems) can further improve the perception of employees in this context. Fourthly, CSR activities that focus on engagement between the firm and social and environmental causes can highly benefit the image and reputation of the organization both internally and externally. Social, economic, and environmental causes and values can be leveraged by employees to act as stewards of the brand, extending its effectiveness through retention and commitment. Authentic and genuine CSR investments can have long lasting benefits for SMEs in the Lebanese context. Lastly, by incorporating sustainability pillars, SMEs can ensure competitive advantages in the market as emotionally intelligent staff are more resilient, aware and regulated to build upon their competencies. Such initiatives can extend the application of sustainable programs to the Middle Eastern region.

Limitations and Recommendations

Despite the previously noted contributions of this research, there are a number of limitations which should be noted; 1) the research employed a quantitative, deductive and cross-sectional approach which limits the representativeness, depth, and tracing effects through time; 2) while 42 SMEs were included in the survey, a larger sample and a broader area is required for generalization of the current findings; 3) the Lebanese SME context is scarce in the extant literature (i.e. socio-economic environment, strategic implementation, and CSR settings) which limits the specificity of observed measures; 4) self-reported data can have potential common method biases which limit the accuracy of observations; and 5) while the current theoretical setting is robust (Attachment Theory, EI Theory, Sustainability-Oriented Theory of the Firm), other variables (e.g. cultural elements) or theories (e.g. leader-member exchange) can be integrated in this context to improve the interpretations of the measurements.

In accord with the previously noted limitations, there are several paths for future studies that are enlisted below:

1. Qualitative studies can be designed to obtain in-depth information about employees' EI and commitment to the organization.
2. Longitudinal studies can address the effectiveness of CSR and Branding initiatives among SMEs, enabling observation of changes through time.
3. Corporate organizations and SMEs in the Middle East can be addressed with larger sample size to include cross-cultural results and build upon the current findings.
4. Internal and external CSR activities can be compared along with different leadership styles, organizational cultures, or industry-specific settings to further build upon the current understanding of the subject.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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