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Investigating Key Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee-Based Brand Equity

Abstract

A wealth of research examines firm- or consumer-based brand equity but largely ignores internal stakeholders' perceptions of the brand asset. The present study focuses on service employees who affect both internal (i.e. other employees) and external (i.e. customers) stakeholders through their interactions. The study draws on cognitive psychology and social identity theory to develop and empirically test an integrated model of antecedents and consequences of employee-based brand equity (EBBE) that distinguishes between a cognitive and an affective route for its development *via* brand knowledge and brand identification respectively. The research extends the limited work on EBBE by examining how perceptions of employees about their supervisors' brand leadership behaviors and their supervisors' focus on their subordinates significantly drive employees' responses to the internal brand. The proposed model also highlights the significant role of EBBE *vis-à-vis* two citizenship behaviors, namely brand value dissemination and customer orientation.

Keywords: Brand equity, Employees, Antecedents, Consequences

Introduction

Brand equity, or the added value endowed by the brand to the product (Farquhar, 1989), is a key indicator of brand and business success and often firms' most prized asset (Ambler 2000). Whilst the literature recognizes that various stakeholder groups may potentially be recipients of this value, the majority of published research examines brand equity from the consumer or firm point of view (e.g., Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010; Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). The significance of employees in delivering the brand promise to external stakeholders (such as customers), especially in a services context, is well documented. For example, employee's skills and knowledge play an important role in the customers' experience of the brand and subsequently their brand perceptions (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2006). Despite this acknowledgment in the pertinent literature, relatively little research exists on how *employee-based brand equity* (EBBE) can practically be enhanced so that internal stakeholders best perform their role as brand ambassadors (Morokane et al., 2016; Helm, 2011; Sirianni et al., 2013).

EBBE captures the perceived added value that employees receive as a result of employee-based brand building efforts (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). It constitutes a central tenet in internal branding, as the consistent delivery of the brand promise to customers is unlikely without internal stakeholders' internalization of the company's values (Helm et al., 2016). Shedding light on the mechanism through which brands are interpreted from the employee's point of view and how this interpretation translates to brand- and/or customer-related behaviors is key for internal branding success, as customers' experience with the brand promise will remain ineffective without internal stakeholders' alignment with the company's values (Helm et al., 2016; Du Preez et al., 2017).

This work builds on previous research to develop and empirically test an integrated model of antecedents and consequences of EBBE that differentiates between a cognitive and an affective pathway to the development of EBBE *via* brand knowledge and brand identification respectively. Previous research mainly recognizes brand-associated antecedents (e.g. brand commitment) of EBBE (King et al., 2012), but largely ignores how internal stakeholders' perceptions of their proximal work context, particularly with regards to their line managers, shape their attitude towards the employer's brand (Baker et al., 2014; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Mabey and Gooderham, 2005).

This paper extends beyond the extant literature and contends that employees' perceptions of their supervisor's adoption of internal market orientation (i.e. the behaviors associated with creating satisfied and motivated employees) and also perceptions of their supervisor's brand leadership behavior constitute two key, formal and informal, respectively, elements of the work context, which affect brand-related communication and information exchange (Boukis, Kostopoulos, and Katsaridou, 2014; Xiong and King, 2018). Current knowledge is also advanced by examining how a managerial focus on EBBE benefits the firm both through greater brand value dissemination that occurs within the organization (i.e. via inter-employee interactions) but also through an enhanced employee customer orientation.

This study brings together two disparate, yet related, streams of research (i.e. OB and internal branding), extending current knowledge in three ways. First, drawing on equity and social identity theories, it establishes the importance of two elements of the work environment, namely supervisors' internal market orientation and brand leadership, both of which are shown to enhance employees' perceived value of the employer brand. Second, it expands the discussion around the role of the three key components of brand-congruent behavior (i.e. cognition-affect-conation) in internal branding. Employees' cognitive (i.e.,

brand knowledge) and affective (i.e., brand identification) responses to the employer brand constitute the main routes through which conative outcomes, such as customer- or brand-citizenship behaviors, can be enacted. Finally, it emphasizes the influential role of EBBE formation on two employee citizenship outcomes: a brand-related outcome directed at audiences inside the organization (i.e., brand value dissemination to co-workers) and a non-brand-related outcome directed at customers (i.e., customer orientation).

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: the key constructs of the conceptual model along with the model development are first introduced. Next, the methodology is presented, and the findings are discussed. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings, as well as limitations and future research directions.

Key constructs and model development

Employee-based brand equity

Whilst researchers agree on the importance of EBBE as a source of potential benefits for the firm and an integral part of brand equity assessment (e.g. Burmann et al., 2009), there is less consensus regarding its conceptualization. Tavassoli et al. (2014) focus on the firm as the recipient of value by conceptualizing EBBE as “the value that a brand provides to a firm through its effects on the attitudes and behaviors of its employees” (p.677). A more homogeneous group of conceptualizations focuses on EBBE as the differential effect that the brand has on employees (e.g. King and Grace, 2009; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). In this vein, EBBE is viewed as ‘the differential effect that brand knowledge has on an employee’s response to internal brand management’ (King et al., 2012; p. 269); as “the incremental effect of branding on employee behavior” (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; p. 1250); or as ‘the added meaning that employees receive from the brand over and above their job and the firm’s reputation, resulting in positive or negative behaviour towards the firm’ (Berger-Remy and

Michel, 2015; p. 4). In line with this stream, the present study views EBBE as the perceived added value that employees receive as a result of employee-based brand-building efforts (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010).

As shown in Table I, previous research on EBBE antecedents and consequences has made significant contributions, but further research is warranted. In terms of antecedents, prior studies mainly address the impact of individual brand perceptions (e.g. brand image) on EBBE (e.g. Xiong et al., 2013; King and Grace, 2010). Despite the fact that managerial practices and internal brand communication are reported to strongly affect employees' brand perceptions (Baker et al., 2014) scarce research exists on the role of the supervisor or the impact of the proximal work environment in shaping EBBE (Cheung et al., 2014). Regarding the consequences of EBBE formation, prior work is somewhat confined with some evidence confirming the link between employees' brand-congruent behavior and external stakeholders' perceptions of brand equity (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; Kam Fung So and King, 2010). In fact, limited work investigates whether and under which conditions EBBE actually results in positive employee consequences which, in turn, affect the creation of consumer-based brand equity.

Insert Table I

Internal market orientation as a determinant of EBBE

Internal marketing was originally introduced as an organization-wide approach that treats employees as internal customers with the aim of encouraging them to perform better (Sasser and Arbeit, 1976). This managerial approach came into practice through the adoption of an internal market orientation (Gounaris, 2006) which consists of three dimensions; generating and disseminating intelligence about internal market needs and then responding to these needs (Lings and Greenley, 2005). Internal information gathering means collecting

information about employees; supervisors can collect employee information through formal and informal channels to identify employees' wants and needs and their perceptions of the equity of employer–employee exchanges (Karagonlar, Eisenberger and Aselage, 2016). Information dissemination promotes the alignment of employees' attitudes and behaviors with the organization's goals, while responsiveness implies the use of this information for improving employee job satisfaction and well-being (Lings and Greenley, 2010).

Although studies highlight the role of brand orientation as a key approach for successful employer branding (e.g. Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010), brand orientation remains a niche internal branding strategy which is mostly associated with communicating the brand promise internally rather with diffusing strategic directives and goals across organizational echelons (Urde, Baumgarth and Merrilees, 2013). On the other hand, internal market orientation represents an organization-wide philosophy which focuses on identifying and meeting employees' needs with the aim of enhancing employee performance (Gounaris, 2006), and as such, it is arguably more reflective of how employees perceive their proximal work context as well as their supervisor's focus on their well-being.

Pertinent work shows that internal market orientation adoption explains outcomes such as job satisfaction and fit (e.g. Gounaris, 2006; Boukis and Gounaris, 2014), but few empirical studies examine whether the adoption of internal market orientation is associated with improved employee brand performance (Boukis et al., 2014). Drawing on equity theory, internal market orientation is expected to enhance the job value balance internal stakeholders receive from their employer (Boukis et al., 2014), as a result of their employer's focus on their individual needs and wants. This surplus of job value generated from IMO will enhance employees' perceptions of the balance between what they contribute (inputs) and what they receive out of their work (outputs). As a result, employees are more likely to engage in

reciprocal behavior toward the firm (Wat and Shaffer, 2005) and consider themselves protagonists in the delivery of the brand (Morokane et al., 2016).

Employees' perceptions of internal market orientation capture the extent to which employees believe that their organization focuses on their individual needs and cares about their well-being (Lings and Greenley, 2010; Gounaris, 2006). Organizational responsiveness to individual employee needs remains a key pillar of the internal market orientation concept and is actualized through formalized and informal channels. Through formalized channels, the organization's strategic orientation, brand values, and brand promise can be clearly communicated to frontline staff (Baker et al., 2014), resulting in higher employee awareness of the organization's brand. Informal internal communications (e.g., supervisor-subordinate discussions) can also reinforce employees' alignment with the organization's brand values. Subordinates' ongoing information exchange with their supervisor allows them to deal with the challenges they face in delivering the brand's promise to the customer, while also making them aware that their individual performance affects the brand image (Helm et al., 2016). The higher equity surplus on behalf of the employer, through IMO adoption, the higher the sense of belongingness with their organization (Epitropaki, 2013), facilitating employees' assimilation with their firm's brand values. Desired brand values, practices, and behaviors are also clarified and defined, providing a clear direction for organizational efforts (Baker et al., 2014). Thus:

H1a. The greater employees' perceptions of internal market orientation, the higher is their level of EBBE.

Successful employee branding also requires the development of employee awareness of the brand promise to customers and knowledge about the brand's values (Baker et al., 2014). Unless frontline employees become aware of the values the employer brand stands for, they

will be unable to transform its brand promise into a reality for customers (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). As part of internal market orientation adoption, the organization usually establishes a systematic bidirectional communication framework, in which the expected standards of service delivery and the values of the brand are conveyed to employees and feedback on the obstacles and difficulties faced by employees are in turn communicated back to the organization (Gounaris, 2006). Internal communication provides the context within which the brand identity is made relevant to each employee (Lings and Greenley, 2010)—that is, to enable employees to exhibit positive attitudes and deliver the articulated brand promise. The provided information identifies the linkage between the externally promoted brand identity and their responsibilities. This framework constitutes an effective way to enhance frontline employees' brand awareness through formal communication channels. Thus:

H1b. The greater employees' perceptions of internal market orientation in their organization, the greater is their knowledge about the employer brand.

The affective component of employer branding captures employee brand identification, which pertains to the integration of the brand identity into the employee's self-concept (Burmam et al., 2009). Based on the job value surplus that internal market orientation delivers and the change of organizational culture to one that is more people-oriented and focused towards individual needs and wants, internal stakeholders' relationship with the brand can be reinforced (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). Employee-supervisor interactions around the firm's brand values and promise, as advocated by IMO, may render the organization's brand more transparent for employees and easier to identify with (Bartels et al., 2010), facilitating employees' identification with the brand. With the value surplus delivered to them, greater employee perceptions of internal market orientation lead to enhance feeling of reciprocity and improved brand-supporting activity (Boukis et al., 2014).

This enhancement of frontline employees' value perceptions makes them more likely to embrace and internalize brand values. Thus:

H1c. The greater employees' perceptions of internal market orientation in their organization, the greater is their identification with the employer brand.

Brand leadership as a determinant of EBBE

Although leadership at the senior management level is viewed as a crucial antecedent of employees' brand-building and pro-organization behavior (Wallace et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2009), supervisors also remain indispensable in interpreting and instilling the company's values and vision to them (Edlinger, 2015), particularly when employees have limited access to top management, as is often the case in retail settings (Netemeyer and Maxham, 2007). Supervisor brand leadership represents frontline employees' perceptions of their supervisor's brand-congruent behavior (King, So, and Grace, 2013; Edlinger, 2015).

The link between supervisory actions and employee brand-aligned behavior is underpinned by social identity theory. Social identity reflects the individual's awareness that he/she belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of that membership (Tajfel, 1978, p. 31). When employees consider themselves members of an organization, they tend to direct their attitudes and behaviors toward achieving that organization's goals (Mills et al., 2014). Nevertheless, identification also occurs at the level of corporate brand not only to the organizational identity one.

Supervisors through their role-modeling behavior can provide a clear understanding of an organization's brand, rendering corporate brand values deeply rooted in the minds of other organizational members (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006). Supervisor's behavior can also foster employee-organization relationships (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006) and various leadership styles can shape subordinates' role identity and brand-supporting behavior

(Morhart et al., 2009). Hence, employees' buy-in of brand-specific attributes due to supervisor's brand-modeling behavior (i.e. brand values) is likely to increase their perceived value of the organization's brand. Thus:

H2a. The greater employees' perceptions of their supervisor's brand leadership, the higher is their level of EBBE.

Successful employer brand building conceptualizes employees as brand-related information carriers (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006). Given that a shared understanding of an organization's brand values must reside in employees' minds to encourage brand-supporting behavior (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005), managers need to disseminate the desired brand values successfully (Ind, 2004). Communicative leadership behavior harnesses commitment and cultivates brand ambassadors (Wallace et al., 2013). Ellinger et al. (2010) contend that leadership behavior bestows employees' care over blueprints, increasing their understanding of the brand. Supervisors influence the employer brand-building process not only through verbal communication but also through non-verbal communication, experienced in their social interactions. Effective supervisors should consistently and repeatedly communicate messages to employees about the brand identity and commitment to living the brand promise (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Boukis et al., 2017). Thus, their display of brand-consistent behavior should positively affect subordinates' awareness and understanding of the brand essence.

H2b. The greater employees' perceptions of their supervisor's brand leadership, the greater is their knowledge about the employer brand.

The branding literature contends that leaders are important because their brand-related behaviors affect subordinates' understanding of brand values (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, and Herrmann, 2007) and scholars associate leadership behavior with corporate brand

identification (Cornelissen, Haslam, and Balmer, 2007; Lievens, van Hoye and Anseel, 2007) and higher trust in the brand (Punjaisri et al., 2013). Although supervisors' actions and leadership styles are associated with various behavioral (Hui, Lee and Wang, 2015) and brand-related outcomes (Morhart et al., 2009), whether the supervisor's brand-modeling behavior actually leads to affective employee brand-related responses remains unexplored.

Drawing on social identity theory, as individuals are expected to strive for enhancing self-continuity and self-esteem, they would be more prone to act consistently with their peers to enhance their group (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014) and thereby their own brand identity. As employees interpret supervisor's actions as representative of their organisation actions (Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe, 2003), the articulation of brand values by their close peers (i.e. supervisors) could facilitate employees to define themselves with their organization's brand reality (Hodges and Martin, 2012), enhancing their brand identification levels. Therefore, employees' assimilation of the corporate brand values will be a function of their supervisor's brand-modeling behavior. Thus:

H2c. The greater employees' perceptions of their supervisor's brand leadership, the greater is their identification with the employer brand.

Brand identification and brand knowledge as antecedents of EBBE

Employer branding is unlikely to prove successful unless internal stakeholders actively respond to their employer's efforts by internalizing brand values and eventually enhancing their brand-supportive performance (Baker et al., 2014). Frontline staff's depth of brand knowledge and brand identification can significantly affect the delivery of the brand promise, as employees must become knowledgeable about the brand values, embrace them, and be motivated to act in congruence with the brand promise (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Despite studies illustrating the role of brand identification and brand knowledge on employee brand

performance (King and Grace, 2010; Punjaisri et al., 2009), the question of how affective (i.e., brand identification) and cognitive (i.e., brand knowledge) responses to the employer brand may jointly shape brand value formation requires additional evidence.

Brand identification reflects the degree to which employees integrate the brand identity into their own self-concept (Burmann et al., 2009). If employees understand and internalize the brand values, they are more likely to be cognitively and emotionally engaged in the brand as well as to diffuse their own brand experience successfully across the organization (King and Grace, 2010; Iyer et al., 2018). Following social identity theory, employees who strongly identify with their organization become vested in its success and failure. Furthermore, in striving for positive self-esteem, employees are motivated to engage in behaviors that enhance the value of their organization and, thus, of themselves (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Therefore, the value frontline employees receive from the brand is a function of their internalization of the brand's values. Thus:

H3. The greater employees' brand identification, the higher is their level of EBBE.

Brand knowledge captures the cognitive representation of the brand in employees' minds owing to accumulated prior knowledge and thus is also a key determinant of EBBE (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). Accumulated prior knowledge of brand values has a strong influence on orchestrating and directing organizational members towards organization's strategic objectives (Brannan et al., 2015). In turn, such brand-related cognitive schemata can contribute to higher levels of EBBE. Thus:

H4. The greater employees' brand knowledge, the higher is their level of EBBE.

EBBE as a driver of employee extra-role behavior

Several studies focus on the importance of employee extra-role activity directed at the organization or customers (e.g. Lülfs and Hahn, 2013) and identify organizational, individual, and contextual factors that promote employee extra-role behavior, including organizational support (Podsakoff, Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Maynes, and Spoelma, 2014) and corporate reputation (Walsh and Bartikowski, 2013). Scholars have also begun examining the role of employer branding for promoting brand-related extra-role activity, such as brand citizenship behavior (Baker et al., 2014) and participation in brand development (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). However, the contribution of brand-derived value to employees' engagement in extra-role activity is rarely considered, and no research to date examines whether employees' perceptions of the employer brand affect their engagement in extra-role activity (King et al., 2013). In this context, two extra-role outcomes are examined: brand value dissemination to co-workers and customer orientation.

Brand value dissemination to co-workers is an important driver of corporate brand identity formation, as it captures employees' effort to communicate to their peers the corporate brand values. Direct communication and information exchange between internal stakeholders are effective ways to create a coherent brand identity internally (Gardet and Mothe 2011; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006); such communication not only reflects employees' internalization of brand values but also indicates their willingness to disseminate the brand reality to their co-workers (Baker et al., 2014; King and Grace, 2009). Although brand communication directed at employees can lead to various benefits, including enhanced organizational and brand commitment (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005), the communication of brand knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient, for aligning employees with the company's brand promise.

Because employer branding is realized predominantly through firm-derived brand communication initiatives that enhance the perceived congruency between the employee's and the brand's values (Henkel et al., 2007; Boon et al., 2011), the exchange of brand-related information between employees may enhance an employee's understanding of the brand and his or her role in delivering the brand message in connection with brand-specific goals (King and Grace, 2009; 2012). Unsolicited behaviors directed at other peers, such as brand value dissemination to co-workers, are crucial because they can help co-workers improve their performance levels (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Frontline employees' positive associations with the organization's brand enhance their internalization of brand values, while their positive experience with the brand ensures their awareness of the brand values (Kuenzel and Halliday, 2008). Thus, their embracement of the brand is likely to motivate them to disseminate and share brand values with other peers with the view of rendering them effective brand ambassadors.

H5a. The greater employees' EBBE, the greater is the likelihood that they will engage in brand value dissemination to co-workers.

Customer orientation is a widely researched concept (Farrell and Oczkowski, 2012; Hult et al., 2005) and serves as a foundational component of employee management practices. Whereas customer orientation mainly involves the extent to which an organization is market oriented at the organizational level (Homburg, Hoyer, and Fassnacht, 2002), the implementation of the marketing concept in service organizations is achieved through employees and their interactions with customers (Donavan, Brown, and Mowen, 2004). Therefore, researchers consider customer orientation an individual-level construct that plays a significant role in determining the organization's ability to become market oriented (Zablah, Franke, Brown, and Bartholomew, 2012).

Individual-level customer orientation is represented by two perspectives: customer orientation as a behavioral concept and customer orientation as a surface-level personality trait. The surface trait conceptualization portrays customer orientation as a relatively stable predisposition to serve customers (Brown, Mowen, Donavan, and Licata, 2002), whereas the behavioral approach characterizes customer orientation as behaviors designed to satisfy customer needs over time (Hennig-Thurau and Thurau, 2003). The present study views customer orientation from a behavioral perspective in line with scholars who define the concept as a behavioral phenomenon at the level of the individual frontline employee (Stock and Hoyer, 2005). So, individual customer orientation constitutes a set of employee behaviors geared toward engendering customer satisfaction and is linked with outcomes such as customer identification with the organization (Homburg et al., 2002) and customer satisfaction (Stock and Hoyer, 2005).

Previous research predominantly argues that high levels of customer orientation enhance customer views of the organization's brand through positive interactions with the brand's employees and result in greater overall satisfaction among both internal and external stakeholders (Gazzoli, Hancer, and Kim, 2013). However, research does not address the role of employer branding in customer-oriented behavior, even though becoming customer conscious requires an understanding of the organization's values and brand promise before they can be communicated to customers (Homburg, Müller, and Klarmann, 2011; King et al., 2013). A positive employee experience with the organization's brand reality should render employees more prone to reciprocate to their organization by adopting a more customer-oriented behavior (Farrell and Oczkowski, 2012). Thus:

H5b. The higher employees' level of EBBE, the greater is their customer orientation.

The proposed conceptual model investigates two organizational determinants of EBBE—namely, internal market orientation and supervisor brand leadership—and examines the role of employee cognitive (i.e., brand knowledge) and affective (i.e., brand identification) responses to branding in the formation of EBBE. In addition, the study examines the effects of EBBE on brand-related (i.e., brand value dissemination to co-workers) and non-brand-related (i.e., customer orientation) extra-role outcomes (see Fig. I).

Insert Figure I

Methodology

Sampling

To test the conceptual framework and hypothesized relationships, data was obtained from an interpersonal services context, and particularly from high-elaborate services, because frontline employees have a more central role in this context owing to high face time with customers (Ottenbacher, Gnoth, and Jones, 2006). The data contained employees working for organizations covering a broad range of service sectors, such as hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, banks, and airlines. All companies selected were identified on the basis of a European-based sample of service firms within these sectors. Senior executives from service organizations were contacted requesting their permission to conduct the survey within their organization. In total, 103 of approximately 759 service firms contacted agreed to participate in the research (response rate of 13.6%). Companies that agreed to participate provided the contact details of frontline staff from their respective organizations.

The data collection process occurred through an online questionnaire, and a link was sent to all respondents who agreed to participate in the study. Out of 683 frontline employees contacted, 376 representatives from 103 service firms responded to the invitation (response

rate 55.7%). Deletion of incomplete responses led to a final usable sample of 305 questionnaires (final response rate 44.7%). Regarding the demographic profile of the sample, 55.1% of the respondents are male, 67.5% of them have a bachelor degree, 56.4% of the respondents are in the 31-40 age cohort and 42.6% of the respondents have working experience between 1-3 years. Also, before proceeding with data analysis, within-firm interrater agreement was estimated to ensure that the data does not violate the requirement for independence of observations (Lindell and Brandt, 1999). The average within-group interrater reliability values for IMO was (ICC=.658), and for supervisor brand leadership was (ICC=.640). Both of them are below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7, suggesting insufficient within-group agreement for data aggregation to the organizational level for analysis.

Measures

The study employed established scales from an extensive review on the services marketing and employer branding literature. All constructs use a seven-point scale, with anchors of strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (7). The internal market orientation scale is based on 15 items from Lings and Greenley's (2005) scale. Supervisor brand leadership was measured with five items from King et al.'s (2012) scale. EBBE was based on Baumgarth and Schmidt's (2010) work. A four-item scale was used for brand identification, based on Punjaisri and Wilson's (2011) suggestions. Customer orientation was operationalized using Stock and Hoyer's (2005) scale. Brand value dissemination scale was adapted from King and Grace (2010). Finally, brand knowledge was based on Baumgarth and Schmidt's (2010) seven-item scale. The Appendix provides a list of all scale items.

Findings

Reliability and validity

The authors followed the procedure Mathieu and Taylor (2006) use and conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) for all model constructs. The AMOS 21 software was used for data analysis. In line with Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, a CFA was conducted to test the measurement model before testing the structural model. As Table II shows, the results of the CFA indicate that the chi-square (χ^2) value of the model was 3005.83, with 839 degrees of freedom ($p < 0.001$). The model fit indices used for the study were the χ^2/df ($3005.83/839 = 3.58$), where a ratio of less than 5 is generally considered indicative of a reasonable fit between the proposed model and the data on which the model is constructed (Kline, 2005). The relatively large sample size may have rendered this test an inadequate measure of the model's fitness because sample size can affect the chi-square value (McDonald and Ho, 2002). Other representative indices also suggest that the results of the measurement model analysis are an acceptable fit of the proposed model to the data (IFI=0.919, CFI=0.918, TLI= 0.902, RMSEA=0.058).

Insert table II

Additional evidence derived from the CFA indicates that the resulting measures are reliable and valid. To assess construct convergent and discriminant validity, the authors followed Fornell and Larcker's (1981) recommended approach. All construct reliabilities were above 0.70 (Table III), and the lowest average variance extracted (AVE) was 0.59, demonstrating a high level of internal consistency for the latent variables. Furthermore, all indicators demonstrated significant loadings on their respective latent constructs ($p < 0.001$), giving strong support for reliability and convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that the discriminant validity of a construct is established when its AVE is greater than the squared correlations between the construct and all other variables. As Table III shows, all constructs met this criterion for discriminant validity.

Regarding IMO, discriminant validity and reliability were also established for all its sub-dimensions ($AVE > 0.53$; $CR > 0.81$, Cronbach $\alpha > 0.82$).

Insert Tables III

All the items came from the same source (i.e., employees), so common method bias needed to be assessed. Harman's single-factor test (Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, and Eden, 2010) revealed that the items of the original measurement model loaded on eight separate factors, with the first factor accounting for 41.6% of the total variance in the items, which indicates that common source/method variance does not explain the majority of the covariance between the scales. Common method bias is therefore not a large issue with this data set.

Structural model

After assessing measurement reliability and validity, investigating the fit of the hypothesized model is appropriate. Table IV displays the fit statistics, hypotheses, and standardized estimates generated. Summated scores for all constructs were used because they enable researchers to somewhat minimize the measurement error inherent in all measured variables (Van Bruggen, Lilien, and Kacker, 2002). In addition, organizational tenure and company size were employed as control variables, as the length of the relationship with the employer could affect employees attachment with their brand reality (Marchington, Rubery and Grimshaw, 2011), while company size is important as internal marketing practices might significantly vary due to the size of the organization (Liu, 1995). Results indicate no significant effects on brand enactment when controlling for both organizational tenure ($p > .05$) and company size ($p > .05$). The goodness-of-fit statistics of the model reveal that the

model fits the data reasonably well ($\chi^2=398.77$; $df=24$ degrees; $p<0.001$; IFI=0.976; NFI=0.965, CFI=0.976; TLI=0.954; GFI=0.957; RMSEA=0.074) (Hair et al., 2006).

Insert Table IV

Table V reports the standardized results of the structural model. Internal market orientation has no significant effect on EBBE ($p>0.05$), which fails to support H1a. On the contrary, internal market orientation has a significant effect on brand knowledge ($\gamma=0.769$, $p<.001$), verifying H1b, as well as on brand identification ($\gamma=0.718$, $p<.001$), confirming hypothesis H1c. Brand leadership significantly predicts EBBE ($\gamma=0.158$, $p<0.001$), in support of H2a. Likewise, the results also indicate a positive effect of brand leadership on brand knowledge ($\gamma=0.275$, $p<.001$), verifying H2b. Brand leadership has a weak but significant impact on brand identification ($\gamma=0.099$, $p<.01$), confirming hypothesis H2c. Brand identification significantly affects EBBE ($\gamma=0.248$, $p<.001$), in support of H3. Brand knowledge also emerges as a strong predictor of EBBE ($\gamma=0.547$, $p<0.05$), confirming H4. The results also suggest a significant effect of EBBE on brand value dissemination to co-workers ($\gamma=0.658$, $p<.001$), verifying H5a. The impact of EBBE on customer orientation is also significant ($\gamma=0.417$, $p<.001$), confirming H5b. The squared correlations from the model indicate that the antecedents of EBBE explain a significant amount of its overall variance (64.8%). Internal market orientation and brand leadership explain 66.7% of brand knowledge and 52.6% of brand identification. Regarding brand value dissemination to co-workers, EBBE explains 43.5% of its variance but only 17.3% of the customer orientation construct. Additionally, the potential mediating role of EBBE was also tested for the respective paths between IMO and brand leadership and brand knowledge and brand identification. Results in all of these four paths indicate no significant evidence of mediation.

Insert Table V

Discussion

The reported integrated model adds to the emerging stream around the impact of the organization's brand on internal stakeholders (e.g. Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Brannan et al., 2015). More specifically, it enhances understanding of EBBE by examining two key antecedents that emanate from employees' proximal work context (i.e., supervisors' focus on employees, as reflected on IMO, and supervisors' brand leadership). At the same time it identifies a cognitive and an affective route to the development of EBBE and explicitly links the internal brand asset to employee's extra-role activity toward customers and other employees.

As a first major contribution, this study identifies several insightful drivers of EBBE formation. This study is one of the first to investigate how supervisors can enhance EBBE. Although previous research links a supervisor's behavioral orientation to higher employee commitment (Wallace et al., 2013), evidence confirms that a supervisor's brand role modeling actually enhances the value employees derive from the employer brand. Peer effects evidently help promote the brand internally, as supervisors' brand-consistent behavior shapes subordinates' internalization of the brand promise. By contrast, internal market orientation has no direct influence on EBBE; rather, its contribution to EBBE is indirectly through brand knowledge and brand identification. As a result, the adoption of managerial practices, which entail disseminating the company's vision, values, and orientation to internal stakeholders, induce brand knowledge and brand identification among internal stakeholders.

Apart from the influence of the organizational context, employees' cognitive and affective responses to branding emerge as the main determinants of EBBE. In line with brand awareness, which is crucial for brand equity in a consumer context (Christodoulides and de Chernatony, 2010), results also demonstrate that brand knowledge is a strong predictor of

EBBE. Thus, enhancing internal stakeholders' awareness but also their understanding of the brand promise and values should become a key priority of employer branding efforts. Furthermore, brand identification has a positive impact on EBBE, signaling that high emotional attachment to the brand enhances EBBE. Employees' knowledge of brand values remains a more influential factor in the employer branding process, compared to their attachment to the brand. This signals the importance of primarily communicating and diffusing the brand reality to employees rather than independently aiming to enhance brand identification per se.

Another contribution concerns the findings regarding brand knowledge formation. This study extends the range of internal market orientation benefits for service organizations, for the first time empirically connecting internal market orientation with the effective dissemination of brand knowledge across supervisor-employee exchanges. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends equity theory in explaining how employees' awareness of and attachment with the employer's brand can be enhanced from the delivery of a job value surplus. This value surplus to internal stakeholders not only renders them more prone to reciprocate the firm (Lings and Greenley, 2010) but also more inclined to positively respond to internal branding strategies. Although a supervisor's brand-consistent behavior contributes to employees' embracement of brand values, internal marketing activities create the main cognitive prerequisite so that employees can deliver the brand successfully. With respect to brand identification, internal market orientation proves to be its strongest antecedent, whereas brand leadership only has a weak effect on internal stakeholders' brand attachment. Although several studies consider the supervisor-employee relationship the basis for the dissemination of organizational culture and policies (e.g. Mills et al., 2014), higher perceived job value,

along with management focus and care for employees, actually drives employees' identification with the brand.

Regarding the role of EBBE on employer branding outcomes, the findings suggest that EBBE accounts for internal stakeholders' brand- and (non-brand)-related citizenship behaviors, revealing the benefits from employer branding activities to organizational well-being. EBBE has a significant impact on brand value dissemination to co-workers, explaining approximately 43% of the overall variance. Higher levels of EBBE drive the dissemination of brand values to other peers, enhancing the alignment of internal stakeholders with the organization's brand promise. It can be concluded that EBBE emerges as a key enabler of brand identity co-creation; internal stakeholders not only diffuse the brand values to other peers but also tap brand knowledge from each other, resulting in the formation of a more homogenous brand experience within the organization. Higher levels of EBBE also promote a corresponding behavioral response on behalf of employees directed both internally and externally, adding in a twofold way to the creation of a unified brand identity. This is in line with recent research suggesting that brand identities are the product of multiple stakeholders' interactions (Michel, 2017). Regarding customer orientation, EBBE is an important determinant of frontline customer orientation. This study is the first to empirically confirm EBBE as a driver of non-brand-related citizenship activity.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study also have important practical insights for strategic management. A major implication for managers pertains to the importance of internal market orientation for internal stakeholders as a mechanism that can further develop employees and increase their knowledge of brand values. Organizations should rely on supervisors not only to diffuse the brand values to their subordinates but also to communicate the brand essence along with

higher management consideration for employee well-being. Although research assumes that brand-related aspects determine EBBE, in this study the supervisor's role for creating brand value for subordinates emerges as critical. This finding sets supervisors as a primary target group for strategic efforts to enhance frontline employees' perceptions of brand equity. Nevertheless, the supervisor's role becomes more critical for encouraging employees' embracement of the organization's brand. Fostering EBBE constitutes a prerequisite for managers to promote the diffusion of the brand reality across the organization. Although employees must be attached to the brand and have adequate understanding of its promise, the value they receive from the company brand drives the sharing of brand values to their peers. More important, EBBE proves crucial for the enhancement of customer-oriented behaviors. This finding highlights the significance of employees as shapers of brand identities across internal and external stakeholders.

Limitations and future research

This study has three limitations that restrict its interpretation and generalizability. First, the dependent variables (i.e., customer orientation and brand value dissemination) were self-reported measures. Although scholars suggest that self-reported measures have their strengths as assessments of employee performance, some concern exists with using a self-reported performance measure, as employees tend to over-report their performance under the influence of social desirability bias (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone, 2002). Second, the scope of this research is limited to the impact of EBBE on employee-level of extra-role activity. Future research might extend this scope by examining other contextual drivers (e.g., organizational culture) as well as moderators (e.g., employee characteristics) of EBBE. A third limitation is the measurement of EBBE as a unidimensional construct. While this measurement is not unusual in pertinent literature (King and Grace, 2010), the current measurement may not

capture every nuance of the construct. Future research might also address the development of integrated models that combine perspectives of brand equity from different stakeholders—for example, data on employee and customer perspectives of brand equity with a view to determine whether fluctuations of EBBE affect consumer-based brand equity. Last but not least, the analysis in this study was carried out at the individual employee level rather than the organizational level. Due to the complexity of the model and the relatively small sample of firms within our data an analysis at the organizational level was not possible. Future research may examine the relationships at the aggregate level and link EBBE to organizational performance data such as sales and or customer satisfaction scores.

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Appendix - Questionnaire items

Brand Value Dissemination
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I try to communicate to my colleagues the company’s brand values. 2. I often explain to my colleagues the importance of my role in delivering the brand message. 3. I try hard to communicate our brand values to my colleagues (e.g., by way of informal chats, or by volunteering for a mentoring role).
Brand Leadership
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My line manager is truly committed to deliver the brand promise to customers. 2. My line manager tries hard to communicate the company’s brand values to our team. 3. My line manager is concerned about every aspect of my performance that affects our brand image. 4. My line manager behaves consistently with the brand values, even when he is not controlled for doing so. 5. My line manager is a good brand role model.
Customer orientation

1. I try to get to discuss the customers' needs.
2. I answer the customers' questions about products and/or services as correctly as I can.
3. I try to give the customers an accurate expectation of what the product/service will do for them.
4. I try to help the customers to achieve their goals.

EBBE

1. I am aware that everything I say or do can affect the brand image.
2. I always consider the impact on the company's brand when I make decisions.
3. Understanding company's brand values helps me perform better.
4. I believe in the same values held and promoted by my company's brand.
5. The experience with the company's brand has met my expectations.

Brand identification

1. My sense of pride towards (my company) brand is reinforced by the brand-related messages.
2. I view the success of the brand as my own success.
3. I feel I belong to (my company).
4. When someone praises this brand, it feels like a personal compliment.

Brand Knowledge

1. I am familiar with our brand communication (e.g., magazines, Internet, etc.).
2. I am aware of the goals we try to achieve through the brand.
3. I am well informed about the values represented by the brand.
4. I understand how our customers can benefit from our brand.
5. I am familiar with our brand style guide.
6. I know which attributes of our brand differentiate us from our competitors.
7. I know how to comport myself so as to present our brand to customers positively.

Internal Market Orientation

Informal information generation

1. When at work, supervisors try to find out what employees want from the company.
2. When at work, if supervisors notice one of the employees is acting differently to normal, they will try to find out if there is a problem that is causing a change in behavior.
3. When at work, supervisors try to find out employees' real feelings about their jobs.
4. When at work, I regularly talk to my supervisor to find out about my work.

Formal face-to-face information generation

5. In this company, we have regular staff appraisals in which we discuss what employees want.
6. In this company, management meets with the employees at least once a year to find out what expectations they have of their jobs for the future.
7. In this company, management interacts directly with our employees to find out how to make them more satisfied.

Formal written information generation

8. In this company, we do a lot of internal market research.
9. In this company, we survey employees at least once a year to assess the quality of employment.
10. In this company, we often talk with our survey people to identify influences on our employees' behavior (e.g., unions, sales representatives, customers).

Information dissemination

11. In this company, I regularly meet with my supervisor to report about issues relating to the whole organization.
12. In this company, I regularly report back to my supervisor about issues that affect my working environment.

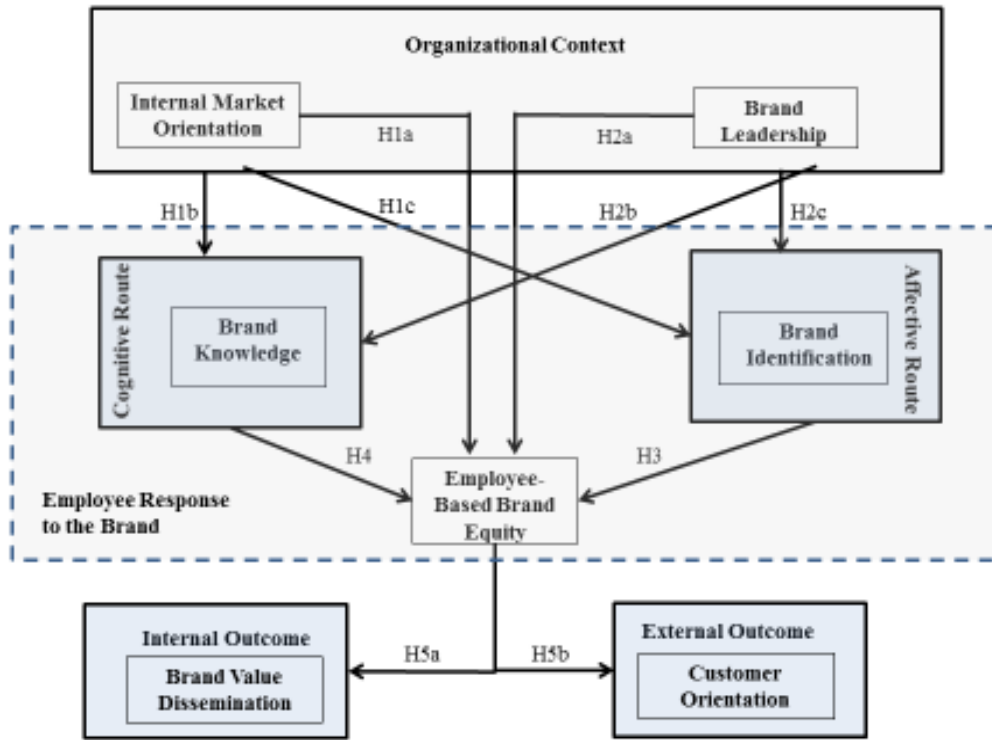
Responsiveness

13. In this company, when supervisors find that employees are unhappy with the management, they take corrective action.
14. In this company, when supervisors find that employees would like to modify their conditions of

employment, the departments make concerted efforts to do so.

15. In this company, supervisors make changes when employee feedback indicates that they are dissatisfied with the status quo.

Figure I



Tables

Table I – Antecedents and Outcomes of EBBE

Antecedents Of EBBE	Brand commitment, Brand knowledge, Brand role relevance, Brand importance	(Xiong et al., 2013)
	Employee assets	(Cardy et al., 2007)
	Brand orientation, internal brand commitment, internal brand knowledge, and internal brand involvement	(Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010)
	Brand Image, Brand Awareness, Perceived Quality	(Tsang, Lee, and Li, 2011)
	Role Clarity, Brand commitment	(King and Grace, 2010)
	CSR, Organizational Trust, Perceived organizational prestige, Psychological Contract obligation	(Biswas and Suar, 2016)
	Perceived environmental uncertainty	(Poulis and Wisker, 2016)
	Brand image	Lee, Lee and Wu (2011)
Outcomes Of EBBE	Executive rewards	(Tavassoli, Sorescu, and Chandy, 2014)
	Firm Performance	(Poulis and Wisker, 2016)
	Customer-based brand equity	(Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010)
	Financial/non-financial performance	(Biswas and Suar, 2016)

Table II - Model fit of the measurement model

Model	CFI	RMSEA	IFI	TLI
	0.918	0.058	0.919	0.902
Model Fit: $\chi^2=3005.83$; df =839; Probability level p=0.000				

Table III - Measure validity tests and construct intercorrelations

	Mean (SD)	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. IMO	4.52(.68)	(0.68)	0.34	0.33	0.53	0.68	0.55	0.36
2. Brand Value Dissemination	4.26(.98)	.589**	(0.59)	0.14	0.49	0.40	0.50	0.21
3. Brand Leadership	4.37(1.18)	.580**	.375**	(0.65)	0.38	0.41	0.24	0.15
4. EBBE	4.43(.98)	.731**	.704**	.618**	(0.88)	0.69	0.55	0.21
5. Brand Knowledge	4.48(.99)	.832**	.637**	.646**	.835**	(0.69)	0.62	0.24
6. Brand Identification	4.59(1.03)	.745**	.710**	.495**	.747**	.793**	(0.65)	0.38
7. Customer orientation	4.76(.88)	.604**	.465**	.392**	.462**	.499**	.631**	(0.79)
Composite Reliability		0.96	-	0.90	0.97	0.92	0.88	0.93
CFI		0.945	-	0.976	0.999	0.981	0.999	0.998
TLI		0.923	-	0.939	0.999	0.971	0.976	0.994
GFI		0.919	-	0.973	0.993	0.968	0.992	0.996
RMSEA		0.078	-	0.045	0.018	0.073	0.064	0.031
Cronbach a		0.910	0.760	0.849	0.876	0.907	0.899	0.805

*Values below the diagonal are correlations; AVE values are placed along the diagonals; values above the diagonal are squared correlations. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table IV - Model fit of the structural model

Model	CFI	TLI	IFI	GFI	NFI	RMSEA
	0.976	0.954	0.976	0.957	0.965	0.074
Model Fit: $\chi^2 = 398.77$; $df = 24$; $p = 0.000$						

Table V - Standardized effects of the structural model

Path	Standardized Estimates	S.E.	p (sig.)
IMO → EBBE (H1a)	0.040	.064	n.s.
IMO → Brand knowledge (H1b)	0.769	.033	***
IMO → Brand Identification (H1c)	0.718	.048	***
Brand Leadership → EBBE(H2a)	0.158	.028	***
Brand Leadership → Brand knowledge (H2b)	0.275	.025	***
Brand Leadership → Brand Identification (H2c)	0.099	.037	***
Brand identification → EBBE(H3)	0.248	.057	***
Brand knowledge → EBBE(H4)	0.547	.038	**
EBBE → Brand Value Dissemination (H5a)	0.658	.047	***
EBBE → Customer Orientation (H5b)	0.417	.052	***