

INTERNAL BRAND COMMUNICATION FOR TRANSFORMING EMPLOYEES INTO BRAND CHAMPIONS: THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE AND VALUE CONGRUENCE

INTERNA KOMUNIKACIJA MARKE ZA TRANSFORMACIJU ZAPOSLENIKA U ŠAMPIONE MARKE: ULOGA ZNANJA I PODUDARANJA VRIJEDNOSTI



Market-Tržište
Vol. 33, Special Issue, 2021, pp. 9-27
UDK 65.012.45:331.101.3:658.626
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.22598/mt/2021.33.spec-issue.9>
Original scientific paper

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper highlights the importance of employees and the internal branding process in building and sustaining powerful brands. Specifically, we explore the impact of internal brand communication on employee brand commitment. By including employee brand knowledge and employee-brand fit as mediators, organizations develop a more comprehensive understanding of how to enhance the affective brand commitment of their employees.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A total of 226 employees of an international hotel chain participated in the study. Employee data were collected with a questionnaire and analyzed by applying structural equation modeling.

Findings and implications – The results imply that what matters is not only the direct influence on employee commitment. Rather, by continuously enriching employ-

Sažetak

Svrha - Rad naglašava važnost zaposlenika i procesa internoga upravljanja markom u izgradnji i održavanju jakih marki. Konkretnije, istražuje se utjecaj interne komunikacije na predanost zaposlenika marki. Uključivanjem zaposlenikova znanja o marki i podudaranja zaposlenika s markom kao medijatorom, organizacije razvijaju sveobuhvatno razumijevanje kako poboljšati zaposlenikovu afektivnu predanost.

Metodološki pristup - U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 226 zaposlenika međunarodnog hotelskog lanca. Podaci su od ispitanika prikupljeni pomoću anketnoga upitnika i analizirani korištenjem modeliranja strukturnih jednadžbi.

Rezultati i implikacije - Rezultati impliciraju da nije važan samo izravan utjecaj na predanost zaposlenika. Umjesto toga, kontinuiranim obogaćivanjem spoznaja zaposlenika i povećanjem podudaranja vrijednosti zaposlenika

ee cognition and enhancing employee brand value congruence, organizations can achieve higher levels of affective brand commitment and, in turn, better customer service. The paper provides several practical implications for managers regarding how to manage communication and other internal branding efforts in their organizations, thus empowering employees and transforming them into brand champions.

Limitations – Data on internal brand communication could also be collected from top management and direct supervisors to complement employee perspectives on internal branding.

Originality/value – The inclusion of internal brand communication and employee brand knowledge in the internal branding process has led to more comprehensive understanding of how to enhance affective brand commitment of employees.

Keywords – internal branding, internal brand communication, employee-brand fit, employee brand knowledge, affective brand commitment

i marke, organizacije mogu postići višu razinu afektivne predanosti marki, a time i bolju uslugu korisnicima. Rad menadžerima pruža nekoliko praktičnih implikacija o tome kako upravljati komunikacijom i ostalim naporima internog upravljanja markom u njihovim organizacijama te na taj način osnažiti zaposlenike i pretvoriti ih u šampione marke.

Ograničenja - Podaci o internoj komunikaciji marke mogli su se prikupiti i od najvišeg menadžmenta i izravnih nadzornika kako bi se upotpunila perspektiva zaposlenika o internom upravljanju markom.

Doprinos - Uključivanjem interne komunikacije i zaposlenikova znanja o marki u proces upravljanja markom ponuđeno je sveobuhvatno razumijevanje kako poboljšati afektivnu predanost.

Ključne riječi - interno upravljanje markom, interna komunikacija marke, podudarnost zaposlenika i marke, zaposlenikovo znanje o marki, afektivna predanost marki

1. INTRODUCTION

For many years, organizations have been struggling with the question of what makes top brands powerful and successful. Employees are becoming essential to successful brand building, as they can either strengthen the brand or, if their message is inconsistent with brand values, undermine the credibility of external branding and marketing communication (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Because they embody brand information, employees influence consumer perceptions of the brand, as well as their brand attitudes and loyalty. Hence, organizations must ensure that the attitudes and behavior of employees are compatible with the way the management wants the brand to be perceived (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). It is therefore crucial to apply an internal view to consider how employee values and attitudes can be aligned with a brand's values and identity.

Although brand management practices vary across industries, scholars (Huang & Lai, 2018; leong & Lam, 2016; Koo & Curtis, 2020) argue that it is extremely important to understand and integrate sound brand management practices into the hospitality industry. Such practices not only influence the intention of employees to stay (Koo & Curtis, 2020) but also turn them into brand champions (Morhart, Herzog & Tomczak, 2009). Internal branding is considered to be one of the essential success factors in brand management (King & Grace, 2010), as the end result is a consistent brand image and authentic brand delivery (Punjaisri, Wilson & Evanschitzky, 2009b; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). However, empirical research on how to induce such preferable employee outcomes is relatively scarce, and important gaps have yet to be filled (Du Preez, Bendixen & Abratt, 2017; Piehler, Grace & Burmann, 2018; Piehler, 2018).

One way in which managers can ensure that employees understand brand identity, develop positive attitudes, and build authentic relationships with customers is by communicating

brand information directly to their employees. Researchers increasingly recognize that organizations can use this approach to achieve a match between how brand managers want to represent the brand and how the brand is actually delivered (Baker, Rapp, Meyer & Mullins, 2014). Internal brand communication is perceived as one of the crucial internal branding activities that create this alignment; other approaches include brand-oriented human resource management and brand-oriented leadership (Bergstrom, Blumenthal & Crothers, 2002; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky & Wilson, 2009a; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006).

Our research attempts to offer several contributions. First, it adds to the extant literature by including employee brand knowledge and employee-brand fit as important mediators in the relationship between internal brand communication and employee brand commitment, whereas past studies have considered the direct influence (Burmann, Zeplin & Riley, 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2009a; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). By investigating the role of mediating variables, we provide a better understanding of how internal brand communication induces an affective reaction in the employee. Second, internal branding studies have focused mainly on the results of internal branding efforts, while those investigating the process of its implementation are fewer. In our study, we explore internal brand communication as an internal branding process, thus deepening existing knowledge by explaining the mechanisms that drive employee affective brand commitment. Third, we take into account the importance of employee cognitions in the internal branding context. Our study contributes to past research by examining the influence of internal brand communication on employee brand knowledge. In sum, our study offers theoretical and managerial contributions to an important but little-researched area of internal branding.

The paper is structured as follows: after presenting internal branding, we focus on the concept

of internal brand communication and discuss the adequacy of communication in the internal branding context. Second, based upon a literature review, we develop hypotheses and build a conceptual model. Third, we present a detailed description of the methodology, including the research design and data collection through a structured questionnaire administered to 226 employees of a hotel chain, followed by a presentation of the results. Subsequently, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed. We conclude the paper with limitations and further research directions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1. Internal branding

Although no uniform definition of internal branding exists, several explanations have been proposed. Tosti and Stotz (2001, p. 30) describe internal branding as a process of “turning a brand promise into reality” and aligning employee behaviors with the brand, while Punjaisri and Wilson (2011, p. 1523) define internal branding as organizational activities which ensure that the brand promise is enacted and delivered by employees. Harris and de Chernatony (2001) expanded on the definition by adding the importance of aligning employee and brand values to achieve employee brand commitment. Based on a review of existing studies, we propose a comprehensive definition that describes internal branding as a process that internally builds a coherent brand identity by aligning employees’ perceptions, values, and behaviors with the brand. Moreover, internal branding aims to transform employees into brand champions—that is, employees who engage in brand-supporting behaviors, feel a strong commitment to the brand and truly live it, thus enabling them to provide higher levels of customer service (Xiong, King & Piehler, 2013). Internal branding can be achieved through internal communication, training, and qualification.

2.2. Internal brand communication

Internal communication is one of the most important activities in the area of internal branding. Gilly and Wolfenbarger (1998) emphasized that communication is essential to the effective dissemination of information in the organization, building understanding among employees, and securing their commitment to the brand (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

One way in which organizations make sure that employees are aware of brand identity and develop positive brand attitudes is through communicating brand information directly to employees (Baker et al., 2014). Internal brand communication is defined as a verbalization of brand identity targeted at employees with the intention of shaping their perceptions and enhancing their understanding of the brand. Internal brand communication includes all verbal and written messages about the brand (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004).

Successful internal branding requires consistent messages about a brand’s identity and uniform communication among all employees to create a coherent brand identity. Internal consistency across employee knowledge, attitudes, and congruency with brand identity are vital to the successful delivery of brand promises to customers. It is therefore important for managers to identify mechanisms that ensure the alignment of employee perceptions with brand identity (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Gilly and Wolfenbarger (1998) recognize communication as an important element in the formation of congruent perceptions. Hence, to build a coherent brand identity, we consider internal brand communication as a factor affecting the congruency of perceptions within an organization.

2.3. Affective brand commitment

Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993, p. 539) described organizational commitment as a psychological state demonstrating an employee’s relationship with the organization. As they provided evi-

dence that their interpretation of organizational commitment can be applied to different domains, we apply commitment to brands. For the purpose of this paper, we focused only on affective brand commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), which is based on shared values, identification, and positive emotions (Zhang & Bloemer, 2011), all of which are important consequences of internal branding. In addition, previous research has shown that affective commitment is more closely related to favourable employee behaviour than other types of commitment (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002).

Employees represent the connection between the internal and the external environment of a brand. Baker et al. (2014) pointed to the importance of employees to keep brand promises and show authentic affection for the brand. Authentic and sincere customer interactions are the drivers for much stronger service delivery than are the internal policies that govern the required behavior. Managers need to provide employees with the right tools and environment to enable them to develop an emotional connection with the brand, which will consequently lead employees to display brand-consistent behaviors when they serve customers. Moreover, authentic employee behavior leads to positive customer emotions and preferred attitudes or behaviors (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul & Gremler, 2006). Employees engage in brand-building behaviors when their personal and brand identities coincide—that is, when employees identify strongly with and feel committed to the brand they represent (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri et al., 2009b). Employee brand commitment significantly affects their intention to stay, which is of great importance in the hospitality industry (Koo & Curtis, 2020).

2.4. Employee brand knowledge

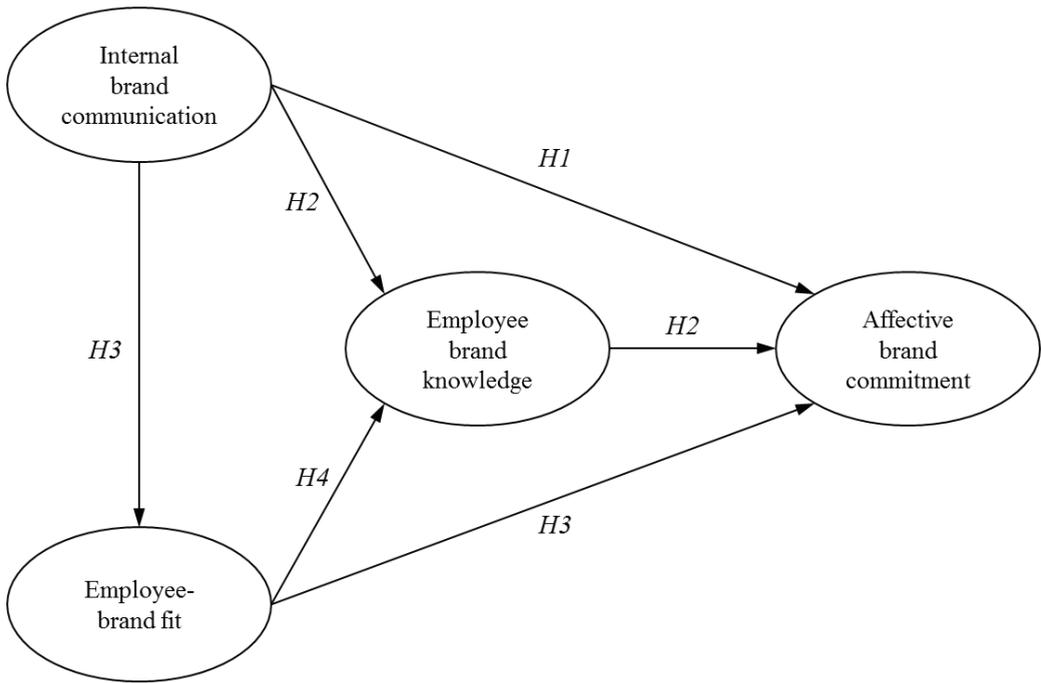
A brand must be made comprehensible to employees in order for them to be able to understand it. Internal branding can shape employees' cognitive perceptions regarding the brand to ensure that they are aligned (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). By adopting clear knowledge about the brand identity, employees tend to develop a positive brand attitude and emotionally engage with the brand (King & Grace, 2010; de Chernatony & Cottam, 2006).

Here, we present the conceptual background and definition of employee brand knowledge. Consumer brand knowledge has a strong theoretical foundation in the marketing literature (Keller, 1993), whereas findings on employee brand knowledge are scarce. Keller (2003, p. 596) defined brand knowledge as a "cognitive representation of the brand" in one's memory and perceives it as an antecedent of an individual's behavior (Keller, 1993). Based on Keller's definition, we argue that the brand knowledge of employees is a cognitive representation of the brand identity in the memory of an employee, which leads to an understanding of the identity and certain brand promises (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014).

2.5. Conceptual model

By applying knowledge from management and marketing theories to the internal branding field, we presume the direct influence of internal brand communication on the employee brand commitment, with employee-brand fit and employee brand knowledge acting as mediators in this relationship (Welch & Jackson, 2007; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012; Smidts, Pruyn & van Riel, 2001). Our model is presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual model



2.5.1. Internal brand communication and affective brand commitment

Brand delivery by organizations is primarily dependent on employees (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). As brand representatives, employees should not only understand the brand identity but also, and above all, must commit themselves to supporting their brand and encouraging brand-building behavior (Baker et al., 2014; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Internal branding is considered one of the most important processes in the development of employee brand commitment to provide higher levels of customer service. A lack of commitment can lead to serious negative consequences for the brand and the organization, such as inconsistent brand messages, negative word of mouth, etc. (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Punjaisri et al., 2009b).

Internal brand communication plays a significant role in developing affective brand commitment among employee (Burmam et al., 2009). While

the appropriate internal brand communication provides employees with a sense of openness and honesty, which is a first step in building employee commitment (Asif & Sargeant, 2000), even more critical to the engendering of commitment is brand communication based on affective, emotional content. Previous theories and empirical studies posit that affective content elicits automatic emotional responses and guides attitudes (Ludwig, de Ruyter, Friedman, Brüggem, Wetzels & Pfann, 2013). By providing positive affective content about brand values, brand personality, and brand vision, organizations can emotionally appeal to employees to establish a unique and emotional connection with the brand (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). Internal brand communication which places an emphasis on emotional brand values creates the conditions for affective brand commitment and is proposed as one of its important antecedents (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). So we hypothesize as follows:

H1. Internal brand communication has a positive influence on employee affective brand commitment.

2.5.2. Mediating role of employee brand knowledge

In addition to the proposed direct relationship, communication is considered to provide the foundation for employee attitudes and creating the conditions for commitment. Previous studies in the organizational behavior literature have proposed several factors that mediate the relationship between communication and commitment (van Vuuren, de Jong & Seydel, 2007), including psychological contract (Guest & Conway, 2002; Miles & Mangold, 2005), person-organization fit, and organizational efficacy (van Vuuren et al., 2007). In this paper, we consider employee brand knowledge as an important mediator in the relationship between internal brand communication and affective brand commitment.

An essential aspect of developing employee brand knowledge is internal brand communication, which influences employees at the cognitive level by providing them with information regarding distinct brand identity and brand promises (Almgren & Göransson, 2012). Moreover, brand-oriented communication verbalizes brand identity in a way that enhances employee brand knowledge. It shapes cognitive perceptions of employees regarding the brand to ensure that they are aligned (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Employees with better brand knowledge are generally more emotionally committed to the brand (King & Grace, 2010).

Our hypothesis proposes that organizations can enhance employee brand cognition by implementing internal brand communication. Weick (1987) views internal communication as a “sense-making” activity that captures and internally constructs brand identity (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). To explain the relationship, we introduce the process of socialization as a key mechanism. In consumer behavior research,

Moschis and Moore (1979) used the term consumer socialization to refer to the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers. Applying this perspective to internal brand management, we posit that during the socialization process, employee brand knowledge is strengthened by internal brand communication (Hurrell & Scholarios, 2014). Communication as a socialization activity helps employees to make sense of their brand experiences (Chatman, 1991).

To establish the mediating effect of employee brand knowledge, we also hypothesize that brand knowledge influences employee affective brand commitment. Previous studies (e.g., Xiong et al., 2013; King & Grace, 2010) have shown that the more knowledgeable employees are, the more open they are to brand-relevant information so they will form more positive brand attitudes. With a clear understanding of brand identity, employees tend to internalize brand values and engage emotionally with the brand (King & Grace, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). The acquisition of more coherent and clearer brand knowledge causes employees to move from simple understanding to an internalization of brand values and, in turn, becoming strongly committed to the brand (Xiong et al., 2013).

H2. Employee brand knowledge mediates the relationship between internal brand communication and employee affective brand commitment.

2.5.3. Mediating role of employee-brand fit

Personal values held by employees and their congruency with brand values serve as antecedents of people’s attitudes (Homer & Kahle, 1988; Paul, Hennig-Thurau, Gremler, Gwinner & Wiertz, 2009). The subjective perceptions of brand values are investigated through the eyes of employees, because brand perceptions in the eyes of customers are likely to determine their attitudes toward the brand (Finegan, 2000). The concept of employee-brand fit derives from

the definition of person-organization fit, which was proposed by Cable and DeRue (2002). It illustrates the congruence between the personal values of an employee and the values of a brand.

In our study, we regard internal brand communication as an important factor in shaping employee brand perceptions and aligning employee values with those of the brand. Employees should internalize brand values as their own to reinforce the employee-brand fit (Baker et al., 2014). We treat the internalization process as a key mechanism explaining the hypothesized relationship and conclude that internal brand communication can fulfill a vital role in achieving brand value congruency among employees via the process of internalization.

Previous research also supports this proposed relationship. For example, in his study Chatman (1991) suggested that increased interaction with the organization may lead to person-organization fit. Applying this view to internal branding, we argue that brand communication enables employees to experience stronger interaction with the brand, which consequently reduces perceptual differences and leads to value internalization and, hence, to a higher employee-brand fit (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). When "a common message" about the values of the brand is communicated, employees perceive greater value congruence (van Vuuren et al., 2007). Therefore, our conclusion is as follows: If managers effectively communicate brand information to their employees, those employees will perceive the brand's values as being similar to their own.

On the other hand, to establish the mediating effect of employee-brand fit, we hypothesize that employee-brand congruence positively influences employee affective brand commitment. The relationship is well established in the organizational research, but available marketing research in this area remains limited (Zhang & Bloemer, 2011). We explain the relationship between employee-brand fit and employee affective brand commitment by building on the sim-

ilarity-attraction theory from social psychology (Byrne, Clore & Worchel, 1966; Higgins & Judge, 2004). Zhang and Bloemer (2011) argue that two people who recognize that they share similar attitudes or beliefs are strongly attracted to each other. Putting this into the branding context, employees who find a good brand-value fit feel more attracted to the brand. This results in an employee's emotional attachment and commitment to the brand (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Research in organizational behavior demonstrates the link between value fit and commitment (Arthur, Bell, Villado & Doverspike, 2006; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Ostroff, Shin & Kinicki, 2005; van Vuuren et al., 2007).

H3. Employee-brand fit mediates the relationship between internal brand communication and employee affective brand commitment.

2.5.4. Effect of employee-brand fit on employee brand knowledge

Furthermore, we hypothesize that employee-brand fit affects employee brand knowledge. Specifically, employees who share similar beliefs with the brand are more open to brand information and are able to more rapidly memorize a brand's identity. Building on the social categorization theory, which is closely related to the similarity-attraction theory (Byrne et al., 1966), we predict that teams or groups composed of members with similar characteristics such as shared values will tend to be associated with positive knowledge sharing or learning (Lauring & Selmer, 2012). According to this theory, group members perceiving a high similarity are positively inclined toward other group members. Consequently, homogenous groups exhibit a higher group cohesion (van Knippenberg, de Dreu & Homan, 2004). We posit that employees who share similar brand values perceive a higher similarity with the brand and with co-workers. Consequently, they are positively inclined toward the brand and brand-relevant information, which results in an increase in their brand knowledge. In addition, Harris and de Chernatony (2001) argued that shared brand

values positively affect employee perceptions and interpretations of the brand, as they feel a higher similarity with the brand.

H4. Employee-brand fit has a positive influence on employee brand knowledge.

3. METHODOLOGY

We conducted our research study in an international hotel chain in a city in Slovenia, where the chain's corporate headquarters and most of its hotels and employees are located. The hotel industry was selected as a suitable context due to its high customer contact service. Hotel employees, who also represent a key audience of internal branding activities, were chosen as a survey unit.

3.1. Data collection and sample

The sample consisted of the employees working in five different hotels, located close to each other in the Slovenian city. Although each of the hotels has an individual name, they are presented under a single "umbrella" brand. Therefore, same branding principles and company culture are communicated to all employees. The research was conducted via an anonymous survey to encourage employees to participate.

The authors personally distributed a questionnaire to the hotel chain's employees during one of their regular training seminars. In consultation with company representatives, we decided to attend one of the seminars delivered during the low season. As the employees attended the training seminar in two groups, data was collected in two steps. All the employees who participated in the seminar filled out our questionnaire.

The final sample consists of 226 questionnaires, representing more than a half (54%) of all employees of the hotel chain. The average age of the respondents was 41.8 years ($SD = 11.3$), and about 60% of them were female. The average respondent had worked for the employer for 13.5 years. All levels of education were repre-

sented, with 70% having completed secondary education, 20% having a university education and the remaining 10% having primary education. The majority of respondents (76.1%) had daily contact with customers, and only 6.1% had rare or no contact with them.

3.2. Construct measurement and assessment

Multi-item measures for all constructs were applied, using existing scales whenever possible. However, due to the lack of established scales in the internal brand management field, we adapted existing measures to the brand context. To assess the appropriateness of the adapted scales, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and brief interviews with hotel chain employees and undertook a final review according to the suggestions of experts (a marketing manager and two university professors). Additionally, to ensure that employees understood the questionnaire, we had the questionnaire pre-screened by organizational representatives of the hotel chain.

The survey measured the following constructs: internal brand communication (adapted from Almgren & Göransson, 2012; Foreman & Monney, 1995; Simões, Dibb & Fisk, 2005), employee affective brand commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), employee-brand fit (adapted from Cable & DeRue, 2002), and employee brand knowledge (adapted from Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009; Wong & Merrilees, 2008). Measurement items are presented in Appendix. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree), except for employee-brand fit, which respondents evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale.

After data collection, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed. All items loaded strongly on the intended factors, with no extremely high cross-loadings. To assess the reliability and validity of the scales, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Mplus 7. The measurement model provided an

acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2(84) = 165.02$; CFI = 0.962; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.065; and SRMR = 0.044). In addition, the results of all reliability (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) and validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Netemeyer, Bearden & Sharma, 2003) tests were above the recommended thresholds. As suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), a comparison was made between the average variance extracted (AVE) of the constructs and the square of the correlations between the constructs. With all AVEs greater than the squares of the correlations between constructs, the discriminant validity of all constructs was confirmed. The results are presented in Table 1.

they would not be presented in the hypothesized order. Harman's single factor test was conducted during data analysis. The EFA, using all survey items from the 226 questionnaires, yielded a four-factor solution with eigenvalues higher than 1.0, where the first factor explained less than 44% of the total variance. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), a single factor will emerge from the factor analysis of all survey items in the presence of CMV. The facts presented above suggest the absence of the CMV problem.

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics, correlation matrix, reliability, and validity tests

| Variables | M | SD | α | CR | AVE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---------------------------|------|------|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Internal communication | 3.18 | 1.07 | 0.86 | 0.88 | 0.71 | 1.00 | 0.38 | 0.29 | 0.32 |
| 2. Brand commitment | 3.58 | 0.99 | 0.90 | 0.91 | 0.66 | 0.62 | 1.00 | 0.37 | 0.52 |
| 3. Brand knowledge | 3.84 | 0.73 | 0.78 | 0.80 | 0.50 | 0.54 | 0.61 | 1.00 | 0.30 |
| 4. Employee-brand fit | 4.46 | 1.38 | 0.94 | 0.95 | 0.87 | 0.57 | 0.72 | 0.55 | 1.00 |

Notes: M – mean; SD – standard deviation; α – Cronbach alpha; CR – composite reliability; AVE – average variance extracted.

Numbers in the matrix represent correlations between constructs. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.001$. Data below the diagonal represent Pearson's intercorrelations, while data above the diagonal represent square of the Pearson's intercorrelations.

Since the data was collected from the same respondents, efforts were made to mitigate the common method variance (CMV) problem. When preparing the questionnaire, attention was paid to the order of the constructs so that

4. RESULTS

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. The structural model provided an acceptable fit to the data, with the goodness-of-fit statistics as follows: $\chi^2(84) = 165.02$; CFI = 0.962; TLI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.065; and SRMR = 0.044. The model explains 61.6% of the variance in employee brand commitment, 38.4% of the variance in employee brand knowledge, and 32.4% of the variance in employee-brand fit. Path coefficients of the model are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Direct effects of the model

| | INDEPENDENT VARIABLE | DEPENDENT VARIABLE | Estimates | (z-values) |
|----|------------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| H1 | Internal communication | Brand commitment | 0.24** | (3.19) |
| H2 | Internal communication | Brand knowledge | 0.34*** | (3.79) |
| | Brand knowledge | Brand commitment | 0.23** | (2.95) |
| H3 | Internal communication | Employee-brand fit | 0.57*** | (10.27) |
| | Employee-brand fit | Brand commitment | 0.46*** | (6.75) |
| H4 | Employee-brand fit | Brand knowledge | 0.36*** | (4.22) |

Notes: Standardized path coefficients are reported.

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

A significant and positive relationship was found between internal brand communication and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$), supporting H1. In support of H2, the relationship between internal brand communication and employee brand knowledge is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.001$), and there is also a significant positive relationship between employee brand knowledge and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.23, p < 0.01$). Moreover, employee-brand fit has significant positive relationships with internal brand communication ($\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$) and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Additionally, H4 is supported because a significant positive relationship between employee-brand fit and brand knowledge ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$) was found.

To test the mediating roles of employee-brand fit and employee brand knowledge, the authors

employed nonparametric bootstrapping and tested the significance of the indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). As is evident from the results, the 95% confidence intervals for both indirect effects did not contain zero. Specifically, brand knowledge was confirmed to mediate the relation between internal brand communication and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.08, p < 0.05$) as the lower boundary of the 95% confidence interval was 0.013, with the upper boundary at 0.181. Finally, employee-brand fit was found to mediate the relationship between internal brand communication and affective brand commitment ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$), with the lower boundary of the 95% confidence interval at 0.149 and the upper boundary at 0.418. Therefore, we can support both Hypothesis H2 and Hypothesis H3 and thus accept the mediating roles of brand knowledge and employee-brand fit (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Indirect effects of the model

| | INDEPENDENT VARIABLE | MEDIATOR | DEPENDENT VARIABLE | 95% CI's | | |
|----|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| | | | | Estimates | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| H2 | Internal communication | Brand knowledge | Brand commitment | 0.08* | 0.013 | 0.181 |
| H3 | Internal communication | Employee-brand fit | Brand commitment | 0.26*** | 0.149 | 0.418 |

Notes: Standardized path coefficients are reported. CI's - confidence intervals. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

Although recent research has focused on exploring internal branding outcomes at the employee level (e.g., Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), it has stopped short of investigating any activities and mechanisms of internal branding implementation. Our study contributes to the current body of knowledge by empirically examining internal brand communication and its effect on employees. It offers insights into how internal brand communication contributes to the achievement of employee brand commitment. When managers communicate affective brand-related content to employees, they respond in turn by developing an emotional attachment to the brand. Moreover, the mechanisms behind the proposed hypotheses were presented, providing explanations of how internal brand communication influences employee-brand fit, employee brand knowledge, and affective brand commitment.

In our paper, we conceptualize internal brand communication and provide arguments in support of the need for its implementation. The conceptual model proposed offers a holistic perspective of the internal branding process which includes employee cognitions, perceptions, and attitudes. The study shows that internal brand communication not only influences affective commitment of employees to the brand but also enhances their brand knowledge and congruence with brand values. The two latter aspects are important prerequisites to the development of affective brand commitment. Internal brand communication is crucial in providing information about brand identity, achieving understanding among employees, and gaining their commitment (Gilly & Wolfinger, 1998). By communicating brand values and making them comprehensible to employees, higher congruence between the values of a brand and those of an employee can be achieved. In addition, employees who feel a

greater alignment with brand values are more open to brand information and are able to more rapidly acquire brand knowledge.

By including employee-brand fit and employee brand knowledge as the constructs that significantly mediate the relationship between internal branding activities and affective brand commitment, we may better explain the development of commitment to the brand. Some of the past studies in this area have found weak direct relationships between internal branding and employee brand commitment, explaining only a small portion of the variation in the dependent variable (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). The present study explains more than 60% of the variance in affective brand commitment and shows strong mediating effects; thus, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge by acknowledging that internal branding initiatives not only have direct effects on employee commitment but also indirectly affect employee attitudes mediated by employee-brand fit and employee brand knowledge. Since the research data revealed no normality, we used appropriate procedures in Mplus (i.e., non-parametric bootstrapping procedures) to deal with this problem. A similar previous study (Terlgav, Konecnik Ruzzier & Kase, 2016) has shown that employee-brand fit and brand knowledge mediate the relationship between another important internal branding activity – brand-oriented leadership – and brand commitment.

Although employee brand knowledge has a very meaningful role in internal brand building, past studies have not taken the cognitive aspect into consideration (Punjaisri et al., 2009b; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). It has often been self-evident that employees must know and understand brand identity in order to develop positive brand attitudes and behavior (Xiong et al., 2013). Based on our findings, employee cognition about the brand enhances the emotional brand attachment of employees, while internal brand communication has an important influence on em-

ployee knowledge. Our study complements the findings of King and Grace (2012), who highlight the importance of brand knowledge dissemination through the process of organizational socialization; however, they do not address the concept of brand knowledge directly. The results of the present research advance their study by incorporating employee brand knowledge and investigating its role in the internal branding process.

Furthermore, this paper offers significant managerial implications, which should be carefully considered by managers in strengthening their brand management practices. As many new brands have emerged in the hospitality industry in recent years (Buil, Martínez & Matute, 2016; Koo & Curtis, 2020), managers should consider and systematically implement good approaches so as to develop, strengthen, and maintain strong brands in the market. This highlights the crucial role of internal brand communication in achieving brand success. By continuously enriching the cognition and positive attitudes of employees toward the brand, managers can ensure the delivery of brand promises on a daily basis (King & Grace, 2010). However, the implementation of internal brand communication is not an easy task. Management should be aware that communication must be based on emotional brand content and must lead employees to authentic brand value congruence and brand commitment. Therefore, managers need to provide their employees with the right tools and environment to enable them to develop authentic relationships with the brand, which will consequently prompt the employees to display authentic feelings when serving customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006).

As already mentioned, our findings indicate that internal brand communication elicits important internal branding outcomes. While communication can enhance affective brand commitment, not only directly but also indirectly through employee-brand fit and brand knowledge, it should be noted that communication is not the only internal branding activity. Hence, man-

agers should augment brand communication with other internal branding efforts, such as brand-oriented training and brand-supporting leadership. For example, brand training courses would provide employees with the knowledge and practical skills necessary to deliver on the brand's promises (Punjaisri et al., 2009b), while brand-supporting leaders would foster employee commitment by acting as role models (e.g., living the brand values) and mentors (Morhart et al., 2009). Additionally, managers could initiate brand-based reward systems. Any employees engaged in brand behaviors and authentic interactions with customers could be rewarded through either compensation or recognition. For an internal branding program to be successful, recommended activities should be implemented concurrently, leading to greater levels of employee brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand-building behaviors.

In our study, we identify consistency between the values communicated by a brand and employee values as a means of enhancing other important internal branding outcomes. Therefore, employee-brand fit has a very meaningful role in the success of internal branding and should be given additional consideration by organizations. We propose that brand-related information be communicated to employees prior to their recruitment. Given that values are difficult to change and that they predominantly determine employee behavior, managers should accept recruitment decisions based on personal values of potential employees and not merely on their technical skills (de Chernatony, 2010). In order for organizations to attract individuals who share similar values with the brand, it is crucial to communicate the brand's values during the selection and hiring process (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & Turban, 2001). The process of building brand identity among potential employees is known as employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). While employer branding is concerned with external brand communication to potential recruiters, internal branding communication focuses on existing employees (Fos-

ter, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). Therefore, we argue that organizations should consistently integrate internal and employer branding. By effectively communicating brand values before and after recruitment, managers could increase the possibility that new hires share the brand's values and also that they will be influenced by forthcoming internal brand communication (Baker et al., 2014). Keeping the employees who can provide outstanding customer service should be an important consideration for any firm (leong & Lam, 2016).

Finally, the present study identifies employees as important brand builders. Service organizations should turn their employees into brand champions because employees can significantly shape the experience customers will have with the brand. As these employees are true brand representatives, organizations should employ mechanisms to promote them. Thus, we propose internal brand communication among the key activities to help transform employees into brand champions. Communication can increase the meaningfulness of their jobs as brand representatives (Chen & Yu, 2014).

5.2. Limitations and further research

Finally, this section discusses limitations and directions for further research. First, data on internal brand communication could also be collected from top management and direct supervisors for the purpose of complementing employee perspectives on internal branding. Consequently, both perspectives could be compared in order to identify potential gaps.

Although the applied test suggested the absence of a CMV issue, by measuring variables with different respondents, we could dismiss the CMV problem. Second, the concept of employee brand knowledge needs to be further improved. Progress in the measurement of employee brand knowledge could be achieved by introducing a performance test or an objective measurement to complement the employee assessment used in the present study. As the concept is still in the development phase, further conceptual and empirical improvements are necessary. In addition, we conducted our study among the employees of only one hotel chain; therefore, the results cannot be generalized, and further empirical tests are needed. We recommend carrying out a study in other hotel chains, as well as in other high-contact hospitality services, such as restaurants and airlines. Finally, the investigation was conducted before the onset of the pandemic. As we know, most hotels were closed for more than a year and are slowly reopening for business. Thousands of employees lost their jobs and hotels were forced to cut back on services. While the hotel industry is slowly reopening, getting back into business seems to be a big challenge. The recent changes may alter affective brand commitment, brand knowledge, and employee relationships with the brand. Even though internal communication is likely to be even more important than before, it needs to be done with the new situation in mind. Therefore, we plead to other researchers to consider the new circumstances in the hotel industry and thus reflect the relationships in internal branding in the post-pandemic period.

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Appendix: Measurement items

- (1) Internal brand communication
 - The company informs me of my role in delivering the brand.
 - The company places great emphasis on communication with employees.
 - The company regularly communicates the brand story to employees.
- (2) Brand knowledge
 - I understand how our customers can benefit from our brand.
 - I know how our brand is different from those of the competitors.
 - I am well informed about the values of the brand X.
 - I understand my role in delivering the brand's promise.
- (3) Employee-brand fit
 - My personal values match values of the brand X.
 - The things that I value in life are very similar to the things that the brand X values.
 - The brand's values and culture provide a good fit with the things that I value in life.
- (4) Affective brand commitment
 - I feel a strong sense of belonging to the brand X.
 - I feel emotionally attached to the brand X.
 - I really feel as if the brand's problems are my own.
 - I feel like 'part of the family' at our organization.
 - The brand X has a great deal of personal meaning for me.