From internal brand management to organizational citizenship behaviours: Evidence from frontline employees in the hotel industry ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Internal brand communications and training enhance employees' organizational identification.
- Transformational leadership has a stronger impact on organizational identification than on work engagement.
- Organizational identification only predicts citizenship behaviors towards an organization.
- Work engagement positively affects all organizational citizenship dimensions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the links between internal brand management, organizational identification, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviours in the hospitality industry. A model is proposed and tested using a sample of 323 frontline employees from the main hotel chains operating in Spain. This model includes different dimensions of internal brand management and different manifestations of citizenship behaviours. Data are analysed through the use of partial least squares. The findings confirm that transformational leadership leverages organizational identification and work engagement. However, brand training and brand communications do not directly raise positive emotions in the workplace. The results also suggest that work engagement is a better predictor of citizenship behaviours than organizational identification. Identification influences citizenship behaviours towards the organization. However, this variable does not explain extra-role supportive behaviours towards customers and other employees. These results extend previous research by empirically analysing the effects of internal brand management from the employees' perspective.

1. Introduction

In recent years, brands have become particularly relevant in the hospitality industry. In such a competitive sector, which is characterized by similar service offerings and imitation, brands serve as referential elements for customers. Brands reduce customers' perceptions of the uncertainty and search costs inherent in the purchase process, while guaranteeing them the expected level of service quality. In addition, effective brand management presents potential benefits for hotel managers in terms of the ability to charge price premiums, gain market share, enhance customer loyalty, or increase brand awareness and image (Kayaman & Arasli, 2007; Sangster, Wolton, & McKenney, 2001). Consequently, hotel organizations have become particularly interested in effectively communicating and delivering the brand promise to their customers (Xiong & King, 2015).

The success of a brand strategy largely depends on the role of employees as brand champions (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), especially in the hospitality industry. In this sector, employees' behaviour has a major influence on how external audiences perceive and experience the brand and, by extension, on the development of competitive advantages (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Service staff play a central role in

these organizations, since employees should adopt behaviours that support a common set of brand values (Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013). In this sense, hotel employees' degree of internalization of brand values, and the way they live and experience their jobs, play a key role in delivering the brand promise.

Within this context, some researchers have become particularly interested in exploring internal branding activities as triggers of employees' favourable attitudes and behaviours (e.g., Bansal, Mendelson, & Sharma, 2001; Burmann et al., 2009; Huang & Rundle-Thiele, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). However, despite some recent developments, current academic research on internal branding still lacks empirical evidence, since existing studies are principally theoretical or based on case studies (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Gapp & Merrilees, 2006). Research on this topic has also often adopted a managerial-based approach, ignoring how employees perceive internal branding activities (Arendt & Brettel, 2010; Davies, 2008). In addition, previous empirical studies have investigated the effects of only a limited number of variables. Indeed, while previous research has debated the effects of internal branding on employees' responses in terms of loyalty, commitment, or brand performance (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; King & Grace, 2008; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009), few papers have focused on critical variables such as organizational identification, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviours.

Specifically, organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB) involve all employee behaviours that are critical for the achievement of organizational goals, but are not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system (Organ, 1988). These citizenship behaviours enhance organizational effectiveness because they 'lubricate the social machinery of the organization' (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983: 654) and 'contribute to the creation of the structural, relational, and cognitive aspects of social capital' (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002: 517). In the hospitality industry, delivering the brand promise depends on how employees internalize and live the brand. Therefore, it is critical to understand how internal branding could leverage hotel employees' favourable attitudes and how these sentiments influence OCB.

In particular, this paper explores the role of two antecedents of OCB: work engagement, conceived as an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural state directed towards the desired organizational outcomes (Shuck & Wollard, 2010); and organizational identification, an employee's knowledge of his or her membership of a social group together with the emotional significance attached to that membership (Riketta, 2005). Exploring the relationships between internal branding, organizational identification, work engagement, and citizenship behaviours is especially relevant in the hospitality industry, because individuals are more likely to go beyond their formal job requirements when they are committed to their organization or feel that the organization is part of their self (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000).

Consequently, the aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of the internal brand management process from the employees' perspective and to explore how the different dimensions of internal brand management (IBM) influence frontline employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses in the hospitality industry. Specifically, the study examines the effect of IBM dimensions, such as brand training, communications activities, and transformational leadership, on employees' identification with their hotel and work engagement. In turn, it investigates the influence of organizational identification and work engagement on different expressions of OCB towards the organization, customers, and other employees.

This research contributes to the literature in various ways. First,

it fills a gap in the current academic literature on internal branding. Specifically, it extends previous research by empirically analysing how different IBM dimensions influence employees' attitudes and behavioural responses. Furthermore, this study has practical implications for practitioners in the tourism industry. It offers useful guidelines on how to manage branding elements in order to construct desirable working conditions that foster service employees' citizenship behaviours. The lack of knowledge about the internal conditions that leverage employees' favourable responses may negatively affect customers' perceptions of service quality or damage relationships among employees.

This paper is structured as follows. It opens with a general discussion of internal brand management. The conceptual model and hypotheses are presented. This section is followed by the methodology and the analysis of empirical findings. Finally, the paper outlines the conclusions, implications, limitations, and directions for further research.

2. Internal brand management

Internal brand management is an effective tool for creating and maintaining strong brands (Burmann et al., 2009). This important source of sustainable competitive advantage includes 'the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers' expectations is enacted and delivered by employees' (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011: 1523). Employees are, therefore, the key audience of the internal brand management process, which seeks to promote the brand inside the organization (Xiong & King, 2015). Based on a brand identity approach, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) propose a holistic model for internal brand management that includes three main factors: brand-centred human resource activities, brand communication, and brand leadership.

Brand-centred training implies that human resource management practices are aligned with the organization's brand values (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). These practices include initiatives related to recruitment policies, training and development of employees, evaluation of brand performance, and orientation programmes, among others (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). For instance, a brand-centred style of human resource management should ensure that applicants who are recruited and selected share the values and identity of the brand (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Involving human resources in the internal brand management process is therefore necessary if a company wants employees to incorporate the brand message in their work activities (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005).

Internal brand communications refer to actions that seek to enhance employees' knowledge about the personality, values, and promise of the brand (Whisman, 2009). Traditionally, external stakeholders have been the focus of brand messages. However, to ensure that these brand messages are communicated successfully, effective internal brand communication to all employees is first required. Internal brand communications include all verbal and non-verbal messages related to the brand and the organization (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). As such, companies need to define what to communicate and also the different communication channels that will be used to disseminate brand messages internally (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Well-managed internal brand communication may help to align employees' behaviour with the corporate values (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003) and develop a workforce that is committed, loyal, and identified with organizational values and goals (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012).

Finally, leadership also facilitates internal brand building, encouraging behavioural changes consistent with the desired brand identity (Terglav, Konecnik, & Kase, 2016; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). According to Burmann and Zeplin (2005), two