An examination of the progressive effects of hotel frontline employees' brand perceptions on desirable service outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The present study scrutinizes how hospitality firms' internal branding influences the service performance of frontline employees in a progressive way. More specifically, based on social influence and social exchange theories, this study examines if organizational commitment mediates the link between hospitality frontline employees' perceptions of brand authenticity (BA) and brand-value fit (BVF) and their service-related behaviors such as generating ideas for service improvement (GISI) and service-oriented citizenship behavior. With a matched sample of 286 customer-contact frontline employees and 33 of their supervisors from five-star hotels in South Korea, this study found that the higher employees' perceptions of BA and BVF, the more likely they were to generate ideas for service improvement and engage in service-oriented citizenship behavior, as they were more likely to be committed to the firm. Based on the findings, implications are discussed for hospitality practitioners and researchers alike in terms of internal branding with frontline employees.

1. Introduction

Developing and maintaining a proper brand reputation is a crucial task for hospitality companies that constantly interact with customers (Han et al., 2018; Manhas and Tukamushaba, 2015; Prentice and Wong, 2016). For this reason, service firms invest resources to manage their brand in communicating with their external customers such as guests (Ahn and Back, 2018; Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Kim et al., 2003). In addition to firms' branding efforts for external customers, it is also important for hospitality firms to ensure that their brand value is properly perceived by internal customers, such as frontline employees, who represent their brand in service encounters (Hu et al., 2018; Terglav et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015). Internal branding means a firm's effort to promote its brand to internal customers (i.e., employees) with ongoing communication and education (Aurand et al., 2005). King and Grace (2008) argue that internal branding enables employees to provide what their firm has promised to deliver to external customers.

Extant research reports that internal branding has positive outcomes for hospitality companies, such as employees' brand commitment (Terglav et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015) and brand supportive behaviors (Hu et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2015). However, little is known regarding how internal branding influences employees' attitudes and behavior in

a progressive way in which employees' attitude acts as a mediator between internal branding and behavioral outcomes. Aligned with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) and the progressive categories of training outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1959), this study investigates the outcomes of internal branding at the two levels – employees' attitudes and their behavior – in which the former is a determinant of the latter as well as acting as a mediator between employees' perceptions of internal branding and the latter.

Another gap in the literature is that the impact of an internal brand might have been overestimated given that the outcomes of internal branding in previous studies were predominantly measured by employees' self-reports exposed to the risk of common method variance. Relying on a single source of information is not uncommon in the hospitality literature. Min et al. (2016) reported that most survey-based empirical studies in the hospitality literature rarely deal with common method variance that could be controlled.

To address these gaps, this study examines employees' perceptions of their firm's internal branding in terms of brand authenticity (BA) and brand-value fit (BVF) and the impacts of these on desirable service behaviors being observed by their supervisors in the hospitality context where frontline employees play a representative role in service encounters with customers. Based on theories of social influence, planned

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behavior, and person-organization fit (Ajzen, 1985, 1991; Cable and DeRue, 2002; Kelman, 1961), a set of hypotheses is developed in the study to investigate if employees' internal branding perceptions result in desirable service performance (cf., behavior) mediated by their organizational commitment (cf., attitude).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background of this study is presented followed by a discussion of the hypotheses that will be tested. Then, the methods used for the study are explained in terms of sampling, measures and the data analysis employed to test the research hypotheses. Lastly, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed followed by the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Employees' perceptions of internal branding: brand authenticity (BA)/ brand-value fit (BVF)

Baker et al. (2014) suggest that a firms' internal branding communication enhances its employees' perceptions of *brand authenticity (BA)* and *brand-value fit (BVF)*. This study focuses on these constructs as key indicators of internal branding related to desirable outcomes. BA can be defined as an employee's or a customer's perception of whether a brand genuinely represents the values that it embodies in its positioning (Baker et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014). More specifically, BA has been proposed as a concept associated with either employee-based authenticity or customer-based authenticity.

Previous hospitality research has mainly focused on the customers' perceptions of a firm's authenticity (Lu et al., 2015; Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Youn and Kim, 2017), with research in this stream suggesting that the cultivation of customer-based BA is essential in heightening customers' brand equity. Understanding the frontline employee's perception of BA matters given that they represent their organization and its brand. In other words, how a brand is perceived by frontline employees can be easily transmitted to how a brand is perceived by customers. As noted earlier, only a few studies in the service context have focused on employee-based BA comprising the employee's perception of a genuine embodiment of the firm's authentic brand image (Baker et al., 2014).

Brand-value fit (BVF) refers to the similarity between the firm's brand values and those of an employee (Baker et al., 2014). A similar definition is provided by Cable and DeRue (2002) in their longitudinal investigation on the development of person-organization fit, needs-supplies fit, and demands-abilities fit using a sample of individuals in management positions. Values congruency between an organization and its employees was shown by Merrilees et al. (2017) to prompt staff commitment, engagement and empowerment followed by co-value co-creation in non-profit organizations. Likewise, employee-company fit has also been examined in the hospitality literature by previous studies (e.g., King et al., 2013; Xiong and King, 2015; Xiong et al., 2013; Foster et al., 2010).

However, it should be noted that most hotel companies diversify their brands (Wang and Chung, 2015). Hence, BVF is not the same as employee-company fit as a company may have multiple brands (e.g., Marriott Incorporation includes a number of brands, such as Courtyard, Ritz-Carlton, etc.). In their investigation of the influence of employee brand orientation, King et al. (2013) found that service brand orientation among employees is vital for positive employee brand-oriented behaviors. Also, Xiong et al. (2013) examined the factors that motivate employees to champion their brand and found that employee perceived brand–value fit and perceived brand meaningfulness are important motivators for affective brand commitment. The next section highlights the major outcomes of employees' perceptions of BA and BVF.

2.2. Outcomes of internal branding: generating ideas for service improvement (GISI) and service-oriented citizenship behavior

Employees' generation of ideas for service improvement (GISI) refers to the ability of employees to construe the needs that customers have and to provide the higher level of service expected by the customer (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Lages and Piercy, 2012). Specifically, an employee's GISI is characterized by an employee's contribution, and encouragement of coworkers, in the generation of ideas and suggestions for service improvement designed to provide consistent and creative solutions for customer services (Agnihotri et al., 2014; Lages and Piercy, 2012).

In the hospitality industry, which is characterized by inseparable production and consumption of services, frontline employees interact closely with customers during service delivery. As such, they are generally in the best position to identify various customer needs and, with their coworkers, develop creative ideas for enhancing existing services (Tang, 2014). Consequently, frontline employees in the hospitality industry are expected to generate new ideas for service improvement, share creative solutions to customer needs with their team members and go out of their way to satisfy their customers. Despite the importance of the GISI by frontline employees, which is germane to service improvement and customer satisfaction, there has been limited empirical research conducted concerning the factors that trigger it.

In addition to employees' GISI, service-oriented citizenship behaviors are a form of extra-role behavior performed by service workers toward customers (Auh et al., 2014; Bettencourt et al., 2001). Specifically, service-oriented citizenship behaviors are the discretionary behaviors of service employees that go beyond the formal job description and enhance the service experiences of customers (Auh et al., 2014). Consistent with this notion, empirical evidence shows that service-oriented citizenship behaviors facilitate more effective delivery of service promises and offer a higher level of service quality, thereby increasing customer satisfaction (Tang and Tang, 2012). Therefore, service-oriented citizenship behaviors have been recognized as the key factor for strengthening employee work performance in the hospitality industry (Wang et al., 2017).

Introduced nearly three decades ago (Organ, 1988), the role of service-oriented citizenship behavior has, in recent years, been increasingly studied in the context of the hospitality industry (Nadiri and Tanova, 2010; Ravichandran et al., 2007). However, among previous studies conducted in the context of the hospitality industry, there has been a dearth of empirical studies that have examined the relationship between internal branding and desirable service performance behaviors, particularly those assessed by supervisors.

2.3. Hypotheses development: a mediating role of organizational commitment

Based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), this study examines whether employees' perceptions of internal branding progressively impact their attitude towards their work (cf., *proximal outcome*) and, consequently, desirable service behaviors (cf., *distal outcome*). Job attitudes consist of individuals' overall attitudes regarding the job, which then affect job behaviors. Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) defined general attitudes as the aggregated cognitions (e.g., beliefs) of people. Job attitudes are termed as "a fundamental evaluation of one's job experiences" (Harrison et al., 2006, p. 306) and refer to employees' personal perspectives about their job, which influence job behaviors. Some employees may experience a sense of affection or commitment to their company, whereas others may experience a sense of contempt for their organization. This study proposes that organizational commitment, as a key attitudinal outcome of employees' perceptions of internal branding, mediates the link between employees' brand perceptions and their service performance behaviors.

We adopted organizational commitment as an attitudinal outcome

(mediator) between the internal branding constructs and the behavioral outcomes in the hypothesized model for the following reasons. As discussed earlier, given the theories of planned behaviors (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), employees' attitudes are followed by their behaviors. As the outcomes of the study are organizationally desirable behaviors, we considered organizational commitment as a representative attitudinal construct desirable for a company influenced by an organization's internal branding. In the management literature, organizational commitment often represents intermediate outcomes given its nature – employees' perspective toward the entire organization (Hulin, 1991) – and organizational commitment, currently, has still been employed as a construct in a number of recent research papers, due to its value to an organization (e.g., Kim et al., 2018; Lapointe and Vandenberghe, 2018; Steffens et al., 2018).

The concept of organizational commitment is defined by Steers (1977, p. 46) as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization". Meyer and Allen (1991) conceptualized organizational commitment in terms of three dimensions including continuous, affective and normative organizational commitment. Among the three dimensions of organizational commitment, affective commitment is the aspect that best represents the constitutive and operational definition with job attitude (Meyer and Allen, 1991). In addition, affective organizational commitment has received the most research attention as it leads to important organizational outcomes (e.g., Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran, 2005; Kim et al., 2012; Wu and Chen, 2018; Yao et al., 2019). An employee's affective organizational commitment reflects an emotional attachment to his/her organization resulting from an identification with the organization (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). This research uses both 'affective organizational commitment' and 'organizational commitment' interchangeably for the rest of the paper.

2.3.1. Perceived brand authenticity (BA) and desirable service performance behaviors

Baker et al. (2014) suggested that employees' perception of BA positively influences their service behaviors given Kelman's theory of social influence (1961), in which employees who view the brand as genuinely embodying its promoted values may identify highly with the brand and consequently engage in behaviors aligned with the values the brand represents. This research, however, hypothesizes that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between perceived BA and desirable service performance behaviors, such as GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior. As noted earlier, we argue that, based on the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), employees' attitudes toward the organization is an antecedent of their behaviors.

As Baker et al. (2014) argued, we also predict that employees who, based on their experiences, find the values of the brand promoted to customers to be genuine are also likely to be engaged in desirable service performance behaviors. However, this research proposes that an attitudinal consequence (i.e., affective organizational commitment) should be placed between BA and service behaviors, as employees inherently form attitudes first – prior to engaging in behaviors (Ajzen, 1985, 1991). Empirically, Abimbola et al. (2010) showed that brand authenticity perceived by employees was likely to lead to organizational commitment. Also, López-Cabarcos et al. (2015) reported that when employees develop affective commitment toward their company, they tend to display initiative behaviors due to the perceptions employees have in regard to rewards, interpersonal relationships and a feeling of justice regarding general procedures. Moreover, employee commitment to the organization has been shown to be an outcome of the perception employees have in relation to the organization fulfilling promises to the employee (i.e., psychological contract theory; Terglav et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it has been shown in the literature that organizational commitment leads to employee GISI (Babakus et al., 2003; Baker et al., 2014; Lages and Piercy, 2012; Morhart et al., 2009; Sirianni et al.,

2013). Babakus et al. (2003) proposed a service recovery performance model, testing it with data from frontline bank employees in Turkey, and found that frontline workers' affective commitment to their organization mediated the influence of management commitment to service quality on service recovery performance. Moreover, Lages and Piercy (2012) investigated the drivers of GISI in service industries and found that reading the needs of customers by employees followed by the affective organizational commitment among employees were the leading drivers of GISI. Therefore, we present the following hypothesis:

H1. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between frontline employees' perceived BA and GISI.

We also hypothesize that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between perceived BA and service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior. As was shown by Baker et al. (2014), employees' brand psychological ownership and perceived BA lead to brand citizenship behaviors. Furthermore, there have been empirical studies in the literature that found a positive relationship between organizational commitment and service-oriented citizenship behavior (Cichy et al., 2009; Liang, 2012; Tang and Tsaur, 2016). These findings lead us to develop the following hypothesis:

H2. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between frontline employees' perceived BA and service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

2.3.2. Brand-value fit (BVF) and desirable service performance behaviors

We further hypothesize that organizational commitment mediates the relationship between brand-value fit (BVF) and frontline employees' desirable service behaviors based on social influence theory (Kelman, 1974) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985). An organization functions to reflect its values, which should be internalized, to its employees. Employees' BVF, a consequence of brand internalization, is similar to person-brand fit (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Given person-organization fit theory (O'Reilly et al., 1991), employees can have desirable attitudes resulting in desirable behavior on the job once their values are well aligned with their firm's values. Research empirically shows that employees' fit with their organization leads to desirable outcomes. For example, Yaniv and Farkas (2005) also found that a significant role is played by person-organization fit in increasing organizational commitment, employee job satisfaction, and willingness to do extra work in the organization. Moreover, Yaniv and Farkas's (2005) findings were corroborated by Zhang and Bloemer (2008) who found that BVF had a direct and significant positive impact on employee loyalty and affective commitment.

Research also shows that frontline employees who are committed to their organization are likely to exert desirable service behaviors. For example, Meyer et al. (1989) found that employees' affective organizational commitment positively influenced the performance of first-level managers working in a large food service company. Similarly, Babakus et al. (2003) found that management commitment to service quality acted positively on the organizational commitment of frontline employees working in the banking sector, which resulted in higher levels of employee service recovery performance associated with GISI. Furthermore, empirical research shows that BVF led to the enhanced desire of frontline employees for their organization and the associated brand to be successful (Backhaus, 2016; Baker et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2009). We, therefore, suggest the following hypothesis:

H3. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between frontline employees' BVF and GISI.

As noted earlier, according to person-organization fit theory (O'Reilly et al., 1991), employees can demonstrate desirable attitudes and then behavior on the job when they find their values well aligned with their firm's values. Research empirically shows a positive relationship between BVF and organizational citizenship behavior in the
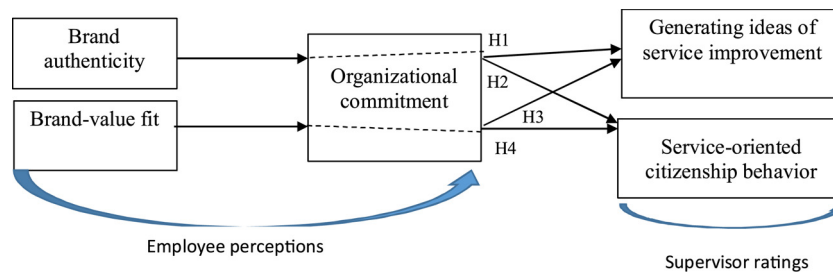
Fig. 1. Proposed research model.

service sector (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Chang et al., 2012). Furthermore, since Burmann and Zeplin's (2005) work suggesting that brand commitment leads to brand citizenship behavior, research has consistently found that organizational commitment is associated with frontline imployees' service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., Chang et al., 2012; Cichy et al., 2009; Liang, 2012; Tang and Tsaur, 2016; Zhang and Bloemer, 2008). Hence, the following hypothesis is presented:

H4. Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between BVF and service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior.

Drawing on the literature outlined above, we propose four hypotheses on the relationships between frontline workers' perceptions of BA and BVF, generation of ideas for service improvement and service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior with the key mediating mechanism of organizational commitment. The proposed research model is outlined in Fig. 1.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection and sample

There were 22 five-star hotels located in Seoul in 2017 (Statistics of hotels in Korea, 2018). Five of these hotels met the three study requirements: being situated downtown in Seoul Metropolitan City, containing more than 400 rooms, and agreeing to participate in the survey. Two sample groups from the five hotels – customer-contact frontline employees and their immediate supervisors – were invited to take part. The surveys were undertaken by senior managers of the Department of Human Resources (HR) under a project contract between the managers and the project leader. The HR manager listed department teams that were able to undertake the surveys and contacted the immediate supervisors and their frontline team members. Questionnaires were designed for respondents to complete during team shift meetings. Data from groups of team leaders and groups of team members were collected separately to avoid any influence on their responses.

At the beginning of each meeting, a research member was allowed to explain to employees the purpose of the study. Employees were then asked to fill out a self-reporting survey and return it directly to the research member by a certain time. Two weeks later, the employees' immediate supervisors were asked to assess their employees' service performance behaviors in terms of idea generation for service improvement and service-oriented citizenship behavior.

Again, prior to administering a main survey, the research member emphasized that participation in the research was completely voluntary and confidential. To allow the matching of the immediate supervisor's evaluation of each of his/her subordinates with each employee's perceptions of internal branding and organizational commitment, the immediate supervisors were asked to write the subordinate's name on their questionnaire; similarly, each employee participant was requested to write his/her supervisor's name on the questionnaire. Even though a total of 291 frontline employees and 35 immediate supervisors

participated in this main survey, five questionnaires answered by employee participants and two by supervisor respondents were deleted because names of employees on the questionnaires could not be matched with their supervisor.

The final study sample included 286 full-time frontline employees and their 33 immediate supervisors. Regarding affiliated departments of the participants, the highest percentage was found in food and beverage divisions (55%), followed by room divisions (32%). Of 286 employee respondents, 53 percent were male. The employee respondents showed a mean age of 32 years and a mean of 7.1 years of tenure at their current hotel. More than 87 percent had educational qualifications above college degree level. Concerning the socio-demographic and job experience profiles of the 33 supervisors, 82.8 percent of them were male. Their mean age was reported as 42 years, while they indicated a mean of 13.3 years of tenure at their current hotel. Over ninety percent of the supervisor respondents had at least a college degree.

3.2. Measures

To measure frontline employees' perceptions of BA and BVF, a four-item scale and a three-item scale were developed based on previous scales designed by Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) and Wood et al. (2008), respectively. Measurement items of brand authenticity included 'The brand of my company genuinely embodies its image' (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010), and those of BVF included 'The values represented by the brand of my company are more than just words; they influence my day-to-day behavior' (Wood et al., 2008). Organizational commitment was operationalized using the three-item scale adapted from Allen and Meyer (1990); questions included 'I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization.'

Items to reflect the immediate supervisor's assessment of his/her subordinates, employees' service performance behaviors in terms of idea generation for service improvement were derived from the study by Bettencourt and Brown (2003). A sample question about idea generation for service improvement was 'This employee makes constructive suggestions for service improvements.' Service-oriented citizenship behavior was operationalized using the four-item scale borrowed from Netemeyer et al. (2005); a sample item was 'This employee often goes above and beyond the call of duty when serving customers.'

Since respondents were Korean hotel staff, items in the English version of the questionnaire were required to be translated into Korean. Firstly, two professors who were proficient in both languages participated in translating the English-version questionnaire into a Korean version. Then, as recommended by Adler (1983), the Korean-version questionnaire was back-translated into English. A meeting with the two translators and the authors was held to ascertain whether the translation was well implemented. After confirming the accuracy of the questionnaire translation, a pre-test was administered using a group of 30 postgraduate students with the experience of working in the hospitality and tourism industry in order to receive their evaluation of the questionnaire items. Some of the pre-test respondents commented on the vagueness of the passive voice used in two of the items. By

accepting the comment, all items were rewritten in active voice; for example, '*I (or my supervisor) ….*'

A pilot test was subsequently deployed using 30 hotel employees and 10 managers who were working for 5-star hotels in Seoul. Some respondents pointed out difficulty in understanding the brand perceptions, and consequently the brand perceptions (i.e., BA and BVF) were defined in the introduction part of the survey. Items to indicate constructs used for this study were measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = '*strongly disagree*', 4 = '*neutral*', 7 = '*strongly agree*'). Requests for socio-demographic and job/career-related characteristics were designed as either categorical or open-ended questions.

4. Results

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis and bi-variate correlations

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using LISREL (version 9.1), to assess each measure's reliability and validity in the expected factor structure. The CFA results indicated that the proposed factor structure was a good fit to the data; X^2 = 219.29, df = 113, p = .000, Room Mean Square of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058, Normed-Fit Index (NFI) = 0.97, Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.98, and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.98. Table 1 shows that all factor loadings of measurement items were statistically significant (p < 0.01) demonstrating convergent validity, and the average variance extracted (AVE) met the threshold of 0.5 for all constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). All AVEs are larger than the squared correlation (R^2) for each pair of constructs, and composite reliability (CR) exceeded the cut-off level of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2006), demonstrating discriminant validity.

As shown in Table 2, the relationships of frontline workers' perceptions of BA and BVF were positively related to organizational commitment, GISI, and service-oriented citizenship behavior. Among demographic variables, age was positively related to employees' perceptions of BA and BVF.

4.2. Hypothesis testing

For this study, the four criteria of regression analyses proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) were used to test the mediation hypotheses. To meet the first criterion, independent variables must be related to dependent variables, and the second criterion is met if independent variables are related to a mediator. The third and fourth criteria are met if the mediator is related to dependent variables in the presence of independent variables, and the effect of independent variables becomes zero or substantially reduced in magnitude once the mediator is included in the regression equation. The first and second criteria were met as frontline employees' perceptions of BA and BVF (independent variables) were related to GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior (dependent variables) and organizational commitment (mediator), as shown in Table 2. Then, we used a series of three-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses to assess the third and fourth criteria. As seen in Tables 3 and 4, control variables (gender, age and tenure) were entered to regress on dependent variables (GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior) in the first step. Then, independent variables (frontline workers' perceptions of BA and BVF) were entered in the second step, and lastly, organizational commitment (mediator) was entered in the third step.

As shown in Table 3, the impacts of BA on GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior in the absence of the organizational commitment in Step 2 were significant (β = 0.16; p < 0.01 / β = 0.23; p < 0.01, respectively). However, in the presence of organizational commitment in Step 3, the impacts of BA were substantially reduced (β = 0.03; p > 0.05 / β = 0.10; p > 0.05, respectively). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported showing that organizational commitment fully mediates the impact of frontline workers' perception of BA on GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior.

Table 1
Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA): Properties of the measurement model (*N* = 457).

Construct and indicators	Completely standardized loading	t-value	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Brand authenticity			0.94	0.91	0.72
BA1	0.86	–			
BA2	0.89	20.2			
BA3	0.72	21.4			
BA4	0.90	20.7			
Brand-value fit			0.92	0.92	0.79
BVF1	0.87	21.9			
BVF2	0.92	20.2			
BVF3	0.88	–			
Organizational commitment			0.79	0.80	0.58
OC1	0.84	–			
OC2	0.57	9.6			
OC3	0.85	14.8			
Generating ideas of service improvement			0.89	0.90	0.74
GISI1	0.83	–			
GISI2	0.89	17.7			
GISI3	0.86	16.9			
Service-oriented citizenship behavior			0.93	0.93	0.77
SOCB1	0.82	–			
SOCB2	0.88	18.1			
SOCB3	0.90	18.4			
SOCB4	0.90	18.6			

Note:
BA1: "The brand of my company genuinely embodies its image.".
BA2: "The brand of my company has integrity.".
BA3: "The brand of my company is not fake or phony.".
BA4: "The brand of my company exists in accordance with its values and beliefs.".
BVF1: "My attachment to the brand of my company is based first and foremost on the similarity of my values to those represented by the brand of my company.".
BVF2: "The values represented by the brand of my company are more than just words; they influence my day to day behavior.".
BVCF: "In our company, we have a clear idea of what our brand stands for; brand identity and brand promise are well defined.".
OC1: "I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization.".
OC2: "The people I work for do not care about what happens to me (reverse-coded).".
OC3: "I feel like 'part of the family' at this organization.".
GISI1: "This employee makes constructive suggestions for service improvements.".
GISI2: "This employee shares creative solutions to customer problems with other unit members.".
GISI3: "This employee encourages co-workers to contribute ideas and suggestions for service improvement.".
SOCB1: "This employee often goes above and beyond the call of duty when serving customers.".
SOCB2: "This employee often willingly goes out of my way to make a customer satisfied.".
SOCB3: "This employee voluntarily assists customers even if it means going beyond job requirements.".
SOCB4: "This employee often helps customers with problems beyond what is expected or required.".

Table 4 shows the results of the regression of GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior on frontline workers' perception of BVF. In Step 2, the impacts of BVF in the absence of the organizational commitment were significant (β = 0.13; p < 0.05 / β = 0.15; p < 0.01, respectively). However, the impacts of BA were dramatically reduced in the presence of organizational commitment in Step 3 (β = − 0.04; p > 0.05 / β = − 0.01; p > 0.05, respectively). Therefore, hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported showing that organizational commitment fully mediates the impact of workers' perception of BVF on GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior.

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations of study variables ($N = 286$).

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.54	0.5	1							
2. Age	33.32	19.26	0.09	1						
3. Tenure	7.10	6.42	0.28**	0.27**	1					
4. BA	4.97	1.06	−0.01	0.14*	0.03	1				
5. BVF	4.87	1.07	0.01	0.14*	0.11	0.81**	1			
6. OC	4.96	1.07	−0.02	0.08	0.010	0.59**	0.57**	1		
7. GISI	5.11	1.05	0.04	0.09	0.07	0.19**	0.14*	0.29**	1	
8. SOCB	5.27	1.01	−0.05	0.07	0.11	0.24**	0.18**	0.29**	0.72**	1

Note. BA = brand authenticity; BVF = brand-value fit; OC = organizational commitment; GISI = generating ideas for service improvement; SOCB = service-oriented citizenship behavior; standardized parameter estimates are reported; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 3
Results of mediation hypotheses with brand authenticity.

Variable	DV: GISI			DV: SOCB		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender	0.02	0.01	0.03	−0.10	−0.10	−0.09
Age	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.02	0.02
Tenure	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.13*	0.13*	0.13*
Brand authenticity		0.16**	0.03		0.23**	0.10
Organizational commitment			0.25**			0.20**
R^2	0.01	0.04	0.08	0.02	0.07	0.10
R^2		0.03**	0.04**		0.05**	.03**
F	1.06	2.85*	4.58**	2.12	5.07**	5.67**

Note. DV = dependent variable; GISI = generating ideas for service improvement; SOCB = service-oriented citizenship behavior; standardized parameter estimates are reported; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 4
Results of mediation hypotheses with brand-value fit.

Variable	DV: GISI			DV: SOCB		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Gender	0.02	0.02	0.03	−0.10	−0.10	−0.90
Age	0.08	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.03	0.03
Tenure	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.13*	0.12	0.13*
Brand-value fit		0.13*	−0.04		0.15*	−0.01
Organizational commitment			0.29**			0.27**
R^2	0.012	0.028	0.083	0.02	0.05	0.09
R^2		0.016*	0.055**		0.02*	0.05**
F	1.06	1.83*	4.61**	2.12	2.99*	25.25**

Note. DV = dependent variable; GISI = generating ideas for service improvement; SOCB = service-oriented citizenship behavior; standardized parameter estimates are reported; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 5
Results of the structural paths of the hypothesized model.

Structural paths	Path estimates (beta)	t-values
BA → OC	0.41	3.29**
BVF → OC	0.34	2.80**
OC → GISI	0.27	4.08**
OC → SOCB	0.31	4.67**

Note. BA = brand authenticity; BVF = brand-value fit; OC = organizational commitment; GISI = generating ideas for service improvement; SOCB = service-oriented citizenship behavior; **$p < .01$.

Lastly, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was also conducted using LISREL (version 9.10) to examine the strength of the structural paths in the hypothesized model. As shown in Table 5, the structural path from BA to OC ($\beta = 0.41$; $p < 0.01$) was slightly stronger than that from BVF to OC ($\beta = 0.34$; $p < 0.01$), and the structural path from OC to SOCB ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < 0.01$) was slightly stronger than that from OC to GISI ($\beta = 0.27$; $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence for the progressive impacts of frontline employees' perceptions of internal branding, in terms of brand authenticity (BA) and brand-value fit (BVF), on their attitude and behaviors observed by their immediate supervisors. As hypothesized, organizational commitment fully mediated the impacts of BA and BVF on GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior of customer-contact frontline employees. The findings of the study have meaningful implications for both hospitality scholars and practitioners as follows.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study raises theoretically meaningful implications, which can contribute to the academic conversation on the effect that internal branding, in the forms of BA and BVF, prompting positive service outcomes (i.e., GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior in hotel frontline employees). As anticipated, the findings show that employees' perceptions of internal branding had a progressive effect on their attitude (cf., *proximal outcome*) and then behavior (*distal outcome*) on the job. This is important given that few efforts have been made to systematically investigate how internal branding influences its outcomes (cf., medication mechanism), although the existing literature acknowledges the importance of BA (Baker et al., 2014) and BVF (Yaniv and Farkas, 2005; Zhang and Bloemer, 2008) in leading to desirable employee outcomes. By investigating the outcomes of internal branding at two levels (i.e., proximal and distal outcomes), our study provides empirical evidence that organizational commitment is the critical mediator between frontline workers' perceptions of internal branding and positive service outcomes. Our findings are consistent with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) and the progressive categories of training outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1959) in which organizational interventions (e.g., training) start to influence the attitude of employees which acts as a determinant of desirable behaviors of employees.

Another critical research implication arising from the present study is related to the methodology we employed, specifically the sample that we used. A gap that we identified in the literature is that the impact of internal brand might in some cases have been overestimated, given that the outcomes of internal branding in previous studies have predominantly been measured by employee self-reporting. While most previous internal branding research has primarily focused on the outcomes of internal branding (e.g., Hu et al., 2018; Terglav et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015), these studies have generally always used employee self-reporting in their data collection and, moreover, there has been little attention paid to how internal branding influences employees'

attitudes and behaviors in a progressive way. The present study aimed to fill this gap in the literature by contrasting the employee self-reports with those of their immediate supervisors, adding not only depth but also validity to the data collected.

This study also provides insights into the value of using proximal outcomes. In most previous meta-analyses in the management literature (e.g., Alliger et al., 1997; Kurtessis et al., 2017) attitudinal criteria were most frequently utilized by organizational researchers, since it is data that are comparatively easy to collect. Likewise, hospitality researchers also tend to rely on attitudinal criteria in their research design (Min et al., 2016). Although we seldom endorse the use of only attitudinal criteria in research design, the proper use of proximal criteria can be encouraged, given that employees' attitudinal outcomes (cf., *proximal*) fully mediated the effect of internal branding on their service behaviors (cf., *distal*).

It is also worth observing the links between employees' organizational commitment and service outcomes. The finding that the effect of organizational commitment on SOCB is slightly stronger than its effect on GISI is similar to that of Merrilees et al. (2017) in which brand commitment had a stronger effect on SOCB than on service improvements. Although organizational commitment is not the same as brand commitment, it can be implied that committed employees are likely to engage in desirable behavior but not all committed employees are generating ideas for service improvement given their individual capacity.

5.2. Managerial implications

Based on the results of our study, we suggest that there are three main fields of managerial implications that present themselves. Firstly, we suggest ways to improve frontline workers' perceptions of BA and BVF; secondly, we highlight the implications of measuring and then rewarding desirable service behaviors; and finally, we reiterate the importance of organizational commitment in prompting these desirable service behaviors.

In terms of improving employees' perceptions of BA and BVF, we suggest that, for internal branding to be successful, HR practices in the form of training and recruitment must be closely linked to marketing efforts both internally and externally. Management can promote behavioral changes in employees, which lead to the generation of ideas for service improvement and service-oriented citizenship behavior, through training that happens on an ongoing basis, where the employees are encouraged to give their input for the goals of the training sessions. Through this strategy, managers can show that these employees are important members of the organization.

Furthermore, this training should be consistent with the promises made by the brand to the external customer. A strategy to enable this is that managers could ensure that at the end of each training session employees are recognized for their achievements to further show them that they are appreciated and to develop a long-term relationship with them. This would be in line with the practices of successful hospitality organizations who also value their external customers and aim to build relationships with them. Moreover, these training programs could focus on both employee soft skills and hard skills to not only generally develop the skills of employees but also improve their brand-specific skills. As a result, employees would not only improve their ability to deliver on brand promises, but also create a stronger identification with the brand (i.e., organizational commitment, which would lead to service-oriented citizenship behavior).

Moreover, it is suggested that besides this ongoing training, a channel is created for two-way communication where, rather than just top-down communication, frontline workers are encouraged to share their ideas through group meetings and regular briefings (i.e., GISI). There are several strategies that managers can adopt to facilitate this communication and empower employees to feel confident in sharing their opinions freely. Specifically, this can be achieved by managers of

the organization adopting a more brand-specific transformational leadership style. This leadership style would involve things such as managers acting in a manner that is in line with the values of the brand and sharing with the employees a unifying vision of the brand. Furthermore, actively supporting their employees through taking roles as mentors or coaches would foster employees' feelings of proficiency and relatedness to the organization (i.e., BVF).

In terms of recruitment, it is suggested that the values of the brand are clearly marketed/advertised to internal customers right from the beginning of their hiring process. This would start with very clearly written job descriptions to address job-specific requirements, and then more broadly familiarizing potential employees with the values and mission of the organization. In the dynamic job market, it can be difficult to identify and then hire individuals whose values fit with those of the organization's brand. It is, therefore, again, vital for the HR and marketing departments to work closely together in communicating the values of the brand and eliciting feedback from potential employees on how those brand values fit with their own values. This could then be followed up with an orientation that focuses not only on the specifics of the position the employee has been hired for but also on the organization as a whole, including intensive introductory brand-specific training during the employee's probationary period. At the end of this process, it could be judged whether the employee's BVF is strong, to ensure the employee views the brand as authentic and also to ensure that future brand training would be well received and expected by the employee, increasing organizational commitment and leading to GISI and service-oriented citizenship behavior.

Regarding the implications of measuring desirable service behaviors, this could be facilitated through incentives. Considering that frontline workers are also customers (i.e., internal ones), it would be in the managers' interest to treat them in line with the same brand values they promote when engaging in brand promises with external customers. If employees are to see the organization and its associated brand as authentic, they must receive the same type of treatment that external customers have come to expect of the brand. This type of authentic treatment of the employees would result in increased organizational commitment, which, in turn, would prompt further service-oriented citizenship behavior and, consequently, further rewards for the employee.

Moreover, it would spur employees to improve the service level through their idea generation. If this idea generation leads to tangible improvements in service, this should also be rewarded and would, therefore, be viewed as an incentive for employees. In order to facilitate this, we again point to the promotion of two-way communication between managers and employees. Research shows that incentive programs are not often mentioned by employees as a driver for aligning the behaviors of employees to values of the brand (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). It would, therefore, be salient for incentive programs to be developed not to directly influence employee behavior but rather to focus on organizational commitment. Again, this could be achieved by taking on board the opinions of employees, as suggested, above, in the training goals. Employees could, for example, be encouraged to share with management the types of incentives that would be most motivating for the employees.

Finally, as touched on above, we see managerial implications arising from the role of organizational commitment, as it relates to loyalty and emotional attachment to the company. Employees are more likely accept brand values and align their attitudes and become committed to the brand if they perceive that the brand authentically embodies the values they communicate to external customers and that these values are congruent with their own. This was then shown in our study to consequently lead to behavioral changes that are aligned to those values. Our study, therefore, shows that, in order to be successful in the internal branding process, organizations must focus on progressively building up to positive behaviors through first focusing on their employees' attitudes (i.e., organizational commitment).

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings, and these can be addressed in future research. A major caveat of the study is associated with our sampling strategy. Our research employed a convenience sample consisting of full-time frontline employees and their immediate supervisors in Korean hotels. Inherently, the generalizability of the findings is limited, as the data were collected from only four hotels in South Korea that had agreed to participate in the research. Therefore, replication of this research is highly encouraged using a sample in a different hospitality context (e.g., restaurants) where employees, who are mostly female, have normally short tenure and include part-time workers, given that our respondents had quite long tenure in their organization ($M = 7.1$ years) and 53% of them were male. Furthermore, a future study is warranted to replicate the hypotheses and methods of this research in different cultural settings (e.g., Western countries) to enhance generalizability.

It should also be noted that this study was unable to collect other variables that may possibly influence the findings. For example, the findings of this research may have differed if it had included other organizational variables such as empowerment and engagement (Merrilees et al., 2017). Likewise, future research may replicate this study, but include a consideration of organizational characteristics and/or culture, which may moderate the impacts of employees' perceptions of internal branding. A further promising approach for future research would be to reexamine the findings of this study using qualitative methods (e.g., in-depth interviews and focus-group interviews).

Acknowledgement

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