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**INTERNAL BRANDING: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE
PERSPECTIVES ON TURNING EMPLOYEES INTO BRAND CHAMPIONS**

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INTERNAL BRANDING: SOCIAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVES ON TURNING EMPLOYEES INTO BRAND CHAMPIONS

Abstract

Prior research acknowledges employees' crucial role in building strong service brands, yet empirical research on how to turn employees into brand champions remains scarce and has been largely approached from an internal branding perspective. Drawing on social identity and social exchange theories, this study takes a broader organizational perspective to link internal branding outcomes (employee–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand) and employees' perceptions of organizational support to a range of employee brand-building behaviors, with organizational identification as the key mediating mechanism. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of employee data from a major retail bank reveal organizational identification as a strong motivational force for employees to become brand champions, largely mediating the effects of internal branding outcomes. When organizational identification is low, perceived organizational support (as a quality indicator of employees' exchange-based relationship with the organization) constitutes an alternative, external motivator of on-the-job brand building behaviors; when organizational identification is high, perceived organizational support boosts employees' voluntary participation in brand development and positive word-of-mouth. These findings highlight the managerial relevance of the employee–organization relationship for turning employees into brand champions and show how organizational identification can be stimulated by means of internal branding.

Keywords: service brands, internal branding, organizational identification, perceived organizational support, employee brand-building behaviors

Strong brands are vital to the success of service companies because they act as “surrogates when the company offers no fabric to touch, no trousers to try on, no watermelons or apples to scrutinize, no automobile to test-drive” (Berry 2000, p. 128). Strong brands help reduce consumers’ perceived risk and increase their trust in buying intangible services that are difficult to evaluate in advance (Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler 2013). In building a strong service brand, the organization’s employees are particularly critical because when the source of customer value creation shifts from (physical) products to services, frontline staff are responsible for delivering on promises and predominantly shape customer brand perceptions (Berry 2000). Moreover, all employees of an organization potentially can support and influence their organization’s brand-building efforts, whether as internal service providers to coworkers (George 1990) or organizational representatives to friends, family, and (potential) customers (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998). Hence, service companies must turn their employees into “brand champions”, that is, motivate them to help build and strengthen the brand image of their organization (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). Empirical research on *how* companies can induce such motivations is, however, relatively scarce and important research gaps are still to be filled.

According to organizational behavior literature, employee behavior depends largely on the psychological relationship employees maintain with their organization (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007). Here, two theoretical perspectives have been receiving increasing attention: social identity (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg and Terry 2000) and social exchange (e.g., Eisenberger, Hutchinson, and Sowa 1986; Rousseau and Parks 1993). Based on social identity processes, employees’ organizational identification (OI) has been found to be a powerful predictor of various behaviors, such as performance, turnover intentions, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Ricketta 2005). Similar relationships seemingly result from

employees' (social) exchange relationships with employers, which are manifested as perceived organizational support (POS; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). Van Knippenberg and colleagues (2007) even suggest that social identity and social exchange processes coexist and that OI might substitute the effects of POS in predicting employee behavior. Despite arguments that "internal branding cannot be looked at in isolation" from employees' work environment (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011, p. 1531) or their relationship with their employers (Miles and Mangold 2004), the psychological employee–organization relationship (both in terms of OI and POS) has not been considered in prior research on how to turn employees into brand champions. In particular, two important research questions remain unanswered: How does the employee–organization relationship affect an employee's motivation to build and strengthen the brand image of the organization? And how is the employee–organization relationship (and OI in particular) affected by internal branding efforts?

To address these questions, we propose and test a comprehensive model based on social identity and social exchange theories. Specifically, we examine how OI and POS affect employees' engagement in brand building, as well as the routes by which OI might be influenced by internal branding outcomes (i.e., employees' perceptions of self–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand). In this sense, we propose OI as a motivational mediator between internal branding outcomes and employee brand-building behaviors. The unique insights we derive extend research on internal branding in two important ways.

First, we offer a complementary perspective on the relevance of identity-based motivation for turning employees into brand champions (e.g., Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak (2009) who show the motivational power of internalizing one's role as a brand representative). By focusing on the *overall* psychological relationship of employees with their organization, we identify OI as an identity-based motivator of employee brand-building behaviors, as well as POS as an

alternative, exchange-based motivation. Thus, we provide initial empirical evidence that turning employees into brand champions is not purely an internal branding issue and that other organizational variables can also play an important role.

Second, we show how internal branding can evoke OI, by contributing to employees' perceived self-brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand. These (or similar) constructs have previously been proposed as key outcomes of internal branding (Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010; Burmann and Zeplin 2005; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2001), however, research that links these constructs to employee brand-building behaviors is scarce. By linking these variables to OI based on the social identity approach, we provide additional evidence for the importance of identity-based effects to turn employees into brand champions and we reveal how internal branding potentially could affect other desired employee behaviors (e.g., employee performance or citizenship behaviors) that benefit the organization beyond brand building.

Our findings have major implications for business practice, particularly in light of evidence that few employees have emotional bonds with their organization (Gallup 2013). Understanding the relevance of OI and, as an alternative, POS for brand-building success is therefore of paramount importance; knowing how to foster employees' OI through internal branding also has direct managerial relevance, considering the various beneficial outcomes of OI, beyond brand building (for a review, see Riketta 2005).

In the next section, we offer a conceptual definition of the employee brand-building behaviors that serve as outcome variables in our model. Next, we develop our research hypotheses and describe the empirical setting used to test them. We conclude with a discussion of the results, their implications for theory and practice, and some directions for further research.

EMPLOYEE BRAND-BUILDING BEHAVIORS

The term “employee brand-building behaviors” was introduced by Miles and Mangold (2004) to capture the idea that employees can engage in various behaviors to build and strengthen the brand image of their organization. In line with Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak (2009), we define *employee brand-building behaviors* as employee behaviors (both on and off the job) that contribute to an organization’s branding efforts and we denote employees who engage in such behaviors as “brand champions”. From a comprehensive review of the internal branding and service marketing literatures, we derive four employee brand-building behaviors as key outcome variables in our model: brand-congruent behavior, customer-oriented behavior, participation in brand development, and positive word-of-mouth. In a service context, these behaviors can be classified according to whether they take place on (off) the job and within (outside) a customer interaction.

Internal branding literature asserts that employees must behave in line with the brand when interacting with customers, to create and maintain a consistent brand image (e.g., Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010; Henkel et al. 2007; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). We term such behavior *brand-congruent behavior* and define it as the degree to which an employee’s personal communication and appearance in a customer interaction is in line with the organization’s brand identity. Moreover, an employee’s customer orientation appears crucial for brand building, in the sense that strong-brand service companies “provide a service that customers truly value” (Berry 2000, p. 132). *Customer-oriented behavior* is the degree to which employees try “to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs” (Saxe and Weitz 1982, p. 344). While brand-congruent behavior relates to conveying and creating an image *specific* to a certain brand (e.g., an Apple salesperson who appears casual and

trendy), customer-oriented behavior refers to the effective service delivery in general (e.g., an Apple salesperson who fulfills customer needs) (Henkel et al. 2007).

Employee participation in brand development (on the job) and positive word-of-mouth (WOM; off the job) are also central to brand building. Drawing from Bettencourt (1997) and Hughes and Ahearne (2010), we define *participation in brand development* as a proactive employee behavior that goes beyond the job description and indicates active, responsible involvement in nurturing and building the organization's brand. In representing the organization to outsiders, these employees can serve as "sensors" of information about consumer needs and brand perceptions (Day 1994). For example, they can provide high-quality input for brand management by generating ideas for needed products and services, making suggestions on how to improve the brand experience, passing on brand-relevant feedback from customers, and so forth (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). Off the job, an employee's *positive WOM* refers to personal advocacy of the organization's brand, which provides a credible form of advertising among both current and potential customers (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009).

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Our research model as shown in Figure 1 focuses on how brand-building behaviors of a firm's employees might be influenced by mechanisms of social identity and social exchange. Specifically, based on the social identity approach, we propose that OI is a key internal motivational driver for employees to engage in brand building, while being itself influenced by internal branding. Based on social exchange theory, we further predict that POS is an alternative, external motivator of employee brand building, albeit negatively moderated by OI.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Social Identity-Based Processes for Turning Employees into Brand Champions

The social identity approach, comprising social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT), predicts that people derive part of their self-concept from their psychological membership in various social groups (e.g., Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1985). According to Tajfel's (1981, p. 255) original definition, social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group ... together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." The more one identifies with a group, the more one conceives of oneself in terms of that group membership, leading to a shift from *I* to *we* intentions as the most basic explanation of behavior (Brewer 1991; Turner et al. 1987).

A specific form of social identification is OI, whereby employees define themselves (at least partly) with their organization and have a feeling of oneness with or belongingness to it (Ashforth and Mael 1989). We follow recent research and define OI "as the perception, the value, and the emotional significance of oneness with or belongingness to the organization" (Wieseke et al. 2009, p. 124). Accordingly, OI should constitute a key motivational driver of employee brand building, while being itself influenced by internal branding.

Impact of OI on Employee Brand-Building Behaviors

The more employees identify with their organization, the more their (self-)perceptions and behaviors are governed by their organizational identity. Most important, SIT argues that because people continually strive for self-continuity and positive self-esteem, they engage in behaviors that are consistent with their sense of self to enhance their group and thereby their own social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to SCT (which extends SIT), people's self-categorization in terms of a salient group membership leads to cognitive assimilation of the self with the in-group, such that a depersonalized self-conception in terms of the group prototype

results in group-prototypical behavior (Turner et al. 1987). Through these basic mechanisms, OI should internally motivate employees to become brand champions (i.e., engage in the brand-building behaviors described above).

OI → brand-congruent behavior. Because people desire consistency and continuity in their self-concepts, they are motivated to behave in a way that is consistent with how they see themselves (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007); due to the self-defining nature of OI, employees' behavior similarly should become "consistent with the core characteristics of their organization" (Wieseke et al. 2007, p. 269) when they strongly identify with it. The corporate brand represents the organization's identity (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009) and thus its core characteristics, therefore, employees should behave in a more brand-congruent way when their OI is higher. SCT describes how identification engenders the attribution of prototypical group characteristics to the self, following "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of the self as a unique person" (Turner et al. 1987, p. 50). Such self-stereotyping may create brand-congruency in employee behavior, due to the self-ascribed (prototypical or core) characteristics of the group. These mechanisms should be particularly relevant in situations in which the organizational identity is highly salient, such as during customer interactions when the employee represents the organization (Van Dick et al. 2005).

H_{1a}: Employee OI has a positive effect on employee brand-congruent behavior.

OI → customer-oriented behavior. According to SIT, employees who strongly identify with their organization become vested in its success and failure; and in striving for positive self-esteem, they are motivated to engage in behaviors that enhance the value of their organization and thus of themselves (e.g., Tajfel and Turner 1979). Customer-oriented behavior is one way to

help enhance the organization's value (Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer 2009). Moreover, because people experience an organization's identity as self-descriptive when they identify with it, Wieseke et al. (2007, p. 270) argue that "[a]ssuming that CO [customer orientation] is included in the identity of many modern service organizations, we can predict a direct effect of OI on CO ... for organizations that rely on a high-quality service to customers."

H_{1b}: Employee OI has a positive effect on employee customer-oriented behavior.

OI → *participation in brand development*. Various discretionary behaviors arise when employees identify themselves with an organization, such as organizational citizenship behaviors and lower turnover rates (Riketta 2005). Following SIT, the impact of OI on such discretionary behaviors "stems from the desire to protect, support, and improve the organization that surfaces when organizational identities and self-identities converge" (Hughes and Ahearne 2010, p. 85), which can be explained by the individual's struggle for a positive self and positive social (in that case, organizational) identity. When an employee participates in brand development, he or she voluntarily, proactively engages in behaviors that nurture and build the organizational brand – although neither requested nor expected in a job description. Thus, by participating in brand development, the employee helps protect, support, and improve the corporate brand image and thus the organization embodying the brand.

H_{1c}: Employee OI has a positive effect on employee participation in brand development.

OI → *positive WOM*. Talking positively about an organization which one identifies with, provides another way to express the own identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). In addition, such "personal advocacy ... outside the job context is a credible form of advertising" (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009, p. 123); thus, positive WOM constitutes another form of support for the organization that helps to positively differentiate it from other brands. In support of this view,

identification has been found to be an important predictor of the extent to which a brand is recommended by retail employees (e.g., Hughes and Ahearne 2010) and customers (e.g., Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003).

H_{1d}: Employee OI has a positive effect on employee positive WOM.

Impact of Internal Branding on OI

Closely connected to employees' OI is the identity or image of the organization itself and, by extension, its brand identity or image. Following SIT, the perceived brand identity or image fosters employees' identification with their organization as far as this helps to satisfy self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement motives (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) and create feelings of belongingness (Brewer 1991; Mael and Ashforth 1992). We thus argue that, through these basic mechanisms, internal branding can evoke OI – insofar as it contributes to an employee's perceived self-brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand.

Employee-brand fit refers to the perceived congruence between the brand values and the employee's own, personal values (Yaniv and Farkas 2005). Drawing from internal branding literature, we define *brand knowledge* as the degree to which the employee has a good understanding of the distinct brand identity and knows what the brand promises to its customers. *Belief in the brand* captures the extent to which the employee is convinced of the brand's value for customers. This is reflected in the employee's perception that the brand generates positive customer outcomes such as buying intentions, loyalty, or positive WOM and is thus perceived as important for the firm's success.

Employee-brand fit → *OI*. As outlined by Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994), people are motivated to maintain continuity in their self-concept, across situations and over time. A brand identity that matches an employee's sense of self can help maintain this consistent, stable

self-concept, which has a positive effect on the employee's identification with the organization. People possess a general desire to act authentically and express themselves; an organizational brand identity that matches their sense of self provides them with such an opportunity (Pratt 1998). Employees accordingly develop stronger emotional bonds with employers when they perceive a fit between themselves and the organization's values (Cable and DeRue 2002). Similarly, consumers exhibit stronger identification when they perceive their selves as similar to or congruent with the brand's identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

H_{2a}: Employee-brand fit has a positive influence on employee OI.

Brand knowledge → *OI*. Research on social identity (e.g., Brewer 1991; Tajfel and Turner 1985) and OI (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) maintains that people seek distinctiveness. In particular, Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness posits that people have two independent, yet opposing needs that together determine the integration of a group membership into an individual's self-concept: a need for belongingness and similarity to others versus a need for differentiation and uniqueness. People can resolve the fundamental tension between these needs by selecting and activating social identities that help them achieve an "optimal" balance. Thus, to foster identification, "groups must not only satisfy members' needs for affiliation and belonging *within* the group, they must also maintain clear boundaries that differentiate them from other groups" (Brewer 1991, p. 478, emphasis in original). The more an employee knows about the distinct identity of the organizational brand, the more the employee should recognize a shared sense of purpose and shared values that bind the organization, while simultaneously recognizing the clear boundaries that differentiate the own organization from others. As Deal and Kennedy (1982, p. 23) point out, "shared values define the fundamental character of their organization, the attitude that distinguishes it from all others....,

they create a sense of identity for those in the organization,” which might result from a simultaneous fulfillment of needs for belongingness and differentiation. These arguments imply that brand knowledge *per se* positively affects an employee’s OI – “independent of the status or evaluation attached to group membership” (Brewer 1991, p. 478). Indeed, research shows that people can identify with groups that provide even negative distinctiveness (e.g., stigmatized, disadvantaged or otherwise negatively evaluated groups – see Ashforth and Mael 1989; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010).

H_{2b}: Employee brand knowledge has a positive influence on employee OI.

Belief in the brand → OI. In addition to self-continuity and self-distinctiveness, people strive for self-enhancement (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and, consequently, are more likely to identify with groups that help them see themselves in a more positive light. An important influence is whether group members believe that others (i.e., outsiders) hold positive views of their group (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994), which would allow them to “bask in reflected glory” by associating their self-concept with it (Cialdini et al. 1976, p. 366). When employees believe in their organization’s brand, they are convinced of its importance because of the brand’s value for customers and potential to induce favorable customer outcomes. Such a belief implies that consumers, who are important outsiders, are perceived to think highly of the brand. In line with research on firms’ perceived status and prestige (e.g., Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Mael and Ashforth 1992), we thus argue that an employee transfers such positive perceptions to the own self-concept by identifying with the organization that embodies the brand.

H_{2c}: Employee belief in the brand has a positive influence on employee OI.

Social Exchange-Based Processes for Turning Employees into Brand Champions

Social exchange theory (e.g., Blau 1964; Rousseau and Parks 1993) explains employees' positive behavior towards their employers as a result of reciprocity for benefits they (expect to) receive in return. Most operationalizations of these give-and-take processes are based on employees' evaluations of the quality of the exchange relationship as evident in POS (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007). Here, POS reflects an employee's evaluation of the organization's prior contributions to their exchange relationship (Eisenberger, Hutchinson, and Sowa 1986). Defined as "employees' general belief that their work organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being" (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002, p. 698), POS is taken as evidence that the organization will continue to care about the employee's well-being in the future. Resulting in reciprocity-based motivation to support the organization, POS has been linked to various employee-related outcomes that benefit the organization, such as job performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and turnover intentions (see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002; Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007 for an overview). Similarly, POS might instill a feeling of obligation, which motivates an employee to engage in brand building, following the norm of reciprocity (Miles and Mangold 2004).

H₃: Employee POS has a positive direct effect on employee (a) brand-congruent behavior, (b) customer-oriented behavior, (c) participation in brand development, and (d) positive WOM.

Interaction of Social Identity- and Social Exchange-Based Processes

Social identity- and social exchange-based processes likely coexist in organizations, so "an obvious question to raise is how these processes relate to each other" (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007, p. 462). A high-quality exchange relationship (i.e., high POS) might invoke feelings of obligation that render an employee's engagement in brand building more

likely even when OI is low – because of the norm of reciprocity, as previously discussed in connection with H₃. Importantly, in social exchange–based relationships, the individual and the organization remain separate psychological entities, such that POS constitutes an *external* source of motivation (Ellemers, Gilder, and Haslam 2004). In the case of identification, however, an employee becomes psychologically one with the organization such that organizational goals, interests, and success become *internal* sources of motivation (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Responding to low-quality exchange (i.e., low POS) with reduced engagement in brand building would thus have negative consequences for the employee’s sense of self when OI is high – due to the reasons outlined in H_{1a-d}. In line with Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares (2007), we therefore expect that OI interacts with POS in predicting employee brand-building behaviors, such that the relevance of POS diminishes the more strongly an employee identifies with the organization (i.e., the less the employee and the organization are separate psychological entities):¹

H₄: Employee OI has a negative moderating effect on the link between POS and employee (a) brand-congruent behavior, (b) customer-oriented behavior, (c) participation in brand development, and (d) positive WOM.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Sample

To collect the data for hypothesis testing, we conducted an employee survey in a regional unit of a major German retail bank. Similar to other studies of internal marketing and service employee behavior (e.g., Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985), we chose the retail-banking sector as an appropriate context for several reasons. First, the service does not involve physical goods, which increases the relevance of strong brands to increase customers’ trust (Berry 2000). Second, it is a relatively high contact service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985), which increases the relevance of employees as brand champions.

Third, although a bank typically offers a variety of financial services, the focal brand is the corporate brand. Thus, we can rule out the potential confounding effects of different brands within one organization. We conducted our study with one specific regional unit of one bank with a relatively independent management and branding strategy, to avoid any further confounding effects due to differences between branding strategies or organizational cultures. All employees from all functions were included in the survey. To encourage participation and avoid positively biased responses, the survey was completely anonymous.² All 132 employees took part in the survey (100% response rate); eight questionnaires were excluded due to excessive missing data, resulting in 124 usable questionnaires. We conducted a second survey with the same set of employees after 18 months, to test for reverse causality or reciprocal effects between OI and its antecedents and outcomes.³ As questionnaires from both surveys included self-generated identification codes, we used these codes to anonymously match the data, resulting in a longitudinal data set with 88 employees.

Construct Measurement

We applied multi-item measures for all our constructs and used existing scales whenever possible. Due to the lack of established brand-specific scales in internal brand management research, we developed or adapted some brand-related measures (employee–brand fit, brand knowledge, belief in the brand, brand-congruent behavior, and participation in brand development). In all these cases, we used conventional scale development procedures to generate the measures (e.g., Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma 2003). We started with a comprehensive literature review and in-depth interviews with two bank directors, three bank managers, and six front- and back-office employees. When expert judges, both scholars and company representatives, suggested refinements, we pretested the revised scales with managers and

employees. The complete listing of all study constructs, together with their measures and sources, appears in the Appendix.

We included three control variables in our analyses. First, *customer contact* showed whether the employee had regular contact with external customers as part of the job. Second, the *sales function* variable pertained to whether the employee performed sales duties, because salespeople have different performance targets that might affect their attitudes and behaviors. Third, *management position* indicated if the respondent held a management position with leadership responsibilities. All control variables were measured using binary (yes/no) measures, indicating the presence or absence of the respective attribute.

We also tested an alternative model incorporating job satisfaction and organizational commitment as alternative predictors of employee brand-building behaviors and potential mediators of the OI impact (see Wieseke et al. 2009). We measured organizational commitment with the commonly used, six-item affective organizational commitment scale from Allen and Meyer (1990) and job satisfaction with the three-item scale from Hackman and Oldham (1975).

Psychometric Properties and Common Method Variance

Because we used newly developed and adapted scales for some of our constructs, we first conducted an exploratory factor analysis; all items loaded strongly on the intended factors with no unusual or high cross-loadings. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for each scale exceeded .70, and all composite reliabilities were above the recommended threshold of .60 (Bagozzi and Yi 1988), indicating acceptable internal consistency. For all constructs, the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the .50 benchmark (Fornell and Larcker 1981), providing support for convergent validity. We also compared the AVE of each construct with its squared correlations with all other constructs; since, in each case, the highest shared variance was lower than the AVE, support for discriminant validity was obtained (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The

descriptive statistics and associated psychometric properties for the various study constructs are shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Because we used self-reported data from the same respondents to measure the model constructs, common method variance (CMV) might affect the results of our hypotheses testing. We applied both *ex ante* and *ex post* control procedures to account for potential CMV. *Ex ante*, we ensured that respondents' answers were anonymous and emphasized "that there are no right or wrong answers and that they should answer questions as honestly as possible" (Podsakoff et al. 2003, p. 888). *Ex post*, we accounted for CMV by using a version of Lindell and Whitney's (2001) marker variable approach (Malhotra, Kim, and Patil 2006). The questionnaire did not include a marker variable that was theoretically unrelated to the model indicators, so we took the second-smallest positive correlation (r_M) between our model indicators (excluding control variables) as a conservative proxy for CMV, namely the correlation between an indicator of POS and customer-oriented behavior ($r_M = .031$). All zero-order correlations were subsequently adjusted for CMV by partialling out r_M . Of the 488 significant correlations, 34 fell below the 5% significance level (two-tailed); the lowest resulting t-value was 1.65 instead of 1.96, which was the largest change in t-values we found. Thus, CMV was not a threat for our study.

Hypothesis Testing Results

We applied partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende, and Will 2005), considering our relatively small sample size. A common rule of thumb suggests that sample size should be at least ten times the largest number of independent constructs affecting a dependent variable (see Goodhue, Lewis, and Thompson 2012); in our model, the maximum number of independent constructs (including control variables) was six, so our sample of 124 was clearly large enough. In addition, we conducted a

post-hoc power test for the smallest R-square (.204) in our model. The power level of .99 ($f^2 = .256$, $\alpha = .05$, $N = 124$) exceeded the recommended threshold of .80 (Cohen 1988), indicating that statistical power is more than sufficient.

Direct Effects and Mediation Analyses

The results from testing hypotheses H₁—H₃ are shown in Table 2, Model A. In total, this model explains 37.8% of the variance in employees' OI, 41.4% of brand-congruent behavior, 20.4% of customer-oriented behavior, 43.6% of participation in brand development, and 48.7% of positive WOM, suggesting good overall predictive power. Moreover, the Stone-Geisser Q^2 values for each outcome variable, computed using the blindfolding procedure, range between .113 and .361 (i.e., are well above zero; Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics 2009), in further support of the predictive power of our model. To assess the statistical significance of our proposed relationships, we applied a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure using 1,500 subsamples with 124 cases and individual sign changes (Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics 2009).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

In accordance with H_{1a-d}, OI positively affects all four brand-building behaviors: brand-congruent behavior ($\beta = .63$, $p < .001$), customer-oriented behavior ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), participation in brand development ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$), and positive WOM ($\beta = .57$, $p < .001$). In turn, OI is positively influenced by all outcomes of internal branding suggested in H_{2a-c}: employee-brand fit ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), brand knowledge ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), and belief in the brand ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$). To investigate whether OI significantly mediates the impact of the internal branding variables on brand-building behaviors, we tested for the significance of the indirect effects using nonparametric bootstrapping. Bootstrapping offers a superior alternative to the commonly used Sobel test in PLS modeling, because it does not impose any distributional

assumptions (Preacher and Hayes 2008). As we show in Table 3, the 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals for all indirect effects do not contain zero, which confirms the relevance of OI as a psychological mechanism mediating brand-specific employee perceptions (as outcomes of internal branding) and brand-building behaviors.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

With regard to the exchange-based effects of POS on brand-building behaviors, we find a positive impact on participation in brand development ($\beta = .26, p < .001$) and positive WOM ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), supporting H_{3c} and H_{3d}. However, we uncovered no significant impact on brand-congruent behavior ($\beta = .04, n.s.$) or customer-oriented behavior ($\beta = .09, n.s.$), as proposed by H_{3a} and H_{3b}. However, we cannot draw firm conclusions from these non-significant findings without considering the results from the moderation analysis, because we hypothesized that high levels of OI would negatively affect the links between POS and employee brand-building behaviors (see H_{4a-d} earlier).

Moderating Effects

To test the moderating effects proposed in H_{4a-d}, we followed the latent variables approach suggested by Chin, Marcolin and Newsted (2003) and multiplied each indicator that measured OI with each indicator of the POS construct, after standardization. The resulting interaction variable served as an additional predictor of each brand-building behavior (see Table 2, Model B for results). As expected, OI has a significant negative impact on the link between POS and brand-congruent behavior (H_{4a}; $\beta = -.21, p < .01, f^2 = .07$) and customer-oriented behavior (H_{4b}; $\beta = -.25, p < .01, f^2 = .08$). Contrary to H_{4d} though, OI exerts a *positive* impact on the link between POS and positive WOM ($\beta = .19, p < .05, f^2 = .06$). The moderating impact with

respect to participation in brand development, proposed in H_{4c}, is also positive but does not reach significance ($\beta = .10$, n.s., $f^2 = .01$).

For a more complete picture of the implications of these findings, we plotted and tested the simple slopes of the conditional POS effect (Figure 2) for respondents with high and low OI (1 SD below and above the mean), following Aiken and West (1991). To obtain the required unstandardized coefficients (which are not provided by SmartPLS) and their covariances, we computed the unstandardized latent variable scores and subjected each regression equation for the behavioral outcomes in Model B to regression analysis in SPSS, after standardizing the independent variables. The conditional slopes for brand-congruent behavior and customer-oriented behavior are positive and significant when OI is low ($\theta = .19$, $t = 1.74$, $p < .05$; $\theta = .22$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .01$) and non-significant when OI is high ($\theta = -.09$, $t = .83$, $p > .05$; $\theta = -.06$, $t = .85$, $p > .05$). In line with the non-significant interaction term for participation in brand development, both slopes are positive and significant for this criterion variable (OI low: $\theta = .16$, $t = 1.73$, $p < .05$; OI high: $\theta = .28$, $t = 3.89$, $p < .001$). For positive WOM, the pattern reversed, such that the slopes are non-significant when OI is low ($\theta = .00$, $t = .01$, $p > .05$) and positive and significant when OI is high ($\theta = .48$, $t = 4.89$, $p < .001$). Thus, POS seems to substitute for the lack of identity-based motivation that results from low OI, though only for on-the-job brand-building behaviors; it also positively affects participation in brand development and positive WOM, but only in the case of high OI.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Robustness Analyses

Longitudinal Analyses

To better understand the nature of OI and rule out alternative explanations for our cross-sectional findings due to reverse causality, we performed autoregressive/cross-lagged panel data

analysis with latent variables (Finkel 1995), using the matched data from the 88 employees who participated in our original study (t_1) and the follow-up study (t_2). For each pair of independent and dependent variables, we ran PLS-SEM, including the cross-lagged and autoregressive paths from t_1 to t_2 . The results from the longitudinal analyses support our cross-sectional findings (Table 4), with the exception of a non-significant link between OI and customer-oriented behavior (H_{1b}). This might stem from the high mean and small variance of the latter variable in both waves that might have artificially increased the autoregressive effect. The cross-lagged results also indicate reciprocal causality between OI and employee–brand fit as well as most of its outcomes, with causal dominance of the hypothesized direction. These results strengthen the empirical support for our cross-sectional findings and thus the internal validity of our study; they also help clarify the reciprocal nature of the identification–behavior relationship as indicated by the literature (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Stoner, Perrewé, and Munyon 2011).

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Alternative Models

We ran several alternative models to affirm the robustness of our proposed model. First, we freed the direct paths of employee–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand to brand-building behaviors. For brand knowledge, all the paths to on-the-job brand-building behaviors emerged as significant (brand-congruent behavior: $\beta = .26, p < .01$; customer-oriented behavior: $\beta = .24, p < .01$; participation in brand development: $\beta = .17, p < .05$). These results indicate an additional “behavior-guiding” effect of brand knowledge to perform on-the-job brand-building behaviors, irrespective of OI. No other direct paths turned out as significant. Second, we excluded OI from the model, leaving all direct paths between exogenous variables and the brand-building behaviors free. Adding OI yielded the following effect sizes, which support its relevance for predicting employee brand-building behaviors (Cohen 1988): $f^2 = .30$ for brand-congruent

behavior, $f^2 = .02$ for customer-oriented behavior, $f^2 = .15$ for participation in brand development, and $f^2 = .32$ for positive WOM. Third, we repeated the estimation of our model without control variables. The results remained stable. Fourth, we included organizational commitment and job satisfaction as additional predictors of employee brand-building behaviors and outcomes of OI. We found a positive, significant impact of OI on both organizational commitment ($\beta = .63, p < .001$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = .30, p < .001$). However—with one exception for the link between organizational commitment and brand-congruent behavior ($\beta = .19, p < .05$)—these two variables had no significant impact on brand-building behaviors, and the impact of OI on all outcomes remained robust both in magnitude and significance. Fifth, we included a path from POS to OI (see endnote 1) but found no support for this relationship ($\beta = -.05, n.s$). The path coefficients of the internal branding outcomes on OI also remained robust both in magnitude and significance.

DISCUSSION

Research Issues

Despite the apparent importance of employees for building strong service brands, little empirical work has addressed *how* firms can turn their employees into brand champions, that is, motivate them to engage in behaviors that support their organization's brand-building efforts. Drawing from social identity and social exchange theories, our study provides clear evidence that employees' identification with their organization constitutes such a powerful motivational force. Previous research shows that OI predicts various desirable employee behaviors, such as task performance, organizational citizenship, or reduced turnover (for a review, see Riketta 2005). Our findings extend current knowledge on OI by highlighting its relevance in the context of brand-building behaviors. Notably, OI's positive impact on brand-building behaviors remains robust, even in the presence of organizational commitment and job satisfaction and is not

mediated by these constructs. We thus affirm the proposed psychological mechanisms that are specific to the self-referencing nature of OI and contribute to the growing acknowledgement that a collective self-concept (that is, the aspect most closely linked to OI) fundamentally shapes employee behavior (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007). The finding that OI's impact on brand-congruent behavior is the strongest among all proposed effects further highlights this specific nature of OI that results from converging individual and organizational identities.

Although we obtained mixed results for the social exchange-based effects of POS on employee brand-building behaviors, adding OI as a moderator revealed that the effects of POS depend on the level of employees' OI – though not entirely as expected. In the case of low identifiers, POS constitutes an alternative motivator of on-the-job brand-building behaviors, but not of positive WOM. A potential explanation can be derived from the identity literature. Stoner, Perrewé, and Munyon (2011, p. 99) argue that people holding a “peripheral” organizational identity (i.e., are low OI on OI) engage for their organization “only if they perceive a potential social exchange benefit from that behavior”; because positive WOM (off the job) is not visible to the organization, it cannot invoke such benefits. In contrast, high identifiers hold a central organizational identity, so their behavior is guided by their “true sense of self” (Stoner, Perrewé, and Munyon 2011, p. 98). This renders the social exchange rather irrelevant for their brand-congruent behavior and customer orientation. However, high identifiers also respond to high (low) POS with increasing (decreasing) engagement in voluntary participation in brand building and positive WOM. This might constitute one potential answer to “the question of what is a viable response to low-quality exchange for high identifiers” (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, and Tavares 2007, p. 471), which is an issue worth exploring in further research.

Regarding the relative impact of OI and POS, we found consistently that OI is a stronger driver of brand-building behaviors. In the case of social exchange-based motivation, the

individual and the organization remain separate identities, but OI implies that the organization is incorporated into the person's own self-concept. Our results underline the importance of such identity-based internal motivation for turning employees into brand champions (see also Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009); and considering the relevance of OI for a range of beneficial employee behaviors beyond brand building, they support Wieseke et al.'s (2009, p. 123) recommendation that OI "should be the ultimate goal of internal marketing."

Our study also offers important insights into how internal branding can foster OI when contributing to employees' perceived self-brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand. By showing that OI largely mediates the effects of these internal branding outcomes on employee brand-building behaviors, we facilitate a better understanding of *how* internal branding can motivate employees to become brand champions. Identifying OI as a key mediating mechanism is particularly appealing since it is theoretically grounded in the well-established social identity approach (cf. Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). Moreover, "[e]mpirical research on OI has largely focused on the consequences of OI, whereas its antecedents have received comparably less research scrutiny" (Wieseke et al. 2009, p. 126). Our three internal branding outcomes explain almost 40% of OI's variance, providing an effective means to enhance OI; and although not explicitly tested, the strong impact of internal branding outcomes on OI suggests that internal branding might prompt various beneficial employee behaviors, beyond brand building.

Managerial Implications

Organizational identification is a powerful force for turning employees into brand champions. The stronger employees identify with their employer (that is, incorporate the organization's identity into their self-concept), the more internally motivated they are to engage in behaviors that support organizational brand-building efforts, both on and off the job. It is known that employees who identify with their employer also provide better performance, engage

in voluntary citizenship behaviors, and express lower intentions to leave (Ricketta 2005). These findings accordingly have important implications for managerial practice.

First, firms should constantly monitor their employees' level of identification and its fluctuations (see also Homburg, Wieseke, and Hoyer 2009). In addition, managers should track whether employees feel valued and supported by the firm (e.g., through supervisor support, job security, adequate pay, and possibilities for development and promotion; see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002 for an overview). High identifiers who feel valued and supported show an increased voluntary engagement in brand building (on the job) and positive word-of-mouth (off the job). POS also offers an alternative route of external motivation for low identifiers, which is important, as people might not be equally prone to identification.

Second, firms should actively work to stimulate OI through internal branding efforts that enhance employee–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand. Importantly, internal branding should link closely with human resource management, including personnel selection. From the start, the firm must clearly communicate its core values and hire employees who share them. To inform employees about what the brand stands for and promises to customers, managers can use training programs and internal and external communication, such as brand books, storytelling, or (external) advertising messages. At every employment stage, “symbols such as traditions, myths, metaphors, rituals, sagas, heroes, and physical setting ... can make the individual's membership salient and can provide compelling images of what the group or organization represents” and what differentiates it from competitors (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p. 28). Employees might gain further knowledge about brand values from observing role models such as coworkers or (transformational) leaders who live the brand (Miles and Mangold 2004; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009). Similar instruments can foster employees' belief in the brand, even if the content and mechanisms might differ because establishing employees' belief in

the brand involves convincing employees of the brand's value to its customers and its contributions to company success.

Successfully implementing internal branding measures can be challenging though, because employees do not always react as intended and might feel brainwashed. For instance, using the term "brand" (as opposed to, for instance, "common values") might raise negative connotations, reminding employees of fancy advertising or even manipulation.⁴ Particularly if internal culture or communication deviates from external marketing communications, employees might suspect the promoted brand image is a lie and not actually embodied by the company. Such suspicions likely lower employees' OI (see also Yaniv and Farkas 2005) and thus their willingness to champion the brand. Thus, managers should not "blindly" implement internal branding measures without careful evaluation and consideration of employees' potential responses. Instead, we propose that they use the internal branding outcomes suggested by our study as (1) indicators of the very need to take internal branding measures, (2) elements for evaluating job applicants, (3) goals to seek when designing internal branding instruments, and (4) "quality checks" for existing internal branding activities.

Limitations and Further Research

Our study offers important theoretical and managerial insights for turning service employees into brand champions, but it also has certain limitations that offer opportunities for research. First, our sample was drawn from a single organization in the banking sector. Further research is thus needed to establish the generalizability of our results across companies and industries. Second, recent methodological research affirms the advantages of PLS over covariance-based SEM for complex models and small samples (Goodhue, Lewis, and Thompson 2012) but also notes the higher probability of false negatives with smaller sample sizes, irrespective of the technique. The non-significant paths in our model thus require cautious

interpretation; tests with larger sample sizes would be warranted to confirm the (non-)existence of the respective paths. Moreover, PLS-SEM prohibits state-of-the-art measurement invariance testing. We tested for longitudinal invariance in the measures in the single cross-lagged models using covariance-based SEM in Mplus, but the sample was too small to test for cross-group invariance across employee groups (e.g., with or without regular customer contact) in the cross-sectional model. Third, although the longitudinal analysis confirmed our cross-sectional findings, it would be valuable to complement this study with (field) experimental data and additional longitudinal studies (e.g., with different time lags and/or additional waves) to provide more definitive evidence about causality.

Three areas for additional research relate to the proposed outcomes of internal branding as drivers of OI.⁵ First, we treated these variables as exogenous, but they might be theoretically related (e.g., interact in predicting OI or influence one another). Second, these variables (or related ideas) have been proposed as key outcomes of internal branding, but no systematic investigation describes how specific internal branding instruments should be designed to achieve them. Third, mediation analyses might assess the impact of internal branding outcomes on other beneficial employee behaviors through OI, as suggested by our research. In conducting such analyses, explicitly distinguishing the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of OI may provide more refined insights into the role of OI in shaping service employee behaviors.

APPENDIX

Constructs and Measurement Items

Employee–Brand Fit (adapted from Cable and DeRue 2002)

- The values of our brand are consistent with how I see myself. (.90)
- My personal values match the values of the brand [name]. (.94)
- Our brand values provide a good fit with the things that I value in life. (.93)

Brand Knowledge (adapted from Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010)

- I know how our brand differentiates us from our competitors. (.84)
- I have sound knowledge about the values represented by the brand [name]. (.85)
- It is clear to me what is promised to our customers by the brand [name]. (.76)

Belief in the Brand (adapted from Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010; Henkel et al. 2007)

- I am convinced that the brand [name] significantly contributes to the overall success of our company. (.70)
- I believe that our customers buy more products and services because of the brand [name]. (.80)
- I believe that the brand [name] accounts considerably for the loyalty of our customers. (.84)
- I am convinced that our customers recommend the brand [name] to others. (.70)

POS (Eisenberger, Hutchinson, and Sowa 1986)

- My organization values my contribution to its well-being. (.81)
- My organization strongly considers my goals and values. (.87)
- My organization is willing to help me when I need a special favor. (.81)
- My organization cares about my general satisfaction. (.89)
- My organization tries to make my job as interesting as possible. (.81)

OI (Mael and Ashforth 1992)

- When someone criticizes this organization, it feels like a personal insult. (.81)
- I am very interested about what others think about this organization. (.74)
- When I talk about this organization, I usually say “we” rather than “they”. (.68)
- This organization’s successes are my successes. (.69)
- When someone praises this organization, it feels like a personal compliment. (.83)
- If a story in the media criticized this organization, I would feel embarrassed. (.65)

Brand-Congruent Behavior * (adapted from Baumgarth and Schmidt 2010; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009)

In customer contact situations...

- I make no statements that are inconsistent with our brand communications in the media (e.g. advertising or web presence). (.73)
- I see that my actions are not at odds with our brand. (.84)
- I pay attention that my personal appearance is in line with our corporate brand. (.87)

Customer-Oriented Behavior *(Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan 2001)

- I always try to figure out what a customer's needs are. (.82)
- I always try to bring a customer with a problem together with a product or service that helps him/her solve that problem. (.82)
- I always recommend the product or service that is best suited to the customer's problem. (.86)
- I always try to find out what kind of product or service would be most helpful to a customer. (.84)

Participation in Brand Development (adapted from Burmann and Zeplin 2005; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009)

- If I have a useful idea on how to improve our brand's performance, I share it with my organization, even when I am not rewarded for doing so. (.75)
- I would voluntarily accept extra work if that has a positive effect on our brand image. (.80)
- I participate in building our brand, even when I am not rewarded for doing so (.84)

Positive WOM (Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003; Bettencourt 1997)

- I bring up [corporate brand name] in a positive way in conversations I have with friends and acquaintances. (.77)
- I 'talk up' [corporate brand name] to people I know. (.91)
- In social situations, I often speak favorably about [brand name]. (.89)
- I encourage friends and acquaintances to buy the products and services of [corporate brand name]. (.89)

Note: Standardized loadings in parentheses. Seven-point Likert-scales anchored by “strongly disagree” [1] and “strongly agree” [7].

* Employees with no regular customer contact as part of their job evaluated situations in which they served internal customers.

NOTES

1. Several studies show that OI mediates (rather than moderates) the impact of POS on specific outcomes. Treating OI as a moderator does not preclude the possibility that it mediates the POS–outcome relationships (Edwards and Peccei 2010). However, neither the general impact of POS nor a full exploration of the potential drivers of OI is an objective of the present research. Rather, our focus is understanding social identity– and social exchange–based motivations for brand building, as reflected by OI and POS, and thus the interaction between these two variables. To ensure that the impact of the internal branding outcomes on OI is not affected by the omission of the POS–OI path, we ran an alternative model, controlling for POS; we report these findings in the Robustness Analysis section.
2. Anonymous questionnaires and envelopes were provided to each employee by one of the authors, in person. Employees could put the completed questionnaire in the envelope and slip it into a locked box maintained by the employee committee (works council) or send it directly to the researchers. Because the organizational unit that provided our sample was relatively small, individual employees could have been identified easily by demographic information, so we did not ask for age, gender, or organizational tenure. From separate company records, we learned that the workforce consists of 63% women and 37% men, with an average age of 39.6 years ($SD = 13.3$) and average organizational tenure of 17.0 years ($SD = 11.1$). We could not control for these variables in our model, but we considered unbiased answers more important for the validity of our results than adding these controls.
3. We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to conduct this longitudinal analysis.
4. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this important issue.
5. We thank two anonymous reviewers for raising these ideas.

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TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, PSYCHOMETRIC PROPERTIES, AND CORRELATIONS OF STUDY CONSTRUCTS

Variables	MEAN	SD	α	CR	AVE	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Employee–Brand Fit	4.72	1.17	.92	.95	.85											
2. Brand Knowledge	5.73	.83	.73	.85	.65	.41										
3. Belief in the Brand	4.77	.98	.76	.85	.58	.47	.36									
4. POS	4.31	1.25	.90	.92	.70	.35	.29	.46								
5. OI	5.24	.99	.83	.88	.54	.49	.41	.40	.20							
6. Brand-Congruent Behavior	5.61	1.02	.75	.86	.66	.43	.48	.36	.18	.62						
7. Customer-Oriented Behavior	6.08	.72	.86	.90	.70	.32	.39	.27	.14	.39	.40					
8. Participation in Brand Development	5.55	.94	.72	.84	.64	.35	.44	.33	.37	.55	.48	.48				
9. Positive WOM	5.57	1.08	.89	.92	.76	.39	.39	.45	.41	.61	.49	.29	.58			
10. Customer Contact	.55	.50	---	---	---	-.01	.05	-.12	-.13	.14	.06	.19	.13	.00		
11. Sales Function	.52	.50	---	---	---	-.03	.02	-.07	-.06	.11	.12	.20	.14	.08	.82	
12. Management Position	.14	.50	---	---	---	.12	.14	.03	.10	.22	.11	.18	.34	.14	.03	.05

Note: SD = standard deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite (construct) reliability, AVE = average variance extracted. Numbers in the matrix represent construct correlations.

TABLE 2. RESULTS

	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	MODEL A		MODEL B	
			Estimates	(t-values)	Estimates	(t-values)
H1a	OI	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.63 ***	(11.39)	.56 ***	(9.06)
H1b	OI	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.34 ***	(3.41)	.28 **	(2.69)
H1c	OI	→ Participation in Brand Development	.44 ***	(6.52)	.43 ***	(5.95)
H1d	OI	→ Positive WOM	.57 ***	(7.42)	.55 ***	(6.84)
H2a	Employee–Brand Fit	→ OI	.31 ***	(3.82)	.31 ***	(3.95)
H2b	Brand Knowledge	→ OI	.19 **	(2.47)	.19 **	(2.43)
H2c	Belief in the Brand	→ OI	.22 ***	(2.72)	.22 **	(2.69)
H3a	POS	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.04 n.s.	(.86)	.05 n.s.	(.91)
H3b	POS	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.09 n.s.	(1.18)	.11 n.s.	(1.51)
H3c	POS	→ Participation in Brand Development	.26 ***	(3.69)	.23 **	(2.87)
H3d	POS	→ Positive WOM	.28 ***	(4.11)	.22 **	(2.84)
H4a	POS × OI	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior			-.21 **	(2.59)
H4b	POS × OI	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior			-.25 **	(2.78)
H4c	POS × OI	→ Participation in Brand Development			.10 n.s.	(1.16)
H4d	POS × OI	→ Positive WOM			.19 *	(2.02)
	Customer Contact	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior			-.22 *	(1.77)
	Sales Function	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.22 *	(1.68)	.22 *	(1.69)
	Management Position	→ OI	.15 **	(2.48)	.15 **	(2.53)
	Management Position	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.09 *	(1.67)	.12 *	(2.03)
	Management Position	→ Participation in Brand Development	.21 ***	(3.89)	.21 ***	(3.61)

Note: Completely standardized path coefficients are shown. Only significant effects of the control variables are shown.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant (one-tailed-test, d.f. = 1,499).

TABLE 3. INDIRECT EFFECTS OF INTERNAL BRANDING OUTCOMES ON EMPLOYEE BRAND-BUILDING BEHAVIORS THROUGH OI (MODEL A)

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Indirect Effects Bootstrapping		
		Estimates	95% Percentile CIs Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Employee-Brand Fit	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.19	.093	.302
	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.10	.034	.205
	→ Participation in Brand Development	.14	.063	.230
	→ Positive WOM	.17	.082	.276
Brand Knowledge	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.12	.030	.224
	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.06	.012	.148
	→ Participation in Brand Development	.08	.020	.163
	→ Positive WOM	.11	.025	.207
Belief in the Brand	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.14	.036	.250
	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.07	.016	.166
	→ Participation in Brand Development	.10	.027	.181
	→ Positive WOM	.12	.035	.232

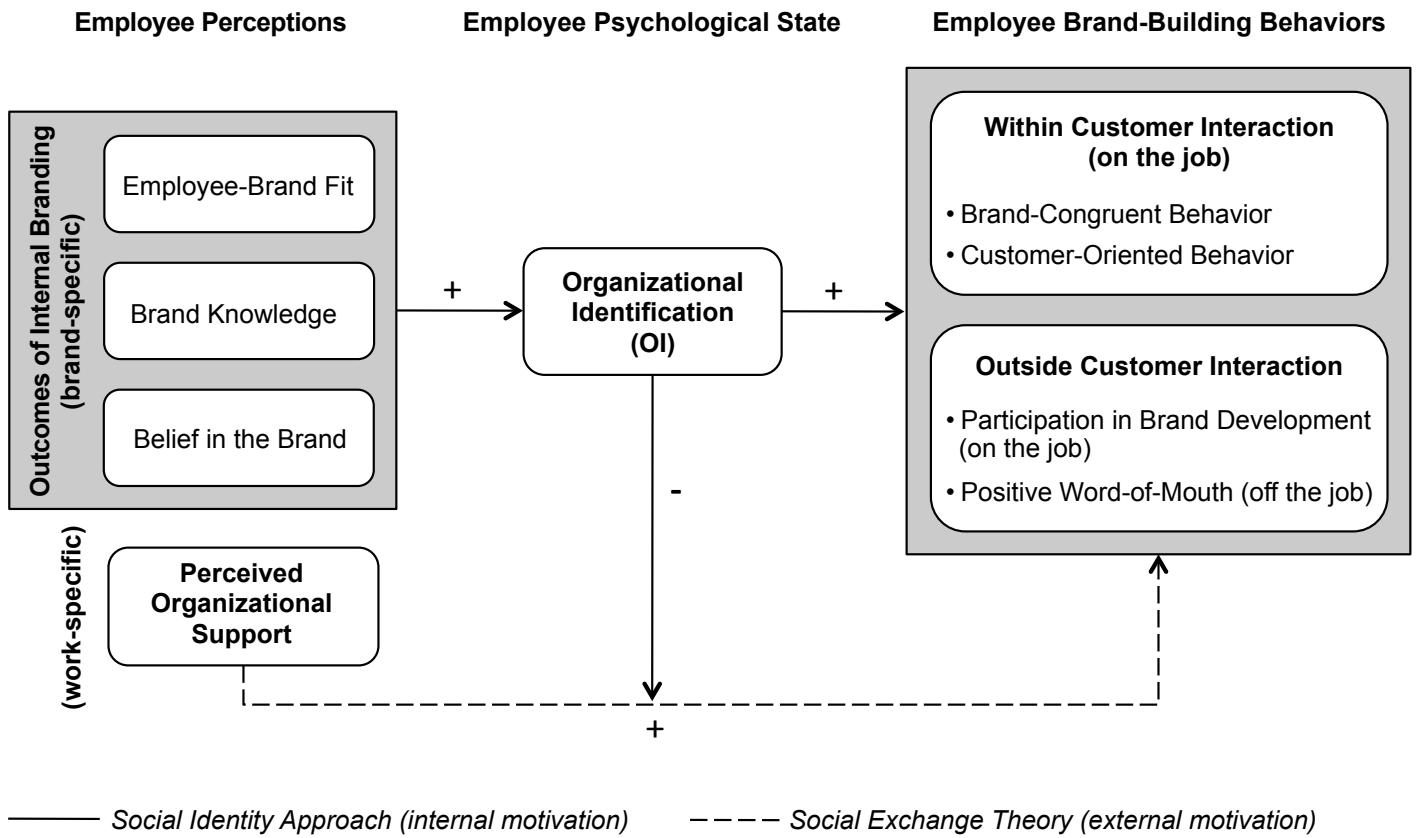
Note: Completely standardized path coefficients are shown. Confidence intervals (CIs) based on 1,500 bootstrap samples.

TABLE 4. LONGITUDINAL ANALYSES

	Independent Variable (t ₁)	Dependent Variable (t ₂)	Cross-Lagged Effect		Autoregressive Effect of Dependent Variable	
H1a	OI	→ Brand-Congruent Behavior	.33	*** (3.37)	.29	** (2.50)
	Brand-Congruent Behavior	→ OI	.29	** (2.80)	.46	*** (4.54)
H1b	OI	→ Customer-Oriented Behavior	.06	n.s. (1.51)	.66	*** (9.07)
	Customer-Oriented Behavior	→ OI	.11	n.s. (1.04)	.57	*** (7.07)
H1c	OI	→ Participation	.28	** (2.61)	.47	*** (4.73)
	Participation	→ OI	.22	* (1.92)	.48	*** (4.96)
H1d	OI	→ Positive WOM	.34	** (2.54)	.38	* (2.40)
	Positive WOM	→ OI	.20	* (1.83)	.48	*** (4.23)
H2a	Employee–Brand Fit	→ OI	.31	*** (3.55)	.45	*** (5.06)
	OI	→ Employee–Brand Fit	.22	* (1.94)	.25	* (2.00)
H2b	Brand Knowledge	→ OI	.27	*** (3.02)	.52	*** (6.62)
	OI	→ Brand Knowledge	.07	n.s. (.96)	.62	*** (9.89)
H2c	Belief in the Brand	→ OI	.25	** (2.81)	.52	*** (6.49)
	OI	→ Belief in the Brand	-.03	n.s. (.45)	.57	*** (6.90)

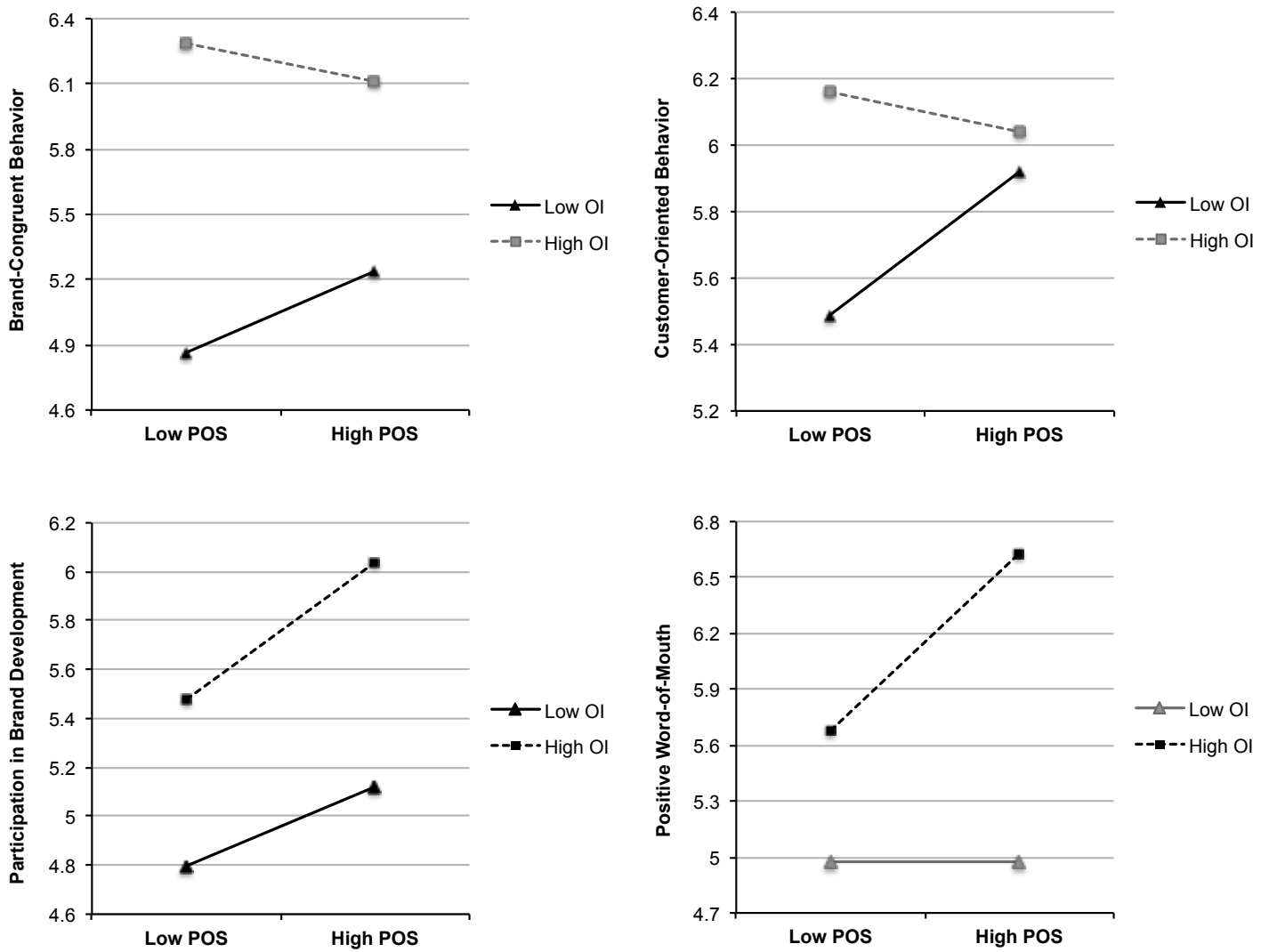
Note: Completely standardized path coefficients are shown. Numbers in parentheses represent t-values.
 *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant (one-tailed-test, d.f. = 1,499).

FIGURE 1. RESEARCH MODEL



Note: Customer contact, sales function, and management position are included as control variables for all dependent variables. Organizational commitment and job satisfaction serve as additional controls for brand-building behaviors and outcomes of OI in an alternative model.

FIGURE 2. MODERATING EFFECTS OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION (OI)



Note: Significant slopes are in black; nonsignificant slopes are in grey.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How can companies turn their employees into brand champions? And what role does the employee–organization relationship play in this respect? This research reveals employees’ organizational identification (OI) as a powerful motivation for them to champion their organization’s brand. Employees can develop strong emotional bonds with their employer by incorporating the firm’s identity into their own self-concept. The stronger their identification with the firm, the more internally motivated they are to engage in a range of important behaviors that support and benefit the firm’s brand-building efforts. Such behaviors include behaving in a brand-congruent and customer-oriented way in service encounters as well as voluntary participation in brand development and personal advocacy of the organization and its brand. It is known that employees’ OI predicts a range of important employee behaviors that highly benefit a firm, such as task performance, organizational citizenship, or reduced turnover. This study further extends the relevance of OI to the context of brand-building behaviors. Managers should therefore constantly monitor their employees’ level of OI and its fluctuations and also actively work on its stimulation.

This research further reveals an alternative driver of employee brand-building behaviors, namely employees’ perceptions of organizational support. Perceived organizational support indicates the quality of an employee’s exchange-based relationship with the organization as perceived by the employee (e.g., based on supervisor support, job security, adequate pay, and possibilities for development and promotion). When employees feel valued and supported by their firm, they are willing to reciprocate by supporting its brand-building efforts. High identifiers who also feel valued and supported show an increased voluntary engagement in brand building (on the job) and positive word-of-mouth (off the job). For low identifiers, perceived organizational support offers an alternative route of motivation, which is important, as people might not be equally prone to identification. Thus, managers should not only monitor and stimulate their employees’ level of OI, but also their perceptions of being valued and supported by their employer.

What can companies do to stimulate their employees’ OI? This research shows that internal branding can provide such an effective means when it contributes to employees’ perceptions of self–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand. To achieve these outcomes, a firm must clearly communicate its core values and hire employees who share them. To inform employees about what the brand stands for, managers can use training programs and internal and external communication, such as brand books, storytelling, or (external) advertising messages. Employees might gain further brand knowledge from observing role models such as coworkers or (transformational) leaders who live the brand. Similar instruments can foster employees’ belief in the brand. The content and mechanisms, however, might differ as establishing employees’ belief in the brand involves convincing employees of the brand’s value to its customers and its contributions to company success. Managers can use the presented internal branding outcomes as (1) indicators of the need to take internal branding measures, (2) elements for evaluating job applicants, (3) goals to seek when designing internal branding instruments, and (4) “quality checks” for existing internal branding activities.

Summarizing, internal branding can foster employees’ OI—and thus internally motivate employees to become brand champions—by contributing to employee–brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand. Through OI, internal branding could also leverage various other beneficial employee behaviors beyond brand building.