

Converting internal brand knowledge into employee performance

Liem Viet Ngo

School of Marketing, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Nguyen Phong Nguyen

Department of Accounting, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Kim Thien Huynh

Department of Marketing, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Gary Gregory

School of Marketing, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and

Pham Hung Cuong

Foreign Trade University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Abstract

Purpose – Internal branding efforts are essential in improving employee performance in services marketing. Drawing on reformulation of attitude theory, this paper aims to contribute to the internal branding literature by positing that while internal brand knowledge (IBK) is essential for transforming brand vision into brand reality, it is not brand knowledge per se but its integration with other brand- and customer-related aspects that drive superior employee performance. In particular, this paper develops a cognitive-affective-behaviour model of internal branding proposing that IBK results in higher levels of employee brand identification (EBI); this sense of identification then motivates employees to engage in both employee-related and brand- and customer-focussed behaviours (i.e. brand citizenship behaviour [BCB] and customer-oriented behaviour [COB]), which in turn foster employee performance.

Design/methodology/approach – The hypotheses were empirically tested using a sample of 697 from services industry in Vietnam.

Findings – The findings indicate a sequential mediation model in that employee brand knowledge affects employee performance (both objective and subjective measures) through EBI, BCB and COB. Employee brand knowledge results in higher levels of EBI; this sense of identification then motivates employees to engage in employee-related brand and customer-focussed behaviours (BCB and COB), which in turn foster employee performance.

Practical implications – Firms should understand that IBK may not directly result in high levels of service performance, and instead should embrace the culture of self-driven positive brand-connection attitudes that motivate employees to engage in BCB and COB that are consistent with their sense of self.

Originality/value – This study makes a unique contribution to the internal branding literature by unravelling a pathway that integrates employees' self-related psychological mechanism (EBI) and employee-related brand and customer-focussed behaviours (BCB and COB) through which employee brand knowledge is converted into employee performance.

Keywords Internal branding, Employer branding, Employee performance, Internal marketing, Brand identification

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Turning service employees into brand champions has become crucial in building a strong brand, especially in high-contact services such as financial, legal, and higher education (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Morhart *et al.*, 2009; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Sujchaphong *et al.*, 2015; Devasagayam *et al.*, 2010; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Foster *et al.*, 2010; Garas *et al.*, 2018). Service employees often serve as the living brand,

responsible for delivering on brand promises and shaping the way the customer perceives a service brand (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005). Internal brand knowledge (IBK) is fundamental to achieving this outcome.

To date, understanding intervening mechanisms of the knowledge-performance nexus has generated increased attention from marketing scholars as part of the broader area of internal branding (Xiong *et al.*, 2013; Piehler *et al.*, 2016; Piehler *et al.*, 2018; Piehler, 2018). Mediation research in internal branding has covered a wide range of divergent and fragmented mediators as depicted in Table I. They include brand commitment (Biedenbach and Manzhynski, 2016;

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Journal of Product & Brand Management
29/3 (2020) 273–287
© Emerald Publishing Limited [ISSN 1061-0421]
[DOI 10.1108/JPBM-10-2018-2068]

Received 19 October 2018
Revised 18 March 2019
14 June 2019
Accepted 14 June 2019

Table I Mediation studies published in the internal branding literature

Author (date)	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Mediator
Piehler et al. (2018) Iyer et al. (2018)	External communication congruence Brand orientation; Strategic brand management	BCB Brand performance	Brand commitment; Brand understanding Internal brand
Liu et al. (2017) Biedenbach and Manzhynski (2016) Buil et al. (2016)	Internal branding; Brand orientation Brand orientation; IBK; Internal brand involvement Internal brand management	Employee brand-building behaviors Sustainable importance Organisational citizenship behaviour	Interfunctional communication Internal brand commitment Organisational identification; Work engagement
Helm et al. (2016)	Ideal brand-self congruency; Actual brand-self congruency	BCB	Brand identification; Brand pride
Piehler et al. (2016) Terglav et al. (2016)	Brand understanding Brand-oriented leadership	Brand citizenship behaviour Commitment	Brand identification; Brand commitment Employee brand knowledge; Psychological contract; Employee brand fit
Du Preez and Bendixen (2015) Yang et al. (2015) Baker et al. (2014)	Internal brand management Internal branding Brand knowledge dissemination	Intention to stay Brand behaviour Service performance	Job satisfaction; Brand commitment Brand commitment Employee perceptions of authenticity; Brand value congruence perceptions; Service ability; BCB
Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014)	Employee-brand fit; Brand knowledge; Belief in the brand	Brand congruent behaviour; COB; Participation in brand development; Positive word-of-mouth	Organisational identification
Ferdous and Polonsky (2014)	Experience of internal marketing programmes	COB	Internal market orientation; Job satisfaction, Organisation identification
Porricelli et al. (2014) Lee et al. (2014) Xiong et al. (2013)	Internal brand management Internal branding Brand knowledge; Brand importance; Brand role relevance	BCB Job satisfaction; Employee loyalty Employee brand equity	Job satisfaction; Brand commitment Employee engagement Employee brand commitment
King et al. (2013) King and So (2013)	Service brand orientation Brand-oriented support; Brand-oriented recruitment; Brand-oriented training	Brand-oriented behaviour; COB Brand-building behaviour; Brand endorsement; Brand allegiance; Brand consistent behaviour	Employee customer orientation Employee brand understanding
Matanda and Ndubisi (2013)	Internal branding; Internal customer orientation	Employee intention to stay	Person-organisation fit
Hughes (2013)	Perceived ad quality; Perceived ad quantity	Effort; Sales Performance	Outcome expectancy; Brand Identification
Sirianni et al. (2013) Shaari et al. (2012) Chang et al. (2012)	Employee-brand alignment Brand knowledge; Brand rewards Brand-centred human resource management	Brand evaluation BCB BCB	Brand conceptual fluency Brand commitment Brand psychological ownership
King and Grace (2012)	Organisational socialisation; Relationship orientation; Employee receptiveness	BCB	Brand commitment
Punjaisri and Wilson (2011)	Internal branding	Brand performance	Brand identification; Brand commitment; Brand loyalty
Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010)	Brand orientation	Internal brand equity; Customer-based brand equity	Internal brand commitment; IBK; Internal brand involvement

Shaari et al., 2012; Du Preez and Bendixen, 2015; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; Yang et al., 2015; Xiong et al., 2013; Porricelli et al., 2014; King and Grace, 2012), role clarity (King and Grace, 2010), brand value fit between employees and organisations (Baker et al., 2014; Matanda and Ndubisi, 2013), perception of internal market orientation (Ferdous and Polonsky, 2014), employee engagement (Buil et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2014), employee brand understanding (King and So, 2013), brand pride (Helm et al., 2016), brand conceptual

fluency (Sirianni et al., 2013), brand value adoption (Tuominen et al., 2016), internal branding (Iyer et al., 2018), BCB (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; Baker et al., 2014).

Despite the recent proliferation of mediation research in internal branding, there is still much we do not know. Indeed, while it is logical and makes sense, therefore, that employee-related brand-focussed behaviours (e.g. BCB) is a mechanism underlying IBK effects on employee performance, we do not believe that employee-related customer-oriented behaviour

(COB) has received adequate attention as a potential mediator of IBK effects. “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” (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014, p. 311). Despite the importance of COB as “a desire outcome” in high-contact services (King et al., 2013, p. 175), little is known about how COB plays out in transforming IBK into employee performance.

In response to the above-identified gap, the current study contributes to the internal branding literature by positing that while IBK is essential for transforming brand vision into brand reality (King and Grace, 2008) it is not brand knowledge *per se* but its integration with other brand- and customer-related aspects that drive superior employee performance. Specifically, this study unpacks the IBK–employee performance relationship by examining a multi-mediator model in which IBK enhances employee performance through employee-brand identification (EBI), BCB, and COB. In studying the underlying process, this study utilises Bagozzi’s (1992) reformulation of attitude theory to build our conceptual model. Bagozzi (1992) articulates that cognition, affect and behaviour occurring in a process in that individual’s cognition precedes affect and subsequently leads to behaviour. In this regard, we extend the works of Xiong et al. (2013), Piehler et al. (2016), Piehler et al. (2018) and Piehler (2018) on examining plausible cognitive-affective-behaviour linkages in internal branding. This study develops a cognitive-affective-behaviour model of internal branding proposing that IBK results in higher levels of EBI; this sense of identification then motivates employees to engage in both employee-related brand- and customer-focussed behaviours (i.e. BCB and COB), which in turn foster employee performance.

The next section presents the conceptual model and reviews the literature on the focal constructs in this study. Research hypotheses are then developed, and the empirical setting is described. Next the paper outlines details about the sample, measurement instrument, analytical procedure, and a discussion of the results. The paper concludes with theoretical contributions, implications for managers, limitations, and future research directions.

2. Literature review and research model

2.1 Internal branding: a cognitive-affective-behaviour model

There exists a growing body of research in the field of internal branding. Despite various definitions of internal branding that have been proposed (Saleem and Iglesias, 2016), there is certain agreement that it is a process through which brands aim to influence employees’ attitudes and shape their behaviours to be aligned with a brand, by creating employees’ understanding of brand values and engaging them in living brand reality (Punjaisri et al., 2009). A scrutiny of extant literature identifies three common elements that underlie the internal branding process; cognitive brand engagement, affective brand engagement, and brand-focussed behaviours.

While the literature shows strong support that employee brand engagement is a critical driver in building organisation brand equity (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; King and Grace, 2010),

there is little research examining how cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of internal branding work together to enhance employee performance. The present study proposes a cognitive-affective-behaviour model where IBK is indirectly related to employee performance serially through EBI, BCB and COB (Figure 1). The following section discusses the focal constructs of the model, the theoretical rationale for their inclusion in the model, and hypothesis development.

2.2 Internal brand knowledge

The central premise of internal branding is to “communicate and educate employees about the brand values to enhance their intellectual and emotional engagement with the brand” (Foster et al., 2010, p. 402). IBK represents the cognitive engagement aspect of internal branding. IBK is defined 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” (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014, p. 314). Consistent with Keller’s (1993) cognitive approach of consumer-based brand equity, IBK is formed based on human cognitive activity upon which employees understand, remember, make decisions, and perform based on the information they have received (Peter and Olson, 2001; Keller, 1993). IBK enables employees to make sense of their roles and responsibility when delivering on the brand promise (Biedenbach and Manzhynski, 2016; King and Grace, 2008). High level of brand knowledge enables employees to reduce their role ambiguity (Babin and Boles, 1996), and facilitates the delivery of brand promise (Ambler, 2003; Aurand et al., 2005; King and Grace, 2010):

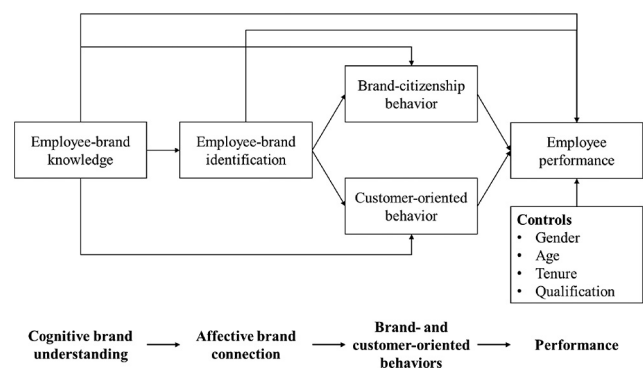
Without such brand knowledge, employees are unable to transform the brand vision into the brand reality [...] As such, it is imperative that marketers understand firstly, how to ensure employees possess the required brand knowledge. [I]f employees are void of brand knowledge, they are not able to behave in the manner desired by the organisation nor are they able to make brand-related decisions (King and Grace, 2009, p. 129).

Thus, the current study considers IBK as the cognitive element of the cognitive-affective-behaviour model (Biedenbach and Manzhynski, 2016).

2.3 Employee brand identification

A recent literature review by Saleem and Iglesias (2016) reveals that EBI and brand commitment are the two key attitudinal outcomes of internal branding. EBI refers to the degree to

Figure 1 Conceptual model



which the employee “defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes defines [the firm’s] brand” (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010, p. 84). Brand commitment refers to the psychological attachment of employees to the brand (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005). The current study includes EBI as the affective element of the cognitive-affective-behaviour model instead of brand commitment for two reasons. First, empirical findings from recent research by Piehler *et al.* (2016) reveal no direct relationship between brand understanding and commitment. An examination of EBI might shed new light on the role of this important attitudinal outcome in the cognitive-affective-behaviour linkage. Second, EBI is highly relevant in this linkage because of its self-referencing nature. Theoretically grounded in the well-established social identity approach, EBI is one such point of identification that involves the integration of perceived organisational brand identity into the employee’s self-identity (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010; Baker *et al.*, 2014). EBI is an identity-based motivational driver “for employees to engage in brand building, while being itself influenced by internal branding” (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014, p. 312). Recent empirical research also shows that organisational identity instead of organisational commitment fundamentally shapes employee behaviour (Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2007; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014).

2.4 Internal Brand knowledge–employee brand identification link

The link between cognition and affect have received a great deal of attention by psychologists and marketing researchers (Dalgleish and Power, 1999; Scherer, 1999; Smith and Lazarus, 1990; Bagozzi, 1992). Does affect influences cognition or vice versa? This fundamental issue “continues to generate intense debate” (Forgas, 2008, p. 94). Advocates of the affect-cognition link (i.e. the cognitive consequences of affect) propose that:

When people experience a specific affective state, the corresponding emotion node is activated in the associative memory network and cognitions associated with that emotion node become more accessible (Pereg and Mikulincer, 2004, p. 69).

On the contrary, other psychologists focus on the cognitive antecedents of affect, proposing that cognition leads to emotional responses; these in turn, lead to coping activities: cognition → emotional response → coping (Smith and Lazarus, 1990; Forgas, 2008; Bagozzi, 1992). This “represents a promising framework for understanding the cognitive antecedents of affective experiences [and behaviours] (Forgas, 2008, p. 96).

The current study applies this framework to the context of internal branding. It is important to note that knowledge and appraisal are two types of cognition relevant to emotion. Whereas knowledge, although necessary, does not result in emotion, the appraisal of the personal significance of the encounter, based on this knowledge, is both necessary and sufficient (Lazarus and Smith, 1988). However, IBK *per se* is not situational knowledge generated from adaptational encounters. Instead, IBK “describes the cognitive representation of the brand within an employees’ mind, which can be interpreted as schemata” (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010, p. 1253). Appraisal psychologists state that:

The personal significance of an encounter is often appraised automatically, and nearly instantaneously, based on past experiences with similar encounters [...] In automatic or schematic processing, it is not necessary to view appraisal as following in a temporal sense the knowledge upon which the appraisal might depend (Lazarus and Smith, 1988, p. 285).

As IBK is consistently appraised in particular ways by employees, IBK and the appraisals of IBK for personal well-being become functionally inseparable and seemingly fused over the course of development.

As such, the current study proposes that IBK is associated with EBI. The successful practice of internal branding engenders a shared brand understanding among employees (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2008). Prior research on organisational identification finds that organisational communication to employees facilitates the identification process, because it discloses the goals, values, and achievements of an organisation (Smidts *et al.*, 2001). In the same vein, brand understanding can affect employees’ willingness to identify with their brand. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014, p. 314) claims that:

The more an employee knows about the distinct identity of the organisational brand, the more the employee should recognize a shared sense of purpose and shared values that bind the organisation, while simultaneously recognizing the clear boundaries that differentiate the own organisation from others.

In line with this argument, Buil *et al.* (2016) state that employees who have clear knowledge of brand values are more likely to be intellectually and emotionally engaged with the brand. Brand knowledge allows employees to be “citizens of the brand”. In a recent study, Baker *et al.* (2014) propose that internal branding be seen as occurring when meaningful and relevant brand information is disseminated to employees in order to aid in the provision of higher levels of customer service. Their empirical findings show that “providing brand-specific information directly to frontline employees increases their identification with the brand (as evidenced in perceptions of firm authenticity) and enhances their internalisation of brand values” (p. 642). As such, the higher level of IBK, the more an employee affiliates themselves with the organisation’s brand.

2.5 Behavioural elements: brand citizenship and customer-oriented behaviours

With respect to the behaviour element of the cognitive-affective-behaviour model, the current research proposes that brand-citizenship and COBs are of paramount importance in bringing the brand to life (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; King *et al.*, 2013; Baker *et al.*, 2014). BCB refers to “the employees’ voluntary basis to project a number of generic employee behaviours that enhance the brand identity” (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005, p. 282). COB refers to the ability of the employees to help their customers by engaging in behaviours that increase customer satisfaction (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Stock and Hoyer, 2002; Brown *et al.*, 2002). The rationale for the inclusion of BCB and COB in the model is twofold. First, a recent comprehensive review of the internal branding literature indicates BCB and COB as the dual outcome of internal branding. By turning service employees into brand champions, the service firm needs to ensure the behaviours exhibited by the employees lead to a level of service consistent with that expected by both the firm and its customers (Baker *et al.*, 2014).

Both BCB and COB are distinct but complementary constructs essential for employees to deliver the brand promise within a customer interaction (Punjaisri et al., 2008). While BCB is mainly focussed on the brand-side, relating to behaviours of employees that contribute to the brand value and development, COB is mainly focussed on the customer-side, relating to behaviours of employees that aim to achieve high level of customer satisfaction (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). “Customers drive the success of brands, but brands are the necessary touch point that firms have to connect with their customers” (Leone et al., 2006, p. 136). This is in line with the definition of internal branding adopted in the current study, which is the alignment of employees’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours with brand values when delivering the brand promise to customers (Dean et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2018; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Second, while BCB is a well-established internal branding outcome, COB has recently received increasing attention in the internal branding literature. Indeed, King et al. (2013) suggest that both BCB and COB are necessary in internal branding. They find that BCB and COB positively influence employee performance. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) claim that an employee’s customer orientation appears crucial for brand building, in the sense that strong brands provide what customers truly value.

2.6 Employee performance

Service employees are brand champions when their frontline performance supports the brand message (Wallace and de Chernatony, 2009). Employee performance refers to job related behavioural outcomes and employee personal productivity comparisons in accordance with organisational requirements like work quality, efficiency, and awareness (Babin and Boles, 1996). The extant literature has identified employee performance as an important outcome of the internal branding process. “Internal brand management helps bridge the employee knowledge gap and, in doing so, aligns customer brand expectations with employee performance” (King and Grace, 2009, p. 128). In a similar vein, Punjaisri and Wilson (2007, p. 57) claim that:

Internal branding not only directly influences the extent to which employees perform their role in relation to the brand promise, but also influences the attitudes employees have towards the brand, which in turn affects employee performance.

In their study, however, Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) measured employee brand promise delivery performance. What is missing, however, is empirical evidence in support of employee performance as an outcome of the internal branding process. Thus, the current study includes service employee performance in the proposed cognitive-affective-behaviour model.

2.7 Dual mediation effects of employee brand identification and brand citizenship behaviour

Employees enhance their brand delivery performance by aligning their attitude and behaviour to the organisation’s brand (Shaari et al., 2015). BCB develops as a function of brand knowledge and EBI in “bringing a brand to life” and goes beyond the internal focus of organisational citizenship behaviours to include externally targeted behaviours (Burmam and Zeplin, 2005). Employees that exhibit increased BCB tend to be more externally focussed, resulting in a greater ability to

deliver service that meets or exceeds customer expectations (Baker et al., 2014). Thomson et al. (1999) highlight that employees could live the brand, but before doing so they must first gain brand awareness and knowledge and have a clear understanding of brand meaning.

Employees’ brand knowledge is necessary for employees to acquire organisational knowledge, helping them carry out their roles and responsibilities in accordance with the brand promise (King and Grace, 2008). This suggests that brand knowledge is a necessary condition, a base that all employees must have prior to developing BCB. Prior research shows that employees’ thoughts or job cognitions are strongly associated with BCB as such the more employees are aware of their brand behaviours the more they will exert extra efforts that lead them to be citizens of the brand (Lee and Allen, 2002). In line with the extant literature, the current study proposes that employees with high levels of BCBs demonstrate an external focus, making them more inclined to deliver service that meets or exceeds customer expectations (Baker et al., 2014). Since IBK describes the cognitive representation of the brand within an employees’ mind, it is expected that EBI and BCB describe the affective and behavioural aspects that mediate the relationship between IBK and employee performance. This hypothesised mediation assumes that without emotional (affective) attachment to the brand, an employee is limited in their ability to go beyond the expectations of their roles and engage in brand enhancing behaviours such as BCB. That is, employees that are knowledgeable are more likely to identify with the brand that motivates them to engage in behavioural citizenship behaviours. Based on past research and applying a cognitive-affective-behavioural model approach, this study expects that highly aware employees that positively identify with the brand will exhibit positive BCB and will be more likely to have higher levels of employee performance. Based on this dual mediation logic, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. EBI and BCB will serially mediate the effect of IBK on employee performance.

2.8 Dual mediation effects of employee brand identification and customer-oriented behaviours

Prior research treats COB as an important outcome of IBK (King et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2006). King and Grace (2009, p. 129) state that “the key to an employee being able to deliver the brand promise is brand knowledge”. However, it is not IBK *per se* that motivates employees to engage in COB, but rather how EBI mediates the impact of IBK on COB. This argument is premised on social identity theory, which postulates that:

Identification with a group leads to a deep-lying motivation to enhance the value of the respective group [...] [and] engaging in customer-oriented behaviour can be one way of acting positively toward the organisation (Homburg et al., 2009, p. 43).

The more employees are knowledgeable about the service brand and its brand promise being made to customers, the more they identify with their service brand (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; King et al., 2013).

Prior research shows that having a good understanding of the distinct brand identity motivates employees to create a sense of oneness with the service brand and see its success and failure as their own (Balaji et al., 2016). Once the employees strongly

identify with the service brand, they achieve self-enhancement by indulging in behaviour consistent with values that enhance the identity of the service brand (Demirbag *et al.*, 2012). Identification encourages behaviours that benefit the collective (Korschun *et al.*, 2014). Advocates of social identity theory state that EBI influences employees to engage in COBs that enhance service firms' value (King *et al.*, 2013). Prior research has also highlighted that "engaged, customer-oriented employees [...] perform much better than those who are not customer oriented (Menguc *et al.*, 2016, p. 65). Thus, identification with the service brand is associated with dedication to helping customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs, which in turn lead to greater employee performance (Korschun *et al.*, 2014).

In this study, the focus is to determine the extent to which IBK impacts upon employee performance, and more importantly, the dual mediation effects of EBI and COB in this relationship. The proposed theoretical contention is that employees who are brand knowledgeable tend to have higher brand identification and adopt proactive approaches to address customers' needs, and this customer-oriented behaviour, in turn, positively impacts upon their performance. Based on this dual mediation logic, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. EBI and COB will serially mediate the effect of IBK on employee performance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

Target respondents were frontline service employees working in the service industry in Vietnam. We chose Vietnam as our research site because of the relative importance of the service industry in this transition market. Vietnam has an economy structure shifting towards a services-based economy, in which the service industry contributes to 40.9 per cent of GDP (VCCI, 2017) and 34 per cent of employments (18 million people) (GSO, 2017). Specially, the two largest economy centres of Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi) have about 60 per cent of employed population in the service industry (GSO, 2017). In the period 2007-2015, Vietnam had experienced a rapid growth in number of services firms. Most service industry sectors in Vietnam had annual growth rate of nearly 20 per cent during this period, for example, education and training (> 20.0 per cent), information and communication (19.5 per cent), healthcare and social work (19.4 per cent).

We collected the potential respondents' personal emails from LinkedIn and created a link to the survey on SurveyMonkey and the informants' completion of the survey was considered as their consent of participation. We used LinkedIn as a representative framework for drawing a sample of service industry employees because we can efficiently recruit a large and heterogeneous sample quickly. In addition, by doing so we followed a standardised procedure, making studies easy to replicate. What is more, more than eighty per cent of the 9,880 LinkedIn contacts are from the service industry. As LinkedIn might be dominantly used by professionals and consultants as well as sales personnel, we undertook several steps to draw a sample of service industry employees. First, we followed Mathies and Ngo (2014) to screen the respondents to include

only those who spent at least 40 per cent of their work time in immediate contact with customers. Second, we used some scanning questions to exclude inappropriate contacts, resulting in a sample of seven per cent of service industry employees (with customer contact time more than 40 per cent). We used the existing Vietnam Standard Industrial Classification (VNSIC) to categorise the respondents' industries, which ranged widely from, for example, transport and storage, hotels and restaurants, information and communication, financial intermediation, banking, insurance, real estates, consulting, education and training, health and social work, arts, entertainment and recreation.

The original survey items were prepared in English and two bilingual academics translated the surveys independently into Vietnamese using back translation methods (Brislin, 1970). The two translators then discussed and had full agreement about correct wording, expressions, and readability of the translated surveys. The final version of the survey was emailed to 9,880 potential respondents' personal emails. After three weeks with two reminder emails, 2,371 responses were received, of which 1,233 were not from the service industry sectors (manufacturing and trading) and then subsequently deleted. We then deleted 284 responses from respondents who spent less than 40 per cent of their work time in immediate contact with customers. Then we further eliminated 120 incomplete responses and 37 careless responses with response time of less than three minutes, which is far less than the reasonable time to complete the survey. The final sample contains 697 completed and valid responses with an overall response rate of 7.1 per cent, which is quite satisfactory for email surveys in Vietnam. Given that the final response rate was low (7.1 per cent), a non-response bias test was conducted following the procedure recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977). The independent *t*-tests revealed no statistically significant differences in all key measures among the first (earliest) and fourth (latest) quartiles of responses, signifying no response bias in this research study.

The sample size of 697 is great according to the often-cited rule of thumb for robust PLS-SEM estimations, which suggests using a minimum sample size of ten times the maximum number of path relationships directed at any construct in the outer model and inner model (Barclay *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, following recommendations by Cohen (1992), and Hair *et al.* (2017), statistical power and effect sizes were taken into consideration. The results show that the sample size of 697 is great given a statistical power of 80 per cent for detecting R^2 values of at least 0.25 with a 5 per cent probability of error (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

Table II shows the demographic profile of respondents. In total, 50.2 per cent of the respondents were male, and 49.8 per cent were female. 52.2 per cent of the respondents indicated that they spent more than 80 per cent of their time interacting with customers. Most respondents were less than 30 years of age (54.7 per cent), followed by the ages of 30 to 39 (19.5 per cent). Most respondents had tenure ranging from 2 to 5 years (54.2 per cent), followed by those with the tenure of less than 2 years (20.7 per cent), and from 6 to 10 years (15.6 per cent). In term of qualification, most respondents had a college or bachelor's degree (70.4 per cent) and just graduated from high school (24.2 per cent). In term of service industry sector

Table II Demographics of the respondents

Demographics	Frequency	
	(n = 697)	(%)
Customer immediate contact time		
40%-60%	141	20.2
61%-80%	192	27.6
81%-100%	364	52.2
Age		
<20	38	5.5
20-29	343	49.2
30-39	136	19.5
40-49	78	11.2
>50	102	14.6
Tenure		
<2 years	144	20.7
2-5 years	378	54.2
6-10 years	109	15.6
>10 years	66	9.5
Gender		
Male	350	50.2
Female	347	49.8
Qualification		
Not graduated from high school	37	5.3
High school	169	24.2
Graduation (college, bachelor)	491	70.4
Service industry sector		
Transport and storage	49	7.0
Hotels and restaurants	88	12.6
Information and communication	88	12.6
Financial intermediation, banking, insurance, real estates	125	17.9
Consulting (accounting, law, architecture ...)	76	10.9
Education and training	31	4.4
Health and social work	18	2.6
Arts, entertainment and recreation	13	1.9
Other industry sectors	209	30.0

classification, more than half of the respondents were involved in hotels and restaurants (12.6 per cent), information and communication (12.6 per cent), financial intermediation, banking, insurance and real estates (17.9 per cent) and consulting (10.9 per cent).

3.2 Measurement scales

As shown in Table III, the current study used well-established scales to measure the focal constructs of the cognitive-affective-behaviour model using a five-point Likert-scale format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). IBK was measured with a nine-item scale that addressed the degree to which the employee has a good understanding of the distinct brand identity and knew what the brand promises to its customers (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). Based on Bell and Menguc's (2002) and Hughes and Ahearne's (2010) studies, this study measured EBI with twelve items that reflected the degree to which the

employee defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes defines the brand. BCB, being well-established in the extant literature as a multidimensional construct (Burmam et al., 2009; Buil et al., 2016), was measured with seven items that reflect the employees' voluntary basis to project several generic employee behaviours that enhance brand identity (King and Grace, 2010). Based on prior studies (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Stock and Hoyer, 2005), COB was measured with eight items that addressed the degree to which the employee helps customers to make decisions that will satisfy their needs. Employee job performance was measured with seven items adopted from Mathies and Ngo (2014). While self-reported employee performance measures are sometimes regarded as less quantifiable than objective measures, it is widely used in the extant literature (Babin and Boles, 1996; King and Grace, 2009; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

4. Data analysis and findings

4.1 Convergent validity

Table III reports the scale items and evaluation of the latent variables. All the items in the outer-measurement models had acceptable bootstrap *t*-values (>1.96) with loadings (0.51 – 0.81) equal or greater than the recommended 0.5 (Hulland, 1999), therefore demonstrating adequate individual item reliabilities. Average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were uniformly acceptable, ranging from 0.51 to 0.57. Moreover, the composite reliability values ranged between 0.89 and 0.93, indicating that the scale items possess high reliability. Next, the standardised root mean squared residual (SRMR) value of the composite model was examined. The SRMR of 0.055 was lower than the recommended value of 0.08, indicating a good model fit (Henseler et al., 2016).

4.2 Discriminant validity and multicollinearity test

The current study assessed the discriminant validity of the key variables following procedures outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). As shown in Table IV, the square roots of the AVE values are consistently greater than all corresponding correlations, thus demonstrating discriminant validity. In addition, discriminant validity is evident when the correlation between two variables (the off-diagonal entries) is not higher than their respective composite reliability estimates. Table IV demonstrates that no individual correlations (from 0.30 to 0.53) exceeded their respective reliabilities (from 0.89 to 0.93), therefore indicating satisfactory discriminant validity of all variables. In addition, correlations between the independent variables are all below the cut-off of 0.70, demonstrating that the correlations are acceptable (Tabachnick et al., 2001). Finally, the Heterotrait-Montrait (HTMT) ratio was calculated. This is a more recent and stringent assessment of discriminant validity than Fornell and Larcker's criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table IV, the HTMT ratios ranged between 0.33 and 0.58, and the highest upper confidence interval was 0.65, which is significantly different from 1. This provides further evidence that all constructs used in the current study have discriminant validity.

Furthermore, the study examined the correlations between EBI, IBK and BCB and calculated their corresponding

Table III Scale items and latent variable evaluation

Construct and items	Loading	t-value
<i>IBK (AVE = 0.54, composite reliability = 0.91)</i>		
1. I am aware of my company's goals we try to achieve through the brand	0.74	33.51
2. I am familiar with what my company's brand stands for	0.76	30.01
3. I have a clear sense of my company's vision	0.70	29.11
4. I know how our company's brand differentiates us from our competitors	0.76	44.75
5. I know the importance of my company's goals in delivering the brand promise	0.74	36.09
6. I know how to comport myself so as to present our brand to customers positively	0.75	40.86
7. I know which attributes of our company's brand differentiate us from our competitors	0.74	38.04
8. I understand how our customers can benefit from our brand	0.71	34.27
9. I am well informed about the values represented by the brand	0.74	42.84
<i>BCB (AVE = 0.54, composite reliability = 0.89)</i>		
1. I demonstrate behaviours that are consistent with the brand promise of my company	0.75	43.91
2. I consider the impact on the company's brand before communicating or taking action in any situation	0.77	47.01
3. If given the opportunity, I pass on my knowledge about the company's brand to new employees	0.79	49.75
4. I take responsibility for tasks outside of my own area if necessary	0.67	27.34
5. I show extra initiative to maintain my company's brand behaviour	0.73	39.17
6. I regularly recommend the company I work for to family and friends i.e. non job-related acquaintances	0.73	37.55
7. I am always interested to learn about my company's brand and what it means for me in my role	0.73	34.24
<i>COB (AVE = 0.51, composite reliability = 0.89)</i>		
1. I always try to figure out what a customer's needs are	0.76	39.54
2. I always recommend the product/ service that is best suited to the customer problem	0.78	44.60
3. I always try to find out what kind of products/ services would be most helpful to a customer	0.76	37.71
4. I try to get to discuss the customers' needs	0.73	30.41
5. I answer the customers' questions about products/ services as correctly as I can	0.72	31.37
6. I try to give the customers an accurate expectation of what the products/ services will do for them	0.73	31.62
7. I am willing to disagree with the customers in order to help them make a better decision	0.51	13.20
8. I try to help the customers to achieve their goals	0.69	26.87
<i>EBI (AVE = 0.53, composite reliability = 0.93)</i>		
1. When someone praises my company's brand, it feels like a personal accomplishment	0.69	31.72
2. When I talk about my company's brand, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	0.71	32.34
3. I am very interested in what others think about my company's brand	0.76	38.38
4. My company's brand's success is my success	0.65	20.46
5. When someone criticises my company's brand, it feels like a personal insult	0.68	23.52
6. If the media criticises my company's brand, I would feel embarrassed	0.65	27.62
7. I believe that my company cultivates the values that I hold in esteem	0.74	43.16
8. I believe that consuming products/ services of my company leads others to view me in a manner that I wish	0.78	38.42
9. I recognize myself in my company	0.72	34.36
10. The decision to choose this company is based on values that I judge to be important in my personal life	0.81	30.93
11. I can see similarities between my identity and that of the company	0.73	40.69
12. People who are important in my life identify with the values of the company	0.78	53.67
<i>Employee performance (AVE = 0.57, composite reliability = 0.90)</i>		
1. I am a top performer	0.76	46.51
2. I am in the top 10% of employees here	0.79	49.30
3. I get along better with customers than others do	0.70	35.23
4. I know more about our products and services than others do	0.76	37.78
5. I know what my customers expect	0.68	28.19
6. I get better awards/bonuses than most	0.81	55.74
7. I have higher productivity than others	0.79	40.54
Note: AVE: Average variance extracted		

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values to ensure no multicollinearity problem. No evidence of multicollinearity was found as the VIF scores ranged between 1.00 and 2.12, which were far below the critical value of 10 (Hair et al., 1992).

4.3 Common method bias

As we collected cross-sectional data using a single-informant approach, there might be common method bias effects that lead to spurious relationships among the variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table IV Construct means, standard deviations and correlations

Research constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. BCB	3.83	0.79	<i>0.74</i>				
2. COB	4.28	0.50	0.30**	<i>0.71</i>			
3. EBI	3.93	0.67	0.52**	0.40**	<i>0.73</i>		
4. IBK	3.81	0.76	0.43**	0.30**	0.53**	<i>0.74</i>	
5. Employee performance (PERF)	3.38	0.64	0.34**	0.44**	0.44**	0.31**	<i>0.76</i>
			0.38	0.48	0.48	0.35	

Notes: 1st value = Correlation between variables (off diagonal); 2nd value = HTMT ratio; Square root of AVE (italic diagonal); **correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed *t*-test)

Therefore, we applied the following statistical remedy to test for common method bias. We conducted a Harman test as recommended by Fuller *et al.* (2016) and found that the proportion of variance explained by the extraction of a single factor was 29.0 per cent, suggesting that common method variance is not problematic.

4.4 Hypothesis testing

The proposed hypotheses were tested in several ways. First, PLS-SEM was employed with SmartPLS 3.0, a non-parametric approach based on OLS regression designed to maximise explained variance (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). Second, we conducted a robustness check by performing fsQCA, a set-theoretic method that examines how variables (causal conditions) combine into all possible configurations of binary states (i.e. presence or absence) to explain the desired outcome (Ragin, 2008).

SmartPLS 3.0 software (Ringle *et al.*, 2015) was used to test the proposed hypotheses. First, the PLS path model was estimated without the mediators (i.e. EBI, brand citizenship behaviour, and customer-oriented behaviour). As shown in Table V, IBK positively influences employee performance in the absence of the mediators (Model 1, $b = 0.31$, $t = 8.87$). Second, Model 2 was examined by including the mediators into Model 1. Table V shows that IBK positively influences EBI ($b = 0.53$, $t = 18.23$), which in turn influences brand citizenship

behaviour (BCB) ($b = 0.41$, $t = 10.09$) and customer-oriented behaviour (COB) ($b = 0.34$, $p = 8.69$). In turn, BCB ($b = 0.11$, $t = 2.74$) and COB ($b = 0.29$, $t = 7.51$) positively influence employee performance, while the direct effect of IBK on employee performance becomes nonsignificant ($b = 0.06$, $t = 1.44$). This provides evidence for the serially mediating effects of EBI, BCB and COB in the relationship between IBK and employee performance. We also found that OCB and BCB carry distinct weights relative to their influences on employee performance. We answered this question by undertaking a Hotelling-Williams test to compare non-independent correlations that share a variable (Steiger, 1980). Significant differences between the strengths of effects of OCB and BCB on employee performance were found.

We also employed the bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap testing in SmartPLS 3.0 with 5,000 bootstrap runs in order to examine the significance of the total indirect effects in our research model (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Hayes *et al.*, 2017). We found that the total indirect effects were significant:

- From EBK to BCB via EBI (indirect effect = 0.22, $t = 9.14$);
- From EBK to COB via EBI (indirect effect = 0.18, $t = 7.50$);
- From EBI to employee performance via BCB and COB (indirect effect = 0.14, $t = 6.46$); and
- From EBK to employee performance via EBI, BCB and COB (indirect effect = 0.25, $t = 9.94$).

Table V Partial least squares results for conceptual model

Dependent variable	Model 1		Model 2		
	Employee performance	EBI	BCB	COB	Employee performance
<i>Independent variable</i>					
IBK	0.31 (8.87)**	0.53 (18.23)**	0.22 (5.67)**	0.12 (2.73)**	0.06 (1.44)
EBI			0.41 (10.09)**	0.34 (8.69)**	0.22 (4.67)**
BCB					0.11 (2.74)**
COB					0.29 (7.51)**
<i>Control variable</i>					
Gender	0.02 (0.56)				0.01 (0.40)
Age	-0.18 (3.85)**				-0.18 (4.42)**
Tenure	0.21 (4.08)**				0.19 (4.14)**
Qualification	0.25 (6.08)**				0.23 (6.86)**
Adjusted R^2	0.18	0.28	0.31	0.17	0.35

Notes: **, *** Significant at the 0.01, and 0.001 levels respectively (two-tailed *t*-test)

The results indicate that IBK influences employee performance via the serially mediating effects of EBI, BCB and COB. Therefore, the serial mediating *H1* and *H2* were supported. The current study also controlled for gender, age, tenure and qualification. Among them, age had a negative effect on employee job performance ($b = -0.18, t = 4.42$), while tenure and qualification had positive effects ($b = 0.19, t = 4.14$ and $b = 0.23, t = 6.86$, respectively).

5. Discussions and implications

5.1 Discussion

Drawing upon Bagozzi's (1992) reformulation of attitude theory, this study developed and examined a cognitive-affective-behaviour model of internal branding that links IBK to employee performance, through EBI, BCB and COB. The study empirically validated the mediation model using a survey data of frontline service employees in Vietnam. The findings showed that IBK results in higher levels of EBI; this sense of identification then motivates employees to engage in BCB and COB, which in turn foster employee performance. The findings have several theoretical and managerial implications.

First, this study advances the internal branding literature by demonstrating the important role of COB in making the knowledge-performance linkage more effective. We find that COB together with EBI and BCB are essential intervening mechanisms that transform IBK into employee performance. Our study responds to recent calls by Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) and King et al. (2013) for further research on the contribution of COB to the effectiveness of internal branding. In this regard, our study also extends the works of Xiong et al. (2013), Piehler et al. (2016), Piehler et al. (2018), and Piehler (2018) by including COB into a cognitive-affective-behaviour model in internal branding.

This study contributes empirical verification to a view that without IBK "employees are unable to transform the brand vision into the brand reality" (King and Grace, 2008, p. 360). The study found that IBK may not be intrinsically valuable; instead realising the performance contribution of IBK depends on emotional and behavioural components that co-align with IBK. As shown in Table VI, the fsQCA results confirmed that none of the individual causal conditions (i.e. IBK, EBI, BCB and COB) are sufficient for the occurrence of employee

performance, but their combinations are. The use of fsQCA and configuration logic enables us to capture the complexities underlying the internal branding processes. The findings also help explain why "there are inconsistencies as to the aim of internal branding and the processes by which these aims are achieved" and the role of attitudinal and behavioural components of internal branding is inconclusive (Saleem and Iglesias, 2016, p. 44). The findings validate an untested theoretical proposition that internal branding aims at aligning employees' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours with brand values when delivering the brand promise to customers (Saleem and Iglesias, 2016).

Second, the findings on the concurrent mediating effects of EBI, BCB and COB shed new light on the mechanism how IBK and employee performance are connected. While the mediation research in internal branding has mainly focussed on single-mediator models (Baker et al., 2014; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014), this study found that IBK links to a series of intermediate steps that culminate in employee performance. That is, EBI in combination with BCB and COB forms the mediating mechanisms of the internal branding process. This new insight implies that EBI (served as the first-stage mediator) is an essential self-related psychological mechanism that motivates employees to engage in BCB and COB (served as the second-stage mediators), which in turn enhance employee performance. In line with this finding, Preacher and Hayes (2008) note that multiple mediator models are more recommended for investigating complex relationships in the real world than are models with only a single mediator. "The multiple-mediator model is likely to provide a more accurate assessment of mediation effects in many research contexts" (MacKinnon et al., 2007, p. 604).

Lastly, the findings of this study are consistent with the broader marketing literature that suggests employees with a deep-level bond to their firm's brand have higher levels of brand identification (Hughes and Ahearne, 2010), greater engagement in brand citizen and COB (Homburg et al., 2009) and higher levels of service performance (Baker et al., 2014). By providing empirical evidence for the mediating roles of EBI, BCB and COB, this study shows that IBK is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for high levels of employee performance and that EBI, BCB, and COB are essential psychological and behavioural components that transform IBK

Table VI fsQCA Configurations results

	Complex solution		
	Model: EP = f (IBK, EBI, BCB, COB)		
	Algorithm: Quine-McCluskey		
	Frequency cut-off: 4.000000		
	Consistency cut-off: 0.884358		
	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
IBK × EBI	0.407536	0.018683	0.900630
IBK × BCB	0.681549	0.233692	0.863014
IBK × COB	0.339138	0.020477	0.863014
Solution coverage: 0.735170			
Solution consistency: 0.812245			

Notes: IBK= internal brand knowledge; EBI = employee-brand identification; BCB = brand citizenship behaviour; COB = customer-oriented behaviour; EP = employee performance

into employee performance. This finding provides empirical support to the existing view that suggests, “knowledge is viewed as residing within the individual, and the primary role of organisation is knowledge application rather than knowledge creation” (Grant, 1996, p. 109). In this aspect, this study makes a unique contribution to the internal branding literature by integrating employees self-related psychological mechanism (EBI), BCB and COB through which IBK is converted into employee performance.

5.2 Managerial implications

Beyond the theoretical contribution of the findings, this study provides several managerial implications for managers. By focusing on attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of IBK, this study offers important guidelines to managers to successfully implement internal branding. First, firms should understand that IBK may not directly result in high levels of service performance. The cognitive-affective-behaviour model suggests that firms should take steps to enhance EBI along with BCB and COB. Second, the findings show that IBK is tied to EBI. Firms should thus actively stimulate employee-brand connections. For example, firms can foster EBI by utilising corporate storytelling as an engaging and effective means of internal communication and employee engagement (Baker et al., 2014; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler et al., 2018). In addition, firms should measure and track the employees’ level of identification on a regular basis to evaluate the effectiveness of internal branding (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). Furthermore, to facilitate a collectively shared understanding of brand values, firms should place more emphasis on “rich media”. One way to start is by using social media within the comfortable bounds of the firm. For example, Best Buy created Blue Shirt Nation, an internal social network for the firm’s employees. This forum improved communication between supervisors and employees, provided better and consistent access to customer feedback, and reduced employee turnover.

Third, EBI is a powerful force for engaging employees in brand-citizenship and COBs. Indeed, this study indicates that EBI is positively related to BCB and COB, which in turn influence employee performance. Managers should be noted that the more commitment employees to an organisational brand the more they are willing to “devote their attention to discovering the expressed and latent needs of customers before developing solutions that satisfy customers in the long-term” (Sousa and Coelho, 2011, p. 1035). The new insight for managers is that they should embrace the culture of self-driven positive brand-connection attitudes that motivate employees to engage in BCB and COB that are consistent with their sense of self. To this end, managers and team leaders should serve as role models (e.g. transformational leaders) who live the brand and bring the brand to life.

Finally, our research findings show that OCB and BCB are not equally weighted contributors of employee performance. Instead, managers should place more emphasis on OCB compared to BCB. This finding is refreshing because previous studies have known very little about how COB plays out in transforming IBK into employee performance.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations imposed by the study design and empirical context. First, as this study is cross-sectional in nature, there is no statistical evidence of causality. Though this study provided theoretical rationale in support of the relationships and their direction, future research could replicate and extend this study by using experiment and longitudinal data in explicating the causal relationships among focal constructs in the model. Second, the generalisability of the findings is limited because data was drawn from a sample of a service organisations in a single Asian country. Future research should consider testing the generalisability of the findings to other service and country settings. Third, our study highlights the important role of COB and its contribution to the knowledge-performance nexus. Further studies could explore other potential customer- and brand-focussed behaviours that we believe might intervene the knowledge-performance nexus. Finally, the implications might be inflated given that self-assessed employee performance was used, which is another limitation in this study. Future research could be more beneficial using objective performance indicators and multiple respondents.

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Corresponding author

Gary Gregory can be contacted at: g.gregory@unsw.edu.au