



International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Lishan Xie, Yaoqi Li, Sheng-Hsiang Chen, Tzung-Cheng Huan, (2016) "Triad theory of hotel managerial leadership, employee brand-building behavior, and guest images of luxury-hotel brands", International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Vol. 28 Issue: 9, pp.1826-1847,

<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-01-2015-0004>

Permanent link to this document:

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Triad theory of hotel managerial leadership, employee brand-building behavior, and guest images of luxury-hotel brands

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the brand building behavior in the luxury hotel industry from the perspective of frontline employees. In particular, this study addresses the importance and relevance of supportive leadership, brand building behavior and customers' perceived brand image in the hotel industry.

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses data from four luxury class (4 and 5 star) hotels in the Pearl River Delta of China. Contact with frontline employees yielded employee and customer data, with 243 of 369 employee questionnaires having one or more matches with 1,158 customer questionnaires. Hierarchical linear modeling was adopted to test the research model.

Findings – Luxury hotels benefit from managers who provide supportive leadership that encourages employee brand building behavior. In turn, employee brand building behavior influences customers' positive perception of brand image.

Practical implications – Brand building behavior is a top-to-bottom process. Luxury hotels need to pay attention to internal brand building orientation, while managers should reinforce the organization's cultural orientation and provide appropriate job skills training to improve employees' willingness and ability to build the company's brand.

Originality/value – Findings of this study contribute to the brand management literature and the hotel management literature by addressing important matters affecting the frontline employees' brand building behavior.

Keywords Hotel industry, Luxury hotels, Hotel management, Brand building, Triad theory, Image perception

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Some ideas seem to fit together. [Thorbjørnsen and Supphellen \(2011\)](#) emphasized that frontline employees are likely the most influential people involved with building and communicating service brands to customers. Similarly, a hospitality firm's failure to treat employees' development as a high priority has led to problems associated with poor employee brand building behavior ([Kong and Cheung, 2009](#)). [King and So \(2013\)](#) examined the essential role of employee brand understanding in forging brand building behavior, which impacts customers' perceptions of the hotel brand.

The service triangle relates to this fit. It is one of the most popular models used to understand service marketing and operations ([Bitner, 1995](#)). This model is used in explaining the relationships among a service organization, its employees and its customers. However, while research on consumers' perception and understanding of brands is fairly extensive, research is lacking on service employees' behaviors that are motivated by leadership style relating to front line employees influencing consumers' brand image perception. For example, [Buttle \(1998\)](#) states that relatively few companies harness the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing.

As the literature reviewed describes, traditional views of brand image largely relate to customers' perspectives. A substantial body of research focuses on customers' cognitions about and reaction to branding. Nevertheless, research is scant on how employees' brand behaviors influence consumers' brand image perception. In this regard, [Morhart *et al.* \(2009\)](#) focused on the relationships between brand-specific leadership to employee brand building behavior without pursuing the final outcome of brand building behavior on customers' perceptions. Through focus group and questionnaire research, [Morhart *et al.* \(2009\)](#) concluded that employee brand building behavior falls into one of three categories: retention, in-role brand building behavior and extra-role brand building behavior. [Morhart *et al.* \(2009\)](#) changed the measurement of employee brand building behavior from four dimensions (positive WOM, participation, in-role brand building behavior and retention) to three dimensions by merging participation and positive WOM into extra-role brand building behavior.

This study fills the research gap relating to the relationships among employee brand building behavior, customer perceived brand image and hospitality management tenets. The relationship is examined through the exploration of several hospitality management issues. First, the theory of behavior of frontline employees is examined. The application is to the behavior of frontline employees impacting the successful implementation of management's strategies to influence customers' brand image. The second area of research is the relationship between supportive leadership by managers and employee brand building behavior. Finally, this study examines the relationship between employee brand building behavior and customers' perceived brand image. The research involves an empirical examination of theory. Therefore, the findings can provide strong support for core tenets of theory. In practical terms, the research provides information on hotels' administrative commitment to train employees' in brand building behavior impacting customers' perceptions of luxury hotels' brand images.

Literature review

Topics in this literature cover matters relating to our model explaining the relationships among a service organization, its employees and its customers. Because of the concerns addressed, key matters are management providing supportive leadership, employee

brand building and brand image. We see internal brand communication as important topic related to our model.

Supportive leadership

Leadership theories abound in the literature. One management principle is that managers should coach their subordinates as well as assess them (Wong and Li, 2015). Given guidance, the leadership styles of managers can greatly influence employees' behavior (Lin *et al.*, 2010; Li and Sun, 2015). Two dimensions of leadership are recognized by the Ohio School of Management Leadership, which are leader consideration and leader initiating structure. Leader initiating structure is bound up with how a supervisor coaches service staff. Leader consideration refers to the degree to which supervisors create an atmosphere of support and show their concern for the subordinates' well-being (Bass and Stogdill, 1981; Judge *et al.*, 2004; Kerr *et al.*, 1974; Lin *et al.*, 2014).

Supportive leadership research lacking reliable and valid measures for the supportive leadership construct has been an issue. Rooney and Gottlieb (2007) made progress following Oldham and Cummings's (1996) two empirical studies. They conducted focus groups and used questionnaires to explore the supportive leadership construct and develop a valid scale to measure the construct (Rooney and Gottlieb, 2007). Supportive leadership behavior is divisible into two dimensions:

- (1) supportive behavior toward the job; and
- (2) supportive behavior toward the relationship (Rooney and Gottlieb, 2007).

Employee brand building behavior

The employee brand building behavior concept is an extension of employee branding literature which addresses frontline employees' behavior affecting the brand image of the company in consumers' minds (Miles and Mangold, 2004). An organization may be involved in brand building by both internal marketing (i.e. employee training, organization culture orientation and management styles) and external marketing (i.e. advertising and public relationship). A desirable consequence is a psychological contract between the organization and its employees, which leads employees to perform as an organization's image speakers (Henkel *et al.*, 2007).

In-role brand building behavior refers to frontline employees performing as brand representatives (Vallaster and Lindgreen, 2013). Performance may be written in behavioral codices, in manuals, in display rules and so forth, or even be unwritten. Specifically in the service context, customers' brand experience depends on frontline employees' behavior (Berry, 2000). For this research, this relates to the hotels depending on frontline employees, as company representatives, to treat consumers with a high standard service quality supporting the brand promise of the organization.

Extra-role brand building behavior refers to employee behaviors that surpass the job requirement. The most important extra-role brand building behaviors are *on the job* participation and *off the job* positive WOM (Morhart *et al.*, 2009). Participation involving employee communication with supervisors proactively contributes to brand building policies by providing information on consumers' needs to the hotel decision-maker(s) (Harber *et al.*, 1991; Locke and Schweiger, 1979). Positive WOM indicates that employees' are willing to recommend their company to their friends or relatives during their daily life (Morhart *et al.*, 2009).

Brand image

Ideas on brand image continue to evolve from [Ogilvy \(1963\)](#). [Ogilvy \(1983\)](#) proposed the development of brand image theory. [Park et al. \(1986\)](#) considered brand image as consumers' overall view about the brand's functional, symbolic and experiential benefits from the relationship benefits theory. [Keller \(1993\)](#) proposed the customer-based brand equity model based on an associative network memory model, and thus defined brand image as the set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory.

Measuring brand image has been addressed. [Martinez and Polo \(2008\)](#) measured the brand image with two dimension, product brand image (PBI) and general brand image (GBI). A GBI approach is measuring the brand image of all of a company's services or products by differentiation/association scales based on general perspectives ([Aaker, 1996](#); [García and Bergantiños, 2001](#)). Recent studies recognize not only limits on the physical attributes but also the self-expressive and emotional benefits of services or products ([Davis and Halligan, 2002](#); [Gwinner and Eaton, 1999](#); [Hsieh, 2002](#); [Low and Lamb, 2000](#)). Compared to GBI, PBI focuses on attributes of specific service or product, such as physical, functional, emotional and self-expressive attributes. [Martinez and Polo \(2008\)](#) assumed that customers would evaluate the corporate brand image considering PBI and GBI.

In this study, brand image is defined as the customer's overall opinion of the service or product brand, based on reactions to the associations of the brand. As seen in the methods section, measures include both a GBI and a PBI measure.

Internal brand communication

Internal brand communication theory focuses attention on non-mass media communication ([Cai et al., 2015](#)). [Katz \(1957\)](#) dealt with ideas about communication addressed at the masses being mediated and transmitted to the public by opinion leaders. In the context here, the two-step communication process is related to first line employees bridging between internal brand communication and mass media communication ([Nisbet and Kotcher, 2009](#)). Criticism of the two step communication process is well known ([Troidahl, 1966](#)). Here, inclusion of communications from the frontline service employees adds a third step addressing the importance of managers' supportive leadership to the communication process. As a result, the managers' supportive leadership, employees' brand building behavior and customers' perceived brand image are components of a three-step communication process illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

Interpersonal communication and WOM have long been recognized as essential in the tourism industry because hospitality and tourism product offerings are intangible goods, which cannot be evaluated before their consumption ([Lewis and Chambers, 2000](#)). [Litvin et al. \(2008\)](#) assert that hospitality and tourism theories, such as Cohen's

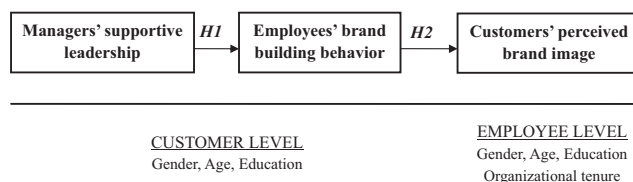


Figure 1.
Research framework

typology theory (Cohen, 1974), Plog's theory of allocentricity and psychocentricity (Plog, 1974, 2001) and Butler's tourism area life cycle model (Butler, 1980), show that opinion leaders discover information about destinations and share their experiences with their less intrepid counterparts (Litvin *et al.*, 2008). In this regard, management sets policies and tries to establish a brand image. Publicity may be directed at various markets. However, for hospitality, frontline staffs are a major interface with customers.

The effectiveness of frontline staff in developing relations with customers involves many matters (Kim *et al.*, 2009; Woodside *et al.*, 1989). Such staff must support the brand image (Berry, 2000). Management communicates expectations to staff, and, in turn, staffs communicate with customers, which can lead to customers' ultimate perception of a service providing organization (Henkel *et al.*, 2007).

Generating good WOM publicity is important (Buttle, 1998). Part of what is being considered in this research is getting customers to communicate about, as well as repurchase, products. In this regard, the three-step process (Figure 1) seems reasonable. The bottom line is customers becoming salespeople for the organization as a result of good communication with the organization's staff (e.g. see discussion in Woodside *et al.*, 1989). Therefore, research needs to examine how a service company communicates its internal brand building policies through frontline employees to customers.

Research framework and hypotheses

Manager supportive leadership and employee brand building behavior

Research on organizational behavior shows consensus about the effect of managers' leadership behaviors on employees' job performance. In particular, supportive leadership can affect attitudes and behavior positively (Judge *et al.*, 2004; Yukl, 1989, 1999) supporting relationships and job performance (Karatepe, 2015). What is more, supportive leadership can build psychological contract between managers and employees through satisfying the employees' needs (Henkel *et al.*, 2007). This psychological contract yields positive attitudes which can promote desirable behaviors (Henkel *et al.*, 2007; Qin *et al.*, 2014). Schalk *et al.* (1998) showed empirically that psychological obligation for both managers and employees can result. Based on this logic, employees who received supportive leadership tend to not only accomplish the in-role job but also in the out-role job can contribute positive WOM influencing customer decision-making.

Supportive leadership may do more than induce employees' positive emotions (Fu *et al.*, 2014). Employees may see supportive leadership as showing managers' recognition of and love for employees (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Wofford and Liska, 1993). Employees encouraged by supportive leadership can see it as an obligation to support a manager's work (Grandey, 2000). As a result of supportive leadership vs only marginal support, employees can get more support from the managers to improve the job efficiency (Gardner and Schermerhorn, 2004; Luthans *et al.*, 2008) yielding high employees' enthusiasm to perform better (Babin and Boles, 1996).

Social exchange theory implies that employees will tend to repay their leader's trust and support through improving job performance and providing information for management decisions (Hudson *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, positive WOM behavior is situation dependent. For example, when at work, employees may compliment managers, whereas when not at work, employees may praise the corporation (i.e. indirectly compliment their managers). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Managers' supportive leadership perceived by employees relates positively to employees' brand building behavior.

Triad theory

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Employee brand building behavior and customer perceived brand image

Employee brand building behavior includes three dimensions: extra-role brand building behavior, in-role brand building behavior and retention (Morhart *et al.*, 2009). Berry (2000) demonstrated that brand vision is transformed into brand reality, which is perceived as brand image by customers, through external and internal marketing. The frontline service employees' brand building behavior is one of the most effective approaches for internal marketing (Stafford *et al.*, 2002; Chang and Ma, 2015). A company that encourages its employees to be the brand builders can use rules to help employees. Rules can keep employees' personal behavior on the same page as the corporate image helping customers make connections between their perceptions of service providers and a company's image (Manhas and Tukamushaba, 2015).

King and So (2013) examined the essential role of employee brand understanding on forging brand building behavior that leads to customers' hotel brand perception. They found that employee brand building behavior is one of the most important factors on building or damaging customers' perceptions of brand image in the hospitality industry. Malik *et al.* (2013) found that brand image plays a crucial role in boosting business performance because brand image can positively change people's buying behaviors. Morhart *et al.* (2009) and Herr *et al.* (1991) demonstrated that the employees' skills, attitudes and ability to handle emergencies influenced customers' perceptions of the brand image of the service company. Particularly, interpersonal influence and WOM were important information sources for purchase decision-making for the hospitality and tourism industries. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Employees' brand building behavior positively to customers' perceived brand image.

Communication research framework

Figure 1 depicts the communication research framework for the two hypotheses. The practical interpretation of Figure 1 is that to nurture growth of positive customer perceptions of brand image, a service company should manage a supportive executive leadership structure that encourages employee brand building behavior. An implication is that this triad of customer–employee–executive relationships supports the growth of returning customers and highly favorable WOM communications among prior and new customers.

Research method

Measurement development

Data were collected using two questionnaires. One questionnaire was completed by employees and the other by customers. The employees responded to items measuring the supportive leadership and employee brand building. Customers responded to items that measure brand image.

Scale concepts and dimensions with citations appear in Table I. Previously developed scales were reviewed and adopted using a pre-test to make some modifications. For the employee questionnaire pre-test, 200 questionnaires were sent out and 121 returned (response rate = 61 per cent). For the customer questionnaire pre-test,

150 questionnaires yielded 74 valid returns (response rate = 49 per cent). The pre-test results showed that the measurements used in the study had good reliability in the Chinese hotel context. The specific items for each scale and descriptive statistics from the final study appear in [Table II](#). One sees good reliability based on high values of Cronbach's alpha.

Individual demographic characteristics were included in the questionnaires. For employees, gender, age, educational level, position (junior employee vs senior employee vs junior manager vs senior manager) and organizational tenure were collected for use as controls. For customers, gender, age, educational level and high or low contact were collected for controls. The inclusion of demographics was prompted by [Lee et al. \(2012\)](#) proposing that demographic characteristics impact perceptions of hotel's characteristics.

Study location

The Pearl River Delta refers to the dense network of cities that covers nine administrative districts of the Guangdong province ([Figure 2](#)). Of relevance here, China has a loosely knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. As a result, WOM plays an essential role in brand success in China. In China, to a high degree, an "old" brand is considered to be better than a new one. This provides an opportunity for long-established foreign companies with a good reputation to get a premium selling products in China ([Melewar et al., 2004](#)).

Participants and procedures

Four high-class hotels in the Pearl River Delta of China were invited to participate in the study. Survey packages were sent to the four hotels. Each package included copies of questionnaire for each frontline employee, and six copies of the customer questionnaire per frontline employee. Employees were informed that the research was for academic purposes. Respondents volunteered and were assured anonymity. Customers were selected during the survey data collection period based on an employee asking every tenth person served to complete a questionnaire. The employees were allowed one month to respond.

Questionnaire returns were acceptable. Distribution of 630 employee questionnaires yielded 386 returns. A missing values list-wise deletion process further reduced the employee sample size to 369 (response rate 59 per cent). From the 3,150 questionnaires distributed to customers, 1,392 were of which 1,181 usable (response rate 38 per cent).

Table I.
Measurement
information of brand
building research
framework

Concept	Dimensions	References
Managers' supportive leadership	Relationship supportive leadership Job supportive leadership	Rooney and Gottlieb (2007)
Employees' brand building behavior	Retention In-role brand building behavior Extra-role brand building behavior	Morhart et al. (2009)
Customers' perceived brand image	General brand image Product brand image	Martinez and Polo (2008)

Variable/items	Means	SD
<i>Managers' supportive leadership (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.975$)</i>		
Relationship supportive leadership		
When I am experiencing difficulty, he or she sympathizes with me	4.18	2.05
Gives me positive feedback when deserved	4.14	1.89
Encourages me to take on work that will help me to develop professionally	4.12	1.99
Thanks me for things I do	4.05	1.96
Goes to bat for me at work when I need it	4.06	2.03
Asks me how I'm doing and means it	4.25	2.00
Makes himself or herself easily accessible to me	4.18	1.94
Shows interest in what's going on in my life outside of work	4.39	1.92
Job supportive leadership		
Grants time off work when I need it	3.76	1.93
Praises my work in front of others	4.68	1.89
Answers questions I ask in a timely manner	4.46	1.90
Ensures I have everything I need to get my work done efficiently	4.22	1.90
When a problem comes up and I need help, he or she provides me with suggestions, but leaves the final decision to me	4.42	1.91
Gives clear instructions	4.27	1.90
<i>Employees' brand building behavior (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.917$)</i>		
Retention		
I intend to leave the hotel within a short period of time	3.45	2.02
I have decided to quit the hotel	3.04	2.04
I am looking for some other employer now	3.14	2.02
In-role brand building behavior		
In customer contact situations, I pay attention to my personal appearance and ensure that it is in line with our corporate brand's appearance	5.66	1.56
I see that my actions during customer contact are not at odds with our standards for brand adequate behavior	5.84	1.50
I adhere to our standards for brand congruent behavior	5.77	1.49
Extra-role brand building behavior		
I let my supervisor know of ways we can strengthen our brand image	5.02	1.67
I make constructive suggestions on how to improve our customers' brand experience	4.95	1.63
If I have a useful idea on how to improve our brand's performance, I share it with my supervisor	4.98	1.75
I "talk up" the hotel to people I know	5.10	1.87
I bring up the hotel in a positive way in conversations I have with friends and acquaintances	5.35	1.76
In social situations, I often speak favorably about the hotel	5.10	1.81

(continued)

Table II.
Descriptive statistics
and Cronbach's α for
brand building
research scale

Variable/items	Means	SD
<i>Customers' perceived brand image (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.948$)</i>		
General brand image		
There is a reason to stay in this hotel instead of others	4.65	1.44
The hotel brand has personality	4.67	1.30
The hotel brand is interesting	4.66	1.28
Product brand image		
I have a clear impression of the type of people who consume the hotel	4.58	1.21
This hotel is different from the competing hotels	4.65	1.16

Table II. Note: The sources for each of these scales are addressed in Table I



Figure 2.
The Pearl River
Delta of China

Based on hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) standards, only dyads (matching employee-customer data sets) with at least three customer responses were retained. Thus, 243 dyads were retained. The final usable sample consisted of 369 employees and 1,158 customers (number of customers per employee ranged from 3 to 6; average, 4.77); in the 243 dyads, matching employees had 3 to 6 (average, 4.77) customer responses.

Samples had numbers allowing for control. For employees, 73 per cent were female, 70 per cent were aged between 20 and 40 years, more than 80 per cent worked in the hotel sampled over one year, 84 per cent were at junior and senior positions and about 30 per cent had no college education. For customers, the sexes were equally represented, 87 per cent of respondents were aged between 20 and 50 years, more than 60 per cent had at least a college education and 55 per cent considered the service they received to be a high contact one.

Data analysis

As the key variable of this study, employee brand building behavior was taken from [Morhart et al. \(2009\)](#) who developed the construct in four dimensions, but in empirical study used three dimensions. Therefore, the construct was assessed by examining its dimensionality and criterion-related validity through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and second-order factor analysis. Then, the viability of the employee-level construct was checked by examining the intra-class correlation [ICC(1)].

The research model is hierarchical. The dependent variable is customer-perceived brand image which is a customer-level construct. The predicting variables are employee-perceived supportive leadership and brand building behavior which are employee-level constructs. As described data are hierarchical, they meet the customer/employee criteria appropriate for HLM ([Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992](#)). Therefore, HLM method was adopted to test the model.

Testing involved steps. First, a null model was tested, which included no predictors at Level 1 (customer-level) and Level 2 (employee-level) to divide the customer perceived brand image variance into between- and within-employee. Second, at Level 1, brand image was regressed on control variables of customers such as gender and age. Next, the intercept estimates obtained from the Level 1 analysis were used as outcome variables and regressed on the employee-level predictors. The employee-level predictors included employee perceived supportive leadership and brand building behavior, which were grand means centered as recommended by [Hofmann and Gavin \(1998\)](#).

Results

Factor analyses of brand building behavior

As the measure of brand building behavior is debated, it is necessary to confirm the validity of the brand building behavior measure. In [Morhart et al.'s \(2009\)](#) study, participation and positive WOM merge into one factor called extra-role brand building behavior. However, [Morhart et al. \(2009\)](#) divided the extra-role brand building behavior factor into two subcomponents in the data analysis. That is to say, a three-dimensional model was used in construct (scale) development, but a four-dimension model was adopted when the concept was applied.

Principal components factor analysis as EFA was performed to check scale structure. The Keiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic was $0.84 > 0.80$, suggesting an adequate sample size relative to the number of nutrients. The KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.01$) showed the data were suitable for conducting a factor analysis. Factors with eigenvalues > 1 were kept. The factors were named based on the variables mainly represented in the factor. [Table III](#) showed the EFA results. The four factor structure was considered in the EFA, which captured 87 per cent of the variance in employee brand building behavior. The four factors were identified as: in-role brand building behavior, retention, positive WOM and participation.

Results in [Table III](#) indicated that a four-factor model of employee brand building behavior has a better fit than the three-factor model developed by [Morhart et al. \(2009\)](#). In addition, the four-factor model exhibits high convergent validity, discriminate validity and reliability. Therefore, it is appropriate that this study modifies the three-factor model of [Morhart et al. \(2009\)](#) by dividing the factor, extra-role brand building behavior, into two factors, positive WOM and participation.

Variable	Indicator	F1	Component			
			F2	F3	F4	
Retention	RE1	0.894				
	RE2	0.914				
	RE3	0.797				
In-role brand building behavior	IR1		0.855			
	IR2		0.852			
	IR3		0.833			
Extra-role brand building behavior	Participation	PA1		0.824		
		PA2		0.853		
		PA3		0.779		
	Positive WOM	WOM1				0.746
		WOM2				0.787
		WOM3				0.774

Notes: Rotated component matrixes of employee brand building behavior; total variance explained is 87 percent; the Keiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic was $0.84 > 0.80$, suggesting that we had an adequate sample size relative to the number of nutrients; Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.01$) allowed to reject the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix

Table III.
Exploratory factor
analysis results

After the EFA, CFA and a second-order factor analysis were used to compute the model fits of the three-dimensional and the four-dimensional models. As shown in Table IV, the composite reliability, average variance extracted and p -values of the three-dimensional model and the four-dimensional model are not significantly different. A second-order factor analysis was conducted to test whether the brand building behavior construct can be reflected by the four dimensions. The second-order analysis results show the four-dimension model ($\chi^2 = 161.10$, $df = 48$, $\chi^2/df = 3.35$, $p = 0.00$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.079, root mean square residual (RMR) = 0.036, normed fit index (NFI) = 0.98, non normed fit index (NNFI) = 0.98, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.93, adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = 0.89) exhibits a better fit ($\Delta\chi^2 = 460$, $\Delta df = 3$, $\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df = 153$) than the three-dimensional model ($\chi^2 = 621.06$, $df = 51$, $\chi^2/df = 12.17$, $p = 0.00$, RMSEA = 0.170, RMR = 0.052, NFI = 0.93, NNFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.79, AGFI = 0.67).

Based on the results of the EFA, CFA and second-order factor analysis, the four-dimensional model yields a better fit than the three-dimensional model of Morhart *et al.* (2009). Moreover, the four-dimensional model has higher reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity than the three-dimensional model. These results provided strong evidence that the four-dimensional model should be used in this study.

Reliability and validity

The following demonstrates the reliability and validity of the measures used. Table V presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables. Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability for the constructs used in this study were above 0.9 which exceeds the suggested cut-off value of 0.8 recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The AVE for each constructs also exceeded the 0.50 cut-off value recommended by Graham (2008). Correlations among independent variables were

Reliability and validity	Confirmatory factor analysis						Second-order factor analysis	
	Three dimensions (Morhart <i>et al.</i> , 2009)			Four dimensions (This study adopted)				
	Factor	Indicator		Factor	Indicator			
Convergent validity	1. Retention	RE1	0.84	1. Retention	RE1	0.84		
		RE2	0.93		RE2	0.93		
		RE3	0.74		RE3	0.74		
		CR	0.76		CR	0.76		
		AVE	0.90		AVE	0.90		
	2. In-role brand building behavior	IR1	0.91	2. In-role brand building behavior	IR1	0.91		
		IR2	0.90		IR2	0.90		
		IR3	0.92		IR3	0.92		
		CR	0.72		CR	0.72		
		AVE	0.88		AVE	0.88		
	3. Extra-role brand building behavior	ER1	0.80	3. Participation	PA1	0.90		
			ER2		0.81	PA2		0.91
			ER3		0.84	PA3		0.89
			ER4		0.84	CR		0.67
			ER5		0.90	AVE		0.86
			ER6		0.88			
		4. Positive WOM			WOM1	0.86		
					WOM2	0.96		
				WOM3	0.91			
				CR	0.94			
	CR	0.94	AVE	0.83				
	AVE	0.72						
<i>p</i> -value	0.00		0.00		0.00			
Model fit								
NFI	0.93		0.98		0.98			
NNFI	0.92		0.98		0.98			
CFI	0.94		0.98		0.98			
GFI	0.79		0.93		0.98			
AGFI	0.67		0.89		0.88			
RMR	0.052		0.036		0.048			
RMSEA	0.170		0.079		0.080			
χ^2	621.06		161.10		175.72			
df	51		48		50			
χ^2/df	12.17		3.35		3.08			
$\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df$	153.33 ($\Delta\chi^2 = 460, \Delta df = 3$)							

Notes: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted

Table IV.
Reliability and validity for brand building behavior

Variable	M	SD	AVE	α	CR	1	2	3	4
<i>Customer-level</i>									
1. Gender	0.49	0.50				–			
2. Perceived brand image	4.63	1.35	0.79	0.95	0.96	–0.04			
<i>Employee-level</i>									
3. Gender	0.73	0.45				–0.15*	0.03	–	
4. Supportive leadership	4.20	1.72	0.77	0.98	0.98	0.01	0.20*	0.04	
5. Brand building behavior	4.68	1.03	0.79	0.92	0.98	–0.10	0.57*	0.13	0.61*

Notes: Employee $n = 243$; customer $n = 1,158$; alpha coefficients are reported in parentheses on the diagonal; for gender, 0 = male, 1 = female; AVE = average variance extracted, α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

Table V.
Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

moderate, with a correlation between brand image and supportive leadership of 0.203 ($p < 0.05$), between brand image and brand building behavior of 0.574 ($p < 0.01$), and between supportive leadership and brand building behavior of 0.614 ($p < 0.01$). Thus, brand building reliability and convergent validity were assured.

The discriminant validity of the constructs' measures was also examined. As a latent construct should share more variance with its items than it shares with other constructs, the square root of the AVE should be greater than the partial correlations between the construct and other variables (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In the present study, the AVE for each factor was greater than the partial correlations for entire variables. Hence, the variables were valid and reliable in the current study.

Hierarchical linear modeling results for the antecedents of customer-perceived brand image null model

The analyses test the hypothesis that employee brand building behavior relates positively to customer-perceived brand image. This hypothesis receives support if the between-employee variance in customer-perceived brand image is significant. Hence, using HLM, a null model was used to test the significance of the residual variance of the intercept in Level 2 ($\tau_{00} = 1.25, p < 0.01$). The ICC(1) was 0.70, indicating 70 per cent of the variance in customer-perceived brand image resided between employees, and 30 per cent of the variance resided within employees, justifying HLM as the appropriate analytic technique.

Customer-level variables only

To test whether the customers' demographic characteristics relate to their perceived brand image or not, a Level 1 model including control variables of customers (age, gender, education level), with no predictors specified for the Level 2 model was tested. As shown in Table VI, the demographic variables explained 2 per cent of the within-employee variance. No control variables in Level 1 related to brand image significantly. This finding meant that the results of the hypothesis testing can be apply to all customers, regardless of age, gender and education level. Therefore, the current study can ignore the influence of customers' demographic characteristics on their perceived brand image.

Adding employee-level predictors

H1 predicts that the supportive leadership perceived by employees relates positively to employees' brand building behavior. As both supportive leadership and brand building behavior are employee-level variables, the study tested *H1* by using simple regression. Regression findings indicated supportive leadership related to brand building behavior positively with a standard coefficient of 0.614 ($p < 0.01$) and adjusted R^2 equal to 0.48. Thus, *H1* receives support. The above finding meant that the supportive leadership perceived by employees of the high-class hotels relates positively to employees' brand building behavior. For the four high-class hotels in Pearl River Delta of China, the frontline staff's supportive leadership can positively impact frontline employees' brand building behavior, including retention, in-role brand building behavior, participation and positive WOM.

H2 predicts that employee brand building behavior relates positively to customer-perceived brand image. To test *H2*, an HLM model is tested, in which the customers' demographic characteristics were Level 1 predictors and then regressed

Variable	Null model	Customer-level predictors	Employee-level predictors
Intercept	4.70*	4.39*	4.48*
<i>Level 1</i>			
Gender		0.05	0.04
Age		0.03	0.06
Education		0.03	0.06
<i>Level 2</i>			
Gender			0.17
Age			-0.22*
Education			0.04
Organizational tenure			0.05
Brand building behavior			0.68*
δ^2	0.59	0.58	0.58
T_{00}	1.25*	1.23*	0.71*
ICC(1)	0.70		
ICC(2)		0.92	
Rwg			
$R^2_{\text{within-employee}}$		0.02	
$R^2_{\text{between-employee}}$			0.43
Model deviance	2789	2574	2487

Table VI.

Hierarchical linear modeling results for customers' perceived brand image

Notes: Employee $n = 243$; customer $n = 1158$; entries are estimations of the fixed effect with robust standard errors; estimations of the random variance components (T_{00}) are in parentheses; the T_{00} for the intercept also represents the between-employees variance in customer-perceived brand image; * $p < 0.05$

on the intercept coefficients obtained from the measure of brand building behavior at Level 2. As Table VI reports, the brand building behavior ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) demonstrated a significant relationship with customer-perceived brand image, after accounting for the control variables both from Levels 1 and 2. Hence, *H2* receives support.

The findings indicated that the employee brand building behavior relates positively to customers' perceived brand image. For the four high-class hotels in Pearl River Delta of China, the frontline employees' employee brand building behavior (i.e. retention, in-role brand building behavior, participation and positive WOM) can positively impact customers' perceived brand image (i.e. GBI and PBI).

Conclusion and implications

Conclusion

Our study shows employee brand building behavior is shaping customers' perceived brand image. In doing that, there are some interesting and original results. First is the evidence that four dimensions are better than three dimensions for the employee brand building scale. Due to the newness of the Morhart *et al.* (2009) scale adopted and lack of prior empirical testing, a series of empirical analyses confirm the scale's reliability and validity. In other words, by using through EFA, CFA and second-order factor analysis, we accept the original brand building behavior model in four dimensions and not the three-dimensional application, from merging participation and positive WOM. The

four-factor model has high convergent validity, discriminate validity and reliability measures.

The four factors of the employee brand building behavior concept of this study are retention, in-role brand building behavior, participation and positive WOM. In this research, participation and positive WOM are divided into two independent factors. The finding just mentioned contrasts with *Morhart et al. (2009)* in which participation and positive WOM merged into one factor, extra-role brand building behavior.

Second, we introduced the influence of managers' supportive leadership in shaping employees' brand building behavior. Regression showed supportive leadership perceived by employees of the high-class hotels can positively impact frontline employees' brand building behavior on all four dimensions mentioned. So, brand building behavior can be fostered by a top-to-bottom process. The managers should reinforce an organization's cultural orientation and provide appropriate job skills training to improve employees' willingness and ability to build the company's brand.

Third, consistent with expectations, the employees' brand building behavior relates positively to customers' perceived brand image. Examining the impact of employee brand building behavior on customers' perceived brand image, we argue that hotels with a high level of employee brand building perform better because of consumers' brand image evaluation. Employees being spontaneous brand image ambassadors is beneficial. The employee brand building behavior of employees of service companies is an influential factor in building customers' brand image perception.

Theoretical implications

Theoretical contributions of this research are in three areas. First, improvement of accuracy of measurement of employee brand building behavior occurs. *Morhart et al. (2009)* proposed four but developed three dimensions of employee brand building behavior. Our evidence supports four dimensions contributing to a better tool to capture employee brand building behavior.

Second, the study considers both customers and employees. Rather than focusing on consumers' cognitions about their response to brand image, the role of external brand communication in building the consumer brand image perception has been examined. In *Morhart et al.'s (2009)* study, the focus is on the relationships between brand-specific leadership and employee brand building behavior. The final outcome of brand building behavior perceived by customers was not a consideration. This study, however, develops a triad theory of hotel managers' supportive leadership, employees' brand building behavior and consumer brand image perception of luxury hotel brands.

Third, this current study fills in a gap by examining the relationship between customer-perceived brand image and employee brand building behavior. HLM analyses show that supportive leadership helps the staffs fulfill the in-role job and motivates them to participate in out-role job brand building behavior which leads to positive customer-perceived brand image. In other words, the research shows that in a supportive environment, employees want to share positive WOM with others in reciprocity to the manager's supportive leadership they experience.

Fourth, this research extends role theory and social exchange theory to organization human resource studies. The results show that both in-role and out-role brand building behaviors are very important to organizations in building their customers' perceived brand image. This implies that managers should reward

employees engaging in out-role brand building behavior to motivate positive out-role brand building behavior. The benefits of the reciprocity process between organization and employees works. The organization benefits from employees' brand building behavior resulting from the organization's supportive leadership. Employees benefit when they receive rewards from the organization for brand building behavior.

Practical implications

First, the service-providing firm should pay more attention to the company's internal brand building orientation training. The rapid growth of the hospitality industry in China has brought a tremendous increase in business to the hotel industry, with the number of luxury hotels going up to 11,367 in 2012 (Fu *et al.*, 2014). Sustaining this competitive advantage of luxury hotels depends more on intangible resource than on the traditional physical and financial assets. The delivery of a favorable hotel image rests heavily on service employee behaviors (Chang, 2013). The findings from the present study confirm and strengthen the following propositions. Customers' perceived brand image mostly follows from the service process. Frontline employees' behaviors impact customers' perceptions significantly. The service quality and satisfaction depend on the service provided by the frontline employees to a great extent. Therefore, more attention should be paid to the internal brand communication, such as employee brand build behavior.

Second, hospitality firms should communicate brand meaning from the top-to-bottom and also from the bottom-to-top. Every coin has two sides. In the service encounter, the employees can enhance customer-perceived brand image through brand building behavior as a brand ambassador (Wallace and De Chernatony, 2009) during specific, identifiable, "moments of truth" (Carlzon, 1989). At the same time, they also can work against the corporate brand policies and weaken customer-perceived brand image through brand destroying behavior as a brand saboteur (Wallace and De Chernatony, 2008). Management decision quality will likely increase by identifying factors associated with employee brand building behavior or brand destroying behavior. This study finds that a supportive leadership style used by managers relates to employee brand building behavior positively and leads to favorable perceptions of brand image by customers. The study provides insights about how to build brand image using a triad communication theory (i.e. from hotel's managers to customers through employees). Communicating brand meaning from the top-to-bottom and vice versa is useful in hospitality firms.

Third, an organization can overcome negative perceptions and inhibitors of communication by building the company's brand image through its employees' service delivery behaviors. If customers believe that the services delivered satisfy their needs, they have a positive attitude toward the brand and intend to repurchase the service in the future. The glut of advertising in the present market has reduced the effectiveness of traditional advertising.

Fourth, managers should provide appropriate training to promote employees' willingness and ability to behave the brand building behavior. One of the most effective ways for achieving this is to foster employee brand building behavior, which can motivate the employee not only to finish the in-role job but also to accomplish some

out-role job, such as spreading the positive WOM to others and providing their ideals to improve the service quality.

Limitations and future research

This research has limitations. First, the relationship between managers' supportive leadership and employees' brand building behavior is just one of many possible elements of organizational internal brand management. Investigating the effects of other leadership styles on employee branding behavior is important. For example, the extent of a service contact between customer and service provider and customers' familiarity with the service are expected to have consequences (Ryu *et al.*, 2012; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

Second, the study does not use random sampling, so the findings may not generalize to the population sampled or to similar situations. Research is needed to establish contexts in which the findings are supported. In addition, the study is a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal study. The causal relationships among the concepts tested here merits longitudinal investigation. In this context, the Pearl River Delta of China involves special cultural and political considerations. To some degree, Chinese culture affects hotel managerial leadership, employee brand building behavior and guest images of luxury hotel brands. Only research in other cases will show the generalizability of the findings.

A study can test the mediating effect of brand building behavior between supportive leadership and brand image. This would allow considering if a non-significant relationship arose because of a mediator. Though existence of a mediator is not supported by the literature, in-depth interviews could establish the value of further quantitative research on this topic.

Finally, further research is warranted for the purpose of theory development and practical employee improvement purposes. Additional testing is needed on the role of employee's characteristics and attributes on the formation of their brand building behavior, and the effect of leadership style in causing different kinds of employee brand building behaviors. Exploring these topics would require considering how attributes of employees and leadership affect outcomes. Though this is an interesting matter, this is research for a paper addressing a different research problem.

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