

## Hotel internal branding: A participatory action study with a case hotel

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### ABSTRACT

Successful hotel branding requires the management of both external and internal branding. External branding has been widely studied to understand how hotel brands connect with customers; however, internal branding targets internal employees, and the practice is not well understood by hoteliers. For that reason, this study proposes a framework for implementing internal branding in hotel organizations. We analyzed an internal branding project for three consecutive years using a participatory action study. The findings of this study support a six dimensions framework for implementing internal branding strategies: (1) corporate support; (2) leadership of managers; (3) reciprocal learning; (4) being proactive at the personal level; (5) characteristics of departments; and (6) performance evaluation. In the proposed framework, we applied a combined social identity and social exchange approach to identify how these approaches function in different paths which contributes new theoretical insights to the understanding of internal branding.

### 1. Introduction

To build strong brands, both internal and external branding initiatives are needed (Davies & Chun, 2002). Brands need to maintain relationships with both internal and external stakeholders by improving both internal organizational identity and external customer identity (Urde, 2003). When considering internal branding, employees are vital assets to building and maintaining a favorable corporate reputation and brand image (Gofton, 2000). Organizations and customers are better served if employees have a strong attachment to and a positive image of their own companies. Employees' identification with and internalization of a company's brand values and norms can reflect strongly on their service to external customers (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001) which is particularly relevant to front-line team members in the service industry. The central role of service employees in the hotel industry cannot be overemphasized. Service organizations are labor-intensive, and they depend on employees to maintain and deliver brand promises to guests. Because of their many interactions with customers, the perception of employee service and the actual delivery of service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) determine the scope of service quality and, ultimately, customer satisfaction with the brand. During service delivery, employee attitude and brand-related competencies are highly valued (O'Neill & Mattila, 2010); therefore, the benefit of well-trained employees who "live the brand" (Gotsi & Wilson,

2001) is growing, yet few service studies have comprehensively examined employee brand education (Terglav, Ruzzier, & Kaše, 2016).

Extant literature demonstrates the positive impact of internal branding which is echoed in many empirical studies that point to a strong link between internal branding and employee satisfaction (Huang & Rundle-Thiele, 2014), employee loyalty (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014), employee work attitude (To, Martin, & Yu, 2015), employee commitment to a brand (Terglav et al., 2016), organizational citizenship behavior (Buil, Martínez, & Matute, 2016), employee brand-supporting behaviors (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009), employee brand equity (Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013), and employee brand performance (Xiong & King, 2015). While literature about the impact of internal branding is growing, there lacks a framework and documented process for implementing internal branding initiatives in a service organization. Although Lee et al. (2014) study suggested internal communication, training, and reward as key factors of internal branding, they fail detail which parts of internal communication can be improved, what kinds of training are necessary, or how to effectively reward employees. Punjaisri et al. (2009) recommends exploring internal branding using longitudinal qualitative studies that merge diverse perspectives, and Horton, Bayerl, and Jacobs (2014) suggested that a link between cross-level social identity and internal branding may yield meaningful implications for employee branded behaviors; however, the extension of these issues has yet to be studied.

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To explore ways to implement internal branding in depth, a qualitative approach is needed (Yang, Wan, & Fu, 2012). Di Domenico and Morrison (2003) argued that action research enables researchers to study small firms. Through action research, information can be collected and grounded to form theoretical models (Di Domenico & Morrison, 2003). We apply participatory action study to our investigation so that researchers can fully understand the mechanisms underlying research issues and the reasons governing observed behaviors (Huxham & Vangen, 2003). Taken together, the purpose of this study is to explore the mechanism and process for implementing hotel internal branding. Findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. First, this study provides logical viewpoints regarding internal branding. Using the findings from the participatory action study, we attempt to establish a framework for implementing internal branding. Moreover, we clarify the functions of social identity approach and social exchange approach as they relate to internal branding, thereby adding to the knowledge base of theoretical foundations for this issue. Second, this study can be used as a baseline model for implementing practices that support internal branding in an organization.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical backgrounds of internal branding

The purpose of internal branding is to ensure that employees deliver brand promises to customers, ensure customer perception of the brand experience is consistent in both the physical environments and through human connections (Xiong & King, 2015). Therefore, the development of internal branding focuses on the progression of employees' brand commitment, and include chances for employees to learn brand-related competencies and employee willingness to carry out branded performance at work. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) summarized that effective internal branding can be achieved through both the social identity approach and the social exchange approach. Social identity approach gives employees opportunities to learn brand-related competencies through social aspects in their workplace; these are practices in which employees internalize themselves as part of the brand, such as when observing senior employees' service operations (Van Knippenberg, Van Dick, & Tavares, 2007). On the other hand, social exchange approach identifies the reasons employees are willing to deliver branded behaviors at work, such as when employees receive recognition or awards for performances that are aligned with brand values (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007).

Based on social identity theory, individuals measure their identity with a brand across several aspect of their work environment, such as service team, department, age cohort, and brand image (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Information received through the social aspects of a workplace offers employees chances to acquire wanted attitudes and behaviors in an organization, provides employees real-life learning about a service brand, and encourages them to internalize themselves as part of the service brand (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Employees who have a higher social identity with their brand experience a strong psychological link to the fate of the brand and regard themselves as ambassadors of the brand (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to social identity approach, employees perform branded service behaviors because they identify the brand as an extension of their self-image (Wheeler, Richey, Tokkman, & Sablynski, 2006), involve themselves in organizational culture (Lugosi & Bray, 2008), support the organization (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), perform citizenship behavior (Blader & Tyler, 2009), and eventually work together to achieve goals in internal branding.

The social exchange approach, on the other hand, explains employees' external motivations for participating in internal branding (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). This theory proposes that employees establish a psychological link to and develop loyalty for a brand

in the employee-organization relationship when they receive an exchange of benefits such as support, knowledge, pay, and recognition (Blau, 1964). Thus, when employees perceive that corporate policies care about their well-being (Van Knippenberg et al., 2007) or supervisory management makes their benefits and feelings a priority (Thau, Tröster, Aquino, Pillutla, & Cremer, 2013), they respond with desired behaviors for the brand. By applying social exchange theory to hospitality organizations, To et al. (2015) found that hotels can improve employee work attitude using both formal and informal internal communications, and Terglav et al. (2016) identified that upper level managers' brand-oriented leadership can strengthen employees' brand commitment by enhancing employee brand knowledge and employee-brand fit. Xiong and King (2018) found that the dissemination of brand knowledge and co-worker support significantly improve employee brand performance, and most recently, Wang, Ryan, and Yang (2019) found that employees can actually develop a love for their internal brand and bestow love behaviors like forgiveness, supportive voice, and helping others through social exchange with the brand they work for.

### 2.2. Internal branding

Keller (2003) argued that “a brand is often described as a combination of name, sign, and symbol to represent a group of service and/or products and to separate selling organizations from competition” (p. 3). The objective of internal branding is to purposefully promote the brand from within so that both internal and external brand messages consistently meet customers' brand expectations (Punjaisri et al., 2009), and corporate brand management calls on employees to cooperate by aligning their behaviors with the organization's brand values (Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Internal branding practices are a key common process for motivating and encouraging employees' brand-supporting attitudes and behaviors (King & Grace, 2007). To shape hotel employees' brand-supporting performance, social identity plays an important role in (1) assimilating brand knowledge and understanding of desired brand performances through social interactions in a workplace and (2) helping employees internalize themselves as part of the hotel brand (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Lugosi & Bray, 2008; Punjaisri et al., 2009).

Sirianni, Bitner, Brown, and Mandel (2013) defined branded service encounters as “service interaction in which employee behavior is strategically aligned with the brand positioning” (p. 108). In hotels' internal branding practices, building branded service encounters is a key performance goal because customers should be able to experience brand promises through all services delivered by employees of the brand. Elements such as employees' service behavior and appearance can shape meaning in a customer's brand experience; these branded service encounters reinforce brand meaning, shape affective brand linkage, and establish customer-based brand equity (Sirianni et al., 2013). To build a strong branded service encounter, the function of social exchange in internal branding should be emphasized to increase employees' willingness to deliver brand promises and achieve brand performance (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Internal branding projects should provide employees with both tangible and intangible benefits, including support, recognition, and awards. Because reciprocity is a part of social exchange, employees who benefit from internal branding will then be willing to support and achieve brand performance (Terglav et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019; Xiong & King, 2018).

### 2.3. The role of HR in internal branding

To promote a brand from within, human resource (HR) departments within hotel organizations are at the strategic center for creating cross-departmental synergy. The significance and need of HR in engaging core business processes is recognized in both industry and academic communities (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Becker, Huselid, Pickus, & Spratt, 1997; Ulrich, 1998). Lee et al. (2014) defined three

elements of internal branding that are directly related to HR practices: training, reward, and internal communication. [Aurand et al. \(2005\)](#) noted that HR can lead internal branding by implementing annual performance evaluations that include metrics about delivering brand values, providing training that helps employees add brand value to their daily tasks, and identifying competencies that deliver brand values when making staffing decisions. [Punjaisri et al. \(2009\)](#) further explained that to foster internal branding, HR is the best and most suitable department for generating internal communications, providing related training programs, monitoring employee performances, and encouraging synergy among departments. These studies, among others, provide a solid foundation for justifying why HR departments should take the lead in implementing hotel internal branding practices and strategies.

HR departments, however, do not unilaterally develop policies and training material; instead, they embrace High Performance Work Systems (HPWSs) that link human capital-related processes from all departments to an organization's business and strategic initiatives, and it is through these systems that desired employee behaviors are produced ([Arthur, 1994](#); [Huselid, 1995](#)). Although much of the literature acknowledges that HR departments are critical to helping firms achieve higher profitability and operational performance, only a few isolated studies have examined how HR processes and activities contribute to internal branding. Among these studies, the work of [Aurand et al. \(2005\)](#) identified a positive association between HR involvement in internal branding and brand incorporation into work activities. [Gotsi and Wilson \(2001\)](#) also noted that HR management initiatives can foster the brand by connecting what is communicated to external customers with what is practiced by the internal workforce. These initiatives can be realized via recruitment policies, performance assessments, and consistent brand value training.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participatory action study

[Eden and Huxham \(1996\)](#) argued that action research is a method for “developing effective professional practice” (p. 77). The focus of this method is on individual researchers who work as reflective practitioners and generate knowledge from the field through action learning ([Eden & Huxham, 1996](#)). Action learning is characterized by the all-in-one role of researcher as investigator, subject, and consumer, making most inquiries heavily embedded in education research that improves the quality of the researcher's own practice ([Whitehead, 1994](#)). The outcomes of action research can also help clarify theoretical and conceptual frameworks by showing systematic relationships among theories in the research context and elaborating on or developing theory from practice ([Eden & Huxham, 1996](#)). [Di Domenico and Morrison \(2003\)](#) further proposed three reasons for applying action research to service studies: (1) it can generate knowledge which fits the characteristics and nature of service firms, (2) it serves as a more appropriate approach for small service firms, and (3) from interactionists' perspectives, it offers diverse input from research fields to extract valuable and deep information.

Based on the level of participation in action research, action research can be conducted using several different approaches ([Huxham & Vangen, 2003](#)). Participatory action study relies on a two-way relationship in which researchers become a part of the subject's community while subjects contribute to the research output ([Eden & Huxham, 1996](#)). As summarized by [Kindon, Pain, and Kesby \(2007\)](#), researchers in a participatory action study consider participants to be reflexive and competent partners who participate in the entire research process, involve participants in a collaborative process to generate understanding, and lead the emergence of new meanings through reflection. Methods such as interviewing, participant observation, learning by doing, group work, mapping, surveys, and storytelling can be jointly used in participatory action study ([Kindon et al., 2007](#)).

Participatory action study has been applied in management and organization intervention literature to facilitate transformational change and advance knowledge ([Huxham & Vangen, 2003](#)); however, it has seen limited application in service studies. Only a few studies have used this approach ([Afify, 2008](#); [Waser & Johns, 2003](#)), although it has the potential to be a great tool for reinforcing culture ([Lashley, 1999](#)).

#### 3.2. The case hotel

For the purpose of this participatory action study, our case hotel was in the process of initiating an internal branding project and agreed to allow our researchers to collect information for qualitative analysis. Based on the selection criteria, the case hotel (labeled “T hotel”) for this study opened in 1997 in Taichung City, Taiwan. T hotel had 300 employees and total assets of 5,000,000 USD. After being franchised with a chain hotel brand for 12 years, the property owner of T hotel decided to create its own brand in 2009. All T hotel employees are Taiwanese with most living in Central Taiwan. To establish its core brand value, the HR manager introduced an internal branding project to encourage employees to practice the core values identified by the hotel as critical to their brand. The core brand values of T hotel are: (1) teamwork with enthusiasm; (2) exceeding customer expectations; (3) producing memorable experiences; (4) presenting professionalism; (5) providing unique facilities; and (6) striving to reach the top. Beginning in February 2010, the project was launched and then expanded with an award ceremony every two to three months. Executives of T hotel awarded employees who had embraced the hotel brand in their daily operations. In 2011, only a year after the internal branding launch, the Taiwan Tourism Bureau officially rated T hotel as a 5-star hotel.

#### 3.3. Data collection process

The first author arranged with T hotel's HR manager to work as an intern employee in the HR department during the summer of 2010 which presented several advantages for collecting data. First, both the new hotel brand and the internal branding project were designed by the HR manager of T hotel, giving researchers the ability to collect first-hand information as well as request related information during daily work. Second, award ceremonies for internal branding were held by the HR department, and as an intern employee in the HR department, the first author was involved in preparing the project from the very beginning. Third, the internship prompted the first author to become closer to the operations and employees of T hotel. Fourth, the position in the HR department allowed the researcher to conduct interviews with awarded employees and managers in different departments.

In the first two weeks of the internship, the HR manager assigned the intern researcher the task of working in the food and beverage department during lunch times. Afterward, the intern researcher assisted in training and recruiting in the HR department. The HR manager spent 30 min to 1 h each afternoon talking with the researcher about the market environment of T hotel, the process of implementing the internal branding project, and sharing stories of previously awarded employees. In the third and fourth weeks, the intern researcher read materials about internal branding, including a recommendation letter from department managers, slides used by the award selection committee, reviews of awarded employees, and photos from three previously held award ceremonies. After reading about the internal branding initiative, the intern researcher scheduled interviews with each awarded employee and department manager to collect anecdotal testimonies about how employees practiced hotel branding at work and what motivated them and wrote an article for each interview. In the fifth and sixth weeks, the intern researcher interviewed previously awarded employees and department managers and worked with the HR manager to plan the fourth award ceremony. In the seventh week, the intern researcher hosted the fourth award ceremony in the HR department. In the eighth week, the intern researcher met with all

**Table 1**  
Award books summary.

No.	Completion time	Number of ceremonies	Number of pages	Number of interviewees
1	August 2010	4, 1st to 4th	53	15 managers, 18 employees, 2 teams
2	August 2011	5, 5th to 9th	51	6 managers, 22 employees, 5 teams
3	August 2012	6, 10th to 15th	71	3 managers, 44 employees, 9 teams

interviewees to review their articles and make sure the records objectively reflected their observations and perceptions. Finally, the interned researcher put together a report that included stories about internal branding from awarded employees on the four award ceremonies.

In 2011 and 2012, the HR manager of T hotel assigned the same task initiated by the interned researcher to two other summer interns in the HR department. Both interns were Master's students with human resource management majors and qualitative research training. A second report was finished in 2011, and a third report in 2012. Table 1 lists the three reports. From 2010 to 2013, the first author of this study and original interned researcher hosted the internal branding project, discussed the project's progress with the HR manager, and reflected on learned action with the coauthors and established that the entire data collection process accommodated the requirement for continuing action and reflection in a participatory action study.

### 3.4. Analysis

To analyze participatory data, Cahill (2007) suggested using multiple information sources to collect data and emphasized the need to have more than two raters code the qualitative data. Materials for analysis were the three reports written by intern HR employees at T hotel and the reported action learning experience achieved by the first author. The research team read existing literature about internal branding before proposing and discussing dimensions for establishing a framework for internal branding and lastly coming to a consensus on six dimensions: (1) corporate support; (2) leadership of managers; (3) reciprocal learning; (4) being proactive at the personal level; (5) characteristics of departments; and (6) performance evaluation. Based on these six dimensions, the research team coded the three reports and sorted the coded information according to the six dimensions. The codes used in this study indicate the sequence of publishing, page number, interviewee number, and type of employee. For example, Y1-P3-E2 means the coded information came from the first report on page number 3 from the second employee listed in this report. Type of employee is shown as E – employee, M - manager, T - team.

Decrop (1999) suggested using triangulation to examine the same phenomenon from multiple sources. In this study, we applied two types of triangulation. First, data triangulation was applied by combining diverse sources of material. In addition to interviews, conversations with managers and teams at the T hotel were documented in order to compare successful practices of internal branding. Second, investigator triangulation was performed among the researchers to analyze and interpret data. During data collection, interns communicated with the third author of this study on a weekly basis to discuss emerging patterns. In summarizing the dimensions, all three authors provided unique perspectives with the first author reflecting on the internship experience at T hotel, the second author integrating interview transcripts with hospitality management theories, and the third author assessing the reports based on field experience.

## 4. Findings

A summary of our analysis is shown in Table 2. The dimensions and themes of hotel internal branding that emerged were supported by codes extracted from this participatory action study. Some of the themes strongly tie to one or several of the core brand values of T hotel.

**Table 2**  
Emergent dimensions and themes.

Dimensions	Themes
Corporate Support	HR manager as planner Support from CEO
Leadership of managers	Praise and blame Generational differences in a team Emotional contagion Mentoring
Reciprocal learning	Reciprocal learning Mutual support
Being proactive at the personal level	Observing Taking ownership Thinking and acting as a manager (No specific themes identified)
Characteristics of departments	Cross-departmental cooperation
Performance of internal branding	Continue winning awards Talent retention Cost reduction Star rating

In the following sections, abbreviated findings were organized by dimension.

### 4.1. Corporate support

*HR manager as planner.* The T hotel brand was designed in 2009, incorporating ideas from the HR manager who was the originator of the internal branding project. The following quote from the HR manager represents the importance of applying social identity approach as a means for employees to embrace the hotel brand as a part of their own identity:

*We live our own style and shape our own culture. When customers think of us, I hope our brand can form a unique image. Thus, the next step for us is to think how to involve brand value in each department. Talk the talk of a brand is dead; only by practice can one make it alive. (Y1-P47-M3)*

*Support from CEO.* Working at the case hotel during the internal branding project allowed the research team to witness strong support for the initiative from the hotel's CEO who attended all internal branding award ceremonies to recognize role model employees and met with the HR manager frequently to discuss internal branding performance. The CEO supported the use of social exchange approach to cultivate employee willingness to contribute to brand performance. During an interview, the CEO stated:

*This project should be held continuously. Awarding is not enough; we should keep practicing it. We need to maintain excellent practices, copy role models, and highlight good examples among employees. Our employees are encouraged to actively seek ways to create memorable experiences for customers which is one of the core brand values of T hotel. Training can only enhance skills and knowledge. The key to creating memorable experiences is based on attitude. Attitude is based on the organizational culture that is created by T brand. Only by internal branding can our employees continuously and naturally deliver memorable experiences to customers. (Y1-P44-M12)*

#### 4.2. Leadership of managers

**Praise and blame.** Managers at T hotel were observed complementing employees publicly and reprimanding employees for mistakes privately. If a mistake became a common occurrence, then managers tried to provide solutions rather than blaming employees (Y1–P23-M3). Hence, employees gained confidence in performing good work, saved face when making mistakes, and identified solutions to specific problems. The manager of housekeeping, M1, earned respect from her team using these methods:

*I think praise is very important! Praise should be given immediately to directly inform the employees what they did was good. Sometimes I would verbally praise a team who did their work quickly or did something awesome. Sometimes, I may shake older employees' hands and show my wholehearted appreciation for their efforts.* (Y1–P8-M1)

*Our manager always cares about us and praises our work often. I still remember last time she told my mom that I worked very hard. It truly lifts me up. So, when our department needs help, even on my days off, I am in.* (Y1–P11-E6)

**Generational differences in a team.** Hotels employ a wide range of ages across all areas of operations. From young interns to older housekeepers, managers showed appreciation for generational differences within a team and identified ways to communicate with such diverse groups.

*We cannot treat intern employees too harshly. It will make them unhappy and reluctant to follow directions.* (Y3–P12-E9)

*I know silver workers love warm words. I sometimes praise them in public by saying, "You did it very quickly!" or "You did it beautifully!" or wholeheartedly appreciating their efforts by gently tapping their shoulders or shaking their hands.* (Y1–P8-M1)

**Emotional contagion.** Based on the function of social exchange in encouraging positive reciprocity, managers in the service encounter should value the importance of emotional contagion and learn to radiate positive energy.

*I smile a lot. It not only influences customers but also invigorates employees. I leave negative feelings at home and only present my brightest side when interacting at work.* (Y1–P16-M15)

*I always remind myself to wear happiness on my face so that my employees can be positively influenced by me.* (Y2–P16-M1)

**Mentoring.** Training employees is a basic requirement for managers when implementing internal branding projects. Managers at the case hotel designed training mechanisms that fit individual learning styles; thus, junior and intern employees embraced mentoring at the case hotel as friendly and valuable.

*Good attitude leads to good service. A good manager should train each employee to first establish a positive and active attitude, and then look closely at employee burnout.* (Y3–P31-E25)

*When she mentors newcomers, she first allows them to get used to the work environment and the overall atmosphere. At the beginning stage, she observes newcomers' comprehension, service attitude and active behavior, and then she would customize teaching procedures based on individual differences.* (Y3–P31-E25)

#### 4.3. Reciprocal learning

**Reciprocal learning.** Awarded coworkers became role models. During the project, the collection of interview reports became popular learning materials that T hotel employees could use to learn from actual situations that happened in their departments. Through reciprocal learning, "professional presentation" and "striving to reach the top" are

enhanced within a department. The following statement was made by an awarded employee who benefited from the example set by previous winners:

*I think the professional service competence is based on learning atmosphere in a service team. Our peers at the front desk are happy to share work experiences and skills. Hence, we grow in service competence happily and naturally.* (Y1–P2-E1)

*She is my best role model. She taught me how to interact with customers and transformed me from a shy girl into a confident server.* (Y1–P3-E2)

**Mutual support.** A network of support affects the quality of service delivery, demonstrating the functions of social identity (e.g., learning from peers) and social exchange (e.g., paying back favors). In the food and beverage (F&B) department, employees are generally similar in age, and mutual support from service teams form peer bonding. In the housekeeping department, employees may be years apart. Older employees' support for young interns is comforting. Mutual support can enhance affective links among peers and create "teamwork with enthusiasm" within a department.

*Mutual support is strong in our F&B. Sometimes we share experiences about hard work or make jokes among each other, and then feel refreshed.* (Y2–P18-E7)

*E17 is always like a mother to young interns. She listens to our problems and offers help when needed. She also mentors interns to magnify details when cleaning. For coworkers her age, she always reminds them to keep good health.* (Y3–P21-E17)

#### 4.4. Being proactive at the personal level

**Observing.** Employees closely watch customers to identify needs based on the customer's behaviors. Employees can also improve service delivery by observing prior operations. Using observation, employees can identify opportunities to "exceed customer expectations," provide a "memorable experience," and improve their "professional presentation."

*When I meet fashionable female guests, I always introduce department stores nearby and offer directions to get there. When I see parents with their children coming from our pool, I always give them bags to take wet clothes. I think service is to provide without being asked. As long as you observe more, customers can feel the difference.* (Y1–P9-E5)

*I'm good at connecting with customers quickly by understanding how to communicate with them based on observation. After escorting young people, I sometimes say "please feel free to call back if you have any questions ... just say you want to talk to the most beautiful lady at the front desk ... my name is beauty." When greeting children, I always play with them by saying, "Hi! Am I your sister or aunt? Call me sis and you get three candies, but call me aunt, you only get one!"* (Y1–P2-E1)

**Taking ownership.** Having the courage to take on responsibility is necessary to practicing internal branding at the individual employee level. "Striving to reach the top" follows when employees take ownership for exceeding expectations.

*One night, lighting and security door in C zone parking lot failed, and we were short staffed. E19, the safety guard, got the information on the way home and volunteered to come in. During the whole night, E19 stayed at C zone parking lot to provide directions for customers and take care of parked cars.* (Y1–P38-E19)

*E3 majored in Japanese in college. Seeing increasing Japanese customers in the hotel, she volunteered to teach us Japanese. E3 designed language trainings based on our work context. To accommodate most of us, she even scheduled some courses on her days off. She thought it was her rightful responsibility.* (Y2–P4-E3)

*Thinking and acting as a manager.* Ideas for improving services often come from within an organization. Employees are encouraged to vocalize and actualize improvements. By thinking and acting as a manager, employees improve their “professional presentation” and ability to “strive to reach the top.”

*Making handicrafts is E11's hobby.* When she started to work for F&B, she found small decorations can largely improve service ambiance. Upon her suggestion, our manager let her improvise. Her crafts totally beautified our work space. (Y1–P18-E11)

*One time, our Chinese restaurant received a booking for a wedding event.* Normally, wedding bookings are booked at least one month prior to the event with communications in great details about menu selection, space capacity check, and contract signing. The couple called us eight days before the wedding date without having decided all the details yet. Realizing how important a wedding is for our customers, E10 actively called the couple several times to discuss the details. The night before the wedding, the couple moved into T hotel at 10 pm and asked to visit the space for the event. E10 led them to the event space and introduced the event process, despite the fact that it was already time for her to go home. After the wedding, the couple was very satisfied with the services of T hotel and the genuine assistance of E10. The bride also mentioned that they randomly decided to switch to T hotel because of the lousy service from their previously picked hotel. (Y1–P17-E10)

#### 4.5. Characteristics of departments

A successful internal branding project requires participation from all employees in all departments; therefore, planners of a hotel internal branding initiative would do well to consider the different characteristics of different departments, ensuring those working in service sectors as well as employees who work in the back of the house feel they are part of the hotel family. Based on different task features in each department, internal branding award ceremonies at the case hotel were designed to ensure all employees and teams had the chance to be recognized for excellence in achieving core brand values. For example, T hotel chefs were eager to attend external workshops or international competitions that improved their skills and knowledge (note Y1–P21-M2 and Y2–P25-E14) for the purpose of providing unique cuisine to customers and sharing what they learned with fellow chefs. Similarly, the engineering department evaluated the costs of utilities such as water and electricity and reassessed renovations project, and employees in the department formed weekly workshops to share case experiences and discuss work skills (Y2–P29-T3). Additionally, laundry staff began to demonstrate more compassion for handicapped employees (Y2–P12-T2). Throughout the project, many employees and employee groups embraced the need to work together and cooperate closely. Using internal branding, employees shifted from passive followers to active participants in supporting T hotel's core values. These examples suggest that all departments can provide “unique facilities” while also improving “teamwork with enthusiasm” and “striving to reach the top.”

#### 4.6. Performance of internal branding

The impact of the project quickly triggered positive transitions in T hotel. Project assessment started in 2011, and within one year, cross-departmental cooperation blossomed. T hotel shifted from awarding individuals to awarding entire departments. For instance, the T hotel food booth was understaffed for an unexpectedly large crowd during its first festival appearance (Y3–P50-T7) until T hotel employees, while touring the event as visitors, pitched in to help at the booth, making it a great success. Employees from the safety department helped direct customers from one T restaurant to another while on their routine patrols. As time went on, the branding project saw increasing numbers of repeat winners (such as four-time winner Y3–P25-E20), along with a

big improvement in employee retention. Internal branding not only helped retain the current talent, but it also reduced turnover costs, and several interns accepted permanent placements at the hotel (Y1–P3-E2 and Y1–P19-E12) with one intern also recruiting a friend to work for T hotel (Y1–P12-E7).

Several other departments also reported cost saving. The engineering department, for example, focused on efficient facilities management throughout the project. As a result, they monitored and changed the elevators in Building A that produced an annual savings of 4,000 USD (Y1–P33-T2), and they redesigned the heating system, saving 5,000 USD in gas costs (Y2–P34-T4). They also began recording occupation percentages, pool visitors, and outdoor temperatures to help them adjust daily air-conditioning settings, an effort that reduced gas cost by another 13,000 USD (Y2–P30-T3).

During the second year of the internal branding project, T hotel earned a 5-star rating from the Taiwan Tourism Bureau. Their evaluation was based on service quality and facility maintenance. As a result of the practices established during the internal branding program, T hotel received the highest score in service over several more-established competitors.

## 5. Discussion

To explore the mechanisms and processes of implementing hotel internal branding practices, this study conducted a participatory action study that produced significant findings about internal branding. Different from previous quantitative approaches that examined how internal branding stems from “influences from the top” (Buil et al., 2016; Terglav et al., 2016; To et al., 2015), this study extends the literature by describing the “top-to-bottom” mechanism functions of both corporate support and leadership of managers and identifying the “bottom-to-top” mechanisms of reciprocal learning and personal proactivity. These research findings also add to the scope of knowledge about hotel internal branding by emphasizing individual-level performance of service employees (Löhdorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Xiong & King, 2015; Xiong et al., 2013) and identifying opportunities in different hotel departments for employees to support internal branding.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

There are several theoretical implications from this study. First, a six-dimensional framework for implementing hotel internal branding is proposed in Fig. 1. In agreement with Terglav et al. (2016) about the importance of top-level management support in initiating and sustaining an internal branding project, we demonstrate that corporate support from the CEO and HR manager provides a foundation for hotel internal branding practices. Top level support positively influences perceptions and behaviors of department managers and front-line employees (Lee et al., 2014; Terglav et al., 2016). Anecdotal evidence from our case hotel reveals that unique departmental characteristics should be considered when managing corporate policies because leadership skills of department managers are a key driver to creating a supportive organizational culture for implementing internal branding (Wang et al., 2019).

In addition to influencing individual-level outcomes like service behavior and brand commitments as identified in former literature (Buil et al., 2016; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Terglav et al., 2016; To et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019; Xiong & King, 2015), this participatory action research study found that hotel internal branding can lead to several other positive outcomes, including cross-departmental cooperation, higher employee retention, and better overall work performance in both back of the house and front of the house departments within a hotel organization. Furthermore, our proposed framework explains the roles of corporate leadership, managers, supervisors, and peers as multi-level sources that shape employees' branded behavior, extending the employee progression pyramid of King and Grace (2007). The

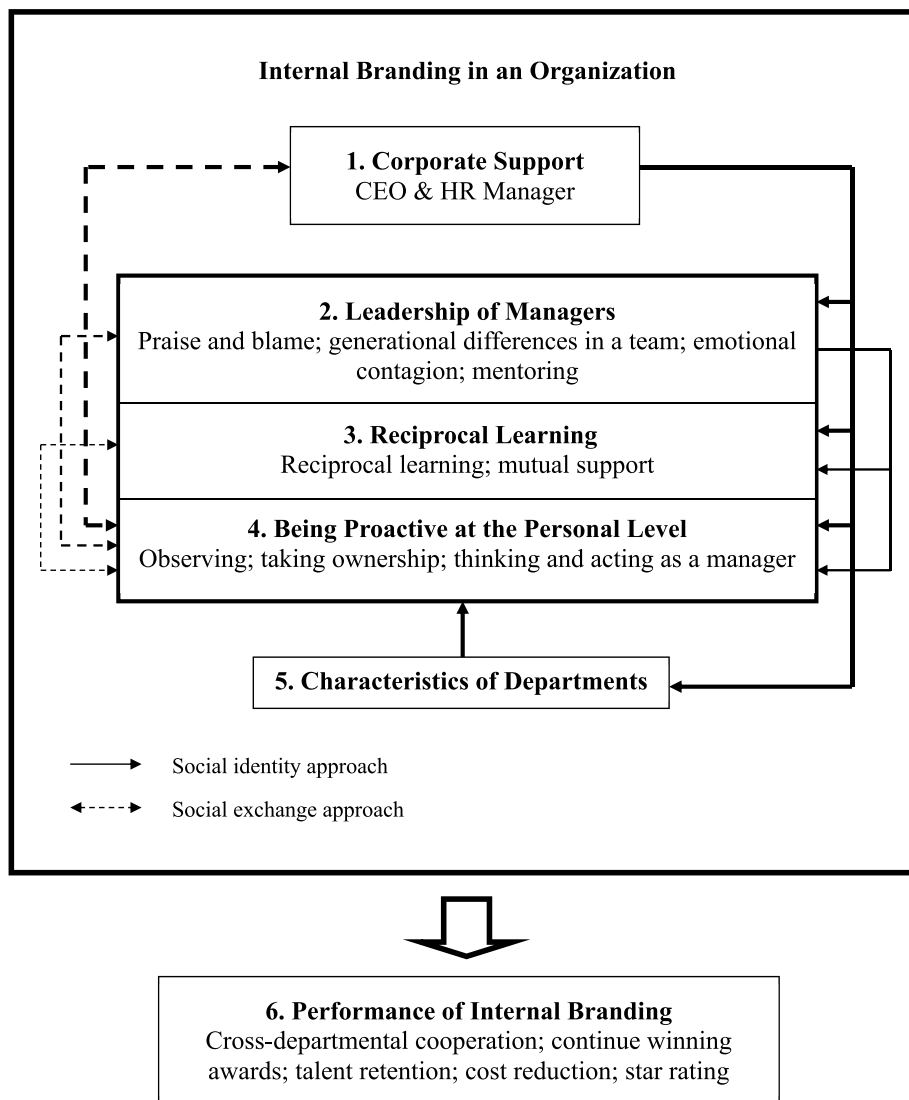


Fig. 1. Framework of hotel internal branding in an organization.

proposed framework expands on previous studies of internal branding from employees’ perspectives (Buil et al., 2016; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri et al., 2009) by looking at internal branding initiatives in an organization from a cross-level perspective (Horton et al., 2014; Wieseke, Ahearne, Lam, & Dick, 2013).

Secondly, our proposed framework reveals paths for using the social identity approach to implement internal branding. A study by Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) argues that employee identification with their firm’s brand is formed through the individual’s perception of employee-brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand, and Terglav et al. (2016) showed that top managers who deliver brand-oriented leadership improve employee brand knowledge, psychological contract, and employee-brand fit. Based on the proposed framework, this study further determined that employees’ social identity with internal branding can also be enhanced through corporate support and leadership of department managers. General managers and HR managers must provide support by first incorporating internal branding into effective practices that secure employees’ social identity (Aurand et al., 2005; Punjaisri et al., 2009), and department managers should incorporate brand values into their own attitudes and communication styles (Xiong & King, 2018). Efforts like these from the corporate and managerial level cultivate proactive employees at the personal level, and this, in turn, contributes to brand performance (Xiong et al., 2013).

Third, the proposed framework also shows how the social exchange approach influences internal branding. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) pointed out that social exchange approach with internal branding works when organizational support is recognized as improving employee brand-building behaviors. Lee et al. (2014) mentioned that reward can serve to motivate employee engagement in internal branding. The results of this study add to our understanding of social exchange in internal branding by identifying the functions of corporate support, leadership of managers, reciprocal learning, and feedback from proactive behavior. An example of corporate support includes an award ceremony that provides both tangible gifts and intangible honors. Good managerial leadership encourages employee engagement in internal branding by showing care and concern for employees. Mutual learning and support of peers also accelerates employees’ willingness to reciprocate the same attitude and behavior. Customer and peer positive feedback for proactive behavior also enhances employees’ determination to commit themselves to providing excellent performance. Overall, these findings support Wang et al. (2019) which suggests that employees who love the brand they work for will demonstrate reciprocal love behaviors that pay back the hotel brand. In addition to these individual-level love behaviors (Wang et al., 2019), our proposed framework reveals the diverse paths for social exchange within hotel internal branding initiatives.

## 5.2. Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications. First, a well-designed internal branding project should have top-down support from C-level executives as well as bottom up support from individual team players and units. HR should work as a center hub from which to direct all elements of the internal branding project by incorporating core brand values across all levels. Tangible resources such as monetary incentives and recognition awards are essential to reinforcing internal branding behaviors.

Secondly, managers must be properly trained in order to communicate brand values and behaviors to employees and identify high performers. Our findings discuss several tactics managers can use in this regard, including praise and blame, identifying and managing generational differences within a team, fostering emotional contagion, and mentoring. Since low quality leader-member communication reduces reliability and validity when selecting awarded employees, HR managers should also evaluate the leadership skills of their department managers and offer workshops and training sessions as necessary.

Third, every employee within a hotel organization should be included in internal branding initiatives. Unfortunately, the service industry sometimes downplays the importance of service departments, but engineers, IT staff, security guards, and other “unseen” departments can and should be recognized as proactive partners. Furthermore, today's interns can be tomorrow's full-time employees (Chen & Shen, 2012), but budget constraints can leave interns with less compensation, smaller bonuses, and fewer benefits, resulting in weak links between interns and the organization when there is no perception of care and recognition for employees. Internal branding provides a platform on which to establish and strengthen links within this group, giving full-timers, part-timers, and interns equal opportunities to compete.

Finally, managers of internal branding projects should be flexible and willing to continuously refine assessment criteria, just as the HR manager for our case project did, when considering the number of times a repeat winner can be awarded.

## 5.3. Limitations and future research

Although this study add information and provides practical and theoretical implications to existing internal branding literature, it has limitations that future researchers should consider. First, our study uses a single hotel for its case. Future research can extend the scope of study to construct a benchmark branding profile for different market segments and even different cultural and geographical backgrounds. Second, Balmer and Greyser (2006) argued that internal branding can facilitate successful external branding. This study examined internal mechanisms for implementing an internal branding project, but external mechanisms such as customers' perceptions about internal branding are worth exploring (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015). Third, performance barometers for internal branding should be further examined. As an explorative study, we found that cross-departmental cooperation, awards, employee retention, and cost reduction are viable indicators; however, other metrics of influence will serve to add to the service and branding literature.

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