



# Internal branding to influence employees' brand promise delivery: a case study in Thailand

Employees'  
brand promise  
delivery

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to understand the internal branding process from the perspective of service providers in Thailand. It will reveal the key internal branding mechanisms and empirically assess the relationship between internal branding and employees' brand attitudes and performance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study representing the Thai hotel industry is adopted with mixed methodologies. In-depth interviews are first carried out with 30 customer-interface employees in six major hotels in Thailand. On a census basis, a quantitative survey with 699 respondents from five major hotels in Thailand follows.

**Findings** – Internal branding coordinating marketing with human resource management has a statistically significant impact on attitudinal and behavioural aspects of employees in their delivery of the brand promise. As employees' brand commitment do not have a statistically significant relationship with employees' brand performance, it is not regarded as a mediator in the link between internal branding and employees' brand performance.

**Practical implications** – A number of significant managerial implications are drawn from this study, for example using both internal communication and training to influence employees' brand-supporting attitudes and behaviours. Still, it should be noted that the effect of internal branding on employee behaviours could be dependent on the extent to which it influences their brand attitudes.

**Originality/value** – The paper provides valuable insights, from the key internal audience's perspectives, into an internal branding process. It has empirically shown the relationship between internal branding and the behavioural outcome as well as the partial mediating effects of employees' brand identification, commitment and loyalty.

**Keywords** Brand identity, Brand loyalty, Thailand, Employee behaviour, Hotel and catering industry

**Paper type** Case study

## 1. Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that brand equity is an important antecedent of loyalty and behaviour (Vogel *et al.*, 2008) and hence, firms need to find ways to positively influence brand perceptions. A service organisation may endeavour to do so by creating a well-crafted brand identity, a well-defined brand positioning and a well-conceived brand personality, a strong brand needs to ensure the brand image resonates with management's efforts. As service employees are often considered the embodiment of the service brand in the consumer's eyes (Grönroos, 1994; Wangenheim *et al.*, 2007), an organisation should attempt to align the attitudes and behaviours of



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service providers with the brand's and its organisation's values so that they not only rightly demonstrate but also deliver its promise of values at each service encounter (Hart, 1998).

Recent studies in the branding and corporate marketing literature make it appear that internal branding could enable organisations, particularly those that rely on service elements, to fulfil the brand promise proposed to external constituencies (Drake *et al.*, 2005). The attention to keeping the brand promise is warranted since, to some extent, a favourable, powerful brand needs to become a focal point of trust, which could reduce any potential perceived risks intrinsic to service transactions. Despite the growing interest of both academics and practitioners in the "internal branding" concept, there is still a dearth of research to uncover the answers to what, why and how of internal branding. Furthermore, while it is agreed that internal branding is about promoting the brand inside an organisation and has employees as the key audience, existing insights were gained from management's and brand consultants' perspectives. There are a few recent studies that have involved both management and employees within one research; however, management as respondents outnumbered employees. Importantly, all studies were carried out within the European and the UK context. This could raise concerns whether the concept could be of value when applied within the Asian context. Therefore, this paper sets out to understand internal branding from employees' perspective within the hotel industry in Thailand, where people are different from Americans and Europeans (Malai, 2007). However, it should be acknowledged that different Asian countries could have different culture-specific issues. Still, the differences between Thai people and Americans as well as Europeans are bigger than those from Asian countries. For example, one of the four dimensions of Hofstede's (1997) schema – individualism vs collectivism – is often used to reflect Asia-Western contrasts (Straughan and Albers-Miller, 2001). While Asian cultures are collectivist and have strong group orientations, Western people are individualist and are trained to be self-reliant and focus much more on themselves (Triandis, 2001). This dimension is often used to show the cultural impact on people's behaviours and attitudes. This suggests that the personality traits of Thai people are different from the western people; thus, this may lead to different results from past studies. It also provides insights into how internal branding should be practiced, what outcomes management can expect and what factors can interfere with the success of internal branding campaigns.

## **2. The concept of internal branding**

The service and corporate branding literature has recognised that staff are influential on customers and other stakeholders' brand perceptions through their role in delivering both functional (what are delivered) and emotional (how they are delivered) values (de Chernatony, 2002). When they are aligned with the brand values, a corporate (service) brand could achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Pringle and Thompson, 2001). Therefore, internal branding is argued as having the attainment of competitive advantage through people as its core objective, which is difficult to be replicated (Jacobs, 2003). This is then pertinent to the concern revolving around the heterogeneous quality of a service brand. On one hand, the intangible nature of service brands highlights the importance of brand promise fulfilment. As it is difficult to evaluate service brand quality, customers encounter perceived risks during a buying

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decision process. Dawar and Parker (1994) suggest that a brand needs to become a risk-reducing device. To achieve this, the brand promise needs to be delivered at every service encounter. On the other hand, the simultaneity of the production and consumption processes suggests the presence of consumers and service providers, which is further related to heterogeneity. Similarly, the corporate branding concept suggests numerous points of contact that stakeholders have with the brands (King, 1991). To ensure consistency of the brand experience across stakeholder groups, staff need to be enabled to understand their brand's values. Consequently, they will appreciate their roles and their commitment to delivering the brand promise will increase (Heskett, 1987). As such, Cleaver (1999) places an emphasis on internal issues to ensure staff's appreciation of the brand promise and use brand's values to guide their behaviours.

Internal branding has been proposed to promote the brand inside an organisation, namely to employees (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003). Recent studies (Aurand *et al.*, 2005; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005) support that internal branding enables employees to deliver the brand promise during service encounters because it engenders a shared understanding of a brand across the entire organisation. In short, internal branding is argued to be instrumental in influencing employees' attitudes and shaping their behaviours to be aligned with a brand, by creating employees' understanding of brand values and engaging them in living brand reality (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Drake *et al.*, 2005; Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Thomson *et al.*, 1999).

### 3. Coordination of human resource and marketing

Traditionally, internal branding was promoted as a responsibility of marketing people in terms of internal communications. For example, by viewing advertising as a means to link internal and external brand marketing campaigns, Mitchell (2002) argues that the responsibility is of the Marketing Department because the marketing people are uniquely positioned to match the internal campaign to the external campaign. Bergstrom *et al.* (2002) view internal branding as a brand which is about communicating a meaning of some kind. As such, internal brand building is a marketing function. However, Machtiger (2004) criticise the sole reliance on internal communications as a pitfall in internal branding. He purports that internal branding requires a broader integrative framework across marketing, management and human resource (HR) disciplines. While HR is capable of developing the human asset to enhance the organisation's economic performance (Pfeffer, 1998) and the brand's success (Zerbe *et al.*, 1998), it may not do it in the context of fostering brand values. As such, working their principles and knowledge in coordination with those from the Marketing and Branding Department is necessary (Aurand *et al.*, 2005). When management understand and orchestrate marketing and HR theories, employees will better accept and internalise brand values and align their attitudes and behaviours accordingly (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2003). The empirical study of Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) also suggests potential synergy between internal communications (marketing) and training programmes (HR). Their study shows that both internal communication and training have a statistically significant impact on employees' brand-supporting behaviour although the effect of the former is stronger. Furthermore, Drake *et al.* (2005) argues that internal branding is created through the practice of internal marketing (IM). The review of various authors' proposition of IM mix elements

(Ahmed *et al.*, 2002; Gummesson, 1991; Tansuhaj *et al.*, 1991) seems to support the coordination of marketing (internal communications) and HR people.

#### **4. The outcomes of internal branding: brand identification, brand commitment, brand loyalty and brand-supporting behaviours**

Employee identification with an organisation is increasingly considered vital for any business, particularly in the context of corporate services brands where employees' attitudes and behaviours could either make or break the brand. Stuart (2002, p. 30) states that: "the more employees identify with the organisation [...] the more employees are likely to uphold that identity in their actions". As such, internal branding, as argued to ensure employees' brand-supporting attitudes and behaviours, could be instrumental in inducing employees' brand identification.

Drawing upon the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1985), staff are motivated to behave in ways that enhance their group goals when they identify themselves with their social group – the corporate service brand, in this case. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989), when the brand is perceived to be distinctive and prestigious, staff will identify with the particular entity. When they assign themselves as members of a particular brand, they will be motivated to enhance their source of positive identity (Elsbach, 1999) or the brand values in this study. The branding literature similarly argues that brand promise encapsulates a cluster of functional and emotional values that are distinctive (Olins, 1995), resulting in a strong, differentiated brand (de Chernatony, 2001). As internal branding aims at aligning employees with these values, it logically strengthens why recent studies indicate that internal branding is instrumental in enhancing employees' sense of belonging to the brand (Rousseau, 1998) or their sense of "oneness" (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

According to the organisational identification theory, staff who identify themselves with the particular social group will act within the organisation's strategic interest when faced with choice to maintain consistency between the organisation's and their own goals (Brown, 1969; Cheney, 1983; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Patchen, 1970; van Dick, 2001). Similarly, the organisational commitment theory suggests that once staff believe in and accept the organisation's values and goals, they will be willing to exert effort on behalf of the organisation (Cook and Wall, 1980; Mowday *et al.*, 1979). As internal branding aims at engendering a shared understanding of a brand across the entire organisation, recent studies have purported its positive influence on employees' brand commitment (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). The authors from the two theories concur that the acceptance of the organisation's values and goals by staff will enhance their desire to maintain membership or loyalty. Papsolomou and Vrontis (2006) have found that internal branding influences employees' brand loyalty or their willingness to remain with the brand (Reichheld, 1996).

Despite some commonalities between the two concepts, authors contend that they are related, yet, distinct concepts (Benkhoff, 1997; Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Peccei and Guest, 1993). Whilst the organisation identification (OI) theory focuses on the cognitive approach, the organisation commitment (OC) theory reflects more of the emotional connotation (Edwards, 2005). Thus, OC is considered as staff's emotional attachment to the organisation (Meyer and Allen, 1991; Meyer *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, it is noted that brand identification precedes employees' brand commitment (Burmman and Zeplin, 2005;

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Cheney and Tompkins, 1987) and commitment a key precursor to loyalty (Brown and Peterson, 1993; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999; Reichers, 1985).

As both OI and OC connote the organisation's value internalisation of identified and committed staff (Cook and Wall, 1980; Hall *et al.*, 1970; Schneider *et al.*, 1971), the Schwartz's (1992) value theory offers a sound theoretical basis for hypothesising that they will behave in ways that support the delivery of the brand promise. The review from the branding literature has found evidence to support the assumption about the link between these brand-supporting attitudes could encourage on-brand behaviours (Ambler and Barrow, 1996; Hankinson, 2002; Thomson *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, internal branding aims at its utmost to induce employees' behavioural changes to support the delivery of the brand promise (Boone, 2000; Free, 1999). However, there is still a lack of empirical evidence to affirm the link between internal branding and employees' brand performance as this assumption is much of logical reasoning.

Although there is an increased interest in internal branding, there are currently few studies within this area, thereby warranting more research to enrich the knowledge. Most existing insights focus on management's perspective, but few of these studies represent the perception of employees although they are the key audience and the brand enactor. Furthermore, past studies were conducted within the financial sector, namely retail banking (Chebat *et al.*, 2002; de Chernatony and Cottam, 2006; Pappasolomou and Vrontis, 2006), healthcare services (Gapp and Merrilees, 2006) and UK charities (Hankinson, 2004). Only few studies (Bowen, 1997) have discussed branding and IM in the hotel industry although the industry has recognised the need to build a strong, favourable brand (Daun and Klinger, 2006). Moreover, there has been no research within the internal branding context that is conducted within the Asian context. Therefore, the study is carried out in the hotel industry to understand, from the employees' perspectives, the how and why questions of internal branding. As the study was set out in Thailand, it could expand the knowledge within this area of research into a different cultural background, thereby enhancing the ability to adopt the internal branding concept into different cultural contexts.

## 5. Methods

A case study approach representing the hotel industry in Thailand was chosen with a mix of qualitative and quantitative research.

### 5.1 Qualitative phase

The qualitative research was first performed, using indepth interviews with 30 customer-interface employees in six major hotels in Thailand in key tourist provinces. Table I represents the profile of participating customer-interface employees.

This research was necessary to validate the constructs found during the literature review as well as defining the parameters to be measured during the quantitative phase. The findings from the qualitative phase assisted in developing specific hypotheses and in the design of the questionnaires. Together, with the literature review, the qualitative and the quantitative findings created a form of methodological triangulation to overcome the shortcomings of the case-study research, such as a lack of rigour (Amaratunga and Baldry, 2001). That is, these three sources of data were used as a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods as well as

Job position	Hotel	Department	Sex	Age
Housekeeping supervisor (R1)	D	Housekeeping	f	42
Banquet manager (R2)		F&B	m	38
Communication centre officer (R3)		F/O	f	28
Sales reception co-ordinator (R4)		F/O	f	29
Reservation supervisor (R5)		F/O	f	38
Housekeeping supervisor (R6)	H	Housekeeping	f	41
F&B supervisor (R7)		F&B	m	30
F&B officer (R8)		F&B	m	32
F&B server (R9)		F&B	m	35
Guest history officer (R10)		Residence	f	27
Guest contact assistant manager at café (R11)	M	F&B	f	34
Assistant F&B personnel (R12)		F&B	f	30
Guest contact supervisor at restaurant (R13)		F&B	f	26
Sales executive (R14)		Services	f	34
Bell boy (R15)		Services	m	31
Guest service officer (R16)	O	F/O	m	24
Room attendant (R17)		Housekeeping	m	28
Waiter (R18)		F&B	m	23
Concierge officer (R19)		F/O	f	25
Porter (R20)		F/O	m	36
Room maid (R21)	P	Housekeeping	f	22
Guest relations officer (R22)		F/O	f	25
F/O supervisor (R23)		F/O	m	30
Hostess (R24)		F&B	f	26
Server (R25)		F&B	f	23
Café captain (R26)	S	F&B	f	32
Chinese restaurant captain (R27)		F&B	f	38
Busboy (R28)		F&B	m	23
Guest relations officer (R29)		F/O	f	25
Business centre officer (R30)		F/O	f	23

**Table I.**  
Profile of informants  
from six hotels

the literature review. As a result, the study's rigour could also be enhanced (Creswell, 2003).

The participating hotels were selected based on their quality standards rated by stars. Four- and five-star hotels were selected because it was believed that they were likely to make an effort to maintain their promised brand experience and standards. Owing to the focus of the research, employees from three departments (Food and Beverage, Housekeeping and Front Office) were considered key informants as they were in a constant interaction with customers and other stakeholders. Each interview lasted from one hour to one and a half hours and was taped and transcribed to reduce the risk of observer bias (Voss *et al.*, 2002). Content analysis was used to analyse the data. Based on Miles and Huberman's (1984) framework, the produced transcripts were studied several times to identify common themes, leading to the generation of notes in a matrix format.

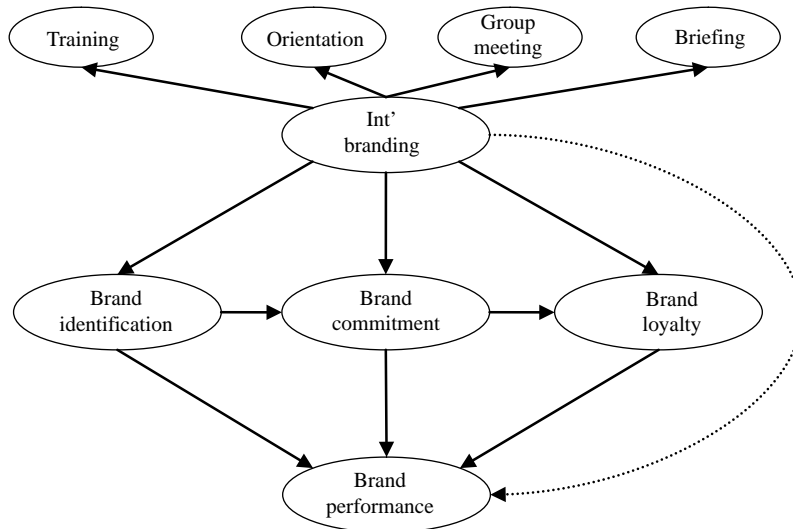
### 5.2 Quantitative phase

*Sample.* The quantitative research followed the qualitative research to investigate the formal relationships among constructs. At this phase, only five out of six hotels that had participated in the qualitative phase granted access. However, the qualitative



findings suggested no significant differences among different hotels. As such, the survey was conducted with customer-interface employees from the three departments in five hotels on a census basis. The questionnaires were distributed to each hotel individually. With the support from senior management, respondents were assured of their anonymity. Also, of 797 questionnaires that were sent out, 699 were returned, giving the response rate of 94 per cent. Because the missing data pattern reveals that there was no concentration in a specific set of questions and the missing data was less than 15 per cent, 19 questionnaires were discarded, leaving only 680 to be included in further analysis. The measurement invariance was also tested since there were five samples from five different hotels. Following the procedure suggested by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998, p. 83; Figure 1), it is noted that configural, metric and scalar invariance are given. Hence, the five data sets can be combined for further analysis.

*Measures.* The questionnaires used a five-point Likert scale as it is one of the most common ways of measuring attitudes (Malhotra and Birks, 2000). Measures for the key constructs were developed from prior literature (Table II represents the



**Figure 1.**  
Proposed framework of internal branding

Parameters	Definitions
Internal branding	The use of internal communication techniques and training programmes to educate employees about the brand promise
Brand identification	An employee's sense of belonging to the hotel brand and a perception of being intertwined with the brand's fate and success
Brand commitment	An employee's psychological and emotional attachment to the brand
Brand loyalty	An employee's willingness to remain with the present brand
Brand performance	The extent to which an employee performs his/her role in the brand promise delivery based on the brand standards in which the brand values are embedded

**Table II.**  
Definitions of each parameter

definitions of this study's constructs). The eight-item scale of brand identification was adapted from different studies (Herrbach *et al.*, 2004; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Shamir *et al.*, 1998). The eight-item scale captures the sense of belonging of employees to the brand and their sense of pride and ownership. The scale used by Mohr *et al.* (1996) was adopted by this study to measure employees' brand commitment. The four-item scale of brand commitment reflects their emotional attachment to the brand. Boselie and van der Wiele (2002) used the scale to measure the loyalty of employees to the brand, giving a three-item scale which measures their intention to stay with the brand. The five-item scale of brand performance of this study was adapted from previous research (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Williams and Anderson, 1991), measuring the extent to which employees deliver the brand promise. The ten-item scale of internal branding was adapted from Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) to measure employees' perceptions towards orientation, training, group meeting and daily briefing. This scale's items were also validated during the qualitative interviews to ensure that all techniques were perceived as relevant. All constructs have been measured with reflective measurement models, suggesting that the latent constructs cause the measured variables (Hair *et al.*, 2006). All items include five-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" as it is a widely used scale for measuring attitudes (Kinnear and Taylor, 1996) and respondents readily understand how to use the scale (Malhotra and Birks, 2000). To assess the validity of the scales, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the attitudes and performance scales was performed (Table III). Further analysis assessing discriminant validity suggested some cross-loadings. Therefore, five items were deleted. When removed, the discriminant validity and the correlations among the factors studied were satisfied (Table IV). Another CFA was conducted as a second-order factor analysis for the internal branding construct. The goodness-of-fit of this model based on the CFI value is 0.952, in line with the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value at 0.066 and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) value at 0.930.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 *Coordination between marketing and human resource management*

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that internal branding should deploy both internal communications (marketing) and training programmes (HR) to coach and develop employees' brand understanding. In particular, internal communication was considered as a key to "give" them "an idea about the brand" (R30)[1] and included different tools such as daily briefing, meetings, newsletters, brand manuals and boards. These tools were also mentioned by previous studies (Hallam, 2003; McCaskey and Symes, 2004; Zucker, 2002). A variety of training courses were regarded as coaching and educating them about the precise attitudes and behaviours necessary to deliver on the brand promise. That is, "training is educating how to enact the espoused brand values as proposed by the brand promise" (R1). The majority of informants (26/30) discussed the indispensability of both mechanisms in a successful internal branding programme because "one should be trained to understand how the communicated brand message can be delivered during service encounters" (R7). Thus, the coordination between the two disciplines is essential for the success of internal branding.



	Critical ration	Average variance extracted (AVE)
<i>Brand identification</i>	0.871	0.576
My sense of pride towards the hotel brand is reinforced by the brand-related messages		
I view the success of the brand as my own success		
Hotel X is like a family to me		
I feel belonging to this hotel X		
When someone praises this brand, it feels like a personal compliment		
<i>Brand commitment</i>	0.803	0.506
My commitment to deliver the brand increases along with my knowledge of the brand		
I am very committed to delivering the brand promise to our hotel guests		
I have a minimal commitment to this hotel		
I don't feel emotionally attached to this hotel		
<i>Brand loyalty</i>	0.695	0.535
I will be happy to spend the rest of my career in this hotel chain		
My intention to stay is driven by the fact that I am competent in delivering the brand promise		
<i>Brand performance</i>	0.820	0.535
The quality level of my services meets the brand standards of hotel X		
I can successfully fulfil responsibilities specified in my job descriptions		
I effectively fulfil the promise that the brand has with customers		
I always handle customers' specific requests within a standard set for the brand		
<i>Second order factor "internal branding"</i>		
<i>Training</i>	0.803	0.505
Training gives me appropriate skills in relations to deliver the brand promise based on the brand standards		
I am usually drawn towards messages made of colourful and attractive materials		
My hotel informs employees in an excellent way about things that are relevant to them		
I feel encouraged to come up with the new and better suggestions of how to do things		
<i>Orientation</i>	0.671	0.505
Orientation programme triggers my inspiration to appropriately fulfil the brand promise delivery		
I like the orientation kit and/or brand manuals of my hotel brand		
<i>Group meeting</i>	0.769	0.625
During the group meeting, I am clearly informed of the brand mission		
I clearly understand my role in relation to the brand mission, after attending the group meeting		
<i>Briefing</i>	0.666	0.503
Briefings contain all essential information for me to provide services according to the brand expectations		
The brand mission and its promise are constantly reinforced during the briefing		

**Table III.**  
Reliability and validity  
tests of each  
measurement scale

**Table IV.**  
Correlations and test of  
discriminant validity

	TR	OR	GM	BR	BI	BP	BL	BC
Training	1							
Orientation	0.682	1						
Group meeting	0.618	0.477	1					
Briefing	0.614	0.59	0.465	1				
Brand identification	0.635	0.484	0.522	0.496	1			
Brand performance	0.406	0.441	0.44	0.389	0.492	1		
Brand loyalty	0.62	0.518	0.468	0.447	0.701	0.43	1	
Brand commitment	0.657	0.464	0.519	0.449	0.674	0.468	0.705	1
AVE <sup>a</sup>	0.505	0.505	0.625	0.503	0.576	0.535	0.535	0.506

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>None of the squared correlations between any pair of constructs is larger than the AVE

### 6.2 Attitudinal and behavioural influences of internal branding

Furthermore, during the interview, all respondents expressed their sense of belonging to the brand (e.g. we are in the same family, we are P [R22]) and 25 showed their sense of pride towards the brand (e.g. I am proud to tell anyone that I work for Hotel S [R28]). Similarly, the majority (20 out of 30) revealed their emotional attachment (e.g. I love working with O [R17]). In short, because they “are kept reinforced about brand values” (R27), they have a clear understanding of their brand and can associate it with their attitude. Also, most (17) of them stated their intention to stay with the hotel because internal branding enhanced their knowledge, skills and capabilities. “It’s been giving me training to enhance my capabilities. I don’t see any reasons to leave” (R13). Figure 1 represents the proposed framework of internal branding that was the result of the qualitative phase and the literature review. Each path also represents the hypotheses that were formulated accordingly for the quantitative phase.

To formally investigate potential linkages between these constructs in the proposed framework, an structural equation modeling analysis using the software package AMOS 7.0 was generated. Table V reveals the estimated coefficients of the relationships among all constructs for the model. The conceptual model’s results as shown in the table above are used to assess the main effects in the internal branding

Path	Focal model
Internal branding → Brand identification	0.724 *
Internal branding → Brand commitment	0.241 *
Internal branding → Brand loyalty	0.320 *
Brand identification → Brand performance	0.193 **
Brand commitment → Brand performance	-0.048
Brand loyalty → Brand performance	0.114 **
Internal branding → Brand performance	0.370 *
Brand identification → Brand commitment	0.554 *
Brand commitment → Brand loyalty	0.315 *
$\chi^2 = 677.653$	TLI = 0.931
df = 262	CFI = 0.940
GFI = 0.962	RMSEA = 0.048

**Table V.**  
Path coefficients  
of the model and the  
fit statistics

**Note:** Significance at: \*0.01 and \*\*0.05 levels, respectively

and brand promise delivery model. The goodness-of-fit statistics revealed that the model fits the data reasonably well: the  $\chi^2/\text{df}$  value of 2.5 indicates a satisfactory level as it is below the recommended 3.0 (Bollen and Long, 1993). Other representative indexes also suggest that the results of the structural model analysis are a good fit of the proposed model to the data: goodness-of-fit index (GFI) is 0.927, CFI is 0.941, RMSEA is 0.047. Although the CFI is lower than the revised cut-off value of 0.95, the CFI value above 0.9 is considered as reasonably well-fitting (Hair *et al.*, 2006). In fact, the CFI value of this research's model is close to 0.95; Hu and Bentler (1995) have recently advised that a cut-off value "close to" 0.95 is acceptable.

The result of the analysis reveals that internal branding has a significant effect on employees' brand performance (0.37,  $p < 0.001$ ). The quantitative analysis also indicated a positive influence of internal branding on employees' brand identification (0.72,  $p < 0.001$ ), brand commitment (0.24,  $p < 0.001$ ) and brand loyalty (0.32,  $p < 0.001$ ). It is, however, noted from the statistical analysis that the effect of internal branding on employees' brand performance was less than on brand identification. Altogether, brand identification, brand commitment, brand loyalty and internal branding explain 36 per cent of the variation in brand performance.

### *6.3 The mediating effect of employees' brand attitudes on internal branding's influences on employees' brand performance*

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) argument for testing steps of mediating effects, the result reveals that the first two steps of the mediating model are fulfilled. The analysis depicted the mediating effect of employees' brand identification and brand loyalty. This is in accordance with some respondents from the qualitative phase who attributed towards internal branding as having an influence on their attitudes towards the hotel. The interview phase also showed that when employees:

[...] feel that the success of the hotel is ours [theirs], I [they] give my 100 per cent to meet or even customer satisfaction within our brand standards (R2).

Furthermore, "as the hotel is my family, I don't want to leave this hotel. To stay with this hotel as long as I want, I do all my best to deliver on our promise" (R21). Still, it is noted that part of the internal branding's total effect on employees' brand performance was through its influence on these two brand attitudes. This suggested that both brand identification and brand loyalty acted as partial mediators in this link whereas brand commitment exerted no mediating effect because it did not have a significant relationship with the extent to which employees perform the delivery of the brand promise. That employees' commitment did not have a significant relationship with employees' brand performance might contradict the past studies. This could possibly be explained by the measurement of brand performance in this study which focuses on the extent to which employees consider themselves delivering on the brand promise based on the brand standards rather than the extra-role behaviours of employees as in the study of Burmann and Zeplin (2005). As the two brand attitudes act as partial mediators in the link between internal branding and employees' brand performance, it is important to acknowledge the direct impact that internal branding still exerts on their brand performance. This also mirrors the qualitative findings which suggested the influence of internal branding on employees' brand-supporting attitudes: "Training and internal communications help me understand the brand and its standards [...]"

I deliver on the brand promise" (R18). However, because part of its influence is through the level of its success in enhancing the employees' perceptions that they are part of the brand's success and/or failure (brand identification) and their intention to remain with the brand (brand loyalty), the total effect of internal branding towards their brand performance becomes bigger when these two attitudes are high.

This study further depicted the pattern of relationships between employees' brand attitudes. In line with the literature, the analysis revealed that employees' brand identification positively influenced employees' brand commitment (0.55,  $p < 0.001$ ), which was a precursor of employees' brand loyalty (0.32,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 7. Discussion and managerial implications

This study has not only enriched the concept of internal branding which is at its infancy, but also extended the knowledge beyond the financial industry, the area on which most studies have focused, towards hotel industry. Also, as this study was carried out within the Asian context, Thailand in particular, this study has extended the knowledge beyond the western school of thoughts, thereby validating the application of the concept within different cultural contexts. Essentially, this study has provided empirical evidence showing the influence of internal branding on employees' brand-supporting behaviour. Also, it has empirically revealed the partial mediating effects of employees' brand-supporting attitudes on the extent to which internal branding influences the performance of employees in delivering the brand promise.

For service firms, which are not limited to the hotel industry, seeking to ensure the delivery of their brand promise, this study agrees with the literature (Aurang *et al.*, 2005; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Machtiger, 2004) that companies should continuously implement internal communication and training programmes to inform and educate staff, as well as reinforce the brand values. This study empirically suggests that internal branding assists management in enhancing employees' brand identification, commitment and loyalty. Furthermore, this study provides empirical evidence that supports the influence of internal branding on the on-brand behaviour of staff (Hankinson, 2002; Thomson *et al.*, 1999). Management are encouraged to communicate with staff and train them constantly about the unique and distinctive brand values, which should be interpreted into daily activities such as brand standards. This will help them to deliver on the brand promise. As such, this study highlights the importance of internal branding to employees' attitudinal and behavioural alignment with the brand values. This will reduce potential variability in customers' brand experiences.

In line with past studies in different disciplines, this study dictates the relationships among the three brand attitudes. Concurring with past studies (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986), brand identification of employees was found to drive employees' brand commitment, suggesting that when employees share their faith with the brand, management can somehow expect emotional attachment of their employees. Similarly, the employees' commitment is positively related to their brand loyalty measured in terms of their intention to stay, which is in agreement with previous research (Brown and Peterson, 1993; Pritchard *et al.*, 1999). As such, although these attitudes are distinct, they are, somehow, related constructs.

Another implication for researchers within the internal branding context is the mediating effects of employees' brand identification and brand loyalty on the link between internal branding and their brand performance. However, as they act as a

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partial rather than a complete mediator, it implies that only part of the total effect that internal branding has on the extent to which employees behave in ways that support the successful delivery of the brand promise is through its influence on their brand identification and brand loyalty. On one hand, management can use internal branding to directly shape their employees' behaviours so that they are in line with the brand values. As such, management should clearly communicate with staff and educate them about the behaviours that they expect to perform during service delivery. They should simultaneously implement training programmes to reinforce the right pattern of behaviours. On the other, they can deploy internal branding to enhance their employees' brand attitudes, particularly brand identification and brand loyalty. They should stress the distinctiveness of its brand values in relation to other brands to enhance their pride towards the brand. When they take pride in their brand and organisation, they will become emotionally attached to it (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Edwards, 2005). Also, management should ensure that internal branding communicates a clear understanding of their role in relations to the delivery of the brand promise. This is because when they clearly understand how they are important in delivering the brand promise, their level of commitment is higher (Helman and Payne, 1992). Therefore, internal communications and training programmes should also be used together to enhance their understanding and knowledge about their important role towards the brand delivery. Management could then influence their identification and commitment, which may extend towards their intention to stay with the brand. This could be particularly beneficial for the hotel organisations which are experienced high staff turnover (Simons and Hinkin, 2001). Moreover, their loyalty could drive down costs through reduced recruitment and training expenditures and all the cost efficiencies which accrue from skilled workers who are up to speed and familiar with both the tasks at hand and their customers (Reichheld, 1996).

Briefly, although this study was set out in Thailand, which is located in East Asia, the result resonates with past studies, which were conducted within the Western/European context, that suggest the influence of internal branding on employees' brand-supporting attitudes. It has also provided empirical evidence supporting the assumption of most authors that internal branding shapes employee's brand behaviours; as the result suggests the positive influence of internal branding and employees' brand performance in delivering the brand promise. Therefore, management from the Asian organisations could use internal branding to align their employees' behaviours with the organisation and its brand. Still, some culture-specific issues need to be aware of, necessitating further research to be conducted in different cultural contexts. While most Asian people are collaborative-oriented rather than individualistic, Japanese people, for example, may have different ways in communicating and expressing their opinions from Malaysian people (Salleh, 2005). This could pertain to particular internal communication techniques. Furthermore, the education level could vary from one Asian country to another, thereby affecting how internal branding campaigns should be implemented although management could apply the concept to influence their employees' behaviours and attitudes.

## 8. Future research directions

This study adds to the current knowledge that internal branding has both attitudinal and behavioural impacts on employees' delivery of the brand promise. While most of

the existing research focused on management's and brand consultants' perspectives, this study has looked at the perspectives of customer-interface employees' who are considered as the key audience of an internal branding programme. Also, it has successfully provided empirical evidence showing the link between internal branding and employees' brand-supporting behaviours, which was previously based on a mere assumption that when employees are committed, they will deliver on the promise. As this study measured all three attitudes together, it could also identify the relationships among these attitudes and how they mediated the strength of internal branding's effect on employees' brand behaviours.

However, it should be acknowledged that this study focused on the hotel industry, which is one among several types of industries in the service sector. Some service industries may have a specific nature which is not shared by the others, thereby limiting the generalisability of this study to other service industries. Still, there is a room for researchers to extend and enrich the "internal branding" knowledge in other service industries other than the hotel and financial industries. As the study used cross-sectional survey data, it neglected possible time-lag effects. Particularly, the hotel industry is affected by high- and low-season of travelling. Therefore, the cross-sectional study could neglect the influence of the different seasons in the industry on the success of internal branding campaigns. Also, it was carried out in Thailand, entailing the issues of culture specific. Therefore, in line with calls for more robust marketing model (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2007), we would suggest that replications of the relationships tested in this study in different service industries and cultural contexts would help clarifying the boundary conditions for generalisations to theory in other parts of Asia. Moreover, longitudinal data would improve an understanding of the mechanisms influencing different attitudes of employees and their behaviours in delivering the brand performance.

#### Note

1. R30 refers to respondent number 30: the detail of his/her profile could be found in Table I.

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