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Investigating the dual-route effects of corporate branding on brand equity

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated the multilevel relationships among corporate branding, brand citizenship behavior, and brand equity using a hierarchical linear modeling method. The corporate branding construct represents practices that could improve the brand cognition and brand attitude of multiple stakeholders. Brand citizenship behavior indicates that employees are altruistic toward and identify themselves with brands. Brand equity was assessed using customer data to measure their awareness, association, quality perception, attitude, and loyalty toward a corporate brand. This study obtained data from 283 employees, 250 supervisors, and 577 customers of 31 franchise organizations to demonstrate the results at different levels. The results of our analysis indicate that corporate branding exerts a positive effect on brand citizenship behavior and customer-based brand equity. Furthermore, when aggregated, the brand citizenship behavior of firms positively affects their corporate brand equity. In addition, brand citizenship behavior mediates the relationship between corporate branding and brand equity. Brand managers should consider adopting corporate branding practices to encourage employees to engage in brand citizenship behavior, which contributes to brand equity.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, corporate branding has been advocated by scholars as an effective approach for companies to build competitive advantage (Balmer, 2012; Melewar, Gotsi, & Andriopoulos, 2012). Originating from product branding, which involves creating market preferences and differentiation, corporate branding seeks to build a favorable image for all stakeholders (Ind, 1997). Over time, products and services typically become more similar because competitors can imitate new products quickly, making it difficult for consumers to differentiate between the offerings of firms. Consequently, promoting entire companies as brands has become an efficient approach for creating differentiation. Moreover, for companies with multiple product lines, corporate branding reduces communication costs and creates synergies among brands under a corporate brand umbrella (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hulberg, 2006).

Corporate branding differs from product branding, which relies more on the efforts of marketing and advertising personnel. Corporate branding draws its value from an entire organization, including its funders, owners, managers, and personnel (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Although brand images may represent what external constituents think about a corporation, corporate branding involves managing the consistency between what stakeholders actually think about an organization and what the organization believes (wants) them to think (Dacin & Brown, 2006). An emerging consensus exists among scholars that corporate brands should be closely aligned with corporate identity (Balmer, 1995, 2012; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hulberg, 2006). Thus, an identity-based perspective could provide a valid paradigm for investigating corporate branding practices. In a literature review, Hulberg (2006) contended that two types of corporate identity exist; one based on marketing theory, and the other based on organizational theory. Although the marketing-based perspective of corporate identity emphasizes the role of external stakeholders, the organizational-identity-based perspective focuses more on the importance of internal stakeholders. Van Rekom (2002) defined organizational identity as the sum of employees' perceptions of an organization's

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identity. Hatch and Schultz (1997) contended that organizational identity is communicated (intentionally or unintentionally) to external environments through employees. Therefore, both marketing- and organizational identity-based perspectives of corporate brand identity are highly related, and the effectiveness of corporate branding should be measured by assessing both perspectives (Burmann, Zeplin, & Reily, 2009). Furthermore, the effect of corporate branding on external brand identity can be engendered through two routes: directly from corporate branding to external stakeholder, and through the mediation of internal stakeholders. However, few studies have investigated these two routes of corporate branding effects simultaneously; rather, most of them have applied only one route. For example, the direct effect route of corporate branding can be manifested on fostering customer corporate brand association, which has been shown to influence consumer product evaluations (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Goldberg & Hartwick, 1990), purchase intentions (Fomburn, 1996; Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000), loyalty (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998), as well as how consumers evaluate brand extensions (Keller & Aaker, 1998). Regarding the other route of corporate branding effect, most studies have focused on internal branding. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) measured internal brand strength using two interrelated constructs, namely, brand commitment (attitude aspects) and brand citizenship behavior. Several subsequent studies (Burmann et al., 2009; Nyadzayo, Matanda, & Ewing, 2011; Xie, Peng, & Huan, 2014) have adopted these two constructs to investigate the determinants of internal branding. In general, this stream of research indicates that internal brand identity can lead to external brand equity, such as customer satisfaction (Chang, Chiang, & Han, 2012) or brand–customer relationship quality (Burmann et al., 2009). Although Chiang, Chang, Han, and McConville (2013) showed that internal branding can enhance various types of external corporate equity, they did not investigate the dual effects. In summary, extant research on corporate branding has not adequately addressed the entire spectrum of effects and influence routes associated with corporate branding. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to fill this knowledge gap.

The reasons why only a few studies have investigated both routes of corporate branding effects can be explained by examining the concept of corporate branding. Corporate branding has been investigated from various perspectives, including corporate communications, corporate reputation, corporate characteristics, corporate identity, and strategic management (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012). Researchers from numerous disciplines have proposed various drivers of corporate brand equity, such as managing organizational culture (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), creating highly motivated employees who incorporate brand messages into their lifestyle (Mitchell, 2002), applying brand-centered human resource management (HRM) practices (Chang et al., 2012), communicating brand values, as well as managing brand image and reputation (Dowling, 2001). However, few studies have adopted a comprehensive perspective of corporate branding to investigate the drivers of corporate brand identity. Consequently, investigations on the performance of corporate branding could be limited by omitting critical aspects of corporate branding endeavors. Hence, the second objective of this research is to investigate the constituents of corporate branding, which encompasses a comprehensive set of brand equity drivers. The results could contribute to managerial practices by establishing causal links of corporate branding.

Melewar et al. (2012) recommended that future studies on corporate branding should address three central tensions, one of which is related to measuring corporate branding through multilevel analysis. In other words, appropriate analysis methodologies should be applied to elucidate how organizational practices influence individual employees (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Research on the cross-level effects of corporate branding is scant; therefore, this study addresses this issue by adopting a multilevel analysis approach.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Dual-effect routes of corporate branding

Corporate branding is defined as a systematical process implemented by an organization to create favorable brand image and maintain brand reputation through interaction with internal and external stakeholders (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Compared with product branding, which is typically handled by marketing personnel (Melewar et al., 2012), corporate branding practices involve organization-wide practices that contribute to corporate identity (Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006), visual identity (Van den Bosch, Elving, & de Jong, 2006), and corporate personality (Abratt & Mofokeng, 2001), all of which can encourage multiple stakeholders to identify themselves with the corporate brand, thereby enhancing brand equity.

Two types of corporate identity, which are related to internal and external stakeholders, contribute to the effect of corporate branding (Hulberg, 2006). Organizational theory perspectives on corporate branding include concepts such as vision, culture, and image alignment (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001), brand leadership (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006), interaction with multiple stakeholders (Leitch & Richardson, 2003), interdepartmental coordination (de Chernatony, 1999), brand-centered HRM practices (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005), training (Roper & Davies, 2010), internal branding (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), and brand communication (Balmer, 2001). Marketing theory perspectives on corporate branding include concepts such as consumer evaluations (Brown & Dacin, 1997), consumer intentions (Goldsmith et al., 2000), and brand extensions (Keller & Aaker, 1998).

Thus, corporate branding is characterized by a highly strategic focus (oriented toward both internal and external targets), as well as by the alignment of internal and external marketing efforts. Building on Fetscherin and Usunier (2012), this study focuses on creating positive associations with corporate brands and identifying corporate branding practices that motivate employees to live the brand (Melewar et al., 2012).

2.2. Social identity theory, social exchange theory, and corporate branding

Hogg and Terry (2000) considered social identity theory as "a platform which can be used to describe in detail how social categorization and prototype-based depersonalization actually produce social identity phenomena." Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that social identity provides people with a sense of belonging to a social group. The concepts underlying social identity theory, which are based on the works of numerous scholars (Hirst, Van Dick, & Van Knippenberg, 2009; Meyer, Becker, & Van Dick, 2006), highlight the role of collective identity, which affects the cognitive awareness of a person's organizational membership, such as employee commitment and organizational goals. Van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) argued that collective attributes of an organization and employees' interpersonal relationships delineate collective self and employees' social identity. Organizational members with high social identity may exhibit positive cognitions (e.g., commitment) toward activities that are congruent with their identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which contributes to the success of organizational activities.

Masterson and Stamper (2003) argued that corporate branding processes can induce a sense of belonging in employees, through which they develop a strong social identity toward corporate brands. Corporate branding involves a systematic process of creating and maintaining a favorable brand image, identification, and reputation through communicating with stakeholders, as well as by managing organizational behavior, communications, and use of symbolism (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006), thereby transforming the external stakeholder perceptions and internal stakeholder behaviors (Vallaser and de Chernatony, 2006).

Blau (1964) and Homans (1961) argued that social exchange theory highlights the importance of the relationship between an organization and organizational members (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), such as the relationship between organizational goals and employee motivation (Aseleage & Eisenberger, 2003). High-quality social exchanges are produced when high levels of mutual trust, respect, and loyalty exist between an organization and its employees (Chen & Klimoski, 2003). Molm and Cook (1995) reported that employees who believe that a reciprocal exchange of valued benefits is possible may learn how to establish exchange relations with work colleagues and the organization. Under such circumstances, an organization and its employees can establish positive, long-term, and interactive mutual relationships that facilitate organizational performance.

Scholars on corporate branding have recommended strengthening corporate brands through brand promises, corporate reputation, and brand identity (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Balmer & Thompson, 2009). Employees who act as an interface between internal and external stakeholders can enhance corporate reputation by communicating brand values to multiple stakeholders. Successful corporate branding practices may foster a relationship of mutual trust between an organization and its employees by implementing effective brand-centered HRM practices, such as leadership, training, rewards, communication, interactive process, and interdepartmental coordination (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Kay, 2006; Leitch & Richardson, 2003). In other words, when an exchange relationship satisfies an employee's needs, he or she may reciprocate the organization by adopting “probrand” attitudes and behaviors.

2.3. Corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior

Brand values can be enhanced through brand citizenship behavior, which is a consequence of brand-related altruistic spirit. Moreover, brand building involves developing emotional components (e.g., brand commitment and brand psychological ownership) that make employees more aware of brand identity (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005), which can be expressed through organizational communication. Employees who have a relatively stronger sense of organizational identity typically exhibit a more supportive attitude toward organizational goals (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). Previous studies have shown that communication is positively associated with organizational identification (Bartels, Ad Pruyn, & Inge, 2007), and that emotional appeals contributing to brand identity can be fostered through effective brand communication (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Based on this perspective, this study argues that organizations may use brand communication strategies to implement effective corporate branding practices that engender brand identification. In other words, an organization could communicate brand-related vision, beliefs, values, and norms to employees by incorporating such messages into corporate branding processes (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Employees who internalize a brand's cultural values as personal values typically identify themselves with the brand, and they engage in brand citizenship behavior.

Brand leadership is a critical component of corporate branding. Through intellectual stimulation, leaders can foster follower perception of variety and autonomy (e.g., seeking new perspectives and developing novel ways to frame new organizational tasks), indicating that effective leadership contributes to positive employee behavior (Piccolo & Coiquitt, 2006). Previous research showed that transformational leadership is positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Both transformational and brand-oriented leadership are considered to be effective leadership styles (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005); in other words, leaders who apply a brand-oriented style might express a brand-centered vision that influences the personal values of employees, thereby inspiring a sense of altruism that encourages them to engage in brand citizenship behavior (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005).

The integrated efforts of HRM, communications, and marketing departments facilitate successful corporate branding, indicating that interdepartmental coordination plays a crucial role in corporate branding practices (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Furthermore, an organization can use brand-centered HRM strategy to facilitate the internalization of brand identity (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Brand-centered HRM, which includes training, selection, reward, development, and corporate brand evaluation, could assist in developing employees who are effective brand representatives (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007). Previous studies have found that high-performance brand-centered HRM strategies involving supportive practices can transform employee perceptions and behaviors into positive brand behaviors (Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter, 2001; Sun et al., 2007). Thus, implementing an effective corporate branding strategy through high-performance brand-centered HRM may engender brand citizenship behavior. According to social exchange theory, high-quality social exchange relationships are produced when high levels of mutual trust, respect, and loyalty exist between an organization and its employees (Chen & Klimoski, 2003). Eisenberger et al. (1986) argued that employees receiving adequate organizational support may engage in altruistic behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Chi & Han, 2008; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). Based on the concept of reciprocal relationships (Flynn, 2005), employees disregard their gains when exerting efforts to a brand, and they subsequently reciprocate through brand citizenship behavior (Burmann et al., 2009). Davies and Chun (2012) empirically proved that the role of employees as brand symbols is critical in enhancing the value of a corporate brand (Davies & Chun, 2012). Extending the aforementioned arguments, corporate branding can be considered as an aggregated construct comprising effective brand communication, brand leadership, brand-centered HRM, interdepartmental coordination, as well as the strategic alignment of external and internal orientation; accordingly, Hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows.

Hypothesis 1. Corporate branding positively affects brand citizenship behavior

2.4. Corporate branding and brand equity

Corporate branding is related to interactions with multiple stakeholders (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Melewar et al., 2012) who can contribute to brand equity. Balmer (2001) asserted that strategic branding can be communicated externally and internally, thereby providing a valuable source of brand equity. Leitch and Richardson (2003) argued that organizations can improve their corporate brand image and reputation by adopting corporate branding practices that involve interacting with customers, thereby fostering brand equity. A favorable corporate brand image and reputation can be created and maintained through effective branding practices, such as customer signaling, effective communication, and appropriate use of symbolism (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Successfully implementing an effective corporate branding strategy may transmit an image that the corporate is trustworthy, competent, ethical, and socially responsible (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), therefore facilitating a desired corporate identity (Abratt, 1989), reputation (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997), and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Furthermore, through interactive processes, organizations can acquire ideas, knowledge, and insights of corporate brands from external stakeholders (e.g., customers and trade) and employees (Leitch & Richardson, 2003), as well as customer engagement and commitment from brand communities (McAlexander, Scheuten, & Koenig, 2002). Formulating an effective corporate branding strategy that fulfills the needs of stakeholders can improve customer brand evaluations and brand resonance (Keller, 1993). Customers who consider a corporate brand has desirable characteristics may develop a sense of oneness with the organization and develop customer–company identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Based on this discussion, we argue that an organization that successfully implements an effective corporate branding strategy can enhance its customer-based brand equity. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Corporate branding positively affects brand equity

2.5. Brand citizenship behavior and brand equity

Brand citizenship behavior refers to the brand-related voluntary behaviors of employees that strengthen the brand (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). This study argues that employees who engage in brand citizenship behavior might also engage in brand-centered extra-role behaviors that could enhance brand equity. In other words, they might engage in behaviors that go beyond any formal requirements, which could enhance customer perceptions toward the image of a brand (Sun et al., 2007). Previous studies have indicated that brand citizenship behavior can enhance customer satisfaction (Chang et al., 2012) and brand–customer relationship quality (Burmann et al., 2009).

Numerous scholars have argued that customer-based responses, including customer attachment, association, awareness, attitude, and loyalty, can be used to measure brand equity (Ailawadi, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2003; Keller & Lehmann, 2001). Yoo and Donthu (2001) stated that brand equity is measured in terms of customer awareness, association, quality perception, and loyalty toward a brand; therefore, the effects of corporate branding manifest in customer-based brand equity. Based on social exchange theory, employees who receive appropriate organizational support (i.e., corporate branding) typically reciprocate by engaging in brand citizenship behavior, which enhances brand equity. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Organization-level brand citizenship behavior positively affects brand equity

2.6. Mediating role of brand citizenship behavior

Hypotheses 1–3 indicate that the relationships among corporate branding, brand citizenship behavior, and brand equity may be correlated. Three aspects of corporate branding (i.e., brand leadership, brand-centered HRM, and brand communication) elicit positive brand cognitions in employees, thereby leading to brand citizenship behavior (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) and Piccolo and Coiquitt (2006) have shown that brand leaders typically frame new brand tasks and construct a brand-centered vision that induces positive brand cognitions and encourages brand citizenship behavior. Employees who identify themselves with a brand are more likely to incorporate the brand into their lives and enthusiastically deliver the brand's values to customers, thereby increasing brand equity. Brand-centered HRM practices assist in cultivating employees who are effective brand representatives (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Sun et al., 2007). Burmann et al. (2009) proposed a holistic model to explain how branding practices (e.g., brand-centered HRM) lead to brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior, thereby enhancing the quality of brand–consumer relationships.

Through brand communication, employees identify themselves with a corporate brand, and subsequently engage in brand citizenship behavior (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Moreover, Davies and Chun (2012) argued that employees, as an element of a corporate brand symbol, can affect customer perceptions of that brand. Furthermore, the ages of the employees may influence the symbolic meaning of the corporate brand, which can be crucial in generating customer associations with the corporate brand. Therefore, organizations can enhance their brand equity through effective communication through the symbolism, attitude, and behavior of employees who interact with customers.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, corporate branding contributes to employees' probrand attitude and brand citizenship behavior, which enhance brand–customer relationship and brand equity. Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 is proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 4. Brand citizenship behavior mediates the relationship between corporate branding and brand equity

Based on Hypotheses 1–4, Fig. 1 presents the proposed research framework.

3. Analysis method

Raudenbush and Bryk (2002) argued that hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) can be used to measure the effects and explained variance that exist in multilevel relationships. Thus, HLM can be used to solve bias resulting from disaggregation and aggregation (Kidwell, Mossholder, & Bennett, 1997). Because the constructs proposed by this research exist at multiple levels, we applied HLM to examine the multilevel relationships among corporate branding, brand citizenship behavior, and customer-based brand equity.

3.1. Item development

Comprehensive concepts of corporate branding have been formulated based on various theoretical perspectives (Balmer, 2001, 2008; Balmer & Gray, 2003; de Chernatony, 1999; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Knox & Bickerton, 2003; Leitch & Richardson, 2003; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006; Uggla, 2006; Urde, 2001). This study developed a corporate branding scale by adopting the guidelines proposed by Hinkin (1998). The dimensions of corporate branding were identified after interviewing 10 managers from various franchise organizations in Taiwan. Subsequently, we surveyed 283 managers from the franchise organizations in Taiwan. After performing exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the following five factors of corporate branding were identified: (1) communication and evaluation; (2) interdepartmental coordination; (3) leadership and interaction with stakeholders; (4) training and selection; and (5) vision and culture. The fitness indices of secondary CFA of corporate branding [$\chi^2/df = 1.90$, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = 0.81, root-mean-square residual (RMSR) = 0.053,

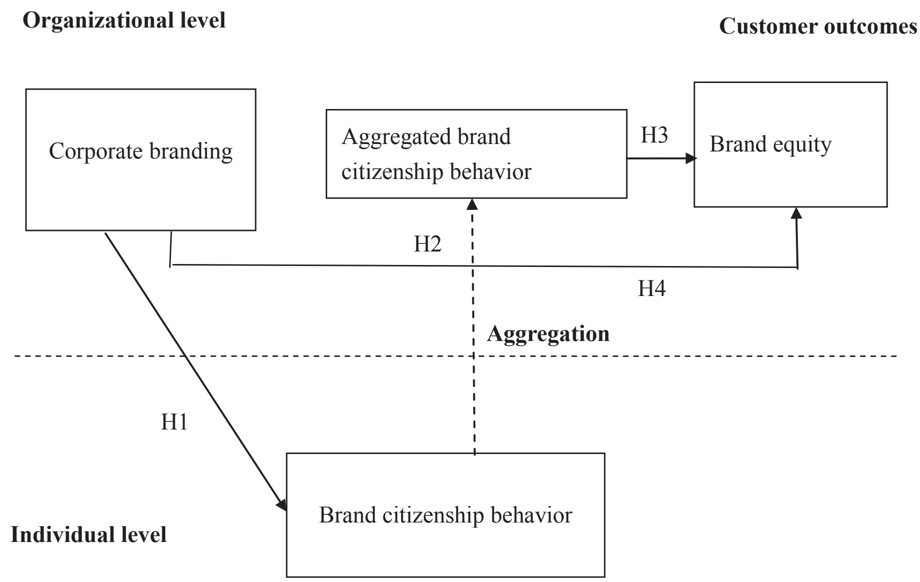

Fig. 1. Research framework.

comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, normal fit index (NFI) = 0.96, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.082] show that the model fit is satisfactory. Discriminant and convergent validity were assessed in accordance with Jöreskog and Sörbom (1981). Two dimensions of corporate branding were considered distinct if PHI ± 1.96 × standardized error excludes 1. The results indicate discriminant validity among the dimensions of corporate branding. Furthermore, the standardized λ of each indicator is >0.73, and the *T* value of each indicator achieved statistical significance ($p < 0.01$), indicating convergent validity for each construct.

For the individual-level analysis, the concepts of brand citizenship behavior were adopted from previous studies (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000). The dimensions of brand citizenship behavior were developed after interviewing 10 employees from franchise organizations in Taiwan. Subsequently, we surveyed 361 customer-facing employees from the franchise organizations. After performing EFA and CFA, we identified the following three factors of brand citizenship behavior: (1) sportsmanship and endorsement; (2) helping behavior; and (3) consideration and enhancement. The fitness indices of secondary CFA of brand citizenship behavior (χ^2/df = 1.45, GFI = 0.93, RMSR = 0.035, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.052) show that the results are satisfactory. The discriminant and convergent validity test results show that any two dimensions of PHI ± 1.96 × standardized error exclude 1, indicating discriminant validity among the dimensions of brand citizenship behavior. Furthermore, the standardized λ of each indicator is >0.7, and the *T* value of each indicator achieved statistical significance ($p < .01$), indicating convergent validity for each construct.

3.2. Research sample and procedure

The data used in this study were collected using questionnaires that were distributed to store managers and customer-facing employees of franchise organizations in Taiwan. The questionnaire for supervisors was designed to measure corporate branding based on the perceptions of store managers, whereas the questionnaire for employees was designed to measure the cognitions and brand citizenship behavior of customer-facing employees. The respondents who participated in this research were supervisors, employees, and customers of 31 franchise organizations listed in the Taiwan Franchise Association. Two types of franchise organization were surveyed; retail stores and food and beverage organizations. All of the questionnaire items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (extremely disagree) to 5 (extremely agree). Among the 330 (420) questionnaires distributed to the supervisors (employees), 275 (283) of them were returned, yielding a response rate of 83% (67%). Customers were invited by research assistants to complete the questionnaires. Among the 1300 questionnaires distributed to customers, 577 of them were returned, yielding a response rate of 44.39%.

3.3. Measurements

3.3.1. Corporate branding

The 20-item corporate branding scale used in this study was adopted from a corporate branding scale developed by Chiang et al. (2013). Appendix 1 lists the corporate branding measurement items (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.95$).

3.3.2. Brand citizenship behavior

The 12-item brand citizenship behavior scale used in this study was adopted from a brand citizenship behavior scale developed by Chiang et al. (2013). Appendix 2 lists the brand citizenship measurement items (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.93$).

3.3.3. Brand equity

This study adopted a nine-item brand equity scale proposed by Yoo and Donthu (2001) for two reasons. First, the scale was developed based on the conceptualization of brand equity espoused by seminal works (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), indicating that the content validity of the scale is high. Second, this scale was tested in a study involving 1530 participants from various countries; specifically, the scale was used to evaluate the brand equity of 12 brands, reporting adequacy of the questionnaire items, and thus, indicating that the scale has satisfactory generalizability. Examples of the scale items include “I consider myself to be loyal to the store brand,” “The store brand would be my first choice,” and “I will not buy other brands if the store brand is available.” Appendix 3 lists the brand equity measurement items used in this study (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.9$).

3.3.4. Control variables

Several variables that may influence the dependent variables were controlled. At the individual (organizational) level, the control variables were sex, age, and education (franchise type).

4. Results

4.1. Sample characteristics

Thirty-one franchise organizations participated in this research. All of the selected organizations were appropriate for HLM analyses. From these 31 organizations, 250 supervisors and 283 customer-contacting employees participated in our survey. Among the supervisors, 108 were men (43.2%) and 142 were women (56.8%). Most of them (53.6%) were aged between 26 years and 35 years. Furthermore, 165 of them (66%) had a college degree.

After completing the survey, 283 completed individual-level questionnaires were analyzed. Among the employees who participated in this research, 115 were men (40.5%) and 168 were women (59.5%). Most respondents (61.7%) were younger than 25 years. Senior-high-school graduates accounted for 31.7% of the sample, and college graduates accounted for 61.7%. Regarding the customers, this study collected questionnaire data from customers 1 month after surveying the supervisors and employees. The customer sample comprised 577 valid responses.

4.2. Null model analysis

This research employed null models to prove two phenomena. First, employee cognition and behavior varied among the franchise organizations. Second, employee behavior may be affected by contextual variables (i.e., corporate branding). Initially, this study evaluated null models that do not incorporate a predictor at either the individual or organizational level. Investigating multilevel relationships is more appropriate when the residual variance of the intercepts ($\tau 00$) associated with the null models is statistically significant (Hofmann, 1997). For brand citizenship behavior, the null model analysis results show that the residual variance of the intercepts is significant ($\tau 00 = 0.124$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, in the proposed model, heterogeneous relationships exist among the various organizations; thus, multilevel analyses is appropriate for investigating the relationships between corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior.

4.3. Aggregation of constructs

To conduct a cross-level analysis, this study examined the validity of the organization-level variables (corporate branding and aggregated brand citizenship behavior). Interrater agreement was assessed by r_{wg} (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1993). The median r_{wg} of corporate branding (brand citizenship behavior) is 0.974 (0.990). All of the r_{wg} values are above the acceptable level of 0.6 (James, 1982). Furthermore, this study measured the intraclass correlation (ICC1) and reliability of group means (ICC2) of brand citizenship behavior (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), which were 0.228 and 0.912, respectively. Based on Yoo and Donthu (2001), brand equity was measured based on customer perceptions. Therefore, the customer data had to be nested with a corporate brand. To provide the evidence that a multilevel relationship exists between corporate branding and brand equity, this research measured the ICC1 and ICC2 of brand equity, which were 0.189 and 0.891, respectively. All of the ICC1 values were higher than the acceptable level of 0.12 (James, 1982), and the ICC2 values were also above the acceptable level of 0.6 (Glick, 1985). Therefore, forming aggregated level constructs is suitable.

4.4. Correlations

As reported in Table 1, the correlation results show that corporate branding is significantly related to brand citizenship behavior ($r = 0.361$, $p < 0.05$) and brand equity ($r = 0.287$, $p < 0.1$). Organization-level brand citizenship behavior is significantly related to brand equity ($r = 0.419$, $p < 0.05$). These results support the proposed hypotheses.

4.5. Hypothesis examination

Table 2 shows the HLM analysis results. This study used a cross-level analysis to test Hypothesis 1, which was proposed to investigate the relationship between corporate branding (organizational data) and brand citizenship behavior (individual-level data). As shown in Table 2 (Model 1), corporate branding positively affected brand citizenship behavior ($\beta = 0.317$, $p < 0.01$); thus, Hypotheses 1 is supported. For the organization-level analysis, Hypothesis 2 was proposed to investigate the relationship between corporate branding and customer-based brand equity (Model 2). Table 2 shows that corporate branding positively affected brand equity ($\beta = 0.257$, $p < 0.01$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 was proposed to investigate the relationship between organization-level brand citizenship behavior and brand equity. The results of the Model 3 analysis indicate that organization-level brand citizenship behavior positively affected brand equity ($\beta = 0.268$, $p < 0.01$); thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

All of the models achieved statistical significance, with Model 2 yielding the highest explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.58$), followed by Model 1 ($R^2 = 0.37$), and Model 3 ($R^2 = 0.37$). These results indicate that the influence of corporate branding yields a more accurate prediction of brand equity. Furthermore, the support of Hypothesis 2 demonstrates that corporate branding has a direct effect on brand equity. To explore the dual-effect routes of corporate branding on brand equity, we investigated the indirect route by testing Hypothesis 4.

Table 1
Mean, standard deviation, and correlations of research constructs.

Variables	Mean	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Corporate branding	3.993	0.5441	1						
(2) Brand citizenship behavior	4.035	0.4309	0.361*	1					
(3) Brand equity	3.795	0.3309	0.287**	0.419*	1				
(4) Sex	1.59	0.2078	0.265**	0.007	0.063	1			
(5) Age	1.523	0.4376	0.128	0.128	−0.167	0.027	1		
(6) Education	2.583	0.4263	−0.192	−0.192	0.002	0.201	−0.51***	1	
(7) Type	0.8667	0.3458	0.208	0.208	−0.043	0.12	0.263**	0.05	1

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.1$.
*** $p < 0.01$.
SD = standard deviation.

Table 2
Hierarchical linear modeling results of the proposed model.

Models	Model-1	Model-2	Model-3
Independent variable	Dependent variable		
	Brand citizenship behavior	Brand equity	Brand equity
Individual level			
Intercept	4.01***	3.77***	2.71***
Gender	0.037		
Age	0.026		
Education	−0.193		
Organizational level			
Corporate branding	0.317***	0.257***	
Brand citizenship behavior			0.268***
Industry Type	0.11	−0.143	−0.143
R^2	0.37	0.58	0.37
Deviance[a]	558.29	797.97	799.18

Organizations, $n = 30$; supervisors, $n = 250$; employees, $n = 283$; customers, $n = 577$.
*$p < 0.01$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.1$.
[a] Deviance is a measure of model fit. Deviance = −2* log-likelihood of the full maximum-likelihood estimate.

4.6. Mediating effect of brand citizenship behavior

To explore the mediation role of brand citizenship behavior on the relationship between corporate branding and brand equity, this study followed the four analytical steps proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). The first step is to confirm the effect of brand citizenship behavior on brand equity. The second step is to confirm the effect of corporate branding on brand citizenship behavior. The third step is to examine the effect of corporate branding on brand equity. The fourth step is to examine whether the effect of corporate branding on brand equity became nonsignificant (or reduced) when corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior were used in combination to predict brand equity. If these effects were observed, the mediating effect of brand citizenship behavior would be confirmed. This research performed regression analyses to investigate the mediating role of brand citizenship behavior. Accordingly, the individual-level (i.e., brand citizenship behavior) and customer-level variable (i.e., brand equity) were first aggregated to form organizational variables. Subsequently, we investigated the relationships among corporate branding, brand citizenship behavior, and brand equity.

Table 3 shows the model results. First, the Model 1 results indicate that corporate branding significantly affects brand citizenship behavior ($\beta = 0.295$, $p < 0.05$). Second, the Model 2 results show that corporate branding affects brand equity with marginal significance ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.1$). Third, the Model 3 results show that brand citizenship behavior significantly affects brand equity ($\beta = 0.336$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, the Model 4 results show that brand citizenship behavior significantly affects brand equity ($\beta = 0.322$, $p < 0.05$), although the effect of corporate branding on brand equity was only marginally significant ($\beta = 0.124$, $p < 0.1$). Following a comparison of these models, we observed that the effect of corporate branding on brand equity was reduced when both corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior were combined to predict brand equity. Based on these results, we conclude that brand citizenship behavior (partially) mediates the relationship between corporate branding and brand equity; thus, Hypothesis 4 is supported.

Table 3
Regression analyses of the proposed model.

Models	Model-1	Model-2	Model-3	Model-4
Independent variable	Dependent variable			
	Brand citizenship behavior	Brand equity	Brand equity	Brand equity
Intercept	3.336***	3.137***	2.66***	2.733***
Corporate branding	0.295**	0.18*		0.124*
Brand citizenship behavior			0.336***	0.322**
Gender	0.037		0.125	0.116
Age	−0.157		−0.195	−0.291**
Education	−0.201		−0.048	−0.102
Industry Type	0.245	−0.07		−0.149
R^2	0.22	0.09	0.23	0.32

* $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.05$.
*** $p < 0.1$.

5. Discussions

5.1. Conclusions

Previous studies on the enhancement of corporate brand equity have typically focused on one type of effect route, taking either a marketing perspective focused on external stakeholder or an organizational-identity perspective focused on internal branding (Burmann et al., 2009; Xie et al., 2014). However, this study adhered to the viewpoints of Leitch and Richardson (2003), contending that corporate branding involves interactive processes with multiple stakeholders and is characterized by multiple dimensions, including strategic alignment, brand leadership, brand-centered HRM, and brand communication, and it therefore concerns both internal and external brand identity. Furthermore, this study observed the dual-route effects of corporate branding strategy on brand equity. First, successfully implementing corporate branding contributes to building a coherent brand image and reputation, as well as a brand identity that is perceived favorably by customers. Moreover, these results are in agreement with the findings of previous studies (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Leitch & Richardson, 2003). Second, the multilevel analysis results indicate that implementing effective corporate branding practices can encourage employees to identify themselves with a corporate brand and foster a sense of altruism toward the brand, which can facilitate extra-role brand behavior. This result is in agreement with the assertions of Burmann and Zeplin (2005), who argued that supportive practices can encourage employees to engage in brand citizenship behavior. Third, the findings of this study show that employee brand citizenship behavior contributes to brand equity, which is a critical metric for measuring the market performance of a brand. This finding is consistent with the assertions of Sun et al. (2007), who argued that employees who engage in service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior might serve customers beyond their formal role requirements. Furthermore, the mediation analysis results show that corporate branding affects branding equity directly as well as indirectly through brand citizenship behavior, that is, the effects of corporate branding on customer-based brand equity function through both external and internal interactions. The results indicate that corporate branding construct can be investigated in relation to marketing or organizational theory perspectives of corporate identity, which is consistent with the findings reported by Hulberg (2006).

5.2. Practical implications

The results of this study indicate that interactive corporate branding practices positively affect brand equity and brand citizenship behavior. The findings have implications for managers intending to build competitive advantages through corporate branding. Managers can enhance corporate brand equity by delivering value offerings and adopting effective communication channels to convey a positive brand image (e.g., competence and socially responsibility) to external stakeholders. In addition, corporate managers should systematically monitor whether internal stakeholders are committed to brand value creation practices, such as strategic alignment, effective interdepartmental coordination, and high-performance HRM practices. Employees are regarded as a symbol of a corporate brand, implying that internal branding is critical. Brand managers can assist employees by adopting brand-centered HRM to develop their sense of brand identification, which subsequently encourages them to engage in altruistic brand citizenship behavior. Managers should consider rewarding employees (e.g., promotion, flexible work hours) when they exhibit brand citizenship behavior. Brand citizenship behavior positively affects brand equity, indicating that brand managers can encourage employees to exhibit altruistic brand behavior. Therefore, brand managers can communicate consistent messages of brand citizenship behavior to employees through informal interactions, formal meetings, or emails. In the examined multilevel relationships, brand citizenship behavior acted as a mediator in the corporate branding process. In other words, brand managers can foster brand equity by strengthening the link between corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior. For example, a hotel recognizes employees who engage in brand citizenship behavior (e.g., voluntarily extending service time to aid customers), thereby fostering brand equity. Managers can periodically assess the performance of corporate branding strategies using the corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior measurements employed in this study.

6. Contributions, limitations, and future research

6.1. Contributions

Several important contributions from this study can be noted. The relationship between corporate branding and brand equity was empirically confirmed, which represented that corporate branding encourages employees to fulfill long-term brand promises (Balmer, 2012), thereby contributing to customer-based brand equity. As for the effect of corporate branding on employees' brand behavior, this study investigated the multilevel relationship between corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior to demonstrate that corporate branding can encourage employees to engage in extra-role brand behavior, thereby improving customer perceptions toward a corporate brand. This finding is consistent with the findings of Whitener (2001) and Allen, Shore, & Griffeth (2003), who have argued that supportive practices can encourage employees to engage in both altruistic and extrarole brand behavior. Corporate branding, which is a type of interactive branding management, can raise employees' awareness of brand-related support mechanisms and encourage them to engage in brand citizenship behavior (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Furthermore, the effect of organization-level brand citizenship behavior on brand equity was tested to prove that employee brand citizenship behavior can improve customer perceptions and enhance brand equity. The results are in agreement with previous studies (Hirst et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2006; Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001) that have argued that employees who identify themselves with a corporate brand typically engage in brand citizenship behavior, thereby contributing to brand equity. As for the multilevel mediating effect, brand citizenship behavior mediates the relationship between corporate branding and brand equity, indicating that brand citizenship behavior plays a critical role in corporate branding processes. In other words, employees who are considered as brand symbols (Davies & Chun, 2012) play a critical role in enhancing the value of a corporate brand. To mitigate the common method variance (CMV) bias, three data sources (supervisors, employees, and customers) were used in this study, and multilevel approaches adopted by this study allowed to examine the effects of organization-level variables on individual-level variables while retaining the organization-level variables as predictors; consequently, the estimates obtained in this study are biased less than those used in single-level analysis methods (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In conclusion, the results of this study prove that both effect routes are relevant to corporate branding, which contribute to marketing-based theory, social identity theory, and social exchange theory, thereby broadening their applicability.

6.2. Limitations and future research

This section discusses the limitations encountered while conducting this study and provides recommendations for future studies. This research data were obtained from 31 franchise organizations, indicating that the data were not randomly selected from Taiwanese markets. Consequently, the generalizability of the results may be limited. Future studies should consider collecting data using a random sampling method and/or obtaining data from other industries to analyze the differences. Schwab (2005) asserted that researchers should use longitudinal data to examine causal relationships to reduce the CMV bias; however, this study analyzed cross-sectional data. Therefore, future studies should consider using longitudinal data. Furthermore, the analyses performed in this study involved using only two levels of HLM. Future research should consider using a three-level model to comprehensively investigate the relationships among brand-oriented strategy, corporate branding, brand psychological ownership, and brand citizenship behavior. Regarding the application of multilevel analysis methods, this study investigated only the relationship between corporate branding and brand citizenship behavior. Therefore, we recommend that future studies employ additional individual-level constructs, such as person–brand fit and brand commitment, to further clarify the concept of employee brand cognition. Because corporate branding involves multiple stakeholders, researchers should consider investigating how hotels interact with multiple stakeholders.

Conflicts of interest

All contributing authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix 1. Organizational-level questionnaires.

Organization level	Items
Corporate branding (supervisors)	V1: Our company makes employees compare their behaviors with a brand-related standard via self-evaluation or colleague evaluation. V2: Our company regularly assesses employees' contribution toward the brand value. V3: Our company often transmits values of the brand toward organizational members through various kinds of informal channels, such as interactions between colleagues. V4: Our company often transmits values of the brand toward organizational members through various kinds of formal channels, such as regular meetings. V5: Our company often transmits values of the brand toward stakeholders through interactions between organizational members and stakeholders (e.g., customers, suppliers, and the government).

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(*continued*)

Organization level	Items
	V6: Our company often transmits values of the brand toward stakeholders through various kinds of communicative channels, such as advertisements, meetings, public relations, and networks. V7: Different departments of our company work together for designing activities to improve brand image. V8: Different departments of our company often discuss how to make employees express brand behaviors. V9: Different departments of our company often exchange information in order to make each department more understand customers' perception of the corporate brand. V10: Our company would accept the suggestion provided by other stakeholders (e.g., supplier and government) in order to enhance service quality and brand image. V11: Our company would provide good product and service quality in order to realize brand commitment. V12: Our senior managers make brand strategies, which are based on values of the corporate brand proposed by our company. V13: Our senior managers make clear brand goals, which employees follow. V14: In order to enhance brand value, our senior managers adjust contents of product and service according to the responses of customers. V15: When the market share of the brand enhances, our company rewards employees who participate in brand-related activities. V16: Our company makes newcomers understand brand-related value and spirit through training. V17: Our company makes employees' personal value and behaviors consistent with brand value through training courses. V18: Our company considers personal value of applicants to recruit employees with person-brand fit. V19: Our company transmits the vision of the corporate brand toward organizational members through various kinds of channels. V20: Our company transmits belief, value, and norm of the corporate brand toward organizational members through various kinds of channels.

Appendix 2. Individual-level questionnaires.

Individual level	Items
Brand citizenship behaviors (employees)	V1: I voluntarily participate in brand-related activities. V2: I seldom complain about inconveniences caused by brand-related activities. V3: I tolerate inconveniences caused by brand-related activities to satisfy customers and enhance brand value. V4: I am willing to endorse the brand and voluntarily transmit brand value to newcomers or friends. V5: I am willing to endorse the brand and have trust and loyalty toward the brand. V6: I voluntarily provide new information and ideas for the brand to enhance brand value. V7: I regard customers as my family and solve their problems as I do mine. V8: I voluntarily solve problems of customers to foster brand value. V9: I voluntarily help newcomers to foster service quality and brand value. V10: I voluntarily follow brand standard processes without organizational monitoring. V11: I am willing to endlessly enhance brand-related skills. V12: Whatever the information is, I voluntarily respond to customers' thoughts on my company.

Appendix 3. Customer-based brand equity.

Customer outcomes	Items
Customer-based brand equity	V1: I consider myself to be loyal to the store brand. V2: The store brand would be my first choice. V3: I will not buy other brands if the store brand is available. V4: The likely quality of the store brand is extremely high. V5: The likelihood that the store brand would be functional is very high. V6: I can recognize the store brand among other competing brands. V7: I am aware of the store brand. V8: Some characteristics of the store brand come to my mind quickly. V9: I can quickly recall the symbol or logo of the store brand.

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