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Luca Quaratino, Alessandra Mazzei,

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Managerial strategies to promote employee brand consistent behavior

Employee
brand
consistent
behavior

The new frontier for brand building strategies

Luca Quaratino and Alessandra Mazzei
IULM University, Milan, Italy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of managerial strategies in promoting employee brand consistent behavior. Using a recently developed holistic model of behavioral branding, that suggests that a wide array of managerial strategies affects the branding process, this study addresses two specific questions: what communication strategies, in the opinion of managers, sustain employee brand consistent behavior? And what are the most important factors, both contextual and related to their cognitive-emotional states, that employees think affect their brand ambassadorship behavior?

Design/methodology/approach – A long-term research program was conducted based on a multiple methods research strategy to answer the two questions. The choice of different methods was mainly based on the specific characteristics of the two targets: communication managers and employees. The first one based on interviews with 32 managers, and the second one based on a case study of a single company.

Findings – The results show that enablement-oriented strategies are more effective than communication-oriented strategies in sustaining employee brand builder roles. Weak employee commitment, unsatisfactory external communication, and low levels of motivation are strong contextual factors inhibiting employee attitudes to brand ambassadorship, one of the most relevant employee brand consistent behaviors in competitive contexts. The main practical implication is that companies should engage employees as brand ambassadors, not by means of prescriptions of in-role behavior, but enablement strategies leading to authentic and voluntary behaviors; besides, that companies should put a significant effort in “preparing the soil,” i.e. investing in enhancing employee commitment, level of motivation, and understanding/alignment with the external communication.

Practical implications – The main practical implication is that companies should engage employees as brand ambassadors not by means of in-role behavior prescriptions rather by means of enablement strategies leading to authentic and voluntary behaviors. Besides, managers should invest significant efforts in enhancing employee motivation, commitment, and understanding/alignment to external communication as they represent key factors in sustaining brand ambassadorship behaviors.

Originality/value – The values of the study lies in having highlighted the crucial role of enablement-oriented strategies, and the relevance of specific contextual variables affecting the attitude of employee toward brand consistent behaviors.

Keywords Internal branding, Brand ambassador, Brand-building strategies, Employee brand consistent behavior, Employee enablement

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Brand experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Keller, 2003; Kapferer, 2012) and consumer brand engagement (Aaker, 1991; Bowden, 2009; Schultz and Block, 2011; Smaoui and Behi, 2011) are increasingly becoming the focus of attention in marketing studies (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). The customer experience (Schmitt, 1999) depends on their interactions with employees (Henkel *et al.*, 2007; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013; Bellou and Andronikidis, 2017). The traditional borders between internal and external relations (Hatch and Schultz, 1997) are increasingly blurred as phenomena like networking, outsourcing, and internationalization of business processes intensify interactions between members of the organization and outsiders. Those outsiders are stakeholders and, in particular, customers. The pervasive use of social network sites exposes employees to interactions with stakeholders, often beyond the control of



the organization (Cornelissen, 2014; Dreher, 2014; Einwiller and Steilen, 2014; Rokka *et al.*, 2014). While branding strategies are a key factor in marketing activities, especially in promotion, in the face of increasing competition, the process of employee engagement is becoming more complex and strategic. Nowadays, the organizational setting is undergoing major transformations: delocalization of workplaces, diversity of the workforce, heterogeneous and temporary contracts, cultural changes due to M&A processes, and rapid obsolescence of jobs. All these changes affect the relationship between individuals and organizations, making it difficult for organizations to create commitment, involvement, and motivation, which produce brand consistent behaviors.

Employee brand consistent behavior includes an array of verbal and non-verbal employee behaviors, prescribed or discretionary, that can generate valuable outcomes during interactions with customers. According to a recent holistic model of behavioral branding (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), it is affected by human resources practices (Aziz and Rizkallah, 2015), internal communication (Vrontis *et al.*, 2010), and managerial style (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012), as well as the cognitive and emotional states of employees – including satisfaction (Brown and Lam, 2008), and brand identification and loyalty (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009) – which mediate the effects of contextual conditions on employees' attitudes and behavioral intentions (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

The literature on internal marketing (Grönroos, 1981; Gummesson, 1987; George, 1990; Papolomou and Vrontis, 2006) and internal branding (de Chernatony, 1999; Mitchell, 2002; Dunn and Davis, 2003; Ind, 2003; Aurand *et al.*, 2005; Burman and Zeplin, 2005; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006; Burmann *et al.*, 2009; Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009) has highlighted the need to study managerial practices that can stimulate employee behaviors (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). However, the question of which managerial strategies promote or inhibit brand consistent behavior, in particular those of brand ambassadorship, on the part of employees has not been fully answered (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006; Henkel *et al.*, 2007). The paper attempts to fill this lacuna in the knowledge about specific managerial strategies that sustain employee brand consistent behavior.

The objective of this study is to examine the managerial strategies that promote employee brand consistent behavior. The holistic model of behavioral branding suggests that an array of managerial strategies affect the branding process. This study explores two aspects in greater depth: the communication strategies that, in the opinion of managers, sustain employee brand consistent behavior, and the most important contextual factors that employees think affect their brand ambassadorship behavior. These aims are expressed in two research questions:

- RQ1.* What are the communication strategies that managers consider most suitable to sustain employee brand consistent behavior?
- RQ2.* What are the antecedents (contextual factors and employee cognitive-emotional states) that employees believe affect most their brand ambassadorship behavior?

The choice to focus only on these specific aspects of the holistic model is due to practical constraints, given that the precise scope of both studies had to be negotiated with the funding organizations, who – especially in the case of the retail company – were interested in getting specific managerial results, besides contributing to a research program. As observed in the literature on management research (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991), we had to combine the philosophical and technical aspects and choices with the political ones.

This paper presents the main findings of a long-term research program on companies' strategies to encourage the brand consistent behavior of employees. It reports the results of two studies that collect the points of view of managers and employees on the two research questions to provide insights for the development of effective managerial strategies to support employee brand consistent behavior (Mazzei and Quarantino, 2015). We combine two

studies, conducted in different places with different methods, to contrast the views of managers and employees on the same issues.

The first empirical study is based on interviews with 32 Italian and American companies, and examines which strategies communication managers adopt to stimulate employee brand consistent behavior (*RQ1*). The second study is a case study of a retail company, and investigates the antecedents of brand ambassadorship efforts. The case study collected the views of the employees by means of an extensive survey (*RQ2*). Before reporting on those empirical studies, the paper presents the conceptual background, based on the holistic model of brand-building processes and employee brand consistent behavior developed by Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015). The paper concludes with theoretical, research, and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual background: a holistic model of behavioral branding

Brand consistent behavior is conscious communication, purposefully performed by employees to support the success of their company in various ways. It may enhance customer and brand experience and has been described as “behavioral branding” (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). Employee behaviors that convey brand values have been described in many ways: brand citizenship behaviors (Burman and Zepelin, 2005), brand supporting behaviors, or brand-adequate behavior (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006), brand consistent behaviors (Henkel *et al.*, 2007), behavioral branding (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012), and brand-aligned employee behavior (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

Employee brand consistent behavior confirms the brand promise (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Vrontis *et al.*, 2010) and positions a brand in customers’ minds (Henkel *et al.*, 2007). Employees familiar with the brand values are able to “live the brand” (Bendapudi and Bendapudi, 2005) and become brand ambassadors (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006) or brand builders (de Chernatony, 1999; Vrontis *et al.*, 2010).

During their interactions with customers, employees affect several brand outcomes, including corporate and product branding (Henkel *et al.*, 2007; Gremler and Gwinner, 2008; Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009), the overall brand evaluation, and customer-based brand equity (de Chernatony, 1999; Henkel *et al.*, 2007; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

In recent years, some literature has focused on developing integrated models for understanding and explaining brand-building behaviors, and their relationship with corporate branding.

Corporate branding and brand-building behavior are linked and there is a need “to incorporate the existing, so far, quite scattered models into a single integrated one to allow wider perspectives to emerge and more thoroughly and holistically explain corporate branding management” (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012, p. 194). The integrated synthesized model of corporate branding and brand-building behavior (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012) is the first integrated proposal for behavioral branding. It encompasses many interrelated factors, such as strategic vision, stakeholder images and identity, brand-oriented leadership, motivational base, and brand-building behavior.

Another proposal for a comprehensive conceptual framework of the corporate process for building brand equity includes both internal (company-determined), external (consumer/stakeholder-determined), and mediated variables, including corporate performance, industry, and internationality (Halliburton and Bach, 2012).

Recently, Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) developed a new holistic model of behavioral branding whose main strengths are to integrate the literature from management, marketing, and communication – whereas extant studies usually stem from a single discipline – and to offer a holistic view of causality linkages in the path from contextual factors to employee behaviors (while previous studies consider only one or a few segments of causality

linkages), combining the theoretical perspectives of proactive behaviors (Crant, 2000; Parker *et al.*, 2006), theory of hierarchical effects (Lavidge and Steiner, 1961), and theory of planned behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). It suggests that several contextual conditions affect the employee behavior that can generate or limit brand competitive outcomes, and it indicates several intermediate steps between contextual conditions and brand competitive outcomes (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). These include the cognitive and emotional states of employees, their attitudes, behavioral intentions, and brand consistent behaviors.

In the practice, the holistic model offers to managers' knowledge about a large spectrum of interrelated levers to solicit employee behaviors and thus develop a brand competitive advantage: human resource management, management and internal communication, communication climate. The holistic model enlarges the managers' perspective by including a great number of levers operating in different areas. Furthermore, it gives the opportunity to managers to consider interrelations and potential of integration of different levers. From this point of view, it adds new interesting insights compared to the other integrated models we referred to.

This holistic model of behavioral branding – which is the conceptual framework used in this paper – has six main elements, summarized briefly here:

- (1) Contextual conditions encompass variables that can be intentionally and strategically planned, managed, and evaluated by a company: management techniques and human resource management practices (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Aziz and Rizkallah, 2015); communication climate and internal communication (Smidts *et al.*, 2001; Thomas *et al.*, 2009; Jo, Shim, 2005; O'Neil, 2008; Vrontis *et al.*, 2010; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012; Arora *et al.*, 2012); physical environment (Bjerke and Ind, 2015); managerial communication style and leadership (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2013, 2014; Botero and van Dyne, 2009; Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012).
- (2) Employee cognitive-emotional states include employee satisfaction (Brown and Lam, 2008; van Wangenheim *et al.*, 2007), which increases when employees perceive that their expectations are fulfilled by the company; employee brand identification (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010), conceived as an employee's sense of belonging to the brand and taking pride in being its builder and ambassador; employee brand commitment, or the extent of an employee's emotional attachment to the brand (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Ki and Hon, 2012); employee brand loyalty (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009), which indicates a willingness to maintain a personal relationship with the brand and contribute to its success. Employees' cognitive and emotional states mediate the effects of contextual conditions on attitudes and behavioral intentions.
- (3) Employee brand attitudes toward the brand represent an evaluation (Ki and Hon, 2012) of the brand and indicate the degree to which employees have a favorable or unfavorable opinion, like or dislike the brand. According to the theory of planned behavior, employee brand attitudes affect brand behavioral intentions (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).
- (4) Employee brand behavioral intentions are distinct from real behaviors and include the predisposition of employees to perform brand consistent behaviors. The extent to which an employee has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the brand affects his or her behavioral intentions, which are the immediate determinant and most reliable predictors of behavior (Ki and Hon, 2012).
- (5) Employee brand consistent behaviors include the ability to identify customer needs and help customers (Grenler and Gwinner, 2008); perform supportive communicative behavior, like recommending the brand in both work and extra-work situations, defend

the brand from criticism, avoid criticizing the brand, report to managers information and personal or customers' opinions for the development of the brand (van Vuuren *et al.*, 2007; Burman and Zeplin, 2005; Kim and Rhee, 2011); convey brand values coherent with the brand positioning through verbal and non-verbal communication (Burman and Zeplin, 2005; Henkel *et al.*, 2007); and show inner feelings (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). Effective brand consistent behavior requires genuine (or deep) acting consistent with actual inner feelings (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

- (6) Brand-related outcomes of employee-customer interactions include customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (van Wangenheim *et al.*, 2007; Brown and Lam, 2008), positive word-of-mouth, and brand equity (Yee *et al.*, 2008; Chi and Gursoy, 2009).

The holistic model of behavioral branding (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015) acknowledges the complex, co-constructive, and flexible nature of the process and calls for research and managerial approaches that do not deny or oversimplify this complexity. It further underlines the need to engage employees as brand ambassadors, not by means of in-role behavioral prescriptions and control techniques, but more indirectly and genuinely through the management and enhancement of distal and proximal variables (Parker *et al.*, 2006) that sustain proactive and discretionary brand consistent employee behavior. In particular, it is important to adopt non-normative practices (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006) that facilitate co-construction processes (Wallpach and Woodside, 2009), and to compare the efficacy and peculiarities of this approach with a normative approach based on in-role prescriptions and control techniques.

This inside-out process should be considered in its entirety, looking at each and every step as intertwined elements. In particular, human resource management, managerial and internal communication, and communication climate are interrelated levers that need to be integrated in an effort to create a favorable context for genuine, discretionary, and extra-role employee brand consistent behavior. Managerial practices intended to sustain employees as strategic communicators and ambassadors of brand values cannot be based on prescription but require negotiation and sharing among organizational members.

3. Methods

The holistic model of behavioral branding calls for research projects based on qualitative and ethnographic methods, capable of integrating previous quantitative studies focused on causal linkages and of capturing the complexity of interactions (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). This is a question of how and why the phenomenon occurs. Qualitative methods are chosen to explore some basic assumptions of the holistic model of behavioral branding, and to test it with a wide group of qualified practitioners. As Yin (1994) observed, qualitative methods and case studies are not only useful for exploratory but also for descriptive and explanatory purposes.

More specifically, the researchers conducted a long-term research program based on a multiple methods research strategy to answer the two research questions. The choice of different methods was mainly based on the specific characteristics of the two targets (communication managers and employees). So on the one hand, it was realized an exploratory study to collect the points of view of communication managers, a quite specific professional community, where a qualitative study with a limited number of people was considered adequate; on the other hand, a case study on a specific company was realized, in order to capture the points of view of employees living in the same organization and cultural *milieu*, given the aim of understanding the contextual factors sustaining brand consistent behaviors.

First, the researchers conducted an interview-based study with managers to examine which strategies communication companies adopt in order to sustain employee brand consistent behavior.

The study was based on interviews with 32 Italian and American companies carried out in 2011 (Mazzei, 2014). The study collected management perceptions of the relevance of employee communication actions for company competitive performance and whether their companies had implemented any internal communication strategy to this end.

The study was qualitative and included interviews and focus groups. The research team selected the companies in the study according to three criteria: "best in class" in internal communication (companies recognized as a benchmark by experts, consultancy service providers, employers' associations, and the professional community of internal communication managers), heterogeneity in terms of industry, and large in size. Data were gathered by in-depth interviews with internal communication managers and specialists. Two focus groups with Italian internal communication managers and specialists were used to support the interpretation of findings and to triangulate with other data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The area of investigation was defined, focusing on the relationship between internal communication strategies of managers and the adoption of brand consistent behaviors by employees. Specific questions were asked on the following items: the main aims and activities of internal communication in the companies; the relevance of the employee communication role issue and the reasons for that; the employees' and managers' communication behavior that the company considered to be strategic; the expected benefits for the company of strategic communication behavior; the internal communication strategies, managerial methods, tools, channels, and content used by the company to encourage employees to adopt strategic communication behavior; the obstacles faced by communication managers in promoting brand consistent behaviors by employees. These items were included in a formal checklist, used by the researchers for conducting the semi-structured interviews in the field.

The researchers grouped the content of interviews according to its significance for the research questions (relevance), the number of occurrences (prevalence), and originality. All findings were anonymized. The analytic strategy was based on the literature about qualitative data analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994) using various techniques: making a matrix of categories and placing the evidence within such categories; and tabulating the frequency of different events; listing similarities and differences among interviews.

The researchers also carried out a case study based on interviews and an extensive survey with a sample of 2,300 employees to test the contextual factors affecting the brand ambassadorship role, one of the most important brand consistent behaviors of employees.

The company is a cooperative firm and in 2013 had about 7,700 employees and 300 stores. It experienced rapid growth, and consequently hired a significant number of millennials, employees who had previously worked for other companies, part-timers, and casual workers. As a result, corporate culture, cohesion around corporate values, and motivation of co-workers were at risk and the management felt more out of touch with the workforce than before. This feeling led to the launch of a structured listening program.

The fieldwork combined qualitative and quantitative methods in a two-step study, and employed triangulation between different data collection methods (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In total, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key internal informants (people with a specific, wide, and deep knowledge of the company history, leadership style and culture because of their seniority and/or their positions inside the organization). The formal checklist used by the researchers touched the following items: origins and distinctive features of the culture and identity; description of the prevailing style of leadership and people management, adopted by top and middle managers; level of motivation and commitment (exploring the specific factors supporting and preventing them); formal and informal dynamics and processes of employees' participation in organizational decision-making; internal organizational climate and atmosphere; perceived quality of internal and external communication. All these areas were considered crucial contextual factors for brand consistent behaviors.

Then the study continued with an extensive survey among employees. Based on a structured questionnaire, it addressed the following areas through very specific questions: company identity and values, participation, employee internal voice and brand ambassador behavior, responsibility, relationships between generations, commitment, motivation, quality of internal relationships, managerial style, and perceived external communication. The study covered a broad range of issues, but this paper only discusses the findings related to brand ambassador behavior and its determinants. Coherently with the contextual conditions and the employee cognitive-emotional states proposed by the holistic model and with the aim of testing further specific variables, brand ambassador behaviors were related to the following set of possible antecedents: level and type of commitment, motivation of employees, quality of the relationship between supervisor and team members, managerial style, and perception of external communication. The concept of brand ambassadorship was measured using the concept of megaphoning of Kim and Grunig (2011) and Kim and Rhee (2011), adapting the model to the specific context and jargon of the company, according to the evidence collected through the interviews with the company's opinion leaders.

The sample of 2,300 employees was randomly selected and stratified by gender, age, seniority, education, employment contract, and organizational unit assuring statistical consistency. The questionnaire was delivered on line over a four-week period and the researchers collected the data directly to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. In total, 1,870 answers were collected, with a response rate of 81 percent. Data were analyzed using frequency distributions and bivariate joint frequencies. The interpretation of the results was supported by findings from the interviews, open comments at the end of the questionnaire, and the literature.

4. Findings

In this section, the findings are reported separately for each of the two studies. In the first paragraph, managerial strategies adopted by communication managers, to enhance employee brand consistent behavior, are described, with a specific focus on the enabling role of internal communication. In the second paragraph, the role played by some specific contextual factors affecting brand ambassadorship behavior by employees, i.e. motivation, commitment, and perception of external communication, is presented. Data from both the extensive survey and the in-depth interviews to the key informants are triangulated to answer to the research question.

4.1 Internal communication strategies to enhance employee brand consistent behavior: findings from an international study

The holistic model of behavioral branding and the huge literature based upon it (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015) show that a wide range of managerial strategies affects employee brand consistent behavior. This initial study had the objective of understanding the communication strategies adopted by companies that sustain the brand consistent behavior of employees.

The findings include a wide range of employee communication behaviors: acting as brand ambassadors and advocates; being allies of the company and supporting the business of the company, in a manner that is consistent with the commercial role of employees who interact with clients; sharing expertise and information with colleagues; communicating openly with leaders to convey ideas and suggestions for improved products and services.

The strategies that interviewees mentioned as effective in supporting the brand-building behaviors by employees are sometimes communication-oriented, i.e. directly linked to the classical internal communication functions: creating communication paths, developing new languages, adopting full disclosure, and stimulating effective managerial communication. These strategies involve the design and management of communication instruments and styles to ensure information adequacy and proper directions (White *et al.*, 2010), spread communication competencies (Zerfass and Franke, 2013).

However, according to the respondents, these communication strategies are more effective when directed at employee behaviors indirectly by working on their attitudes and future behavior intentions: building trust between managers and employees (Jo and Shim, 2005), building accountability for corporate values, stating mutuality, adopting multiple and integrated practices. As one of the interviewees said: "It is not just a matter of developing adequate techniques and tools for internal communication. If you want to get real results you have to invest in 'preparing the soil', creating the conditions for brand building behaviors." These are enablement-oriented communication strategies: they aim to create communication conditions and integrate communication with other managerial practices that enable the employee brand-building role (Mazzei, 2014).

The enabling role of internal communication develops competencies, instead of giving advice (Zerfass and Franke, 2013), facilitates employees in their communication roles implementing meta-communication, as communication developers, supporting communication training, and linking evaluation and reward systems to communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2011). And in the opinion of respondents, this leads to significant advantages for the company: "brand awareness and reputation, commercial and economic performance, internal cohesion and quality of relations among members [...] in other words our competitive advantage."

Finally, the interviewees underlined the crucial factor, able to increase the commitment of employees in adopting brand consistent behavior when interacting with external stakeholder, is the organizational culture: specific values, beliefs, history, and traditions act as "an accelerator of their willingness to spontaneously sustain the brand through appropriate behaviors and language." The interviewees underlined the importance of putting a strong effort in directing the internal communication on "engineering organizational culture" (Kunda, 1992).

4.2 Brand ambassador behavior of employees: a case study[1]

The interviews with managers described in the previous section showed that employee brand ambassadorship, together with other brand consistent behaviors, is crucial for company success and it depends on an array of organizational conditions. The second study, focused on a retail company, explored the most relevant antecedents (contextual factors and employee cognitive-emotional states) that, in the perception of employees, affect their brand ambassadorship behavior (Mazzei and Quarantino, 2014).

Employees were asked about their brand ambassador behaviors when not in the workplace (Figure 1). They feel that it is natural to provide advice on the company's products and services (72.9 percent), to talk positively about the organization with

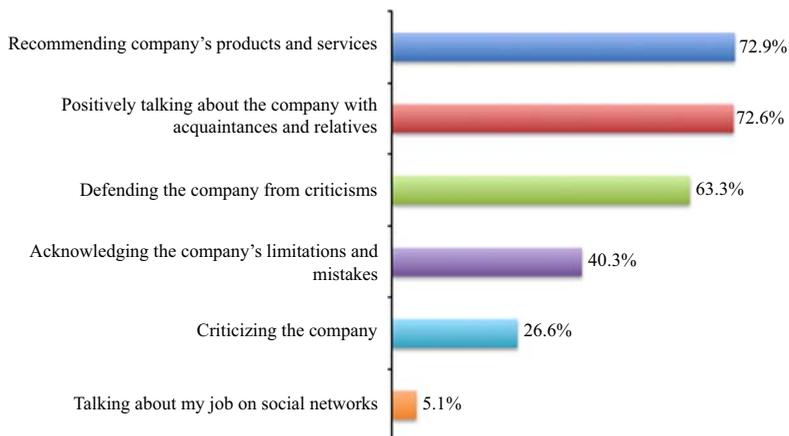


Figure 1.
Outside the workplace, it is natural...

acquaintances and relatives (72.6 percent), and to defend the company from criticism (63.3 percent). Moreover, they are ready to acknowledge mistakes (40.3 percent) and to criticize the company (26.6 percent). In this company, employees act as brand ambassadors only in a limited way, and at times they are even disloyal, e.g. spreading outside mistakes and criticism about the company.

Also, the interviewees indicate a critical attitude of employees toward the company during their interactions with stakeholders. It seems to be a byproduct of inadequate communication about strategic choices: "I believe that people lack information and the overall perspective needed to promote the company's distinctive brand in the eyes of customers." In other cases, people do not feel loyal to the organization: "Some workers own the loyalty card of competitors." Or workers just forget the relevance of their role in supporting the competitive advantage and the brand of the company: "Here people do not fully perceive the risk of criticizing the company outside."

Employees in this company were not strong advocates, and did not volunteer to communicate organizational strengths, but were highly adversarial, and spread negative information to external constituencies. This amplifies organizational problems and reduces opportunities and increases threats to the organization (Kim and Rhee, 2011).

The study then focused on the some specific antecedents affecting the way the brand ambassadorship behaviors are performed, in order to understand their impact on the low level of brand ambassadorship inside the company: level and type of commitment, motivation of employees, quality of the relationship between supervisor and team members, managerial style, and perception of the external communication. All these variables were derived from the holistic model (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015).

Three specific items proved to be relevant in the case study, and are then discussed here: level of commitment, perceptions of the external communication of the company, and level of motivation.

Commitment to the organization was explored by asking employees their opinions about shopping in a competitor's store (Figure 2). In total, 60.7 percent of the workers consider it an economic drain on the company. The percentage is apparently high, but taking into account the cooperative nature of the company – that it is owned by its customers and workers – and its history, one would expect greater awareness of the economic losses. Also, many workers saw shopping in a competitor's store as a matter of convenience ("I go to the nearest store," 53.8 percent) and a significant number of them saw it as a normal habit ("It is just normal," 36.1 percent). The interviewees also underlined the lack of support on the part of workers: "Here many people do not understand how important it is to support the

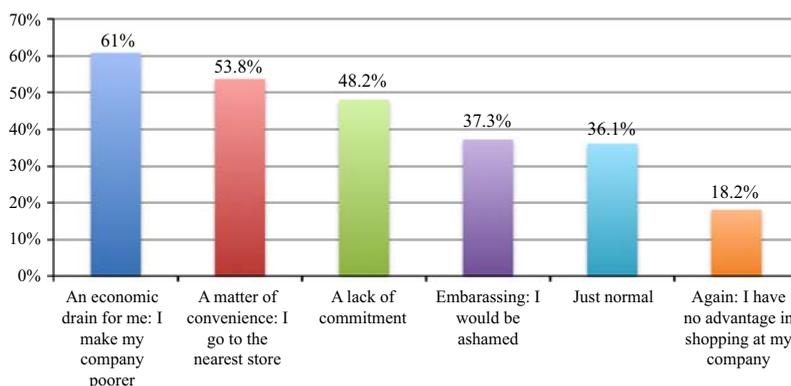


Figure 2.
Shopping in a
competitor's store is...

company by buying and promoting its products.” In relation to both the survey and the interviews, the level of commitment would appear to be a matter of concern.

Employees’ perceptions of the company’s external communication are also unsatisfactory (Figure 3). Only the 61 percent of workers believe that it fully reflects the values of the company; the issue seems to be particularly critical given that the majority of workers in this company are employed in “front-line” activities inside the stores. At the same time, they feel that, “It does not reach all our potential customers” (50.9 percent), “It is not appealing” (25.5 percent), and “It does not express how good we are” (32.9 percent). Overall, employees seem to lack confidence in the quality of external communication from the company and this perception probably affects their lack of motivation and willingness to become “brand ambassadors” (Smidts *et al.*, 2001).

The level of motivation of employees was explored by asking people about their personal condition in the organization. They feel “ready to address problems and look for solutions” (59 percent), which is probably a driver for “voice” behaviors. But only the 39.5 percent of respondents said they were “motivated and satisfied,” and inside the organization, there is a widespread feeling of “not being recognized” (56.1 percent) and of “being discouraged” (43.3 percent).

Data from interviews help to explain this widespread feeling: “There is a significant amount of knowledge and competence among employees that is not rewarded or recognized,” “Many people try to contribute with ideas and proposals but often they are not listened to by the management.” The feelings of demotivation help to explain the limited efforts that employees make to behave as “brand ambassadors,” as pointed out in the literature on employee satisfaction (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Ki and Hon, 2012).

The emerging attitude of employees, i.e. not being strong advocates for the company, derives, according to the holistic model of behavioral branding, from weak commitment, perceptions that the company’s external communication is unsatisfactory, and demotivation of employees.

The main contribution emerging from the results of this study is twofold. In terms of contents, it empirically tests specific aspects of the holistic model of behavioral branding (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), highlighting the crucial role of internal communication strategies that are enablement-oriented and not just communication-oriented; besides, it further elaborates on the relationship between perceived external prestige and organizational identification (Smidts *et al.*, 2001), showing how the perception of external communication by

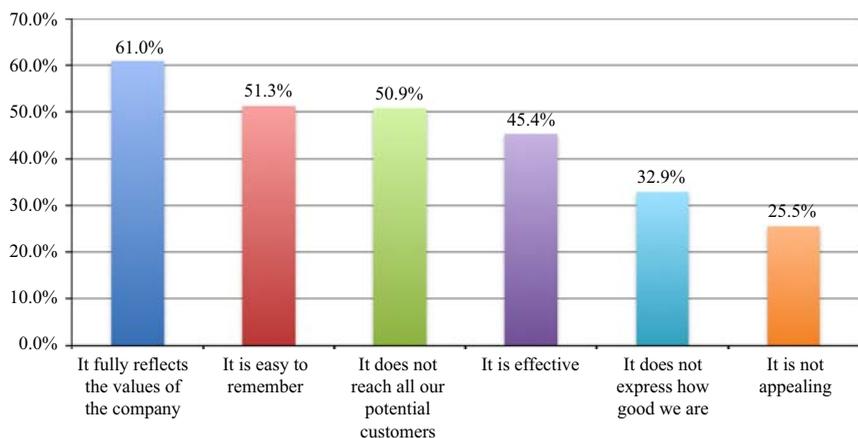


Figure 3.
Our external communication...

employees affect their willingness to act as brand ambassadors. In terms of research approach, it originally tries to collect and contrast the point of view of both managers and employee on the factors able to produce or inhibit brand consistent behaviors.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this paper is its contribution to fill the knowledge gap about specific managerial strategies that sustain employee brand consistent behavior. In particular, it offers insights into two research questions regarding the communication strategies that managers say sustain employee brand consistent behavior, and the most relevant antecedents (contextual factors and employee cognitive-emotional states) that employees believe affect their brand ambassadorship behavior.

Regarding the first research question, about the communication strategies that sustain employee brand consistent behavior, a qualitative study based on interviews with 32 internal communication managers of leading Italian and American companies indicates that managers are aware of the relevance of employee roles in brand building. The study also revealed that the most effective internal communication strategies that aim to sustain the employee brand builder role are enablement-oriented rather than communication-oriented, confirming what had been found in earlier studies (Mazzei, 2014). Managers stated that they make most effort to earn the loyal behavior of employees rather than prescribe desirable employee behavior. As a consequence, internal communication has an enabling role rather than being a means for conveying behavioral rules and this leads to positive organizational advantages through the development of new competences among employees (Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). This study adds to previous studies the understanding of the peculiar role on enablement-oriented strategies, and confirms the wide spectrum of potential advantages gained from developing brand consistent behavior (de Chernatony, 1999; Sirianni *et al.*, 2013).

Regarding the second research question, about the most relevant antecedents of brand ambassadorship behavior by employees, the case study of a retail company confirmed the impact of weak employee commitment and low levels of motivation on employee attitudes to brand ambassadorship. The focus on these two specific contextual variables is consistent with the previous literature (Punjaisri *et al.*, 2009; Ki and Hon, 2012; Dasgupta *et al.*, 2013): it is not possible to expect ambassadorial behaviors when employees are critical of the organizational setting in terms of managerial style and of the effectiveness in managing employee motivation. Moreover, the study was able to develop the previous literature, highlighting the role of a specific antecedent of brand ambassador behaviors, i.e. an unsatisfactory external communication. From this point of view, it emerges as a managerial priority to continuously monitor the perception of external communication by employees, and implement all required corrective actions when necessary (enhance the internal information process on it, clearly explain the reasons behind the specific external communication strategy, involve employees in giving ideas and advices about how to improve it, etc.).

The main limitation of this study is the lack of measures for assessing the importance of each factor affecting employee behaviors that generate brand competitive outcomes.

Further studies are needed to find appropriate constructs and measures of organizational contexts now that the diverse workforce includes millennials, women, workers from non-western cultures, job-hoppers, part-timers, contractors, contingency workers, and so forth. It is crucial to understand the “psychological contract” that can create commitment (Loureiro and Kaufmann, 2016) when space and time are fragmented and where there are more young workers, who bring a new set of values and attitudes to the workplace. More people have temporary relationships with companies, they frequently change their jobs and often are asked to work without a fixed workplace. It is not clear how these dynamics affect

all the variables that have been described in this paper. What is clear is that without a diffused and integrated support from every employee in adopting brand consistent behaviors, organizations will be ineffective in sustaining and reinforcing their brand.

It is also important to capture the voice of employees by conducting both qualitative and quantitative studies to examine the range of employee brand-building behavior, confirm the most important variables influencing employees' attitudes, intentions and behavior, understand whether different groups of employees require customized enablement strategies, and test the efficacy of the enablement strategies adopted by companies so far.

Major managerial implications also emerge from the findings, contributing new knowledge on the subject, especially in terms of managerial strategies that promote brand consistent behavior by employees. Companies should engage employees as brand ambassadors not by means of prescriptions of in-role behavior and control techniques but through the creation of an organizational context leading to genuine, voluntary, extra-role brand consistent behavior, because the level of commitment, the perception of external communication and the level of motivation emerged as key drivers of the desired behaviors. In particular, this study suggests paying specific attention on monitoring the perception of external communication by employee and on developing improvement actions when necessary.

This paper also recommends enablement-oriented practices consisting of investment in the creation of a communication and organizational context that promotes genuine brand consistent behavior. These practices are more effective than the traditional internal communication strategies. Such enabling practices include programs for both managers and employees to enhance soft skills and individual motivation to work, training and development for managers, supporting them in building relationships of trust with employees, and using open communication, together with bottom-up participation in decision-making processes by listening to employees' ideas and suggestions, both formally and informally. The findings suggest non-normative practices that facilitate the processes of co-construction of implicit and shared values about brand consistent behavior, as strongly underlined by the communication managers interviewed in the first study. This means working on the development of organizational cultures, establishing rituals, symbols, stories and heroes, describing and embodying the expected brand ambassador behaviors. This task implies the ability of those communication managers to cooperate effectively with other organizational units, such as external communication, human resource management, and top management.

The studies of strategies that sustain employee brand-building behavior discussed in this paper highlight the crucial role of employees as brand builders and the need for strategies that enable their genuine, authentic and non-prescribed extra-role effort to benefit their company and ultimately themselves.

Note

1. All quotes in this section are taken from interviews.

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Further reading

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About the authors

Luca Quaratino is Assistant Professor in Organization Theory and Human Resource Management at the IULM University of Milan. He graduated in Law and completed his studies at the Industrial and Labour Relations Department at Cornell University, USA. For more than 15 years, he has worked as Consultant/Trainer in HRM and organizational development issues for major companies. Today, his research interests deal with "train the trainer" processes in transition economies, the relationship between organizational culture, business strategy and performance, and the evolution of HRM. Luca Quaratino is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: luca.quaratino@iulm.it

Alessandra Mazzei is Associate Professor of Corporate Communication and Public Relations at the IULM University, Milan, Italy. She has been a Visiting Researcher at the Department of Communication Studies, Baruch College/CUNY and a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Corporate Communication, University of Aarhus, Denmark. She serves as a Member of Editorial Boards of academic journals and series. Her primary research interests and publications focus internal communication, internal crisis communication, reputation and brand management, marketing and communication for credence goods, communication planning, and evaluation.

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