

Improving internal branding outcomes through employees' self-leadership

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ABSTRACT

Internal branding is considered as a top priority for hospitality organizations to gain a competitive advantage. This study aims to investigate the effect of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes, as well as the mediation effect of role identity on this relationship. A self-administered survey was used to collect data from employees at five-star hotels in Sanya, China, and structure equation modeling was used to examine the hypothesized model. The results show that brand knowledge and brand commitment positively affect brand citizenship behavior. Self-leadership has a positive effect on brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior. Role identity mediates the effects on self-leadership on brand knowledge and brand commitment. Management implications and limitations are discussed.

1. Introduction

The major task of the hospitality industry is to provide superior value for customers by delivering excellent services (Wang, Tsai, & Tsai, 2014). The services provided by hospitality organizations, compared with other service industries, are high-contact in nature and involve substantial interactions between customers and the brands. Employees in hospitality organizations are bridges connecting the brand and its customers (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Customers' perception of a hospitality brand quality relies heavily on the performance of employees. Employees in hospitality organizations are therefore called "brand champions" who "transform brand vision into brand reality" (Berry, 2000, p. 135; Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). From this perspective, hospitality organizations are encouraged to adopt an internal branding perspective to make sure that employees understand and internalize the brand value prior to serving customers, and ultimately, "live the brand" (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009). Internal branding is considered as "the top priority of management" for hospitality organizations (Keller, 2013).

Two major research streams were identified in internal branding literature. The first one focused on internal branding outcomes (Piehler, Schade, & Burmann, 2019), which highlights employees' psychological and behavioral responses regarding the hospitality brand (Zhang & Bai, 2018), and the second one focused on internal branding activities which

can trigger favorable employees' attitudes and behaviors toward the brand (Buil, Martínez, & Matute, 2016). Regarding internal branding outcomes, researchers studied the cognitive (Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), emotional (Burmann et al., 2009; Erkmen, Hancer, & Leong, 2017), and conative (Erkmen et al., 2017) dimensions of employees' responses toward the brand. However, the majority of research had only focused on one of three dimensions above-mentioned. Zhang and Bai (2018) suggested that in order for employees to become brand champions, they must understand the brand, establish emotional commitment to the brand, and exhibit brand-consistent behavior. In other words, employees' cognitive, emotional and conative relationships with the brand jointly make up successful internal branding outcomes. Research findings in employee typology indicated that if employees do not have appropriate brand knowledge, high-level of brand commitment, and positive brand behaviors, they may become brand disruptors who have low performance and high compliant behaviors, or even brand saboteurs who actively work against the brand (Ind, 2004; Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2013b). Therefore, Piehler, Grace, and Burmann (2018) asserted that more studies should be conducted to examine the dimensionality of internal branding outcomes, as well as the relationships between them.

Among the internal branding activities, previous studies had consistently confirmed the positive impacts of leadership on internal branding outcomes. For example, Burmann et al. (2009) noted that

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brand leadership leads to employees' brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior. Morhart et al. (2009) observed that transformational leadership contributes to employees' brand-building behavior through internalization, while transactional leadership negatively influences brand-building behavior through compliance. However, the role of leadership in shaping employees into brand champions needs further investigation. There are a variety of leadership styles within an organization, including formal (or vertical) and informal leadership, as well as organizational- and individual-level leadership (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006). Previous researchers had mainly focused on vertical and organizational-level leadership (e.g., transformational leadership), neglecting informal and individual-level leadership. Self-leadership, which applies to every employee whether or not he/she holds a management position (Pearce & Manz, 2005), has seldom been investigated.

Self-leadership is a self-influential process in which employees achieve positive behavioral outcomes through self-guidance and self-motivation (Pearce & Manz, 2005), and previous studies have consistently confirmed the positive impacts of self-leadership on employees' work-related attitudes and behaviors (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz, 2011). Internal branding requires high levels of employee motivation, innovation, and collaboration with co-workers as well as customers (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Self-leadership is therefore highly consistent with the requirements of internal branding. Self-leadership promotes employees' intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and therefore triggers their role identity as brand champions, while employees who internalize their role identities are likely to perform their tasks more effectively, i.e., have more positive internal branding outcomes (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003). In other words, role identity mediates the effects of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes. To that end, the following research questions are raised. First, what are the relationships among the three dimensions of internal branding outcomes? Second, does self-leadership lead to positive internal branding outcomes? And third, does role identity mediate the effects of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes? To our best knowledge, this study is the first one to examine the effects of individual-level leadership on internal branding outcomes. This study collected data from hotel employees in Sanya, Hainan province, China, to test the hypothesized model. It is hoped that the findings of this study will have significant theoretical and management implications for the hospitality industry as well as other service industries.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Self-leadership

Self-leadership is a process of self-influence through which employees achieve self-direction and self-motivation (Manz & Sims, 2001). The theoretical bases of self-leadership involve self-regulation, self-control, and self-management (Houghton & Neck, 2002). Self-leadership strategies usually cover three primary categories: behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Manz & Neck, 2004). Behavior-focused strategies facilitate positive behaviors that contribute to successful outcomes and restrain negative behaviors that lead to unsuccessful outcomes (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Self-goal-setting and self-reward are the most popular types of behavior-focused strategies. Natural reward strategies focus on the enjoyable aspects of an activity, which can induce a sense of competence and self-control. Constructive thought pattern strategies include visualizing successful performance, self-talk, and evaluation beliefs that transform dysfunctional and irrational beliefs into positive ones or that create new thought patterns (Houghton & Neck, 2002).

Unlike vertical leadership, which stems from an appointed or formal leader of an organization (Ensley et al., 2006), self-leadership is a type of informal leadership that can be adopted by any employee regardless of

whether or not he/she holds a management position. In this sense, every employee in an organization can become a self-leader. Pearce and Manz (2005) asserted that self-leadership is more appropriate when work situations require a high level of commitment, creativity, interdependence, and complexity. Internal branding is an ongoing process involving an employee's establishment of attachment to the brand and his/her execution of a series of extra-role behaviors (Zhang & Bai, 2018). The nature of service work requires an employee's cooperation with his/her coworkers and the development of an innovative ability to solve exceptional problems (Zhang, 2019). Therefore, self-leadership has particular relevance to internal branding.

This study defines self-leadership as a series of strategies employees use to influence themselves to behave in a way that benefits the brand. Following previous literature (Houghton & Neck, 2002; Neubert & Wu, 2006; Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012; Carmeli, Meitar, & Weisberg, 2006), self-leadership in this study has been operationalized as a second-order construct consisting of four sub-dimensions: visualizing successful performance, self-goal-setting, self-talk, and self-reward (Neubert & Wu, 2006). Visualizing successful performance means that employees visualize themselves successfully performing a brand-related task before they actually do it. Self-goal-setting means that employees set specific goals for themselves regarding brand-related performance. Self-talk means that when employees encounter brand-related problems, they will talk to themselves to work through those problems. Self-reward means that when a brand-related task is successfully completed, employees will reward themselves in their own way.

2.2. Internal branding

Recent years have seen increased attention being given to internal branding. Although a number of studies have been published on internal branding, no general consensus has yet been reached regarding its definition. Two perspectives of internal branding in literature were identified. The first one focuses on organizational activities that drive employee-related positive attitudes and behaviors, and hence is termed as internal brand activities (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Previous studies have identified internal brand communication (Garas, Mahran, & Mohamed, 2018), brand training (Buil et al., 2016), and brand leadership (Koo & Curtis, 2019; Terglav, Ruzzier, & Kaše, 2016) as the most important internal brand activities. Among them, brand leadership was widely studied. For example, Morhart et al. (2009) observed that transformational leadership leads to more positive brand-building behavior through internalization. Buil et al. (2016) noted that transformational leadership positively affects employees' citizenship behavior through work engagement and organizational identification. Wallace, de Chernatony, and Buil (2013a) observed that consideration-oriented leadership is positively correlated with affective and normative brand commitment and negatively correlated with continuance commitment. However, the majority of studies focused on vertical leadership, little research has been done on the effect of self-leadership on employees' attitudes and behaviors toward the brand in internal branding area.

The second perspective of internal branding focuses on employee-related internal branding outcomes (Zhang & Bai, 2018; Piehler et al., 2018), which involve employees' cognitive, emotional, and conative responses toward the hospitality brand (Ngo et al., 2019; Zhang & Bai, 2018; Wang, Yang, & Yang, 2019). Regarding internal branding outcomes, researchers studied the cognitive dimension, i.e., brand understanding (Xiong et al., 2013; Xiong & King, 2019; Piehler, King, Burmann, & Xiong, 2016), brand knowledge (Zhang, 2019), and brand belief (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), emotional dimension, i.e., brand commitment (Burmann et al., 2009; Erkmen et al., 2017) and identification (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), and conative dimension, i.e., brand citizenship behavior (Erkmen et al., 2017) and employee brand equity (Xiong et al., 2013). However, there are very limited studies comprehensively cover these three dimensions (Zhang & Bai, 2018).

This study follows Zhang's (2019) study and divides internal branding outcomes into three dimensions: brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior. Brand knowledge is the cognitive component of internal branding outcomes and refers to the extent to which employees believe that they understand the meaning of the brand (Keller, 2013; Xiong et al., 2013). Brand commitment is the emotional component of internal branding outcomes and means the degree of an employee's attachment and identification to the brand (King, 2010; Wallace et al., 2013a). Employees are unlikely to "live the brand" unless they have appropriate brand knowledge and deep emotion about it (Xiong et al., 2013). Brand citizenship behavior is the conative component of internal branding outcomes and refers to an employee's extra-role behaviors that on the whole, benefit the brand (Burmann et al., 2009). Brand knowledge reflects what employees know, brand commitment reflects how employees feel, and brand citizenship behavior reflects what employees do. These three components are indispensable for a successful internal branding (Zhang & Bai, 2018).

The above-mentioned arguments have been supported by studies on employee typology. For example, Thomson, de Chernatony, Aigambright, and Khan (1999) developed an intellectual-emotional buy-in matrix which divides employees into four types: champions who understand the brand well and are committed to the brand, bystanders who have a lot of brand knowledge but lack commitment to the brand, 'weak links' who lack brand knowledge and commitment, and 'loose cannons' who are highly committed to the brand but lack necessary brand knowledge. Similarly, Ind (2004) clustered employees into four categories: brand champions who have high extra-role behaviors, brand agnostics who are interested in but not committed to the brand, brand cynics who are not involved with the brand idea, and brand saboteurs who actively work against the brand idea. Wallace et al. (2013b) identified that three types of employees (i.e., champions, outsiders, and disruptors) exist in a service organization. Collectively, these studies show that employees are unlikely to become brand champions without a comprehensive cognitive, emotional, and conative response to the brand.

Combining the two perspectives mentioned above, this study defines internal branding as a process of selling the brand to employees in order to shape their brand knowledge structures (King, So, & Grace, 2013), align their attitudes with the brand (Xiong et al., 2013), and encourage their brand-consistent behaviors (Uen, Wu, Teng, & Liu, 2012). In other words, internal branding aims to shape employees into brand champions who can represent the brand to customers and "transform brand vision into brand reality" (Berry, 2000, p. 135).

Although considerable research has been published on internal branding, few researchers have comprehensively covered all the three components of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses in their research (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Besides, very little attention has been given to the relationships between these three dimensions of internal branding outcomes (Piehler et al., 2018). In this study, we argue that employees follow a standard learning hierarchy (i.e., cognition → emotion → behavior) to form their relationship with the brand. In other words, employees will first develop brand knowledge, and then establish feelings regarding the brand, which is followed by their positive behaviors. The cognition-emotion-conation approach is prevalent in organizational studies (Zhang & Bai, 2018). According to Xiong et al.'s (2013) study, when employees believe that they have adequate brand knowledge, they are more likely to be committed to the brand and exhibit positive brand behaviors. Davis (2005) developed a brand assimilation model, which suggests that the process of employees' brand internalization has three stages: hear the brand, believe the brand, and live the brand. In order for employees to become passionate brand

champions, they must first understand what their organization's brand stands for (Davis, 2005). When employees have appropriate brand knowledge, they can establish an emotional attachment to it and then produce actions aiming to benefit the brand (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Previous research also found that employees' brand knowledge positively affect their brand behaviors (Xiong et al., 2013). Based on the above arguments, we posit that:

- H1a. Brand knowledge positively influences brand commitment.
- H1b. Brand knowledge positively influences brand citizenship behavior.
- H1c. Brand commitment positively influences brand citizenship behavior.

2.3. The influences of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes

A substantial body of literature has revealed the positive correlation between self-leadership and employees' work-related attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction, work engagement, positive affect, self-efficacy, and organizational commitment) and behaviors (e.g., creativity, performance, team effectiveness, and coping) (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011). For example, Elloy (2008) noted that self-leading employees are more likely to have more knowledge of their work and to recognize behaviors that are appropriate for team success, while Cohen, Chang, and Ledford (1997) observed that workers in self-leading teams reported higher levels of organizational commitment than employees of other teams. Carmeli et al. (2006) noted that self-leadership is positively correlated with both self and supervisor ratings of innovative behaviors, and Knotts (2018) found that self-leadership is positively correlated with organizational citizenship behavior. As internal branding outcomes are highly similar to those attitudinal and behavioral constructs previously studied (Zhang, 2019; Zhang & Bai, 2018), we argue that self-leadership can contribute to high levels of brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior.

The positive effects of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes can be explained by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Social cognitive theory suggests that an individual's self-efficacy affects his/her performance. Self-efficacy means an individual's confidence in his/her ability to achieve a desired outcome, and employees with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to devote themselves to brand-related tasks (Neck & Houghton, 2006; Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012). Self-leadership strategies were found to positively influence the individual's cognitive and motivational processes (Konradt, Andreßen, & Ellwart, 2009), which leads to favorable internal branding outcomes, i.e., brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior (e.g., Fu, Elliott, Haim, & Galloway, 2017; Chen & Kao, 2011). For example, when a goal is self-set by employees, they are more committed to it and employ better strategies to achieve it (Manz & Neck, 2004). Employees who visualize future successful performance are more likely to attain their desired outcomes (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). Through constructive thought patterns and positive self-talk, employees will have improved self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations, thus improving internal branding performance (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

In the context of the hospitality industry, few empirical studies have been done on self-leadership and its outcomes; however, various types of vertical leadership have been found to have important influences on employees' attitudes and behaviors. For example, Mohamed (2016) and Jaiswal and Dhar (2015) found that transformational leadership promotes a climate for innovation, e.g., hotel employees' creativity and satisfaction, while Qiu, Alizadeh, Dooley, and Zhang (2019) noted that authentic leadership has a positive effect on customer-oriented

organizational citizenship behavior among employees of five-star hotels in China. Because both self-leadership and vertical leadership are conceptualized as an ability to influence someone else (Pearce & Sims, 2002; Pearce and Manz, 2005), we believe that self-leadership may have an impact on employee outcomes similar to that of vertical leadership.

Based on the theoretical arguments from social cognitive theory made above as well as the empirical research findings in organizational studies, we posit that:

H2. Self-leadership positively influences (a) brand knowledge, (b) brand commitment, and (c) brand citizenship behavior.

2.4. Mediation effect of role identity

Role identity reflects an employee's self-identification as a brand representative (Morhart et al., 2009). An individual may have multiple role identities at the same time, but in a specific situation, a particular role identity becomes salient. Role identity is a domain-specific variable, whereas self-leadership involves a series of more general cognitive and behavioral strategies than role identity and is less specifically oriented (Prussia, Anderson, & Manz, 1998), and hence can be applied to many domains. A domain-specific perception (i.e., role identity) may be influenced by general behavioral and cognitive strategies, and through adopting self-leadership strategies, an employee's identity as a brand champion is evoked and made more salient, which further influences their subsequent brand-related cognition and behaviors.

Self-leadership influences role identity also because it promotes employee's intrinsic motivation. Based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) cognitive evaluation theory, intrinsic motivation emerges because the needs for feelings of competence and self-determination are satisfied (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Once an employee's basic needs are satisfied by a situational factor (i.e., self-leadership), he/she will internalize an externally encouraged role identity (Morhart et al., 2009). In other words, self-leadership serves as a salient source of role identity for brand representatives. Although there has been no empirical evidence directly supporting the effect of self-leadership on role identity, a number of studies have supported the positive effect of vertical leadership (e.g., transformational leadership) on an employee's role identity (e.g., Morhart et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2014). Considering that vertical leadership has a positive effect on self-leadership, and that there are similarities between leading oneself and leading others, we predict that self-leadership leads to employees' internalization of their roles as brand champions.

Role identity theory suggests that individuals identify appropriate behavior related to various roles and then integrate it as a part of themselves (Farmer et al., 2003). The more salient an employee's role identity is, the more likely he/she is to behave in accordance with that identity (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Through identity-consistent behaviors, employees can validate their self-conceptions, which satisfy their needs for self-consistency and self-expression (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Therefore, role identity has a strong predictive effect on an employee's cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses toward the brand. In other words, when employees internalize the role identity of brand champions, they will be more active in learning and practicing the brand's values, so they will have higher levels of brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior. Existing studies have provided empirical support for the points mentioned above. For example, Morhart et al. (2009) observed that employees who internalized a role identity as a brand representative had higher identity-congruent behaviors, which were reflected in participative behavior, positive word-of-mouth, in-role brand-building behavior, and retention. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) found that organizational identification positively leads to employee brand-consistent behavior, customer-oriented behavior, participation in brand development, and positive word-of-mouth. Also, other types of leadership (e.g., charismatic leadership) were found to have a positive effect on role

identity (Paulsen, Maldonado, Callan, & Ayoko, 2009).

Based on theoretical arguments and empirical findings stated above, we expect that role identity mediates the link between self-leadership and internal branding outcomes. Previous studies have suggested that a series of attitudinal variables, including commitment, trust, positive affect, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy, mediate the effect of self-leadership on individual performance (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Role identity, as an attitudinal variable, may mediate the link between self-leadership and internal branding outcomes. Although there have been no empirical studies focusing on the mediation effect of role identity, a number of studies have provided empirical support for the idea that role identity has a mediation effect on the relationship between other types of leadership and individual performance. For example, Wang et al. (2014) reported that hotel employees' creative role identities mediate the effect of transformational leadership on employee creativity. Wang and Zhu (2011) found that individual-level transformational leadership positively influences individual creativity through individual creativity identity and that group creative identity mediates the relationship between group-level transformational leadership and group creativity. Morhart et al. (2009) noted that role identity mediates the effect of transformational leadership on employees' brand-building behavior. Thus, we posit that:

H3. Role identity mediates the relationships between self-leadership and (a) brand knowledge, (b) brand commitment, and (c) brand citizenship behavior.

The hypothesized model proposed in this study is summarized in Fig. 1.

3. Method

3.1. Measurement

We used 14 measures adapted from Neubert and Wu's (2006) study to measure self-leadership, which were validated in Chinese context. Self-leadership is a second-order factor consisting of four sub-dimensions: visualizing successful performance (VSP, four items), self-goal-setting (SGS, four items), self-talk (ST, three items), and self-reward (SR, three items). We used four items adapted from Zhang and Bartol (2010), Callero (1985), and Morhart et al. (2009) to measure role identity. The measures for brand knowledge (four items), brand commitment (four items), and brand citizenship behavior (9 items) were adopted from Zhang's (2019) study, these measures were validated among the Chinese hotel employees.

For measurements originally developed in English (i.e., self-leadership and role identity), a back-translation approach was used in order to get Chinese versions. A researcher firstly translated the English items into Chinese, and then another researcher translated the Chinese item back into English. The two English versions were compared to identify the flaws. This process was repeated until convergence among the translations was achieved. Thereafter a panel consisting of two professors and five students in tourism and hospitality management was established to assess content validity of these items. The panel members were asked to provide comments on content and understandability of those items, to edit and improve those items to enhance their clarity and readability. After that, an initial questionnaire was designed, and a pretest was conducted on a small group of hotel employees ($n = 15$). The purpose of the pretest was to determine whether our planned measures of those variables were meaningful to respondents. Based on the pretest, the quality of the questionnaire was improved. All items were measured on five-point Likert-type scales which ranged from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree).

3.2. Data collection and sample

Hypotheses were tested using data collected from employees of five-

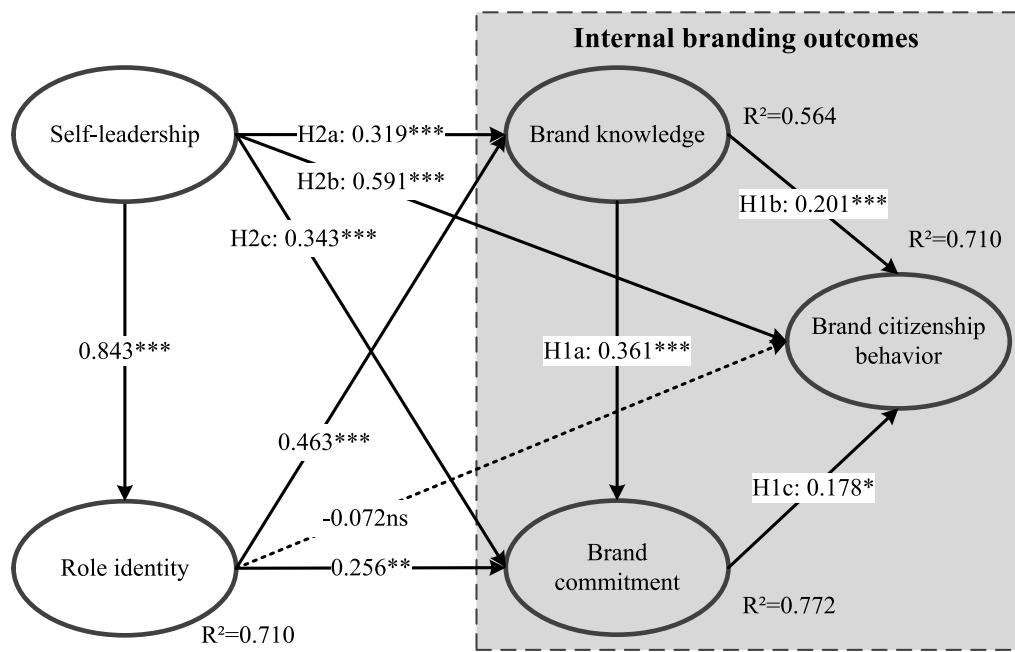


Fig. 1. Hypothesis model. Note: * $p < 0.5$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; ns = nonsignificant; dotted line represents nonsignificant path.

star hotels in Sanya, a famous tourist city in Hainan province, China. In 2018, Sanya received 22.4257 million domestic and foreign tourists, representing a year-on-year growth rate of 11.3%. Sanya's total tourism revenue in 2018 reached 51.473 billion yuan, an increase of 17.0% compared with 2017. The rapid development of the tourism industry has resulted in prosperity of the hotel industry in Sanya (Bureau of Statistics of Sanya, 2019). The characteristics of Sanya make it an ideal city to collect data, and selecting data from one city is considered acceptable for the study of internal branding (King et al., 2013).

Similar to other studies on internal branding (e.g., King & So, 2013; King et al., 2013; Zhang, 2019; Qiu et al., 2019; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009), we selected the five-star hotel industry as an appropriate context for several reasons. First, the services provided by five-star hotels do not involve tangible goods, which increase the relevance of strong brands to reduce customers' uncertainty (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Second, a greater level of contact exists between service providers and customers in the five-star hotel industry (Xiong et al., 2013), which increases the relevance of employees as brand champions. Third, the focal brand for a five-star hotel is its corporate brand (Berry, 2000), which eliminates the potential confounding effects of different brands within one organization (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014).

Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were used to collect data in January 2019. The researchers first contacted the hotel managers to determine their willingness to participate in our study. Eleven five-star hotels were willing to participate, and the questionnaires were then randomly distributed to hotel employees by four trained research assistants under the help of HR managers. Five hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed, with 482 valid ones being returned, for an effective response rate of 87.6%. The sample size is adequate because it is nearly five times the number of estimated parameters (Wolf, Harrington, Clark, & Miller, 2013).

We used several procedures in this study to reduce potential response bias. First, the respondents were assured of confidentiality. Second, the

Table 1
Sample profile.

Variable	Value	Frequency	Percent (%) ^a
Gender	Male	216	44.8
	Female	226	46.9
Age	18–20	65	13.5
	20–29	206	42.7
Education	30–39	114	23.7
	40–49	60	12.4
Monthly income ^b	>50	20	4.1
	Junior high school or below	67	13.9
Length of service in the hotel	Senior high school	168	34.9
	University	212	44.0
	Postgraduate and above	11	2.3
	<¥2000 (or \$287)	99	20.5
	¥2000–3999 (or \$287–430)	220	45.6
	¥4000–5999 (or \$430–860)	71	14.7
	¥6000–7999 (or \$861–114)	30	6.2
	>¥8000 (or \$1148)	42	8.7
	<1 year	130	27.0
	1–3 years	145	30.1
	3–5 years	83	17.2
	5–10 years	61	12.7
	>10 years	47	9.8

Note: ^aTotal percent does not equal 100 because of missing values; ^b 1 Yuan = 0.1513 US dollar.

respondents were told that there were no right or wrong answers. Third, the measurement items were carefully constructed to avoid ambiguity and complexity. Fourth, all items were neutrally worded, and social desirability and demand characteristics were eliminated. Fifth, the

respondents were given enough time to answer the questionnaires (Cooper & Schindler, 2013).

The detailed sample profiles are presented in Table 1. Among the respondents, 44.8% were males and 42.7% were between 20 and 29. Nearly one-third (34.9%) had a senior high school education. Most of the respondents (75.2%) earned a monthly income of more than 2000 yuan. As for length of service, 69.8% of the respondents reported that they had worked in their current hotel for more than one year. Similar to others studies (e.g., King & So, 2013; King et al., 2013; Sürütü, Öztürk, Okumus, & Bilgihan, 2019; Zhang, 2019), marital status was not included in our questionnaire. The sample profiles were similar as other studies taken in China hotel industry (King et al., 2013; Wang, Xu, Zhang, & Li, 2020), supporting the representatives of our sample.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

The means, standard deviations, skew, and kurtosis were calculated using SPSS 20.0 and are presented in Table 2. All absolute skewness

values were less than 2 and all absolute kurtosis values were less than 7, indicating the normality distribution (Zhang, Gursoy, & Xu, 2017). Cronbach's Alpha values for self-leadership, role identity, brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior were 0.959, 0.927, 0.951, 0.925, and 0.949, respectively, indicating high internal consistency (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014).

4.2. Common method bias check

Common method bias (CMB) was checked using two methods. First, correlations between the constructs were calculated using SPSS 20.0, and all were below 0.9 (Pavlou, Liang, & Xue, 2007), indicating that CMB was not a potential problem. Second, model comparisons were conducted using Mplus 7.0, and it was found that the one-two-three- and four-factor models were significantly worse than the current five-factor model (Xiong et al., 2013), further implying that CMB was not a major concern in this study.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and CFA results.

Construct/dimension/item	Mean	Std	Skewness	kurtosis	Loading	CR	AVE
Self-leadership (second-order construct)						0.934	0.782
Visualizing successful performance						0.919	0.739
I use my imagination to picture myself performing well on important brand-related tasks	4.066	0.790	-0.576	0.329	0.871		
I visualize myself successfully performing a brand-related task before I do it	4.104	0.770	-0.537	0.128	0.853		
I purposefully visualize myself overcoming the brand-related challenges I face	4.081	0.776	-0.543	0.303	0.882		
I often mentally rehearse the way I plan to deal with a brand-related challenge before I actually face the challenge	3.998	0.827	-0.638	0.453	0.832		
Self-goal-setting						0.950	0.934
I establish specific brand-related goals for my own performance	4.091	0.768	-0.433	-0.288	0.885		
I consciously have brand-related goals in mind for my work efforts	4.147	0.739	-0.583	0.408	0.872		
I work toward specific brand-related goals I have set for myself	4.162	0.705	-0.453	0.036	0.888		
I think about the brand-related goals that I intend to achieve in the future	4.058	0.785	-0.465	-0.063	0.886		
Self-talk						0.922	0.897
Sometimes I find I'm talking to myself (out loud or in my head) to help me deal with difficult brand-related problems I face	4.060	0.770	-0.460	0.028	0.893		
Sometimes I talk to myself (out loud or in my head) to work through difficult brand-related situations	4.008	0.776	-0.416	-0.001	0.853		
When I'm in difficult brand-related situations I will sometimes talk to myself (out loud or in my head) to help me get through it	4.035	0.780	-0.564	0.313	0.839		
Self-reward						0.743	0.933
When I do a brand-related assignment especially well, I like to treat myself to some thing or activity I especially enjoy	3.961	0.858	-0.618	0.327	0.905		
When I do something well, I reward myself with a special event such as a good dinner, movie, shopping trip, etc	3.963	0.879	-0.740	0.531	0.908		
When I have successfully completed a brand-related task, I often reward myself with something I like	3.986	0.864	-0.633	0.200	0.907		
Role identity						0.928	0.811
The work I do is very important to me	4.135	0.777	-0.666	0.380	0.891		
My job activities are personally meaningful to me	4.110	0.781	-0.458	-0.369	0.912		
The work I do is meaningful to me	4.104	0.791	-0.516	-0.106	0.898		
Brand knowledge						0.951	0.829
I know the values of our hotel brand	4.031	0.796	-0.503	0.039	0.883		
I know the vision of our hotel brand	4.083	0.769	-0.500	-0.059	0.913		
I know the brand promise of our hotel	4.125	0.764	-0.664	0.523	0.929		
I know the culture of our hotel brand	4.106	0.789	-0.878	1.410	0.915		
Brand commitment						0.925	0.755
I have a strong personal connection to our brand	4.108	0.826	-0.714	0.333	0.845		
I feel a close relationship with our brand	4.064	0.842	-0.626	0.083	0.890		
I am proud to tell other people that I am working for this hotel	4.044	0.865	-0.645	0.030	0.877		
The success of our brand makes me proud	4.127	0.847	-0.738	0.203	0.862		
Brand citizenship behavior						0.950	0.678
I adhere to the policies and procedures of our brand	4.286	0.707	-0.613	-0.278	0.750		
I think about the consequences my behavior may have on our brand image	4.295	0.718	-0.775	0.456	0.747		
I always improve my brand-related knowledge and skills	4.338	0.732	-1.102	1.830	0.759		
I always encourage my colleagues and customers to provide brand-related suggestions	4.073	0.816	-0.618	0.337	0.805		
I always report customer feedback directly to the person or department in charge	4.168	0.762	-0.491	-0.378	0.863		
I always help new colleagues to learn about our brand	4.268	0.725	-0.752	0.455	0.875		
I always help my colleagues to solve brand-related difficulties	4.174	0.743	-0.506	-0.194	0.887		
I always cooperate with my colleagues and talk about brand-related problems with them	4.197	0.755	-0.664	0.323	0.845		
I always help customers to learn about our brand	4.268	0.739	-0.751	0.466	0.863		

Note: std = standard deviation, CR = composite reliability, and AVE = average variance extracted.

4.3. Measurement model

A measurement model consisting of self-leadership (as a second-order construct), role identity, brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior was constructed using Mplus 7.0 with MLM estimation, i.e., maximum likelihood parameter estimates with standard errors and a mean-adjusted chi-square test statistic that were robust to multivariate non-normality (Byrne, 2011). The model achieved an excellent fit, with $\chi^2 = 939.309$, $df = 513$, CFI = 0.953, TLI = 0.949, RMSEA = 0.042, and SRMR = 0.045. The results (Table 1) showed that the standardized factor loadings for all items on the corresponding constructs were above 0.7, and the composite reliabilities (CRs) and average variances extracted (AVEs) of all constructs were greater than 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, indicating excellent convergence (Hair et al., 2014). All the AVE square roots were larger than the correlations between constructs (Table 2), suggesting strong discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014).

4.4. Structure model

Structure equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine the construct relationships. The SEM was performed using Mplus 7.0. As shown in Fig. 1 and Table 4, brand knowledge has a positive effect on brand commitment ($\lambda = 0.361$, $p < 0.001$) and brand citizenship behavior ($\lambda = 0.201$, $p < 0.05$), supporting H1a and H1b. Brand commitment has a positive effect on brand citizenship behavior ($\lambda = 0.178$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1c. Besides, self-leadership has a positive effect on brand knowledge ($\lambda = 0.319$, $p < 0.001$), brand commitment ($\lambda = 0.343$, $p < 0.001$), and brand citizenship behavior ($\lambda = 0.591$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2a, H2b, and H2c. Role identity has a positive effect on brand knowledge ($\beta = 0.463$, $p < 0.001$) and brand commitment ($\beta = 0.256$, $p < 0.001$). Self-leadership has a positive effect on role identity ($\lambda = 0.843$, $p < 0.001$). However, the positive effect of role identity on brand citizenship behavior is not supported ($\beta = -0.072$, $p > 0.05$). The variances of role identity, brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior explained by their antecedents, are 0.710, 0.564, 0.772, and 0.794, respectively.

4.5. Mediation effect

Bootstrapping (bootstrap = 2000) was used to examine the mediation effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results in Table 3 show that role identity mediates the effects of self-leadership on brand knowledge (indirect effect = 0.390, $p < 0.001$; 95%CI: [0.206, 0.574]) and brand commitment (indirect effect = 0.216, $p < 0.01$; 95%CI: [0.070, 0.362]), supporting H3a and H3b. However, the mediation effect from self-leadership to brand citizenship behavior via role identity was not found, rejecting H3c. A further analysis indicated that role identity and brand knowledge sequentially mediates the effects of self-leadership on brand commitment (indirect effect = 0.141, $p < 0.01$; 95%CI: [0.053, 0.228]) and brand citizenship behavior (indirect effect = 0.078, $p < 0.05$; 95%CI: [0.011, 0.145]) (Table 5).

Table 3
Discriminant analysis.

	1	2	3	4
Self-leadership	0.884			
Role identity	0.785	0.901		
Brand knowledge	0.672	0.690	0.910	
Brand commitment	0.740	0.772	0.769	0.869
Brand citizenship behavior	0.775	0.695	0.696	0.738
				0.823

Note: Numbers in the matrix represent correlations between constructs. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

Results of SEM.

Path		Estimate	Results
H1a	brand knowledge→brand commitment	0.361***	supported
H1b	brand knowledge→brand citizenship behavior	0.201***	supported
H1c	brand commitment→brand citizenship behavior	0.178*	supported
H2a	self-leadership→brand knowledge	0.319***	supported
H2b	self-leadership→brand commitment	0.343***	supported
H2c	self-leadership→brand citizenship behavior	0.591***	supported

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5

Results of mediation effects.

Path	Indirect effects bootstrapping			
	Estimate	95% confidence interval		
		Lower bound	Upper bound	
H3(a)	SL→RI→BK	0.390***	0.206	0.574
H3(b)	SL→RI→BC	0.216**	0.070	0.362
H3(c)	SL→RI→BCB	-0.060	-0.236	0.116
	SL→RI→BK→BC	0.141**	0.053	0.228
	SL→RI→BK→BCB	0.078*	0.011	0.145
	SL→RI→BC→BCB	0.038	-0.019	0.096
	SL→RI→BK→BC→BCB	0.025	-0.012	0.063

Note: * $p < 0.5$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; SL = self-leadership, RI = role identity, BK = brand knowledge, BC = brand commitment, BCB = brand citizenship behavior.

5. Discussions and implications

5.1. Conclusions

This study aims to empirically investigate the effects of self-leadership on internal branding outcomes, as well as the mediation effects of role identity on these relationships. The results indicate that a hierarchy-of-effect exists among three dimensions (i.e., brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior) of internal brand outcomes. Specifically, it is found that both brand knowledge and brand commitment positively affect brand citizenship behavior, and that brand knowledge positively affects brand commitment. This finding implies that employees follow a standard learning hierarchy to form their relationships with the hospitality brands (Xiong et al., 2013; Zhang & Bai, 2018); in other words, employees will first develop brand knowledge and then establish feelings regarding the brand, which is followed by brand-consistent behavior.

This study also finds that self-leadership has a positive effect on brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior, indicating that employees who have higher levels of self-leadership skills are more likely to have increased internal branding outcomes. This finding is in accord with previous findings that self-leadership improves an individual's work-related attitudes and behaviors (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Even if employees do not have a leadership title within the organization, they are still self-leaders (Manz & Sims, 2001). Employees can develop self-leadership skills through visualizing successful performance as well as self-goal-setting, self-talk, and self-reward. Social cognitive theory provides an explanation for this finding (Bandura, 1997). Self-leaders are more likely to have high levels of self-efficacy, and hence have favorable internal branding outcomes (Fu et al., 2017).

The results show that role identity mediates the effects of self-leadership on brand knowledge and brand commitment. This finding is consistent with Neck and Houghton's (2006) suggestion that attitudinal variables are important mediators between self-leadership and work-related outcomes. This is also in accord with empirical findings regarding vertical leadership, i.e., that the effect of transformational leadership on employee brand-building behavior is mediated by role

identity (Morhart et al., 2009). Self-leadership can lead to the development of employees' role identities as brand champions because it induces employees' intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which facilitates role identity internalization.

Role identity has a positive impact on brand knowledge and brand commitment. This finding is in line with role identity theory (Farmer et al., 2003), which suggests that an individual's attitudes are influenced by his/her salient role identity. People exhibit particular behaviors because of who they are (Shamir et al., 1993), and employees' role identities as brand champions satisfy their needs for self-expression, and hence employees will deepen their understanding about the brand with their own work experience and form an emotional attachment to the brand.

However, the mediation effect from self-leadership to brand citizenship behavior via role identity was not found. Self-leadership influences brand citizenship behavior sequentially through role identity and brand knowledge. One explanation for these results is that brand citizenship behavior is a higher-order response of employee toward the brand than brand knowledge and brand commitment, as suggested by the standard learning model, and therefore a stronger driver and extra effort are needed to make it happen.

5.2. Theoretical contributions

This study offers several theoretical contributions to internal branding and leadership theory. The study extends the body of knowledge on internal branding by conceptualizing it as a construct that comprehensively covers employees' cognitive (brand knowledge), affective (brand commitment), and behavioral (brand citizenship behavior) responses toward the brand, and examines the relationships among these three dimensions. Although a number of studies have been published on internal branding, most of them have mainly focused on only one aspect of the cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses employees show toward their brand (e.g., Morhart et al., 2009). This study asserts that brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior are indispensable for successful internal branding. This is an important theoretical contribution because employees are unlikely to become brand champions unless they have adequate brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Further, this study finds that employees follow a standard learning hierarchy to form a relationship with the brand. In other words, in order for employees to behave consistently with the brand's values, they must first fully understand the brand and have a deep emotional bond with it. These findings provide critical insights for hospitality organizations in fostering desired internal branding outcomes.

This study also enriches the existing knowledge on relationship between self-leadership and internal branding outcomes. Although leadership is known to be an important driver of internal branding outcomes (Burmann et al., 2009; Morhart et al., 2009), the majority of previous studies have primarily focused on formal or vertical leadership, neglecting informal leadership. To our best knowledge, this study is the first to examine the effect of informal leadership (i.e., self-leadership) on internal branding outcomes. Vertical leadership stems from an appointed or formal leader of an organization (Ensley et al., 2006), while self-leadership can be adopted by all employees in an organization regardless of whether or not they are in a formal leadership position (Pearce and Manz, 2005). In other words, every employee can be a leader who can improve his/her internal branding performance. Therefore, this study notes a new type of leadership that positively influences internal branding outcomes, thus providing a theoretical basis for hospitality organizations to turn employees into brand champions.

The current study also contributes to the existing theory by examining the mediating effects of role identity on the links between self-leadership and internal branding outcomes. Employees will have positive internal branding outcomes if they have a clear understanding of their role as brand champions. On the one hand, an employee's role

identity as a brand champion can be evoked by self-leadership strategies, while on the other hand, role identity further leads to behaviors that are in accordance with that identity (Leary & Tangney, 2003). This is an important contribution because it opens the "black box" of how self-leadership influences internal branding outcomes.

5.3. Managerial implications

The findings of this study have important implications for hospitality organization management. Internal branding serves as a critical management priority for hospitality organizations to create a strong brand (Keller, 2013). Because of the intangibility and inseparability of hospitality services, there is a need for hospitality organizations to take an internal perspective to involve their employees in cultivating the brand (Zhang & Bai, 2018). Internal branding includes three dimensions: brand knowledge, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behavior, and employees follow a cognitive-affective-behavioral order to form a relationship with the brand. Managers of hospitality organizations are therefore advised to evaluate internal branding outcomes using the three dimensions mentioned above. In order to shape employees into brand champions, managers of hospitality organizations should make sure that employees understand the brand's values (Xiong et al., 2013), form a positive emotional bond to the brand, and exhibit brand citizenship behaviors (Burmann et al., 2009).

Given that self-leadership was found to contribute to positive internal branding outcomes, the results of this study emphasize the need for employees to become self-leaders who direct themselves in the internal branding process. Self-leadership covers a series of behavioral and cognitive strategies, such as visualizing successful performance as well as self-goal-setting, self-talk, and self-reward (Neubert & Wu, 2006). Therefore, employees are encouraged to imagine themselves as brand managers so as to better adopt self-leadership behaviors; e.g., when employees encounter brand-related difficulties, they are advised to talk to themselves in order to overcome them. Vertical leaders play a crucial role in fostering employees' self-leadership skills (Pearce and Manz, 2005), and thus hospitality organizations can facilitate employees' self-leadership through vertical leadership. For example, vertical leaders can provide informal leadership opportunities to employees based on their unique knowledge, abilities, and interests. Vertical leaders can also practice self-leadership and serve as visible models for employees. When employees successfully demonstrate self-leadership behaviors, vertical leaders can verbally reinforce these behaviors and encourage other employees to learn from them. Organizational factors are also important in developing employees' self-leadership (Stewart et al., 2011). Hospitality organizations are advised to employ training programs on self-leadership strategies to encourage employees to exercise more self-leadership behaviors. As well, an organizational reward system that uses individual- and team-based incentives can be designed in order to boost self-leadership while not harming teamwork.

As role identity was found to mediate the effect of self-leadership on brand knowledge and brand commitment, managers of hospitality organizations can enhance employees' brand knowledge and brand commitment through evoking the employees' role identities as brand champions. Once an employee's role identity as a brand champion becomes salient, they tend to exhibit behaviors in line with this role identity in order to achieve self-verification (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Role identity is internalized by employees primarily for two reasons: normative expectations of social "important others" and self-expectations (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Managers of hospitality organizations are therefore encouraged to shape these two types of expectations to evoke employees' specific role identities. If employees perceive that their supervisors and co-workers expect them to be brand champions, their role identity as brand champions will become salient. Therefore, communication of positive brand champions to employees is important for hospitality organizations. Besides, managers are encouraged to help employees to better understand themselves and their roles

in building a strong hospitality brand in order to establish appropriate self-expectations.

In addition, this study found that role identity does not mediate the effects of self-leadership on internal branding citizenship behavior. However, it was found that role identity and brand knowledge sequentially mediate the effects of self-leadership on brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior. In order for employees to build deep emotional and behavioral relationships with the brand, they must first internalize a brand-based role identity into their self-concepts, and then develop adequate knowledge about the brand. It is important for hotel managers to learn more about the causal chain relationships that may exist between self-leadership and employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior. In addition to improving employees' role identity and brand knowledge separately as mentioned above, hotel managers are advised to utilize other strategies to simultaneously enhance employees' role identity as brand champions and brand knowledge. For example, hotel managers would do much better by identifying employees with a clear role identity and high level of brand knowledge and setting them as role models to inspire others to emulate.

5.4. Limitations and future directions

Some limitations of this study should not be overlooked. First, only five-star hotels are selected to collect data, which may constrain the generalizability of our findings to other hotels, and therefore more studies are needed to further examine the model developed in this study. Second, many types of leadership exist in an organization, and they may have quite different impacts on individual outcomes. Future research could examine the effects of vertical leadership (e.g., servant leadership) and horizontal leadership (e.g., shared leadership) on internal branding outcomes, as well as their interactive effects on internal branding outcomes. Third, as Berry and Parasuraman (1991) asserted, internal branding is an ongoing process involving employees' caring for and nurturing the brand, dynamic approaches such as field experiments and longitudinal designs are therefore particularly encouraged in order to investigate how employees form cognitional, emotional, and conative relationships with the brand, as well as the dynamic effects of various antecedents (e.g., training, communication, and leadership) on internal branding outcomes.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no Conflict Of Interest.

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