**Unveiling front-line employees' brand construal types during corporate brand promise delivery: A multi-study analysis**

**Abstract**

Marshalling empirical insights from three empirical studies, this work unveils the heterogeneous nature of front-line employees' (FLEs) corporate brand construals. Our insights contest corporate brand perspectives that assume employees respond to internal branding initiatives in a homogeneous manner. In *Study 1*, four types of FLEs' corporate brand construals are identified (i.e. brand enthusiasts, brand conformists, brand deviants, brand skeptics). *Study 2a* develops and validates the measurement scales of these four types. Through a Bayesian SEM approach, *Study 2b* reveals the existence of multifaceted cognitive and affective FLEs' responses to corporate branding initiatives. Our findings substantiate the significance of the social identity theory to both corporate/internal branding by revealing the link between corporate brand construal and corporate brand identification. In instrumental terms, this typology explains variations in FLEs' corporate brand promise delivery and renders practitioners more equipped to implement corporate branding initiatives.

**Keywords:** *corporate branding, corporate brand construal, corporate brand identification, frontline employees, internal branding, Bayesian SEM.*

## 1. Introduction

How do traditional brick-and-mortar firms such as IKEA, Home Depot and Lululemon build and sustain such a strong corporate brand reputation among consumers? The answer partially lies on the success of their tailored corporate branding programs that enable them to turn their frontline employees (FLEs) into corporate brand ambassadors. To date, corporate brand scholarship has not fully taken cognizance of the heterogeneous nature of corporate brand construal among employees when designing and implementing corporate branding initiatives (Müller, 2017). This oversight is paradoxical given that FLEs are at the vanguard of brand promise delivery in their interactions with customers (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018) and can leverage the benefits from the corporate brand to consumers, enhancing their trust in the brand and increasing sales (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Hughes et al., 2019).

Work in the corporate and internal branding streams extensively explores how FLEs shape customer experience with the corporate brand and sets their cognition, affect and behavior as key drivers of the corporate brand promise delivery (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Buil, Martínez, & Matute, 2016). Yet, these studies view FLEs as a homogenous group of organizational stakeholders and assume that they construe, interpret and deliver the corporate brand in a similar fashion (e.g., Morhart et al., 2009; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). FLEs are assumed to respond uniformly to the firm's corporate branding initiatives and consistently deliver its promise to craft a homogeneous customer brand experience (Liu, Ko, & Chapleo, 2017). However, work in cognitive psychology suggests that employees frame their role differently, having vastly different motives when pursuing various role objectives (Di Mascio, 2010; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Surprisingly, existing corporate and internal branding studies overlook any variations in the way FLEs construe the corporate brand when interacting with customers (Müller, 2017), although the success of FLEs' as brand ambassadors depends

heavily on how they interpret and deliver the brand in such encounters (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). In effect, without accommodating for the variations of FLEs' corporate brand construal during corporate brand promise delivery, any initiatives towards strengthening their brand-supporting behavior might become futile (Balmer, Liao, & Wang, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011).

This work seeks to address this gap and advance the corporate branding territory, by (*a*) explicating the heterogeneous nature of FLEs' construals of the corporate brand, and (*b*) revealing the impact of FLEs' corporate brand construals on their delivery of the corporate brand promise to customers. In doing so, this study highlights the instrumental value of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Construal Level Theory in explaining these variations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Extending prior work around service employees and how job framing affects their role fulfillment (e.g., Di Mascio, 2010; Xiong & King, 2015), *Study 1* reveals, through an exploratory approach, four different types of FLE corporate brand construals (i.e. brand enthusiasts, conformists, deviants, and skeptics); and, *Study 2a* develops and validates the measurement scales for these four types.

*Study 2b* then examines the varied responses of these four FLE corporate brand construal types towards the firm's corporate brand-building efforts. A survey-based approach is used to investigate how training and coaching affect the FLEs' cognitive (brand mindfulness) and affective responses (brand attachment) to the corporate brand and their consequent impact on FLEs' brand-supporting behavior, namely FLEs' brand resilience. Importantly, the moderating effect of the four types is examined through a Bayesian SEM approach, advancing a clustering view of FLE management in the corporate branding literature (Liu et al., 2017). Furthermore, the empirical insights of these studies are of material importance to senior management and

store supervisors; they provide a means by which practitioners could tailor corporate branding programs to fit the type of their FLEs' corporate brand construal (Balmer, 2013).

The article proceeds by scrutinizing the corporate brand canon with particular reference to corporate brand construal and SIT; then, it presents the three studies, explicates the methodology used and discusses the findings of each study. Lastly, it enumerates the managerial implications and considers the limitations of this study.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Corporate branding, FLEs and corporate brand promise delivery

The formal introduction of the corporate marketing and corporate brand notions from the mid to late 1990s onwards came with the realization that customer wants and needs were not only met by products and services but, in addition, through the organization's corporate brand (Balmer, 1998; Balmer & Illia, 2012). Notably, the foundational corporate branding literature stressed the importance of all employees in delivering the corporate brand (Balmer, 1995; 2001a; 2001b; Ind, 2007; Balmer & Gray, 2003) with organizational members sharing responsibility for corporate brand delivery, while recognizing CEOs as the ultimate guardians of a corporate brand (Balmer 1995; 2001b; 2012). For service brands, FLEs are at the vanguard of corporate brand delivery because of their intimate interactions with customers. These interactions can shape customers' corporate brand experience, resulting in increased sales and higher customer satisfaction (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Balmer et al., 2009; Schepers & Nijssen, 2018; Hughes et al., 2019).

Thus, it is a requisite that FLEs' self-identity is aligned with the corporate brand (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Balmer, 2012; Brannan et al., 2015) to engender an effective delivery of the corporate brand promise. In organizational studies, scholars have marshalled SIT to

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explain organizational members' cognitive and psychological identification with an entity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In corporate branding contexts, this resulted in the articulation of the corporate brand identification notion (Balmer et al., 2010; 2019). Stronger employee identification with the corporate brand is desirable since it results in greater firm-employee co-operation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), stronger brand attachment (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008) and increased brand citizenship behaviors (Tuškej et al., 2013; Balmer, 2017a). SIT is also used to explain how internal branding fosters corporate brand knowledge and engenders brand-supporting behaviors among employees (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018).

*2.2 Multifarious FLEs' corporate brand construals*

To date, the extant literature on the role of FLEs in corporate brand delivery promise commonly assumes that they constitute a homogeneous rather than a heterogeneous group of organizational stakeholders. As corporate brand ambassadors (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018), FLEs are seen to construe, interpret and deliver the corporate brand promise in a uniform manner (Morhart et al., 2009; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). Moreover, they are deemed to respond uniformly to internal/corporate branding initiatives; act seamlessly in interpreting the corporate brand; and act unvaryingly in delivering the corporate brand promise (Liu et al., 2017). However, recent studies offer a different perspective (Xiong & King, 2015; Müller, 2017), noting possible variations among FLEs' interpretation of the corporate brand in their interactions with customers.

Muller's (2017) standpoint is supportive within psychology, where cognitive models reveal that employees frame their role functions in different ways because of diverse individual motives and multifarious job role objectives (Di Mascio, 2010; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). These cognitive models also show that individuals use different construal and cognitive structures

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(e.g. schemas) during information processing to facilitate efficiencies in their decision-making (Rosch et al., 1976; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Construal constitutes an FLE's conscious, or subconscious, response to contextual demands (e.g. role demands) (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999) and enables them to focus on specific goals and behaviors during their interactions with customers (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Thus, a person's construal of their work environment can differ from one to another, resulting in different evaluations and motivations for fulfilling their job role (Di Mascio, 2010). However, the question of how FLEs' corporate brand construal influences their corporate brand promise delivery during service encounters, as well as how the corporate brand construal varies among FLEs, has yet to be addressed via empirical research (Müller, 2017; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018).

Addressing this question becomes even more important in light of recent insights. Evidence shows that different FLEs experience the corporate brand in multifarious ways; from a resource of symbolic importance for their delivery efforts (Müller, 2017) to a task that they might be unwilling to embark on despite having the required understanding (Xiong & King, 2015). Also, a perceived (mis)fit between an employee's identity and the corporate brand may co-exist with their corporate brand construal, affecting their ability to convey the corporate brand promise to customers (Brannan et al., 2015; Müller, 2017). This evidence suggests that FLEs' corporate brand construal is inextricably intertwined with the corporate brand identification notion. As employees' role construals remain relatively constant over time (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017), their investigation in relation to the corporate brand becomes worthy of managerial attention.

Categorizing employees based on interpersonal and behavioral differences (e.g. their perceptions of customer service) is not new in the service employee literature (cf. Di Mascio, 2010). Two studies in the branding literature have so far adopted a similar approach. Mangold and Miles (2007) propose a brand categorization schema based on the level of brand awareness.

Yet, their study remains conceptual in nature. Similarly, Xiong & King (2015) propose a brand typology for employees, without empirically explaining its implications for employee-customer interactions. What is apparent is that the way employees identify with and construe the corporate brand may have implications for their responses to corporate branding initiatives and, subsequently, for their brand-supporting behaviors. Thus, understanding how FLEs' corporate brand construals vary during brand promise delivery is necessary for the effective coordination and tailoring of corporate branding programs. Table A (Appendix) provides an overview of the key studies in this area.

## 3. Study 1 - Exploratory process

*Study 1* entails a deeper understanding of multifarious FLE corporate brand construals. A qualitative research design is adopted to explore how FLEs construe the corporate brand when delivering the corporate brand promise. Thirty-nine in-depth interviews with full-time FLEs were conducted during a four-month period. FLEs were recruited from a range of service and retail organizations in London, UK. The interview questions focused on participants' interpretation of their employer's corporate brand and their attitude towards brand-related policies and norms in their working environment[1]. Restaurant and hospitality sectors were excluded from our sample due to high employee turnover rates and the wide use of part-time

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[1] The transcripts were grouped according to commonalities of the summaries and quotes. The interviews, guided by open-ended questions to allow the participants' reflection of their own view, lasted between 43 and 64 minutes. All interviews were recorded with their consent and were professionally transcribed, resulting in a 436-page transcript. A list of initial codes was first developed based on knowledge around FLE construals and it was subsequently complemented with codes emerging from the data. Transcripts were grouped based on commonalities in FLEs' summaries and quotations around their brand construals. The inter-coder reliability was established through using two independent researchers who checked the original coding. The coefficient of agreement was calculated at 98.4%, which is considered acceptable.

staff (Podnar & Golob, 2010). The demographic profile of the participants is available in the Appendix (Table D).

*3.1 Study 1 findings*

Three common themes emerge during the qualitative data analysis: a) FLEs' attitude towards the corporate brand, b) the role of different construals in FLEs' attitude towards the corporate brand and c) the use of FLEs' construals when interacting with customers. The differences within these themes led to the identification of four types among participants. The four types that emerged are labeled as 1) ***Brand enthusiasts***, 2) ***Brand conformists***, 3) ***Brand deviants*** and 4) ***Brand skeptics***. The main attributes of each type are discussed below, with reference to indicative quotes.

**Brand enthusiasts** construe the corporate brand as an indispensable guide during the brand promise delivery, which provides them with a clear and detailed understanding of their role fulfilment**:** *"I definitely think that brand helps me to deliver better service … to understand and help the patients in a more productive way. It is something that makes us understand what we are doing, and why"* (Kevin). They demonstrate a strong psychological connection with the corporate brand, explaining their willingness to go the extra mile during service encounters, as they feel responsible for the corporate brand reputation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), as expressed by Kevin: *"We are not just defending my reputation or my colleague's reputation, but also the reputation of the business."* Furthermore, brand enthusiasts usually use *"*we*"* rather than "I" when referring to their corporate brand, showing their cognitive connection with the brand as their in-group (Dutton et al., 1994). Often, brand enthusiasts actively share their brand knowledge with customers, being cognizant of their impact on customers' corporate brand experience, as encapsulated in Krystyna's expression: "*When you know the brand, it's very useful because it's everything we say, smile, stand, deliver… During the whole day, we share our brand knowledge and brand experiences with customers… they think that we are the best*

*people in this brand and that we want to give them an unbelievable experience with X [brand].*" Additionally, they express eagerness to know more about the brand and report behaviors such as *"give feedback to x [brand]"*, *"did something out of our way"*, and *"do more and more to make customers happy with us"*, suggesting that brand enthusiasts are actively engaged with extra-role brand-related activity (Morhart et al., 2009).

**Brand conformists** view the corporate brand as a set of standards and procedures that they should comply with to fulfill their role. As Lauren suggests: *"You must comply with brand standards and procedures to give the quality of service that the brand requires, and the customer expects. As long as you follow the rules, everything is okay and you get home in time".* Brand knowledge is, thus, important, and supporting activities, such as training, help them contextualize the brand knowledge during the brand promise delivery. Sarah echoes this viewpoint: *"Brand knowledge is important. In training, I get the knowledge what to say and sell to customers. I like sticking to brand procedures, otherwise you might put yourself at risk ... customers complain [and] sales are not easy."* Brand conformists often construe the corporate brand at a relatively surface level; their compliance to brand norms facilitates their brand promise delivery, regardless of their actual feelings: "*You might be giving the same information over and over and over. It's annoying... I think it is important to just follow the rules"* (Chris). Besides, their compliance behaviors exist when they are mindful of their brand advocacy role; especially when having a brand affiliation on (i.e. uniform): "*I usually have my work clothes on after my shift... and I (often) want to have a cigarette on my way home. But you know, people will think, this shouldn't be happening?"* (Chris). The findings further reveal the brand conformists' cognitive state of self-awareness of their brand in-group (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). However, they seek support when encountering unexpected customer incidents, as in Lauren's statement: *"I've gone to see my manager so many times, asking how to say, what to say to customers in different cases."* Thus, by construing the corporate brand at

the surface level, brand conformists can deliver on its promise, as long as they are not facing new/unfamiliar challenges.

**Brand deviants** depart from brand standards and normative expectations when delivering the brand promise. They find limited value in translating the corporate brand into their brand promise delivery, as they believe that customers have diverse and heterogeneous brand expectations: "*It's good to know all this about how great [corporate brand] is but when they [customers] come in, everybody wants something different so you are on your own*" (Katerina). Brand deviants believe in their own judgment and often adopt arbitrary approaches during customer interactions. This viewpoint is exemplified by Alex's statement: "*What the book says doesn't matter. The head office has designed it, but you can't make them happy this way… Whatever [corporate brand] says, it won't make a difference. It's the staff's actions that matter and how they deal with customers' issues. Everyone is different, you'd act differently.*" They do not see how the corporate brand represents the values that the customers seek; rather, their action appears more pertinent to customer satisfaction: "*You feel like why should I bother communicating [corporate brand] with them. I'm clearly not going to get anything out of them so I change my approach just to make things happen. Why bother do as told when it doesn't matter for customers?*" (Lizzie). Brand deviants do not have a shared understanding of what the corporate brand stands for, reflecting some cognitive deviance from the corporate brand identity and values. Furthermore, being oriented towards self-directed goals, such as sales (Ferris et al., 2013), brand deviants express cynicism and weariness towards brand-related training sessions, as echoed by Katerina's expression: "*I remember the training sessions about company history, etc. that we all had to attend. I can't really see how they help me sell better.*" As findings reveal, they often show limited brand-related knowledge and skills and observe other peers to meet their role requirements: "*Sometimes just not sure what I should tell some people about [corporate brand], the easiest way is to check how other guys do it*" (Monica).

Overall, brand deviants do not express a negative corporate brand attitude. They consider themselves as an individual "working at" rather than "being part of" the corporate brand, unlike brand enthusiasts (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). As Lizzie says: *"It's great to go by the book and let them [customers] know what [corporate brand] does for them, but you know, this is not… what I get extra credit for.*" Brand deviants seem to work towards achieving their personal goals (approach motivation) rather than towards higher-order corporate brand goals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).

**Brand skeptics** question the value of their role in communicating the corporate brand promise and remain skeptical and passive in delivering corporate brand values to customers. Their brand construal is attributed to customers' rigid and pre-established brand perceptions, notwithstanding their behaviors in delivering the brand. According to Nick, "*Most of them [customers] think much of the brand one way or another, so what can I do to change it?*" The findings further reveal that the specific corporate brand construal has developed from negative customer reactions in their attempt to follow the brand standards: *"What about the brand? What brand knowledge? Not many customers care. I only tell them the offers so I can sell. When I first started here, I did everything by the book, but soon you realize that they don't care and you get an indifferent shrug so I had to adjust… They find it weird. Well, I find it weird too"* (Jamie). Brand skeptics remain relatively dismissive in supporting the corporate brand. On the one hand, their past attempt to internalize the corporate brand as part of their self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) was not well-received. On the other, their psychological detachment from the brand is portrayed in Amelia's quote: *"You don't take things personally. It's just not worth, it's a job and you know, you might get fired."* The findings further highlight their avoidance motivation (Ferris et al., 2013). Unlike brand conformists, brand skeptics ascribe to brand standards only when being monitored or to avoid punishment: "*I don't do it [brand standard] when the manager is not there. When she's not there I don't because they*

*[customers] don't like it. I don't like it."* (Nick). Although brand deviants and brand skeptics are often driven by their self-achievements, their rationale varies. The former believe that their behaviors need to be adjusted according to individual customers. The latter, however, remain inactive in construing the corporate brand when interacting with customers. Thus, brand skeptics' construal of the corporate brand during brand promise delivery is usually externally-imposed and avoidance-driven. A summary of each type's features is available (Table B, Appendix).

*3.2 Conclusion of Study 1 findings*

   *Study 1* uncovers four types of FLE brand construals during corporate brand promise delivery. *Brand enthusiasts* construe the corporate brand as essential in guiding their brand promise delivery during their customer interactions, showing stronger corporate brand identification. *Brand conformists* construe the corporate brand as standards and procedures that they should comply with. They demonstrate self-awareness of their representing the corporate brand, particularly when they have a brand affiliation on. This understanding enables them to normatively comply with the brand meaning in daily activities, but they do not necessarily construe the corporate brand in disruptive encounters with customers, where they seek support to facilitate their promise delivery to customers. *Brand deviants* depart from brand standards and lack a shared understanding of the corporate brand promise. They do not usually construe the corporate brand during customer interactions and often adopt arbitrary approaches when interacting with customers, which often serve their personal goals. Finally, *brand skeptics* remain dismissive in representing the corporate brand and shaping customers' perception of the corporate brand. Their self-concept is detached from the corporate brand due to prior disruptive experiences with customers. Adopting an avoidance motivation, they demonstrate the corporate brand construal only when being monitored or afraid of punishment. Given these

variations among FLEs, S*tudy 2a* aims at developing and validating the measurement scale for the four FLE types and *Study 2b* examines whether and how FLEs variedly respond to the firm's corporate branding initiatives.

## 4. Study 2a - Scale development and validation

The well-established protocol for scale development efforts that the prior literature recommends was followed, including item generation, content validity, initial purification and item refinement (Netemeyer et al., 2003; Öberseder et al., 2014).

*4.1 Item generation*

Following Öberseder et al. (2014), an item pool was initially developed for these four types based on representative quotations from *Study 1* and a comprehensive review of the internal branding and employee construal literatures. This process resulted in the creation of a 29-item pool to capture the key features of the four types previously identified (Appendix, Table C). All items were measured by seven-point Likert scales, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

*4.2 Content validity and initial scale purification*

Five marketing scholars and six marketing professionals – all with extensive experience in the service and retail industries – were first invited to assess the content of these items (face validity), and evaluate the items' clarity and conciseness. A detailed description of each of the four types was given to them and they were asked to report potential aspects of the constructs that were not adequately captured. Some differences between the panel and the items generated were found and four items were initially dropped (items 15, 22, 28, 29; Appendix, Table C). Then, the panel rated the remaining 25 items as "not applicable", "somewhat applicable" or "very applicable" with relevance to the context of interest (Öberseder et al., 2014). Items that

were considered at least "somewhat applicable" were retained. Four items were deleted (items 7, 8, 9, 21) and three items were rephrased due to ambiguity and/or repetitiveness (i.e. items 6, 19, 20, 23; Appendix Table C). Overall, twenty-one items remained.

*4.3 Item refinement*

Adopting a survey approach, the remaining items were pretested to further alter or delete any items that did not meet psychometric criteria (Netemeyer et al., 2003). A similar sample of respondents to *Study 1* was used and respondents were invited to complete an online survey. For the purposes of this study, only firms operating with FLEs in high-contact service settings were included. Using FAME as a sampling frame (i.e. a database of UK and Irish companies[2]), a random sample of 4,000 UK-based retailers was identified using a random number generator algorithm. First, senior management and/or store supervisors of each unit of our sample were contacted to gain permission for participation in this study. The purpose of the study was clearly explained in the cover letter and the participation of a store supervisor and at least two corresponding store FLEs were required for inclusion (a max of up to four FLEs per store was imposed). No stores/supervisors from the same firm were finally selected and all firms selected were considered corporate brands (cf. Balmer, 2001b; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer, 2010). Anonymity was reassured, as individual responses would not be distributed to neither FLEs' supervisors nor their firms.

Overall, 438 stores provisionally agreed to participate in this project (response rate 10.9%) and 1393 participants were initially indicated (438 store supervisors and 955 store employees). In addition, three criteria were set for participation: 1) FLEs should work at least over six months at the firm; 2) supervisors should work at least over 2 months with the indicated FLEs; 3) FLEs should work over four full-working days per week. For *Study 2a*, the research team

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[2] Bureau Van Dijk – A Moody׳s Analytics Company

randomly contacted half of the indicated FLEs (477 of them) to participate in an online survey. Overall, 401 responses were returned to the research team; finally, 357 responses were usable due to dropouts or not meeting the screening criteria imposed (74.8% overall response rate). The background of the respondents is available in Appendix (Table D).

To identify latent factors, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation, which revealed four factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1. The total variance explained is 55.55%. KMO test (0.86) and Barlett's test of Sphericity ($\chi^2$=2645.79, df (210), p < 0.001) showed that exploratory factor analysis is adequate for this data; no high cross-loadings among the items tested were present (Table 1). Item loadings for each factor range from 0.67 to 0.89 and the measures of sampling adequacy (MSA) exceed 0.8; thus, the correlation matrix is appropriate for principal axis factoring (Hair et al., 2010). The correlations among the four factors are moderate to low and range from 0.14-0.54; all are significant at the 0.01 level (Table 2). Cronbach's coefficient for all types remain within the suggested thresholds (0.74-0.82). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each factor ranges from 0.56-0.60, above the 0.5 threshold (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), indicating that the constructs' convergent validity was achieved. Discriminant validity was satisfied, as none of the squared correlations between any pair of constructs is larger than the AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The final item pool contains 21 items (see Table 1).

*------Insert Tables 1 & 2 ---*

## 5. Study 2b – The moderating effects of FLEs' corporate brand construals

Pertinent work confirms the effect of internal branding practices on employee brand knowledge, brand belief, brand identification, brand loyalty, trust and their brand-supporting behavior (e.g. Morhart et al., 2009; Balmer et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Balmer et al., 2020). However, whilst mindfulness has recently

received an interest in marketing (Ngo et al., 2016), branding scholars have yet to investigate its role in internal branding, with the exception of Bennett (2011), who identifies the effects of mindfulness on brand managers' job performance. Brand mindfulness represents FLEs' cognitive processing of a brand-related incident, reflecting their attention to brand promise delivery (Barber & Deale, 2014; Ngo et al., 2016). Furthermore, whilst existing studies explore the role of brand identification in bringing about brand-supporting behaviors, they mostly focus on the cognitive state of self-categorization. Yet, the affective component – brand attachment (Lam et al., 2010) – has not received the same level of interest. Therefore, it is worthwhile investigating how internal branding can influence employees' emotional responses towards the corporate brand. Evidence highlights internal branding as a driver of FLEs' in- and extra-role brand-supporting activity (Morhart et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014), for example, identify a positive relationship between internal branding and brand development, regarded as an extra-role brand-supporting behavior. However, in service contexts, service failures are common and FLEs are expected to recover from such incidents. Yet, existing internal branding studies have not investigated whether coaching and training are effective in helping FLEs deal with disruptive brand promise delivery (Luthans et al., 2007; Ngo et al., 2016). Hence, this study focuses on brand resilience, which reflects FLEs' ability to recover from and adapt to disruptive brand-related events during customer interactions.

*Study 2b* aims to investigate how internal branding practices, namely coaching and training, affect FLE brand resilience through their brand mindfulness and brand attachment. Moreover, it assesses how FLEs' cognitive and affective responses to coaching and training vary according to their type of corporate brand construal. An online survey approach is adopted using the scales developed in *Study 2a* (see figure 1).

*------ Insert Figure 1 here ------*

*5.1 Study 2b hypotheses*

Internal branding studies suggest training and coaching as key HR practices in ensuring FLEs' corporate brand promise delivery (e.g., Burmann et al., 2009). *Training* is defined as a systematic, ongoing and formalized process to develop employee knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that are critical for successful job performance (Ellinger et al., 2003; Elmadağ et al., 2008). It continuously enhances employees' understanding of corporate brand values (Cascio, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). *Coaching* is the process of providing employees with personal guidance and support to improve their KSAs in a less formal fashion than training (Elmadağ et al., 2008). In coaching, supervisors play a key role in explaining to subordinates how to meet their role expectations by enacting brand standards and offering constructive feedback in a timely manner (Ellinger et al., 2003). Coaching ensures that FLEs develop attitudes and behaviors supportive to corporate brand promise delivery, thereby enhancing their competence (Cascio, 2014).

*Brand mindfulness:* Mindfulness represents *"a state of consciousness"* in psychology literature (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 824), encompassing an individual's cognitive reaction to internal and external stimuli. This study defines *brand mindfulness* as FLEs' consciousness of corporate brand promise and values and their attention to corporate brand-related information (i.e., brand knowledge) and incidents (i.e., brand promise delivery) (Barber & Deale, 2014; Ngo et al., 2016). On the one hand, formal training develops and reinforces FLEs' understanding of distinctive corporate brand values and how to enact brand standards to realize these values (Cascio, 2014). On the other, coaching provides FLEs with personal guidance and constructive feedback, tailored to their daily job activities and brand-specific goals, facilitating their awareness of the corporate brand promise (King & Grace, 2008). Supervisors actively filter, interpret and instill corporate brand values to FLEs during their coaching efforts (Wieseke et al., 2009). Thus, we hypothesize that:

*Training (H1a) and coaching (H1b) will enhance FLEs' brand mindfulness*

*Brand attachment:* Brand attachment represents the emotional bond FLEs have with the corporate brand, based on how they feel about it and its relationship to them (Park et al., 2010). Training demonstrates the firm's focus and care for its employees to stimulate their personal KSAs to deliver the brand promise (Boukis & Gounaris, 2014; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018). Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) identify the effect of training on FLEs' emotional brand attachment, which then influences their brand promise delivery. Coaching also allows FLEs to appreciate their supervisors as role models, enhancing their understanding of and trust in corporate brand values (Boukis et al., 2017; Punjaisri et al., 2013). Studies show that brand understanding and brand trust are positively related to employees' brand identification (i.e. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014), which leads to emotional attachment with the brand (Park et al., 2010). Thus:

*Training (H2a) and coaching (H2b) will enhance FLEs' brand attachment*

*Brand resilience:* Drawing on previous work (Bonanno, 2004; Luthans et al., 2007), this study defines brand resilience as FLEs' ability to recover from and adapt to disruptive brand-related events during customer interactions to effectively deliver the brand promise. FLEs often receive negative input, such as negative customer feedback on the brand, and might face disruptive incidents during their encounter with customers, such as customer incivility (Boukis et al., 2020; Luthans et al., 2007). These are rarely prescribed in brand standards. Thus, strengthening brand resilience is important to ensure that FLEs could recover the corporate brand from such disruptive incidents.

As mindfulness suggests, an active refinement of existing schemas, openness to new information from the continuous stream of events, and a more nuanced appreciation of context (Langer, 2014) are related to FLEs' brand resilience. Management studies indicate that mindful

employees can better cope with social pressure and organizational change (Gärtner, 2013). The corporate brand-related KSAs acquired from training and coaching can provide FLEs with an action repertoire. Thus, brand mindfulness should enable FLEs to adapt to disruptive events and maintain their promise delivery (Gärtner, 2013; Ngo et al., 2016). Furthermore, FLEs with higher brand attachment strive for the achievement of the corporate brand's goal (Park et al., 2010). Indeed, internal branding increases their understanding of and attachment to the corporate brand, which is instrumental in guiding FLEs' brand-supporting behaviors during service recovery (Punjaisri et al., 2013).

Brand mindfulness mediates the links between training and coaching, and brand resilience. Specifically, training and coaching enable FLEs to be mindful of brand-related incidents, enhancing their ability to adjust to disrupted incidents. Indeed, Miao et al. (2017) report the influence of mindfulness on organizational citizenship behaviors. Additionally, past studies have provided empirical evidence for the mediating effect of brand identification on the link between internal branding and extra-role brand-supporting behaviors (e.g. Lohndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). When internal branding is effective in influencing shared values and understanding between FLEs and the corporate brand, FLEs develop an emotional connection with the corporate brand and work instinctively to the benefit of the brand (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008; Park et al., 2010). Therefore:

*Brand mindfulness will mediate the effects of training (H3a) and coaching (H3b) on FLEs' brand resilience.*

*Brand attachment will mediate the effects of training (H4a) and coaching (H4b) on FLEs' brand resilience.*

*5.2 The moderating effects of FLEs' corporate brand construals*

The different ways FLEs construe and identify with the corporate brand suggest potential moderating effects of their corporate brand construals on how they respond to internal branding initiatives. Based on *Study 1* findings, brand enthusiasts' psychological connection with the corporate brand is in line with their corporate brand construal as an indispensable guide for customer interactions. They seek clear and detailed brand information to facilitate their brand promise delivery, including extra-role brand-supporting behaviors, and nurture the brand reputation (Piehler et al., 2016; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). *Study* 1 findings also highlight brand conformists' compliance with the corporate brand standards. Because of their surface-level corporate brand construal, they seek supporting activities, such as training, to enable their role compliance. However, supervisor support is required when they face a new challenge, such as a disruptive customer incident.

Furthermore, brand deviants express cognitive deviance from the corporate brand, demonstrating arbitrary approaches to satisfy customers. They do not find much value in attending training and other role-supporting activities. As they often observe their colleagues, their supervisor's role in supporting them and providing timely guidance becomes crucial (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018). Last, *Study 1* findings reveal that brand skeptics oppress their psychological connection with the corporate brand, to some extent, due to prior negative experiences with their delivery efforts. Their corporate brand construal is externally-imposed and avoidance-driven. Thus, with appropriate guidance and timely feedback from supervisors, they may appreciate further their role in delivering the brand promise when enacted effectively.

Similarly, the service branding literature suggests tailoring HR practices according to the level of FLEs' customer orientation. Studies identify varied effects of training on employee attitudes, behaviors and performance (Peccei & Rosenthal, 2000; Di Mascio, 2010). This study, thus, hypothesizes that the effect of training and coaching on FLEs' mindfulness of and attachment to the corporate brand varies according to their corporate brand construal type:

*The effects of training on brand mindfulness and brand attachment will be stronger for brand enthusiasts (H5a) and brand conformists (H5b), compared to the other FLE types*

*The effects of coaching on brand mindfulness and brand attachment will be stronger for brand skeptics (H6a) and brand deviants (H6b), compared to the other FLE types*

*5.3 Sampling and data collection*

For *Study 2b*, data was collected from a single dyad from the pool of firms identified in *Study 2a* to test the hypothesized relationships. Both store managers and corresponding FLEs from each firm were invited to participate in an online survey at different points in time, following a dyadic methodological approach that limits single-source bias (Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Initially, the remaining FLEs from *Study 1* (478) were contacted regarding their perceptions of internal branding practices and their brand-related responses and one month was given for completing the online survey[3]. By gathering data from two different sources at different points in time, (supervisors were approached two weeks after FLE data collection was completed), common method bias was reduced. To ensure anonymity and avoid biased responses, FLEs were not informed of the type of data that would be gathered from their supervisors (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Rindfleisch et al., 2008). Anonymity and confidentiality were strongly assured to all respondents as each group was not informed of the specific content of the questions asked to the other one. In total, 373 final responses were usable, as not both sides of FLE-supervisor dyads completed the online survey (78% overall response rate). Code numbers were assigned to each supervisor and matched to FLE responses. The background of *Study 2b* respondents is available in Appendix (Table D).

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[3] A reminder was sent two weeks after the initial invitation and in cases where more than one responses per store were received, the earlier one was used for data analysis.

### 5.3.1 Measures

All constructs rely on previous studies, using seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). Table 5 presents the scale items together with descriptive and scale measurement statistics. Training and coaching are measured with four and five items respectively, adapted from Ellinger et al. (2003); brand mindfulness with three items from Barber and Deale (2014) and Ngo et al. (2016); brand attachment with four items, from Punjaisri and Wilson (2011); brand resilience with five items from Luthans et al. (2007). All scales were adapted to measure at the corporate brand level. FLEs report on coaching, training, brand attachment and brand mindfulness and supervisors report on FLEs' brand resilience. Each FLE type is measured with the items developed in *Study 2a*.

### 5.4 A Bayesian estimation approach

To analyze *Study 2b* data, a Bayesian estimation method was adopted. Although most of the published research relies on regression analysis to evaluate the hypothesized paths, the multivariate normality assumption is violated when Likert rating scale data is treated as continuous outcomes in confirmatory factor analysis (Lubke & Muthén, 2004); and if the ordinal nature of the data is not taken into account, biased research findings may be obtained. Bayesian estimation methods result in more unbiased estimates and "comparable power to the ML method with bootstrap bias-corrected confidence intervals" (Wang & Preacher, 2015, p. 251). Bayesian approaches with Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) techniques are more flexible and feasible for the estimation and testing of individual parameters or linear combinations of parameters in more complex mediation or moderation models (Wang & Preacher, 2015), as the case in this study.

### 5.4.1 Nomological validity

The nomological validity of the new scale is tested by examining the scale's ability to behave as theoretically expected in relation to other constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Prior empirical work in the internal branding and cognitive psychology areas suggests a positive association between employee role construals and their corresponding role-support behavioral outcomes (Xiong & King, 2015; Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Hence, if the different corporate brand construal types have a significant effect on brand-supporting behavior, nomological validity is then established. To measure FLEs' brand citizenship behavior, the four-item scale from Erkmen and Hancer (2015) was used. Correlations among FLE types are significant at the 0.01 level (Table 3) and all four FLE types have a significant and positive effect on brand citizenship behavior, as Table 4 indicates, establishing this way nomological validity.

*-----Insert Tables 3 & 4 ----*

*5.4.2 Measurement model*

The psychometric properties of all study constructs were first examined using the Bayesian estimation posterior values (Table 5). Apart from the means that Bayesian estimation commonly provides, all standardized factor loadings were estimated. During the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) process, all latent construct items were statistically significant ($p<0.05$) (i.e., the zero value was not included in the confidence interval) and over 0.5, indicating that all constructs have convergent validity (Hair et al., 2010). Frequentist reliability and validity measures, such as composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha, are based on multivariate normality. Thus, they cannot be calculated for ordinal variables.

*-----Insert Table 5 ----*

Next, discriminant validity is assessed, using two different methods. First, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010). The posterior distributions of the co-variances and variables for all model variables were provided by the

Bayesian estimation procedure, while the correlations were then computed from these. As correlations were lower than the square root of AVE for all constructs, discriminant validity is established (Table 6). In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was conducted, as using the HTMT ratio with a 0.85 cutoff better assesses discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Results show that all values are below 0.85 (Table 6).

*-----Insert Table 6----*

The Bayesian estimation approach uses the MCMC algorithms to continually extract random samples from the model parameters' posterior distribution (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). To assess convergence of the MCMC algorithm in distribution, the posterior distributions must be monitored (Muthén & Muthén, 2012)[4]. In Bayesian estimation, the posterior predictive value is used as the general goodness-of-fit measure to evaluate model fit (Wang & Preacher, 2015). The posterior predictive value of our model was 0.51, demonstrating the model's goodness-of-fit (Gelman et al., 2014). MCMC convergence could also be assessed according to the potential scale reduction (PSR) convergence criterion (Gelman et al., 2014). Within- and between-chain variation of parameter estimates are compared to the PSR criterion. When a single MCMC chain is used, the PSR compares variation within and between the third and fourth quarters of the iterations. When the PSR value is 1.000, the convergence is perfect. With a large number of parameters, a PSR lower than 1.100 for each parameter demonstrates convergence of the MCMC sequence (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). In this model, the PSR value was 1.0013; therefore, convergence was accomplished.

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[4] During the analysis procedure, burn-in samples are extracted for the MCMC procedure to converge to the true joint posterior distribution. Once the burn-in samples have been extracted and discarded, additional samples are then extracted for a clearer overview of the joint posterior distribution.

*5.5 Structural model- Direct & mediation effects*

To evaluate the Bayesian structural model, the BSEM model was fitted to the data using AMOS 24 (Papastathopoulos et al., 2020). Results (Table 7) confirm H1a and indicate a positive effect of training on brand mindfulness (Mean=0.187, CI=0.028 to 0.348). Coaching is also found to significantly affect brand mindfulness (Mean=0.631, CI=0.398 to 0.879), supporting H1b. Likewise, H2a is supported, indicating a positive effect of training on brand attachment (Mean=0.145, CI=0.021 to 0.271). Results also confirm H2b, indicating a positive impact of coaching on brand attachment (Mean=0.690, CI=0.502 to 0.896). Results also show a significant impact of brand mindfulness on brand resilience (Mean=0.187, CI=-0.093 to 0.283). Finally, brand resilience is also positively affected from brand attachment (Mean=0.586, CI=0.458 to 0.728). As these effects are statistically significant, a full mediation effect exists for all four hypotheses made, confirming H3a, H3b, H4a and H4b (Table 7). Hence, brand mindfulness and brand attachment fully mediate the relationships between coaching and training and brand resilience respectively. Regarding the control variables added to make the model more robust, gender (Mean=0.136, *n.s.*) and tenure with the firm (Mean=-0.072, *n.s.*) have no significant effect on brand resilience, whereas work experience has a significant effect on brand resilience (Mean=0.130*).

*-----Insert Table 7 ----*

*5.6 Moderated mediation using the Bayesian SEM approach*

Following Muller et al.'s (2005) recommendations, this study falls under the moderated mediation, which occurs when the mediation effect varies as a function of one or more moderators. Hence, the effects of training and coaching on brand attachment and brand mindfulness (asmediators) are assumed to be moderated by the four FLE corporate brand

construal types. By following the moderated mediation approach, the effect of these four types as moderators can be specified and distinguished more easily.

*5.7 The moderating effect of corporate brand construal types*

Results (Table 8) indicate that the effect of training on brand mindfulness becomes significantly higher for brand conformists (Mean=0.117, CI=0.005 to 0.143), but lower for brand deviants (Mean=-0.117, CI=-0.147 to -0.014). Contrarily, brand skeptics and brand enthusiasts do not significantly moderate this relationship. Training positively affects brand attachment for brand conformists (Mean=0.091, CI=0.005 to 0.123), but negatively for brand skeptics (Mean=-0.074, CI=-0.093 to -0.008). Brand deviants and brand enthusiasts have no significant moderating effect on the training-brand attachment relationship. Therefore, H5a is rejected whereas H5b is supported.

Results also indicate that the effect of coaching on brand mindfulness is significant and stronger for all corporate brand construal types, particularly for brand deviants (Mean=0.125, CI=0.005 to 0.155) and brand enthusiasts (Mean=0.075, CI=0.005 to 0.093). This effect also remains significant and positive for brand conformists (Mean=0.070, CI=0.008 to 0.089) and brand skeptics (Mean=0.054, CI=0.009 to 0.069). Hence, H6a is partially confirmed. Regarding the effect of coaching on brand attachment, it becomes significantly stronger for brand deviants (Mean=0.081, CI=0.013 to 0.131), brand skeptics (Mean=0.068, CI=0.008 to 0.094) and brand enthusiasts (Mean=0.057, CI=0.014 to 0.079), whereas brand conformists have no significant moderating effect on this relationship. Therefore, H6b is supported.

*-----Insert Table 8 ----*

*5.8 Discussion of Study 2b results*

The mediation analysis indicates that training and coaching affect FLE brand resilience through their influence on their levels of brand mindfulness and brand attachment. Both support

FLEs in coping with disruptive brand-related incidents. That is, both enable FLEs to become conscious of any brand-related information and incidents, and enhance their emotional bond with the corporate brand, facilitating their ability to adjust to and recover from disruptive customer incidents. Besides, the moderated mediation confirms that these effects vary according to different brand construal types.

For brand enthusiasts and brand skeptics, coaching appears to be more effective in enhancing their levels of brand attachment and brand mindfulness. Training does not influence brand enthusiasts and negatively influences brand skeptics' brand attachment. However, the rationale behind this finding differs between these two types. Referring to *Study 1* findings, brand enthusiasts are eager to enact the brand promise. Thus, they may perceive personal guidance and support more useful to improve their competence when encountering disruptive incidents (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2018). Coaching becomes effective in inducing their mindfulness and attachment. For brand skeptics, due to their avoidance approach, the informal, yet timely, feedback from their supervisor is necessary to increase their attention to brand-related information and incidents (Gärtner, 2013). Furthermore, due to their disruptive past experiences with customers, they distance their self-concept from the corporate brand. Thus, personal guidance and support as well as constructive feedback from their supervisor strongly facilitates their corporate brand value enactment, thereby restoring their emotional bond with the corporate brand. Hence, it is not surprising that training, which is less personalized, is not helpful in bringing about brand skeptics' brand mindfulness, and even exerts a negative effect on their emotional connection with the brand.

Similarly, coaching emerges as a relatively strong predictor of brand deviants' consciousness of and emotional attachment to the corporate brand, compared to training. As brand deviants act arbitrarily in their customer interactions and often observe colleagues to

meet their role requirements, having a supervisor offer them timely feedback could enable them to become more mindful with relevant brand-supporting behaviors. This is particularly important during disruptive incidents, as *Study 1* shows that they may depart from the brand standards to serve their personal objectives. Furthermore, as coaching offers personal guidance to improve their KSAs even during brand promise disruption, it helps them attain their self-achievement, explaining why coaching becomes more effective than training in enhancing their brand attachment. However, this insight should be treated with caution, as their brand understanding may not be shared nor aligned with management's expectations. Corroborating with *Study 1*, findings highlight the negative effect of training on brand deviants' brand mindfulness.

As *Study 1* reveals that brand conformists consider brand knowledge important, training is more instrumental in enhancing their cognitive and affective responses than coaching, unlike other types. On the one hand, both training and coaching positively influence their awareness of brand-related knowledge and incidents, facilitating their role fulfilment (Piehler et al., 2016). On the other, due to their surface-level corporate brand construal, personal and informal guidance from their supervisor may not be as well received as training, which is a formalized process from the institution. This explains why they do not cope well with unfamiliar incidents, during which coaching becomes relevant. Additionally, the formalized process of training focusing on enhancing FLEs' understanding of the corporate brand's distinctive values (Cascio, 2014) becomes more instrumental in inducing their brand attachment. The heightened awareness of the distinctive brand values could nudge them not only towards a cognitive, but also an emotional connection with the corporate brand (Lam et al., 2010), considering that they maintain brand-supporting behaviors outside their working hours, as long as they have their brand affiliation, as *Study 1* findings reveal. Finally, as findings reveal, work experience, as a

control variable, seems to have a role in facilitating FLEs' ability to cope with any brand-related disruption.

## 6. Discussion

This work contributes to one of the core dimensions of the corporate marketing mix – the corporate brand covenant, which represents the promise between the corporate brand and its stakeholders (Balmer, 2011). In corporate marketing, FLEs play a crucial role in upholding the corporate brand covenant through building and sustaining a trusted relationship between the organization and its external stakeholders (Balmer, 1995; 1998; 2001b; 2009; 2012; 2017a; Balmer et al., 2011; Leitch, 2017). Acknowledging this central role of FLEs in nurturing corporate brand covenant, this work's contribution to corporate brand scholarship is threefold.

First, it differs from previous corporate branding studies that assume homogeneous FLEs' responses to branding initiatives. Drawing on SIT/corporate brand identification and construal level theoretical perspectives (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Balmer et al., 2010; 2011), it reveals four types of FLEs 'corporate brand construal and empirically exhibits their varied cognitive and affective responses to corporate branding initiatives. Findings further broaden existing internal branding insights by unveiling four types of FLEs' corporate brand construal: brand enthusiasts, brand conformists, brand deviants and brand skeptics. Essentially, findings highlight that FLEs variedly construe the corporate brand when interacting with customers. These insights advance corporate branding literature by indicating the consequences from the FLEs' varied level of cognitive connection with the corporate brand. Thence, FLEs hold varied views towards their role in living the corporate brand and respond differently to internal branding initiatives. Thus, corroborating with studies from occupational psychology (e.g. Wiesenfeld et al., 2017), this work advances the corporate branding literature by showing that FLEs of different construal types use varied schemas to make sense of their role requirements;

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their corporate brand construal shapes their brand promise delivery. Importantly, this work develops a measurement scale for each of these four distinct types, adding to employee classifications in internal branding and corporate branding streams of research (Powell, 2011; Xiong & King, 2015).

Second, this work substantiates the role of corporate brand identification theoretical perspectives (Balmer & Liao, 1997; Balmer, 2017b; Balmer et al., 2020), identifying the co-existence between multifarious FLE corporate brand construals and corporate brand identification. Unlike most studies that focus on the cognitive side of corporate brand identification (cf. Lam et al., 2010), this work features its emotional counterpart. It reveals that the effect of internal branding initiatives on the FLEs' emotional bond with the corporate brand is intertwined with their corporate brand construal type. For example, when FLEs perceive the corporate brand as an essential guide of their brand promise delivery, they cognitively and emotionally identify with the corporate brand. However, when FLEs construe the corporate brand to fulfil their self-achievement, they do not develop a sense of oneness nor an emotional connection with the brand, hindering the attainment of corporate brand goals.

Third, this work bridges the corporate and service branding literatures (Di Mascio, 2010; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Schepers & Nijssen, 2018), highlighting differing effects of coaching and training on cognitive and affective responses according to FLEs' corporate brand construal type. For example, while coaching is instrumental in influencing brand mindfulness of all FLE types (particularly brand enthusiasts and brand deviants), it is not effective in influencing brand conformists' brand attachment. To induce their brand attachment and brand mindfulness, training seems to be a more effective counterpart, though this is not the case for other FLE construal types. Hence, this work enriches existing internal corporate branding insights (i.e. Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) by showing that coaching, relatively to training, is generally

effective in influencing FLEs' corporate brand promise delivery even during a disruptive brand-related incident. Their effects on FLEs' brand resilience are through their influences on brand attachment and brand mindfulness. Specifically, when training and coaching successfully induce the emotional bond of FLEs with the corporate brand and conscientious attention to brand-related incidents, they will adapt better to disruptive incidents during the brand promise delivery.

*6.1 Managerial implications*

In terms of instrumental utility, senior managers and store managers, by taking cognizance of variations in FLEs' corporate brand promise delivery, are better-equipped to design more tailored internal branding initiatives that are relevant to their corporate brand construal type. As FLEs are often key for living the corporate brand covenant from the corporate marketing perspective (Balmer et al., 2009; Balmer, 2011), ignoring variations in FLE corporate brand construal can undermine customer corporate brand experience, and subsequently, corporate brand reputation. Particularly for a corporate service brand, FLEs may experience disruptive incidents during their corporate brand promise delivery. Hence, managers, seeking to enhance their ability to adjust to these incidents are encouraged to design and implement training and coaching with awareness of varied corporate brand construal types.

Although training and coaching are generally effective in fostering corporate brand identification and brand-supporting behaviors, FLEs of different construal types variedly respond to these initiatives. Indeed, personal guidance and support from store managers, as in the form of coaching, are necessary to improve FLEs' attentiveness to corporate brand-related incidents, and facilitate their prompt adjustment to disruptive incidents during their corporate brand promise delivery. Coaching is also effective in promoting FLEs' emotional bond with the corporate brand for all types but brand conformists. Specifically, for brand skeptics, who

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encounter past negative experiences when attempting to follow corporate brand standards, store managers could provide them with individual coaching to ascertain successful enactment of the corporate brand, reassuring their positive experiences in construing the corporate brand. Furthermore, store managers should seek to provide them with timely and constructive feedback to engender an understanding of their vital role as a corporate brand ambassador. These actions could then facilitate the ability of brand skeptics to cope with disruptive incidents during the brand promise delivery. Training is recommended when seeking to enhance the brand conformists' emotional attachment to the corporate brand. Although brand deviants and brand skeptics demonstrate a relatively weak corporate brand identification, training is not recommended, as it may not effectively nurture a meaningful emotional connection with the corporate brand. To develop FLEs' brand mindfulness, tailoring training programs to suit different FLE types is necessary because their perceptions towards training programs are also found to vary. Having said that, management should note that training may not be efficacious for brand conformists in this instance.

Furthermore, taking into account corporate brand construal types, store managers can more resourcefully assign employees to appropriate roles. For instance, brand conformists can be optimized for standardized and routine service encounters where they can follow corporate brand standards (e.g. cashiers). Brand enthusiasts are more suited for high-contact brand touchpoints, where resilience is desirable (e.g. customer complaint officers) or where extra-role brand behaviors are necessary (e.g. front-desk associate and client relations associate). Additionally, they could also undertake a brand ambassador role for both external and internal stakeholders. Contrarily, brand skeptics should initially work under guidance and supervisory support. Their interactions with customers should be restrained until they build up confidence and keenness to fulfil the corporate brand promise. Last, brand deviants could be assigned to

deal with tasks that are transaction-oriented (e.g. inventory associates) or be allotted to limited personalization for individual customers.

The overriding message for managers is that they should take into account the heterogeneous nature of FLEs' corporate brand construal when assigning personnel to specific roles and when implementing corporate coaching and training programs. Failure to accommodate these insights can subvert corporate brand stratagems, including internal branding initiatives for the same, and militate efforts to foster organization-wide corporate brand orientation.

## 7. Limitations and future research

This work has some limitations. First, data was collected from FLEs in a service/retail setting, thereby restricting its generalizability to back-office employees and other business settings. Future research could investigate how the variations among FLE types shape other attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g. involvement in co-creation activities with customers). Given the specific focus on high-contact settings, more studies are necessary to investigate whether the typology holds true in other contexts (e.g. hospitality or B2B). Given the variation in the effectiveness of training, future work should also consider from a longitudinal perspective whether it is of higher value for entry-level employees with different corporate brand construals. Also, this work does not examine whether, why and how FLEs could eventually switch from one type to another, depending on various contextual conditions (e.g. leadership style), their work experience or their personality traits. Thus, future research could also adopt a longitudinal study to detect changes in FLEs' identification within the typology, or involve other contextual factors. Finally, this study focuses only on training and coaching.

Other internal branding practices could be explored to understand how they induce cognitive, affective and behavioral responses from different types of FLEs.

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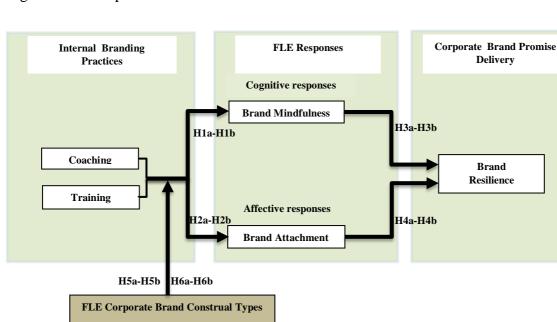
**Figures**

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

**Table 1 -** Items and EFA Factor Loadings

| Brand Factor 1 Enthusiasts | (Cronbach a=0.799) | Item Loadings |
|---|---|---|
| Providing customers proactively with brand-related info improves their experience with the brand. | | 0.74** |
| I really enjoy discussing with friends about what this brands stands for. | | 0.73** |
| I take up what this firm stands for. | | 0.72** |
| I am a resource for customers to use so they can know more about this firm's brand. | | 0.87** |
| Knowing about what this brand stands for is a prerequisite so that I can provide good customer service. | | 0.70** |
| The role of the brand is vital so that I explain customers how they can benefit from the products/services that the firm offers. | | 0.75** |
| Brand Conformists | (Cronbach a=0.823) | Factor 2 Item Loadings |
| Communicating the brand the way I am told to is all it takes to keep customers satisfied. | | 0.89** |
| I am always cautious about what customers think of the brand, as they can get easily affected. | | 0.79** |
| Often, I have to hide my real feelings when discussing with customers about my firm's brand. | | 0.74** |
| Following brand communication guidelines when interacting with customers is a top priority for me | | 0.76** |
| I rarely ask for my supervisor's advice when it comes to communicating customers info about the brand (r). | | 0.71** |
| Brand Deviants | (Cronbach a=0.817) | Factor 3 Item Loadings |
| Employees should adjust their brand communication efforts towards customers depending on how responsive customers are. | | 0.67** |
| Employees receive adequate support from this firm so that they communicate the brand promise successfully to customers. | | 0.85** |

| Often, I check how other colleagues talk about the brand to customers and I do things in the same way. | 0.70** |
|---|---|
| It is the firm's brand reputation that makes customers satisfied rather than how much employees know about the brand. | 0.84** |
| The way I think of different customers might affect the way I communicate brand information to each one of them. | 0.78** |

| Brand Factor 4 | (Cronbach a=0.746) |
|---|---|

| Skeptics | Item Loadings |
|---|---|
| Explaining customers in detail about the brand is something that they really enjoy (r). | 0.72** |
| I follow brand communication standards, especially when they help me achieve my work goals. | 0.75** |
| No matter what employees communicate to customers about the brand, it is advertisement that mostly make consumers like or dislike a brand. | 0.73** |
| If specific bonuses were provided for communicating the brand promise to customers, I would put more effort into it. | 0.77** |
| No matter how hard I try with customers to explain what the firm's brand stands for, they are not going to change if they think little of us. | 0.80** |

Notes: **:$p<0.01$, *:$p<0.05$

**Table 2 -** Correlation Matrix

| | Brand Enthusiasts | Brand Skeptics | Brand Conformists | Brand Deviants |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Brand Enthusiasts** | 0.56(0.88)[a] | (0.02) | (0.01) | (0.03) |
| **Brand Skeptics** | .160** | 0.56(0.86) | (0.23) | (0.15) |
| **Brand Conformists** | .141** | .482** | 0.60(0.88) | (0.29) |
| **Brand Deviants** | .193** | .391** | .540** | 0.59(0.87) |

Notes: [a] Diagonal elements in bold denote Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and the Composite Reliability (CR) index in the parenthesis / **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3 -** Nomological Validity and Correlation Matrix

| | AVE | CR | Dev | Conf | Skept | Ent | BCB |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dev | 0.758 | 0.940 | **0.871** | | | | |
| Conf | 0.583 | 0.873 | 0.593** | **0.764** | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Skept | 0.624 | 0.890 | 0.626** | 0.602** | **0.790** | | |
| Ent | 0.641 | 0.914 | 0.596** | 0.668** | 0.642** | **0.801** | |
| BCB | 0.618 | 0.866 | 0.648** | 0.655** | 0.651** | 0.657** | **0.786** |

*Notes: Diagonal elements in bold denote square root of AVE. The off-diagonal entries denote the correlation between the constructs. Correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

**Table 4 -** Nomological Validity Effects

| Path | Mean | S.E | S. D. | C.S | 95% Lower Bound | 95% Upper Bound | Min | Max | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BCB<--Ent | 0.187 | 0.007 | 0.109 | 1.001 | 0.041 | 0.392 | -0.081 | 0.477 | *Supported* |
| BCB<--Skept | 0.167 | 0.003 | 0.102 | 1.002 | 0.088 | 0.348 | -0.029 | 0.506 | *Supported* |
| BCB<--Conf | 0.177 | 0.004 | 0.102 | 1.001 | 0.048 | 0.279 | -0.073 | 0.433 | *Supported* |
| BCB<--Dev | 0.141 | 0.006 | 0.074 | 1.001 | 0.041 | 0.305 | -0.107 | 0.421 | *Supported* |

*Notes: $R^2_{BCB}$=0.537; Notes: Ent = Enthusiasts; Skept = Skeptics; Conf =Conformists; Dev = Deviants; BCB = Brand Citizenship Behavior*

**Table 5 -** Test of Normality, Descriptive and Measurement Model

| Constructs & Indicators | Test of Normality SW[a] test Statistic | AVE | Posterior Mean | Posterior SD | Loading | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Training** (Ellinger et al., 2003) - At this firm, employees… | | 0.743 | | | | |
| Receive extensive formal training before they come into contact with customers. | 0.791** | | 0.961 | 0.034 | 0.909 | * |
| Receive ongoing formal training on how to serve customers better | 0.768** | | 0.975 | 0.034 | 0.920 | * |
| Are formally trained to deal with customer complaints. | 0.784** | | 0.954 | 0.035 | 0.909 | * |
| Receive ongoing formal training on resolving customer problems. | 0.901** | | 0.763 | 0.050 | 0.687 | * |
| **Coaching** (Ellinger et al., 2003) - At this firm, my supervisor… | | 0.676 | | | | |
| Sets expectations with me and communicates the importance of those expectations to the broader goals of the firm. | 0.807** | | 1.107 | 0.066 | 0.836 | * |
| Encourages me to broaden my perspectives by helping me to see the big picture. | 0.821** | | 1.198 | 0.070 | 0.859 | * |
| Provides me with constructive feedback. | 0.829** | | 1.151 | 0.065 | 0.854 | * |
| Solicits feedback from me to ensure that our interactions are helpful to me. | 0.803** | | 0.927 | 0.037 | 0.762 | * |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Provides me with resources so I can perform my job more effectively. | 0.832** | 0.972 | 0.041 | 0.797 | * |
| | | | | | |
| **Brand Mindfulness** (Barber & Deale, 2014; Ngo et al., 2016) | | 0.668 | | | |
| My firm's brand communication has my interest captured. | 0.823** | 0.966 | 0.081 | 0.826 | * |
| I often search for answers to questions I have about the goals my team tries to achieve through brand promise communication. | 0.807** | 0.973 | 0.058 | 0.865 | * |
| My firm's brand style guide has my curiosity aroused. | 0.846** | 0.955 | 0.062 | 0.757 | * |
| **Brand Attachment** (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) | | 0.534 | | | |
| My sense of pride towards (my firm's) brand is reinforced by the brand-related messages. | 0.864** | 0.889 | 0.079 | 0.727 | * |
| This firm is like a family to me. | 0.810** | 1.037 | 0.073 | 0.836 | * |
| I feel I belong to this firm. | 0.865** | 0.868 | 0.082 | 0.650 | * |
| When someone praises this brand, it feels like a personal compliment. | 0.835** | 0.857 | 0.077 | 0.698 | * |
| **Brand Resilience** (Luthans, 2002; Luthans et al., 2007) (supervisor-rated) | | 0.560 | | | |
| When employee (X) receives negative comments about the firm's reputation, (X) has trouble recovering from it (R). | 0.689** | 0.803 | 0.059 | 0.778 | * |
| Employee (X) usually takes stressful complaints about the brand at work in stride. | 0.706** | 0.896 | 0.067 | 0.734 | * |
| Employee (X) usually manages difficult questions about the brand one way or another at work. | 0.745** | 1.003 | 0.082 | 0.751 | * |
| Employee (X) always get through difficult times because they have handled negative comments about the firm's reputation before. | 0.738** | 1.008 | 0.070 | 0.697 | * |
| Employee (X) copes with most of customer inquiries about the firm's brand at a time at this job. | 0.746** | 1.012 | 0.073 | 0.778 | * |

*Notes: An asterisk (\*) indicates significance at 0.05 level (i.e. the zero value was not included in the confidence interval). Two asterisks (\*\*) denote values significant at a=0.01 / [a] Shapiro-Wilk test / Posterior Mean and Posterior SD: In Bayesian statistics, a posterior probability is the revised or updated probability of an event occurring. The posterior mean θ is a weighted average of the prior mean θ0 and the observation y, with the weights being proportional to the associated precisions.*

**Table 6 -** Discriminant Validity

|  | BA | BM | TR | CO | BR |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BA | **0.731[a]** | 0.643[c] | 0.618 | 0.674 | 0.807 |
| BM | 0.641[b] | **0.817** | 0.769 | 0.779 | 0.824 |
| TR | 0.617 | 0.544 | **0.862** | 0.767 | 0.801 |
| CO | 0.673 | 0.587 | 0.765 | **0.822** | 0.796 |
| BR | 0.728 | 0.598 | 0.586 | 0.718 | **0.748** |

*CO=Coaching, TR=Training, BM=Brand Mindfulness, BA=Brand Attachment, BR=Brand Resilience

*Notes: [a] Diagonal elements in bold denote the square root of Average Variance Extracted.*

*[b] Lower triangle: denotes the posterior means of the correlations.*

*[c] Upper triangle: denotes the heterotrait-monotrait values*

**Table 7 -** Structural Model Results (with controls)

| Path | Posterior Mean | S.E | S. D. | C.S | 95% Lower Bound | 95% Upper Bound | Min | Max | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **BM<--TR** | 0.187 | 0.004 | 0.081 | 1.001 | 0.028 | 0.348 | -0.129 | 0.493 | *H1a→Supported* |
| **BM<--CO** | 0.631 | 0.005 | 0.125 | 1.001 | 0.398 | 0.879 | 0.216 | 1.131 | *H1b→Supported* |
| **BA<--TR** | 0.145 | 0.002 | 0.064 | 1.001 | 0.021 | 0.271 | -0.073 | 0.409 | *H2a→Supported* |
| **BA<--CO** | 0.690 | 0.004 | 0.103 | 1.001 | 0.502 | 0.896 | 0.291 | 1.120 | *H2b→Supported* |
| **BR<--BM** | 0.187 | 0.002 | 0.048 | 1.001 | 0.093 | 0.283 | 0.010 | 0.370 | *H3a/H3b→ Supported* |
| **BR<--BA** | 0.586 | 0.003 | 0.070 | 1.001 | 0.458 | 0.728 | 0.359 | 0.928 | *H4a/H4b→Supported* |
| **Controls** | | | | | | | | | |
| BR<--TEN | -0.072 | 0.003 | 0.062 | 1.001 | -0.194 | 0.047 | -0.306 | 0.154 | *N.S.* |
| BR<--EXP | 0.130 | 0.003 | 0.061 | 1.001 | 0.016 | 0.253 | -0.102 | 0.378 | * |
| BR<--GEN | 0.136 | 0.003 | 0.077 | 1.001 | -0.013 | 0.287 | -0.153 | 0.415 | *N.S.* |

*Notes: $R^2_{BM}$=0.392; $R^2_{BA}$=0.553; $R^2_{BR}$=0.654; *CO=Coaching, TR=Training, BM=Brand Mindfulness, BA=Brand Attachment, BR=Brand Resilience, EXP= Working Experience, TEN= Tenure with the brand, GEN=Gender*

**Table 8 -** Interaction effects of internal branding practices on FLEs' responses

| Internal Branding | Corporate brand construal types | Brand Mindfulness | | | Brand Attachment | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Posterior Mean (SD) | 95% Credible interval | Moderated Mediation Effect | Posterior Mean (SD) | 95% Credible interval | Moderated Mediation Effect |
| **Training** | x brand deviants | -0.117 (0.035) | (-0.147, -0.014) | Yes | -0.028 (0.014) | (-0.047, 0.003) | No |
| | x brand skeptics | -0.014 (0.018) | (-0.051, 0.020) | No | -0.074 (0.024) | (-0.093, -0.008) | Yes |
| | x brand conformists | 0.117 (0.036) | (0.005, 0.143) | Yes | 0.091 (0.038) | (0.005, 0.123) | Yes |
| | x brand enthusiasts | -0.008 (0.022) | (-0.052, 0.034) | No | -0.029 (0.016) | (-0.056, 0.008) | No |
| **Coaching** | x brand deviants | 0.125 (0.025) | (0.005, 0.155) | Yes | 0.081 (0.022) | (0.013, 0.131) | Yes |
| | x brand skeptics | 0.054 (0.017) | (0.009, 0.069) | Yes | 0.068 (0.023) | (0.008, 0.094) | Yes |
| | x brand conformists | 0.070 (0.033) | (0.008, 0.089) | Yes | 0.023 (0.014) | (-0.003, 0.051) | No |
| | x brand enthusiasts | 0.075 (0.028) | (0.005, 0.093) | Yes | 0.057 (0.028) | (0.014, 0.079) | Yes |