



Linking brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of airline employees: “The role of trust”



Ezgi Erkmen ^{a, *}, Murat Hancer ^{b, 1}

^a Ozyegin University, School of Applied Sciences, Cekmekoy Kampusu, Nisanteppe Mah. Orman Sok, 34794 Cekmekoy – Istanbul, Turkey

^b Oklahoma State University, School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration, 210 Human Sciences West, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in understanding employees' brand related behaviors in the airline industry, the research in this area mainly focus on the effect of employee brand commitment and limit the empirical support as well. Although, brand commitment explains brand behaviors of employees, commitment in a relationship usually works through trust. Therefore, this study integrated brand trust and analyzed the relation between brand trust and brand commitment on brand citizenship behaviors of employees. Data were collected from 523 flight attendants of a corporate airline company. The findings reveal that brand trust has a significant effect on brand citizenship behaviors as well as it mediates the effect of brand commitment on these behaviors. The uniqueness of this study is the integration of brand trust for its effect on commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of employees as well providing empirical support for their relationship within the context of airline industry.

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1. Introduction

Many researchers have appreciated the important role of employees' brand supporting behaviors for services branding (Aurang et al., 2005; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Gapp and Merrilees, 2006; Papisolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). This is because brand is usually considered a promise for services (Ambler and Styles, 1996; Berry, 2000), and services branding relies on employees' understanding and delivery of the brand promise (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). Therefore, with the increased importance of employees, internal branding has emerged as a mean to create a corporate brand by aligning employees' attitudes and behaviors with the brand promise.

Also, for the airline industry, the common thing for most successful airlines is the adoption of internal branding to make their employees customer-oriented and establishing their commitment (Appelbaum and Fewster, 2002). In the United States, Southwest Airlines is one of the most successful airline companies because of its competitive advantage based positioning their brand in the minds of consumers through its employees' behaviors (Miles and

Mangold, 2005). Moreover, Singapore Airlines is another airline company that owes its success to have its employees as the representatives of the company brand through their brand supporting behaviors (Chong, 2007). What constitutes the success for these two airline companies is that they deliver a consistent brand promise through employee behaviors.

The fulfillment of brand promise at each service encounter relies on the consistent behaviors of employees during their customer interaction, thereby suggesting that consistent behavior towards brand is at the core of internal branding activities (Thomson et al., 1999). This is true because although consumers experience a service, they usually need to reevaluate the service in each distinct encounter due to variability of services (Zeithaml et al., 1985). As a result, each service encounter represents a distinct contact with a consumer and depends on the performance of customer contact employees. Specifically in airline travel, touch points that passengers directly experience with service provider from departure to arrival form their brand impression through distinct interaction experiences (Berry and Lampo, 2004). Furthermore, Frost and Kumar (2001) have identified that airline employees have the opportunity to both negatively and positively affect the perceptions of airline service quality during their interaction with airline passengers. Therefore, involving employees in branding and aligning their behaviors with the brand promise are becoming a major issue for the success of the airline industry.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90 216 564 9594.

E-mail addresses: ezgi.erkmen@ozyegin.edu.tr, ezgi.erkmen@yahoo.com (E. Erkmen), murat.hancer@okstate.edu (M. Hancer).

¹ Tel.: +1 405 744 8645.

Given the importance of managing behaviors of employees in service industries, [Burmam and Zeplin \(2005\)](#) have developed a holistic model to understand the brand behaviors of employees. They have developed the concept of “brand citizenship behaviors” to understand what constitutes brand supporting behaviors of employees. Moreover, a growing number of literature also tried to understand what leads to brand related behaviors of service employees ([Burmam et al., 2009](#); [de Chernatony, 2001](#); [Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005](#)) and they mainly focused on employee brand commitment to explain employees' brand citizenship behaviors. However, within the context of relationship, trust has been proposed to be a strong predictor to explain commitment ([Morgan and Hunt, 1994](#)). The commitment was found to increase when people believe that the exchange party is able to carry out what is promised and its obligations. Therefore, it might be reasonable to argue that employees' trust regarding the brand may affect their commitment, which in turn results in brand supporting behaviors.

While this argument has intuitive logic, there has been no consideration given to measurement of employees' brand trust and its link to brand commitment as well as brand citizenship behaviors of employees. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by identifying the role of employee brand trust for its effect on brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of employees. In doing so, airline industry was chosen due to airline employees' position to affect customers' perception regarding the service quality as well as the brand during their interaction with customers ([Frost and Kumar, 2001](#)). As a result, this research employed an empirical analysis of a network of relationships regarding the effect of brand trust on brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of airline employees in order to understand the role of brand trust on brand commitment as well as brand citizenship behaviors.

Therefore, this study contributed to the previous research for the effect of brand citizenship behaviors in the airline industry field in different ways. First, previous studies have examined the role of employees' brand commitment to explain their brand citizenship behaviors. However, no previous study looked at how brand trust informs brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of employees. Second, even previous literature have argued for the positive effect of employees' brand commitment on brand citizenship behaviors of airline employees ([Miles and Mangold, 2005](#)), limited attention has been given to empirically analyze the role of brand trust and commitment in the airline industry. By that, the present study extended the prior research on brand citizenship behaviors of airline employees through its proposed model and empirical evidence.

2. Review of literature

2.1. The role of employees in branding

Although the brand concept is almost same for both products and services, the distinguished characteristics of services make their branding different from product branding in terms of the execution of branding activities. Both product and service branding have the same external orientation such as identifying market opportunities, segmenting the market, or positioning the brand. However, services branding also needs internal orientation in terms of involving employees in branding process ([de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001](#)). In traditional marketing, there is a customer centered approach that concentrates on external brand building process ([Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996](#)). However, the importance of employees in services shifts this externally oriented approach to a balanced approach that has both internal and external orientation. The point is the integration of employees into the branding process

to deliver a consistent quality service around brand promise so that the brand promise made in external branding efforts such as advertising could be realized consistently during consumer brand experience ([Burmam and Zeplin, 2005](#)).

As in other service industries, the role of employees in branding activities has also increased its importance for the long term success of airline companies. The airline industry is identified as a resource intensive industry, and airline employees constitute one of the major competitive resources of an airline company ([Low and Lee, 2014](#)). In particular, both customer contact flight personnel and other personnel who do not have any customer contact are important for the success of airline business. However, airline employees interacting with passengers are especially important because they influence passengers' perceptions regarding the company during their interaction with the passengers ([Street, 1994](#)). Therefore, they help both building and maintaining company image through their service behaviors ([Yeh, 2014](#)). As a result, the common thing for most successful airlines is the adoption of internal branding to make their employees customer-oriented and establishing their commitment through communication, recruitment, socialization and training ([Appelbaum and Fewster, 2002](#)). This is because airline industry is one of the service industries with high level of intangibility of the services offered ([Shostack, 1977](#)). Second, deregulation in the airline industry as well as the increased competition led to focus more on service quality issues. Therefore, airline companies have started to more focus on their employees' behaviors due to their position to influence passengers' perception regarding the service and the brand.

In particular, the success of the airline companies depends on enhancing brand citizenship behaviors of its employees through aligning their behaviors and attitudes with respect to its desired brand image in consumer mind ([Miles and Mangold, 2005](#)). How the companies achieve these brand citizenship behaviors is based on the psychological contract with employees in order to enhance their commitment to the brand and the company.

2.2. Brand commitment and brand trust of employees

Based on the crucial role of service employees, [Burmam and Zeplin \(2005\)](#) have first introduced the concept of “brand citizenship behavior” to realize the corporate brand promise during service encounters and argued that brand commitment of employees is the key to explain their brand citizenship behaviors. [Burmam and Zeplin \(2005, p. 284\)](#) have defined brand commitment as “the extent of psychological attachment of employees to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards reaching the brand goals, in other words, to exert brand citizenship behaviors”. The authors have suggested that brand commitment construct is synonymous with organizational commitment, which can be defined as psychological attachment between employee and organization ([Allen and Meyer, 1990](#); [Mowday et al., 1982](#)). Therefore, commitment is not only important to understand employees' relation with the organization but also with the brand because employees, who would be the brand advocates, are created through commitment. However, little interest has been given to understand how employees form their relation with the company brand and become committed to that brand.

Within the context of relationship commitment, trust has been proposed to be a strong predictor to explain commitment, and it has been defined as “existing when one party has confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity” ([Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23](#)). Thus, confidence for the exchange partner's reliability and integrity helps people to become committed to a relationship. Like in other relationships, trust is also an important factor to increase commitment and to enhance relationships within

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