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How internal brand management enhances brand citizenship behavior via brand identification under leader-member exchange effects

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Abstract: In an era of intensified market competition, internal brand management (IBM) has emerged as a critical strategy for aligning employee behavior with brand values. This study investigates how IBM influences brand citizenship behavior (BCB) among front-line restaurant employees in Macao, emphasizing the mediating role of brand identification (BI) and simultaneously testing the moderating effect of leader-member exchange (LMX). Drawing from Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the model using data from 315 employees across 11 Macao restaurant companies. Analyzing via software package Smart-Pls 4.1, we found that IBM significantly enhances BI, which in turn strongly predicts BCB. While IBM directly impacts BCB, the effect is mediated by BI. Furthermore, LMX moderates the IBM-BI relationships, underscoring the role of leadership in internal branding effectiveness. These findings contribute to the internal branding literature by validating BI as a key psychological mechanism and LMX as a boundary condition. Practically, the study provides insights for restaurant industry seeking to foster brand-aligned behaviors through internal brand management.

Keywords: internal brand management; brand citizenship behavior; brand identification; leader-member exchange; Macao catering industry

1. Introduction

In many developed countries and regions, the service industry plays an important role in driving economic growth. The Macao Special Administrative Region of China is a clear example, where services have long been a central pillar of the local economy (Chang et al., 2012). As competition within the market continues to intensify, improving the competitiveness of service-oriented firms has become a pressing concern in Macao. Brand management has emerged as a crucial strategy, helping service-based businesses pursue sustainable growth, build stronger competitive advantages, and establish a stable position in the marketplace (Koo and Curtis, 2020; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Leijerholt et al., 2022; Piehler et al., 2018).

Brand management is typically divided into two main areas: internal and external, depending on the target audience. Much of the focus in both research and practice has been on external brand management, which involves building customer value and creating a strong brand image. Many organizations have placed a priority on these external efforts, often investing significant resources in customer satisfaction and brand awareness initiatives (Santos-Vijande et al., 2013). In contrast, internal brand management has received comparatively limited scholarly attention (Piehler et al., 2018). Recently, however, more studies have started to highlight its importance, particularly its role in encouraging employee engagement and supporting long-term

competitive performance (Afshardoost et al., 2023; Qureshi et al., 2022).

Burmann et al. (2009) introduced the concept of internal brand management (IBM), emphasizing its role in building and maintaining strong brands through internal organizational processes. Since then, IBM has attracted increasing scholarly attention, and related constructs such as internal brand marketing and employee brand identification have also been explored. Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2020) pointed out that internal brand management acts as a key mechanism through which employees come to understand and internalize a company's brand values and identity. This process strengthens employee-brand alignment, builds trust in the brand, and helps organizations deliver on their brand promises. When IBM is implemented effectively, employees are better equipped to serve customers, which in turn contributes to organizational performance by encouraging customer loyalty, promoting positive purchasing behavior, and generating word-of-mouth advocacy (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2020).

Although IBM has been developed conceptually and has produced notable empirical findings, there remains a lack of studies that integrate its various constructs within a unified model. Prior research has tended to examine IBM's direct effects on employee behavior (Jiang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2025), but comprehensive models testing multiple variables and their interrelationships are still limited. This study addresses that gap by proposing and testing a conceptual framework that incorporates direct, indirect, and moderating effects within one structural model, using SmartPLS 4.1 for statistical analysis. The results support the model and meet expectations for such a complex set of relationships. In addition, the study investigates the psychological mechanisms involved, drawing on the hierarchy of effects model to understand outcomes at the employee level. Following the model developed by Zhang and Bai (2018), a survey was conducted among employees in Macao's restaurant industry to examine the relationships among IBM, brand citizenship behavior (BCB), brand identification (BI), and leader-member exchange (LMX). Through this approach, the study confirms and extends prior theoretical framework.

Employees in Macao's catering sector are regarded as important organization resources, playing a key role in service delivery and business performance (Chan and Shek, 2021). The Macao Chamber of Commerce classifies catering as a major subsector of the broader service economy, with the Macao Catering Industry Association recognized as one of its prominent industry bodies (The United Association of Food and Beverage Merchants of Macao, 2025). According to Statistics and Census Service Macao (Statistics and Census Service Macao, 2025), as of the third quarter of 2024, approximately 52,700 individuals were employed in the "Hotels, Restaurants and Similar Activities" sector, accounting for around 13.9% of the total employed population of 379,300. Given that the service industry constitutes a significant share of Macao's GDP, maintaining competitiveness in this sector is essential for the region's continued economic development. For this reason, investigating the influence of internal brand management (IBM) on employees' brand citizenship behavior (BCB) is especially relevant. Doing so helps assess the effectiveness of internal organizational practices in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors—a topic emphasized by Piehler et al. (2018), who called for more empirical research in this area.

In Macao's food catering industry, where customer experience and service consistency are essential, getting employees to align with brand values is a growing concern for many businesses. This study looks at whether internal brand management (IBM) helps to promote brand citizenship behavior (BCB) and whether it strengthens employees' identification with the brand (BI). In addition, this research inquires whether BI acts as a bridge between internal brand efforts and the way employees behave in support of the brand. Finally, because relationships between general employees and their supervisors can shape how brand messages are received, the study also integrate leader–member exchange (LMX) with the process. Specifically, it examines whether the quality of this relationship affects how strongly IBM influences BI, offering insight into how leadership may support or limit the success of internal branding.

In this extent, this research raises four research questions:

- Does IBM positively influence employees' BCB?
- Does IBM positively influence employees' BI?
- Does BI mediate the relationship between IBM and BCB?
- Does LMX moderate the relationship between IBM and BI?

Following the framework proposed by Zhang and Bai (2018), we conducted a survey among employees in Macao's restaurant industry to examine the relationships among internal brand management (IBM), brand citizenship behavior (BCB), brand identification (BI), and leader-member exchange (LMX).

The structure of this paper is organized as follows. First, we define the key constructs and establish the theoretical foundations for hypothesis development. The methods section then outlines the research design, measurement instruments, and the rationale behind their selection. The findings and analysis section presents empirical results and interprets them in relation to the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of the study's findings.

1.1. Internal brand management

Professor David Aaker argues that misunderstandings about branding lead to the misconception that brands are solely focused by external audiences but in practice, a brand also plays a crucial role within internal corporate communication (c.f. Zhang and Bai, 2018), because it is grounded in the belief that employees are internal customers. In this sense, same principles that apply to external brand management should be employed internally to engage employees (Burmann et al., 2009; Iyer et al., 2018). Employees are not only key internal stakeholders but also important audiences for the organization's brand and they are expected to convey clear organizational messages to outsiders (Baca and Reshidi, 2023), such as customers or other stakeholders (Gounaris, 2006), once they have received adequate internal brand training. Regardless of their specific roles or positions, employees are encouraged to contribute to building a competitive advantage through strong brand representation (Burmann et al., 2009). A review of earlier studies by Gounaris (2006) highlights that internal brand management tends to focus primarily on general employees, and its positive outcomes often include improved job satisfaction, stronger employee

engagement, and other organizational benefits.

Beyond physical attributes, a brand also carries intangible value. It not only represents high quality in the eyes of target consumers but also reflects the company's culture and values (He and Wu, 2015). Managing a brand effectively is important for building brand equity and maintaining a long-term competitive advantage. This requires a strategic approach that involves developing, sustaining, and strengthening the brand through coordinated use of resources and management efforts that support the organization's broader goals (Pang, 2016).

From a managerial standpoint, brand management consists of two core dimensions: external and internal brand management (IBM). External brand management focuses on shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing behavior. In contrast, internal brand management involves embedding brand values within employees to ensure they understand, identify with, and uphold the brand's promises in their interactions with customers (Zhang and Bai, 2018).

Scholars have examined IBM through various theoretical lenses. Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) emphasized its role in supporting sustainable competitive advantage by strengthening employee commitment to the brand. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) describe IBM as a mechanism for aligning employee-customer interactions with the brand's core ideology. Saleem and Iglesias (2016) further emphasize that the internalization of brand values enhances service consistency, which is vital in customer-facing roles. Hoppe (2018) expands on this by positioning IBM as a key component of internal marketing, contributing to both emotional and cognitive attachment between employees and the brand.

IBM also plays a practical role in shaping employee behavior. It contributes to employee education, enhances identification with the corporate brand, and helps cultivate a customer-oriented culture—ultimately improving customer satisfaction (Chang et al., 2012; Hoppe, 2018). In line with this, Dechawatanapaisal (2018) argues that IBM enables employees to internalize, identify with, and embody brand values, thereby fostering consistent and authentic brand-related behavior.

Synthesizing insights from prior research, this study defines internal brand management as a strategic and systematic approach that encompasses brand planning, internal communication, employee training, and transformational leadership. Its purpose is to strengthen employees' identification with the brand, enhance the brand's internal influence, and promote consistent brand-aligned behaviors that support organizational performance. Internal brand management contributes to organizational effectiveness by educating employees, fostering cognitive attachment to the brand, enabling employees to communicate brand messages externally, and encouraging behavior that aligns with brand values (Baca and Reshidi, 2023; Bravo et al., 2021; Burmann et al., 2009; Gounaris, 2006; Iyer et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2018).

1.2. Brand identification

Brand identification is rooted in social identity theory (SIT), a psychological framework that marketing scholars began to explore in the 1970s (Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979). According to this theory, people classify themselves and others into various social categories—such as ethnicity, occupation, or nationality—and use these

affiliations to maintain a positive self-image through in-group comparisons (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). This suggests that people categorize themselves and others into groups (e.g., by race, nationality, or profession), identify with these groups, and compare them to other groups to maintain a positive self-concept (Hornsey, 2008). In the context of branding, brand identification refers to a consumer's emotional connection and psychological attachment to a brand. It is a multidimensional concept that reflects the extent to which individuals incorporate a brand into their self-concept and see it as aligned with their values and identity (Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979).

In marketing research, consumer-brand identification (CBI) refers to a consumer's perceived sense of oneness with a brand, reflecting both psychological attachment and alignment with the brand's identity. Grounded in organizational identity theory, CBI emphasizes how individuals incorporate brand meaning into their self-concept. It differs from related constructs such as brand attachment or self-brand connection, as it focuses more on the cognitive dimension of identification rather than purely emotional ties (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Psychological identification further suggests that consumers tend to choose brands that reflect their personality traits, using these associations to reinforce or enhance their self-image (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2020).

This study shifts the focus from consumer identification to employee brand identification, which captures an employee's sense of belonging to and unity with the brand. It describes the degree to which employees feel aligned with the brand and view its values and goals as their own (Helm et al., 2016). Employees who identify strongly with the brand tend to see its success or failure as a personal matter. For example, individuals with high levels of employer brand identification often interpret the organization's achievements or setbacks as if they were their own, reinforcing their commitment and fostering a shared sense of identity with other members of the organization (Salameh et al., 2023).

1.3. Brand citizenship behavior

Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) builds upon the broader concept of Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), which refers to employees' voluntary and discretionary actions that go beyond formal job requirements to support the organization's overall effectiveness and long-term success (Kaur et al., 2020). While OCB is typically directed inward—focusing on behaviors such as helping colleagues, showing initiative, or promoting a positive work environment—BCB extends this idea by incorporating brand-specific behaviors that reflect employees' alignment with and advocacy for the brand (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Hoang, 2022).

In 1998, Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) was defined as discretionary behavior that is not directly or explicitly acknowledged by formal reward systems but collectively contributes to the effective functioning of the organization (cf. Afshardoost et al., 2023). Such behaviors reflect the need for employees to voluntarily engage in actions that support the organization beyond their defined roles. While OCB is primarily focused on intra-organizational contexts, the concept of Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) expands this perspective by including externally directed

behaviors that promote the brand outside the workplace. BCB captures employees' active participation in brand-related activities, both within the organization and through positive brand advocacy in informal and external settings.

Employees engaging in BCB undertake extra-role behaviors that help strengthen brand recognition and perception, although these actions are not explicitly mandated or financially incentivized (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). By fostering brand-consistent behaviors among employees, organizations can ensure that their brand identity is upheld at all touchpoints, thus enhancing both internal engagement and external brand credibility.

Unlike general workplace behaviors, BCB influences both organizational culture and customer perception, making it essential for sustaining brand differentiation (Afshardoost et al., 2023). Employees exhibiting strong BCB integrate brand values into their work, advocate for the brand, and contribute to brand-oriented service delivery (Kim et al., 2019). Beyond internal alignment, these behaviors help bridge the gap between brand promise and reality, reinforcing customer trust and loyalty. Organizations that cultivate BCB among employees can achieve stronger brand-consumer relationships and a more cohesive brand image, ultimately driving long-term brand equity (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Piehler et al., 2016).

1.4. Leader-member exchange

Leader-ember exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the dyadic dynamics between managers and team members (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Varma et al., 2022). According to the theory, managers do not interact with all employees in the same way. Instead, they tend to develop high-quality exchange relationships with a select group of subordinates whom they perceive as competent, dependable, or personally compatible. These employees, often referred to as the "in-group," are typically granted greater autonomy, access to important information, and emotional support. In contrast, employees in the "out-group" experience more limited interactions with supervisors and generally receive only the standard support and communication defined by formal job requirements (Varma et al., 2022).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory challenges the traditional assumption that leadership is applied uniformly across all employees. Instead, it emphasizes the quality of individual relationships between managers and subordinates within the organizational hierarchy (Zhao et al., 2019). Managers often develop varying levels of relational quality with different team members, resulting in the formation of "in-groups" and "out-groups." In high-quality exchanges, supervisors provide greater access to resources such as trust, respect, and emotional support. Employees in these relationships are more likely to respond with positive discretionary behaviors, including higher levels of commitment, loyalty, and willingness to go beyond formal job responsibilities. In contrast, low-quality exchanges are marked by limited support and more transactional interactions, with managers offering only what is formally required (Zhao et al., 2019).

Some researchers argue that differentiated exchanges can enhance leadership effectiveness, as they enable supervisors to allocate resources and opportunities to the most capable or trustworthy employees, ultimately contributing to improved

organizational performance (Varma et al., 2022). Others highlight the broader implications of LMX, noting that the quality of these relationships influences leadership style, employee role clarity, and managerial decision-making, all of which shape the work environment and affect overall employee engagement (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Premru et al., 2023).

Building on these perspectives, this study defines Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) as a relational process between supervisors and subordinates that includes both economic and social dimensions—such as emotional connection, mutual loyalty, work contributions, and professional respect.

2. Conceptual work and hypotheses development

Zhang and Bai (2018) examined the mechanisms of internal brand management (IBM) at the employee level (see **Figure 1**), highlighting how psychological processes—such as social learning, social exchange, and social identity—influence employees' acceptance of IBM. Their study found that when organizational leadership effectively communicates brand messages, it helps shape employees' brand-related beliefs and enhances their brand knowledge. This internal communication process lies at the core of the IBM concept. As a result, employees develop brand identification on an emotional level, which in turn influences their Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB). Ultimately, both IBM and brand identification contribute to shaping employees' brand-supportive behaviors.
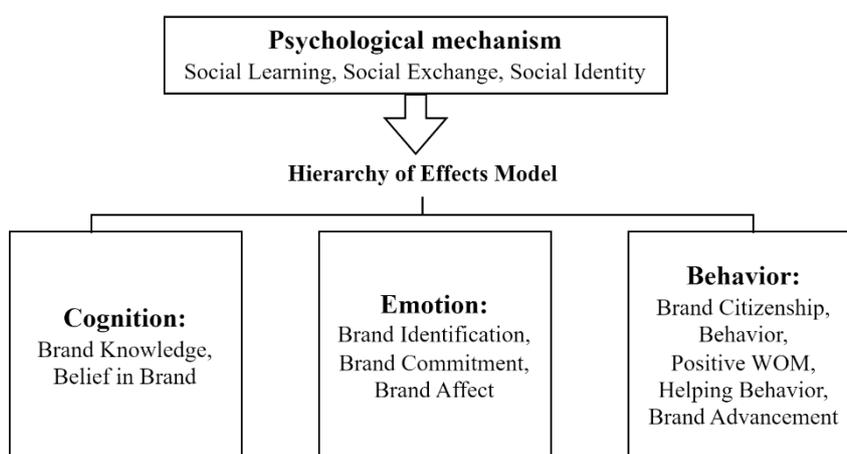
Employee Level

Figure 1. Part of theoretical framework of internal branding, adapted from Zhang and Bai (2018).

Meanwhile, based on social exchange theory—which suggests that employees are likely to respond with positive behavior toward their employers on the principle of reciprocity, feeling obligated to return kindness or benefits received (Hoang, 2022; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014)—Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) interacts with employees' perceptions of the organization's messaging. Reciprocity grounded in social norms shapes employees' views of organizational management. For instance, when line managers treat subordinates with care and fairness, employees may form positive perceptions of their supervisors. Since organizations and brands are often

abstract and ambiguous (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Employees may view their immediate supervisors as the most tangible representation of the company. Therefore, such interactions can enhance brand identification.

It is believed that the psychological mechanism of LMX plays a critical role in shaping a process in which employees interpret IBM efforts and translate them into brand identification (BI). In other words, organizational success depends not only on how IBM is implemented but also on whether it effectively influences employees' perceptions, fostering their sense of connection with the brand. When employees strongly identify with the brand, they are likely to engage in BCB—that is, voluntary and proactive behaviors that support and promote the brand beyond their formal job responsibilities. Thus, brand identification serves as a key mediating mechanism through which IBM influences employees' brand-aligned behaviors.

Internal brand management (IBM) plays a crucial role in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors toward corporate brands. Prior research has shown that internal marketing efforts significantly influence how employees perceive and act on behalf of the brand (Buil et al., 2016; Tansuhaj et al., 1988). IBM enhances brand awareness, strengthens brand consciousness, and fosters brand commitment, ultimately empowering employees to actively contribute to brand development (Chen et al., 2011).

IBM also supports Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) by ensuring that employees—when provided with adequate support through training, internal communication, and effective leadership—are more likely to engage in extra-role behaviors that reinforce brand identity (Piehler et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Key components of effective IBM include brand-centered human resource practices, consistent internal brand communication, and brand-oriented leadership (Xiong and King, 2015). These elements have been shown to positively influence BCB. When employees perceive that the organization prioritizes their development and communicates brand values clearly, they are more inclined to voluntarily support and represent the brand in ways that go beyond their formal job requirements. Thus, we propose:

H1: Internal brand management positively influences brand citizenship behavior.

Employees' identification with and commitment to a brand subtly influences their behaviors, which in turn contributes to enhancing the corporate brand image and organizational performance. According to social identity theory (SIT), employees with a strong sense of brand identification internalize the brand as part of their self-concept. Consequently, they adopt the perspective of the brand in their decision-making, comply with organizational norms and rules, and exert extra effort to uphold and defend the brand (Wegge et al., 2006). This psychological attachment fosters behaviors that support and strengthen the brand, ensuring alignment between employees' actions and the organization's brand values. Brand identification has been found to influence brand-supporting behaviors, which refer to employees' voluntary actions that promote and reinforce the corporate brand. It has been argued that employees who strongly identify with a brand exhibit behavior that contribute to brand success, such as advocating for the brand and maintaining brand-consistent interactions with customers (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Empirical research has

demonstrated a positive relationship between employees' brand identification and brand citizenship behavior (BCB), a set of discretionary, extra-role behaviors that enhance brand value, such as brand advocacy, positive word-of-mouth, and voluntary compliance with brand-related norms (Piehler et al., 2016).

Moreover, when employees have a comprehensive understanding of brand values, they engage with the brand at both cognitive and emotional levels (Koo and Curtis, 2020). This interaction fosters a deeper sense of connection with the brand, motivating employees to demonstrate behaviors that align with and reinforce the brand's identity. Employees with a strong sense of brand belonging and identification are likely to engage in brand-supporting behaviors, actively contributing to the development and sustainability of the corporate brand.

H2: Brand identification positively influences brand citizenship behavior.

Ashforth and Mael defined organizational identification as a cognitive process in which employees compare their self-concept with organizational attributes, thereby fostering a sense of belonging (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Beyond cognition, identification also has an emotional component, as employees feel pride and attachment to the organization, which in turn strengthens their brand identification (Smidts et al., 2001). Internal Brand Management (IBM) plays a central role in driving this identification by aligning employee behavior with corporate brand values through structured guidance and internal messaging (Aslam et al., 2023). IBM provides both cognitive and emotional engagement opportunities that encourage employees to internalize brand values (Koo and Curtis, 2020). Through targeted internal communication and human resource management practices, organizations actively instill these values in ways that differentiate their brand identity from that of competitors (Leijerholt et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Organizational Support Theory (OST) suggests that employees are likely to identify with organizations that they perceive as valuing their contributions and well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). IBM supports this through mechanisms such as transparent communication, training, and developmental initiatives that enhance employees' sense of brand commitment and participation (Chang et al., 2012). Activities such as CSR engagement, team reflections, and participatory discussions further embed brand values at the individual level.

Taken together, these theoretical inferences suggest that IBM not only strengthens brand identification but also fosters brand loyalty and encourages employees to engage in Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB)—voluntary, brand-supportive actions that go beyond formal role expectations (Leijerholt et al., 2019). By investing in internal communication and training, organizations can cultivate brand attachment and unlock employees' full potential as brand ambassadors. We propose:

H3: Internal brand management positively influences brand identification.

Brand identification enhances brand loyalty and plays a crucial role in expanding brand influence (Fatma and Khan, 2023). Strengthening consumer brand identification is key to increasing brand equity and fostering more stable brand relationships (Chen et al., 2021). Similarly, employees develop a sense of brand identification (Tumasjan et al., 2020). Consequently, brand identification helps enhance employees' brand values and goal alignment, motivating them to align with corporate objectives and exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.

Employees with strong brand identification are more likely to adopt corporate decisions, directions, and visions as their goals (Baca and Reshidi, 2023). Beyond performing their core responsibilities, they actively contribute suggestions and demonstrate initiative-taking behaviors, including extra-role behaviors (Zhang and Bai, 2018). So, organizations can foster brand citizenship behavior by enhancing employees' brand identification. Thus, we propose:

H4: Brand identification mediates the relationship between internal brand management and brand citizenship behavior.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory suggests that the quality of relationships between leaders and employees varies and affect organization performance (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). In high-quality LMX relationships, characterized by mutual respect and trust, employees tend to experience stronger identification with organizational values, including brand-related initiatives. In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships are more transactional and formal, often limiting employees' emotional investment in the organization. Regarding the Macao food business, workplace relationships between line managers and their subordinators are often shaped by hierarchical structures and collectivist cultural values. Respect for authority and strong interpersonal ties between supervisors and employees are commonly observed and tend to influence how staff engage with their work (Jiang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2025). In this context, the quality of the relationship between leaders and team is important in understanding how internal brand management efforts are received and interpreted.

Leaders in high-LMX relationships are more likely to engage in personalized communication and provide support aligned with brand values (Gooty et al., 2010) thereby enhancing employees' sense of belonging and brand identification (Premru et al., 2023). Conversely, in low-LMX relationships, where employees may receive limited guidance or recognition, IBM initiatives may be perceived as impersonal directives, weakening their psychological connection to the brand (Wallace et al., 2013). For example, employees with strong ties to their managers may be more active, reinforcing their brand alignment, whereas others may view branding efforts as externally imposed. Therefore, we propose:

H5: LMX moderates the relationship between internal brand management and brand identification.

Based on the theoretical inferences drawn from existing literature, the conceptual framework of the present study was developed, as illustrated in **Figure 2**.
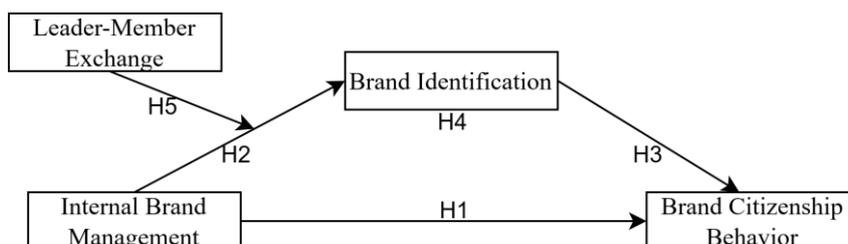

Figure 2. Conceptual model.

3. Materials and methods

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among Internal Brand Management (IBM), Brand Identification (BI), Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB), and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX). Established scales were used to ensure validity and reliability, followed by a pilot test and full-scale survey conducted among employees from Macao's restaurant industry. The methodology ensures empirical rigor and supports the structural model evaluation.

3.1. Scale selection

To maintain the reliability and validity of the scales, we selected established measurement instruments from previous research. These scales were carefully chosen from various studies. We used the Internal Brand Management (IBM) scale from Buil et al. (2016), which has been well adapted to the hospitality industry. A sample item is: "The restaurant communicates the corporate brand values to employees."

We used the Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) scale from Burmann et al. (2009). In this scale, BCB is assessed across three dimensions: willingness to help, brand enthusiasm, and propensity for future development. The Chinese version of the BCB scale was previously used to measure hotel employees in an empirical study (Xie et al., 2014). The BCB scale also uses a 5-point Likert scale from very unlikely (1) to very likely (5). A sample item is: "I am willing to assist others to understand our restaurant. I am willing to help others solve problems related to our restaurant."

The present study adopted the LMX scale from Wang et al. (2004) and Culbertson et al. (2010), which divides LMX into four dimensions: affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect. In the hospitality industry, this scale has been used to assess paternalistic leadership and organizational citizenship behavior in the context of Chinese hotels (Tang and Naumann, 2015). Pan and Zhou (2011) applied these four LMX dimensions to test their relationship with affective commitment. A sample item is: "My supervisor understands my problems and needs."

Wegge et al. (2006) developed the Brand Identification (BI) scale, originally tested in the call center industry. Subsequently, based on prior studies (Cheney, 1983; Wegge et al., 2006), Piehler et al. (2016) adapted the scale and developed a 13-item version. The BI scale also uses a 5-point Likert scale from very unlikely (1) to very likely (5). A sample item is: "I am glad I chose to work for our brand rather than another brand."

We asked English-translation major professor to conduct a back-translation process to ensure the validity of the translated scales. The results were satisfied.

3.2. Survey conduct

This study employed a convenience sampling method to conduct a questionnaire survey among employees from 11 Macao restaurant groups. These eleven restaurant groups are leading businesses in Macao, and they are representative of Macao catering industry. A total of 315 valid responses were collected for this study. This sample size is considered sufficient for the analysis using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), as recommended in the literature. According to Hair et al. (2022), the minimum sample size in PLS-SEM depends on the maximum number of

arrows pointing at a single latent construct in the model. In this study, the most complex construct receives no more than three incoming paths, which suggests a recommended minimum sample size of approximately 100–150 under standard statistical power and significance criteria (e.g., power = 0.80, α = 0.05, effect size = 0.15). Therefore, 315 valid samples are sufficient.

To ensure scientific rigor and validity, the questionnaire incorporated established scales. The structured design of the questionnaire ensured comprehensive data collection for examining the relationships among Internal Brand Management, Brand Identification, Brand Citizenship Behavior, and LMX within the Macao restaurant industry.

3.3. Pilot study

For the pilot study, a small-scale survey was conducted at a Macao-based Chinese restaurant that has been operating for over 30 years. We distributed the questionnaire via instant messaging platforms, allowing employees to complete it in a timely manner. Participants were required to complete the informed consent form.

We removed incomplete questionnaires (e.g., missing answers) and invalid responses (e.g., all answers marked as "highly satisfied"). After this screening process, ninety valid responses were retained for analysis. Overall, the pilot study assessed the reliability and validity of four scales: Internal Brand Management, Brand Identification, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), and Brand Citizenship Behavior. The results indicated that both reliability (Cronbach's alpha) and validity (construct validity and factor loadings) were acceptable.

3.4. Research tool

Smart-Pls 4.1 was selected for this study due to its capacity to analyze complex models that incorporate both mediation and moderation effects. This is essential given the study's focus on how internal brand management (IBM) influences brand citizenship behavior (BCB) through brand identification (BI), and how this process is moderated by leader-member exchange (LMX). Rooted in Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the study emphasizes the psychological and relational mechanisms behind employee behavior, making a prediction-oriented approach like partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) appropriate. With a sample size of 315, PLS-SEM offers reliable results even when assumptions of normality may not be fully met, which is often a limitation in traditional covariance-based methods (Hair et al., 2022). Its built-in features for bootstrapping, interaction effects, and model quality assessment further strengthen its suitability. In addition, Smart-Pls can simultaneously operate mediating and moderating variables in one equation, which can facilitate research objectives in this study. Altogether, Smart-Pls 4.1 aligns well with the methodological needs and theoretical framework of the study.

4. Findings and analysis

We conducted formal surveys online from 11 Macao restaurant companies. These restaurants are members of the United Association of Food and Beverage Merchants of Macao, and they are representative of Macao's catering industry competitiveness.

All online participants need to agree to the Informed Consent Letter to complete the survey. In total, we collected 381 samples. We removed invalid questionnaires based on the following criteria: incomplete responses, inconsistent answers across items (e.g., participants reporting 1–3 years of work experience but over 10 years of collaboration with their supervisor), and uniform response patterns (e.g., selecting only 1s or 5s across items). After screening, 315 valid responses were retained for analysis. Inclusion and exclusion criteria in the present research are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Sample selection.

Sample Selection	Content	Number of samples
Inclusion Criteria	General employees from eleven restaurants Macao; should submitted the questionnaires before April 2023; should agree informed consent	381
Exclusion Criteria	incomplete responses; inconsistencies among responses; drop-out responses; uniform responses	Sixty-six removed
Total		315

Among the valid participants, the gender distribution was 54.6% male and 45.4% female. Age groups of samples were distributed as follows: 18–25 years (7.5%), 26–35 years (22.2%), 36–45 years (47.6%), 46–55 years (19.4%), and above 56 years (3.5%). Special attention was given to the duration of coworking experience between employees and their supervisors. This variable was distributed as follows: less than 1 year (13.3%), 1–3 years (29.5%), 4–10 years (50.5%), 11–20 years (3.2%), and more than 20 years (3.5%).

Preliminary analyses using T-tests and ANOVA (F-tests) revealed that although minor differences existed among subgroups, the distribution of these demographic and relational characteristics did not significantly affect the subsequent analyses.

4.1. Common method bias

Given the cross-sectional design of the present study and the use of anonymous self-reported data, the potential for common method bias (CMB) was considered a methodological concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To address this issue, two approaches were adopted. First, the questionnaire was carefully designed to reduce the likelihood of invalid or biased responses. Second, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess the extent of CMB. **Table 2** showed that the first unrotated factor accounted for only 18.47% of the total variance, below the commonly accepted threshold of 40% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This indicates that CMB was not a significant issue to the validity of the findings.

Table 2. Harman's single-factor test.

Factor	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Cumulative Variance Explained (%)
1	1.085	18.47%	18.47%
2	0.915	15.25%	33.72%
3	0.723	12.05%	45.77%
4	0.503	8.38%	54.15%

4.2. Correlations among variables

Table 3 presents the correlation matrix, indicating that all variables are positively correlated and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The strongest correlation is observed between Internal Brand Management and Brand Identification ($r = 0.622$), suggesting a substantial positive relationship. These results provide preliminary support for the proposed theoretical relationships among Internal Brand Management, Brand Identification, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), and Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB), reinforcing the conceptual framework of the study.

Table 3. Correlations test.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4
1. Internal Brand Manage	4.075	0.511	1			
2. Brand Identification	4.173	0.553	0.622**	1		
3. Leader-Member Exchange	4.036	0.624	0.511**	0.464**	1	
4. Brand Citizen Behavior	4.184	0.499	0.517**	0.589**	0.487**	1

Note: ** stands for significance at 0.05 level.

4.3. Measurement of model analysis

In the present study, we did not test the different dimensions of the construct; therefore, we focused on a first-order measurement model. According to **Table 4**, results of the measurement model illustrate the validity and reliability assessment of the four constructs (IBM, LMX, BCB, and BI), which were conducted using factor loadings, Composite Reliability Index (CRI), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All constructs exhibited strong factor loadings, with each indicator loading above 0.70, confirming adequate indicator reliability. The AVE values for IBM (0.651), LMX (0.698), BCB (0.642), and BI (0.731) are all above the 0.50 threshold, establishing convergent validity and indicating that the constructs explain variance in their indicators. The Composite Reliability Index (CRI) for all constructs exceeded 0.90, with IBM (0.933), LMX (0.969), BCB (0.932), and BI (0.928) demonstrating good internal consistency reliability. However, the CRI of LMX (0.969) was exceptionally high, which could indicate potential redundancy in its indicators. Despite this, the overall findings confirm that the constructs are statistically reliable and valid for structural equation modeling (SEM).

To test discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) were applied, following SmartPLS 4.1 procedures. As shown in **Table 5**, the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs—BCB (0.801), BI (0.855), IBM (0.807), and LMX (0.835)—are greater than the correlations with other constructs, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion. HTMT values are also within the acceptable range, with the highest being 0.821 between BI and IBM, remaining below the commonly accepted threshold of 0.85.

Although the BI-IBM relationship is conceptually close, both metrics confirm that the constructs are empirically distinct. Therefore, the model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity. Since the measurement model has met accepted validity criteria, additional procedures such as the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) are not required.

Table 4. Results of the measurement model.

Variable	ITEM	Factor loading	Composite reliability Index (CRI)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
IBM	A1	0.779		
	A11	0.825		
	A12	0.825		
	A13	0.811		
	A2	0.832	0.933	0.651
	A3	0.793		
	A4	0.832		
	A5	0.748		
	A6	0.812		
LMX	C1	0.759		
	C10	0.844		
	C11	0.846		
	C12	0.857		
	C13	0.878		
	C14	0.859		
	C16	0.820	0.969	0.698
	C2	0.813		
	C3	0.829		
	C4	0.827		
	C6	0.856		
	C7	0.862		
	C8	0.820		
	C9	0.816		
BCB	D1	0.838		
	D12	0.786		
	D13	0.774		
	D14	0.805		
	D2	0.761	0.932	0.642
	D3	0.860		
	D7	0.780		
	D8	0.776		
	D9	0.826		
BI	T1	0.917		
	T2	0.850		
	T3	0.906	0.928	0.731
	T4	0.861		
	B4	0.783		
	B6	0.807		

Table 5. Discriminant validity of the model measurement.

	Variable	BCB	BI	IBM	LMX
Fornell-larcker method	BCB	0.801			
	BI	0.759	0.855		
	IBM	0.642	0.764	0.807	
	LMX	0.579	0.523	0.7	0.835
	Variable	**BCB**	**BI**	**IBM**	**LMX**
HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) method	BCB				
	BI	0.815			
	IBM	0.685	0.821		
	LMX	0.603	0.544	0.735	

Table 6 summarizes the results of the structural model and hypothesis testing. All five hypotheses (H1–H5) were supported at statistically significant levels. H1 confirms that internal brand management (IBM) positively influences brand citizenship behavior (BCB), with a path coefficient of 0.149 (t = 2.243, p = 0.025; 95% CI [0.018–0.275]). H2 demonstrates that brand identification (BI) strongly predicts BCB (β = 0.645, t = 12.050, p < 0.001; CI [0.543–0.755]). H3 shows that IBM significantly contributes to BI (β = 0.767, t = 12.645, p < 0.001; CI [0.650–0.880]). For H4, the mediation analysis confirms that BI transmits the effect of IBM to BCB, with a significant indirect effect of 0.495 (t = 10.076, p < 0.001; CI [0.403–0.596]).

Table 6. Path analysis and hypotheses test.

Path	Coefficient	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	p values	Bootstrap Confidence Interval (2.5%–97.5%)	R^2	Q^2	Results
H1: IBM → BCB	0.149	0.066	2.243	0.025	[0.018–0.275]			Support
H2: BI → BCB	0.645	0.054	12.05	0.000	[0.543–0.755]	BI (0.603)	BI (0.432)	Support
H3: IBM → BI	0.767	0.061	12.645	0.000	[0.650–0.880]	BCB (0.582)	BCB (0.368)	Support
H4: IBM → BI → BCB	0.495	0.049	10.076	0.000	[0.403–0.596]			Support
H5: LMX*IBM → BI	0.105	0.042	2.472	0.013	[0.027–0.192]			Support

H5 investigates the interaction effect between IBM and leader-member exchange (LMX) on BI. The moderation effect is statistically significant (β = 0.105, t = 2.472, p = 0.013; CI [0.027–0.192]), indicating that the quality of supervisor-employee relationships enhance the effectiveness of IBM on brand identification.

The model explains a considerable amount of variance, with R^2 values of 0.603 for BI and 0.582 for BCB. Q^2 values (0.432 for BI, 0.368 for BCB) indicate strong predictive relevance. These results were derived using bootstrapping procedures in SmartPLS 4.1, in line with recommended practices for PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2022), supporting both explanatory and predictive robustness of the model.

As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the structural model findings confirm that internal brand management (IBM) has a significant influence on brand identification (BI), and that BI plays a critical role in predicting brand citizenship behavior (BCB).

Specifically, BI mediates the relationship between IBM and BCB, providing strong support for the proposed indirect effect and highlighting BI's central role in linking internal brand strategies to employee brand-supportive behaviors. All indicator loadings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating good indicator reliability. The analysis also confirms that leader-member exchange (LMX) acts as a significant moderator, amplifying the impact of IBM on both BI and BCB. These results underscore the importance of high-quality leader-follower relationships in enhancing the outcomes of internal branding efforts. In contrast, the non-significant results for the control variables (age, gender, education, coworking time, and work experience) indicate that these demographic factors do not meaningfully predict BCB. This suggests that organizational and behavioral factors—specifically IBM, BI, and LMX—serve as stronger and more relevant predictors of brand-supportive behavior than individual demographic characteristics. Therefore, Hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 are supported based on the empirical results.
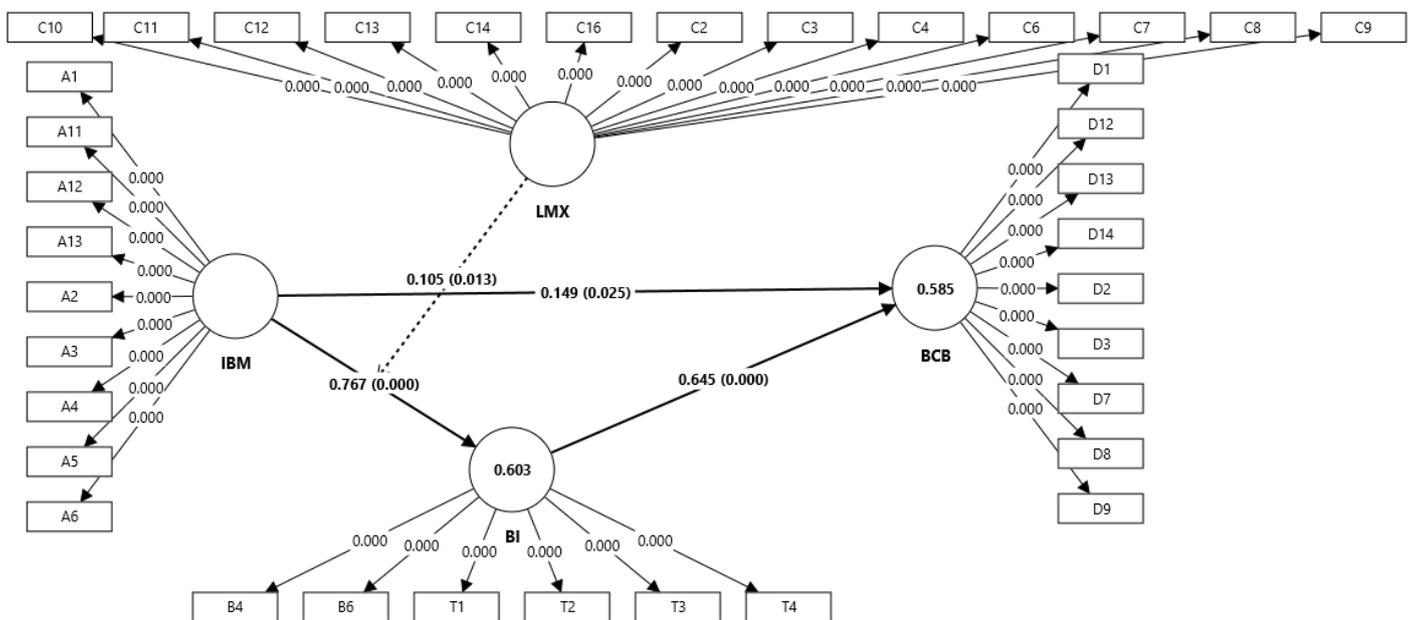

Figure 3. The results of model structure produced by Smart-Pls 4.1.

Note: *p*-value is shown in parenthesis.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how IBM influences BCB among front-line restaurant employees in Macao, with BI acting as a mediating variable and LMX serving as a moderating factor. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and Social Exchange Theory (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014), the findings validate the internal branding framework proposed by Zhang and Bai (2018) within the Macao restaurant industry context.

The results confirmed all five proposed hypotheses. IBM demonstrated a direct positive effect on BCB ($\beta = 0.149$, $p = 0.025$), despite a relatively weak effect. Moreover, IBM had a strong impact on BI ($\beta = 0.767$, $p < 0.001$) whereas BI strongly predicted BCB ($\beta = 0.645$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that BI plays a mediating role between IBM and BCB. The indirect effect of IBM on BCB through BI ($\beta = 0.495$, *p*

< 0.001) further emphasized the central role of brand identification in translating internal brand initiatives (via IBM) into brand-supportive behaviors (e.g., BCB). These findings support the theoretical argument that employees who identify with their brand are more likely to voluntarily engage in actions such as advocacy, brand enthusiasm, and support for their coworkers (Zhang and Bai, 2018; Zhao et al., 2019).

The moderating role of LMX was also confirmed. The interaction effect of IBM and LMX on BI was small but significant ($\beta = 0.105$, $p = 0.013$). The results suggest that high-quality leader-member relationships strengthen organizational management practices to employees' behaviors, which in line with previous findings (Stewart and Johnson, 2009; Zhu et al., 2023). Line managers, when seen as trusted representatives of the organization, enhance employees' engagement with internal branding efforts (Gooty et al., 2010; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Wallace et al., 2013). Therefore, LMX plays a crucial role in amplifying the effectiveness of IBM.

While the study contributes valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships among IBM, BI, BCB, and LMX. Future research should consider longitudinal or experimental designs to observe changes over time and confirm causal paths (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for common method bias and social desirability effects. Although Harman's single-factor test indicated minimal bias, future studies should incorporate multi-source data—such as supervisor ratings or behavioral observations—to improve data accuracy (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, cross-sectional data within this study limits causality. In future study, we will attempt to design longitudinal empirical study to examine internal brand management effects in different time phases. Third, the study's sample was limited to the restaurant industry in Macao, which may affect generalizability. Cultural and industry-specific characteristics unique to this setting may not apply to other regions or service sectors. Future research should therefore test this model across different industries and cultural contexts to enhance external validity (Piehler et al., 2018). Fourth, while the study focuses on the core constructs of IBM, BI, BCB, and LMX, it does not examine other potential psychological or organizational factors. Future work could explore variables such as psychological ownership, perceived brand authenticity, or organizational justice to offer a more comprehensive view of internal branding dynamics (Helm et al., 2016; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Sixth, although demographic variables were not significant in this study, future research may explore whether employee responses to internal branding differ across generational cohorts, personality traits, or motivational profiles. These differences could offer further managerial insights into how internal branding is perceived and internalized by various employee groups. Lastly, while this study employed quantitative research design, such an approach may overlook nuanced insights from participants. Therefore, future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of employees' experiences and perceptions regarding internal brand management.

This study explored how Internal Brand Management (IBM) influences Brand Citizenship Behavior (BCB) among front-line restaurant employees in Macao, with Brand Identification (BI) acting as a mediator and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) as a moderator. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the

findings provide empirical support for the proposed model. It is found that IBM has a significant positive effect on BI and BCB, with BI serving as a key psychological mechanism that transmits IBM's impact on employee behavior. The indirect effect of IBM on BCB through BI was stronger than the direct effect, emphasizing the central role of brand identification. Additionally, LMX significantly moderates the relationship between IBM and BCB. In other words, high-quality supervisor-employee relationships enhance IBM and BCB, underscoring the importance of leadership in internal branding efforts.

In theory, this study contributes to internal branding literature by highlighting the combined importance of psychological attachment and interpersonal relationships driving brand-consistent employee behavior. Practically, Macao organizations should align internal communication with leadership practices to foster identification and strengthen employee engagement. These insights offer valuable guidance for service-sector managers seeking to enhance brand performance through internal branding strategies.

In practice, the results of this study suggest that internal brand management can directly influence how employees behave in support of a brand. For restaurant businesses in Macao, investing in staff training, internal communication, and brand-focused leadership can improve service consistency and customer satisfaction. When employees identify with the brand, they are more likely to promote it through their actions. The role of supervisors is also critical—those who maintain strong, supportive relationships with their teams can strengthen the impact of internal branding. For the Macao catering sector, these efforts are essential for building customer loyalty and maintaining a competitive edge. The quality of leader-member relationships influence how effectively internal brand management (IBM) is implemented among employees, which subsequently affects their brand-supportive behaviors.

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