

Exploration and Scale Development of Brand Internalization Dimensions for Employees in Refined Oil Sales Enterprises

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Abstract

In recent years, fierce competition has compelled refined oil sales enterprises to make strategic adjustments, one of which is to modify their marketing strategies. These strategies include internal marketing to employees, perceived as brand internalization from the employees' perspective. However, exploration of employee brand internalization has often been limited to industries such as tourism and hospitality, with no specific scale for refined oil sales enterprises. To address this, the article employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, leading to the following conclusions: Using employees from four refined oil sales enterprises as samples, an exploratory study was conducted using grounded theory, extracting 24 primary dimensions of employee brand internalization. A theoretical model of the meaning dimensions of employee brand internalization in refined oil sales enterprises was constructed. Furthermore, following a rigorous scale development process, a measurement scale of employee brand citizenship behavior with 20 items was developed. This research not only provides a measurement tool for empirical studies on the meaning of employee brand internalization in refined oil sales enterprises but also offers a diagnostic tool for refining marketing strategies in these enterprises.

Keyword: sales enterprises, refined oil

1. Introduction

Outstanding branding is a soft power of enterprise development and an important reflection of enterprise competitiveness. For a long time, brand building has been a shortcoming for refined oil sales enterprises. Due to the monopolistic and service-oriented nature of these enterprises, the industry tends to rely more on the benefits brought by its monopoly while overlooking its service-oriented characteristics, a crucial factor affecting brand building in refined oil sales enterprises. Brand enhancement can be approached from various aspects, with the most significant yet often overlooked aspect being employees (Hao Yiran, 2019). For a long time, China's refined oil sales enterprises have adopted a labor employment model with few formal employees, causing significant differences in employee perceptions of the enterprise. Given the service characteristics of refined oil sales enterprises, such differences can greatly impact brand building.

In response, this study intends to adopt a mixed research method, first selecting employees from four refined oil sales enterprises, including Sinopec Sichuan Sales XC Branch, as research subjects. Using grounded theory research methods, the study will conduct coding analysis on employee brand internalization in refined oil sales enterprises to clarify the meaning dimensions of employee brand internalization. Subsequently, following the standard procedures for scale development, a scale for employee brand internalization in refined oil sales enterprises will be constructed and validated. Theoretically, this study enriches the types of employee brand internalization, revealing the deep symbolic logic of each brand internalization among employees in refined oil sales enterprises, laying a theoretical foundation for future research on the internal structure and generation, transmission, and interpretation mechanisms of employee brand internalization. Practically, this study mythologizes the understanding of employee brand internalization, providing references and insights for optimizing marketing strategies in refined oil sales enterprises.

2. Literature Review

With the continuous development of the commodity economy, the customer-centric brand concept in the field of marketing has been continuously developed and gradually ingrained in people's minds. However, the fact shows that a significant gap between consumer experience and corporate brand promises has led to increasing customer dissatisfaction. The main cause of this problem lies in the collision between corporate brand culture and philosophy

and consumers. Since employees play a role in conveying this process and serve as important actors, enterprises have gradually realized the importance of brand internal and external alignment and balance in their continuous development, giving rise to research on brand internalization.

Currently, there is no consensus on the concept of brand internalization. Some mainstream concepts, such as those proposed by Berry and Parasuraman, professors at Texas A&M University, define internalized branding. Berry (2000) pointed out that internalized branding includes training employees and marketing the brand as an internal product to them; sharing the efforts and strategies behind the brand with employees; creative brand communication by employees; employee training that reinforces brand behavior; focusing on giving spiritual encouragement and material rewards to employees who significantly contribute to corporate brand building; and most importantly, encouraging employees to recognize the corporate brand and actively engage in brand-building work. In mainstream definitions, researchers emphasize the connotation of "employee branding." For example, Boone (2000) believes that brand internalization is about establishing employee behavior consistent with brand commitments to vitalize the service brand; Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) argue that the purpose of brand internalization is to ensure employees provide consistent brand information to customers.

In China, Bai Changhong and Qiu Wei (2008) were the first to propose the concept of "brand internalization." They pointed out that external brand communication only increases customer expectations, and only when brand value is embedded in the company's internal brand management behavior can it ensure that brand value is reflected internally and ultimately ensure consistency between customer experience and expectations. In recent years, researchers have continuously enriched the connotation of "brand internalization." Zhang Ran (2018) proposed a model composed of three brand internalization dimensions: learning actions, internal communication, and leadership demonstration, combined with the characteristics of social organizations and grounded theory, which is one of the early academic achievements of domestic scholars in studying brand internalization of non-profit organizations. Xu Zehui (2020) pointed out in his research that the essence and core purpose of brand internalization in an enterprise is to make employees genuinely aware of the brand core of the enterprise or organization and the relevance of their work behavior through communication and intervention.

Currently, research on brand internalization examines the influencing factors and outcomes from different perspectives. Generally, it is studied from two angles: organizational brand internalization (process perspective) and employee brand internalization (outcome perspective).

3. Exploratory Study on the Dimensions of Brand Internalization for Employees in Refined Oil Sales Enterprises

3.1 Research Design

3.1.1 Research Methodology

The choice of grounded theory in this study to construct the brand internalization conceptual structure from the employee's perspective is due to several reasons: Firstly, under the current national policy-driven context, refined oil enterprises have distinct practical backgrounds and local characteristics. However, the service research of these enterprises has not yet received academic attention, and there is a lack of studies on employee brand internalization. Qualitative research allows for a comprehensive exploration of all potential categories, focusing on deriving theory from empirical data rather than preset theoretical assumptions. This is a bottom-up process, moving from the specific to the abstract, from phenomenon to essence, with the aim of establishing substantive or formal theories based on empirical facts. Secondly, employee brand internalization is a process from cognition to behavior, involving multi-subject and multi-level interactions. Grounded theory, as a qualitative research method, helps researchers discover often overlooked behavior patterns through real events and uncover the essence of brand internalization (Glaser, 1978). Lastly, grounded theory is one of the few research methods focused on theory generation, utilizing rigorous research procedures and scientific methods. Therefore, this study employs grounded theory to achieve its research objectives.

3.1.2 Research Subjects and Data Collection

This study primarily explores the psychological and behavioral manifestations of employee brand internalization, based on the specific activities of the organization. As a preliminary exploration of the conceptual structure of employee brand internalization, it selects employees in the refined oil industry as research subjects, aiming for breakthroughs at specific points. In the era of the internet and ubiquitous WeChat, traditional qualitative data sources in China are increasingly expanding to online platforms. This study selects multiple refined oil enterprises to explore common psychological and behavioral traits among their employees, choosing employees from Sinopec Sichuan Sales XC Branch, Yanchang Petroleum Sichuan Sales XC Branch, and PetroChina Sichuan Sales SG

Branch as research subjects (during interviews, many employees were unwilling to disclose personal and company information, so company names are abbreviated in English). Due to the difficulty in obtaining large-sample primary research data, data collection primarily relied on WeChat online platforms, Tencent Meetings, and phone calls, supplemented by field interviews. This multi-source interview data can complement and verify each other, helping to avoid issues from single data sources and improving the reliability and validity of the research results.

3.1.3 Data Processing

Classic grounded theory in data analysis mainly encompasses two stages: substantive coding and theoretical coding. Substantive coding includes the process from open coding to selective coding, focusing on abstracting raw data to generate initial concepts and categories. During the coding process, researchers are required to conduct continuous iterative comparison operations on the raw materials, striving to extract various concepts, construct and form categories, and accurately perceive their internal logical relationships. Meanwhile, existing literature should be cross-referenced to condense core categories until theoretical saturation is achieved, ultimately constructing new or further enriching existing theoretical models, as elaborated in the research by Jia Xudong and Heng Liang (2020). Following the coding logic of classic grounded theory, this study combines raw materials and work memos to complete the data analysis of employee brand internalization. Additionally, researchers utilized computer software for assistance, similar to the approach adopted by Cao Yuankun et al. (2019), effectively enhancing the efficiency of coding work. The coding process in grounded theory is a crucial method in qualitative research, aiming to construct a theoretical framework through systematic and procedural analysis of collected data. Following the principles of grounded theory, Nvivo 11 software was used to sequentially number the selected texts (A1-A8, A9-A18, A19-A31, B1-B21, C1-C19, D1-D42) and perform open, axial, and selective coding on the extracted codes. During the coding process, expert opinion consultation, repeated reflection, and comparison were used to extract conceptual categories, refine core categories, and ultimately construct a theoretical model from the bottom up based on the relationships between categories.

3.2 Category Refinement and Model Construction

3.2.1 Data Organization and Concept Discovery

Based on complete fidelity to the original materials, the text is decomposed for the extraction and discovery of relevant initial concepts. Due to the interconnectedness of some research questions (including inclusion or parallelism), it is not feasible to simply extract raw data entries independently. By analyzing the original coding entries, it is possible to extract two or more concepts from some entries. Consequently, this study decomposed and discovered 128 initial concepts from the original statements (omitted due to space constraints).

3.2.2 Open Coding Analysis

To ensure scientific and appropriate refinement from concepts to categories, this stage follows the open coding analysis method. Based on existing conceptual categories, 128 concepts are screened, analyzed, merged, and classified, ultimately uncovering 24 categories: designated brand vision, clear brand strategy, convey brand value, leadership innovation traits, set reward mechanisms, informal incentive behavior, formal incentive behavior, share experiences, deepen brand understanding, convey brand story, transmit brand information, conduct training courses, organize knowledge competitions, organize learning activities, establish brand systems, create integration environments, establish internal social platforms, accurately analyze employee needs, establish intelligent management systems, integrate digital technology, cultivate brand culture, inherit brand spirit, practice brand value, and eradicate cultural symbols.

3.2.3 Axial Coding Analysis

To establish relationships between different categories and develop core categories, this stage employs axial coding analysis to analyze and summarize the relationships between categories. After repeated deliberation, seven core categories are refined: brand leadership, brand motivation, brand communication, brand training, brand integration, brand digitalization, and brand culture. Among them, the core category "brand leadership" consists of designated brand vision, clear brand strategy, convey brand value, and leadership innovation traits. "Brand motivation" comprises setting reward mechanisms, informal incentive behavior, and formal incentive behavior. "Brand communication" includes sharing experiences, deepening brand understanding, conveying brand stories, and transmitting brand information. "Brand training" involves conducting training courses, organizing knowledge competitions, and organizing learning activities. "Brand integration" consists of establishing brand systems and creating integration environments. "Brand digitalization" includes establishing internal social platforms, accurately analyzing employee needs, establishing intelligent management systems, and integrating digital technology. "Brand culture" comprises inheriting brand spirit, practicing brand value, and eradicating cultural symbols.

3.2.4 Selective Coding Analysis

This stage primarily explores the connections between categories and core categories, and theoretically abstracts the attribution and connotation of core categories to generate more generalized core dimensions. By examining the connections between concepts, categories, and core categories, the seven core categories of brand leadership, brand motivation, brand communication, brand training, brand integration, brand digitalization, and brand culture can be summarized into a single core dimension of "employee brand internalization." Consequently, a theoretical model of employee brand internalization dimensions in refined oil sales enterprises is constructed, comprising 24 primary dimensions (categories) and 7 secondary dimensions (core categories).

3.2.5 Saturation Test

After reaching the above conclusions, this study added one new company and eight employees, obtaining eight interview records through focus group interviews. The reason for choosing focus group interviews is that they can provide a large amount of information in a short period of time. Subsequently, a confirmatory analysis was conducted using the text data from the eight interviews to determine whether theoretical saturation had been achieved. Compared with the existing initial concepts, subcategories, and core categories, the new text data did not extract new concepts, subcategories, or core categories, indicating that the construct structure of employee brand internalization had reached saturation (Jia Xudong et al., 2020).

4. Development of the Employee Brand Internalization Scale

In this study, utilizing grounded theory analysis, we have preliminarily clarified and organized the construct structure of employee brand internalization. However, we are also acutely aware of the obvious limitations of relying solely on grounded theory as a research method. From the perspective of construct structure validation, using only grounded theory can only achieve the initial construction of the employee brand internalization construct structure, but it is challenging to conduct in-depth and comprehensive validation. To address this shortcoming, we must introduce quantitative research methods, combining the two approaches to achieve a more precise and scientific validation of the employee brand internalization construct structure. Additionally, when considering the practical process of employee brand internalization, we found that the construct derived from grounded theory does not accurately depict the level of employee brand internalization exhibited by teams in actual work scenarios. Therefore, to more accurately measure this level, it is particularly important and urgent to develop a highly operational scale for team employee brand internalization. Based on the above considerations, we have determined the core tasks and main objectives of the following text. First, we will focus on developing an employee brand internalization scale, which will strictly adhere to the classic approach and methodology proposed by Churchill (1979). Specifically, the development process will be divided into three key steps: the first step is the item generation phase, where we will comprehensively collect and organize relevant information from various factors and considerations to meticulously design representative and targeted scale items; the second step is the scale structure exploration phase, where we will use various statistical analysis methods and techniques to conduct in-depth analysis and exploration of the generated items to discover the most reasonable and scientific scale structure; the third step is the scale validity testing phase, where we will conduct a series of rigorous testing procedures and standards to comprehensively test the validity of the constructed scale, ensuring its quality and reliability. Through this series of work, we hope to successfully validate the construct structure of employee brand internalization, providing a solid and powerful basis for the structural dimension division of employee brand internalization, and laying an indispensable measurement foundation for more in-depth and systematic research on the formation process and mechanism of employee brand internalization, thereby promoting further development and improvement of the entire field of employee brand internalization research.

To develop a scientific employee brand internalization scale and ensure that the newly developed construct structure covers the theoretical boundaries of employee brand internalization, the initial measurement items of this study mainly originate from two aspects: first, systematically sorting through relevant theoretical research both domestically and internationally, drawing on measurement items from existing research on employee brand internalization scales or related construct scales; second, refining and merging textual materials from the coding process to write corresponding measurement items, ultimately forming an original employee brand internalization scale consisting of 24 items (see table 4-5). To ensure the content validity of the original employee brand internalization scale, the researchers invited three experts in the field of organizational psychology to discuss each measurement item of the original scale, evaluating whether the wording of the measurement items is clear and concise and whether the item classification is relevant. During this process, the experts provided sincere suggestions on the wording of the measurement items. For example, the experts considered the wording of the measurement items "we uphold the corporate mission" and "we integrate the organizational values" to be too broad

and not matching the construct connotation of the employee brand internalization scale, leading to revisions. Additionally, there was content repetition in the brand communication dimension regarding conveying brand stories and brand culture. Finally, based on expert feedback, the measurement items "conveying brand stories" and "practicing brand values" were deleted, resulting in an initial employee brand internalization scale consisting of 22 measurement items.

5. Conclusions and Prospects

This study first compiled an original employee brand internalization scale consisting of 20 items, sourced from two aspects: first, based on a systematic review of domestic and international research, it drew from measurement items of existing employee brand internalization scales or related construct scales. Second, it refined and merged text materials from the coding process. Secondly, to avoid subjective bias from researchers, three experts were invited to analyze the content validity of the original employee brand internalization scale. Subsequently, based on expert opinions, the revised initial employee brand internalization scale underwent structural exploration and validity testing. The results indicated that the employee brand internalization scale, composed of 7 dimensions and 20 measurement items, has good reliability and validity. In conclusion, the conceptual structure of employee brand internalization developed in this study has certain theoretical contributions, and the compiled measurement scale provides a measurement basis for subsequent research on the mechanism of employee brand internalization.

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