Enhancing Brand Understanding Through Brand Training: a Conditional Process Analysis of Recent Hires at an Airline

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Abstract

Purpose – Within internal branding research, the positive association between employee brand training and brand understanding is well established. However, the boundary conditions of this focal relationship have not been researched to date, and insights about the effect of individual differences would be of significant practical value to service organizations. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to test the moderating effect on the focal relationship of three key individual differences: age, gender, and customer-contact position.

Theoretical framework – The study is grounded on established constructs and relationships from the internal branding literature.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected at a Latin American airline using a web-based survey. The sample included 225 recently hired employees. The analysis was performed through conditional process models estimated with the PROCESS macro for SPSS.

Findings – Age moderates the focal relationship, with older employees displaying a weaker impact of brand training on brand understanding, which becomes non-significant after the age of 50. For gender, the moderating effect was not significant. Contact position had a significant negative effect on the focal relationship, i.e. brand training had a weaker impact on brand understanding for contact employees compared to non-contact employees. This is attributed to contact employees' involvement in service encounters, which provides real-world opportunities to learn about the brand above and beyond formal brand training, opportunities which non-contact employees lack.

Practical & social implications of research – Training managers in service organizations can use the study results to achieve a greater impact from scarce brand training resources. For gender differences, the findings support a uniform allocation of training resources. For age differences, a differential allocation is advised, with more resources for younger employees, who have lower brand understanding scores and derive a greater impact from brand training. The finding of a diminishing impact of brand training suggests devising alternative means/

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Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Negócios

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opportunities for older employees to enhance their brand understanding. Lastly, the results support allocating more training resources to non-contact employees who, when compared to contact employees, have lower brand understanding scores, exhibit a higher impact of brand training, and have fewer non-training opportunities to learn about the brand. The result generalizability is limited by the sample coming from a single organization.

Originality/value – Within the internal branding research there is little examination of moderating effects for established relationships. This study makes an incremental contribution by testing the effect of three relevant individual differences on the relationship between brand training and brand understanding. The results have practical managerial applications.

Keywords: Internal branding, brand promise, conditional process analysis, service employees.

1 Introduction

Internal branding is a mostly unexplored line of research within the scientific journals indexed by Redalyc. To date, only a conceptual literature review (Sahoo & Mohanty, 2019) and two empirical studies have been published on the subject (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Murillo, 2019). The paucity of research in the Latin American region is disappointing, considering that service organizations actually consider internal branding to be very useful, without necessarily using that name, and regularly deploy such practices to train employees regarding their service brand and the promise it makes to customers (Brodie et al., 2009; Pinar et al., 2016). This contrasts with the related yet distinct research streams of internal marketing and employer branding, where numerous studies have been published (e.g. Araque-Jaimes et al., 2017; Cassundé et al., 2014; Farias, 2010; Reis et al., 2018).

Research on internal branding has been centered mostly on the hospitality industry (e.g. Buil et al., 2016; Chung & Byrom, 2021; King, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Terglav et al., 2016), which has always paid close attention to the customer experience (Kandampully et al., 2018), and the need to create differentiated experiences through careful employee training (Hurrell & Scholarios, 2014). In addition, there have been a few studies in the airline industry (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Vatankhah & Darvishi, 2018), financial services (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Garas et al., 2018; Tuominen et al., 2016), public sector organizations (Leijerholt et al., 2022), healthcare (Huang & Lai, 2021),

and the retail industry (Itam & Singh, 2017; Murillo, 2020; Porricelli et al., 2014).

Internal branding is not a recent development, as attested by the attention brand training has historically been accorded at such admired companies as Ritz Carlton Hotels (Yeung, 2006), Singapore Airlines (Chong, 2007), and Starbucks (Berry, 2000). What is recent is internal branding research, i.e. the scientific study of the processes that service organizations implement internally to turn their employees into authentic "brand ambassadors" (Xiong et al., 2013). Among these processes, the systematic enhancement of employees' brand understanding through brand training is particularly important, and constitutes the focal relationship examined in this research. In today's saturated consumer markets, a strong brand, when consistently translated into a differentiated customer experience, generates loyalty and word of mouth among customers, thus becoming a source of competitive advantage (Berry & Lampo, 2004).

However, understanding the service brand and its actionable implications for the role it plays when facing customers is not something that employees, particularly recent hires, can achieve with just the standard orientation and initial training. This is because brand understanding contains a large proportion of tacit knowledge, which new employees can only assimilate over time, by developing their individual work experience and judgment. The need for time, and training continuity, has been established by longitudinal studies of the relationship between brand training and brand understanding (Murillo & King, 2019). However, the boundary conditions that shape this key internal branding relationship have not been

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researched before. Insights about relevant moderating variables would be a timely contribution, because this relationship arguably constitutes the immediate goal of internal branding organizational practices. Although previous studies show this relationship to be positive, a better understanding of moderating effects, linked to individual differences, would have a large practical value for organizations seeking to improve their training of brand ambassadors.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to make an incremental contribution to internal branding knowledge by examining three previously untested moderators of the relationship between employee brand training and employee brand understanding, specifically gender, age, and customer-contact position.

2 Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 Internal branding

Recent systematic reviews of the internal branding concept (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016) have pointed out that the literature is fragmented and that numerous definitions have been advanced. This study, in particular, is aligned with the definition by Punjaisri and Wilson (2011, p. 1523): "[...] the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers' expectations is enacted and delivered by employees." Since the first seminal studies (Burmann et al., 2009), internal branding, also known as internal brand management, has taken the position that most service organizations deploy internal branding practices, even without using that name. Top service organizations have historically emphasized rigorous training regimes (e.g. Chong, 2007; Yeung, 2006) to turn new hires into competent brand ambassadors (Jacobs, 2003).

The intentional development of a competent and motivated workforce that can deliver the brand promise to customers during service encounters can form the basis of effective differentiation, i.e. a strong service brand (Berry, 2000; Berry & Lampo, 2004). In the hyper-competitive environment that organizations face today, a strong brand is a proven source of competitive advantage (Barney, 2014; Berry, 2000). This is why successful service organizations have traditionally attached considerable importance to the

training and motivation of their employees, so that they are capable and motivated to deliver the brand promise to their customers. These companies use advertising, as well as other promotional initiatives, to generate expectations and make brand promises to consumers (Brodie et al., 2009). However, as the services they offer are made up of intangible benefits or experiences, customers base their brand judgments and verdicts largely on the behavior of customer-contact employees (Grace & O'Cass, 2005; Sirianni et al., 2013).

Internal branding research has provided scientific confirmation of the effectiveness of long standing managerial practice, through the identification of basic constructs (e.g. brand training, brand leadership, brand understanding, brand commitment), and the validation of the key relationships in a nomological network using structural equation modeling (e.g. King & Grace, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Xiong et al., 2013). However, the important task of testing the boundary conditions of these key relationships has barely started (e.g. Dechawatanapaisal, 2019), and currently represents a gap in internal branding knowledge.

Over the years, internal branding research has systematically identified the various practices that service organizations implement to achieve brand-aligned employee behavior, and validated multi-item scales to measure the newly proposed constructs (e.g. King et al., 2012; Xiong et al., 2013). These organizational practices include brand-oriented recruitment (King & So, 2015; Murillo & King, 2019), brand training (Huang & Lai, 2021; King, 2010; Murillo & King, 2019; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), brand communication (Buil et al., 2016; Burmann et al., 2009; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), and brand leadership (Burmann et al., 2009; Morhart et al., 2009, Terglav et al., 2016).

Among these, brand training is the most common organizational practice aimed to shape employees' brand behaviors, and in that sense can be characterized as the core practice in the internal branding toolkit. Indeed, some studies do not measure brand training separately but only a global internal branding construct with a prevalence of brand training items (e.g. Dechawatanapaisal, 2019; Huang & Lai, 2021; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Van Nguyen et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2015). In studies that explicitly measure brand training, the construct appears under different labels, such as brand training (Murillo &

King, 2019), brand-oriented training (King & So, 2015), brand knowledge dissemination (Baker et al., 2014; King, 2010; King & Grace, 2010), and brand-centered training (Buil et al., 2016). These studies show uniformly positive impacts of brand training on various outcome variables, such as brand commitment (King, 2010; Yang et al., 2015), brand value congruence (Baker et al., 2014), and brand understanding (King & So, 2015; Murillo & King, 2019; Murillo & Terán-Bustamante, 2020).

2.2 The moderator effects of the relationship between brand training and brand understanding

In order to deliver a differentiated customer experience, the employee must understand the meaning of the service brand, i.e. the brand identity, brand values, and the promises made to consumers through external advertising (Brodie et al., 2009). In addition, the employee must learn the specific behaviors that the brand translates into during service encounters with customers (Fleming & Witters, 2012). This knowledge conveys a sense of self-efficacy to the employee regarding their ability to fulfill the brand promise at the service encounter (Xiong et al., 2013). Internal branding research has approached this knowledge through the notion of *employee brand understanding*, defined here as the cognitive representation of the brand within employees' minds (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010).

This notion plays a central role in many internal branding studies, and several labels have been advanced for constructs sharing similar conceptualizations, such as shared brand understanding (Vallaster & Chernatony, 2005), brand knowledge (Chung & Byrom, 2021; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009; King & Grace, 2010; Terglav et al., 2016; Van Nguyen et al., 2019), corporate brand knowledge (Hoppe, 2017), internal brand knowledge (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Morokane et al., 2016; Ngo et al., 2019), and brand understanding (Altaf et al., 2017, Altaf & Shahzad, 2018, King & So, 2015; Piehler, 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Xiong et al., 2013). In addition, the construct has been modeled with both unidimensional (e.g. Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Hoppe, 2017; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009; King & So, 2015; Murillo & King, 2019; Ngo et al., 2019; Piehler, 2018; Terglav et al., 2016) and multidimensional approaches (e.g. Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Piehler, 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Xiong et al., 2013).

Previous studies have shown that brand understanding can be enhanced through a number of internal branding practices including brand recruitment (King & So, 2015; Murillo & King, 2019), brand training (King, 2010; King & Grace, 2010; King & So, 2015; Murillo & King, 2019; Murillo & Terán-Bustamante, 2020; Van Nguyen et al., 2019), brand oriented support (King & So, 2015), internal brand communication (Muhammad et al., 2019), brand leadership (Murillo & King, 2019; Terglav et al., 2016), and brand empowerment (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Altaf et al., 2019). However, few studies control for employee tenure (Dechawatanapaisal, 2019; Murillo & King, 2019; Van Nguyen et al., 2019), a significant issue given that most employee learning about the brand and the brand promise takes place during their first months in the organization. Longitudinal studies show in fact that for employees with a low tenure, brand training has a stronger impact on employee brand performance than brand-oriented leadership (Murillo & King, 2019).

Accordingly, this study will focus on the potential moderators of the relationship between brand training and brand understanding. Based on extant internal branding research, the following hypothesis is proposed as a baseline for this study:

H1   Brand training has a positive impact on brand understanding.

Examining the boundary conditions of this relationship would be a timely addition to internal branding research, because of its practical implications for service organizations. Specifically, training managers need to know whether and in what ways they should adapt their brand training practices for recently hired employees who differ in such basic dimensions as age, gender, and contact position. Within the internal branding literature there has been very little research of these variables as potential moderators. The moderating role of tenure has been previously examined (e.g. Dechawatanapaisal, 2019; Van Nguyen et al., 2019), but the current study will keep tenure relatively constant, because it focuses on perceptions of internal branding among recently hired employees (i.e. less than 18 months). This follows a twofold rationale. First, recent hires have a good recollection of the internal branding practices that they were exposed to when they joined the company, and second, most service organizations concentrate their internal branding

efforts at the orientation and in the first months after new employees join the company (e.g. Murillo & King, 2019).

The moderating effect of age or generational differences has been tested in internal branding studies (e.g. Huang & Lai, 2021; King et al., 2017; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), although not in the focal relationship examined in this research. The study by Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) found a positive moderating effect of age on the relationship between internal branding and employees' brand identification, with said relationship being stronger for employees older than 30. These results, though, are limited by their dichotomizing age, a continuous predictor, at the sample median, a practice which is not recommended (Hayes, 2018; MacCallum et al., 2002). A more recent study found a positive moderating effect of age (operationalized as belonging to Gen X versus Gen Y) on the relationship between internal branding and brand identification (Dechawatanapaisal, 2019). It should be noted that both studies focus on brand identification, which is an affective outcome of brand training, unlike brand understanding, which by definition is a cognitive outcome. The human resource management literature reports a positive relationship between employee age and affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1993; Ng & Feldman, 2010), an effect that could be mirrored in an affective variable such as brand identification.

For the more cognitive dimension of brand understanding, no previous study within the internal branding literature has tested age as a moderator of the relationship between internal branding generally, or brand training specifically, and brand understanding. However, several studies from the general training literature have found a negative relationship between age and learning (Sarin et al., 2010; Webster & Martocchio, 1995; Zwick, 2015). This effect is attributed to employees becoming more resistant to change or to new technology with increasing age (Sarin et al., 2010). Lacking previous research findings from the internal branding literature, but drawing on similar studies from the human resource management literature, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H2   Age moderates the positive impact of brand training on brand understanding, with a weaker effect expected for older employees.

Another potential moderator of the focal relationship is gender, but within the internal branding literature, gender differences in the outcomes of internal branding practices have not been formally examined. Even within the general training literature, no significant gender-based differences have been detected (Webster & Martocchio, 1995), and nowadays there appears to be no theoretical rationale for differences in training effectiveness based solely on gender (Colquitt et al., 2000). The study by Moncrief et al. (2000), which set out to examine the validity of the gender-differences hypothesis in sales organizations, found that when both the organization and the customer base were gender-balanced, differences between employees purely on the basis of gender became non-significant, or even changed sign with respect to reported results from the 1970s and 1980s. A more recent study found no significant gender differences in interest in training content and training transfer among 203 participants (35 percent female) in off-the-job training courses in Germany (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020).

There have been previous calls for research of gender as a moderator within internal branding. In particular, King and Grace (2012) point out that the study by Peterson (2004) reports higher organizational commitment among female employees, and since the premise of internal branding studies is to achieve "[...] a more productive workforce, future studies would bode well to explore gender differences so as to inform practitioner actions" (King & Grace, 2012, p. 484). Given that commitment is related to the extra-role behaviors frequently associated with brand promise delivery, this previous finding can provide an indirect rationale for hypothesizing a gender effect of training on brand understanding with a stronger impact on female employees, notwithstanding the fact that commitment is an affective variable, and brand understanding a cognitive one. Accordingly, this study follows previous calls for research (King, 2010; King & Grace, 2012) and tests the moderating role of gender on the relationship between brand training and brand understanding. To this end, the following hypothesis is posited:

H3   Gender moderates the positive impact of brand training on brand understanding, with a stronger effect expected for female employees.

A third potential and highly relevant moderator is customer-contact position, a key contingency within service organizations, because customer-contact employees

are directly responsible for delivering the brand promise during service encounters with customers. This explains the tendency of leading organizations to provide more specific and detailed brand training to contact employees to enable them to deliver a brand-aligned service experience to customers (Chong, 2007; King et al., 2013; Murillo, 2019). Indeed, the internal branding literature is markedly concentrated on frontline or customer-contact employees (e.g. Buil et al., 2016; Du Preez et al., 2017; Garas et al., 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Vatankhah & Darvishi, 2018), and few studies have probed for differential effects of internal branding between employees who either have or lack direct interactions with customers. Using a panel sample of 137 tourism and hospitality employees in Australia, King (2010) found that brand knowledge dissemination, a form of brand training, had a significant positive effect on role clarity, and that this positive effect was stronger for managers as compared to frontline employees. In other words, there is a negative moderating effect of contact position on the relationship between brand training and role clarity, which seems counterintuitive to the notion of contact employees receiving more detailed brand training. In the study by King (2010), this was attributed to the fact that most frontline employees in the sample (i.e. 67%) were in a casual or part-time contractual relationship, compared to managers, which for the most part were in full-time positions. By contrast, a study of internal branding at a chain of restaurants (Murillo, 2019), with a sample size of 248, detected a significantly higher explained variance of brand-consistent behavior among contact employees (i.e. waitresses and hostesses) than non-contact ones (i.e. kitchen and cleaning staff), which is indirect evidence of a positive direction for the moderating effect of contact

position. Given the sparsity of previous research and the inconsistency of reported results, this study hypothesizes that contact position moderates the relationship between brand training and brand understanding, and furthermore, that the direction of the effect is positive under the rationale of the more intensive brand training frontline employees usually receive. Therefore, the last hypothesis is formulated as follows:

H4   Contact position moderates the positive impact of brand training on brand understanding, with a stronger effect expected for employees occupying a contact position.

The conceptual model that reflects all of the hypothesized relationships is displayed in Figure 1

3 Methods

3.1 Data collection

The hypothesized relationships were tested using data from a large employee survey of a Latin American airline that has a strong brand and uses internal branding practices to train and lead its employees. The airline experienced strong growth in recent years, reaching at the time of the study a headcount exceeding five thousand employees, which has required a significant investment in training. The top managers were quite welcoming of academic research to examine employee attitudes towards a brand repositioning (a larger study still underway). However, they requested through a signed non-disclosure agreement full confidentiality of their brand name and survey data.
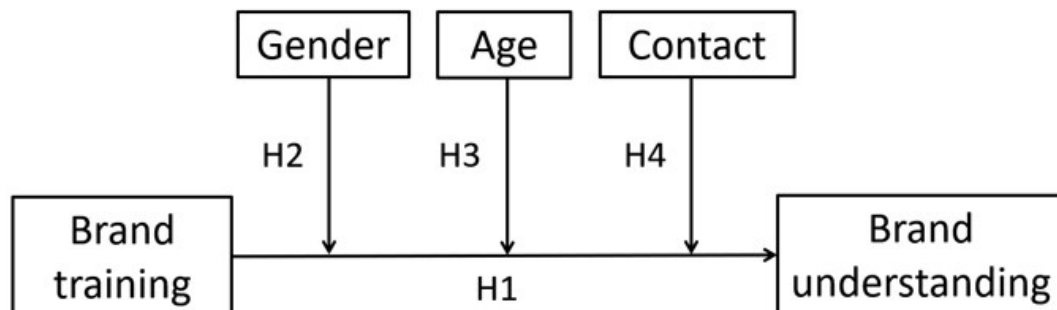

Figure 1. Conceptual model

The survey instrument was uploaded to a professional survey platform (Qualtrics) to facilitate its application to a dispersed and mobile workforce. The smartphone was the response mode used by most of the participants. Prior to the main launch, a pilot survey was distributed to 40 randomly chosen employees using the same online platform. The examination of responses showed no anomalous responses, or undue time spent on any question. Accordingly, the main survey invitation was sent by the corporate communications department to all employees. The link to the survey remained active for a month (June, 2017), with a reminder sent after two weeks. Following the recommendation of the personnel department, and aiming for fully candid responses, the survey was anonymous. In all, 225 surveys were returned by employees with a tenure of 18 months or less. The sample demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

In common with most internal branding research, this study is cross-sectional, since the data were collected at a single point in time; with a correlational-causal quantitative approach, since it sought to establish the degree of association between the constructs in order to test the proposed hypotheses (Hernández-Sampieri & Torres, 2018).

3.2 Measurement

Previously published and validated scales were used to measure the variables in the study. For brand training, the two-item scale by King and So (2015) was complemented with one item from the knowledge dissemination scale by King and Grace (2010). Brand understanding was measured with three items from the scale for perceived brand knowledge used by Xiong et al. (2019). English language scales were translated to Spanish following a team approach (Harkness, 2003), which involved, in addition to the author, two professional translators and an external marketing researcher. Within the airline, the marketing executive overseeing the survey reviewed the final wording of all items to make sure that employees would have no difficulties with any questions. All items were evaluated with a five-point Likert measurement scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree."

To validate the multi-item scales used in the study, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using Mplus version 8.3, with the results displayed in Table 2. The standardized indicator loadings all exceeded

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the sample

	Number	Percentage
Age		
18-24	58	25.78%
25-29	66	29.33%
30-34	43	19.11%
35-39	17	7.56%
40-44	20	8.89%
> 44	21	9.33%
Total	**225**	**100%**
Gender		
Female	94	41.78%
Male	131	58.22%
Total	**225**	**100%**
Contact position		
Yes	170	75.56%
No	55	24.44%
Total	**225**	**100%**

Table 2
CFA results for measurement model

Indicator	BRTRN	BRUND
TRAIN1 In all training programs the relevance of the particular training topic to our brand is demonstrated	.82	
TRAIN2 [airline] communicates its brand promise well to employees	.79	
TRAIN3 [airline] communicates the importance of my role in delivering the brand promise	.85	
BRUN1 I know how to live our brand in my daily work		.77
BRUN2 I know how to act brand consistent in my daily work		.81
BRUN3 I know how to implement our brand into my daily work		.87
Cronbach's alpha	.86	.85
Composite reliability	.86	.86
Average variance extracted (AVE)	.68	.67

Note. Model Fit: χ^2(df = 8) = 16.054, p = .042, CFI = .990, RMSEA = .067, SRMR = .027.

the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hulland, 1999). The model displayed a good fit, with 0.99 CFI, 0.067 RMSEA, and 0.027 SRMR (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). The composite reliabilities of the scales and average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the recommended thresholds of 0.8 and 0.5, respectively (Martínez-López et al., 2013), indicating adequate scale reliability and convergent validity. Moreover, the correlation between the two latent variables, shown in Table 3 below the main diagonal, was below the square root of the two AVEs (on the main diagonal, in parentheses), in compliance with the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which indicates adequate discriminant validity (Martínez-López et al., 2013). Furthermore, the HTMT, reported in the same table above the main diagonal, is below the critical value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), also confirming discriminant validity.

3.3 Assessment of common method bias

Because the survey data were collected with self-report measures, common method bias (CMB) can potentially affect our results (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Two methods were used to assess the presence of CMB. First, the Harman test was used by running an exploratory factor analysis of the six items, with principal axis factoring extraction restricted to a single factor, and a non-rotated solution. The single factor explained 66.01% of the covariance of the items, a clear indication of CMB contamination.

To more precisely assess the severity of CMB, and statistically control for it, the comprehensive CFA marker technique was used (Williams et al., 2010). Prior to launching the survey, a three-item marker variable of preference for solitary work (Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998) was included in the instrument. This variable is theoretically uncorrelated to the substantive variables in the study, and is subject to the same cognitive processes and response tendencies as the substantive items in the survey (Simmering et al., 2015). The technique estimates the amount of bias due to CMB in the items measuring the substantive variables, and in the correlations between substantive variables. The technique requires the estimation of five consecutive structural models, called CFA, Base Model, Method-C, Method-U, and Method-R (Williams et al., 2010). The results of the five models are shown in Table 4, and the contrast between models, using the change in the chi-square statistic, in the last two columns.

The chi-square tests showed that neither Method U nor Method R have a better fit than Method C. As Method C is the best-fitting model, it is concluded that there is a significant level of CMB in the items that measure the substantive variables, but this CMB does not differentially affect those items (tested in Method U), nor does it affect the correlation between the substantive variables brand training and brand understanding (tested in Method-R), which is the focal concern of this study.

Following the guidelines proposed by Williams et al. (2010), the reliability decomposition of the substantive variables was calculated using results from the previous models. The percentage of total reliability due to method variance, for which the marker variable provides a proxy, was 10.1% and 17.8%, respectively, for BRTRN and BRUND, whereas the reliability of the variables after removing the effect of CMB was 0.77 and 0.70, respectively, which is

Table 3
Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT

	BRTRN	BRUND
BRTRN	(.82)	.81
BRUND	.69	(.82)

Table 4
CFA Marker Technique Results

Model	Chi-square	Degrees of freedom	CFI	Δ Chi-square	Chi-square critical value
CFA	34.608	24	0.989		
Baseline	74.750	32	0.956		
Method-C	34.224	31	0.991	C vs B: 40.526	3.8 (1) **
Method-U	26.845	26	0.999	C vs U: 7.379	11.1 (5) n.s.
Method-R	27.561	27	0.999	C vs R: 6.663	9.5 (4) n.s.

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within the 0.70 reliability recommended for multi-item scales (and this is "clean" reliability).

Having confirmed scale reliability and validity, and the limited extent of CMB, the scales for BRTRN and BRUND were averaged to obtain observed variables. Using averaged or summated scales is a requisite of the PROCESS macro, which relies on observed variables, unlike structural equation models, which use latent variables (Hayes et al., 2017). However, good practice requires that prior to averaging multi-item scales, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity should be tested through the usual validation procedures as detailed above (e.g. del Barrio-García & Prados, 2019; Han & Gao, 2019).

4 Results

To test the moderation hypotheses, conditional process analyses were run using the PROCESS macro version 3.5 for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). The testing strategy contemplated three ordinary least squares models, A, B, and C, with each model testing two of the four hypotheses, as follows:

Model A: H1, H3

Model B: H1, H4

Model C: H1, H2

This sequence was adopted in order to first test the dichotomous moderators GENDER and CONTACT, and finish with the test of the continuous moderator AGE. All models are estimated with the PROCESS Model 1 template. In all models, the dependent variable is brand understanding and the predictor is brand training (BRTRN), and all were estimated with 10,000 bootstrapping samples.

The PROCESS results of the Model A estimation are displayed in Table 5. The results of this model show support for H1, as the coefficient of brand training (0.553) is strongly significant. However, the coefficient of the interaction term BRTRN*GENDER is not significantly different from zero, which indicates a lack of support for H3. The substantive interpretation is that among recently hired employees there is no significant difference between men and women in the impact that brand training has on brand understanding.

The results of the PROCESS macro were further corroborated by running two separate least squares regressions in SPSS with the male and female subsamples. The results, not shown for brevity, confirmed support for H1, as the coefficient of BRTRN is strongly significant in both regressions. However, the 95% confidence intervals for the separately estimated coefficients of BRTRN largely overlap (females: 0.382 - 0.618; males: 0.459 - 0.648), thus indicating that the slope estimates for the male and female subsamples are not statistically different. The implication from these two regressions is that the effect of brand training on brand understanding is not modified by gender, which is the same result as in PROCESS Model A.

The next model, Model B, also tests a dichotomous moderator, namely whether or not occupying a customer-contact position makes a difference for the effect of training on understanding. The model was run with mean centering for the continuous brand training predictor (labelled BRTR-C), in order to provide a clearer interpretation of the results (Hayes, 2018), which are displayed in Table 6.

The results of Model B again support H1, as the coefficient of BRTR-C is strongly significant. Furthermore, the coefficient of the interaction term BRTR-C*CONTACT is significant and has a negative sign, which while supporting a significant moderation

Table 5

Model A results. Outcome variable: Brand understanding

Effect	Coeff.	SE	t-value	p-value	95% Conf.	Interval
constant	2.0872	.2105	9.9140	.0000	1.6723	2.5021
BRTRN	.5531	.0475	11.6533	.0000	.4596	.6467
GENDER	.2450	.3348	.7316	.4652	-.4149	.9048
BRTRN*GENDER	-.0533	.0764	-.6978	.4861	-.2037	.0972

Note. $R^2 = 0.48$; F-test = 68.6, p-value < 0.05.

effect, runs in the opposite direction to that hypothesized in H4. The substantive interpretation is that contact position moderates the relationship between brand training and brand understanding, with a weaker effect observed on contact employees. This is best described graphically. The PROCESS macro conveniently generates SPSS syntax code for generating a graph to visualize moderating effects, as displayed in Figure 2.

By plotting the linear relationship between brand training and brand understanding for both values of the moderator, the graph shows the differences between the two conditions. First, the coefficient of CONTACT is b_2, which is the effect of a one unit difference in CONTACT when BRTR-C = 0. Using the notation suggested by Hayes (2018, p. 229) (Equation 1):

$$\theta_{W \rightarrow Y} = b_2 \qquad (1)$$

$$\theta_{W \rightarrow Y} = 0.1653 \; when \; BRTR - C \; = \; 0$$

This can be interpreted as the difference in the brand understanding of employees in customer-contact positions versus those not in contact with customers, conditional on both having average scores of brand training (i.e. BRTR-C = 0). Moreover, the results of Table 6 indicate that difference (i.e. the b_2 coefficient) is statistically significant.

With respect to the slopes of the lines, the conditional effect of BRTR-C on BRUND (i.e. the slope of the linear function between BRTR-C and BRUND conditional on a value for W) is given by the Formula 2 (Hayes, 2018, p. 227):

$$\theta_{X \rightarrow Y} = b_1 + b_3 W \qquad (2)$$

$$\theta_{X \rightarrow Y} = 0.6239 \; - \; 0.1618 * CONTACT$$

$$\theta_{X \rightarrow Y} = 0.4621 \; for \; customer-contact \; personnel \; (CONTACT \; = \; 1)$$

$$\theta_{X \rightarrow Y} = 0.6239 \; for \; non-contact \; personnel \; (CONTACT \; = \; 0)$$

The results show that the impact (i.e. the slope) of brand training on brand understanding is significantly lower for employees occupying customer-facing positions, which is displayed graphically in Figure 2. On the one hand, the plot shows that contact employees have higher scores in brand understanding than non-contact employees given the same scores in brand training. In other words, the line for customer-contact employees is above the line for non-contact employees, for the entire range of BRTR-C, and the difference is statistically significant. On the other hand, brand understanding scores of contact employees grow more slowly with increases of brand training than the scores of non-contact employees, and the difference in slopes is statistically significant. Both results indicate that contact position has a significant effect on the relationship between brand training and brand understanding, but the direction of the effect is the opposite of that hypothesized in H4, which is therefore supported only partially.

Lastly, Model C tests the effect of employee age as a continuous moderator of the brand training-brand
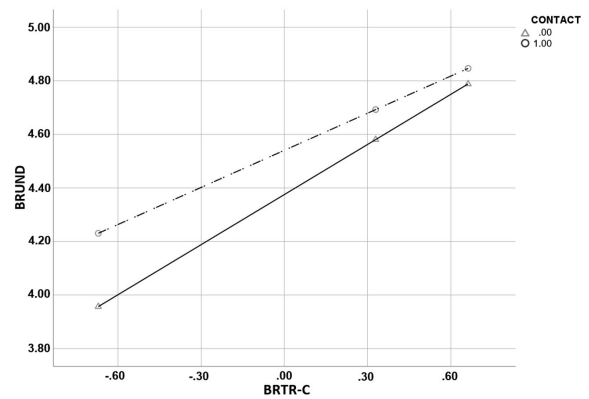

Figure 2. Effect (slope) of BRTR-C on BRUND moderated by CONTACT

Table 6

Model B results. Outcome variable: Brand understanding

Effect	Coeff.	SE	t-value	p-value	95% Conf.	Interval
constant	4.3753	.0556	78.7289	.0000	4.2658	4.4848
BRTR-C	.6239	.0619	10.0753	.0000	.5018	.7459
CONTACT	.1653	.0637	2.5958	.0101	.0398	.2908
BRTR-C*CONTACT	-.1618	.0766	-2.1112	.0359	-.3128	-.0108

Note. R^2 = 0.51, F-test = 76.4, p-value < 0.05.

understanding relationship. The results are displayed in Table 7.

These results again support H1, as the coefficient of brand training is strongly significant. Furthermore, the interaction term BRTRN*AGE is also strongly significant, which indicates H2 is supported. Using again the Formula 3 for the conditional effect of brand training on brand understanding:

$$\theta_{X \to Y} = b_1 + b_3 W = 1.1335 - 0.0189 * AGE \tag{3}$$

This formula clearly shows that the positive association of brand training with brand understanding is a decreasing function of age. Therefore, the impact of brand training will be lower for older employees. In fact, at AGE = 50.6, the effect becomes statistically non-significant, as reported by the Johnson-Neyman significance region in the PROCESS output. The graph in Figure 3 illustrates these effects by plotting the slopes for three AGE values, corresponding to the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentile of the distribution of AGE within the sample.

The plot reveals another important nuance, namely the fact that younger employees, represented by
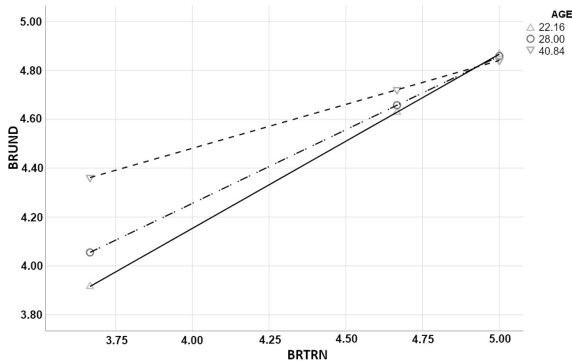
the solid line, display on average lower scores of brand understanding than older employees, represented by the upper dashed line. This complements the previous result about younger employees deriving more benefit from brand training than their older counterparts. The complete picture will be important to consider when drawing managerial implications. The overall conclusion from Model C is that older employees report a weaker impact of brand training on their brand understanding than younger employees, thus supporting H2.

5 Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with previous findings from the internal branding literature to the effect that brand training has a significant positive effect on employees' brand understanding (Murillo & King, 2019). In all three moderation models, the coefficient of brand training was substantial and statistically significant, thus supporting H1.

As regards to the examined moderation effects, this study contributes novel findings. First, the results of Model A, corroborated by separate split-sample SPSS regressions, indicate that the effect of brand training on brand understanding is not significantly different for male and female employees. Therefore, hypothesis H3 is not supported. Even though previous studies have reported significant gender differences for affective variables, such as women displaying higher organizational commitment and discretionary behavior (Peterson, 2004), the focal relationship in this research involved a cognitive variable, specifically brand understanding and its direct antecedent of brand training. The statistical model results point very clearly to a lack of gender differences in the effectiveness of brand training to enhance employee brand understanding. Thus the lack of a significant moderation effect attributed solely to

Figure 3. Effect (slope) of BRTRN on BRUND moderated by AGE

Table 7

Model C results. Outcome variable: Brand understanding

Effect	Coeff.	SE	t-value	p-value	95% Conf.	Interval
constant	-.7695	.6285	-1.2242	.2222	-2.0082	.4692
BRTRN	1.1335	.1392	8.1446	.0000	.8592	1.4078
AGE	.0934	.0193	4.8460	.0000	.0554	.1313
BRTRN*AGE	-.0189	.0043	-4.4483	.0000	-.0273	-.0106

Note. $R^2 = 0.54$; F-test = 86.7, p-value < 0.05.

gender is more aligned with studies from the general training literature that show a lack of significant gender differences in research examining training effectiveness (Colquitt et al., 2000) or motivation to transfer training (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020).

The results from Model B indicate a significant moderation effect of contact position, with a weaker effect for contact employees, a counterintuitive result given the usual practice of providing frontline employees with more detailed and specific brand training to enable them to provide brand-aligned service to customers (King et al., 2013; Murillo, 2019). Hence, hypothesis H4 is only partially supported. The substantive interpretation of this result is that brand training is less important for building contact employees' brand understanding than it is for non-contact employees. One possible explanation is that because of their daily involvement in the service experience, which is closely aligned with the brand and the brand promise, contact employees have opportunities to learn about the brand (i.e. increase their brand understanding) that take place apart from and beyond formal brand training[1]. One specific example is service recovery after a service failure, which often demands impromptu and spontaneous behavior on the part of contact employees (Punjaisri et al., 2013), is closely reviewed by management after the fact, and thereby provides opportunities for actionable learning about the brand and the brand promise. These opportunities for brand learning outside of formal brand training activities would simultaneously explain the lower slope of the brand training-brand understanding relationship, and the higher scores of brand understanding that contact employees display when compared to non-contact employees. By definition, the latter do not participate in service encounters, and thereby miss out on arguably the principal learning opportunity about the brand as implemented in front of actual customers. Hence, for non-contact employees, brand training becomes more impactful to learn about the brand, and would therefore have a higher slope coefficient than for contact employees.

Lastly, the results of Model C indicate that there is a significant negative moderation effect of age on the focal relationship of brand training-brand understanding, such that the relationship is weaker for older employees.

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[1] The author is indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Therefore, H2 is supported. This result is consistent with previous studies from the training literature that report a negative relationship between age and learning (Colquitt et al., 2000; Sarin et al., 2010; Zwick, 2015).

6 Practical implications

The results of this research highlight the importance of brand training for newly hired employees, in order to enhance brand understanding, a prerequisite to brand promise delivery (Xiong et al., 2013). The managerial implication would be that training workshops should be very explicit as to the content of the brand promise, how it creates differentiation versus competing brands, and what visible behaviors employees should display to deliver on what customers have been led to expect. These might appear as rather obvious recommendations, but surveys conducted by international consultancies in the USA have found that less than half of employees can articulate what their brand represents and what makes it different from competing brands (Dvorak & Gabsa, 2017; Fleming & Witters, 2012). This ignorance about the brand and the brand promise does not bode well for service organizations whose market differentiation depends on competent brand ambassadors.

In addition, the study makes a contribution by examining for the first time important moderators of the focal relationship. This improved understanding about the effect, or the lack of it, that individual differences have on the effectiveness of brand training to enhance new employees' brand understanding can help in training managers to better customize internal branding activities, under the premise that enhancing brand understanding is the principal training goal for newly hired employees.

Specifically for the case of gender differences, the results of this study suggest that training resources can be allocated uniformly among women and men, and no differential treatment is necessary or advised for the specific issue of developing brand understanding.

With respect to age differences, the study results, graphically depicted in Figure 3, indicate that there is an objective rationale for providing more training resources to younger employees: the fact that they start from lower average scores of brand understanding, coupled with the fact that they derive greater benefit from the brand training than their older colleagues. Moreover, the

finding that the impact of brand training is weaker for older employees, and actually becomes non-significant at the age of 50.6, suggests that alternative means to brand training activities should be implemented to enhance older employees' brand understanding. The discussion about the brand learning opportunities of contact employees suggests that such alternative means are potentially available within the organization.

Lastly, with respect to differences in customer-contact position, the results as summarized by Figure 2 suggest that additional training resources might be fruitfully provided to employees not in contact positions, given that they have lower average scores of brand understanding, and moreover they derive greater benefit from the brand training than contact employees. The latter already display high brand understanding scores, and by definition are participating on a daily basis in service encounters, with constant opportunities to sharpen their brand understanding. On a final note, it should be mentioned that enhancing brand understanding for non-contact employees is by no means a luxury, given the positive commitment that a strong internal brand generates for the entire workforce (Hoppe, 2017).

7 Conclusion

This study makes a theoretical contribution to internal branding research by testing three moderators of one of its basic relationships, the one between brand training and brand understanding. First, the research found that gender does not moderate this relationship, consistent with previous results in training research that reported no impact attributed solely to gender on training effectiveness (Colquitt et al., 2000) or motivation to transfer training (Gegenfurtner et al., 2020). Second, the relationship is significantly moderated by age, with older employees displaying a weaker impact of brand training on brand understanding, consistent with studies from the training literature reporting a negative effect of age on learning (Colquitt et al., 2000; Sarin et al., 2010; Zwick, 2015). Third, the study detected a moderating effect of contact position on the relationship, with a weaker effect for contact employees. A plausible explanation for this counterintuitive result are the opportunities that contact employees have for learning about the brand beyond

formal brand training, such as their participation in service recovery episodes (Punjaisri et al., 2013).

Of the three moderation hypotheses advanced by this research, two received only partial support, and herein lie promising directions for future research. First, a replication of the moderating effect of contact position on the focal relationship with a different organizational sample would be useful, since the result remains counterintuitive. To this end, an examination of antecedents of employee brand understanding that are different from the well-established brand training, brand communications, and brand leadership, *and* that specifically come into play in the service encounter or in service recovery episodes, would be an important theoretical contribution to the literature. A good starting point is the study of brand-aligned service recovery by Punjaisri et al. (2013), with the caveat that their conceptual model does not include brand understanding.

Second, it is likely that there are undetected gender effects that are missing from internal branding theory. Hence, another promising research direction is to examine moderating effects of gender when affective variables are involved, such as employee brand commitment or brand identification. It is also worth noting that from a methodological perspective, formal tests of moderating effects are still at an embryonic stage in the internal branding literature (Van Nguyen et al., 2019; Xiong & King, 2015), and state-of-the-art tools like conditional process analysis can be better exploited.

The results of the study once again bring to mind the importance of service employees, not just in the airline industry, but in the broader field of travel, hospitality, and tourism, critically affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The fulfillment of the brand promise frequently requires extra-role behaviors from employees, especially during a completely atypical situation, such as the present health emergency. In normal times, internal branding practices make explicit the need for such behavior (Garas et al., 2018) and motivate employees through intensive training and brand leadership. During prolonged crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the support of employees accustomed to going above and beyond their job description can make the difference for organizations that had the foresight to build up their internal branding practices.

In addition, the findings of this study are both important and actionable for training managers. Given that training is costly, and that the effectiveness of brand training to develop employees' understanding of the brand necessitates continuity (Murillo & King, 2019), insights about the effect, or the lack of it, that key individual differences have on the effectiveness of brand training will allow training managers to better allocate their limited resources, as per the specific recommendations detailed in the previous section.

The present study is among the first to examine the internal branding practices of an airline (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Vatankhah & Darvishi, 2018), and the first conducted in Latin America and published in a Redalyc journal. Considering the important role that internal branding can play in the success of service organizations, it is desirable that the topic receive more attention from academic researchers in the region.

Among the limitations of the study, its cross-sectional design, although common in internal branding research, cannot conclusively establish causality in the relationships between the variables. Also, the use of an anonymous and self-reported questionnaire was, even from the design stage, recognized as introducing a risk of CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2012). However, a strong statistical remedy was applied to measure the extent of CMB through the CFA marker variable technique (Williams et al., 2010). This provides a statistical test for evaluating the "clean" reliability of the scales, which was adequate, and the potential for bias in the correlation estimates between substantive variables, which was found to be not significant. Hence, it is considered that CMB does not threaten the validity of the results. Finally, it should be pointed out that the study results have limited generalizability, as they are based on a sample collected at a single organization.

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Financial support:
There are no funding agencies to report.

Conflicts of interest:
The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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