

Does internal branding boost brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior? The role of brand knowledge

Suryana Hendrawan^{1*}, Christina Whidya Utami², Budi Barata Kusuma Utami³, Rikha Muftia Khoirunnisa⁴, Wei Zhao⁵

^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

⁵ Taishan University, Shandong, China

* Corresponding Author Email: suryana.hendrawan@mgm.uad.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Purpose-This study aims to examine how internal branding influences brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior, with brand knowledge serving as a mediating variable. This study is motivated by the need to understand the extent to which internal brand management can transform employees into brand advocates and endorsers on the front lines of service, while addressing the limitations of previous research, which generally examined internal branding, brand knowledge, and brand-supporting behavior separately.

Methodology-A quantitative study with 107 employees from 3–5-star hotels who interact directly with guests, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling to test the relationships among internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior.

Findings-Internal branding has a positive effect on brand endorsement, brand knowledge, and brand-supporting behavior. Brand knowledge has a significant effect on brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior, but with a negative coefficient that deviates from the direction of the relationship typically predicted by theory, while simultaneously forming a significant mediating path between internal branding and both behaviors.

Research Limitations-The study was conducted only at star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, using a cross-sectional design and self-report instruments; therefore, the results may not represent the entire hospitality industry or other regions and remain susceptible to respondent perception bias.

Novelty-This study contributes by simultaneously testing internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior within a single model in the context of hotels in Indonesia. This area has not been extensively studied. The results open opportunities for further research to test this model in other types of hospitality businesses, to add new mediator or moderator variables, and to highlight the dynamics in which increased brand knowledge may be negatively associated with brand-supporting behavior—a relationship relatively rarely explored in previous literature.

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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry in Indonesia has undergone significant changes amid the post-pandemic recovery, intensifying competition and shifts in traveler behavior, with guests becoming increasingly sensitive to service experiences and brand reputation (Bittner et al., 2024). In this environment, digital platforms such as social media and review sites make customer feedback and brand image critical for booking decisions, so competitive advantage depends not only on physical facilities but also on frontline employees' ability to consistently deliver the brand promise (Faliha et al., 2021). Employees are thus not merely technical service

providers but key actors who embody the brand's identity in every interaction (Chung & Byrom, 2021; Naepae et al., 2023).

Two forms of employee behavior are particularly strategic in this context: brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior (Gulati et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2025b). Brand endorsement refers to employees' voluntary tendency to recommend, defend, and speak positively about the brand to external parties, while brand-supporting behavior reflects daily work behaviors that consistently uphold the brand's values and standards, both in in-role and extra-role actions (Garas et al., 2018; Zeitoun et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2025a). Both are highly relevant in hospitality, where guest experiences are shaped by frequent, intensive interactions with employees (Sofi et al., 2025).

A central approach discussed in marketing and branding to foster such behaviours is internal branding (Baca & Reshidi, 2023), defined as the organisation's systematic effort to communicate brand identity, values, and promises to employees, align internal systems with brand positioning, and build commitment to "living the brand" in daily work (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Through internal branding practices, such as brand-based training, internal communication, leadership role modeling, and brand-oriented human resource policies, organizations aim to turn employees into brand ambassadors at the point of service (Ruzzier et al., 2021; Barros-Arrieta et al., 2024). From a broader theoretical perspective, this study is anchored in a cognitive–affective–behavioral view and draws on social identity theory and social exchange theory, which together suggest that internal branding shapes employees' brand-related cognitions (brand knowledge), strengthens identification and perceived organizational support, and ultimately drives brand-oriented behavior (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Afshardoost et al., 2023).

However, internal branding does not automatically lead to brand endorsement or brand-supporting behavior. Between internal branding and behavior lies a psychological mechanism that requires deeper understanding: employees' brand knowledge (Baca & Reshidi, 2026). In an internal context, brand knowledge goes beyond familiarity with the brand name or slogan; it entails a deeper understanding of the brand's identity, values, promises, and positioning, as well as its distinctiveness relative to competitors (Ngo et al., 2020). Employees with strong brand knowledge are theoretically expected to translate internal branding messages more easily into specific behaviors and to feel more confident when supporting or recommending the brand to guests (Terlav et al., 2016; Sultan, 2022). Consequently, this study positions brand knowledge as a mediating cognitive mechanism that explains how and why internal branding practices translate into brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior at the individual-employee level (Muhammad et al., 2020; Prashar & Maity, 2024; He & Hashim, 2026).

The hospitality context of star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia provides an appropriate setting to test these relationships. Yogyakarta is one of Indonesia's main tourist destinations, with a mix of cultural, educational, and meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) tourism that has driven the rapid growth of star-rated hotels competing for domestic and international guests (Pitanatri & Priyanto, 2022; Li et al., 2025). In this highly competitive and price-sensitive market, guests evaluate not only physical facilities but also the consistency between brand promises in marketing communications and the service experiences delivered by employees, making the management of the brand through frontline staff a crucial source of differentiation (Eslami, 2020; Maarif & Widarta, 2024; Saleh & Harun, 2026).

Although research on internal branding, employee brand behavior, and employees' attitudes toward the brand has grown, several gaps remain. Most studies still focus on outcomes such as brand commitment, brand citizenship behaviour, or brand performance (Qureshi et al., 2022; Afshardoost et al., 2023; Chhibber et al., 2025), while the specific relationships between internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behaviour have rarely been examined within a single comprehensive model, especially among frontline employees in hospitality and in emerging markets. Furthermore, although brand knowledge is often cited as an important element of internal branding, its role

as an explicit cognitive mediator between internal branding and brand-oriented employee behavior remains underexplored in-service contexts. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in particular, empirical studies that simultaneously examine internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior in star-rated hotels are still limited, so local evidence to guide practice is not yet robust.

Based on these gaps, this study develops and tests a model that links internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior, with brand knowledge positioned as the primary cognitive mediator between internal branding and brand-supporting employee behavior. The study also explicitly distinguishes between brand endorsement (externally oriented) and brand-supporting behavior (internally oriented in daily work), thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of employees' contributions to brand performance in hospitality organizations. Focusing on star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, the study aims to analyze the influence of internal branding on employees' brand knowledge; test the effects of brand knowledge on brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior; test the direct effects of internal branding on both behaviors; and examine the mediating role of brand knowledge in these relationships. Grounded in cognitive–affective–behavioral and social exchange–identification perspectives, the study is expected to offer theoretical contributions to the internal branding and employee brand behavior literature, as well as practical insights for hotel management in designing more effective internal branding programs.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Grand Theoretical Foundations

This study is grounded in social identity theory (SIT), social exchange theory (SET), and a cognitive–affective–behavioral view, which together link internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior (Kaur et al., 2020; Zhang & Chomvilailuk, 2025). SIT explains how employees who identify with the organizational brand are motivated to protect and enhance that identity (Brown, 2020), whereas SET explains how perceived organizational support through internal branding encourages employees to reciprocate with brand-beneficial behaviors (Meira & Hancer, 2021; Imam et al., 2023). Within a cognitive–affective–behavioral perspective, internal branding is expected first to shape brand-related cognitions (brand knowledge), which then influence attitudes and, ultimately, brand-supportive behaviors (Afshardoost et al., 2023; Jeong & Hong, 2025). These foundations support the proposition that internal branding builds employees' brand knowledge, identification, and reciprocity, which underlie the hypotheses relating internal branding to endorsement and brand-supporting behavior.

Brand Endorsement

Brand endorsement is defined as employees' voluntary tendency to recommend, defend, and speak positively about the organizational brand to external audiences, both offline and online (Zeitoun et al., 2020; Abdullah et al., 2022). In line with SIT and SET, employees who strongly identify with the brand and perceive internal branding as organizational support are more likely to act as "brand ambassadors" and use their personal voice to support the brand. Prior studies show that internal branding and internal brand management are positively associated with endorsement-related outcomes such as positive word-of-mouth and employee brand advocacy, implying that effective internal branding should increase employees' endorsement behavior (Baca & Reshidi, 2025; Khan et al., 2025b). These arguments underpin the hypothesis that internal branding and brand knowledge each influence employees' brand endorsement.

Brand-Supporting Behavior

Brand-supporting behavior refers to employees' in-role and extra-role work behaviors that consistently support the brand's identity and promise, such as adhering to brand-based service standards and taking initiatives to protect the brand's reputation (Taku et al., 2022; Kashyap & Kang, 2025). Theoretically, such behaviors arise when employees both understand

what the brand stands for and are motivated to align their work with it, as suggested by SIT and SET. Empirical research indicates that internal branding, internal brand management, and internal brand communication are positively related to brand-supporting behavior, often through mechanisms such as role clarity, affective commitment, and brand identification (Qureshi et al., 2022; Afshardoost et al., 2023). These patterns suggest that internal branding can shape both employees' understanding of the brand and their willingness to engage in brand-supportive actions.

Brand Knowledge

Brand knowledge refers to employees' understanding of the brand's identity, values, promises, target segments, positioning, and distinctiveness relative to competitors (He, 2022). From a cognitive perspective, it comprises awareness of key brand elements and associations about what the brand stands for and how it should be delivered in service encounters. Evidence from hospitality internal branding research highlights internal brand communication and brand-centered training as important antecedents of employees' brand knowledge (Prashar & Maity, 2024; Han et al., 2025). In this study, brand knowledge is therefore conceptualized as a core cognitive outcome of internal branding and hypothesized to influence both brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior, as well as to mediate the effects of internal branding on these behavioral outcomes.

Internal Branding

Internal branding is defined as an organization's systematic effort to communicate the brand's identity, values, and promise to employees, align internal systems and policies with the brand's positioning, and build commitment to "living the brand" in daily work (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Vokić et al., 2023). From the perspectives of SIT and SET, internal branding provides symbolic and informational cues that make the brand a salient part of employees' social identity and signals organizational investment that may be reciprocated through brand-beneficial behaviors. Empirical studies in services and hospitality show that internal branding is positively associated with employees' brand commitment, brand citizenship behavior, and brand-supporting behaviors (Gulati et al., 2023; Han et al., 2025). Accordingly, the model posits internal branding as a key antecedent of employees' brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior.

Hypothesis Development

Internal Branding and Brand Endorsement

Internal branding can drive brand endorsement through identification and social exchange mechanisms, as internal communication, training, and managerial support foster employees' pride in and attachment to the brand and are perceived as organizational support that should be "repaid" with beneficial behaviors, such as positive recommendations (Merrilees et al., 2021). Within SIT, internal branding strengthens employees' identification with the brand, increasing their likelihood of acting as "advocates" who voluntarily promote and defend it (Baca & Reshidi, 2025), while SET emphasizes that organizational investments in internal branding encourage employees to reciprocate with verbal support and pro-brand behavior (Muhammad et al., 2020). Empirical studies show that internal branding positively affects brand endorsement via stronger employee brand identity and that internal communication is associated with positive word-of-mouth and employee brand advocacy (Natarajan et al., 2017; Thelen & Men, 2023; Hong et al., 2024). **H₁: Internal Branding Has a Positive Effect on Brand Endorsement.**

Internal Branding and Brand Knowledge

Drawing on SIT and SET, internal branding is viewed as a strategic investment to instill brand identity and values in employees through planned internal communication, training, and managerial support, so that they experience the brand as part of their social identity and as a form of organizational support (Vokić et al., 2023). Consistent internal

branding practices help employees understand the brand's vision, core values, and service promises, thereby building strong brand knowledge that serves as a foundation for brand-oriented behavior at the service frontline (Suomi et al., 2021; Han et al., 2025; Srivastava et al., 2025). Empirical work shows that internal branding increases brand knowledge, employee–brand fit, and belief in the brand, and that internal communication and brand-centered training are key antecedents of employees' brand knowledge in service settings (Muhammad et al., 2019; Ahmed & Hashim, 2022; Aycı et al., 2024). **H₂: Internal Branding Has a Positive Effect on Brand Knowledge.**

Internal Branding and Brand-Supporting Behavior

Internal branding clearly articulates brand-aligned behavioral expectations and reinforces employees' identity as members of a branded organization by communicating values, service standards, and desired behaviors through communication, training, and role modeling by leaders (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2017; Leijerholt et al., 2022). Within SIT and SET, employees who receive strong brand communication and feel supported by the organization tend to internalize the brand identity and feel a social obligation to reciprocate by engaging in brand-supporting behaviors, both in-role and extra-role (Gilani, 2019; Jeong & Hong, 2025; Zhang & Chomvilailuk, 2025). Prior studies show that internal corporate branding positively affects brand-supporting behavior via role clarity and affective commitment, and that internal branding and internal brand management are key antecedents of brand citizenship and brand-consistent behaviors across service contexts (Garas et al., 2018; Huang & Lai, 2021; Khairy et al., 2023; Chhibber et al., 2025). **H₃: Internal Branding Has a Positive Effect on Brand-Supporting Behavior.**

Brand Knowledge and Brand Endorsement

Brand knowledge provides employees with the cognitive foundation to explain, compare, and defend the brand convincingly to customers and on social media because they understand its attributes, benefits, and competitive positioning (Gong et al., 2020). Within SIT, deeper knowledge of the brand strengthens employees' identification with it, increasing their willingness to act as "advocates" by making recommendations and providing verbal support (Zhang & Chomvilailuk, 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that brand knowledge is a primary predictor of brand endorsement: internal communication and managerial support enhance brand knowledge, which, in turn, significantly increases employees' readiness to endorse the organization's brand (Khan et al., 2025b). Similarly, employee brand—reflected in understanding, internalization, and commitment to the brand—has been found to correlate positively with brand endorsement (Natarajan et al., 2017). **H₄: Brand Knowledge Has a Positive Effect on Brand Endorsement.**

Brand Knowledge and Brand-Supporting Behavior

Brand-supporting behavior refers to employees' work behaviors that consistently support the brand's identity and promise (Taku et al., 2022), and brand knowledge enables employees to recognize which behaviors align with the brand promise in different service situations (Xiong & King, 2019). Literature reviews conclude that brand knowledge is a key antecedent of brand citizenship and brand-consistent behaviors—substantive forms of brand-supporting behavior—because knowledge provides the cognitive basis for choosing brand-supportive actions rather than relying solely on personal habits (Kashive, 2017; Saleem & Hawskin, 2021). Empirical studies also show that brand knowledge mediates the effects of brand orientation, internal communication, and internal branding on employees' brand-supporting behavior (Garas et al., 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020). **H₅: Brand Knowledge Has a Positive Effect on Brand-Supporting Behavior.**

Internal Branding and Brand Knowledge: The Mediating Role of Brand Knowledge

Internal branding is expected to influence brand endorsement both directly and indirectly through increased brand knowledge as an employee-level cognitive mechanism.

Effective internal branding provides the information and context employees need to clearly understand the brand's identity, values, promise, and market positioning (Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). Brand knowledge in turn strengthens employees' confidence and readiness to recommend and defend the brand because they feel able to articulate its strengths and differentiation (Khan et al., 2020). Studies in service settings show that brand knowledge mediates the influence of internal communication, managerial support, and teamwork on brand endorsement, and is consistently positioned as the bridge between internal branding programs and brand-oriented behaviors such as endorsement, brand citizenship, and brand-consistent behavior (Ngo et al., 2020; Edward et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2025b; Srivastava et al., 2025). **H₆: Brand Knowledge Mediates the Relationship between Internal Branding and Brand Endorsement.**

Internal Branding and Brand-Supporting Behavior: The Mediating Role of Brand Knowledge

Internal branding is also expected to influence brand-supporting behavior through brand knowledge indirectly, a cognitive mechanism that links internal messages to workplace actions (Garas et al., 2018). Internal branding programs equip employees with a clearer understanding of brand values, service standards, and positioning through internal communication, training, and managerial support, thereby guiding the selection of brand-aligned behaviors across service situations (Piehler, 2018; Carlini & Grace, 2021; Vokić et al., 2023). Empirical findings indicate that brand knowledge mediates the effects of brand orientation and internal communication on brand citizenship behavior, thereby confirming its role as a bridge between internal strategies and brand-supporting behavior (Nguyen et al., 2019; Taku et al., 2022). Garas et al. (2018) likewise argue that brand knowledge is a crucial mechanism that translates internal branding efforts into consistent brand-supporting behavior in both formal and extra-role domains. **H₇: Brand Knowledge Mediates the Relationship between Internal Branding and Brand-Supporting Behavior.**

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 summarizes these proposed relationships, positioning internal branding as the primary antecedent of employees' brand knowledge, endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior, with brand knowledge serving as a mediating mechanism.

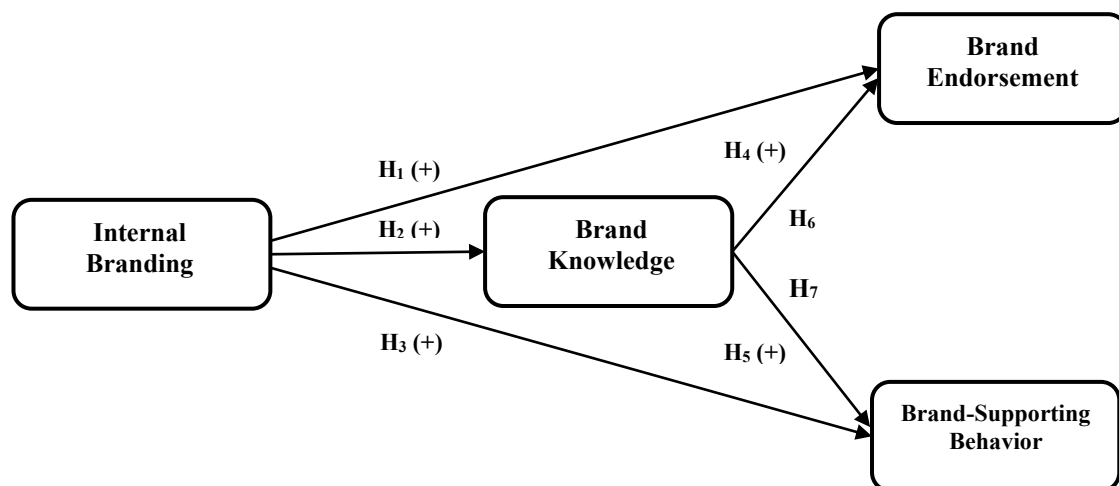


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative survey approach to examine the effect of internal branding on brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior, with brand knowledge as a mediating variable, among employees of star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The study population consists of employees at 3–5-star hotels who interact directly with guests (front

office, food and beverage, and housekeeping staff). A sample of 107 respondents was selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria: (1) at least one year of service, (2) having direct contact with guests or being involved in service delivery, and (3) having participated in internal branding activities such as briefings, brand-based service training, or receiving internal communications related to the brand.

Purposive sampling was chosen because the study specifically targets employees who are directly involved in delivering the brand promise to guests and have been exposed to internal branding programs, so they possess sufficient experience and information to evaluate internal branding practices and exhibit brand-related behaviors. In line with prior internal branding research in service and hospitality settings, this non-probability sampling approach is considered appropriate when the focus is on employees in particular roles critical to brand delivery, rather than on all employees. Data were collected via a structured Likert-scale questionnaire (1–5; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), distributed both online and in print through coordination with the hotel's human resource/training department. Table 1 presents the complete list of measurement items for all constructs (internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior), including their item statements and sources, to ensure transparency and facilitate comparison with previous studies.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Constructs and Items
Internal Branding (IB) (King & Grace, 2008; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Natarajan et al., 2017)
Internal Communication (IC)
IC1: The briefing contains all the important information I need to provide service in line with the brand's expectations
IC2: The brand's mission and promise are consistently emphasized during the briefing
IC3: I believe that excellent communication exists within the organization where I work
Management Support (MS)
MS1: Company leaders regularly interact with employees
MS2: In this company, there is cooperation between leaders and employees
MS3: My supervisor is willing to devote time and effort to help me perform my duties as well as possible
Senior Leadership (SL)
SL1: Creating and maintaining a brand vision helps with Brand Endorsement
SL2: Encouraging participatory communication helps with Brand Endorsement
SL3: Building an organizational culture based on brand beliefs helps with Brand Endorsement
Teamwork (TM)
TM1: During team meetings, I am given clear information regarding the brand's mission
TM2: I clearly understand my role regarding the brand's mission after attending team meetings
TM3: In the company, there is cooperation between management and employees that helps with Brand Endorsement
Training (TR)
TR1: The company provides us with excellent training regarding our work, which helps with Brand Endorsement
TR2: That training enables me to perform my job well
TR3: The training provides me with the appropriate skills to fulfill the brand promise based on brand standards
TR4: Guidance from supervisors is invaluable in helping me perform my job better
Brand Knowledge (BK) (King & Grace, 2008)
BK1: I understand how our customers can benefit from our brands
BK2: I know what sets our brands apart from the competition
BK3: I clearly understand what our company's brands promise to our customers
Brand Endorsement (BE) (Natarajan et al., 2017)
BE1: I am proud to tell others that I am part of this company
BE2: I regularly recommend the organization where I work to family and friends, that is, acquaintances outside the scope of work
BE3: I mention the brand names of our products/services positively in conversations I have with friends and acquaintances
BE4: I encourage friends and acquaintances to purchase the company's products and services.
Brand-Supporting Behavior (BSB) (Garas et al., 2018)
In-Role Behavior
BSB1: I feel that the quality of service I provide meets the company's brand standards.
BSB2: I can perform my job responsibilities well.
BSB3: I can effectively fulfill the brand's promises to its customers.
Extra-Role Behavior
BSB4: I can take responsibility for tasks outside my area of expertise, if necessary.
BSB5: I always consider the impact of my behavior on the brand before acting.
BSB6: I am always interested in learning more about the brand and its implications for my role.
BSB7: I regularly recommend the brand to friends and family.
BSB8: I voluntarily share my knowledge about the brand with new employees.
BSB9: I usually offer suggestions to improve the customer experience with the brand.

Data analysis was conducted using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with the SmartPLS software. The measurement model (outer model) was evaluated using reliability and validity tests, with indicators retained if they had an outer loading > 0.70 . A construct was deemed reliable if Cronbach's alpha > 0.60 and composite reliability > 0.70 , with an average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.50 as an indication of convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022). Hypothesis testing for direct effects and mediating effects was conducted using the bootstrapping procedure, and hypotheses were considered supported if the p-value was < 0.05 (Hair et al., 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

Respondent Characteristics

Based on the respondent characteristics presented in Table 2, the respondents in this study were employees of 3–5-star hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia who interact directly with guests, comprising 41.1% men and 58.9% women, with the majority aged 25–44 years (60.8%) and holding a diploma or bachelor's degree (63.6%). More than two-thirds have worked at their current hotel for over four years (63.5%), suggesting that they have been sufficiently exposed to internal branding programs and are familiar with the hotels' service standards. The sample represents key frontline and operational positions—front office (33.6%), food & beverage (22.4%), housekeeping (28.1%), and sales & marketing/reservations (15.9%)—which are critical roles for delivering the brand promise and for observing employees' brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior in day-to-day service encounters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Respondents

Classification	Description	Total	Percent age
Gender	Male	44	41.1
	Female	63	58.9
Age	< 25 years old	19	17.7
	25–34 years old	37	34.6
	35–44 years old	28	26.2
	45 years and older	23	21.5
Highest Level of Education	Senior/Vocational High School	21	19.6
	Diploma	29	27.1
	Bachelor's Degree	39	36.5
	Graduate	18	16.8
Length Of Employment	1–3 years	11	10.3
	4–6 years	28	26.2
	7–10 years	37	34.6
	> 10 years	31	28.9
Job Category	Front Office (reception, guest relations, concierge)	36	33.6
	Food & Beverage (restaurant, banquet, bar)	24	22.4
	Housekeeping	30	28.1
	Sales & Marketing / Reservations	17	15.9
Employment Status	Permanent Employee	81	75.7
	Contract employees	26	24.3
Involvement In Internal Branding Activities	≤ 1 time/year	9	8.4
	2–3 times/year	25	23.4
	≥ 4 times/year	73	68.2
Hotel Type	3-star	38	35.5
	4-star	26	24.3
	5 stars	43	40.2

Most respondents were permanent employees (75.7%), indicating relatively strong organizational attachment and continuity in brand-related roles. At the same time, their participation in internal branding activities was relatively high, with 68.2% taking part at least

4 times per year and only 8.4% reporting involvement once a year or less. These patterns are consistent with the research context of star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where sustained exposure to internal branding and stable frontline employment are necessary conditions for examining how internal branding translates into employees' brand knowledge, endorsement, and brand-supporting behavior.

Validity and Reliability Test

Table 3 summarises the measurement quality and shows that all indicators and constructs meet recommended reliability and convergent validity criteria. Following Hair et al. (2022), all factor loadings exceed 0.70, while Cronbach's alpha values are above 0.60 and composite reliability values exceed 0.70, indicating good internal consistency. AVE values above 0.50 further confirm convergent validity, in line with Hair et al. (2022), and, together with Figure 2, these results indicate that all constructs in the model are valid, reliable, and suitable for structural analysis.

Table 3. Validity and Reliability Test Results

Construct	Outer Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Internal Branding		0.954	0.958	0.591
IC1	0.708			
IC2	0.730			
IC3	0.738			
MS1	0.707			
MS2	0.714			
MS3	0.773			
SL1	0.767			
SL2	0.797			
SL3	0.796			
TM1	0.810			
TM2	0.740			
TM3	0.840			
TR1	0.764			
TR2	0.741			
TR3	0.859			
TR4	0.802			
Brand Knowledge		0.762	0.863	0.678
BK1	0.760			
BK2	0.846			
BK3	0.860			
Brand Endorsement		0.851	0.900	0.694
BE1	0.829			
BE2	0.837			
BE3	0.899			
BE4	0.759			
Brand-Support Behavior		0.937	0.947	0.667
BSB1	0.840			
BSB2	0.817			
BSB3	0.830			
BSB4	0.772			
BSB5	0.848			
BSB6	0.799			
BSB7	0.737			
BSB8	0.881			
BSB9	0.817			

Figure 2 illustrates the measurement model and shows that the standardized factor loadings for all indicators of internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and

brand-supporting behavior are high and statistically significant, indicating that the indicators load strongly on their respective constructs. This visual pattern suggests that the measurement model performs adequately and that each construct is well represented by its indicators.

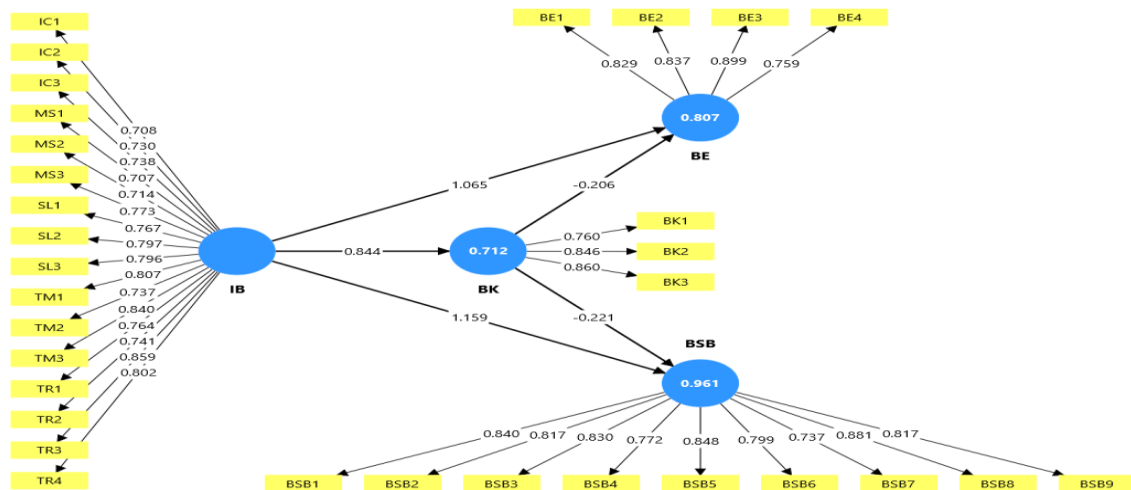


Figure 2. Measurement Framework

Hypothesis Test

Table 4 presents the results of hypothesis testing for the research model and shows that all tested relationships between variables are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Internal branding was found to have a strong positive influence on brand endorsement, brand knowledge, and brand-supporting behavior, thereby confirming its role as the primary driver of brand-oriented employee behavior in star-rated hotels. On the other hand, brand knowledge also significantly influences brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior.

However, the coefficient is negative, indicating that increased cognitive understanding of the brand in this sample is actually correlated with decreased endorsement and brand-supporting behavior. All mediation hypotheses were also supported, as the indirect effect of internal branding on brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior through brand knowledge was found to be significant; however, the coefficient patterns indicate that the mediation is of a competitive nature, where the positive direct influence of internal branding on employee behavior interacts with the negative indirect influence via brand knowledge.

Table 4. Hypothesis Test Results

Variable	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Statistic (O/STDEV)	P-Values
Internal Branding → Brand Endorsement	0.892	0.890	0.026	33.820	0.000
Internal Branding → Brand Knowledge	0.844	0.840	0.040	20.849	0.000
Internal Branding → Brand-Supporting Behavior	0.973	0.973	0.008	121.245	0.000
Brand Knowledge → Brand Endorsement	-0.206	-0.205	0.101	2.047	0.041
Brand Knowledge → Brand-Supporting Behavior	-0.221	-0.222	0.050	4.449	0.000
Internal Branding → Brand Knowledge → Brand Endorsement	-0.174	-0.172	0.086	2.016	0.044
Internal Branding → Brand Knowledge → Brand-Supporting Behavior	-0.186	-0.187	0.044	4.271	0.000

Discussion

Internal Branding and Brand Endorsement

The results indicate that internal branding has a positive and significant effect on hotel employees' brand endorsement, meaning that stronger internal branding practices (internal communication, brand-based training, leadership, and management support) are associated with a higher tendency for employees to recommend and speak positively about the hotel brand. Within the SIT perspective, this suggests that internal branding strengthens employees' identification with the brand as a salient in-group, so that endorsing and defending the brand becomes a way to maintain and enhance their social identity. From a SET perspective, internal branding also functions as a signal of organizational support, which employees reciprocate through brand advocacy and positive word-of-mouth.

This finding is consistent with prior research showing that internal branding and internal brand communication are positively related to employee brand advocacy and brand-supporting communication (Leijerholt et al., 2022; Duh & Wara, 2024; Hong et al., 2024). Studies in higher education and retail banking, for example, report that internal branding outcomes, such as employee-brand fit, brand knowledge, and belief in the brand, translate into stronger brand-building behaviours and brand-related word-of-mouth through organizational identification and perceived organizational support. In the context of star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where guests strongly rely on both online reviews and informal recommendations, these results imply that effective internal branding can transform frontline employees into credible "brand champions" whose endorsements are rooted in both identification (SIT) and reciprocity (SET), thereby helping hotels compete in a dense and experience-sensitive market.

Internal Branding and Brand Knowledge

The second hypothesis, which states that internal branding positively affects employees' brand knowledge, is also empirically supported. Employees who are more frequently involved in internal branding programs report a better understanding of the hotel's brand identity, values, promises, and service standards. This supports the cognitive-affective-behavioral view, which posits that internal branding first shapes brand-related cognitions (e.g., what the brand stands for) as a prerequisite for subsequent attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. From SIT and SET perspectives, this cognitive foundation represents both a shared interpretive schema ("who we are" as a brand) and a form of informational support provided by the organization.

These results are in line with recent work showing that internal brand communication, training, and brand-oriented leadership are key antecedents of internal brand knowledge in hospitality and service sectors (Adamu et al., 2020; Fathya, 2021). For example, studies in tourism and hospitality contexts have found that internal branding enhances employees' brand knowledge and, through that, their brand identification and brand-consistent performance. In Yogyakarta's hotel context, where service differentiation relies heavily on consistent brand execution, the finding underscores that internal branding is not merely symbolic; it is a primary mechanism for building the cognitive resources employees need to interpret and deliver the brand in daily interactions with guests.

Internal Branding and Brand-Support Behavior

The study's findings reveal that internal branding has a strong positive influence on brand-supporting behavior, indicating that hotel employees who experience internal branding more intensely tend to exhibit work behaviors that consistently support the brand's identity and promise, both in core duties and extra-role behaviors. Within SIT, this suggests that employees who internalize the brand as part of their identity are more willing to engage in brand-consistent and brand-protective behaviors because these actions affirm "who they are" as members of the organization. Within SET, internal branding represents an ongoing investment that employees reciprocate through in-role and extra-role behaviors that go beyond minimum task requirements to uphold the brand.

This result is consistent with empirical evidence that internal branding and internal brand management are key predictors of brand citizenship behavior and brand-supporting behavior across different service industries (Biru, 2021; Taku et al., 2022; Prashar & Maity, 2024). Recent studies in banking and hospitality, for example, show that internal branding influences brand-supporting outcomes via mechanisms such as role clarity, affective commitment, and employee brand identification. In star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, where employees often face high service demands and intense customer contact, the findings suggest that internal branding can serve as a strategic lever to align employees' daily work behaviors with the brand promise, thereby enhancing both service consistency and brand equity in a competitive local market.

Brand Knowledge and Brand Endorsement

The results indicate that brand knowledge has a significant effect on employee brand endorsement but with a negative coefficient, which diverges from the positive relationship generally predicted by theory. Within a cognitive–affective–behavioral framework and SIT, brand knowledge is typically expected to support endorsement, as a clearer understanding of brand attributes and positioning should increase confidence in recommending and defending the brand. Prior research has found that internal brand knowledge positively contributes to employee-based brand equity and brand advocacy by fostering brand identification and employee brand performance (Abdullah et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025b; Srivastava et al., 2025).

In the context of star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta, however, the negative coefficient suggests a misalignment between what employees know about the brand standards and promises and what they experience in daily operations. Employees with higher brand knowledge may be more aware of gaps between brand narratives (e.g., promises of premium service or unique experience) and operational realities (e.g., staffing constraints, facility limitations, or inconsistent managerial support), which can reduce their willingness to openly endorse the brand (Agina et al., 2023). This pattern resonates with recent findings that internal branding and internal communication can also generate technostress or cognitive strain when digital and operational demands are not aligned with brand expectations (Durmuş, 2025). In such circumstances, knowledge without corresponding affective reinforcement (pride, trust, sense of fairness) may foster critical or cautious attitudes, leading employees to withhold endorsement to avoid overstating claims they feel cannot be fully delivered. Thus, although the relationship is statistically significant, the negative sign indicates that in this particular context, brand knowledge functions as a context-sensitive cognitive filter that can dampen endorsement when perceived brand–reality gaps are salient.

Brand Knowledge and Brand-Support Behavior

The finding that brand knowledge significantly influences brand-supporting behavior with a negative coefficient also reveals a complex dynamic. Theoretically, brand knowledge is often described as a key antecedent of brand-consistent behavior and brand citizenship behavior, because employees must first know what the brand stands for before they can act in ways that support it. Empirical studies have documented positive links between brand knowledge and brand-supportive behaviors, frequently mediated by constructs such as brand identification, organizational loyalty, or brand-oriented culture (Nguyen et al., 2019; Batt et al., 2021; Saleem & Hawkins, 2021).

The negative coefficient in the Yogyakarta hotel context suggests that when employees have a very clear understanding of the brand's standards and expectations but lack sufficient resources, role clarity, or supportive systems, this knowledge may increase perceived role overload or role conflict rather than facilitate brand-supportive behavior. Employees who know exactly what the brand requires but feel structurally constrained (e.g., high workload, limited staff, rigid procedures) may strategically conserve effort by focusing on meeting minimum in-role requirements and reducing extra-role brand-supportive behaviors to avoid burnout or perceived unfairness. From a SET lens, this reflects an imbalance in the exchange: knowledge

and demands are increased, but reciprocal support and resources are perceived as inadequate, prompting employees to limit discretionary contributions. From an SIT perspective, persistent misalignment between the ideal brand identity and day-to-day working conditions may weaken the motivational pull of identification, especially when employees feel that delivering the “ideal brand” is not realistically supported by their organization. These findings indicate that increasing brand knowledge alone is insufficient; aligned work systems and leadership support must accompany it to translate knowledge into feasible, sustainable brand-supporting actions.

Brand Knowledge Mediates the Relationship between Internal Branding and Brand Endorsement

The mediation analysis shows that brand knowledge significantly explains the relationship between internal branding and brand endorsement. However, the sign of the path from brand knowledge to brand endorsement is negative. This implies that internal branding operates through two partially competing pathways: a direct, positive pathway, consistent with SIT and SET, where internal branding strengthens identification, perceived support, and affective commitment, thereby increasing endorsement (Khan et al., 2025b), and an indirect pathway through brand knowledge, where increased awareness of brand standards and promises is associated with lower endorsement. In mediation terminology, this pattern reflects competitive mediation: the indirect effect via brand knowledge works in the opposite direction to the direct effect, reducing but not reversing the overall positive impact of internal branding on endorsement.

Internal branding in the studied hotels appears effective in providing information and building cognitive understanding. However, when operational realities do not fully align with the brand narrative, the cognitive pathway makes employees more critical and cautious in endorsing the brand. Similar multi-path effects have been observed in recent internal branding studies, in which cognitive outcomes (e.g., increased awareness of standards) can either enhance or dampen brand-supportive behaviors, depending on the level of perceived organizational support and identification (Kashyap & Kang, 2025). In the Yogyakarta hotel context, where resource constraints and intense service pressures are common, internal branding that emphasizes standards and promises without sufficient structural support may unintentionally amplify employees’ sensitivity to brand–reality discrepancies. This underscores the importance of designing internal branding programs that integrate cognitive, affective, and structural elements—ensuring that messages about the brand are backed by realistic service processes, leadership behaviors, and support systems—so that the cognitive pathway via brand knowledge reinforces, rather than competes with, the direct identification-based pathway to endorsement.

Brand Knowledge Mediates the Relationship between Internal Branding and Brand-Support Behavior

The mediating role of brand knowledge in the relationship between internal branding and brand-supporting behavior is also significant and exhibits a competitive pattern. Conceptually, internal branding should strengthen brand-supporting behavior directly by increasing commitment, identification, and role clarity, and indirectly by leveraging brand knowledge as the cognitive foundation for actions consistent with the brand (Garas et al., 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020). However, the negative indirect effect suggests that, in this context, increasingly high standards and brand expectations without corresponding improvements in working conditions and support can make employees more selective about displaying brand-supporting behavior.

From a grand theory perspective, these results reflect a mismatch between the cognitive and exchange dimensions of internal branding (Yoon & Kim, 2025). SIT predicts that when employees internalize the brand identity and feel part of a valued in-group, they are motivated to support the brand; SET predicts that when they perceive fair organizational investment and support, they reciprocate through extra-role brand-supportive behavior. If internal branding increases knowledge and demands without a sense of fair exchange or

realistic role demands, employees may experience branding-related stress and reduce discretionary effort—especially when they realize that ideal standards are difficult to achieve due to time pressures, staff shortages, or rigid procedures. These findings confirm that the effects of internal branding and brand knowledge depend on the broader organizational context (leadership style, workload, cultural norms). For practitioners in star-rated hotels, the implication is that strengthening brand knowledge must be accompanied by tangible support—such as realistic staffing arrangements, empowering leadership, and reward systems—so that employees feel that “living the brand” is both expected and feasible; when cognitive, affective, and structural elements align, the mediating role of brand knowledge tends to follow the positive path predicted by theory, rather than weakening the influence of internal branding on brand-supporting behavior.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that internal branding plays a central role in shaping brand-oriented employee behavior in star-rated hotels in Yogyakarta. Internal branding, implemented through internal communication, brand-based training, leadership, and management support, directly increases brand endorsement and brand-supporting behavior and strengthens employees’ brand knowledge as a cognitive foundation for understanding brand identity and the brand promise. Framed by Social Identity Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and a cognitive–affective–behavioral perspective, the findings support the view that internal branding can turn employees into brand champions by influencing what they know, how they identify with the brand, and how they perceive organizational support.

Theoretically, this study contributes by: (1) modelling internal branding, brand knowledge, brand endorsement, and brand-supporting behaviour in a single framework within an emerging-market hospitality context; (2) demonstrating that brand knowledge acts as a context-sensitive mediator, with competitive mediation patterns in which positive direct effects of internal branding coexist with negative indirect effects via brand knowledge; and (3) clarifying how SIT and SET jointly explain the interplay between identification, perceived exchange, and cognitive brand knowledge in driving or constraining brand-oriented behaviours. In practice, the results imply that hotel management should design internal branding programs that are not only informational but also foster identification and fair, supportive work conditions, so that increased brand knowledge is converted into consistent advocacy and brand-supporting behavior rather than heightened criticality or withdrawal. This requires aligning brand messages with realistic service processes, adequate resources, and recognition systems that enable employees to “live the brand” in daily operations.

This research has several limitations that also point to directions for future work. First, the cross-sectional design and focus on 3–5-star hotels in a single city limit causal inference and generalisability; future studies could adopt longitudinal or multi-wave designs and extend the context to other hospitality segments and regions. Second, all variables were measured via employee self-report, raising the risk of common method bias; subsequent research could triangulate with guest ratings, supervisor assessments, or objective performance indicators. Third, the model includes only brand knowledge as a mediator. In contrast, the competitive mediation patterns suggest that additional psychological variables—such as brand commitment, role clarity, perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, or burnout—may help explain how internal branding translates into behavior. Addressing these limitations in future studies would deepen understanding of the mechanisms through which internal branding fosters (or inadvertently constrains) employees’ roles as authentic brand ambassadors.

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