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

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

Also, for the airline industry, the common thing for most successful airlines is the adoption of internal branding to make their employees customer-oriented and establishing their commitment (Appelbaum and Fewster, 2002). In the United States, Southwest Airlines is one of the most successful airline companies because of its competitive advantage based positioning their brand in the minds of consumers through its employees’ behaviors (Miles and Mangold, 2005). Moreover, Singapore Airlines is another airline company that owes its success to have its employees as the representatives of the company brand through their brand supporting behaviors (Chong, 2007). What constitutes the success for these two airline companies is that they deliver a consistent brand promise through employee behaviors.

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

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

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

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

2. Review of literature

2.1. The role of employees in branding

Although the brand concept is almost same for both products and services, the distinguished characteristics of services make their branding different from product branding in terms of the execution of branding activities. Both product and service branding have the same external orientation such as identifying market opportunities, segmenting the market, or positioning the brand. However, services branding also needs internal orientation in terms of involving employees in branding process (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). In traditional marketing, there is a customer centered approach that concentrates on external brand building process (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1986). However, the importance in employees in services shifts this externally oriented approach to a balanced approach that has both internal and external orientation. The point is the integration of employees into the branding process to deliver a consistent quality service around brand promise so that the brand promise made in external branding efforts such as advertising could be realized consistently during consumer brand experience (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005).

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

Second, deregulation in the airline industry as well as the increased competition led to focus more on service quality issues. Therefore, airline companies have started to more focus on their employees’ behaviors due to their position to influence passengers’ perception regarding the service and the brand.

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

2.2. Brand commitment and brand trust of employees

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

Within the context of relationship commitment, trust has been proposed to be a strong predictor to explain commitment, and it has been defined as “existing when one party has confidence in the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Thus, confidence for the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity helps people to become committed to a relationship. Like in other relationships, trust is also an important factor to increase commitment and to enhance relationships within
the context of branding (Bowden, 2009). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that brand trust of employees might also enhance their commitment to the brand.

In order to better understand the formation of trust, Lewicki and Bunker (1996) theorized the development of trust over time in their trust model. According to that model, there are three types of trust, which are deterrence-based trust, knowledge-based trust, and identification-based trust. More specifically, trust develops through these three stages over a period of time suggesting identification-based trust as the highest level of trust in relationships. As such, identification-based trust is mainly based on emotional attachment and common shared values. Since brand commitment is also defined as psychological attachment of employees to the brand (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005), brand trust of employees may also increase as they become more attached and committed to the brand in time. As a result, based on these discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Employee brand trust will have a direct and positive effect on employee brand commitment.

Hypothesis 2: Employee brand commitment will have a direct and positive effect on employee brand trust.

Having proposed the relationship between employees’ brand trust and brand commitment, it is necessary to understand the consequences of ensuring brand trust and commitment of employees. Closely linked to integrating employees into the branding process, the aim is to enhance brand citizenship behaviors of employees for the success of the brand.

2.3. Brand citizenship behaviors of employees

Foster et al. (2010) argue that employees’ behaviors are crucial for the brand success because service employees locate at the interface between the brand promise and brand delivery. As such, customer contact employees need to adopt behaviors supporting the brand due to their influence on consumer brand experience. Therefore, they are required to live the brand during their customer interaction.

In order to understand what is expected from employees to live the brand, Burmann and Zeplin (2005) have developed the concept of brand citizenship behavior across the construct of organizational citizenship behavior. The construct mainly refers to employee behaviors that enhance the delivery of brand promise by including external behaviors as well as intra-organizational behaviors. Specifically, employees are identified as central for the success of a brand through their brand supporting behaviors as a result of internalizing brand in their behaviors (de Chernatony, 2001; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). It is believed that as service employees internalize the brand promise and its values, they are more likely to perform in accordance with the brand consistently (Berry and Lampo, 2004).

In recognition of the importance of employee brand related behaviors, previous literature has tried to understand how organizations may enhance these behaviors. Evolving around the organizational behavior literature, it has been argued that commitment is the key to understand how employees adopt brand citizenship behaviors and behave in accordance with the brand promise. More specifically, internal commitment has been proposed as one of the major issues for the success of branding because commitment leads employees to believe their service brand (de Chernatony et al., 2003).

Even previous studies have extensively focused on commitment of employees to explain those behaviors. However, according to commitment–trust theory of relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), trust is a key concept to explain people’s desire to stay in a long term relationship, such as with a brand. Trust is defined as “existing when one party has confidence in the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994, p. 23) as well as “it is the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence” (Moorman et al., 1993, p. 82).

Based on the above definitions, it is obvious that confidence is a crucial part of trust. As such, confidence arises from the belief that the trusted party is reliable and has integrity by being competent, honest, responsible, and helpful (Larzelere and Huston, 1980). Therefore, if someone has confidence and trust against the exchange partner, he or she would be more willing to be committed in a relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Specifically for brand relationships, trust in the brand also affects the brand commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002) and perceived brand trustworthiness, which in turn would lead to stakeholders’ favorable attitude toward the firm. Therefore, it is reasonable to explain employee brand commitment through employee brand trust. This is because the aim of all internal branding activities is to have employees believe in the brand as well as to increase their confidence in the brand so that they can be committed to deliver the brand.

Specifically for the airline industry, Southwest Airlines is one of the excellent examples of implementing internal branding activities to enhance brand related behaviors of their employees. Particularly, the idea is to enhance employees’ brand citizenship behaviors to build a strong brand image in the minds of the passengers. How the company achieves its success is mainly depends on its psychological contract with its employees (Miles and Mangold, 2005). The idea is to build the trust of the employees by aligning their attitudes and behaviors with the company brand so that employees become more committed to behave in accordance with the brand. With the recognition of these discussions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Employee brand trust will have a direct and positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors of employees.

Hypothesis 3a: Employee brand trust will have an indirect and positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors of employees through employee brand commitment.

Hypothesis 4: Employee brand commitment will have a direct and positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors of employees.

Hypothesis 4a: Employee brand commitment will have an indirect and positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors of employees through employee brand trust.

Based on the theoretical foundations and proposed hypotheses, this study proposed a conceptual model (see Fig. 1), explaining how...
employees’ brand trust and commitment affect their brand citizenship behaviors.

3. Methods

3.1. Procedure

Data were collected from a convenience sample of airline flight attendants. The sample was initiated by contacting one of the corporate airline companies in Turkey that was willing to participate in the study. Employees were surveyed for their self-reported brand related attitudes and behaviors through a structured self-administered questionnaire. Respondents were asked to report their responses on a five point likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

3.2. Participants

A convenience sample of respondents, who were the flight attendants of the respective airline company, provided responses to analyze the proposed relationships in the research model. In total, 523 employees were included in the data analysis. For employees, males accounted for 28.1% (147) and females accounted for 71.9% (376). Majority of the employees were between the ages of 26–35 (62.9%). The rest of the employees were between 18 and 25 (29.1%) and 36–45 (8%). Of the 523 employees, 39.6% (207) was single and 60.4% (316) was married. More than half of the respondents 64.6% (338) hold bachelor degree. The rest of the employees either had high school or pre-college degree accounting for 14.5% (76) and 20.8% (109) of the respondents respectively. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of employees in the study.

3.3. Measures

The measurement items for the structured questionnaire were adopted from previous studies demonstrating reliability and validity. All constructs were measured on a five-point likert scale to assess the attitudes and behaviors of respondents. The measures are explained in detail below;

3.3.1. Employee brand trust

The measure of brand trust that was used in this study is a four-item measure by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2002). The operationalization of brand trust was based on three facets of trust that are reliability, honesty, and safety. Therefore, four items in the scale aim to measure these three facets of the construct.

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>71.9</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>26–35</td>
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<td>36–45</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
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<td>Bachelor</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>523</td>
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</tr>
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Table 1

Demographic profile of employees.

3.3.2. Employee brand commitment

One approach to measure brand commitment is to adopt models from previous organizational commitment studies (O’Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Meyer and Allen, 1991). Meyer and Allen’s (1997) tri-dimensional model conceptualizes organizational commitment as affective, continuance and normative commitment. Affective commitment is about emotional attachment to the organization, and it is a higher level of commitment in contrast to continuance and normative commitment. This study adopted the measurement scale of affective dimension of brand commitment that measures the brand commitment of employees in terms of identification and involvement with the brand (Kimpákon and Toquer, 2010).

3.3.3. Brand citizenship behaviors

Morhart et al. (2009, p. 123) have defined employee brand-building behavior as “employees’ contribution (both on and off the job) to an organization’s customer-oriented brand building efforts. Extra-role brand-building behavior is defined as “employee actions that go beyond the prescribed roles for the good of the corporate brand and are discretionary and is identified as brand citizenship behaviors of employees that go beyond their in-role brand behaviors”. For brand citizenship behaviors, participation (on the job) and positive word of mouth (off the job) were determined as extra-role branding efforts. Positive word of mouth was measured with a three item scale (Arnett et al., 2003), and participation was also measured with a three item scale (Bettencourt, 1997).

3.4. Preliminary analysis

The constructs for the study that are employee brand trust, employee brand commitment, and brand citizenship behaviors as well as their scale items were checked for reliability and validity. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the measurement model and to assess the reliability and validity for the scale items. Table 2 presents the summary statistics of means, standard deviations, and correlations among the constructs. Additionally, measurement scales were checked for their reliability and validity (see Table 3). The composite reliability and average variance extracted were calculated to assess the internal consistency (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Based on recommended level of .70 for CR and .50 for AVE indices, all constructs other than employee brand citizenship behaviors met the criteria for composite reliability and average variance extracted.

Although, AVE and CR for brand citizenship behaviors were below recommended levels, researchers have argued that these recommended levels are conservative for newly developed scales (Arnold and Reynolds, 2009). Especially in behavioral studies, internal consistency assessment is more complicated, and past research have evidenced reliability measures down to .60 (Arnold and Reynolds, 2009; Clark and Watson, 1995). Because multiple
indicators are used as effects of latent construct, and the belief that the measures cover an important facet of underlying construct (Bollen and Lennox, 1991; Morhart et al., 2009), the study assumed all items are valid and reliable measures of brand citizenship construct. Therefore, the study evidenced both validity and reliability for further analysis.

3.5. Structural equation modeling

After testing the measurement model, structural model was analyzed through structural equation modeling (SEM) by using Mplus v.6 (Muthen and Muthen, 2010). SEM was chosen for its advantage of testing series of relationships between constructs by modeling a regression structure for latent variables (Hair et al., 2005). In order to deal with assumptions of SEM for normality and multicollinearity, this study used Satorra—Bentler procedure in Mplus (Satorra and Bentler, 2001).

In addition to path analysis for direct relationships between latent variables, indirect effects were analyzed to test mediation by decomposing of direct and indirect effects. This study employed bootstrap approach in SEM to test the direct and indirect effects in mediation model (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). One of the advantages of bootstrapping lies in its to perform better than regressions (Iacobucci et al., 2007). The procedure is a resampling method, of bootstrapping lies in its to perform better than regressions (Bollen and Stine, 1990). As a result, this which treats the original data set as the population and draw bootstrap approach in SEM to test the direct and indirect effects in rather than using series of regression analysis.

4. Results

The hypothesized relationships were analyzed by the full structural equation model using Mplus v.6 by applying Satorra—Bentler procedure (see Table 4). The model fit statistics for the measurement model represented a good fit for the model to the empirical data (Hu and Bentler, 1998): $\chi^2 = 229.703 (101, N = 523), p = .000; (CFI) = .970; (TLI) = .965; (SRMR) = .030; (RMSEA) = .027$.

As H1 suggested, brand trust of employees was found to have a positive significant effect on employee brand commitment ($\beta_{12} = .78, t = 9.896, p < .01$). As the employees brand trust increased, their commitment to the brand also increased. Additionally, brand commitment was also found to positively affect brand trust ($\beta_{21} = .51, t = 5.687, p < .01$), thereby providing support for H2. Also supporting H3, as proposed by the study, employee brand trust showed a significant positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors of employees ($\beta_{31} = .75, t = 7.690, p < .01$). Specifically, as employees trust in company brand increased, they were more likely to adopt brand citizenship behaviors. On the other hand, this study failed to find statistical support for H4, which proposes a positive direct effect of employee brand commitment on brand citizenship behaviors. However, the present research found that even brand commitment of employees did not directly affect brand citizenship behaviors, employees’ brand commitment showed a positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors through brand trust of employees. The indirect effect of brand commitment was found to be significant at $p < .01$ supporting H4a. Therefore, brand trust fully mediated the link between employees’ brand commitment and their brand citizenship behaviors. With respect to the hypothesized mediating role of brand commitment between brand trust and brand citizenship behaviors, this study failed to support H3a for the indirect positive effect of brand trust on brand citizenship behaviors.

Taken together, this study could not find any statistical support for the direct effect of brand commitment on brand citizenship behaviors of employees. However, the rejection of H4 and H3a provided a different way of explaining brand behaviors of employees. Although brand commitment did not directly result in brand citizenship behaviors of employees, the variable can explain how employees adopt brand related behaviors through affecting their brand trust. Therefore, this study provided empirical support for the sequential link of: employee brand commitment — brand trust — brand citizenship behaviors (Fig. 2).

5. Conclusion and discussion

Airline industry is one of the service industries with high level of intangibility of services offered (Shostack, 1977). Therefore, touch points that passengers directly experience with airline employee from departure to arrival form their brand impression through distinct interaction experiences over an airline travel (Berry and
Lampo, 2004). With the recognition of employees’ role for the brand success in the airline industry, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of brand trust in explaining brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of employees. A conceptual model for the sequential link of: brand trust — brand commitment — and brand citizenship was developed and tested in order to empirically assess the role of brand trust for its effect on brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of airline employees.

Through a sample of airline employees, this research yields important results about explaining airline employees brand citizenship behaviors through their brand trust as well as brand commitment. First of all, this research found that brand trust showed a positive effect on brand commitment of employees. The finding for the effect of brand trust on brand commitment was consistent with the trust-commitment theory of relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) and with the positive effect of brand trust on brand commitment (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2002). Second, in line with theoretical findings in the airline industry, this study found that employee brand trust is also positively associated with brand citizenship behaviors of employees. As employees’ brand trust increased, their adoption of brand citizenship behaviors also increased. This is because if employees believe their service brand, they would accept the brand in their minds in order to behave in accordance with the brand promise (de Chernatony et al., 2003).

While brand trust of employees was found to affect their brand citizenship behaviors, the findings did not show a relation between employee brand commitment and employee brand citizenship behaviors. Employee brand commitment did not result in brand citizenship behaviors of employees. This finding was contradictory to the previous findings in the literature. Previous research found that employee commitment positively affects brand citizenship behaviors of employees (Burmann et al., 2009; de Chernatony et al., 2003; Kimpakorn and Toquer, 2010). One explanation for this finding is that brand commitment construct measured the affective component of commitment due to its relation with internalization of brand by employees. However, other kinds of commitment that are continuance or normative commitment might have an effect on brand citizenship behaviors.

Finally, even the direct effect of employees’ brand commitment on brand citizenship behaviors was insignificant, brand commitment was found to have an indirect positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors through brand trust of employees. Therefore, this finding suggested a different sequential link as opposed to proposed model for the study. Based on the results of analysis, this research found that brand commitment positively affected brand trust of employees, which in turn affects their brand citizenship behaviors.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This research extends the current literature in internal branding for brand citizenship behaviors of employees in airline as well as in service industry. Even previous studies have tried to understand what affects employees’ brand citizenship behaviors (Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009), these studies mainly focused on the role of brand commitment. However, this study was first to use brand trust of employees and provided empirical evidence for its positive effect on brand citizenship behaviors in the airline industry.

In contrary to previous findings, results of this study also suggested that brand commitment did not directly influence brand related behaviors but the construct had an indirect effect on employee brand citizenship behaviors. More specifically, the link between employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors was fully mediated by brand trust. Therefore, this study goes beyond commitment of employees to explain how they adopt brand supporting behaviors by integrating brand trust into the proposed model. Lastly, this research also provided empirical evidence to explain employees’ brand citizenship behaviors in the airline industry. Previous studies were mainly analyzed the brand citizenship behaviors conceptually or they were mainly focused on brand commitment (Chong, 2007; Miles and Mangold, 2005).

5.2. Practical implications

As a result of deregulation in the airline industry, many carriers entered into the market and started to compete against each other. Therefore, the increased competition led to focus more on service quality issues. This is because consumers see no difference between airline companies based on frequent flyer programs (Ott, 1993), and service is much more important to achieve differentiation (Ostrowski et al., 1993). Even, airline companies are trying to differentiate themselves by competing on price and offering frequent flyer programs, they still need to find different strategies to strengthen their competitive position.

With the appreciation of employees brand citizenship behaviors for the success of a brand, this study suggests that employees could be a source of differentiation and competitive advantage by managing their brand related behaviors. This is because corporate image was found to be an important factor to understand passengers’ perceptions regarding an airline company. As passengers have a more favorable corporate image of an airline company, they are more likely to perceive that airline company as having a better and high quality (Dowling, 1994). However, it is necessary to start establishing brand image within the organization through developing brand relationship of employees with the corporate brand. If employees believe in the brand and live the brand, they can deliver the brand values and create the desired brand image in the minds of customers. Therefore, employees brand supporting behaviors seem to be the key for the success of airline brands.

In order to enhance brand citizenship behaviors of their employees, airline companies first need to build brand trust of their employees. Study results indicated that brand trust is the most important factor to enhance the brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviors of employees. Even previous studies in other industries have argued for the positive effect of brand commitment on brand related behaviors, this study found that it is the brand trust that positively influence brand behaviors of employees. Additionally, it was found that employee commitment results in brand citizenship behavior only if it leads to brand trust of employees. Therefore, brand trust goes beyond commitment to explain how employees may develop their brand related behaviors suggesting that airline companies first need to establish the brand trust of employees in order to behave in accordance with the brand promise.

In addition to enhance relationship of employees with the brand, employees’ brand related attitudes and behaviors are also
important to enhance the relationship of passengers with the brand. It has been suggested that airline employees have the opportunity to influence the perception of service quality for airline customers through their behaviors during their interaction with the passengers (Frost and Kumar, 2001). Given the opportunity of employees to influence perceived quality and brand image for the customers (Chen and Chang, 2008), enhancing employee trust and commitment regarding the brand may affect brand preference and purchase intentions of airline passengers. For customers to trust the brand and to favor the brand for future purchases, first employees need to believe in the company brand. Therefore, this study provides further support for the inside-out brand building for the long-term success of the brand in the airline industry.

Lastly, developing trust and commitment of employees to the brand also helps airline companies to enhance their commitment to the organization. As a labor-intensive industry, the cost of employee turnover could be really high for airlines. However, employees’ commitment to the organization can decrease their intention to leave the company (Chen, 2006). Therefore, internal branding to enhance brand trust and commitment of employees could be one way to manage employees’ attitudes and behaviors of employees regarding the organization (Grundy and Moxon, 2013).

5.3. Limitations and future research

Although this study extended the knowledge on brand citizenship behaviors of employees, the findings also have some limitations. First of all, the study was conducted in a specific airline company thereby suggesting that external validity might be an issue for generalizability of the results to other companies. Thus, future research might be conducted in different companies in order to generalize the results to a larger population.

Second, convenience sampling used in this study might affect the representativeness of the sample for the population. Therefore, generalizing results and making inferences about the population poses a limitation and lowers the external validity of the present study. Third, the participants asked to indicate their self-reported attitudes regarding scale items. However, it is difficult to guarantee that participants truly reflected their own attitudes and beliefs. Forth, this study did not investigate all factors influencing employees brand related behaviors. There might be differences in their brand behaviors and attitudes for working conditions (Hur and Adler, 2011). Additionally, employee-organization fit, employee know-how, and disposable resources may moderate the effect of internal branding mechanisms on employees’ brand supporting behaviors (Burmann et al., 2009). As a result, future research could benefit from analyzing additional control variables.

Lastly, brand commitment of employees is also a factor that might need further analysis. Previous research has found that employee brand commitment positively affects brand citizenship behaviors of employees. However, this study did not found any significant effect for the brand commitment. One reason might be that this study adopted affective dimension of commitment to understand the employee brand commitment. Other dimensions of commitment that are normative or continuance commitment might also explain the brand commitment of employees. Therefore, employee brand commitment might be studied further.

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