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Brand equity in the professional service context: Analyzing the impact of employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport

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ABSTRACT

The study examines whether factors related to customers' perception of employees' behavior in terms of customer perceived role ambiguity, role overload and customer–employee rapport influence the development of brand equity in the professional service context. 632 customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies participated in the study. The results of structural equation modeling show negative effects of role ambiguity and role overload on brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, which constitute brand equity. The findings indicate a positive effect of customer–employee rapport on the enhancement of B2B brand equity. However, the negative influences of role ambiguity and role overload on customer–employee rapport transfer detrimental indirect effects on brand equity. The study contributes to an understanding of how the real interaction between service providers and customers can influence brand equity in the professional service setting.

1. Introduction

Brand equity defined as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Keller, 1993, p. 8) has been shown to be of high importance for companies' competitive positions and performance (Kim & Hyun, 2011; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Webster & Keller, 2004). The concept of brand equity was originally developed in the B2C market and it is a well-accepted fact that brand equity and brand management are crucial for success in this setting (Keller, 2008; M'zungu, Merrilees, & Miller, 2010; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010). Some researchers have argued that brand equity has a minor role in the B2B market as the number of buyers and sellers is relatively small, which makes it easier to develop knowledge about each other (Anderson, Narus, & Narayandas, 2009). The exchange in business markets is also assumed to have a more rational foundation, since professional experts in different areas are involved in the purchasing process (Kim & Hyun, 2011).

Previous research on B2B branding has however demonstrated that brands are also important in the decision making process that takes place in the B2B market (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2007; Michell, King, & Reast, 2001; Mudambi, 2002; Webster & Keller, 2004), especially in the professional service context (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000; Kim & Hyun, 2011; Roberts & Merrilees, 2007). These studies show that brand equity leads to similar positive outcomes in the B2B setting as in the B2C setting. Brand equity motivates B2B customers to pay a price premium, to consider brand extensions, and to recommend the brand (Bendixen, Bukasa, & Abratt, 2004; Hutton, 1997; Michell et al., 2001). Furthermore, successful B2B brands with high levels of brand equity serve as the key for building trust (Roberts & Merrilees, 2007), which is important for the exchange in industrial markets (Hite, 2003). Trust, obligations, and expectations based on relational contracts facilitate knowledge sharing and activity exchange among organizations (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Granovetter, 1985; Hite, 2003), and are of relevance for the maintenance of a relationship (Li & Ferreira, 2008). These factors affect transaction performance, market performance, and profitability performance of a company (Baldauf, Cravens, & Binder, 2003; Han & Sung, 2008).

Earlier studies on the determinants of B2B brand equity mostly elaborated on the influence of marketing-mix efforts on brand equity (Kim & Hyun, 2011). In line with Davies, Chun, and Kamins (2010), we however argue that the real interaction between employees of a service company and the customers affects brand equity in the professional service market, besides the image communicated through marketing efforts. Davies et al. (2010) state that employees within a service organization are the face of the organization, as the employees interact with the customer in service encounters. The personal interaction between the service providers and the customers involves both experiences of how the professional employees engage in their work role to meet customers' expectations and the emotional reactions of the employees during the interaction with the customers. Therefore,

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brand equity can be enhanced or diminished after a service encounter based upon to which extent the employees act upon their role expectations and develop affective relationships with the customers. This is in line with research on how role ambiguity and role overload affect employees' job performance and hence their interaction with the customers (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Örtqvist and Wincent, 2006; Singh, 1993; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004). Role ambiguity and role overload have been proven to have consequences for the individual resulting in stress and strain (Lee & Schuler, 1980; Rahim, 1996), which have been shown to result in non-satisfactory job performance (Morris, Steers, & Koch, 1979; Tubrel & Collins, 2000).

The constructs of employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport are argued to be important in the marketing context, especially in service marketing, but role ambiguity and role overload have only been used to understand employees' own perceptions of their role behavior and their effects on employees' attitudes and performance (Behrman & Perreault, 1984; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 1998; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004). Customer–employee rapport has merely been introduced to explain customer satisfaction and loyalty intentions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). The study of their importance for the enhancement of B2B brand equity has so far been non-existing. While we notice a gap in research in this particular area, our study is based on the assumption that the customers' perception of the employees' role behavior and customer–employee rapport is of crucial importance for the enhancement of brand equity in the professional service context. To address this gap in research, we investigate how the customers' perception of employees' behavior and customer–employee rapport affects brand equity of companies providing professional services.

In a study of customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies, we propose and test a structural equation model of influences of employee role ambiguity and role overload on customer–employee rapport and the dimensions of brand equity. Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model. Thereby, this study contributes to research on B2B branding by analyzing how the interaction between customers and service providers affects the development of brand equity. This issue has not been considered in prior research on brand equity, but is of high relevance, especially for B2B service branding. If employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport influence B2B brand equity, it is a signal that this particular stream of marketing research needs to further acknowledge real customer–employee interaction in brand equity models. Besides acknowledging the customers' perception of their interaction experience captured by customer–employee rapport, we argue that customers' perception of the role performance of employees and how they are able to address their role expectations in interaction with customers are also related to the success of the brand building process of their organization. Drawing on role theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), we hypothesize that customer's perception of the employee's certainty about what

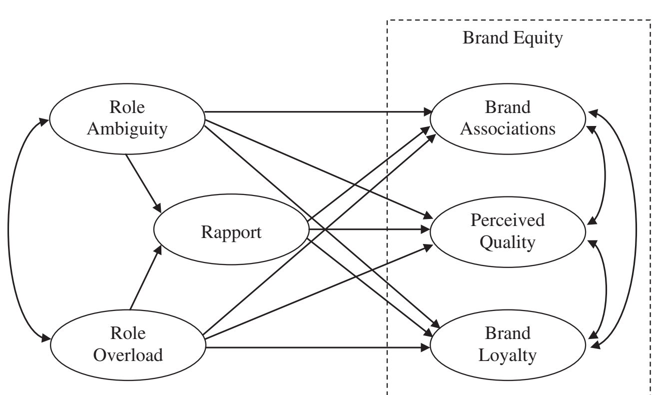

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

he or she is supposed to do, and about the time that he or she has to engage in providing the service is important for the development of B2B brand equity. To our knowledge, these three factors were previously not studied in relation to the enhancement of B2B brand equity. We further notice that no previous research has studied linkages between role ambiguity and role overload and customer–employee rapport.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Dimensions of brand equity and the process of B2B brand equity development

Before discussing the importance of employee behavior on the customer's perception of the brand, we turn to the dimensions that constitute the overall brand equity of a company. Aaker's (1991, 1996) initial model of brand equity originating from research in the B2C market includes four dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Despite a lack of consensus among previous brand equity researchers about a specific design of an overall brand equity model and about the constructs that can consider the specifics of the B2B market, some studies have provided empirical evidence about the overall importance of the above mentioned seminal model also in the B2B setting (Bendixen et al., 2004; Hutton, 1997; Michell et al., 2001; van Riel, de Mortanges, & Streukens, 2005).

The inclusion of all individual dimensions from Aaker's (1991, 1996) model may although be pursued with caution. Only a few studies (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Gordon, Calantone, & di Benedetto, 1993; Kim & Hyun, 2011) include all four dimensions of B2B brand equity in their conceptual models and the findings of these studies indicate problems with the robustness of this model. Kim and Hyun (2011) test the hypothesized effects of a combined measure of brand awareness and brand associations on perceived quality and brand loyalty. The hypotheses about the impact of brand awareness and brand associations on other dimensions of brand equity are not supported in the study (Kim & Hyun, 2011). The study by Biedenbach and Marell (2010) shows similar inconsistent results in relation to the dimension of brand awareness, which is found to be insignificant for most relationships. The reported high mean value of brand awareness indicates that generally in the B2B setting the customers have high levels of awareness about their current service provider, which might have a minor role for the enhancement of brand equity. Based on the results from these studies and on the fact that the B2B market differs in some important respects from the B2C market, we find that the Aaker's (1991, 1996) model needs to be modified for certain settings. The actors are few in the B2B setting, experts are involved in the decision making process, and the knowledge about the brands and companies at the market can therefore be assumed to be high. The importance of brand awareness for the brand equity enhancement can therefore be questioned. In our study, we research brand equity in relation to one of the Big Four auditing companies. The levels of awareness could be argued to be high, and therefore the brand equity development is more likely to be better captured by brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

The dimension of brand associations is defined in the initial model as "image dimensions that are unique to a product class or a brand" (Aaker, 1996, p. 111). This definition is close to the concepts of organizational image and reputation that have been shown to be of importance in the B2B setting. Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organizational image involves externally produced meaning-making about the organization. Many studies have shown that these meanings are of importance for firms' branding and for their performance in the B2B context (c.f. Mudambi, 2002; Roper & Davies, 2010; Shaw, Giglierano, & Kallis, 1989; Shipley & Howard, 1993). Also studies on reputation have shown that perceptions and feelings about the organization are important for B2B branding and overall performance of a company (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Davies et al., 2010; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Brand associations in terms of customers' thoughts and feelings about a company can therefore be assumed to be of importance for the enhancement of brand equity in the B2B market.

The fact that other two dimensions of brand equity, namely perceived quality and brand loyalty, are of high relevance in both the B2C and the B2B markets is well-established. Perceived quality is defined by Aaker (1996) as "the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service with respect to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives" (Aaker, 1991, p. 85). In our conceptualization of perceived quality, we follow the traditional view of quality in B2B setting, where quality also incorporates the reliability and consistency of the product's superiority (Qualls & Rosa, 1995; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). Perceived quality is important in the B2B context, because from the customers' perspective it is often used as a basis for customers' perception of product or service value, whereas from the companies' perspective it can serve as a basis for developing long-term relationships with customers (Michell et al., 2001; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). Brand loyalty portrays the customer's attachment to a particular brand (Aaker, 1991). Brand loyalty has traditionally been described as the most relevant component in the industrial buying decision (Bubb & van Reast, 1973). Considering that a number of buyers in the B2B market are lower than in the B2C market, the gain or loss of just a few customers can be crucial for company's financial outcomes, and consequently its long-term performance and success (Gordon et al., 1993). Therefore, it is important to consider perceived quality and brand loyalty in the process of brand equity development.

The relationships between the three brand equity dimensions are important to consider, since they form the foundation for the development of brand equity. One of the first studies on B2B brand equity explores the effects between the brand equity dimensions in the electrical products sector (Gordon et al., 1993). The exploratory study suggests that brand equity develops from brand awareness to brand associations, then to perceived quality and finally to brand loyalty (Gordon et al., 1993). As already discussed, the significance of brand awareness in B2B markets has however not been confirmed in later studies. The findings of Biedenbach and Marell's (2010) study conducted in the professional service sector have only indicated such hierarchical effects from brand associations to perceived quality, and from perceived quality to brand loyalty. Kim and Hyun (2011) also found a significant relationship between perceived quality and brand loyalty in their study on the formation of B2B brand equity in the IT software sector (Kim & Hyun, 2011). Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that the effects between brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty can unfold in different directions.

The findings of research on the relationships between brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are somewhat contradictory. In some studies, it is argued that positive associations expressed in customers' meanings and feelings about a brand influence their perceptions about the quality of the products offered by the firm and ultimately their level of loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Bendixen et al., 2004; Leone et al., 2006). In contrary, several studies suggest that the perceived quality of offerings provided by a company can contribute to strengthening of positive brand associations and that loyalty of a brand can contribute to the development of higher quality perceptions and stronger brand associations (Jayawardhena, Souchon, Farrell, & Glanville, 2007; Michell et al., 2001; Rauyruen & Miller, 2007; van Riel et al., 2005). Therefore, it is likely that brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty develop in an interrelated process, so that brand associations affect perceived quality, which in turn affects brand associations, and vice versa. The same tendency is likely to be the case for the relationships between perceived quality and brand loyalty, and between brand loyalty and brand associations. This leads us to the first hypothesis regarding the dimensions of brand equity and their relationships:

H1. There is a significant covariance between brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty.

2.2. Determinants of brand equity in the B2B service setting

The relationships between the dimensions of brand equity and their antecedents and consequences have been addressed in many studies on B2C brand equity (Atilgan, Aksoy, & Akinci, 2005; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Villarejo-Ramos & Sanchez-Franco, 2005), but few studies have investigated these relationships in the B2B context. Some factors studied in research on B2C brand equity such as different marketing mix efforts and corporate image have also been investigated in the B2B setting (Kim & Hyun, 2011; van Riel et al., 2005). Among the limited number of previous studies, we notice a set of exploratory qualitative studies that have been conducted to identify antecedents that are specific to B2B brand equity (Bendixen et al., 2004; McQuiston, 2004; Michell et al., 2001; Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997). Only a very limited set of antecedents and consequences has been empirically tested in prior research (Baldauf et al., 2003; Han & Sung, 2008; Taylor, Hunter, & Lindberg, 2007). For example, satisfaction, commitment, and relationship quality have been introduced as determinants of brand equity to better capture the conditions characterizing the B2B setting (Han & Sung, 2008). These factors have, however, been assessed as antecedents in some studies and as potential dimensions or consequences of brand equity in other studies. As such, the distinction between brand equity dimensions, antecedents and consequences is not clear and needs further research for a better understanding.

To understand the brand equity development in the B2B service context, we find that it is important to acknowledge the character of this setting and specifically the interaction, which takes place between the service provider and its customers. Although likely relevant for the professional service setting where interaction is at the core, such factors have been neglected in previous research on brand equity. We have therefore chosen to investigate the impact of factors reflecting upon the interaction between the customers and the employees of service companies. Earlier research has shown that the interaction between customers and service employees is essential for the customers' perception of service providers (Bitner, 1990; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). This is important because the customers' perceptions about the service provider are influenced by their experience of the interaction (c.f. Lloyd, 1990). The attitudes and behavior of the contact employees are relevant for the customers' perception of the service, and in turn for their perception of the service company. These factors have not, however, been explicitly addressed in prior research on B2B brand equity, except for one attempt to integrate the interaction between the customers and the employees into the conceptual model of brand equity (van Riel et al., 2005). The study was conducted in the specialty chemicals sector, and confirmed the hypothesis that better skilled employees are associated with a higher level of satisfaction with service, which in turn leads to positive corporate brand equity (van Riel et al., 2005). Considering the fact that "the service brand is a holistic process beginning with the relationship between the firm and its staff and coming alive during the interaction between staff and customers" (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000, p. 138), there is a need to further explore how customer–employee interaction affects brand equity. We start with the influence of customer–employee rapport and its potential effects on brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

2.2.1. Customer–employee rapport as a determinant of brand equity

Customer–employee rapport has traditionally been used to capture customer's perception of employee's behavior that directly affects the interaction between the customer and the employee. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) state that emotions play a specific role in service encounters as they make an impact on customer satisfaction, customer–employee rapport, and customer loyalty intentions. Although their study did not specifically focus on brand equity, the stated assumptions are applicable to research on brand equity.

Customer–employee rapport is defined as “a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants” (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000, p. 92). This factor hence reflects upon more affective and emotional side of the customer–employee interaction. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) have studied how emotional contagion and emotional labor affect the customers' perceptions of the service encounter. The findings show that employees' deep and authentic emotional behavior has a positive effect on customers' perception of the service encounter, whereas more surface acting does not affect the customers' perception of the service encounter (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Positive cognitive experiences of the interaction between contact employees and customers, due to deep and authentic emotional behavior, will hence result in positive customer–employee rapport that can be assumed to affect the different dimensions of B2B brand equity.

Despite empirical evidence indicating the importance of emotional factors in the B2B market (Andersen & Kumar, 2006), prior research did not explore these factors in relation to B2B brand equity. Positive emotions related to the interaction with the service provider can be expected to affect customers' brand associations as well as perceived quality and brand loyalty. For the creation of brand associations, the reason is that positive emotions from the interaction with the service provider can strengthen the image that the brand holds unique characteristics. Positive emotions triggered by external events in a relationship have the potential to alter a person's view of the source of those stimuli such as the objects, activities, and contexts, be they real, remembered, desired, imagined, or anticipated (Russell, 2003). For the service provider in the professional service setting like the one studied here, this fact implies that the customer could develop better preferences to value the core components of the brand such as being reliable and flexible. Given that positive emotions influence introspective processes (Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2003), encounters of customer–employee rapport are also likely to have long-lasting consequences for the customer and potentially limit the detrimental view of previous negative experiences. This consideration would be important for creating perception that the brand consists of something unique compared to competitors, motivation to find something unique in the brand, and thus strengthening brand associations. In the same vein, positive emotions can guide individual's cognition and behavior by activating and altering physiological and psychological associations left by previous experiences (Russell, 2003). This finding would imply that previously favored brands or the mental order in how brands are internally ranked by a customer could be revisited by the positive emotions triggered by customer–employee rapport. As such, we also expect that perceived quality and brand loyalty are likely to be strengthened by customer–employee rapport, which led us to the second hypothesis:

H2. Customer–employee rapport has positive effects on (a) brand associations, (b) perceived quality, and (c) brand loyalty.

2.2.2. Role ambiguity and role overload as determinants of brand equity

The importance of employees' behavior for customers' perception of a firm has earlier been studied both related to a firm's reputation and its image. The culture and identity of an organization as well as the training of employees have been argued to affect the actions taken by employees and their ability to convey the image and reputation of the organization when interacting with customers (Davies et al., 2010; de Chernatony, 1999; Fombrun, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; M'zungu et al., 2010). The organizational culture and identity can be assumed to be of importance also for company's brand equity. We however argue that the employees' perception of the role expectations that the organization as well as the customers have about their behavior is equally important, and that internal efforts to develop the identity of the firm affect the employees' perception about how they should behave. This proposition complements previous research as no attention has been paid to the importance of role expectations for employees' behavior and company's brand equity. In this article, we further explore the importance of role behavior drawing on role theory (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970).

The role theory states that much of professional life involves acting in accordance to organizational role expectations (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Merton (1957) acknowledges that an actor that is involved in relationships is required to perform in line with the expectations related to different roles. Roles are created through the interaction between different individuals or collectives of individuals (such as norms and guidelines etc.), where different role expectations develop as individuals or groups interpret their roles (for similar approaches, see e.g. Hales, 1987; Fondas & Stewart, 1994; Hales & Tamangani, 1996; Yaconi, 2001; Butterfield, Edwards, & Woodall, 2005; Mantere, 2008). As such, we acknowledge that roles are formed in various forms of social interactions based on interpretation, communication and expectations.

The current study focuses on two factors, which according to prior research capture employee role behavior. First, role ambiguity arises “when individuals lack a clear definition of the expectations of their role and the required methods to fulfill their duties” (Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004, p. 107). Second, role overload arises “when individuals perceive that the cumulative demands exceed their abilities and motivation to perform the tasks related to their job successfully” (Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004, p. 107). Previous studies show that high levels of role ambiguity and role overload negatively affect employees' attitudes, job satisfaction and their performance (Behrman & Perreault, 1984; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 1998; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004).

Most studies on employee role behavior have focused on the employee and his or her perceptions of the roles that they act upon. Since brand equity is formed in the mind of a customer (Keller, 1993), the customers' reflections about the employees' role behavior are as important as the employees' own perception of their roles. If the employee signals that he or she perceives that the role is ambiguous or that there is a role overload, customers will interpret these signals, and these interpretations will affect the customers' evaluation of B2B brand. The employees' actual perception of role ambiguity and role overload is hence less important than the signals that are interpreted by the customers. In the B2B service setting, negative impact of role ambiguity on employee behavior can be perceived by the customer for example as employees' uncertainty about the rules of conduct, their responsibility, or customers' expectations. Negative impact of role overload can be perceived by the customer for example as employees' lack of time to finish their job or to rush with fulfilling their obligations.

In line with Davies et al. (2010), we argue that the employees of a service company are the face of this company and that the employees' perception of the role that they are supposed to have can be instrumental in defining the customers' perception of the company. The employee–role interface is important for attitudes and behavior of contact employees, and hence for the customers' perception of the service provider. Therefore, we assume that employee role ambiguity and role overload can affect customers' perception of the company, i.e. their brand associations. When ambiguity and overload are high, it is likely that customers do not find enough guideline from the providers' efforts to specify role expectations so that the core message of the brand is appropriately communicated, which is something that is likely to imply that the development of brand associations is impaired. For perceived quality, the study of Hartline and Ferrell (1996) actually examined how role conflict and role ambiguity affect this dimension of brand equity. The study found that role conflict and role ambiguity have negative effects on perceived quality (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996). Although the study was not performed in the B2B setting, these determinants are also of importance for perceived quality of the provided B2B services, because B2B services are often co-produced through the interaction between customers and the employees of a service company. If customers perceive that the employees have high role ambiguity or high role overload, they probably also perceive that the employees do not have time to engage fully in the co-production of the service, which is negative for their perception of quality. Also the loyalty to the company is dependent upon the relationship between customers and employees, since the trust and commitment develop as a result of the interaction (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). When role ambiguity and role overload are high, we posit that the lack of enactment upon role expectations will have implications for customer actions evident in recommendations to others and other similar expressions of customer loyalty. Grönroos (2000) argues that brand loyalty is based upon satisfaction, i.e. that expectations are met and properly addressed. We have accordingly developed the following hypotheses:

H3. Role ambiguity has negative effects on (a) brand associations, (b) perceived quality, and (c) brand loyalty.

H4. Role overload has negative effects on (a) brand associations, (b) perceived quality, and (c) brand loyalty.

2.2.3. The relationship between perceived role behavior and customer–employee rapport

As we have previously noticed role ambiguity and role overload can be considered as barriers to creating positive customer–employee rapport. As such, we hypothesize that role ambiguity and role overload have negative effects on customer–employee rapport. Ultimately, this assumption implies that role ambiguity and role overload are expected to have negative indirect effects on the three brand equity dimensions discussed above. Role ambiguity and role overload are traditionally conceptualized from the stressor–strain perspective. This perspective argues that role ambiguity and role overload are strongly associated with strain, tension, and other unpleasant experiences and that they are harmful for job performance (Schaubroeck, Cotton, & Jennings, 1989). Noticing that role ambiguity and role overload are known to constrain individuals' capability to satisfactorily meet role expectations, their personal development and their job performance, we expect that customer–employee rapport will be suffering. The level at which the customer perceives that the service provider faces divergent and hard-to-meet expectations related to the role is likely to lead to frustration. At the same time, when facing expectations that are difficult to meet given limits because of work demands, the level of frustration and anxiety is likely to be evident (Latack, 1981). As such, role ambiguity and role overload set clear limitations on the possibilities to successfully cope with role expectations (Beehr, Walsh, & Taber, 1976), and when the provider experiences such difficulties the relationship with the client will be put under stain and the customer–employee rapport will be affected negatively. Thus, we posit the following hypothesis:

H5. Role ambiguity (a) and role overload (b) have negative effects on customer–employee rapport.

3. Methodology

The data for this study was collected as a part of a longitudinal project investigating the development of B2B brand equity, its antecedents and consequences in the professional service industry. The current study was a second study conducted within the research project. The CEOs and CFOs of companies buying auditing and business consultancy services from one of the Big Four auditing companies in Sweden were chosen as the respondents. The questionnaire used for testing the hypotheses outlined in this paper focused on evaluation of their current service provider. The respondents had to be in direct contact with the company employees to be able to reflect about their role behavior and established rapport. The telephone interviews with randomly selected respondents resulted in 21% response rate (n = 632). The non-response bias was evaluated by comparing the respondents with the non-respondents on their turnover and number of employees (Armstrong & Overton, 1977; Collier & Bienstock, 2007). The results of the chi-square test did not indicate any significant differences between the respondents and the non-respondents.

The measures of brand equity were initially adopted from prior research on brand equity (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Aaker, 1997; Biedenbach & Marell, 2010; Koçak, Abimbola, & Özer, 2007; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Since this study was the project's second study, we have used the measures of brand equity, which were previously pre-tested and applied in the first study (see Appendix 1). Considering the fact that the study was conducted among the current customers of one of the Big Four auditing companies, brand awareness construct was not included in the conceptual model. We assumed that the CEOs and CFOs of companies can rather easily recall and recognize their current service provider. Therefore, brand awareness was considered to have a rather limited role for the enhancement of brand equity in this setting. Following propositions from prior research, measures of brand associations were clarified by considering the specific characteristics of the chosen B2B context and brand image dimensions of the selected company (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1997; Koçak et al., 2007; Pappu et al., 2005). An expert group of marketing and management executives from the company was interviewed to specify brand associations. Empathy, flexibility, reliability and the ability to be pragmatic turned out to be important features of the provider of auditing service. The scale was pre-tested prior to the first study, and consequently applied in both the first and second study. The measures used for perceived quality and brand loyalty originated from previous studies on brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Pappu et al., 2005; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Perceived quality was measured as the customers' overall perception of services quality and the firms' services quality compared to other providers, as well as the perception of the consistency of quality (Aaker, 1991; Pappu et al., 2005; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Brand loyalty was measured as the customers' preference of the company as the first choice provider of services, their promise to use the services again, their commitment to recommend company's services to others, as well as their own consideration of themselves as being loyal to their service provider (Aaker, 1991; Pappu et al., 2005; Washburn & Plank, 2002; Yoo & Donthu, 2001).

The measures of other constructs were adapted from research on role ambiguity (Rizzo et al., 1970; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004; Wincent, Örtqvist, & Drnovsek, 2008), role overload (Beehr et al., 1976; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004; Wincent et al., 2008), and customer–employee rapport (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Instead of using the self-reported reflections of employees about their role ambiguity and role overload, this study focused on reflections of customers and their perceptions of employees' role behavior. This approach allowed us to obtain more objective outsiders' views upon the employees' real behavior in service encounters. By asking the customers to reflect upon behavior of service providers, we have also reduced a common method bias related to the social desirability, which can be caused by "the tendency on the part of individuals to present themselves in a favorable light" (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003, p. 881). As suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to decrease common method biases related to item characteristics and item context, we have used different scale formats, applied various scale lengths, and avoided ambiguous items. With exception of one construct (perceived quality), replies to all other items were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale with the anchors "1—strongly disagree" and "5—strongly agree". Appendix 1 gives an overview of the utilized constructs and their measures.

Table 1
Measurement model: results and standardized loadings.

Construct	Scale items	Standardized loadings*
Brand associations	AS1.	0.67
(ά = 0.84; VE = 0.58; CR = 0.85)	AS2.	0.72
	AS3.	0.80
	AS4.	0.85
Perceived quality	PQ1.	0.80
(ά = 0.73; VE = 0.50; CR = 0.74)	PQ2.	0.75
	PQ3.	0.55
Brand loyalty	LO1.	0.70
(ά = 0.78; VE = 0.47; CR = 0.78)	LO2.	0.69
	LO3.	0.65
	LO4.	0.72
Role ambiguity (reverse scored items)	RA1.	0.47
(ά = 0.76; VE = 0.51; CR = 0.80)	RA2.	0.84
	RA3.	0.86
	RA4.	0.62
Role overload	RO1.	0.72
(ά = 0.84; VE = 0.65; CR = 0.84)	RO2.	0.89
	RO3.	0.80
Customer–employee rapport	CER1.	0.82
(ά = 0.90; VE = 0.70; CR = 0.90)	CER2.	0.88
	CER3.	0.83
	CER4.	0.82

Fit indices: $\chi^2 = 555.51$, df = 194, χ^2/df = 2.86, RMSEA = 0.05, GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, CN 0.05 = 259, CN 0.01 = 276.
Note. Cronbach's Alpha (ά), variance extracted (VE), and construct reliability (CR).
* $p < 0.01$.

4. Analysis and results

The hypothesized relationships between the constructs were examined by conducting structural equation modeling. Prior to this analysis, the Harman's single-factor test was performed to control for common method biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As a first step, the individual items were examined using an exploratory principal components factor analysis. In this analysis, we noticed that no single predominant factor emerged from the data. Instead, the exploratory factor analysis identified six factors with eigenvalues above one and with the first factor accounting for 37.02% of variance. The cumulative variance explained by all factors was 65.33%. According to the results, this test did not indicate significant problems with common method biases. In addition to this test, we used a confirmatory factor analysis in structural equation modeling to test for common method variance. We included a separate test for any such influence by controlling the effects of a common latent factor in our structural model of the hypothesized relationships (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We examined a model proposing that a single factor underlies the study variables by linking all items to a single factor. We did not find any significant common variance among the items and thus the proposed relationships, which suggests that common method biases are not an issue to consider in our study.

We ensured that the individual items for the latent constructs showed acceptable reliability and discriminant validity The Cronbach's alpha coefficients calculated for all constructs exceeded 0.7, which confirmed the reliability of applied measures (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Following common procedures suggested for ensuring measurement quality in structural equation modeling, we also assessed a measurement model to evaluate construct reliability and construct validity (Hair et al., 2006). The results of measurement model analysis are shown in Table 1. As evident, the loading estimates and the fit indices indicated validity of the measurement model. Aware that the measurement model tests used in structural equation modeling could hide measurement problems, we also performed an exploratory factor analysis by including the individual items in a rotated principal component analysis. This analysis extracted six underlying factors as expected and we noticed high and consistent factor loadings of individual items for the factors.

The descriptive statistics for all constructs and their correlations can be found in Table 2. The stated hypotheses were tested by examining the proposed structural equation model. In our conceptual development, we indicated that the effects between the brand equity dimensions in the B2B setting may not necessarily be hierarchical and be directed from brand associations to perceived quality and from perceived quality to brand loyalty. Previous studies show that the effects may unfold in opposite direction or even be nonrecursive. In order to empirically evaluate these propositions, the structural model included the correlational effects between the brand equity dimensions. The proposed structural model also included the direct effects of customer–employee rapport, role ambiguity, and role overload on three dimensions of brand equity. As evident, the calculated fit indices exceeded the minimum levels indicating a good fit between the structural model and the data (Hair et al., 2006).

The structural model estimates and fit indices are shown in Table 3. Based on the squared multiple correlations, the constructs explained a large amount of variance in the measured variables of brand equity dimensions: brand associations ($R^2 = 0.54$), perceived quality ($R^2 = 0.52$), and brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.44$). The results confirmed existence of a mutual influence between three dimensions of brand equity. As such, Hypothesis 1 considering the mutual relationships between brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty was supported by the empirical findings. Customer–employee rapport had positive effects on brand associations ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < 0.01$), perceived quality ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$), which demonstrated support of Hypothesis 2. Role ambiguity had negative effects on brand associations ($\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$), perceived quality ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.01$), and brand loyalty ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.01$). Role overload had negative effects on brand associations ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.01$), perceived quality ($\beta = -0.10$, $p < 0.05$), and brand loyalty ($\beta = -0.07$, $p < 0.10$). Therefore, the results showed support for Hypotheses 3 and 4, which focused on potential impact of role ambiguity and role overload on the dimensions of brand equity.

Role ambiguity ($\beta = -0.43$, $p < 0.01$) and role overload ($\beta = -0.23$, $p < 0.01$) had negative effects on customer–employee rapport supporting the stated Hypothesis 5. Role ambiguity and role overload were found not only to have a direct negative impact on the brand equity development, but also to indirectly hinder the brand equity enhancement through their negative effects on customer–employee rapport, which itself had positive effects on different dimensions of brand equity. Role ambiguity and role overload had the strongest indirect effects on brand loyalty (see Table 4). In order to assess the robustness of the

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Constructs	Mean	Std.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Brand associations	4.07	0.64	1					
(2) Perceived quality	3.89	0.53	0.63**	1				
(3) Brand loyalty	3.85	0.89	0.56**	0.54**	1			
(4) Role ambiguity	4.12	0.73	−0.42**	−0.42**	−0.37**	1		
(5) Role overload	2.04	0.61	−0.34**	−0.25**	−0.21**	0.17**	1	
(6) Customer–employee rapport	2.06	0.95	0.62**	0.55**	0.54**	−0.40**	−0.27**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3
Structural model estimates and fit indices.

Hypothesized effects	Standardized estimates	Conclusion
H1a: brand associations ↔ perceived quality	0.57 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H1b: brand associations ↔ brand loyalty	0.38 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H1c: perceived quality ↔ brand loyalty	0.36 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H2a: customer–employee rapport → brand associations (+)	0.52 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H2b: customer–employee rapport → perceived quality (+)	0.48 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H2c: customer–employee rapport → brand loyalty (+)	0.53 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H3a: role ambiguity → brand associations (−)	−0.22 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H3b: role ambiguity → perceived quality (−)	−0.31 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H3c: role ambiguity → brand loyalty (−)	−0.07 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H4a: role overload → brand associations (−)	−0.19 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H4b: role overload → perceived quality (−)	−0.10 ($p<0.05$)	Supported
H4c: role overload → brand loyalty (−)	−0.07 ($p<0.10$)	Supported
H5a: role ambiguity → customer–employee rapport (−)	−0.43 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
H5b: role overload → customer–employee rapport (−)	−0.23 ($p<0.01$)	Supported
Role ambiguity ↔ role overload	0.19 ($p<0.01$)	

Fit indices: $\chi^2=555.51$, df = 194, $\chi^2/\text{df}=2.86$, RMSEA = 0.05, GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, CN 0.05 = 259, CN 0.01 = 276.

hypothesized relationships in the proposed model, we validated our results by testing a competing alternative model. The alternative model included the hierarchy of effects between the dimensions from brand associations to perceived quality, from perceived quality to brand loyalty, and from brand loyalty to brand associations. Although influences remain rather intact, which supports the robustness of our findings the fit indices of the alternative model ($\chi^2=555.51$, df = 194, $\chi^2/\text{df}=2.86$, RMSEA = 0.05, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.92, CFI = 0.95, IFI = 0.95, CN 0.05 = 259, CN 0.01 = 276) showed that it was fitting the data that was worse than the proposed model. Therefore, the results of the study suggest relying upon the proposed conceptual model instead of the competing alternative model.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The enhancement of brand equity is an inevitable part of the process of brand management. The traditional marketing-mix tools are often used as the key to the development of corporate image, and consequently brand equity (Kim & Hyun, 2011; van Riel et al., 2005). Nevertheless, we argue that overreliance on these tools as only remedies for a continuous growth of brand equity might not be a successful strategy for brand management, especially in the B2B service setting. A personal interaction between employees of a service company and the customers might confirm the communicated image and meet customers' expectations, or in case of negative experience of the personal interaction, it might lead to an opposite outcome. As a consequence, brand equity of a company can be enhanced or diminished after a service encounter. This study examines the impact of customer perceptions of strain in employee role behavior and customer–employee rapport on the enhancement of brand equity in the professional service context. We acknowledged role ambiguity, role overload, and customer–employee rapport as potential factors, which we considered to have an impact on customer's perception of interaction with the service provider. As such, the study empirically tested the effects of these factors, evident in customer–employee interaction, on three dimensions of B2B brand equity, which are brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

The results of the study show that customer perceptions of strain in employee role behavior as counted in perceived role ambiguity and role overload of the service provider and established customer–employee rapport have significant impact on the enhancement of brand equity. These results can be linked to the findings regarding the alignment between an organization's internal culture and identity and its external image (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), and between internal and external reputation (Davies et al., 2010). As shown in prior research, the size of the gaps between the employees' and the customers' perceptions has consequences for the performance of company (Davies et al., 2010). Our results contribute to these findings, as they show that the effects are dependent on the extent to which the customers have incorporated such differences into their associative network memory structures about the interaction and the organization (c.f. Keller, 1993), as it affects the brand equity. Our study enhances the understanding for the process and mechanisms through which the lack of an alignment between internal and external perceptions is linked to the performance of companies.

Moreover, the findings bring up to the attention the fact that role ambiguity and role overload can have direct and indirect negative effects on different dimensions of B2B brand equity. Following the assumptions stated in the role theory (Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo et al., 1970) and previous studies on role ambiguity and role overload (Beehr et al., 1976; Rizzo et al., 1970; Veloutsou & Panigyrakis, 2004; Wincent et al., 2008), the study confirms that the customers' perception of the service providers' capabilities to meet their expectations and fulfill their role affects the overall process of brand equity development. More specifically, role ambiguity has significant negative effects on brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Similarly, role overload has significant negative effects on these three dimensions of brand equity. These findings emphasize the fact, that customers' perception of direct interaction during the service encounter might have consequences not only for customer satisfaction and loyalty, but also alter the potential effects of brand equity on customer decision making. If the customers perceive that the company employees are lacking a clear understanding of expectations related to their role or cannot comply with demands related to their job task, they might form negative impressions about these service providers, which in turn will result in negative perception of the service company and its brand. These negative attitudes can be directly reflected in the formation of negative brand associations and low perceived quality, which are at the core of brand equity. As a consequence, the marketing efforts of company might turn out to be less effective, because brand equity, which was diminished during the service encounter, will be less effective in moderating the effects of marketing efforts on customer choice and behavior. In opposite, the company's efforts in decreasing role ambiguity and role overload will have a positive impact on the enhancement of brand equity, which in turn will have a positive influence on customers' responses to the marketing efforts of this company. It is important to acknowledge that brand equity is not only created through the marketing activities of company, but also modifies the effects of these activities on customer responses. Therefore, it is important to consider the determinants, which can affect company's brand equity, moderate the effects of its marketing activities, and have negative consequences for company's success in the long-term.

Table 4
Structural model: direct effects and indirect effects.

Standardized direct effects (Standardized indirect effects)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Brand associations	–	–	–	−0.22	−0.19	0.52
	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−0.31)	(−0.10)	(−)
(2) Perceived quality	0.61	–	–	−0.31	−0.10	0.48
	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−0.15)	(−0.05)	(−)
(3) Brand loyalty	–	–	–	−0.19	−0.07	0.53
	–	(−)	(−)	(−0.41)	(−0.13)	(−)
(4) Role ambiguity	–	–	–	–	–	–
	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)
(5) Role overload	–	–	–	–	–	–
	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)
(6) Customer–employee rapport	–	–	–	−0.43	−0.23	–
	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)	(−)

Furthermore, the findings of this study highlight the positive impact that customer–employee rapport has on the process of brand equity development. Customer–employee rapport has positive effects on all dimensions of brand equity with the strongest direct effect on brand loyalty. In addition, empirical evidence indicates negative effects of role ambiguity and role overload on customer–employee rapport and the presence of negative indirect effects on B2B brand equity. This finding shows that the damage of role ambiguity and role overload on B2B brand equity is even larger when considering customer–employee rapport above the direct effects. Since previous studies on B2B brand equity did not sufficiently focus on the factors, which characterize customer's perception of an interaction with a service provider, this study contributes to branding research by investigating such factors and their impact on the enhancement of brand equity in the B2B service setting.

5.1. Managerial implications

The results of the study render several managerial implications. Marketing managers can utilize these findings for developing and implementing more effective strategies leading to brand equity enhancement. Knowing the importance of employees' role behavior for the development of brand equity, marketing managers can put their efforts not only on finding an appropriate marketing mix, but also on ensuring that employees are capable of meeting customers' expectations related to their role behavior. As a starting point, the results of the study suggested that the decrease in employee role ambiguity and role overload, in addition to motivating them to establishing rapport during their encounters with customers, can lead to higher brand equity, which is important for the company's success.

The factors, which were examined in this study and found to have strong impact on B2B brand equity, are possible to influence from a marketing management perspective. For example, marketing managers can provide clear and specific job descriptions and invest resources in training the employees to act in accordance with their roles. This is in line with Roper and Davies's (2010) findings that training of employees is important for the success of the branding of an organization, and the results of our study indicate what aspects are of importance for the training. Such actions can reduce the level of perceived role ambiguity. An important additional effort for reducing employees' role ambiguity can be to communicate more explicitly the expectations held by customers about role behavior of service providers to the employees. As such, the unclear expectations as a source of role ambiguity would be reduced. This information could be collected by interviews or by customer surveys. Another possible source could be to create mentoring programs or meetings, where employees share experiences about customer expectations. Emphasizing the importance of spending enough time for providing the service and creating the positive experience during the service encounter is important for decreasing the employees' feelings of role overload, which consequently would affect their behavior, interactions with customers, and finally brand equity, which is formed in customers' minds. Recognizing that role overload is detrimental for brand equity, marketing managers should bring in the downsides of the increasingly higher workload for service providers in the discussions on time allocation and time-planning.

The establishment of customer–employee rapport is only possible during the customer–employee interaction. Therefore, marketing managers should have clear guidelines on how employees could act during the service encounter, so that they could potentially have a joyful and pleasant interaction with the customers. We found that positive experience based on established rapport can stimulate positive associations, create high quality perceptions, and develop long-lasting loyalty of customers to their service provider. Without focusing their efforts on decreasing employees' role ambiguity and role overload and increasing customer–employee rapport, the companies might endanger the enhancement of their overall brand equity.

5.2. Limitations and future research

One limitation of the study relates to the context in which it was conducted. The study took place in the professional service setting with the focus on auditing and business consultancy services. Although this context represents only one type of B2B services, it was an appropriate setting for investigating the effects of role behavior and rapport on brand equity, since all B2B customers have experienced an interaction with the studied company's employees during their service encounters and developed perception about employees' role behavior. Professional services are a valid context for testing the developed theoretical claims, because much of the argumentation is based upon role literature, where the act of expectations – the hallmark of service professionalism – is at the core of service delivery. Whether or not our findings are applicable for industrial goods may be further evaluated, since issues such as relational trust and relational contracts are much more critical for brand building in the B2B service context. However, future studies could validate the proposed relationships in other B2B settings by focusing on other types of B2B services, but also on industrial goods.

Since the study involved the customers of one auditing company, the choice of respondents can be considered as one possible limitation of the study. Although we subscribe to the view that universal relationships are best found in homogenous samples, our approach of only focusing upon experiences of one company may contribute to certain biases. For example, it may be the case that satisfied customers stay with the providers and contribute to biases such as halo effects. Although we follow a well-used practice of studying one company and the clients of this company, it is well known that there is a tendency for informants to allow previous experiences of an organization to influence all ratings of that organization. Even though we believe most of the variance in the variables and mechanisms studied is individually caused, how employees signal challenges on role behavior such as role ambiguity and role overload could partly be organizationally dependent. Whereas we find support for the fact that for employees being overworked and working outside their area of comfort can be detectable of clients, we acknowledge that certain professionals may be more skilled to hide such role challenges. Although organizations may find it difficult to train employees for such coping, we believe that our study should be tested in additional samples to conclude generalization possibilities. We do not find any sources of common method biases and thus systematic respondent bias in the data. Nevertheless, we find that the risk of such bias to inflate the findings of our study should not be disregarded. In this study, most of the relationships are strong and significant enough such that common method variance may not change the findings. However, for the relationships that are significant but weaker, we still believe there may be at least some theoretical possibility for such inflation. The limitation of a monadic design also restricts us from detecting whether the perceived reality matches the actual reality. A study of all Big Four companies would reveal if there are systematic differences between the perceptions of potential clients. It could also provide more definite answers to the potential limitations outlined above. As such, we find that this approach has a potential for further research.

Another limitation of this study is the employment of traditional dimensions of brand equity, which are brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Even though this research approach allowed the use of reliable scales and easier comparison of the findings to prior research, future studies could explore the robustness of findings by analyzing other alternative models of brand equity and brand image. The consideration of effects between the dimensions of brand equity and other brand equity models might be of value for branding research, since it would provide even more detailed reflections about the impact of role behavior on the development of brand equity and brand image. Moreover, the study was limited to the analysis of impact of three factors. Role ambiguity, role overload, and customer–employee rapport are relevant factors for evaluating customers' perception of employee role behavior. However, future studies could explore other factors characterizing the organizational buying behavior, which can affect the development of B2B brand equity.

Finally, the study was limited to the investigation of customers' perception of employees' role behavior. This choice enables the analysis of direct links between customers' perception of their service encounter and brand equity that they have developed in relation to the service company. Future studies could broaden the focus of analysis and in addition to customers' perspective consider employees' perception of their role behavior and its potential consequences for brand equity. The evaluation of discrepancies between these two perspectives can provide an additional input to the understanding of brand equity enhancement in the B2B context.

Appendix 1. Constructs and scale items

Constructs	Scale items
Brand associations	AS1. XXX show empathy (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	AS2. XXX are flexible (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	AS3. XXX are reliable (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	AS4. XXX are pragmatic (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
Perceived quality	PQ1. How would you evaluate overall quality of XXX services (*1—very low…5—very high*)
	PQ2. How consistent is quality of XXX services (*1—very inconsistent…5—very consistent*)
	PQ3. How would you evaluate quality of XXX services compared to quality of services provided by their competitors (*1—much lower…5—much better*)
Brand loyalty	LO1. XXX would be the first choice if my company would need auditing services (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	LO2. I would use their services again (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	LO3. I would recommend XXX services to others (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	LO4. I consider myself to be loyal to XXX (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
Role ambiguity (reverse scored items)	RA1. XXX employees seem to have clear rules on how to accomplish their job (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	RA2. They know exactly what is expected of them (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	RA3. They know exactly their responsibilities in their work for us (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	RA4. It is clear to them what has to be done to accomplish their job in a good way (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
Role overload	RO1. XXX employees often do not have time to finish their job (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	RO2. They are rushing in doing their job (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	RO3. It seems like they do not have any free time on their job (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
Customer–employee rapport	CER1. In thinking about my relationship with XXX employees, I enjoyed interacting with these people (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	CER2. XXX employees created a feeling of "warmth" in our relationship (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	CER3. XXX employees related well to me (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)
	CER4. I was comfortable interacting with XXX employees (*1—strongly disagree…5—strongly agree*)

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