Public Management Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpxm20

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To cite this article: Ulrika Leijerholt, Galina Biedenbach & Peter Hultén (2022) Internal brand management in the public sector: the effects of internal communication, organizational practices, and PSM on employees' brand perceptions, Public Management Review, 24:3, 442-465, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2020.1834607

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1834607

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Published online: 26 Oct 2020.

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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REVIEW
2022, VOL. 24, NO. 3, 442–465
https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1834607

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Internal brand management in the public sector: the effects of internal communication, organizational practices, and PSM on employees' brand perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Challenged by demanding contextual conditions, public sector organizations struggle to succeed in internal branding. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of value congruence in internal communication and positive organizational practices on employees' brand perceptions. The study examines the impact of PSM on these variables. The results of a survey demonstrate the importance of value congruence and positive organizational practices for facilitating employees' brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. The findings show that PSM directly impacts employees' opinions about value congruence and positive organizational practices, and indirectly influences their affective responses to the organizational brand.

KEYWORDS Brand commitment; brand identification; brand pride; internal branding; public sector branding

Introduction

How do enthusiastic internal communication versus actual organizational practices impact employees' perceptions of their organizational brand in a sector challenged by tough working conditions, negative publicity, and strongly criticized reforms? While previous studies and managerial practice do not uniformly answer this question, we can assume that the demanding conditions that characterize the public sector represent an interesting and unique contextual setting for examining employees' perceptions of their organizational brand. These perceptions are important, as the branding literature emphasizes the critical role of employees in building a strong brand in both the private sector (e.g. Piehler et al. 2016; Hatch and Schultz 2009; Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009) and the public sector (e.g. Eid et al. 2019; Chapleo 2010; Judson et al. 2008; Whisman 2009). Employees have a strong influence on how external stakeholders perceive the values of a brand (Dahle and Wæraas 2020; Sirianni et al. 2013; de Chernatony, Cottam, and Segal-Horn 2006; Bettencourt, Gwinner, and Meuter 2001). Therefore, an important role of internal branding is to support consistency between the officially communicated brand values and the values that employees enact in their interactions with external stakeholders (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011).

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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A value-driven perspective on brand management emerged as many organizations have recognized the necessity to communicate the brands' functional and emotional values to manage the expectations of internal and external stakeholders (de Chernatony, Cottam, and Segal-Horn 2006). Thus, those in charge of the internal brand management need to ensure that the employees' values align with the brand values (Piehler et al. 2016; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). Prior research indicates that successful internal branding empowers employees to become brand champions (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos 2014; Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak 2009; Ind 2004) and brand ambassadors (Schmidt and Baumgarth 2018; Causon 2004), while unsuccessful internal branding may create brand saboteurs (Wallace and de Chernatony 2009, 2008, 2007). Thus, earlier studies point to the challenges that organizations face if their employees fail to 'live the brand' (Baumgarth 2010; Maxwell and Knox 2009; Gotsi and Wilson 2001).

In general, internal branding efforts may result in cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses among employees (Boukis and Christodoulides 2020; Piehler, Grace, and Burmann 2018; Piehler et al. 2016; King and Grace 2010). It is commonly accepted that affective responses are a necessity, because employees that are emotionally committed to the brand are more likely to support it behaviourally (Xiong, King, and Piehler 2013; King and Grace 2012; Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009). Previous studies confirm that internal communication represents a key tool of internal branding and a driver of employees' perceptions of an organizational brand (Punjaisri, Wilson, and Evanschitzky 2008; Gapp and Merrilees 2006; Burmann and Zeplin 2005). Extant research also demonstrates that employees develop brand meaning and an understanding of brand values from their interactions with management and other employees (Dean et al. 2016). Exposure to the brand values through organizational culture is thus a necessary means for employee acceptance and buy-in of those values (Wallace, de Chernatony, and Buil 2011). Whenever a discrepancy occurs between the brand information, for example, internal communication, and the brand experiences, experiences take preference (Dean et al. 2016). Evidence of the effects of this discrepancy confirms the need to further explore the impact of internal communication versus actual organizational practices on employees' perceptions of an organizational brand, including diverse responses to internal branding efforts.

While internal brand management plays an important role in the private and public sectors, prior research is limited and predominantly focuses on private organizations (Dahle and Wæraas 2020; Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén 2019; Piehler, Grace, and Burmann 2018; Saleem and Iglesias 2016). Although the body of research on internal branding is growing, there are calls for further studies on affective responses to internal branding efforts (Piehler, Grace, and Burmann 2018), and the organizational factors that support or hinder the desired outcomes (Piehler et al. 2016). This study addresses these calls by examining how internal communication and organizational practices influence employees' perceptions of an organizational brand. In this study, we conceptualize employees' brand perceptions as affective responses to the organizational brand, which are associated with brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. Following propositions from prior research, internal communication is assessed by evaluating employees' opinions about congruence between their personal values and the values communicated on the Intranet (Celsi and Gilly 2010). Organizational practices are assessed by evaluating positive organizational practices, which capture 'positively deviant (i.e. unusual) practices, practices with an affirmative bias, and practices that connote virtuousness and eudemonism in organizations' (Cameron et al. 2011, 269).

The context of the study is the public sector, and branding in the public sector is increasingly attracting academic interest (Dahle and Wæraas 2020; Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén 2019). The public sector also represents a fruitful empirical setting for a study on brand value congruence. This is because, in addition to addressing challenging circumstances, organizations in the public sector are expected to benefit society and its residents, which can act as significant motivators for public sector employees (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015; Wright, Christensen, and Pandey 2013; Perry and Hondeghem 2008a). The question of values is, therefore, particularly interesting, as underlying public service motivation (PSM) may influence employees' perceptions of themselves and their organizational brand. By using these assumptions as a point of departure, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of value congruence in internal communication and positive organizational practices on employees' brand perceptions. The study aims to advance the current state of research by examining the impact of PSM on employees' opinions about internal communication and organizational practices, and consequently, by exploring the influence of these key contextual and organizational factors on brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment.

Theoretical framework

Internal brand management in the public sector

Public sector branding focuses on creating and managing public sector brands. Based on the nature of this context, public sector brands can be attributed to public organizations, public goods, public services, public policies, and other public entities (Dahle and Wæraas 2020). Despite the increasing relevance of branding for public sector organizations, a recent literature review demonstrates that the number of studies on public sector branding is still very limited (Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén 2019). In addition to investigating internal and external perspectives on public sector branding, prior research has explored the underlying reasons for and the consequences of the use of branding principles by public sector organizations (Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén 2019). Previous studies in the public sector indicate challenges that are often caused by the unsuccessful adoption of branding principles that originate in the business sector to the complex realities faced by public sector organizations (Sataøen and Wæraas 2015; Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Indeed, public sector organizations should recognize the specific contextual conditions constraining and enabling features of the sector and its impact on brand-related considerations (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the unique characteristics of the public sector, which can determine success or failure of internal brand management and trigger positive or negative perceptions of an organizational brand by multiple stakeholders.

Internal brand management centres on internal stakeholders and aims to build a strong brand within an organization. Prior research highlights that internal brand management through internal branding efforts seeks 'to develop a workforce that is committed, loyal and identifies with the set of organizational values and goals' (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012, 304). Compared to the private sector, those in charge of internal brand management in the public sector face additional challenges. These include, for example, diverse internal notions concerning the values and identity of

the organization (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009), distinct relationships between employees and external stakeholders (Whelan et al. 2010), or contradictory demands of influential stakeholder groups (Cullinan, Abratt, and Mingione 2020). Critical studies draw attention to the fact that internal brand management might fail to empower employees to control the brand and, instead, result in an inappropriate control of employees by the organization (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Müller 2018). Moreover, prior research indicates concerns that internal brand management can favour brands over employees (Müller 2018), distort boundaries between employees' work and private lives (Müller 2017), or even transform employees into branded robots losing their own identities (Mitchell 2004). There is empirical evidence showing that a strong brand focus can trigger some public organizations to implement employee voice restrictions as a strategy to achieve the desired reputation (Wæraas and Dahle 2020) and to ensure internal brand alignment (Dahle and Wæraas 2020). Thus, the internal branding efforts may cause suspicion among employees in public organizations that these efforts are used to ensure a superficial employee buy-in of the brand with little or no genuine value (Clark, Chapleo, and Suomi 2019).

While internal branding efforts might backfire, they are important since strong organizational brands play a critical role in the meaning-making and regulation of employees (Brannan, Parsons, and Priola 2015). Thus, employees should be considered as active actors re-appropriating brand meanings and as co-creators of the organizational brand (Tarnovskaya 2011). While internal communication is a dominant tool of internal brand management (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012), organizational practices can be also expected to influence employees' brand perceptions and other desired outcomes of internal branding efforts. These assumptions are based on the fact that organizational practices are shaped by role expectations, which can be signalled by various internal and external stakeholders to particular employees (Andersson 2019), which, in turn, would impact employees' brand perceptions.

Employees' perceptions of their organizational brand

Brand identification

Brand identification originates from the concept of organizational identification emphasized in social identity theory, which suggests that an employee's psychological membership affects his/her self-concept (Ashforth and Mael 1989). From a branding perspective, brand identification refers to an employee's positive sense of belonging to the organizational brand (Piehler et al. 2016; Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Burmann and Zeplin 2005). Thus, brand identification can be conceptualized as 'a sense of belonging to the group determining the brand experience, and a perception of being intertwined with the group's fate' (Burmann and Zeplin 2005, 285). Brand identification has both cognitive components (Donovan, Janda, and Suh 2006; Mael and Ashforth 1992; Johnson, Morgeson, and Hekman 2012) and affective components (Johnson, Morgeson, and Hekman 2012; Tajfel 1978). The affective dimension plays a significant role and may more accurately predict employee commitment (Johnson, Morgeson, and Hekman 2012). Brand identification has also been found to positively affect an emotional attachment to the brand in the form of employee brand commitment (Piehler et al. 2016; Punjaisri et al. 2009).

In public sector organizations, the positive sense of belonging to a group and its impact on other affective responses of employees should not be underestimated. For example, prior

research conducted in the healthcare sector, which was chosen as an empirical context for this study, demonstrates that strong organizational identification increases employees' tendency to rely on organizational identity and cues when forming their perceptions and behavioural intentions (Lam, Liu, and Loi 2016). Furthermore, previous studies indicate that organizational identification has a significant impact not only on the job performance of healthcare sector employees and the quality of care they provide, but also on patients' overall satisfaction (Katrinli et al. 2008). Thus, failure to make employees identify with the brand arguably renders other positive perceptions less likely, including affective responses and behavioural intentions.

Brand pride

Brand pride is described as 'a positive, performance-related emotion' (Gouthier and Rhein 2011, 634). Thus, brand pride can be regarded as having a short-term and momentary nature (Fisher and Ashkanasy 2000). However, based on another perspective, pride embodies a stable attitude towards an object, for example, an organization (Gouthier and Rhein 2011; Ajzen 2001), representing 'a summary evaluation' (Ajzen 2001, 28). Therefore, brand pride can be conceptualized as 'the pleasure of being associated with the (corporate) brand' (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016, 62). Brand pride has emerged as an interesting new concept within research on internal brand management (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016). However, earlier studies indicate that a sense of pride in the organization requires that employees identify with the organization and its mission (Gold 1982). Furthermore, brand pride has a positive effect on employee commitment to customer service (Gouthier and Rhein 2011) and towards the organization (Helm 2011).

In the public sector, the complexity of an organization may influence pride. For example, in the healthcare sector, employees can have different levels of organizational and professional identification (Trybou et al. 2014), which can potentially generate diverse senses of pride. In some organizations, employees may have a strong sense of pride connected to a common profession, which may not translate into pride for their employer. Therefore, besides brand pride related to a specific organization, employees can perceive pride associated with a sense of belonging to a particular public sector profession or a team of colleagues that performs tasks, which are important to patients and the public in general.

Brand commitment

Brand commitment concerns the psychological attachment of employees towards the brand (King and Grace 2012; Burmann and Zeplin 2005). It is a form of affective commitment, which is based on 'shared values, trust, benevolence, and rationalism' (Fullerton 2005a, 1375). Prior research suggests that brand commitment requires an emotional bond between the employee and the brand (Piehler et al. 2016). Brand commitment develops as employees interpret the brand in a way that makes it meaningful and relevant to them (King and Grace 2006), because 'individuals need to find their work as inherently meaningful and valuable in their value system' (Xiong, King, and Piehler 2013, 351). Brand commitment is thus a form of buy-in between the employees and the brand (Piehler et al. 2016). Extant research indicates that brand identification enables such a psychological connection; employees who demonstrate greater brand identification tend to develop stronger brand commitment (Piehler et al. 2016).

The brand commitment of public sector employees may not solely be dependent on a sense of identification with the brand. Rather, as follows from the discussion in the previous sections, it is an affective response to internal branding efforts. Thus, employees' brand commitment draws upon their brand identification and brand pride, and the congruence between the communicated values and the values that employees experience in their everyday practices. Prior research demonstrates that when public sector organizations implement restrictive branding efforts (e.g. restrictions of employee voices) rather than supportive branding efforts (e.g. brand ambassador programs), they can negatively influence employees' brand commitment (Dahle and Wæraas 2020). Therefore, we propose the following two hypotheses that focus on employees' brand perceptions:

H1. Brand identification has a positive effect on brand pride.

H2. Brand pride has a positive effect on brand commitment.

Internal communication – the role of value congruence

In advertising, value congruence represents 'the similarity between personal values and values highlighted in an ad' (Celsi and Gilly 2010, 521). Considering internal communication in a broader sense, value congruence can be conceptualized as the similarity between values personally held by employees and values communicated by the organization they are working for. The congruence between the officially communicated brand values and those of the employees is central to internal brand management (de Chernatony, Drury, and Segal-Horn 2003). Value congruence has the potential to increase the likelihood of 'shared meanings and coordinated behavior' (Celsi and Gilly 2010, 522). Accordingly, prior research also points to employee-brand value incongruence as a major obstacle to the implementation of internal branding efforts (Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009).

Communication plays a key role in supporting value congruence between employees and the brand (de Chernatony, Cottam, and Segal-Horn 2006; King and Grace 2012). Both external communication and internal communication are relevant. From an external perspective, 'advertising inherently makes statements about organizational values, prompting employees to invoke self-relevant values and compare them to portrayed values' (Celsi and Gilly 2010, 521). External communication is the means from which employees take cues regarding the fit between their individual identity and the image of the organization (Scott and Lane 2000). Evidence suggests that employees find it difficult to accept external communication that inaccurately portrays values and employees (Celsi and Gilly 2010). Furthermore, the findings of prior research in the healthcare sector indicate that effective external communication should be aligned with internal communication to reduce dilemmas arising from internal interpretations of the outward brand message (Hytti et al. 2015).

From an internal perspective, communication is a key determinant of affective responses to internal branding efforts as expressed in employee brand commitment (Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009). Furthermore, previous studies suggest that internal communication has a significant influence on employee brand identification (Punjaisri and Wilson 2007). Prior research in the public sector shows that internal communication is a central enabler that supports employee identification and brand

commitment, if managed effectively (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012), as internal communication can facilitate employee-brand value assimilation within the organization (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012). However, the congruence between the officially communicated values, the employees' values, and the organizational practices arguably warrants a closer examination, and especially into its impact on how employees perceive their organization's brand. Clearly, this is interesting from a public sector perspective, as public sector employees are likely to take pride in their role of helping others and contributing to society as a whole. Thus, value congruence in internal communication is likely to have a positive impact on employees' brand pride and brand commitment (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016; Celsi and Gilly 2010). These arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

H3. Value congruence in internal communication has positive effects on (a) brand identification, (b) brand pride, and (c) brand commitment.

Positive organizational practices

The importance of positive organizational behaviour and practices for effective management and organizational performance is widely acknowledged in psychology and organizational studies (Luthans and Youssef 2007). Prior research highlights long-term advantages of applying 'a proactive, positive approach emphasizing strengths, rather than continuing in the downward spiral of negativity trying to fix weaknesses' (Luthans 2002, 695). Previous studies provide evidence about the positive impact of positive organizational practices on positive affect, individual behaviour, and organizational effectiveness (Cameron et al. 2011). Surprisingly, organizational practices and their effects on desired outcomes of internal branding efforts have rarely been examined previous studies (Piehler et al. 2016). Nevertheless, prior research acknowledges the criticality of organizational practices, because they facilitate brand perceptions at the individual level and, to a certain extent, insure the functioning of organizational mechanisms through the presence of 'on brand' individuals (Melewar et al. 2012). Thus, positive organizational practices are an interesting avenue for research on internal brand management.

Prior research on brand-centred control confirms that normative control over employees' attitudes and behaviours achieved through internal communication is strengthened by the everyday experiences of employees within and outside an organization (Müller 2017). As a result, employees' attitudes and behaviours are shaped, to a large extent, by expectations of internal and external stakeholders who, in turn, might be influenced by internal and external communication of an organization (Müller 2017). One challenge is that divergent expectations by multiple stakeholders might create identity-tensions in employees (Andersson 2019). Nevertheless, genuine and positive brand values communicated by an organization can be expected to be institutionalized through positive organizational practices performed by employees. Prior research confirms that such institutionalized values influence behavioural norms, which trigger social practices (D'Andrade 2008). Furthermore, value congruence in internal communication may activate 'the appropriate set of brand-supportive behaviors' (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016, 59). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. Value congruence in internal communication has a positive effect on positive organizational practices.

Considering employees' brand perceptions, previous studies show that 'soft' tools, such as trust, respect, and consideration, have a significant positive impact on employees' brand commitment (King and Grace 2012). Further evidence also suggests that considerate leadership fosters affective commitment among employees (Wallace, de Chernatony, and Buil 2013). However, not only do management practices matter, but employees also play an important role, because 'it is not so much what the organization can do for the employee; it is what the employee can bring to the table (i.e. positive and open attitudes, motivation, etc.) that support the establishment of strong positive brand-related behaviours' (King and Grace 2012, 482). Employees' behaviours and interactions in the organization thus affect the internal brand meaning (Dean et al. 2016). Therefore, it is of interest to examine the effect of positive organizational practices on employees' perceptions of their organization's brand. Prior research in the healthcare sector indicates that social bonds, which can be developed, for example, through interactions between nurses, caregivers, and physicians, influence their perceptions, job satisfaction, and loyalty (Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Nill 2013). In general, positive organizational practices can be expected to have a positive impact on the social work environment and act as critical triggers of the employees' identification with the organization, their pride, and organizational commitment. Thus, 'soft' tools and positive organizational practices may influence employees' affective relationships with the organization and its brand. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H5. Positive organizational practices have positive effects on (a) brand identification, (b) brand pride, and (c) brand commitment.

Public service motivation

Prior research suggests that public service motivation (PSM) signifies 'a distinctive feature of employees in public administration' (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015, 692). PSM resonates well with suggestions in the branding literature on the importance of recruiting employees with values similar to those of the organization and its brand (Chang et al. 2012; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007). Originally defined as 'an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations' (Perry and Wise 1990, 368), other, more comprehensive, definitions of PSM have since emerged. For example, one definition of PSM conceptualizes it as 'the belief, values, and attitudes that go beyond self-interest and organizational interest, that concern the interest of a larger political entity and that motivate individuals to act accordingly whenever appropriate' (Vandenabeele 2007, 547). Another definition of PSM emphasizes 'a general altruistic motivation to service the interest of a community of people' (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999, 23). While not identical, PSM is closely related to altruism and the motivation among individuals to do good for society and others (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015). PSM enables employee motivation to support a specific organizational mission or institutional role, and it is a means to employees' organizational citizenship behaviour (Piatak and Holt 2020). PSM may serve as a facilitator for employee engagement (Bakker 2015) and as a mediator of attitudes related to organizational citizenship behaviour and affective commitment (Mostafa, Gould-Williams, and Bottomley 2015).

While we acknowledge the role of PSM in affecting employees' perceptions of their organizational brand, it is incorrect to assume that all public sector employees are equal with regard to it. Nevertheless, it is important to examine how PSM might indirectly affect employees' brand perceptions in a public sector organization. Prior research on PSM confirms that public sector organizations can utilize positive aspects of PSM to increase individual and organizational performance (Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010). For example, in a public sector organization, internal communication congruent with PSM has the potential to facilitate positive perceptions of individual employees about the organization and its internal stakeholders, which would be beneficial for achieving the desired outcomes of internal branding. Public sector employees, who experience organizational practices that are consistent with their PSM, are also likely to refer to these practices as positive examples that confirm their PSM. These assumptions are supported by conceptualizations of PSM as 'mechanisms unique to public institutions that energize and direct behavior' (Perry and Hondeghem 2008b, 4). Positive aspects of PSM can be utilized more effectively in organizations, where employees can observe prosocial behaviours by other employees, which are consistent with values underlying PSM (Esteve et al. 2016). Therefore, employees with high levels of PSM would be empowered by positive organizational practices when performing their work tasks and socializing with other employees. The observed inconsistencies and dilemmas related to internal brand management might be impossible to solve only through internal communication, as they would require the direct engagement of employees (Kuoppakangas et al. 2020). Therefore, the presence of positive organizational practices can potentially reduce such tensions and, to a certain extent, indicate that employees' daily behaviours are consistent with PSM. Prior research highlights that a supportive internal environment plays an important role in determining the success of internal brand management in the public sector (Eid et al. 2019). Thus, since PSM tends to be an underlying motivation among many public sector employees, it is reasonable to assume that PSM directly influences employees' opinions about internal communication and organizational practices, as well as indirectly impacts their perceptions of the organization's brand. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H6. Public service motivation has positive effects on (a) value congruence in internal communication and (b) positive organizational practices.

Conceptual model

From the previous discussion, it can be concluded that the employees' perceptions of the organization's brand are likely to be influenced by their opinions about the congruence between official values communicated via the Intranet and other internal communication channels, as well as the values demonstrated in everyday organizational practices. Furthermore, the value congruence in internal communication and positive organizational practices are likely to be founded on an underlying PSM. As follows from these arguments, our conceptual model includes employees' brand perceptions, value congruence in internal communication, positive organizational practices, and PSM. Figure 1 illustrates the hypothesized effects between the contextual and organizational factors, which influence how employees perceive their organization's brand in the public sector.

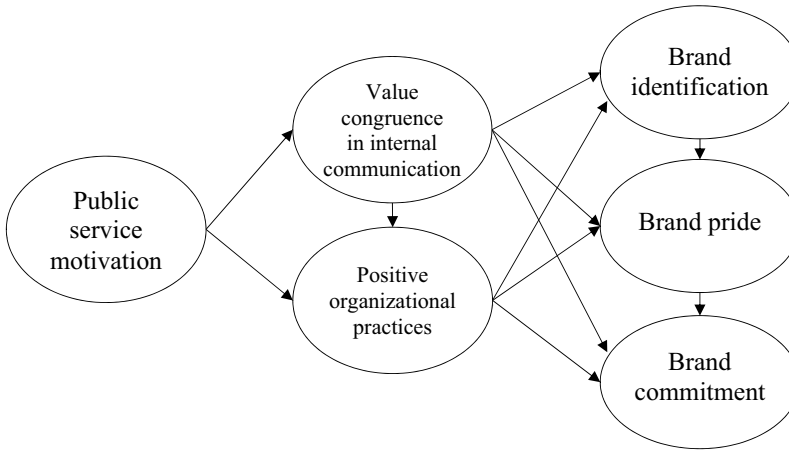

Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Methodology

The public sector organization central to this study operates in the healthcare sector of a county council in Northern Sweden. In addition to healthcare services, the county council is responsible for services such as transportation, culture, tourism, and other relevant public services in the region. Like many other public sector organizations in the settings of healthcare (Sataøen and Wæraas 2015) and local government (Wæraas, Bjørnå, and Moldenæs 2015), the Swedish county councils are continuously increasing their branding efforts and working more proactively on building strong organizational brands. Our data collection took place in a healthcare organization, where internal branding efforts were becoming more apparent to internal stakeholders. For example, the internal brand management included the communication of brand values through the Intranet and other organizational communication channels (e.g. meetings and workshops), and the evaluation of brand value recall and other outcomes by conducting regular employee surveys. Thus, past and ongoing internal branding efforts make the healthcare organization a relevant context for assessing how employees perceive their organizational brand.

Before the data collection, the online survey was pre-tested by an expert group consisting of an academic with expertise in marketing research and a practitioner from the healthcare organization. The survey invitation included a clarification for potential respondents that the target audience was employees within operative departments. Data was collected by distributing the survey to department heads who forwarded it to personnel within their units. In addition, an invitation to participate in a study was posted on four Facebook groups with closed privacy settings, which engaged employees in various operative departments within the organization. Subsequently, a request to complete the survey was posted on the Intranet of the organization. In total, 284 respondents answered the survey. After removing responses with high levels of missing data exceeding 20% (Hair et al. 2006), 211 valid responses remained for testing our hypotheses. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample demographics correspond to national figures on health care personnel, for example, in that 79.8% of healthcare employees in Swedish county councils/regions are women (SKL 2018).

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Demographic characteristic	Category	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Gender	Women	170	80.6%
	Men	41	19.4%
Age	Younger than 30 years old	36	17.1%
	30–39 years old	54	25.6%
	40–49 years old	39	18.5%
	50–59 years old	60	28.4%
	60 years old and older	22	10.4%
Work experience at the organization	Less than 1 year	14	6.6%
	1–4 years	43	20.4%
	5–10 years	44	20.9%
	More than 10 years	110	52.1%
Role	Manager	7	3.3%
	Employee	204	96.7%
Frequency of contact with patients during a week	Often	170	80.6%
	Sometimes	27	12.8%
	Very rarely	6	2.8%
	Never	8	3.8%

The measurement scales for all constructs were adapted from previous studies. The variables that influence employees' perceptions of the organizational brand included PSM (Wright, Christensen, and Pandey 2013), value congruence (Celsi and Gilly 2010), and positive organizational practices (Cameron et al. 2011). The variables that capture employees' brand perceptions were brand identification (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016), brand pride (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016), and brand commitment (King and Grace 2010). For each construct, the items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale with the following anchors: 1 – strongly disagree, and 5 – strongly agree. Appendix 1 presents the items for each construct.

Analysis and results

The data was analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 24 and Amos 24. To assess the nonresponse error, we followed the procedure that compares the early and later respondents (Collier and Bienstock 2007). To conduct the test, we divided the sample into two groups, which consisted of early respondents (n = 106) and late respondents (n = 105). The results of the independent samples t-test did not indicate any significant differences between the groups of early and late respondents across all independent and dependent variables. Therefore, the findings confirmed an assumption about the lack of nonresponse error. In addition, we compared the three groups of respondents who had provided their responses by following a link forwarded by a department head (n = 42), distributed through a Facebook group (n = 83), and posted on the Intranet (n = 86). The results of ANOVA did not identify any significant differences between these three groups of respondents.

We assessed the common method bias by using Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The exploratory factor analysis based on the principal components' method did not extract a single predominant factor. A subsequent analysis,

where a fixed number of factors were restricted to one factor, resulted in a solution that could explain only 39.88% of the total variance. The restriction of the extracted number of factors to six factors resulted in a solution explaining 76.13% of the total variance. The identified factors matched the independent and dependent variables included in the conceptual model. The results of Harman's single-factor test demonstrated the lack of common method bias. Following propositions from the literature on structural equation modelling (Hair et al. 2006; Streiner 2006; Byrne 2005), we used a theory-driven approach and conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the hypothesized structure between scale items and underlying constructs. By applying a two-step approach to structural equation modelling (Anderson and Gerbing 1988), we performed the confirmatory factor analysis by testing the measurement model and afterwards tested the hypothesized structural model. The standardized loadings, average variance extracted, and construct reliability showed that all variables included in the measurement model had acceptable levels of reliability and validity (see Table 2).

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for all variables. For each variable, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the squared correlations between each respective variable and other variables included in the conceptual model. These results indicated acceptable levels of discriminant validity for all variables (Hair et al. 2006).

Table 2. Measurement model: standardized loadings and fit indices.

Constructs	Scale items	Standardized loadings*
Brand identification	BI1.	0.69
(α = 0.90; AVE = 0.65; CR = 0.90)	BI2.	0.78
	BI3.	0.90
	BI4.	0.74
	BI5.	0.89
Brand pride	BP1.	0.84
(α = 0.91; AVE = 0.69; CR = 0.92)	BP2.	0.79
	BP3.	0.73
	BP4.	0.88
	BP5.	0.89
Brand commitment	BC1.	0.78
(α = 0.77; AVE = 0.47; CR = 0.78)	BC2.	0.68
	BC3.	0.70
	BC4.	0.57
Value congruence	VC1.	0.85
(α = 0.91; AVE = 0.77; CR = 0.91)	VC2.	0.88
	VC3.	0.90
Positive organizational practices	POP1.	0.91
(α = 0.94; AVE = 0.72; CR = 0.94)	POP2.	0.91
	POP3.	0.94
	POP4.	0.58
	POP5.	0.89
	POP6.	0.81
Public service motivation	PSM1.	0.68
(α = 0.75; AVE = 0.65; CR = 0.79)	PSM2.	0.92

Fit indices: $\chi 2 = 627.99$, df = 260, χ 2/df = 2.42, RMSEA = 0.08, GFI = 0.82, CFI = 0.91, IFI = 0.91.
*$p < 0.01$; α – Cronbach's alpha; AVE – average variance extracted; CR – construct reliability.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Constructs	Mean (SD)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Public service motivation	4.66 (0.56)	(0.65)	0.08	0.10	0.04	0.05	0.09
(2) Value congruence	3.24 (0.89)	0.28*	(0.77)	0.12	0.15	0.35	0.37
(3) Positive organizational practices	3.93 (0.88)	0.32*	0.35*	(0.72)	0.08	0.20	0.15
(4) Brand identification	2.21 (0.97)	0.21*	0.39*	0.28*	(0.65)	0.36	0.23
(5) Brand pride	2.86 (0.95)	0.22*	0.59*	0.45*	0.60*	(0.69)	0.45
(6) Brand commitment	3.74 (0.78)	0.30*	0.61*	0.39*	0.48*	0.67*	(0.47)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).
Values on the diagonal – AVE (average variance extracted); values below the diagonal – correlations; values above the diagonal – squared correlations.

Table 4. Structural model: standardized loadings and fit indices.

Constructs	Scale items	Standardized loadings*
Brand identification	BI1.	0.69
(α = 0.90; AVE = 0.65; CR = 0.90)	BI2.	0.78
	BI3.	0.90
	BI4.	0.74
	BI5.	0.89
Brand pride	BP1.	0.84
(α = 0.91; AVE = 0.69; CR = 0.92)	BP2.	0.79
	BP3.	0.73
	BP4.	0.88
	BP5.	0.89
Brand commitment	BC1.	0.78
(α = 0.77; AVE = 0.48; CR = 0.78)	BC2.	0.69
	BC3.	0.70
	BC4.	0.57
Value congruence	VC1.	0.85
(α = 0.91; AVE = 0.76; CR = 0.91)	VC2.	0.87
	VC3.	0.90
Positive organizational practices	POP1.	0.91
(α = 0.94; AVE = 0.72; CR = 0.94)	POP2.	0.91
	POP3.	0.94
	POP4.	0.58
	POP5.	0.89
	POP6.	0.81
Public service motivation	PSM1.	0.71
(α = 0.75; AVE = 0.65; CR = 0.78)	PSM2.	0.89

Fit indices: $\chi 2 = 633.77$, df = 264, χ 2/df = 2.40, RMSEA = 0.08, GFI = 0.82, CFI = 0.91, IFI = 0.91.
*$p < 0.01$; α – Cronbach's alpha; AVE – average variance extracted; CR – construct reliability.

Table 4 presents the results of testing the structural model. Consistent with the results of testing the measurement model, the variables included in the structural model had acceptable levels of reliability and validity. The fit indices indicated a good fit between the tested structural model and the data (Hair et al. 2006).

Table 5 shows the structural model estimates. The findings demonstrated significant positive effects of brand identification on brand pride ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). Brand pride

Table 5. Structural model estimates.

Hypothesized effects	Standardized estimates	Conclusion
H1: Brand identification – › Brand pride	0.42 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H2: Brand pride – › Brand commitment	0.53 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H3a: Value congruence – › Brand identification	0.35 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H3b: Value congruence – › Brand pride	0.38 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H3c: Value congruence – › Brand commitment	0.39 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H4: Value congruence – › Positive organizational practices	0.26 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H5a: Positive organizational practices – › Brand identification	0.17 ($p < 0.05$)	Supported
H5b: Positive organizational practices – › Brand pride	0.23 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H5c: Positive organizational practices – › Brand commitment	0.02 ($p = 0.81$)	No support
H6a: Public service motivation – › Value congruence	0.32 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported
H6b: Public service motivation – › Positive organizational practices	0.26 ($p < 0.01$)	Supported

had a significant positive effect on brand commitment ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$). These findings supported hypotheses H1 and H2. Value congruence in internal communication had significant positive effects on brand identification ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), brand pride ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$), and brand commitment ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). These results supported hypotheses H3a, H3b, and H3c. Confirming hypothesis H4, value congruence in internal communication had a significant positive effect on positive organizational practices ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$). Positive organizational practices had significant positive effects on brand identification ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$) and brand pride ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), which confirmed hypotheses H5a and H5b. The effect of positive organizational practices on brand commitment was not significant ($\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.81$). Therefore, hypothesis H5c was not confirmed. The findings demonstrated a significant positive effect of PSM on value congruence in internal communication ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$) and positive organizational practices ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$), which supported hypotheses H6a and H6b. Overall, the study confirmed the direct positive impact of PSM on value congruence in internal communication and positive organizational practices, and the indirect positive effects on brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. Value congruence in internal communication had stronger positive effects on employees' brand perceptions than positive organizational practices. In addition, the presence of positive effects between brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment indicated their strong mutual influences.

Discussion

The findings reported in this study provide evidence of the important role of value congruence in internal communication, positive organizational practices, and PSM for internal brand management. As hypothesized, this study demonstrates the presence of positive effects between brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. The study shows that to ensure brand commitment, it may be necessary to increase a sense of brand identification and brand pride among employees. Indeed, as the study confirms hypotheses H1 and H2, we contend that it is likely to be spillover effects between employees' brand perceptions. The support to uphold H1 and H2 is especially interesting from a brand pride perspective, as a sense of pride among employees may be related to their profession, which may then transfer into a sense of pride for the organization (Trybou et al. 2014). Thus, brand pride should be regarded as an important outcome of internal branding efforts and we recommend it to be included

in conceptual models that focus on the desired outcomes of internal brand management in public sector organizations.

The support for hypotheses H3a, H3b, and H3c demonstrates the importance of value congruence in internal brand communication. As shown in prior research, internal communication has a central role in supporting cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to internal branding efforts (Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007; de Chernatony, Cottam, and Segal-Horn 2006). This study confirms such findings, as value congruent communication had a significant positive impact on our respondents' brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. Thus, value congruence in internal communication serves as a foundation for employees to develop affective responses to the organizational brand. The findings also show a positive significant effect of value congruence on positive organizational practices, which supports hypothesis H4. Therefore, value congruence in internal communication facilitates behaviours that are positive for employees' relationships with the organizational brand.

The confirmation of hypotheses H5a and H5b indicates that positive organizational practices have a strong positive impact on brand identification and brand pride. Thus, when employees perceive behaviours within the organization to be supportive and positive, they increase their identification with the organization's brand and a sense of pride. While positive organizational practices did not have a significant direct effect on brand commitment, they had indirect effects through brand identification and brand pride as mediators. Thus, it can be argued that positive organizational factors affect employees' sense of belonging (Piehler et al. 2016; Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Burmann and Zeplin 2005) and a sense of pleasure of being part of the organization and its brand (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016). However, positive organizational practices may not directly translate to a psychological attachment to the brand (King and Grace 2012; Burmann and Zeplin 2005). A possible explanation as to why there is no support for hypothesis H5c is that positive organizational practices appear to be more closely related to supporting a sense of belonging to a group and the pleasure of being associated with the brand. Therefore, how employees treat each other at the workplace may support their capacities to identify with and develop a sense of pride towards the organization. In turn, this factor may indirectly support brand commitment, with brand identification and brand pride as mediators.

With regard to PSM, the study demonstrates support to uphold hypotheses H6a and H6b. These findings suggest that PSM is a core factor affecting behaviours within the organization and how employees perceive the fit between their values and official organizational values. These findings draw attention to the need to consider PSM as a core influence when planning and implementing internal branding efforts in the public sector. Thus, as PSM is considered 'a distinctive feature of employees in public administration' (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015, 692), it also seems to be a critical factor influencing desired outcomes. Not considering PSM would risk alienating the branding efforts from the motivational forces of employees, making it more difficult to achieve the desired outcomes. This argument is strengthened by our findings pointing towards the need for internal communication to emphasize brand values that employees perceive as desirable. Thus, ensuring employee-brand value alignment (Piehler et al. 2016; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005) is not primarily an issue of communicating the brand values to employees, but it also enables the communicated values to be aligned with employees' values and perceptions. Such alignment is imperative from an internal branding

perspective (Piehler et al. 2016; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). Indeed, it may prevent some of the risks associated with employees becoming brand saboteurs (Wallace and de Chernatony 2009, 2008, 2007) or failing to 'live the brand' (Baumgarth and Melewar 2010; Maxwell and Knox 2009; Gotsi and Wilson 2001). Public sector organizations may thus have an opportunity to enhance value alignment by emphasizing their societal role in communication. In short, values to do good for society and others (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015) resonate well with employees' PSM.

To summarize, this study demonstrates that organizations should incorporate efforts to support value congruence in internal communication and organizational practices as a part of internal brand management. Prior research supports the findings regarding the importance of value congruence for employees' brand perceptions (de Chernatony, Drury, and Segal-Horn 2003) and also suggests that achieving such congruence can be a major challenge for internal brand management (Burmann, Zeplin, and Riley 2009). This study confirms these assumptions, but it also points to a unique opportunity for public sector organizations to build strong organizational brands by considering employees' PSM.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of value congruence in internal communication and positive organizational practices on employees' brand perceptions. This study does not only confirm the important role of internal communication in achieving desired outcomes of internal branding (Sharma and Kamalanabhan 2012; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007), but also highlights its influence on employees' actual behaviours. As such, this study shows that effective value-congruent communication within the organization can facilitate positive and supportive employee behaviours. The findings also suggest that public sector organizations can support such value alignment and behaviours by stressing their societal role in internal and external communication. This study proposes a distinct aspect of public sector branding where the role of the sector needs to be integrated into organizational brand concerns.

The study also indicates that employees' brand perceptions do not solely consist of brand identification and brand commitment, as much of the extant literature suggests, but also brand pride, which mediates the effects between brand identification and brand commitment. While the concept of brand pride has only recently emerged in research on internal brand management (Helm, Renk, and Mishra 2016), this study proposes that it can be regarded as one of the central variables capturing employees' perceptions of their organizational brand.

From the perspective of public sector branding, this study demonstrates that PSM should be considered as a fundamental factor influencing outcomes of internal brand management. As an underlying motivation among employees, PSM affects not only perceived value congruence but also positive behaviours within public sector organizations. As such, public sector organizations may need to consider this motivation during the development and management of their organizational brands. Indeed, the specific role of PSM warrants public sector organizations to incorporate it into their internal brand management. Furthermore, PSM should be considered in recruitment situations as a means to foster brand relationships with current and potential employees. This study concurs with prior research that proposes that the brand-employee value alignment is central in recruitment situations (Chang et al. 2012; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007).

However, this study also shows that PSM may serve as a facilitator to such alignment and positively influence affective relationships between employees and the organizational brand. Aligning the brand values with employees' PSM is, therefore, an opportunity for public sector organizations to not only support internal value alignment and positive behaviours, but also to achieve the desired outcomes of internal branding.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study answers the calls for further research on employees' brand perceptions and their responses to organizational branding efforts (Piehler, Grace, and Burmann 2018; Piehler et al. 2016). We determined that value congruence in internal communication and organizational practices influence employees' perceptions of their organization's brand. This study, therefore, advances extant knowledge by demonstrating the important role of value-congruent communication in supporting such developments. From a managerial perspective, the empirical evidence reported in this study demonstrates that employees do not gain the brand meaning solely from communication but also from experiences within the organization. Consistent with prior research (Dean et al. 2016), the findings highlight that ensuring positive experiences will facilitate employees' relationships with the organizational brand. While efforts to ensure such experiences will positively influence behaviours within the organization, they are also central in supporting how employees perceive the organization's brand. Thus, employees' brand perceptions do not merely result from organizational-managed efforts, but they are also a consequence of employees' behaviours in the form of positive organizational practices.

This study advances the branding literature by further highlighting the role of brand pride in internal brand management. Empirical evidence suggests that brand pride is an important mediator between brand identification and brand commitment. From a managerial perspective, this finding is important as a sense of pride among employees can strengthen a psychological attachment to the brand. Managers should, therefore, take care to facilitate a sense of pride among employees that originates from behaviours within the organization and value alignment in internal communication. The behaviours that employees and managers demonstrate in the workplace, therefore, have an important role in internal brand management.

One of the main theoretical contributions of this study is to the literature on public sector branding. Considering the limited evidence provided by previous studies on public sector branding (Leijerholt, Biedenbach, and Hultén 2019), this study advances the current state of research by demonstrating how a value-driven perspective can be applied for investigating branding phenomena in the public sector. Building on prior research on PSM (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015; Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010; Perry and Hondeghem 2008b), the current study confirms that PSM plays a critical role by acting as an underlying motivation of public sector employees. The study advances the ongoing debate about the role of PSM by exploring the role of PSM in shaping employees' opinions about internal communication and organizational practices, as well as their perceptions about their organizational brands. These findings provide valuable insights into critical factors, which should not be ignored or underestimated by practitioners and politicians aiming to build successful public sector brands.

Another important theoretical contribution of this study is to the research stream on internal branding in the public sector. More specifically, the study suggests that research focusing on internal brand management in the public sector should incorporate PSM in

conceptual models as an underlying construct. As shown, PSM affects both value congruence and practices within public sector organizations. Aligning brand values with employees' motivations may therefore be an effective way to support internal branding. The study contributes to the research and practitioner community in the public sector by proposing and testing a conceptual model that integrates contextual and organizational factors impacting outcomes of internal branding efforts. This model can serve as a valuable foundation for effective internal brand management, because it does not only consider peculiarities of the public sector, but also relates organizational efforts devoted to creating a strong organizational brand to employees' responses. From a managerial perspective, the study indicates that practitioners in charge of public sector brands should consider a value-driven perspective and the motivation of employees. This is important, because commercial values derived from corporate branding in the private sector may be viewed with certain scepticism and be contradictory to core values of the public sector.

Limitations and future research

A limitation of this study is that it focuses only on three variables that capture employees' brand perceptions, which are brand identification, brand pride, and brand commitment. The effects between these variables, which were confirmed in this study, need further investigation in the public sector. Future research can explore alternative variables related to employees' affective responses and also test their possible effects on cognitive and behavioural responses to an organizational brand. Furthermore, while characterized by a limited amount of empirical evidence, brand pride represents an interesting variable for future research on internal brand management.

In general, organizational and contextual factors specific to the public sector remain under-investigated in the research on internal branding. This study demonstrates the critical relevance of one such factor, namely PSM, but other factors may also warrant further examination. Moreover, longitudinal studies exploring employees' brand perceptions and other outcomes of internal branding in public sector organizations would provide important insights about the effectiveness of applied strategies and actions. Longitudinal studies would also enable assessment of the long-term impact of internal branding efforts on internal and external stakeholders. A critical perspective on internal branding represents another interesting avenue for exploring the conditions for and consequences of public sector branding.

With regard to the empirical context, this study is limited to the healthcare sector and an organization operated by a Swedish county council. Future studies are encouraged to develop the proposed conceptual model by considering alternative context-specific factors and testing hypothesized effects in other settings within the public sector, for example, higher education, police, political institutions, and cultural organizations. Since this study was conducted in Sweden, future research can test the proposed conceptual model in other countries and consider conducting cross-cultural examinations to further advance the current state of research on internal brand management in the public sector.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1. Constructs and scale items

Constructs	Scale items*
Brand identification	BI1. Successes of XX feel like my successes.
	BI2. When someone criticizes XX, it feels like a personal insult.
	BI3. When someone praises XX, it feels like a personal compliment.
	BI4. When XX is criticized in the news media, it hurts me personally.
	BI5. When XX is praised in the news media, it feels like a personal compliment.
Brand pride	BP1. I feel proud when others notice that I work for XX.
	BP2. I am proud of what XX stands for.
	BP3. I am proud of how XX is perceived by the public.
	BP4. When I tell others what XX stands for, I do it with a sense of pride.
	BP5. I am proud to be a part of XX.
Brand commitment	BC1. I really care about the fate of XX.
	BC2. I have similar values as XX.
	BC3. I am willing to put in extra effort beyond what is expected for XX to be successful.
	BC4. I really fit to work for XX.
Value congruence	VC1. I am proud of the values of XX, which are expressed on the Intranet.
	VC2. The values, which XX emphasize on the Intranet, are the values that should be highlighted.
	VC3. The values of XX, which are communicated on the Intranet, are similar to my own values.
Positive organizational practices	POP1. We treat each other with respect.
	POP2. We provide emotional support to each other.
	POP3. We really care about each other.
	POP4. We feel that our job is really meaningful.
	POP5. We inspire each other at work.
	POP6. We forgive each other's mistakes.
Public service motivation	PSM1. The opportunity to help others is important for me in my job.
	PSM2. The opportunity to contribute to society is important for me in my job.

*Scale: 1-strongly disagree … 5-strongly agree.