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People and person factors in building brand admiration and leadership for African brands

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Purpose: Brand leadership studies focus on validating their four dimensions of brand innovativeness, value, popularity and quality but neglect their predictors. This study was based on three theories and integrated ideas from three models, examining people and person factors that influence brand admiration and leadership through employee-customer-oriented behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach: The study hypothesises that person and people factors affect brand leadership dimensions through employee-customer-oriented behaviour and brand admiration. Quantitative methods were employed to collect data from 312 employees, including managers of two leading African brands. The hypotheses were examined with partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Findings/results: The findings showed that four of the people factors and all two person factors significantly affected customer-oriented behaviour. In addition, brand admiration had a significant effect on all four brand leadership dimensions.

Practical implications: African brands striving to be leaders can use our findings to understand that brand admiration and leadership do not only come from customers' positive response to brands but also from the top person's leadership style and internal brand management strategies around people.

Originality/value: The study is based on theories and perspectives from brand management, human resources management, internal brand management and leadership to provide an interdisciplinary explanation of four brand leadership dimensions, whose explanation is not only sparse in the literature but also for leading brands in Africa.

Keywords: brand leadership; brand admiration; transactional leadership; transformational leadership; customer-oriented behaviour; people and person factors.

Introduction

Brand leadership is defined as a brand's relative distinctiveness and its ability to continually achieve excellence through a combination of brand positioning and trendsetting within the industry (Chang & Ko, 2014). Chang and Ko (2014) and Aaker (2025) assert that a leading brand is more superior in its brand category, relatively satisfies its stakeholders with high financial value more than costs, shows more flexibility to solutions and new ideas, and is relatively popular in terms of brand knowledge, preferences and purchases. Thus, Chang and Ko (2014) categorise brand leadership into four dimensions: brand innovativeness, quality, popularity and value. In terms of brand value, the Apple brand was the 2024 number 1 brand leader, with a value of $517 billion, followed by Microsoft ($340.2bn) (Brand Finance, 2024a). The brand Tesla was the 2024 brand leader considering its technological innovations valued at $58.3bn, despite declining (Brand Finance, 2024a). Although, in 2024, Apple was the number 1 most valued brand regarding its financial brand value, it was not number 1 in terms of brand strength. Deutsche Telekom was ranked number 1 with regard to brand strength, with a brand strength index of 83/100 (Brand Finance, 2024a). Whilst finance people may be happy with the brand value, brand strength is what motivates employees, thereby building customers' brand preference, loyalty, equity and brand sustainability (Ray & Sharma, 2021).

Haigh (2021) and Ertz et al. (2024) also suggest that brand strength behind brand leadership emanates from how all stakeholders appreciate a brand. Stakeholders include employees (people), person (leaders) and customers. Brand Finance (2021) identifies persons behind a brand as brand guardianship. The 2021 Brand Guardianship Index (BGI) exhibited that the top six global brand guardians are Ajay Banga of MasterCard (72.2), Jensen Huang of Nvidia (72.1), Reed Hastings of

Netflix (69.6), Yong Zhang of Alibaba (69.2), and Rajesh Gopinathan of Tata Consultancy Services (68.9). In 2024, Huateng Ma of Tencent in the WeChat media sector was ranked number 1, with a BGI of 81.6, followed by Mukesh Ambani, with a BGI of 80.3, and then Jensen Huang, with a BGI of 79.9 (Brand Finance, 2024b). These leaders have put their brands amongst the top 500 global brand leaders, with attributes such as commitment to technological innovations. For example, Ajay Banga is known for his reputation, whilst Julie Spellman of Accenture and Joanne Crevoiserat of Tapestry are noted for fame and familiarity. Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Tim Cook (Apple) and Elon Musk (Tesla) are also regarded as personal brand leaders in technological innovations (Haigh, 2021).

Similarly, African brands are ranked by their brand value and strength. However, most African brands gain brand leadership through brand admiration. For example, Dangote and DSTV, the two brands from which data were collected for this study, ranked amongst the top two of the five most admired African brands in 2024. MTN, Ethiopian Airlines and Glo also place in the top five admired African brands. Admiration comes from consumers' and employees' perceptions of brand values, offerings, people behind brands and persons (e.g. CEOs) (Kibuacha, 2024; Oluwole, 2021). Regarding persons behind a brand, the brand equity of the CEO assessed from his or her salient awareness, a favourable, strong and unique image, internationalisation of his/her brand values, and the creation of a competitive advantage can greatly shape the perception of stakeholders with respect to the organisation's brand. This can strengthen the brand and contribute to brand performance and value. CEOs, who lead organisations, hold accountability for employee attitudes, brand-building behaviour and success of the brand (Minbashrazgah, Garbollagh & Varmaghani, 2021).

To retain employees, build brand-citizenship and brand-building behaviours, attract brand participation and gain resultant employee-based brand equity (EBBE), Minbashrazgah et al. (2021) assert that brand-specific transformative and transactional leadership styles are required. Brand-specific transformative leadership fosters employees' morale and instils brand ideology, resulting in positive changes in employees' brand attitudes. Brand-specific transactional leadership (BSTL) represents a social contract and/or exchange, catering to the needs of employees to garner their brand-building participation (Zhao et al., 2025). In terms of people factors, brand communication to employees, brand role clarity, brand knowledge, brand belief and commitment can lead to brand-citizenship behaviour, brand admiration and leadership (Duh & Wara, 2024). The expertise and attractiveness of people behind a brand can lead to positive brand attitude and brand admiration, which form brand trust, love and respect. Brand admiration can, in turn, result in brand popularity, success and leadership (Duh & Wara, 2024; Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

Regardless of the forces behind brand leadership development and the benefits thereof, studies on the concept mainly focus on scale development and testing of its dimensions in various contexts (Chang & Ko, 2014; Chiu & Cho, 2021). Although few studies have explored the antecedents of brand leadership, scholars increasingly argue that brand strength and leadership play a critical role in ensuring brand sustainability and supporting global branding. Thus, Ray and Sharma (2021) recommend the development of frameworks that integrate models and theoretical ideas from various disciplines. The integrated model, they contend, would highlight varied factors behind the strength and leadership of a brand. The leadership and administrative styles and internal brand management in the human resources field influence employee-customer-oriented behaviours (ECOB) and organisational citizenship behaviours (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Zhao et al., 2025). For example, Zhao et al. (2025) demonstrate that in terms of leadership styles, both transformational and transactional types of leadership directly impact ECOB. According to Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos' (2014) proposition, employee brand knowledge (EBK), brand fit, brand belief, and the overall perceived organisational identification and support are some crucial factors that contribute to ECOB before achieving brand equity and resultant brand leadership. Capturing this series of effects in brand leadership development requires the integration of models from various HR and leadership disciplines.

Thus, based on social identity and brand-specific leadership theories and integrated models of Shaari et al. (2015a), Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014), and Chang and Ko (2014) for person, people, and the four dimensions of brand leadership, respectively, this study explores people and person factors influencing brand leadership through ECOB and brand admiration. Specifically, the study aims at achieving the following objectives:

- To examine the extent to which person factors affect employee-customer-oriented behaviour.
- To assess the impact of people factors on employee-customer-oriented behaviour.
- To determine the impact of employee-customer-oriented behaviour on brand admiration.
- To test the relationship between brand admiration and the four dimensions of brand leadership.

Literature review

Hypothesis development

Building a comprehensive understanding of brand leadership requires insights from multiple theoretical perspectives. This review first discusses social identity theory (SIT) and then brand-specific leadership theory, which frame the roles of identity appraisal and leadership in moulding ECOBs. It considers person-related and people-related factors using two established models and the Chang and Ko (2014) brand leadership model, which helps develop an integrated model to generate hypotheses.

The social identity theory and Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos's (2014) model to explain employee-customer-oriented behaviour and brand admiration from people factors

Social identity theory, derived from the social psychology discipline, states that individuals' sense of self or appreciation of self emanates from their social or work group membership (Khalid & Hadi, 2021) or from their leaders (Van Knippenberg, 2023). For example, worker satisfactory identification with an organisation pushes them to work and fulfil organisational goals (Khalid & Hadi, 2021). In terms of SIT in leadership, when the leader adapts the admired values, norms and expectations of a group, group members positively respond to the leader's demands and can therefore work with the leader to live up to expectations of the group (Van Knippenberg, 2023). In regard to employee brand behaviour, Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) report that social identity in the form of feelings of community belongingness can positively predict employer-branding outcomes.

Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) and Khalid and Hadi (2021) further confirm the effects of internal marketing and branding practices on EBK, brand belief, brand identification, brand loyalty, trust and general brand-supporting behaviour. Internal branding causes employees to identify with the brand. This, in turn, causes them to happily interact with customers, to create and maintain a consistent brand image and to develop ECOB. Such behaviour is highly motivated by the strength of bonds that exist amongst employees, the shared identity and the relationships built with their customers (Kim & Jang, 2023). According to social exchange theory, ECOB increases further if employees receive organisational support.

Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos's model (2014) is based on the social exchange and identity theories. The model suggests that people (i.e. employees) factors such as EBK, employee brand fit (EBF), employee brand belief (EBB), perceived organisational support (POS), employee brand-congruent behaviour and organisational identification can affect ECOB and resultant brand-building outcomes and customer effects. This study explores all these people factors and proposes that they will impact ECOB to drive brand admiration.

Employee brand fit and employee-customer-oriented behaviour

Employee brand fit is 'the perceived congruence between the brand values and the employee's own personal values' (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). According to the social identity and brand-specific theories, when the brand values align with the values of employees, the brand benefits from a good ECOB. Employee or brand identification causes employees to passionately serve customers. This employee behaviour plays an important role in shaping customers' perceptions of a brand. Ammar et al. (2021) found that employee behaviour affects perceptions of brands in the tourism and hospitality industry. The key factors responsible for gaining a competitive advantage in the service industry are employees' interaction with customers, their display of customer-oriented behaviour, and their ability to build trust and establish a strong brand–customer relationship (Dorta-Afonso & Cantero-Garcia, 2020). Driven by brand training and brand reward, in the telecommunications sector, EBF positively influences ECOB (Abdghani et al., 2022). One of the customer-oriented behaviours from EBF is an employee providing brand knowledge to customers for brand decisions (Moorman et al., 2024). Thus:

> **H1:** Employee brand fit will positively impact employee-customer-oriented behaviour.

Employee brand knowledge, brand belief and employee-customer-oriented behaviour

Employee brand knowledge is 'all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information, as well as the personal meaning about a brand retained in employees' memory' (Liu, 2022, p. 3). Employees with a deep understanding of their brand have the likelihood of demonstrating customer-oriented behaviour (Yurtseven & Şandir, 2018), because the wealth of knowledge about the brand amongst employees is similar to human capital guiding customers to make brand purchases (Moorman et al., 2024). Employee brand knowledge better equips employees to offer accurate brand information and brand offerings. Employee brand knowledge also enables them to effectively address customer inquiries and concerns and create positive experiences for customers (Abdelmoteleb et al., 2017; Liu, 2022). This, in turn, results in high customer satisfaction, loyalty and positive-word-of-mouth recommendations (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014).

Employee brand knowledge, comprising employees' appreciation of brand awareness and image (Liu, 2022), also contributes to the construction of the brand itself (Yurtseven & Şandir, 2018). With a strong understanding of their brand's 'identity, values and message, employees can effectively align their brand behaviour with the brand image (González-González et al., 2022). This alignment fosters brand identity and further strengthens brand reputation in customers' eyes (Fortunisa et al., 2021). By consistently representing the brand in a customer-oriented manner, employees contribute to building trust and credibility with customers (Bairrada et al., 2021). This ultimately leads to enhanced customer relationships, increased brand awareness and improved organisational performance (Retamosa et al., 2020). Generally, the behaviour of employees and their perception and appreciation of the organisation's brand significantly influence customer decisions (González-González et al., 2022).

Employee brand belief is based on an employee's perception of the brand's value for customers' recommendations (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014), which is also followed by the 'employees' internal evaluation of the value and importance of the brand to customers and organisational success (Xiong & King, 2020, p. 573). Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) and King and Grace (2010) emphasise the pivotal role that brand belief and trust amongst employees play in

building and maintaining strong brands. When employees have a good perception of a brand, and they believe in its ability to satisfy their customers, they develop customer-oriented behaviour and resultant outcomes such as purchase intentions, customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth around the brand (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Employee brand belief also leads to employee confidence in delivering on what the brand promises to customers and enables brand-aligned performances (Xiong & King, 2020):

H2: Employee brand knowledge will positively impact ECOB.

H3: Brand belief amongst employees will positively influence ECOB.

Organisational identification and employee-customer-oriented behaviour

Organisational identification is a relational process and psychological alignment with an organisation for being a growing and successful entity to a point that the interest, goals and success of the organisation internally motivate and psychologically empower employees (Barattucci et al., 2025). In line with SIT, an employee emotionally connected to an organisation has a better likelihood of understanding the business direction, believing in and supporting the organisation. An employee can also perform as required to help the organisation build its brands and succeed (Barattucci et al., 2025; Duh & Wara, 2024; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Employees strongly identifying with their organisation likely exhibit behaviours that prioritise and cater to customer needs and satisfaction (Zhang, 2016). These behaviours go beyond the scope of their job description and contribute to the overall effectiveness and success of the organisation. Organisational identification and social identity play a pivotal role in shaping ECOBs in line with the organisation's brand and values (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Xie et al., 2024). Employees' brand love, loyalty and positive word-of-mouth can be influenced by their sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is fostered by organisational identification coupled with a strong identification with the organisation's brand community (Zhang, 2016) and may eventually lead to customer-oriented behaviour (Duh & Wara 2024):

H4: The organisational identification will positively impact ECOB.

Brand-congruent behaviour and employee-customer-oriented behaviour

Employees often expect organisational brand characteristics and values to be congruent and consistent, which may enhance their self-concepts for emotional brand connection (Changani & Kumar, 2024; Gulati et al., 2023). Employee or corporate brand congruence drives brand identification and commitment, both of which motivate ECOB (Gulati et al., 2023; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). As a brand becomes congruent with employees' ideal and actual self, brand identification increases. Gulati et al. (2023) and Ngo et al. (2020) show that these factors lead to ECOB. In line with customers, whose customer–brand congruence generates behavioural and relational brand outcomes (Wijnands & Gill, 2020), employee–brand congruence can also result in behavioural outcomes (e.g. orientation to serve and satisfy customers) and relational outcomes (e.g. brand commitment) (Gulati et al., 2023):

H5: Employee–brand congruency behaviour will positively impact ECOB.

Perceived organisational support and employee-customer-oriented behaviour

Perceived organisational support refers to the degree to which employees feel that their organisation values their contributions and is concerned about their wellbeing (Aldabbas et al., 2023), particularly in relation to brand-building activities (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). On the basis of social exchange theory, employees pay back what they perceive as supportive treatment from their employers through stronger attachments to the organisation and customer-oriented behaviour (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Considering that POS builds the employee–employer relationship, improves employee wellbeing and encourages employee actions to align with organisational goals (Kurtessis et al., 2017), employees tend to be creative in delivering on the brand's promise to customers. These factors cause employee customer-oriented behaviours (Aldabbas et al., 2023; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Whilst Park and Kim (2024) propose that POS can only impact ECOB by work engagement, the model of Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) suggests that POS directly influences ECOB. Bizri and Hamieh (2020) also show POS directly influences ECOB:

H6: Employees' perceived organisation support will positively impact ECOB.

Brand-specific leadership theory and Shaari et al.'s (2015a) model to explain employee-customer-oriented behaviour from transactional and transformative leadership styles

Building on the notion that employees can become brand champions, Morhart et al. (2009) introduced brand-specific leadership theory, drawing on brand-building and social identity theories. The brand-specific leadership theory suggests that employees can internalise brand values and effectively adopt their brand roles when they receive targeted training and motivation aligned with the brand (Lee et al., 2020). A good brand-specific leader not only motivates employees for employee brand roles but also generates brand admiration from the public, including customers (Sayyadi, 2021). For example, Sharma and Kumra (2025) found that transformational leadership directly influences ECOB. Brand-specific leadership styles, particularly the transformational leadership style, motivating followers to favourably act for the corporate brand, lead to positive brand-related behaviour between employees and customers (Chiang et al., 2020).

Shaari et al.'s (2015a) model posits that both transactional and transformative brand leaderships positively and directly influence brand citizenship behaviour – a driver of ECOB (Chiang et al., 2020). We conceptualised the two leadership styles according to Morhart et al. (2009), one of the seminar authors, to be BSTSL and brand-specific transformational leadership (BSTFL), which Minbashrazgah et al. (2022) report to be both important for brand-building and citizenship behaviours. Brand-specific transformational leadership motivates and appeals to employees' personal values and convictions, supporting and representing the corporate brand. Brand-specific transformational leadership also inspires, aligns leadership towards the core identity of the brand, and provides visions and values (Mao et al., 2024). Brand-specific transactional leadership functions according to social exchanges, whereby employees' needs are met, making them able to perform their roles, become responsible and develop brand citizenship and customer-oriented behaviour (Minbashrazgah et al., 2022). Both styles of leadership are introduced to improve organisational performance. For example, BSTFL stimulates extra-role brand behaviour (BCB), whilst BSTSL mainly generates in-role brand behaviour (Morhart et al., 2009; Minbashrazgah et al., 2022).

Sayyadi (2021) also reports that when both transformational and transactional leadership styles satisfy and attract followers including internal employees and external customer admirers, they positively influence ECOB and brand admiration. Transactional leadership is based on the concept of 'quid pro quo', where employees are appreciated for achieving and completing specific targets or tasks successfully. Transactional leadership can affect ECOB using rewards and incentives (Kasyadi & Virgana, 2022; Nurlina, 2022). However, Morhart et al. (2009) suggest that BSTSL may have negative effects because its exchange nature poses a challenge to employees' need satisfaction. Thus, this may hinder their brand-based role performance and resultant brand citizenship behaviour. Although Minbashrazgah et al. (2022) found that BSTSL positively influenced employee brand-building behaviour for customer satisfaction, they underline that BSTSL needs to specify the required behavioural standards for brand representativeness and to satisfy employees with rewards and incentives when expectations are met. Therefore, when one of these, especially the latter, lacks, a negative impact on ECOB may emerge.

For BSTFL, Jensen et al. (2020) report that a transformational leadership style, in terms of playing the role of an inspirational motivator (i.e. the ability to reinforce team spirit and optimism) and stimulating employee intellectually (i.e. being able to foster creative problem-solving through innovative thinking), provides role modelling and generates respect, trust and admiration. Thus, BSTFL helps brand leaders create an environment of work promoting engagement amongst employees and a strong ECOB (Shaari et al. 2015b; Sim et al., 2025):

H7: Brand-specific transformational leadership will have a positive impact on ECOB.

H8: Brand-specific transactional leadership will have a negative impact on ECOB.

Employee-customer-oriented behaviour and brand admiration

Brand admiration refers to consumer or employee positive emotions towards a brand. Admiration can be characterised by respect, liking and appreciation (Ahmad et al., 2023; Park et al., 2016). It can be deep-seated depending on the brand's perceived quality, value of the brand and general brand performance (Park et al., 2016; Trivedi & Sama, 2020). Admiration can also be generated from the brand's trustworthiness, reliability, likeability, love and respect (Ahmad et al., 2023; Pak et al., 2016). Employee-customer-oriented behaviour includes several dimensions, such as employee knowledge of customer needs, willingness to help, responsiveness and ability to understand and anticipate customer needs (Park & Tran, 2018). This helps fortify brand admiration (Alkandi et al., 2023; Ferdous et al., 2021), particularly as it positively affects how employees perceive the brand. Employee-customer-oriented behaviour not only benefits customers but also has a positive effect on employees themselves (Aslam et al., 2022). When employees believe that their actions make a difference in customer lives, this creates a sense of purpose and job satisfaction (Ali & Anwar, 2021). It consequently generates greater engagements amongst employees and boosts more brand admiration and resultant productivity (Chaudhary, 2019; Dangle & Bagga, 2023; Ramirez-Lozano et al., 2023):

H9: ECOB will positively impact brand admiration.

Brand admiration and brand leadership

With brand admiration reflecting consumer and even employee' high love, respect, regard and a positive and emotional connection with a brand (Park et al., 2016), we questioned how much it will drive brand leadership in terms of brand popularity, value, quality and innovativeness. Given the fact that brand admiration can generate income, cut expenses, facilitate growth, raise the morale of staff and preserve market share, brand admiration should propel brand leadership. This is equally so because brand admiration fosters consumer advocacy and loyalty (Kang, 2019).

Based on the embodiment of brand admiration that includes brand love, respect, regard, and trust, a prediction suggests that its indicators can contribute to durable and sustainable relationships and brand leadership (Aaker, 2012; Park et al., 2016). As a result, employees also admire their brands, which increases their love and engagement with the brand (Park et al., 2016; He et al., 2019) to a degree that pushes them to contribute to brand quality, popularity, innovativeness and brand value. All of these are the four dimensions of brand leadership (Chang & Ko, 2014; Chiu & Cho, 2021):

H10a-d: Brand admiration positively influences a) brand quality, b) brand value, c) brand innovativeness and d) brand popularity dimensions of brand leadership.

The hypotheses are presented in Figure 1.

Methodology

Sample, measurement instrument and data collection methods

Quantitative research methods were appropriate for collecting and analysing data. The target population had males and females aged between 18 and 65+, leading or working with two top admired African brands: DSTV (in the service industry) and Dangote (in the product industry). After obtaining approval from the HR heads at both DSTV and Dangote, the link to an online questionnaire was distributed to the staff and managers of the two companies. We also administered the online questionnaire via researcher' social media spaces, especially on LinkedIn as a form of a reminder to staff who may fail to respond through HR requests. To get only respondents who have worked with or led the two leading brands, we used a screening question.

Lehdonvirta et al. (2021) report that online surveys are generally classified as nonprobability samplings because the likelihood that any individual from the target population will participate is unknown. Online surveys have the benefit of lower cost and faster turnaround time but have a disadvantage of low response rate (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). Using the screening question, we employed a purposive nonprobability sampling method, which, according to Borodovsky (2022), makes some generalisation possible. We successfully obtained 312 useful responses. According to Legate et al. (2023), this sample size is acceptable for ≤ 0.05 that is statistically significant. For partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) used in this study, Hair et al. (2021) recommend a minimum sample size of 155 when a significant level of 5% or 95% confidence level is considered.

The constructs were measured using instruments from previous studies. For example, brand leadership was evaluated with Chang and Ko's (2014) scale. People factors were assessed by using Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos's (2014) scale, whilst person factors were estimated by Jensen et al.'s (2019) scale. Brand admiration was computed by using Christian et al.'s (2022) scale. After assessing and confirming the measurement model for reliability and validity, a PLS-SEM with SMART-PLS V4 was used to test models and hypotheses, considering the multivariate nature of relationships.

Ethical considerations

Before collecting data, we obtained ethics clearance from the University of Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), where one of the researchers works. An ethics certificate was received with reference number H23/01/22. In the cover letter of the questionnaire, respondents were introduced to the study and were informed of study confidentiality and anonymity. They were also provided with supervisor and HREC contact details if respondents experienced any ethical concerns whilst responding to the questions. Participation in the study was taken as implied consent from respondents, in accordance with the HREC rule, as stated in the cover letter.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The results for respondent demographics and construct means are shown in Table 1.

Measurement model testing

The constructs' reliability using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha and validity using discriminant and convergent validities were assessed by testing the measurement model. Table 2 to Table 4 show the results.

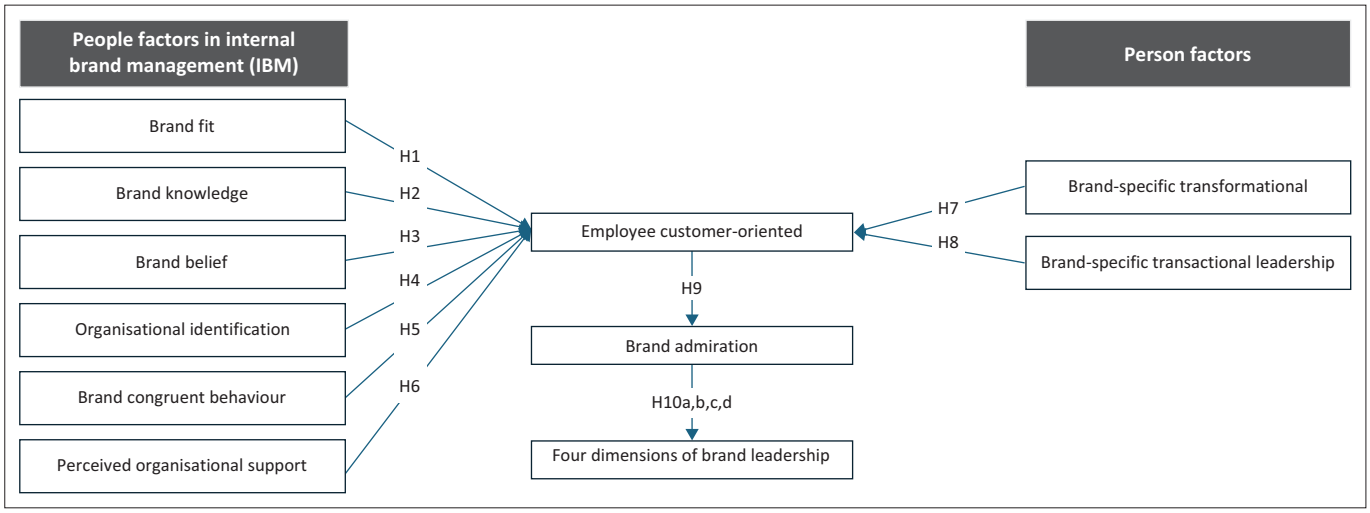

FIGURE 1: Conceptual model of the study.

TABLE 1: Demographics.

Description		Frequency	%	Constructs	Mean	SD
Age (years)	18–24	39	12.5	EBF – employee brand fit	4.11	0.762
	25–34	142	45.5	EBK – employee brand knowledge	4.17	0.763
	35–44	74	23.7	EBB – employee brand belief	4.12	0.700
	45–54	46	14.8	OI – organisational identification	4.96	0.657
	55–64+	11	3.5	BCB – brand-congruent behaviour	4.00	0.879
Total		**312**	**100**	**POS – perceived organisational support**	**4.03**	**0.810**
Position	Senior manager	17	5.3	BSTSL – transactional leadership	3.95	1.001
	Junior-middle level manager	18	5.9	TML –transformational leadership	4.08	0.740
	Accounting or marketing or finance personnel	7	2.4	COB – customer-oriented behaviour	4.01	0.781
	Technicians	52	16.6	BLQ – brand leadership quality	4.34	0.675
	Sales employees	183	58.6	BLV – brand leadership value	3.99	0.766
	Other	35	11.2	BLI – brand leadership innovativeness	4.22	0.705
Total		**312**	**100**	**BLP – brand leadership popularity**	**4.16**	**0.801**
EDU	Undergraduate degree	68	21.9	BAD – employee brand admiration	4.17	0.875
	Postgraduate degree	138	44.4	-	-	-
	Diploma or certificate	23	7.1	-	-	-
	WAEC or GCE	68	21.9	-	-	-
	Others	15	4.7	-	-	-
Total		**312**	**100**	**-**	**-**	**-**

SD, standard deviation; EDU, Education; WAEC, West African Examinations Council; GCE, General Certificate of Education.

Table 2 demonstrates that for both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, the recommended 0.70+ reliability figures were obtained, with figures ranging between 0.713 and 0.977. Table 2 also shows that convergent validity, in terms of average variance extracted, was achieved, with all the figures being above the recommended 0.5 (Ringle et al., 2023). We computed discriminant validity with the Fornell–Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). The results are shown in Table 3 and Table 4.

According to the general rule, HTMT values should not be above 1 and should be between 0.85 and 0.95 (Ringle et al., 2023). According to Table 3, the HTMT values are within the recommended range. For the Fornell–Larcker criterion, constructs average variance extracted (AVE) are greater than the squared interconstruct correlation coefficients. Thus, discriminant validity was established.

TABLE 2: Constructs' reliability and convergent validity (AVE).

Constructs	C_alpha	(rho_a)	(rho_c)	(AVE)
BCB	0.953	0.971	0.977	0.842
BLI	0.886	0.854	0.909	0.903
BLP	0.910	0.928	0.943	0.843
BLQ	0.925	0.929	0.964	0.929
BLV	0.943	0.921	0.970	0.719
ECOB	0.903	0.922	0.932	0.756
EBAD	0.890	0.901	0.920	0.775
EBF	0.809	0.951	0.877	0.545
EBB	0.890	0.895	0.924	0.570
OI	0.804	0.891	0.882	0.732
POS	0.844	0.867	0.903	0.717
BSTSL	0.905	0.937	0.954	0.777
BSTFL	0.713	0.714	0.874	0.674

AVE, average variance extracted; EBF, employee brand fit; EBK, employee brand knowledge; EBB, employee brand belief; OI, organisational identification; BCB, brand-congruent behaviour; POS, perceived organisational support; BSTSL, transactional leadership; TML, transformational leadership; COB, customer-oriented behaviour; BLQ, brand leadership quality; BLV, brand leadership value; BLI, brand leadership innovativeness; BLP, brand leadership popularity; BAD, employee brand admiration.

Structural model

The results of the structural model are summarised in Table 5.

For people factors, Table 5 shows that ECOB was significantly influenced by brand fit ($\beta = 0.272$, $p < 0.01$) (H1), brand knowledge – although negatively ($\beta = -0.310$, $p < 0.05$) (H2), brand belief ($\beta = 0.463$, $p < 0.01$) (H3) and POS ($\beta = 0.354$, $p < 0.01$) (H6). Regarding person factors, both brand-specific transformational and transactional leadership significantly impacted ECOB with ($\beta = -0.431$, $p < 0.01$) and ($\beta = 0.361$, $p < 0.01$), respectively, and as hypothesised (H7 and H8).

Although the ECOB did not significantly impact brand admiration, brand admiration significantly affected all of the dimensions of brand leadership, with ($\beta = 0.650$, $p < 0.01$) for quality, ($\beta = 0.584$, $p < 0.01$) for the brand value, ($\beta = 0.749$, $p < 0.01$) for innovativeness, and ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.01$) for the popularity dimensions of brand leadership.

Discussion

This study examined how much people and person factors impacted the brand leadership dimensions through ECOB and brand admiration. We developed an integrated conceptual model tested with data collected from employees, including management from two leading African brands. Person factors studied were BSTSL and BSTFL, and people factors were EBB, brand fit, brand knowledge, brand-congruent behaviour, organisational identification and POS.

TABLE 3: Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Constructs	BLI	BLP	BLQ	BLV	ECOB	EBAD	EBB	EBF	EBK	OI	POS	BSTFL	BSTSL
BLI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLP	0.737	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLQ	0.886	0.905	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLV	0.699	0.098	0.258	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ECOB	0.606	0.806	0.772	0.195	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBAD	0.092	0.052	0.066	0.080	0.065	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBB	0.868	0.904	0.921	0.288	0.750	0.072	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBF	0.561	0.441	0.567	0.296	0.714	0.158	0.477	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBK	0.777	0.679	0.762	0.332	0.675	0.095	0.905	0.750	-	-	-	-	-
OI	0.375	0.394	0.437	0.231	0.680	0.127	0.360	0.808	0.591	-	-	-	-
POS	0.512	0.709	0.724	0.172	0.688	0.117	0.902	0.659	0.901	0.701	-	-	-
BSTFL	0.651	0.552	0.585	0.213	0.663	0.094	0.852	0.628	0.903	0.765	0.829	-	-
BSTSL	0.925	0.638	0.788	0.311	0.665	0.120	0.902	0.904	0.927	0.882	0.947	0.907	-

EBF, employee brand fit; EBK, employee brand knowledge; EBB, employee brand belief; OI, organisational identification; BCB, brand-congruent behaviour; POS, perceived organisational support; BSTSL, transactional leadership; TML, transformational leadership; COB, customer-oriented behaviour; BLQ, brand leadership quality; BLV, brand leadership value; BLI, brand leadership innovativeness; BLP, brand leadership popularity; BAD, employee brand admiration.

TABLE 4: Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Constructs	BLI	BLP	BLQ	BLV	COB	EBAD	EBB	EBF	EBK	OI	POS	BSTFL	BSTSL
BLI	0.917	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLP	0.592	0.950	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLQ	0.744	0.860	0.918	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BLV	0.620	0.081	0.246	0.964	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ECOB	0.496	0.707	0.680	0.130	0.848	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBAD	-0.108	0.026	0.046	-0.089	-0.050	0.869	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBB	0.633	0.850	0.759	0.238	0.591	0.004	0.880	-	-	-	-	-	-
EBF	0.486	0.390	0.468	0.261	0.616	-0.022	0.322	0.738	-	-	-	-	-
EBK	0.607	0.561	0.642	0.264	0.561	-0.069	0.672	0.587	0.755	-	-	-	-
OI	0.295	0.379	0.434	-0.048	0.541	0.039	0.279	0.614	0.425	0.856	-	-	-
POS	0.420	0.632	0.653	-0.041	0.619	0.086	0.707	0.503	0.734	0.615	0.847	-	-
BSTFL	0.489	0.440	0.477	0.166	0.529	-0.011	0.597	0.475	0.661	0.548	0.641	0.881	-
BSTSL	0.600	0.437	0.544	0.212	0.453	0.057	0.624	0.546	0.695	0.549	0.801	0.817	0.821

EBF, employee brand fit; EBK, employee brand knowledge; EBB, employee brand belief; OI, organisational identification; BCB, brand-congruent behaviour; POS, perceived organisational support; BSTSL, transactional leadership; TML, transformational leadership; COB, customer-oriented behaviour; BLQ, brand leadership quality; BLV, brand leadership value; BLI, brand leadership innovativeness; BLP, brand leadership popularity; BAD, employee brand admiration.

TABLE 5: Hypothesis testing results.

Tested hypothesis	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	T statistics (|O/|)	*p*-value
People factors					
Employee brand fit (EBF)-> Customer-oriented behaviour (COB) (H1)	0.272	0.258	0.086	3.141	0.002**
Employee brand knowledge (EBK)-> Customer-oriented behaviour (COB) (H2)	-0.310	-0.283	0.139	2.233	0.026*
Employee brand belief (EBB)-> Customer-oriented behaviour (COB) (H3)	0.463	0.463	0.120	3.873	0.000**
Organizational identification (OI)-> Customer-oriented behaviour (COB) (H4)	0.190	0.206	0.167	1.140	0.254ns
Brand-congruent behaviour (BCB) -> Customer-oriented behaviour (COB) (H5)	0.156	0.146	0.131	1.113	0.266ns
Perceived organizational support (POS) -> COB (H6)	0.354	0.296	0.198	1.789	0.047*
Person factors					
Brand specific transformational leadership (BSTFL) -> COB (H7)	0.361	0.327	0.109	3.299	0.001**
Brand specific transactional leadership (BSTSL) -> COB (H8)	-0.431	-0.408	0.175	2.462	0.014**
Relationships between ECOB, brand admiration and leadership					
Customer-oriented behaviour (ECOB) -> BAD (H9)	0.020	0.040	0.132	0.304	0.801
Employee brand admiration (BAD) -> brand quality leadership (BLQ) (H10a)	0.650	0.650	0.036	18.267	0.000**
Employee brand admiration (BAD) -> brand value leadership (BLV) (H10b)	0.584	0.582	0.031	19.087	0.000**
Employee brand admiration (BAD) -> brand innovation leadership (BLI) (H10c)	0.749	0.748	0.026	29.029	0.000**
Employee brand admiration (BAD) -> brand popularity leadership (BLI) (H10d)	0.536	0.536	0.045	12.024	0.000**

**, significant at $p < 0.01$; *, significant at $p < 0.05$; ns, not significant.

The results showed that BSTSL negatively and significantly influenced ECOB as proposed. This not only confirms Morhart et al.'s (2009) finding, but it is an indication that managers should use BSTSL only when they are sure that employees' expected needs will be met, which is subjective and not possible for all employees. Following Minbashrazgah et al.'s (2022) assertion that BSTSL comprises brand behavioural standards attainment and satisfying employees with rewards when the standards are met, we found that a negative impact on ECOB could be that the latter was not met. Future studies should study BSTSL in two dimensions if the scales are available. We found that BSTFL is the style that

positively impacts ECOB. This is consistent with Morhart et al.'s (2009) findings and those of Shaari et al. (2015a) and Jensen et al. (2020), indicating that inspirational leadership, role modelling, role clarification and supportive behaviour motivate employees to engage in ECOB.

Our results also revealed that four (i.e. EBF, brand belief, brand knowledge and POS) out of the six people factors studied significantly influenced ECOB, although brand knowledge made a negative impact. The negative and significant relationship may stem from the fact that employees from two leading African brands were surveyed. Therefore, some employees working for a brand may not have full or deep knowledge of the other brand. They would, however, be willing to provide ECOB to both brands because of admiration and belief in them as leaders in Africa.

In fact, brand belief and POS significantly influenced ECOB. With brand belief being how employees internally evaluate the importance and value of the brand to its customers and the organisational success (Xiong & King, 2020), employees may not only build confidence in delivering on the promise of the brand to customers but will also perform ECOB (Xiong & King, 2020). In terms of the positive impact of POS, brands are admired not only because of their financial performance but also because of their employee satisfaction, customers and society at large. Therefore, employees working with these brands or admiring them will potentially perform ECOB. Moreover, POS also entails caring for employee wellbeing and valuing their contributions to brand-building. These may explain why Bizri and Hamieh (2020) and Aldabbas et al. (2023) also found that POS positively and significantly impacted ECOB directly and indirectly, respectively.

Although Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) suggest that organisational identification (OI) is highly motivational to convert employees into brand champions and perform ECOB, we found that OI did not significantly impact ECOB as proposed. This could be because OI has been found to be rather a mediator by Bravo et al. (2017) and Sim et al. (2025). These authors and Piehler et al. (2016) show that OI is an effective IBM outcome from IBM efforts, mediating the IBM effort (e.g. brand communication, brand knowledge, role clarity) and brand citizenship-oriented behaviours. Brand-congruent behaviour also did not significantly impact ECOB in our study. This may be because it needed to impact OI or brand commitment first before influencing ECOB following Piehler et al.'s (2016) and Gulati et al.'s (2023) suggestions. Future research should study the mediating role of OI and brand commitment in how much brand-congruent behaviour impacts ECOB.

Despite Alkandi et al.'s (2023) and Ferdous et al.'s (2021) suggesting that ECOB increases brand admiration, we did not find a significant relationship. This indicates that employees may sometimes not admire a brand from their customer-oriented inputs into its success but rather from what the brand does to them in terms of the intrinsic benefits stemming from working for a strong and prestigious brand. In fact, Ertz et al. (2024) show that employees build positive attitudes and admiration for their company's brand because of the strength of the brand and its leadership.

Brand admiration from employees, as observed in this study, positively and significantly influenced all the four brand leadership dimensions. The highest impact of brand admiration was on the dimension of brand innovativeness ($\beta = 0.791$), indicating that corporate innovativeness is being admired by its employees. Our findings in this case also suggest that brand respect, trust and love (brand admiration), which employees do have of an organisational brand, strongly contribute to brand leadership (Aaker, 2012; Park et al., 2016). Considering the strongly significant relationship between brand admiration and leadership, future research should investigate varied and other drivers of brand admiration.

Implications and limitations

This study contributes theoretically and managerially as discussed in the next subsection.

Theoretical contributions

Theoretically, the study contributes to the fields of brand management, human resources management, internal brand management and leadership. Drawing on these disciplines, we contributed to explaining the four dimensions of brand leadership, whose explanation is not only sparse in the literature but also for leading brands in Africa. The two brand leaders studied are from two industry sectors – construction (physical product) and telecommunication (services) – to broaden the findings' generalisation. Compared to previous studies, such as that of Chang and Ko (2014) and Chiu and Cho (2021) that examined brand leadership from a consumer perspective and mainly to test the nomological ability of brand leadership, our study enriches the literature by showing brand leadership determinants from organisational, internal branding, HR and leadership perspectives. Our study also enriches the ideas and models of Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) on how the elements of internal brand-building (EBK development, brand fit, brand belief and organisational support), organisational identification and brand congruence (affectionate elements) can drive ECOB along the path of building brand admiration, which we found to be a strong driver of brand leadership.

This study also makes theoretical contributions by employing ideas from social identity, brand-specific leadership and social exchange theories for the development of an integrative model that enabled the examination of the path to building brand leadership. In his book titled *Corporate Brand Leadership Starts from the Inside,* Urde (2024) worries that the few attempts to understand brand leadership are mostly from how, why and what of the brand but rarely on 'who' behind the brand. This study contributes by revealing to companies

and their managers how to build brand leadership from who factors (i.e. people and person factors behind leading brands). Our tested integrated model can be used by other brands in Africa and globally on how to build leading brands from the inside.

Managerial and practical contributions

The interdisciplinary nature of our integrated model developed and tested here provides managers with various insights into building ECOB, brand admiration, and leadership from the IBM and leadership perspectives. African brand leaders can now understand that their strength, admiration and leadership do not only come from how customers respond to brands but also from the top person's leadership style and IBM strategies around the people (employees).

Whilst the two brand-specific leadership styles of BSTSL and BSTFL are beneficial, the current study confirms Morharts et al.'s (2009) warning that focusing on the BSTSL style (i.e., BSTSL) is tricky. This stems from the danger of having a negative impact on ECOB because of its exchange or *quid pro quo* nature. For example, an employee feeling of not being appreciated enough according to the contributions made to the brand using BSTSL may negatively impact ECOB. A BSTFL style, as found, is a better way to go. The transformational leadership style, according to Jensen et al. (2020), inspires or motivates employees, raises optimism and team spirit, and stimulates employees to a degree of fostering innovative thinking and creative problem solving for ECOB.

In their special issue on IBM, Piehler et al. (2016) emphasise the important role that IBM plays in brand management and resultant company success through customer-related outcomes such as customer brand attachment, satisfaction and customer-based brand equity. Our study reveals that EBB, EBF and POS are the elements of IBM that can significantly guarantee the customer-related outcomes. Although not significant, OI and BCB made a positive impact in the current study. All of these indicate that IBM strategies should focus on these elements. The elements, especially the EBB, EBF and OI, can be built through constant brand information generation and dissemination, which Duh and Wara (2024) have shown to produce a chain of effects, such as brand knowledge (awareness and image), brand role clarity, brand commitment and resultant employee satisfaction, BCB and employee positive word-of-mouth.

Thus, to enhance the IBM elements studied here, managers should do their best in explicit and implicit brand communications. The explicit communication can be via frequent brand-building orientations and verbal communications and the implicit communication can be through exhibiting behaviours reflecting organisational brand prestige and identity (Duh & Wara 2024). Brand storytelling by managers is a growing, explicit way to educate employees about the brand for better internalisation (Duh & Wara, 2024; Erkmen, 2018), from which EBB, EBF, OI and even brand love and customer orientation can be built (Bookies & Christodoulides, 2020).

Despite the importance of ECOB, especially as it can make customers happy and cause retention (Piehler et al., 2016), we did not find a significant relationship between ECOB and brand admiration, although the relationship was positive. This indicates that managers should regularly perform appraisal of employee contributions to customer service and satisfaction and compliment and reward employees. Employees can then appreciate and admire the brand from their contributions and not only from the overall brand performance emanating from marketing and financial metrics.

Considering the strong relationships between brand admiration and all four brand leadership dimensions (brand quality, popularity, value and innovation), it becomes imperative for managers to prioritise the development of brand admiration amongst employees. This can be achieved by giving employees, and not only the marketing department, opportunities in brand-building, highlighting and celebrating brand achievements and instilling a sense of pride related to employees' linkage with the brand. Park et al. (2016) show that brand admiration is built amongst consumers by enabling, enriching and enticing consumers; this should also be the case with employees to enhance how much IBM generates ECOB for resultant brand admiration and leadership.

Conclusion

Whilst appreciating the contributions that this study has made theoretically and managerially, some limitations should be noted, especially for future studies. Social desirability bias may be one of the limitations, considering that surveys were used for data collection. Employees and managers self-reported on the studied constructs. Although some of the constructs were perceptions (e.g. POS), Bookies and Christodoulides (2020) highlight that there is a tendency for over-reporting behavioural and performance constructs by employees. Thus, future research may use experimental methods to measure some of the constructs. Moreover, a replication study with qualitative methods can expose more person and people factors.

Another limitation is the combined responses from the two leading brands. A separate dataset would have been good for a comparative study, but we combined the responses because responses from one of the brands far outnumbered the other for a multigroup comparative analysis. However, studying the two brands from the services and product sectors provides insights into brands in both sectors. To enhance the ECOB and brand admiration relationship, future studies can examine employee relational factors such as brand satisfaction, trust and brand love that can contribute to brand admiration directly or indirectly through ECOB. Other areas of future studies could be examining the impact of implicit and explicit brand communication on the IBM factors.

To conclude, both people factors and person factors are impactful on ECOB. The four brand leadership dimensions can count on brand admiration to drive them. Specifically,

EBB, brand fit and POS should be prioritised if ECOB needs enhancement. As Urde (2024) speculated, who (person and people) is behind the brand is an important pathway to building brand admiration and leadership.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Nkiru J. Olumide-Ojo: Conceptualisation; Data Curation; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. Helen I. Duh: Conceptualisation; Formal analysis; Supervision; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and took responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, Helen I. Duh.

Disclaimer

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