

# **Employees as brand ambassadors: the role of Employees in turning the Country-Of-Origin-Image (COI) into a Country-specific advantage (COI-CSA)**

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**Abstract:** A country's image can provide a powerful competitive edge, assigning specific expectations to country-specific products and services. Within this context, we focus on understanding the role of brand ambassadors in encouraging the internalisation of brand values and the HR practices that are used to achieve this. Through the lens of signalling theory, this paper makes a key contribution and examines the role of these brand ambassadors and the extent to which they moderate the relationship between marketing communication capability and country of origin image as a country-specific advantage. Using data gathered from 400 executives working in internationalised Brazilian firms and by applying structural equation modelling, the findings suggest that there is a direct positive association between employee brand ambassadors and country of origin/country specific advantage, therefore highlighting the importance of developmental HR practices that act as signals to employees and foster an understanding of the brand and of the specific firm.

*Keywords: Country-of-Origin-Image (COI); Capabilities; Employee Branding; Brand ambassadors.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of employees as brand ambassadors and the mechanisms used by companies to internalise brand values to the internal audience have received limited attention in the extant literature. This study analyses the Country-Of-Origin-Image (COI) as a branding resource for companies in the internationalisation process. In particular, we investigate the role of training and development in developing employee brand ambassadors (EmpB) who are able to convey and promote the COI into the brand. Several studies showed that the COI has been used as an extrinsic cue by consumers to evaluate products, services and/or brands coming from different countries (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999; Lu, Heslop, Thomas, and Kwan, 2016). Besides looking at COI from the consumer perspective and, moreover, driven by the acknowledgement that COI plays an important role in the international marketing strategy of a company, scholars started to investigate the topic considering the branding and the strategy lens (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999; Baker and Ballington; Cuervo-Cazurra, and Un, 2015; D'Antone and Merunka, 2015; Herstein, Berger, and Jaffe, 2014; Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi, 2010; Suter, Giralaldi, Borini, MacLennan, Crescitelli and Polo, 2018b).

This paper contends that COI can be used as a resource by a company especially through the development and promotion of a brand that embraces the values and features connected to the COI, as such the COI can be a resource for the company or even a Country-Specific Advantage (CSA) (Suter, Borini, Floriani, Da Silva and Polo, 2018a). The internalisation of the brand values of the COI is achieved through the incorporation of those specific features of the country such as cultural elements, natural elements, senses, visual and textual elements (Suter et al., 2018a) that can be incorporated into the brand identity. These features can be conveyed at all points of contact between the brand and the customer (employees, website, leaflets, offices, showroom, a

booth at fairs) and products (packaging, raw material and design) (Suter et al., 2018b). Suter et al. (2018a) proposed a scale to measure the COI as a CSA. These authors reinforced the need for combining COI features with marketing capabilities, yet the role of employee brand ambassadors was omitted. This is particularly important as employees are a pivotal variable in communicating, thereby perpetuating the brand image and its overarching message (Kapferer, 2003; Piehler, Burmann, and Xiong, 2016).

This paper focuses on the role of employees in conveying the brand values, in particular, those related to the Country-of-Origin image (COI). During brand building processes, employees are essential as they develop relationships with various external stakeholders. They play an important role as messengers in communicating the value proposition of the brand to receivers (Kapferer, 2003) as they have the responsibility of delivering the promise of the brand to customers (Piehler et al, 2016). A wide variety of Human Resources (HR) practices (Aurand, Gorchels and Bishop 2005) combined with internal communications tools (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) can have a positive impact on a firm's brand success (Aurand, et al., 2005). Therefore, the way in which employees are engaged and prepared to talk about a brand and the features of the brand values (COI in this case) can turn the COI into a brand resource (COI-CSA). To achieve this, companies need to develop marketing capability, but they also need to emphasise training and development focused on turning employees into brand ambassadors thereby contributing to the country of origin image and country-specific advantage.

Since there is a positive association between the marketing communication capabilities and COI-CSA (Suter, et al., 2018a), this paper seeks to answer the following: can and to what extent do employees play the role of brand ambassadors in the process of turning the COI into a brand resource (COI-CSA)? The paper makes a key contribution in that it is the first to connect branding, HRM and the incorporation of COI into the brand strategy of internationalised firms

from Brazil. The paper is structured as follows: First, the importance of COI is explained. Second, the development of a marketing capability is juxtaposed with the role of training and development in creating and sustaining a set of employee ambassadors in order to foster the internalisation of brand and COI values. Signalling theory is then introduced and used to explain how training is able to develop positive psychological contracts and to help employees internalise brand values. The research hypothesis is introduced, and the findings are examined. A discussion and conclusion is then followed by implications for practice and avenues for further research.

We defend the argument that the employee moderates the relationship between marketing communication capabilities and COI-CSA. To support the study, we relied on the Signalling Theory. To the best of our knowledge, the mainstream literature lacks studies linking branding, Human Resources Management (HRM) and the incorporation of COI into the brand strategy of internationalised firms. In the first stage of the study, we developed and validated a scale to measure the importance given by companies to convey their brand values (in this case COI values and features) to the internal audience, the EmpB. To do that, we followed psychometric procedures and conducted a survey (n=230) with executives working in internationalised companies and ran a confirmatory factor analysis. Provided with a valid scale for EmpB, we moved to the second stage and collected another dataset with 400 executives working in internationalised companies. We performed a Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with Amos SPSS to test the study's hypothesis which was grounded on COI, brand, internal branding and marketing capability literature.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 The Importance of the Country of Origin Image

The country-of-origin image (COI) construct has been the focus of international marketing research since 1965 when the impact of the COI on customer evaluation was identified by Schooler (1965). Since then scholars have investigated the influence that the product's country of origin exerts on consumer evaluation towards product quality, beliefs about individual attributes of a product and the actual brand stemming from that specific country (Agrawal and Kamakura, 1999; Pharr, 2005).

The COI refers to the mental representation of a country and its people, involving cognitive beliefs regarding the country's technological and economic development stages, and effective evaluations of the social and political system (Wang, Li, Barnes and Ahn, 2012). The COI also refers to emotions, identity, pride and autobiographical memories (Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Therefore, the COI represents an important extrinsic stimulus in product/brands evaluations, as it causes associations that can influence purchasing decisions (Hakala, Lemmetyinen and Kantola, 2013). As a result, the COI and its attributes form part of the repertoire of extrinsic cues used by consumers when evaluating products along with the brand, price, packaging and the salespeople (Bilkey and Nes, 1982, Hakala et al., 2013; Pharr, 2005). Companies have started to create processes to benefit from their COI aiming to incorporate COI into their brand strategy (Herstein et al., 2014). Indeed, marketers have also started using COI features in the brand strategy to add value to their products and differentiate them through a specific product/market positioning (Baker and Ballington, 2002).

Most of the resources studied in marketing are intangible, what offers benefits, such as the difficulty of imitation (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). For example, branding represents an important

source of information for the customer and is a business asset developed through marketing capabilities. It can be considered a complex resource since it is heterogeneous, expensive to imitate (Barney, 2014; Srivasta et al, 1998) and difficult to build or alter (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), and can represent a source of sustainable advantage. Marketing capabilities can create a strong brand image (a firm asset) that enables the company to achieve superior performance (Ruiz-Ortega and García-Villaverde, 2008). In the process of building a brand with particular values, such as COI, and then turning these values/ COI into a CSA, the marketing communications capability becomes paramount (Suter et al., 2018a) as it is concerned with the ability of the firm to manage customer value perceptions.

## 2.2 Capabilities and Signalling Theory

Capabilities refer to the company's ability to deploy resources, often in combination with organisational processes to achieve the desired aim and increasing the productivity of other resources owned by the company (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Makadok, 2001). Capabilities are invisible, tangible, or intangible assets based on the information; processes developed by the company over time through complex interactions between company resources that cannot be purchased. (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). Capabilities must be built and are responsible for bringing together organisational assets and deploying them advantageously (Zhou, Zhou and Su, 2008).

Capabilities differ from assets because they are not observable, they are difficult to quantify, and cannot be attributed to monetary value as is done with tangible equipment (Day, 1994). In addition, capabilities are embedded in routines and organisational practices that cannot be commercialised or imitated (Theodosiou, Kehagias and Katsikea, 2012). They are customarily developed in functional areas of the company such as brand management in the marketing

department, or combining physical, human, and technological resources at the corporate level (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). Capabilities can include marketing skills, the teamwork, as well as cooperation between management.

Since many resources are generated and sustained by marketing activities (Hooley, Greenley, Cadogan and Fahy, 2005), and because COI literature has its theoretical roots in marketing, the strategic use of this resource should be carried out by the company's marketing area. The marketing area focuses on stimulating demand and offering consumers a unique value proposition (Nath, Nachiappan and Ramanathan, 2010). Thus, marketing capabilities and resources must be related to the company's unique skills in acquiring consumers and offer the benefits sought by them (Woodside, Sullivan and Trappey III, 1999).

Marketing capabilities, resources and processes are in line with the outside-in capabilities presented by Day (1994). In this perspective, managers must first look outside the limits and constraints of the company to the market where they can find a rich set of opportunities to achieve competitive and growth advantages (Day, 2014). As a result, marketing studies have investigated market-based resources (Srivastava, Fahey and Christensen, 2001; Kozlenkova et al., 2014).

Market-based marketing capabilities are those that capture and reflect how well the company performs each of the customer connection processes (Day, 1994), and which refer to the outcome of articulation and management of sub-processes within the process of customer relationship management (Srivastava, Shervani and Fahey, 1999). They can be understood as the integration between processes in which the company uses tangible and intangible resources to understand the needs of the consumer; have a differentiated product in relation to the competitor; achieve superior brand value (Nath et al., 2010) developing the brand; develop the customer relationship and detect environmental changes (Kozlenkova et al., 2014).

However, the brand combined with COI features should embrace more than just marketing products shaped by advertising because brands are also formed “by the words and deeds of employees” (Berger-Remy and Michel, 2015, p. 31). The employees are also acknowledged as one important point of contact with consumers (Kapferer, 2012), therefore, should be considered in the brand building process. Hence, we believe that “a company achieves its greater advantage when employee actions and brand identity reinforce each other” (Aurand et al., 2005: 166). Brands give employees direction and meaning (Berger-Remy and Michel, 2015). That is why it becomes important to identify the awareness, behaviour and loyalty of employees towards the brand, not only in the context of business to consumer (B2C). But more importantly in the service one (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky and Wilson, 2009) and in the business to business (B2B) commercial trades where sales personnel are required to interact with customers.

We argue that employees represent an important touch point between the brand and the customer. They have a face-to-face contact with customers what permits a direct interaction between the customer and the brand (represented by the employee). This two-way contact enables employees to identify the specific needs and problems of the buyer and tailor the sales presentation accordingly. Consequently, employees can answer particular questions overcoming objections presented by customers. This close contact enables employees to start and build a relationship with consumers, what can turn the brand promise delivered by the employee a trustworthy process. Therefore, the efforts made by the company to communicate the brand with COI features to the market is enhanced when the company conducts an internal branding campaign (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) to ensure that employees are aligned, aware and trained to deliver the brand promise (Piehler et al., 2016) with COI features.

To develop an internal branding campaign the company can incorporate the brand message into work activities (Aurand et al., 2005) by using internal communications tools such as



daily briefings, newsletter, notice boards and logbooks (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

Complementarily, other HR strategies can be used to reinforce employees' brand-supporting behaviour e.g. reward mechanisms, recruitment (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007), onboarding (Cascio and Graham, 2016) training and development (Punjaisri et al., 2008; Cascio and Graham, 2016). These processes carry signals and convey messages to the employees.

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973:357) highlights the need for organisational stakeholders to have information in order to make informed decisions about the future of that organisation and what it values. As such, signalling theory identifies the role of "observable characteristics" (Spence, 1973:357) in compensating for information asymmetries. According to Stiglitz (2000), such information asymmetries can relate to an unawareness of the other party's characteristics or a concern with the behavioural intentions of another party. Signals are "observable characteristics attached to the individual that are subject to manipulation by him". In his essay, Spence (1973) introduced signalling theory using an example of hiring decisions, where employers are unable to observe the attributes and predict the performance of potential new hires. In order to reduce levels of uncertainty, the employer will take into account other more observable factors in order to gauge future performance e.g. levels of education or qualifications. Signal emitters need to consider the observability of their signals, the costs associated with emitting such signals, alongside the honesty and the extent to which these signals can be fabricated or faked (Connelly et al., 2011, Martin and Cerdin, 2014).

Signalling theory has been used to explain how the reputational judgements of organisations are formed (Connelly et al., 2011, Musteen et al., 2010), the impact of manager involvement on performance management effectiveness (Biron et al., 2011), the role of employee performance in signalling career potential (Harris et al., 2015), the role of talent management in shaping perceptions of organisation support and fostering affective commitment (Gelens et al.,

2014). Thus HRM practices have the ability to send important signals, symbolic and cultural cues, about the values of the organisation thereby shaping stakeholder expectations (Martin and Cerdin, 2014). Employees distinguish between organisations by evaluating their symbolic rather than instrumental attributes and HRM practices shape expectations and perceptions of employer brand commitment (App and Büttgen, 2016; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003).

To this end, Haggerty and Wright (2010) argue that rather than viewing HRM as practices and bundles – HRM process and practice should be viewed as signals that foster strong organisational situations where employees form part of a shared climate and obtain and experience the signals as the organisation intended. Within this, there is a need to consider, the structure, channels and overall process of signalling (Martin and Cerdin, 2014). Haggerty and Wright (2010:103) consider HRM as “the primary channel through which such signals are sent” and therefore place an emphasis on the role of the HR function and the extent to which they are able to conceptualise and affect organisational action. HR practices are central to employee-based brand equity, and it is influenced by employer brand clarity, consistency and credibility of brand signals (Wilden et al, 2010). This emphasises the extent to which organisations are able to communicate their values and their culture (Haggerty and Wright, 2010, Townsend et al., 2012).

Bal et al. (2013) and Suazo et al. (2009) suggest that developmental HR measures (training and employee development practices) send particular signals to employees about their value and shape expectations of long-term support and rewards, helping to foster more relational contracts and higher employee engagement. The signals are central to employer branding and foster positive attitudes towards the organisation encouraging employees to internalise brand values, strengthen a brand’s image and act as brand ambassadors (App and Büttgen, 2016; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Miles and Mangold, 2004). Employees are able to identify with the organisation and this identity subsequently guides behaviour and reinforces values, strengthening

brand image (Edwards, 2009). This places an emphasis on communication and training and development, both central in facilitating brand identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Bartels et al. 2007; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994).

Training and development practices have been positively linked to sustainable business profitability (Kruse et al. 2004; McGahan and Porter, 2003; Welch and Goyal, 2008), business productivity (Birdi et al., 2008; Ichniowski, Shaw, and Prennushi, 1995); greater employee commitment (Edgar and Geare, 2005; Lee and Bruvold, 2003; Wright, Gardner, and Moynihan, 2003), and the internalisation of values, shaping relational psychological contracts and notions of reciprocity (Leuven, 2005; Miles and Mangold, 2004; Rousseau, 2001; Sieben, 2007). Thus, training is central in ensuring that employees are able to project a brand image to others. According to Miles and Mangold (2004), consistency within the HR architecture is central as this helps to clarify organisational expectations. Training is central to “personified organisational commitment”, making employees feel valued and more psychologically attached to the organisation and aligned with its goals (Glaveli and Karassavidou, 2011:2915). It has been viewed by some as being the prime contributor to enhanced perceived organisational and market performance (Harel and Tzafrir, 1999; Rodwell and Teo, 2008; Stavrou, Charalambous, and Spiliotis, 2007). Indeed, Punjaisri et al. (2008) suggest that training and development measures (in particular coaching and behavioural training) and open communication channels were the only HR measures that were perceived as relevant in developing an understanding of brand values amongst employees and featured as part of an internal marketing campaign. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

*The relationship between marketing communication capability and the successful usage of COI as a resource to the brand (COI-CSA) is positively moderated by turning employees into brand ambassadors (EmpB).*

### 3. RESEARCH METHODS

The paper builds on the work of Suter et al. (2018) who proposed a scale to measure the COI-CSA and used the scale of Vorhies and Morgan (2005) to measure marketing communication capability (MCC). Both measures were used in this paper. However, an appropriate HR scale could not be found in the marketing literature to measure how companies convey their brand values (in this case COI) to the internal audience.

Therefore, the study was carried out in two stages. Firstly, psychometric procedures were followed to develop and validate a scale to measure the EmpB (Churchill, 1979; MacKenzie et al., 2011). We first specified the construct and generated items subject to judgment by researchers and experts. Before collecting the first dataset, we conducted face and content validity with researchers and experts. A survey of executives was then conducted (n=230 executives) in order to apply multivariate statistical techniques and ensure the structure of the proposed measures and constructs respected the appropriate results for reliability and validity (Churchill, 1979; MacKenzie, Podsakoff and Podsakoff, 2011). The steps undertaken to develop the scale are detailed in the next section.

In the second stage of the study, EmpB, the MCC and the COI-CSA variables and relationships were measured to test the formulated hypothesis. The data was collected with 422 executives responsible for the internationalisation department of Brazilian internationalised companies. Among the 422 observations, 400 were considered valid for analysis. To process the data and test the hypothesis, we used Amos SPSS and performed a structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyse the relationship between MCC and the COI-CSA (as presented by Suter et al., 2018) and whether EmpB moderates this relationship.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Scale development

#### *4.1.1 Construct definition*

We conducted a deep literature review regarding brands, COI and internal branding (Kapferer, 2012; Suter et al., 2018b; Aurand et al., 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2008; Cascio and Graham, 2016) to conceptualise the processes used by companies to turn employees into brand ambassadors of COI (EmpB). We defined the EmpB construct as the training and development processes used by companies to convey and internalise the brand values to the internal audience, making use of signs, to turn them into brand ambassadors. The EmpB is a unidimensional construct reflecting the importance given by the company to training and developing routines regarding the communication of brand values by the internal audience to external ones. Our definition is grounded in the idea defended by Borgerson, Schroeder, Magnusson and Magnusson (2009) that employees play an important role in co-creating the brand. Thus, training and developing is central in ensuring that employees are able to project a brand image to others. The scale's unit of analysis is the company that can be represented by its tactical and strategic managers.

#### *4.1.2 Item generation*

After analysing the literature we built an initial pool of items to measure the EmpB construct. The scale assesses the degree of importance given by the company representative to each item using a seven-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree) The preliminary version of the scale was composed by three items and was analysed and criticized by ten international marketing researchers during a research group meeting focused on the scale development subject. The researchers received the description of accurately what the scale intended to measure

(DeVellis, 2016). The group of ten researchers analysed together item by item. In this process, they helped to rephrase the statements to make them clearer and easier to understand, as well as suggested the addition of two items. At the end of the research meeting, the new pool totalled five items (see Table1).

Insert table 1

#### *4.1.3 Content Validity and purification*

The third step of the scale development consisted of a content validity and initial purification of the scale. For that, we consulted four marketing scholars with previous experience in scale development. Our aim at this step was to get suggestions from specialists to simplify and refine the phrases, validate each item (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham, 2009) and make sure the items to measure the EmpB were adequate. Specialists recommended the elimination of item 5 because it was an item specific to the usage of COI into the brand, but not brand values in general. We accepted the suggestion and the final pool version of this step totalled four items.

The four scholars recommended a verification step with experts - professionals working in companies that are responsible, among other tasks, for training employees in regard the brand values.

#### *4.1.4 Face validity*

We interviewed eight managers working in different companies using the COI to build brand values. All the eight managers interviewed pointed out to the importance of employees in conveying the brand to external audiences and agreed that the items analysed were in accordance with the scale aim. We also observed the sales process of two brands that explicitly internalise COI features to build the brand. At the end of this stage, the scale totalled four items.

#### *4.1.5 Confirmatory factor analysis*

We then designed a survey instrument and held two surveys. The first one was carried out with 230 executives working on internationalised companies. The aim of this data collection was to analyse several measures as well as perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the EmpB measure.

The result of the first study tests indicated acceptable values for AVE, CC, Cronbach's alpha, and discriminant validity for the EmpB measure. The adjustment results of the model for EmpB presented a fit of  $\chi^2 = 2.010$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), GFI = .991.; AGFI = .956; TFI = .991; NFI = .994; CFI = .997; RMSEA of .066, and SRMR of .113. These measures confirm the first validation of the EmpB scale.

#### 4.2 Measuring the EmpB, the MCC and the COI-CSA relationships

The aim of the second survey was to verify the relationship between EmpB, the MCC and the COI-CSA variables and test whether EmpB moderates the relationship between MCC and COI-CSA (H1). The initial model parameters adjustment is shown in Table 2. The measures for AVE (greater than 0.5), CC and Cronbach's alpha (greater than 0.7) are above the reference value, ensuring the discriminant validity of the model.

Insert table 2

Overall measurement model fit was good  $\chi^2 = 2.010$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), GFI = 0.915; AGFI = 0.894; TLI = 0.955; NFI = 0.924; CFI = 0.960; RMSEA of 0.050, and SRMR of 0.063.

Insert figure 1

Once we reached the model fit, we started to evaluate the associations proposed in the models. Table 3 presents the results of association tests. The results confirm the model proposed by Suter et al. (2018) in which the association of MMC with the COI-CSA can be observed. However, in this research, we are concerned with the moderating effect of the employee in this relationship. The results show that the direct association of EmpB with COI-CSA is significant at  $p < 0.10$ . In fact, EmpB exerts a positive moderating effect ( $p < 0.05$ ) for the association between MMC and COI-CSA.

Insert table 3

Figure 2 displays graphically this moderation and confirms the positive moderating effect of EmpB on the relationship between MCC and COI-CSA, supporting the Hypothesis formulated.

Insert figure 2

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper sought to test the following hypothesis - *the relationship between marketing communication capability and the successful usage of COI as a resource to the brand (COI-CSA) is positively moderated by turning employees into brand ambassadors* - through an analysis of 400 survey responses from executives in internationalised firms originally from Brazil. The hypothesis was supported: employee brand ambassadors moderate the relationship between marketing communication capabilities and COI-CSA to the extent that the relationship between market-based marketing capabilities and COI-CSA is stronger when there are employee brand ambassadors. The paper makes two key contributions to the literature: First, it connects branding, HRM and COI into the brand strategy of internationalised firms in Brazil. Second, it contributes to the literature by developing and validating a scale to measure the importance placed by



companies on the communication of their brand values (in this case COI values and features) to their brand ambassadors.

The results of the study affirm that the process of building a brand involves an exclusive set of associations that the company aims to create and maintain that should encompass other aspects rather than just marketing mix tools (Aaker, 1998). It emphasises that building a distinguished brand incorporating particular values, such as COI attributes, requires the development of a brand-specific identity (Srivastava and Shocker, 1991) embracing brand values - COI cues (Spence et al., 2010) that are conveyed and co-created with the internal audience. Thus, it shows that to internalise the brand values it is necessary not only to develop specific marketing capabilities capturing and reflecting how well the company performs each of the customer connection processes (Day, 1994); but also do it taking into account the importance of employee training and development to send particular signals to employees regarding their value to the company (Bal et al., 2013; Suazo et al., 2009). These will foster employees to have positive attitudes towards the organisation, encouraging them to internalise brand values, strengthen a brand's image and act as brand ambassadors (App and Büttgen, 2016; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Miles and Mangold, 2004)

In order to internalise the brand values (COI features) and turn it into an important resource for the company (a COI-CSA), it is necessary to articulate efforts in different spheres of the company. In other words, companies aiming to benefit from brand-related COI should rely on a well-developed marketing communication capability (Suter et al., 2018) and, additionally, invest in employee development and training in regard to COI features. However, the role of training does not stop there. While it is important to encourage a deeper appreciation of COI features, training plays an important role in deepening the strength of the bond between the firm and its employees and in ensuring an alignment between brand values, COI and employee values.

Training provides positive signals to employees and creates favourable perceptions of work, encouraging and developing a sense of autonomy in being able to manage and better represent brand and COI signals.

The findings reinforce the relevance of implementing marketing tools to the internal audience as well as the external audience. It highlights the importance of recruiting and maintaining employees that are aligned to an organisation's brand to support and convey how the organisation hopes to be perceived by external audiences (Aurand et al., 2005) as well as the importance of sending signals that manage the psychological contract and ensure employee brand alignment.

### 5.1 Implications for Practice

Managers need to be aware that training employees in the salient brand features and specifically COI features is important. However, the role of training does not stop there. Managers should be mindful of the signalling effects of training and development and ensure that their training measures develop a sense of autonomy and belief in the company and the brand. COI knowledge itself will not necessarily result in superior outcomes. However, the autonomy and commitment that the training develops and the extent to which it encourages personal development will also have a role to play in ensuring positive outcomes and employee brand commitment.

### 5.2 Limitations and Further Research

While the paper makes a key contribution to an understanding of the importance of employee brand ambassadors to marketing communications capability, country of origin image and country-specific advantage, it is not without its limitations. First, it relies on a limited set of HR

practices. Further studies should unpack these relationships and test a range of mediating and moderating HR variables. Training and development is but one way to develop employee ambassadors. Further studies should examine the extent to which a differentiated HR framework is applied to employee brand ambassadors and the outcomes of these on employee brand identification, employee loyalty, performance, and turnover. Further, studies should test other mediating and moderating variables and specifically the features of the COI that have the most impact on performance outcomes. The cross-sectional and quantitative data collection while useful, suggests the need for further qualitative enquiry in order to provide a deeper analysis of the impact of HR measures on employee brand ambassadors and the extent to which this impacts the communication and subsequent marketing of the COI.

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Table 1. EmpB scale items after research meeting

Item	<i>It is important to...</i>
E_1	<i>Train the <b>sales team</b> to explain customers aspects related to the company's brand values (country of origin).</i>
E_2	<i>Transmit <b>information</b> to employees on the <b>importance of the characteristics</b> of the company's brand values (country of origin) that are incorporated during sales.</i>
E_3	<i>Motivate employees <b>to speak</b> to customers on the <b>specificities</b> of the company's brand values (country of origin).</i>
E_4	<i>Recognise the <b>importance</b> of employees in the <b>transmission of information</b> to customers about aspects related to the company's brand values (country of origin).</i>
E_5	<i>Consider important that the employee has a good knowledge of the <b>country culture</b>.</i>

Source: Authors

Table 2 – Discriminant validity

		Discriminant									
		AVE	CC	Cronbachs Alpha	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1	NatRes	0,7259	0,8882	0,8111	0,852						
2	Textual	0,7030	0,8758	0,7856	0,4185	0,838					
3	Sense	0,7252	0,8871	0,8066	0,3048	0,3597	0,852				
4	Communication	0,7684	0,9431	0,9247	0,1872	0,2312	0,1066	0,877			
5	Culture	0,5773	0,8009	0,6336	0,1771	0,2831	0,1477	0,2608	0,760		
6	employee	0,7795	0,9339	0,9055	0,2611	0,0936	0,1910	0,0775	0,1533	0,883	

Source: Authors based on AMOS outputs

Table 3 – Association tests results

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
COI-CSA	<---	EmpB	0,061	0,036	1,717	0,086
COI-CSA	<---	MCC	0,279	0,053	5,231	***
COI-CSA	<---	EmpBxMCC	0,099	0,042	2,371	0,018

Source: Authors based on AMOS outputs

Figure 1 - Research model

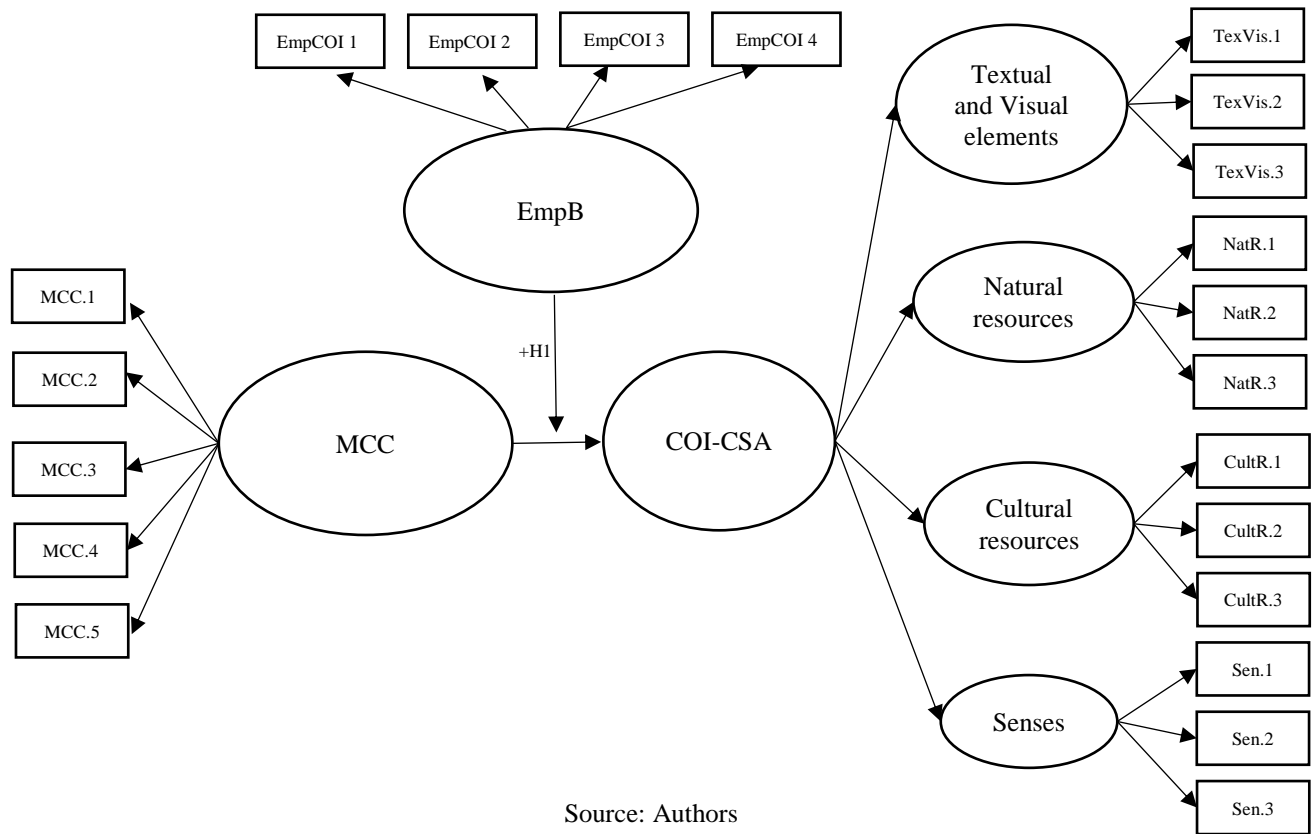
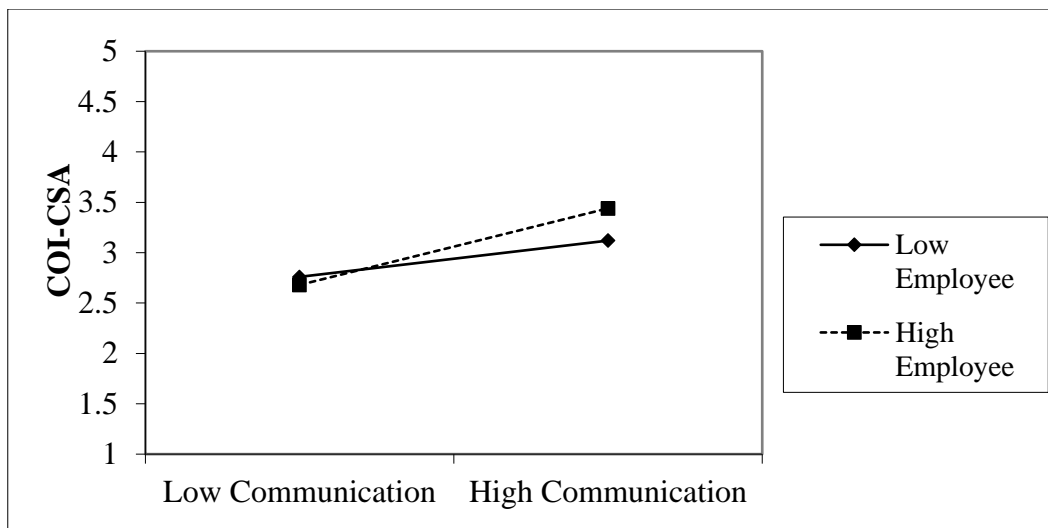


Figure 2: Employee Moderation



Source: Authors based on Amos outputs