Growing brand ambassadors: The role of affective commitment, person-organization fit and networking behaviors in the context of Alumni networks*

Daniela Aliberti†, Rita Bissola‡, Barbara Imperatori§,
Francesca Mochi**

Abstract

Informal and intra-organizational social gatherings can be occasions for individuals to positively talk about their organization and engage in employer branding activities. Relevant to this scenario is the attitude of individuals to networking, as well as the fit that they perceive to their organization. However, the literature misses considering a relatively new, while relevant, HR practice able to influence employer branding: the Alumni network. In this

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study, we look at individual-level antecedents of organization employer branding by considering intra-organizational networking behaviors, as well as the perceived fit with the organization. Moreover, we theorize the role of affective organizational commitment as a mediator of these main relations. Using a quantitative methodology, we analyze the data collected on a sample of 138 employees working in two knowledge-intensive firms, representing contexts of the potential implementation of Alumni networks. Results, implications for management, and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: networking behavior, organizational affective commitment, employer brand ambassador

1. Introduction

Breaks from the daily working routine—sports events or going out for a drink with colleagues—could result in the sharing of ideas and best practices, thus becoming useful for the organization.

These situations can also become occasions for people for talking positively about their organization. In the extant literature, this is called positive word-of-mouth (or WOM) and it denotes moments when an employee becomes an employer brand ambassador (e.g., Dossena, Mochi, Bissola and Imperatori, 2021; Figurska and Matuska, 2013). To be an employer brand ambassador means to be prone to talk positively about the organization with other people outside the workplace (Mochi, Bissola, and Imperatori, 2019). Research confirms that the so-called word-of-mouth can lead to a snowball effect, which indicates that more people will positively talk about the firm overall (Dossena, Mochi, Bissola, and Imperatori, 2021).

This mechanism is considered a cheap and powerful tool to improve organization employer branding (e.g., Chen and Berger, 2016; Mochi, Bissola and Imperatori, 2019; Ya, Vadakkepatt, and Joshi, 2015). The positive tone of voice and the benevolent words coming from committed people can substantially benefit the organizational image. Employees, when affectively committed to their organization, will have a higher propensity to engage in positive word-of-mouth (Sicilia, Delgado-Ballester and Palazon, 2016; Tuškej Golob and Podnar, 2013), disregard negative brand information (Sicilia, Delgador-Ballester and Palazon, 2016; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli, 2007) and carry the brand's values, culture, and message into the world, as brand ambassadors (McEwen and Robison, 2007).

Literature shows that employer branding can be divided into internal and external. Internal employer branding is addressed to existing and leaving employees and is implemented by development programs to build corporate culture. External employer branding is addressed to active professionals and other stakeholders, and it is implemented by the effective use of modern communication channels (e.g., social media) (e.g., Bissola and Imperatori, 2014a; Mochi, Bissola and Imperatori, 2019) and by the relationships that arise in different social communities (e.g., academia communities, students' communities) (Figurska and Matuska, 2013;

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Mochi, Bissola and Imperatori, 2017). Recently, there is a growing interest in a particular type of community, the so-called Alumni network, that many companies are developing and implementing. We suggest that this community can be a fruitful HR tool to develop both internal and external employer branding.

Alumni networks are formal networks populated by former employees of a given organization (Dachner and Makarius, 2021). These networks can be used by the HR department as a practice to activate business relationships creating and reinforcing organization cross-alliances via former employees, manage careers across organizations, attract talents, as well to recruit the so-called 'boomerang employees' returning to their former employers (Bardon, Josserand and Villesèche, 2015; Carnahan and Somaya, 2015). Furthermore, Alumni networks can promote identity, reinforcing the sense of professional and organizational belonging that lasts beyond the employment contract. Alumni networks can represent an ideal way of building and maintaining a long-standing relationship between organizations and their talented former employees (Hoffman, Casnocha and Yeh, 2013; Hoffman, 2014) that can continue to be brand ambassadors of the former employer.

In other words, being part of an Alumni network, both for current employees (which would be *potential* Alumni) and former employees, could be a way to activate brand ambassador behaviors and actions that can be of great value for former organizations. With this research, we have a twofold goal. First, we aim to uncover if the employees' networking behaviors and their perceived fit with the organization can support their willingness to become employer brand ambassadors. Second, we aim to explore if an affective commitment has a role in the previous relationship.

Our research aims can be described by the following research questions: Can intra-organizational networking behaviors induce employees to become employer brand ambassadors? How the perceived person-organization fit pushes employees to become brand ambassadors? Is organizational affective commitment the underneath mechanism that induces employees with certain networking behaviors and perceived person-organization fit to become employer brand ambassadors?

To address these questions, we reviewed the above-mentioned theoretical constructs, and we developed the research model that is depicted in Figure 1. We tested our hypotheses with a sample of employees from two Italian branches of knowledge-intensive firms. The two companies were designing an Alumni network shortly at the time of the data collection. Our results indicate that being prone to engage in organizational social functions (and to "internally network"), as well as perceiving a high personal fit with the organization will increase the affective organizational commitment, which in turn leads to becoming an organization brand ambassador.

2. Theoretical framework

Literature has now long claimed that well-designed Human Resource management practices and tools – especially those aimed at generating high

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commitment – play a crucial role in the company value and have positive effects on organizational performance (e.g., Bissola and Imperatori, 2014b; Boselie, Dietz, and Boon, 2005; McLean and Collins, 2011; Paauwe, 2009; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005; Purcell, Kinnie, Swart, Rayton and Hutchinson, 2009). The Human Resource 'exit' practices, that help the organization to manage the end of the employment relationship, such as Alumni networks, can also have a positive role in the employee-organization relationship.

The rise of corporate Alumni networks is not a new phenomenon, but it is only in recent years that scholars started to debate the effects of maintaining ties with former co-workers by referring to those as Alumni (Bardon et al., 2015; Walsh, Halgin, and Huang, 2018).

Alumni networks can be defined as formal systems populated by former employees of the focal firm (Bardon et al., 2015). They are characterized by a variety of initiatives (from online groups to whole infrastructures of events) and they are present in various industries, especially the knowledge-intensive contexts, such as technology and consulting companies (Dachner and Makarius, 2021).

An Alumni network represents a unique form of collaboration between an organization (or former employer) and its ex-employees (former employees) which can allow for reciprocal benefits in terms of career-long relationships and employer branding (Hoffman et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2014). While the organization holds the possibility to keep in touch with ex-employees and rehire them to exploit and nurture their talent (e.g., Schweer Assimakopoulos, Cross and Thomas, 2012); at the same time, former employees have the possibility to maintain relationships with their former colleagues, to take part to events and to keep updated about what the organization is doing and related career opportunities (e.g., Koc-Menard, 2009). In brief, Alumni do not fully leave the former employer being continuously tied through the network. Consequently, former employees could continue to engage in extra-role behaviors such as knowledge sharing (Snyder, Stewart, and Shea, 2021) and being brand ambassadors of the former employee.

2.1 Intra-organizational networking behaviors, perceived fit with the organization, and organizational affective commitment

Some studies have discussed the role of individual behaviors and socialization tactics in understanding the relationship between the individuals, their organizations, and their social surroundings (e.g., Aliberti & Paolino, 2019; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Simosi, 2010).

The ability to build a network (or 'networking') is considered an important career management competence in the era of boundaryless careers (e.g., Carnahan and Somaya, 2015). While organizations provide the tools for allowing networking to happen in and out, studies have shown employees can rely on different socialization tactics themselves and personal attitudes to build a relationship with their organization (Forret and Dougherty, 2001). Networking behavior can be defined as "individuals' attempts to develop and maintain relationships with others

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who have the potential to assist them in their work or career" (Forret and Dougherty, 2001: 284).

Morrow (2011) found that socialization and interpersonal relationships are positively related to high levels of affective commitment. Similarly, Mercurio (2015) states that socialization and social networking are two of the strongest Human Resource management practices that affect levels of affective commitment. For these reasons, we argue that the propensity of employees to be active in networking activities with coworkers and supervisors and to participate in social activities of the organization could be a predictor of affective organizational commitment defined as emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991).

Perceived fit with the organization (P-O fit) could be another antecedent of affective commitment. P-O fit is associated with different positive outcomes among which affective organizational commitment is one of the most critical. P-O fit is particularly important in the context of organizational commitment because the employee-organization value congruence contributes to the reinforcement of the emotional ties with the organization (van Vianen, Shen, and Chuang., 2011).

The attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) framework can explain the relationship between P-O fit and organizational commitment. According to ASA, individuals prefer organizations that match their characteristics, with value congruence being one of the most critical aspects to consider (Schneider, Goldstein, and Smith, 1995). Individuals and organizations value alignment helps create stronger bonds, also the affective ones, between employee and the organization (Astakhova, 2016).

2.2 Organizational affective commitment and employer brand ambassadorship

Organization studies have defined affective organizational commitment as "an individual's attitude towards the organization, consisting of a strong belief in, and acceptance of, an organization's goals, willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982: 27).

Other studies have also shown that affective commitment is positively related to extra-role behaviors (Liu, 2009; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky, 2002; Shore and Wayne, 1993; Williams and Anderson, 1991). The decision to activate an extra role behavior is one of the characteristics of the employer brand ambassadors that outside the workplace and besides the working hours continue to positively talk about and support their organization.

Employees who are committed to the firm "are willing to give something of themselves to contribute to the organization's well-being" (Mowday et al., 1982: 27), and organizational affective commitment is found to have a positive impact on employees' awareness of their impact on corporate reputation (Helm, 2011).

The relationship between organizational affective commitment and employer brand ambassadorship can also be explained by the meta-theory of Social Exchange. Social Exchange Theory proposes that employee's behavior is the result of a social

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or/and economic exchange (Deluga, 1994). In economic exchanges, the relationship between employees and an organization is defined and regulated by a contract. On the contrary, in social exchanges employees and organizations are loyal to each other and they share feelings of liking and respect (Zeinabadi and Salehi, 2011). Social exchange relationships are based on reciprocity that induces employees to engage in extra-role behaviors becoming employer brand ambassadors. Employees with high levels of affective organizational commitment generally reciprocate with positive behaviors, such as positive WOM. Organizational commitment, especially the affective one, implies a high level of identification with the organization's goals and values and the willingness to an extra effort activating brand ambassador behaviors (Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979; Zeinabadi and Salehi, 2011).

Drawing on the above-mentioned literature, we suggest the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Organization affective commitment mediates the relationship between intra-organizational networking behaviors and employer brand ambassadorship.

Hypothesis 2: Organization affective commitment mediates the relationship between perceived organization fit and employer brand ambassadorship.

Figure 1 depicts our research model.

Figure 1: Research model

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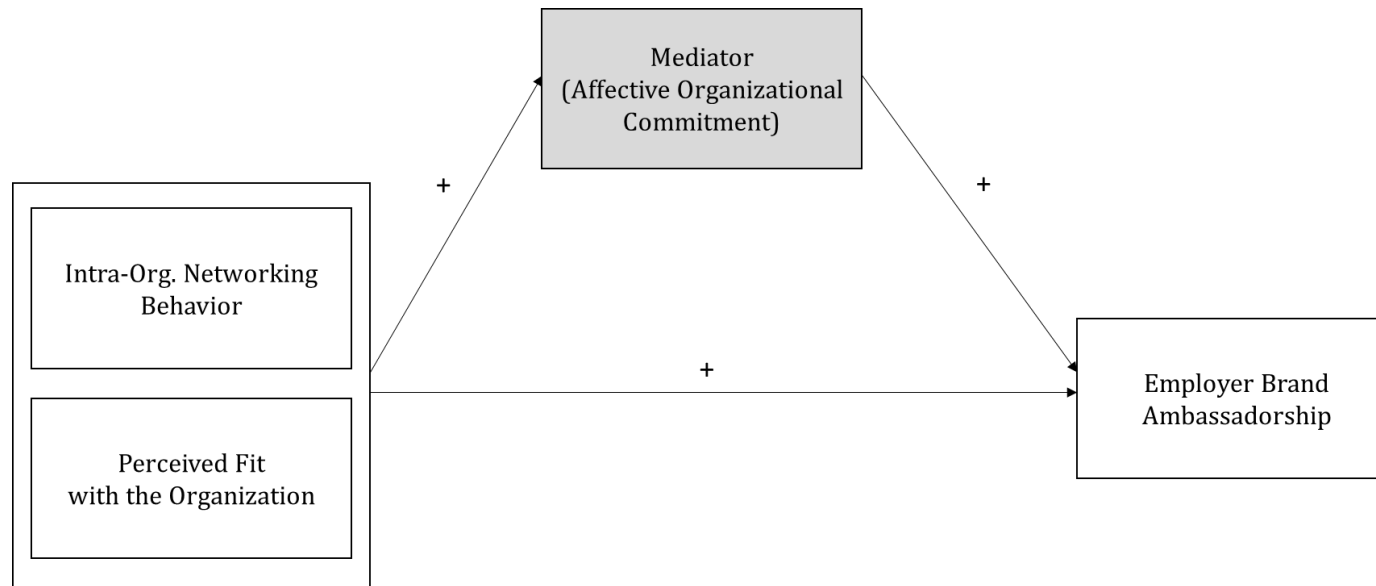
3. Methods

3.1 Context of the study: knowledge-intensive firms

To test our hypotheses, we investigate the context of knowledge-intensive firms, as those drawing "upon investment in intellectual resources to create value, rather than in labor or capital" (Kärreman, 2010: 1406; Starbuck, 1992). These could include international professional service firms (i.e., legal services), as well as large multi-firm conglomerates, often characterized by investments in human resources with both an internal and external orientation (e.g., Lengnick-Hall, Andrade, and Drake, 2009; Kärreman, 2010; Rodwell and Teo, 2004).

These firms have often been proven to be the ideal setting to study Human Resource management systems, strategies, and practices. Extant literature highlighted that they are characterized by highly professionalized workforces, knowledge-intensity approaches to human resource management (e.g., von Nordenflycht, 2010), and an innovative attitude to human relations management to a large extent (e.g., Hitt, Bierman, Shimizu and Kochhar, 2001; Rodwell and Teo, 2004).

In the context of these firms, the so-called Alumni networks can include very diverse initiatives (i.e., social media groups, professional events); these Human Resource tools are becoming more and more diffused in knowledge-intensive contexts (such as multi-business companies) (Dachner and Makarius, 2021).

Such evidence, with the theoretical assumptions summarized above, has motivated our choice to collect data from two international organizations, an international law firm and a multi-business firm, planning to implement an Alumni network at the time of data collection.

3.2 Data collection and research methodology

In order to test our hypotheses, we employed a quantitative methodology by submitting a survey to the professionals of an Italian international law firm, and the employees of the Italian branches of a US multi-business firm. These firms are both characterized by a knowledge-intensive approach to human resource practices.

As for the international legal firm, studies have shown that the professionals working in these firms, ranging from first-year associates to partners with decades of legal experience, are the ideal candidates for the study of HR practices with an external orientation (e.g., Heinz, Nelson, and Laumann, 2001). The same considerations hold for the choice of a multi-national US firm focused on engineering services with a knowledge-intensive approach to its human resources (Rodwell and Teo, 2004).

Before beginning the survey, participants were informed of the intention of their firm to design and implement an Alumni network. We collected 41 observations from the first firm (legal), and 97 observations from the second one (multi-business). Overall, we collected data from 138 individuals operating in two

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knowledge-intensive firms. 37% of the sample was composed of women; the average age of respondents was 43 years, with an average working experience of 10 years in their current firm. Three respondents did not report their age.

To test our hypotheses, we adapted existing validated scales for the constructs of our interest: goodwill to speak about the firm outside, i.e., Employer Brand Ambassadorship, Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior, Affective Organizational Commitment, and Perceived Organization Fit (Cable and DeRue, 2002; Eisenberger, Karagonlar, Stinglhamber, Neves, Becker, Gonzalez-Morales, and Steiger-Mueller, 2010; Raghuram, Gajedran, Xiangmin, Somaya, 2017; Forret and Dougherty, 2001). Adapted measures and sample items are reported in Table 1, with their respective sources.

Table 1: Variables' measures, sample items, and sources

Variable	Adapted Sample Items	Source
Employer brand ambassadorship	Would you rate [*company name*] as a great place to work compared to similar organizations? Would you recommend [*company name*] to others as a workplace?	Adapted from the Goodwill to former employer by Raghuram and others (2017)
Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior	(Are you usually prone to) to attend social function of your organization? (Are you usually prone to) go to lunch with your current supervisor?	Adapted from the Networking Behavior measure by Forret and Dougherty (2001)
Affective Organizational Commitment	I really feel as if [*company name*] problems are my own. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to [*company name*] (Reversed item)	Eisenberger et al., 2010
Perceived Organization Fit	My personal values match my organization's values and culture (*Person-Organization fit*)	Cable and DeRue, (2002)
	There is a good fit between what my job offers me and what I am looking for in a job (*Needs-Supplies fit*)	
	My abilities and training are a good fit with the requirements of my job (*Demands-Abilities fit*)	

As our research model shows (see Figure 1), our dependent variable is represented by Employer Brand Ambassadorship; the main independent variables

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are Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior and Perceived Organizational Fit; the mediator is represented by Affective Organizational Commitment.

We built a standardized measure for our dependent variable, Employer Brand Ambassadorship (alpha = 0.87), and we did the same for our mediating variable, Affective Organizational Commitment (alpha = 0.86), and for our independent variables, Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior (alpha = 0.87), and Perceived Organization Fit (alpha = 0.94).

To test our hypotheses, we employed structural equation modeling (henceforth SEM) (Breitsohl, 2019). We also ran simple regressions to produce the test of the main effects while controlling for the demographic characteristics of participants (gender, age, years of experience in the firm).

4. Results

We report descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix in Table 2, followed by the results of regression analyses in Table 3a (SEM) and 3b (main effects and demographic controls).

Figures 2.a and 2.b graphically represent the hypothesized mediation models, highlighting the main results of the SEM analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlation analyses

	Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Employer Brand Ambassadorship	5.29	1.17	-					
2	Intra-Org. Netw. Behavior	4.99	1.17	0.40*	-				
3	Perceived Org. Fit	4.97	1.01	0.73*	0.35*	-			
4	Affective Organ. Commitment	5.17	1.18	0.52*	0.28*	0.59*	-		
5	Gender (1=woman)	0.37	0.48	0.10*	-0.02	0.10*	0.07*	-	
6	Experience in the Org.	10	8.40	-0.11*	-0.26*	0.17*	0.16*	-0.13*	-
8	Age	43	10.52	-0.12*	-0.23*	0.13*	0.11*	-0.13*	0.66*

*p < 0.05
N. of obs: 138 (full sample), 97 (correlations involving the variable Perceived Org. Fit)

In Table 3a, we report the results of the mediation analyses, followed by Figures 2.a and 2.b. As the tables show, and the figures clarify, Affective Organization Commitment mediates the relations between Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior, Perceived Fit with the Organization, and the Employer brand Ambassadorship.

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As we show in Table 3b, our independent variables positively predict Employer Brand Ambassadorship, while controlling for the demographic characteristics of participants.

Model 0 includes only demographic controls. Models 1 and 2 show that Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior positively predicts Employer Brand Ambassadorship (Coeff. = 0.48; p-value < 0.01), and the same holds for Affective Organization Commitment (Coeff. = 0.65; p-value < 0.01). Model 3 reports that Perceived Organization Fit positively predicts Ambassadorship as well (Coeff. = 0.93; p-value < 0.01). Last, Model 4 includes Intra-Organizational Networking Behavior, Affective Organization Commitment, as well as Perceived Organization Fit, with demographic controls. In this last model, the positive effect of the independent variables on Ambassadorship is confirmed.
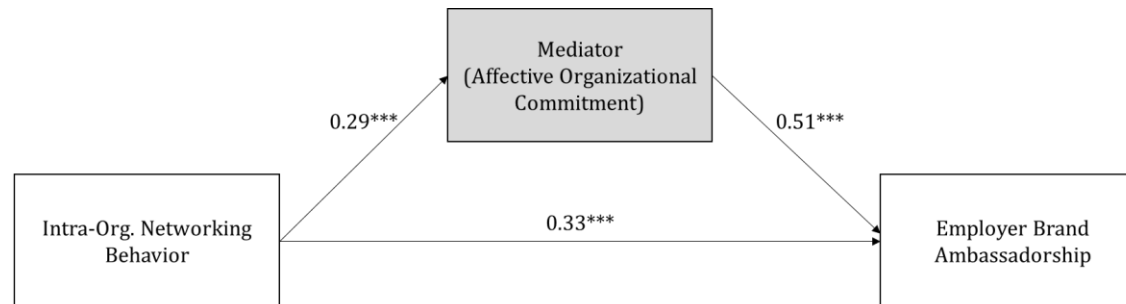
Table 3a: Results of the mediation analyses

	Mediator (Affective Org. Commitment)				
	β	*SE*	*z*	*p*	*95% CI*
IV: Intra-Org. Networking Behavior					
Path Coefficients Predicting Mediator:					
Intra-Org. Netw. Behav. → Mediator	0.29	0.08	3.41	<0.01	[1.22; 0.45]
Path Coefficients Predicting Employer Brand Ambassadorship:					
Mediator → Ambassadorship	0.51	0.08	6.25	<0.01	[0.35; 0.68]
Intra-Org. Netw. Behav. → Ambassadorship	0.33	0.08	3.86	<0.01	[0.16; 0.49]
N. of Obs: 138					
IV: Perceived Fit with the Org.					
Path Coefficients Predicting Mediator:					
Perceived Fit → Mediator	0.56	0.08	7.21	<0.01	[0.40; 0.71]
Path Coefficients Predicting Employer Brand Ambassadorship:					
Mediator → Ambassadorship	0.21	0.10	2.03	<0.05	[0.00; 0.41]
Perceived Fit → Ambassadorship	0.74	0.09	7.56	<0.01	[0.58; 0.93]
coefficients, standard errors, z- and p-values, and confidence intervals are indicated N. of Obs: 97					

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Table 3b: Results of the simple regression analyses predicting employer brand Ambassadorship
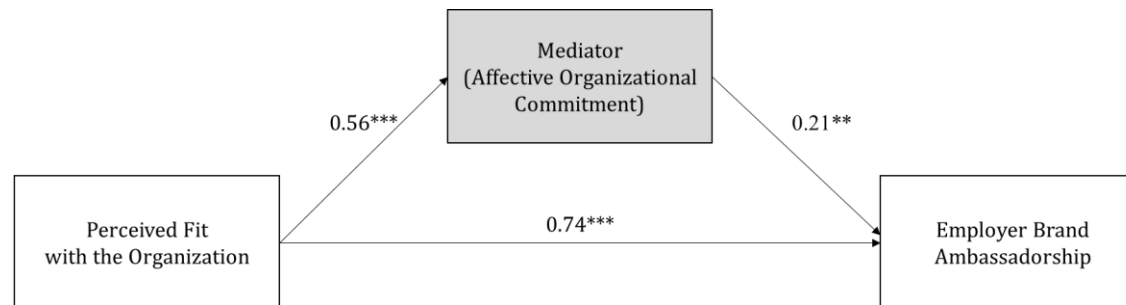
Variables	Model 0 Demographic Controls	Model 1 Main Effect: Intra-Org. Netw. Beh.	Model 2 Main Effect: Intra-Org. Netw. Beh. with Mediator	Model 3 Main Effect: Perceived Org. Fit	Model 4 Main Effect: Perceived Org. Fit with Mediator
Intra-Org. Netw. Behav.		0.48***	0.27***	-	-
Affect. Organ. Commit.		-	0.55***	-	0.19*
Perceived Org. Fit		-	-	0.96***	0.83***
Gender (1=woman)	0.20	0.20	0.09	0.16	0.15
Experience in the Org.	0.00	0.00	-0.01	-0.00	-0.00
Age	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
_cons	0.27	-0.01	0.25	0.05	0.06
N. of Obs.	135	135	135	95	95
R. squared	0.02	0.17	0.37	0.57	0.59

***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.10$
N. of Obs. = 135 across Models 0-2; = 95 in Models 3 and 4 as the authors were not able to collect observations for Perceived Org. Fit in one of the two firms involved in the study.

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Figure 2.a: Results of mediation analysis

*p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

Figure 2.b: Results of mediation analysis

*p < 0.10 **p < 0.05 ***p < 0.01

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Our results indicate that being more prone to engage in networking activities inside the organization will create a higher commitment to the organization at an affective level; this will lead to speaking about the organization outside, suggesting a positive 'word of mouth' and becoming an ambassador of the organization. Our results show that the same considerations hold for individuals perceiving a good fit with their organization.

5. Discussion and managerial implications

Our results suggest that the networking behaviors within the organization represent an antecedent for the affective commitment to the organization. This result corroborates those studies arguing that socialization and interpersonal relationships positively correlate to high levels of affective commitment (Mercurio, 2015; Morrow, 2011). To this, by testing the first stage of the mediation model (see Figure 1), we add that there is a causal relationship between intra-organizational networking behaviors and affective organizational commitment.

As for the second stage of the mediation, our results demonstrate that holding an emotional and personal commitment to the organization will increase ambassadorship. This result is consistent with the literature suggesting that individuals will be more prone to contribute to organizational wellbeing and reputation when they are personally committed to it (Helm, 2011; Liu, 2009; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky., 2002; Shore and Wayne, 1993; Williams and Anderson, 1991). Furthermore, we show that the mediating role of affective organizational commitment holds for the relationship between perceived organization fit and ambassadorship. First, these results are consistent with the ASA framework arguing that individuals will positively speak about the organizations to which they feel more attached (Astakhova, 2016; van Vianen, Shen, and Chuang, 2011). We add that this positive reaction of committed employees will turn into positive word-of-mouth.

Extant studies have missed explaining the mechanisms by which individuals positively speak about their firm outside the organization's walls. In this study, we have started to provide an answer by considering individual Affective Organizational Commitment as a mediator of the relationship between Intra-Organizational Networking personal inclinations and the goodwill to speak about the organization outside becoming an employer ambassador. We do the same concerning the perceived fit between an individual' values and the organization.

Contemporary Human Resource management practices include both internal and external oriented activities (Rodwell and Teo, 2004). Within the context of our study—knowledge-intensive firms—we start to show that, among these practices, Alumni networks could represent a crucial HRM tool that organizations should invest in, not only as a set of practices 'exiled' in the corner of HR but as something able to create a bridge between talent management, the overall business and employer branding directed outside the organization. Indeed, we show that the commitment to the organization at an affective level is able to mediate the

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inclination of individuals to network inside their organization, and their fit to the organization, with the goodwill to speak about the organization outside using positive word-of-mouth. This means that the 'social' characteristics behind HR practices are becoming more and more relevant, opening a space for the study of Alumni initiatives.

Moreover, if we reflect on the role of organizational and individual values, Alumni networks can also represent a tool by which these values emerge and thanks to which organizations can balance business and their employer branding objectives as well.

This study has limitations that represent hints for future research developments. We analyze only two business contexts—international legal service and multi-business firms—both characterized by a knowledge-intensive approach. With this respect, first, we could not collect data on the fit with the organization in the legal service firm. Having to assume the participation of extant employees in future Alumni networks implied the suggestion to 'leave' the company to the future; therefore, we were not allowed to collect data on some specific items, in order not to irritate respondents. Second, we believe that future studies should try to replicate our model by keeping into account the characteristics of each business context and its employees and professionals. Future studies could also focus on the existence of differences in perceptions of networking activities across different groups of individuals (i.e., minorities). Lastly, in our work, Alumni networks represent one of the conditions of the context of our study (i.e., firms sharing the intention to implement an Alumni network with their employees). Future studies should test the same relations using a sample of effective members of Alumni networks.

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