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Integrated community-based internal branding - A holistic approach to internal branding for B2B organizations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study proposes and tests the effectiveness of an integrated approach to community-based internal branding (CBIB) in a business-to-business setting. It integrates classical and contemporary views on internal branding, integrating community-building activities into the proposed internal branding framework ensuring a holistic model of co-creation of a corporate brand identity. It also examines the moderation effect of employee's personal, job, and community-related characteristics on the relationships in the proposed model.
Design/methodology/approach: This paper presents a detailed narrative review to propose a conceptual model and uses a quantitative research design to test a set of hypotheses using structural equation modeling on 400 responses collected through a survey.
Findings: This study finds that integrated CBIB is a viable approach for implementing internal branding. The effectiveness of building employee brand commitment is demonstrated through the testing of the model. We also find that employee's age, gender, organizational tenure, membership duration (in the brand community), education level, customer interaction, leadership status, and participation in brand fests moderate the proposed relationships in the CBIB model.
Research limitations/implications: One key limitation of this paper is that it lacks the multi-cultural and multi-industry perspective, which, given promising results in the current context, may be investigated in future studies.
Practical implications: The paper proposes a community mode of implementing internal branding in a B2B setting and suggests a way to create brand champions across the organization.
Originality/value: As per the authors' knowledge, this paper is the first quantitative investigation of integrated community-based internal branding.

1. Introduction

A brand must deliver its promise (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) or the effort that goes into market research, positioning, and creation of brand identity is likely to be lost (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). No doubt, the internal branding philosophy of a firm directly influences its brand image (Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011). In business-to-business (B2B) and service firms, front-line sales employees, and support staff are key to delivering brand experience to the customer. Further, large B2B firms, due to their extensive employee base, complex structure, and multi-national spread, are at a greater risk of presenting mixed brand messages (Lee, 2021; Martin, 2021).

Research in the areas of internal branding, and organizational behavior reveals that a strong brand identity may be built by treating employees as internal customers (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Berry, Hensel, & Burke, 1976; Grönroos, 1985, 1997). Despite this assertion, when it comes to the implementation of internal branding in the B2B context, the classical view of internal branding recommends a top-down approach (Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic, & Koporcic, 2020). The brand identity is fixed and strongly controlled by the firm, and is uni-directionally communicated to external stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2020; Kapferer, 2012). On the other hand, the contemporary school of thought is shaped by the proliferation of digitalization and the internet, and it highlights the limited efficacy of a control-driven, top-down internal branding in the current B2B landscape (Iglesias et al., 2020; Iglesias, Ind, & Schultz, 2022; Saraniemi, 2022). At the core of this

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school of thought is the idea that brand identity is fluid, and is constantly co-created and developed through active conversation with all stakeholder groups across corporate brand interfaces (Iglesias et al., 2020; Iglesias et al., 2022).

Among all stakeholder groups critical to a B2B firm, the role of the internal stakeholders in the co-creation of the corporate brand identity cannot be over-emphasized. This idea of co-creating or developing a shared understanding of brand identity is at the heart of a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Thus, the brand communities developed and run by employees within a B2B organization can drive co-creation by giving the employees several opportunities to socialize, share brand stories, and in the process develop their knowledge and commitment to the corporate brand (Devasagayam, Buff, Aurand, & Judson, 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Saraniemi, 2022).

Internal branding is a promising mode of engaging employees around the corporate brand and four-decade-long research literature stands witness to this (Berry et al., 1976; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009; Punjaisri, Wilson, & Evanschitzky, 2008; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). However, extant academic research has examined internal branding usually from the organization's perspective (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). There is a dearth of internal branding research in general related to the B2B context (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010), and in particular pertaining to the organization's efforts in addressing the employees' need for socialization and ways of activating this need as an effective internal branding strategy (Devasagayam et al., 2010; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Even as extant literature on socialization has abundant evidence of the effectiveness of customer engagement in online and offline brand communities in building brand commitment among its members (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the application of socialization is limited in the context of internal branding (Devasagayam et al., 2010; Saraniemi, 2022).

The current study proposes a community-based internal branding (CBIB) approach to building brand commitment among employees in a B2B setting. In doing so, on the one hand, this study attempts to reconcile both the classical and the contemporary views on internal branding by integrating community-building activities into the proposed internal branding framework ensuring a holistic model of co-creation of a corporate brand identity. On the other hand, for building brand commitment, this study extends the concept of brand communities to include a community of employees as brand ambassadors. This study has the following research objectives: (1) To extend and test a community-based approach to internal branding, termed hereafter as ‘community-based internal branding’ or CBIB, that integrates existing organization-driven operationalizations of internal branding with those driven by socialization in a community of employee brand ambassadors in the B2B context; (2) To measure the effectiveness of CBIB in building brand knowledge and commitment among brand ambassadors; and (3) To identify the key moderating factors in the relationship between employee-driven CBIB, and brand knowledge and commitment.

The rest of the paper is arranged as follows. The next section presents a review of literature on internal branding, brand communities and organizational behavior. The narrative review of literature on internal branding, brand communities, social identity, and theories of intentional action is used to propose the CBIB model along with the associated hypotheses. The following section presents the methodology, which includes research design and data collection followed by analyses and findings (based on structural equation modeling). Four alternate CBIB frameworks for co-creation, viz., employee-driven, communication-driven, leadership-driven, and HR-driven, are presented and compared with the main conceptual model. We conclude with a discussion on theoretical implications, practical implications, and limitations of this research, along with future research directions.

2. Literature review

A review of the germane literature on internal branding in the B2B context is undertaken to uncover key approaches operationalizing it. Positioning a brand internally is vital to B2B and service-oriented companies as employees in such organizations are key touchpoints for customers and are indispensable for the delivery of the brand promise (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Iglesias et al., 2020).

In this narrative review, we explore the classical, organization-driven (Fig. 1a) and contemporary, socialization-driven approaches (Fig. 1b) to building a corporate brand identity by following the literature on internal branding and multi-stakeholder view of corporate branding. This is followed by an integration of these two approaches using the brand community literature to propose the conceptual model on integrated community-based approach to internal branding (Fig. 2). Finally, the integrated approach to corporate brand identity is compared with the approaches driven by employees, leadership, HR, and communications functions (Fig. 3).

2.1. Brand-related outcomes of internal branding

We start by introducing and defining two key outcomes of building a strong internal brand – brand knowledge and brand commitment.

2.1.1. Brand knowledge

Brand knowledge is the sum of employees' understanding about brand strategy, vision, and values. This is an essential prerequisite for building ‘brand champions’ (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999). Here, brand knowledge must be distinguished from another wider, multidimensional construct brand understanding, since both the concepts are mistakenly used interchangeably (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Piehler, 2018). The broader concept of brand understanding is operationalized by brand relevance (employees' understanding of the brand's role in the organizational success), behavior relevance (employees' understanding that their behavior drives the brand's success), brand knowledge (employees' understanding of the brand identity), and brand confidence (employee's confidence in translating brand identity into brand behavior) (Piehler, 2018). A consistent and coherent level of brand knowledge across all employees is the outcome of the right coordination between HR, internal communications and branding functions, and is enhanced by training and orientation (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). In the classical approach to internal branding, employees' brand knowledge is a crucial antecedent to employee brand commitment (King & Grace, 2008).

2.1.2. Brand commitment

Brand commitment is a latent construct that signifies brand-aligned, extra-role behavior, and is driven by compliance on one hand, and identification and internalization on the other Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Building internal brand commitment among employees secures their emotional buy-in, which, when combined with brand knowledge, ensures their willingness to apply the knowledge in their in-role and extra-role behaviors (Thomson et al., 1999).

2.2. Organization-driven view of internal branding

There is no denying the fact that B2B contexts, services and non-profit industries thrive a lot on the ability of employees to interface with potential and existing customers (Grönroos, 1985, 1997; Hesse, Schmidt, & Baumgarth, 2021; Lings, 2004). A projection of the organization's brand to the outside world is dependent on the effectiveness with which employees have internalized the organization's brand identity. Early research in this context marks the vitality of brand-orientation among B2B firms and the resulting organization-driven internal branding efforts to define and communicate corporate brand identity, eventually leading to superior brand performance (Anees-ur-

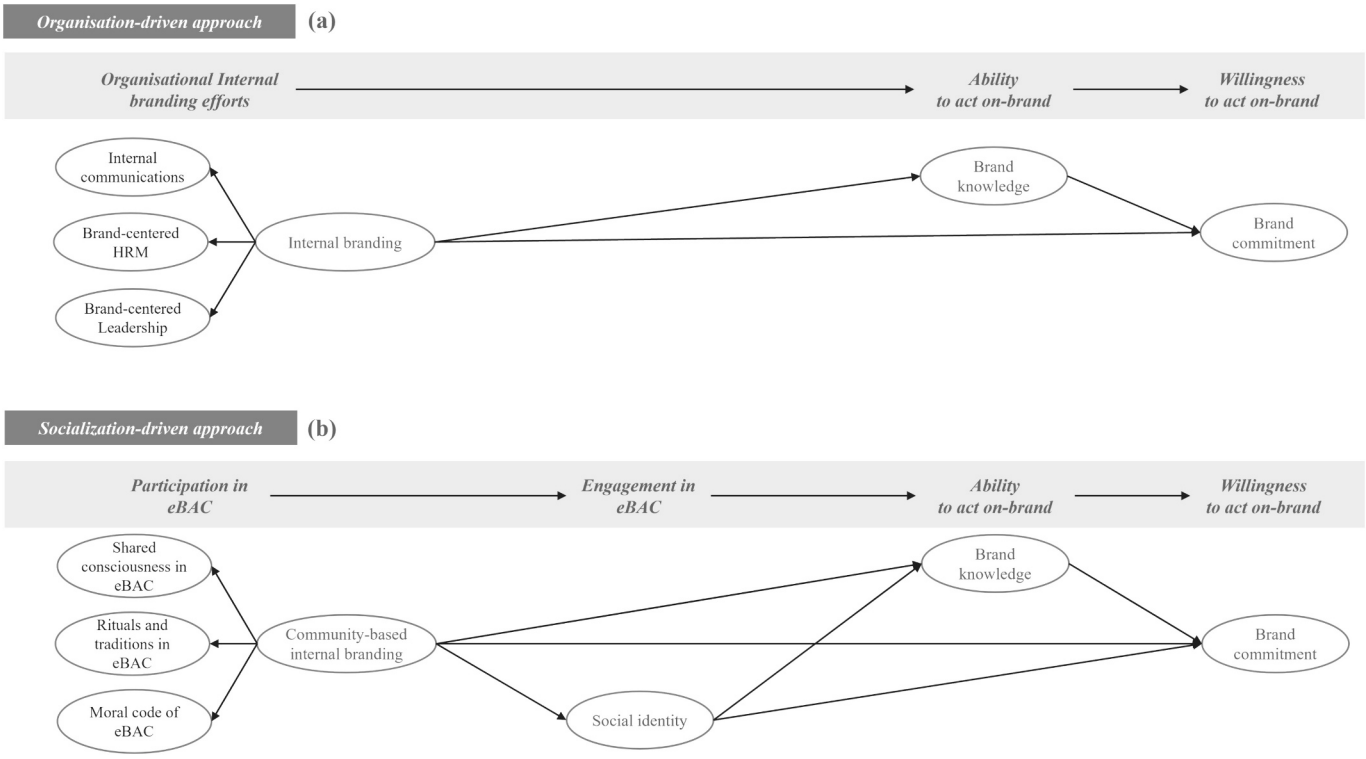


Fig. 1. Two theoretical approaches to internal branding (Fig. 2 is based on these theoretical approaches).

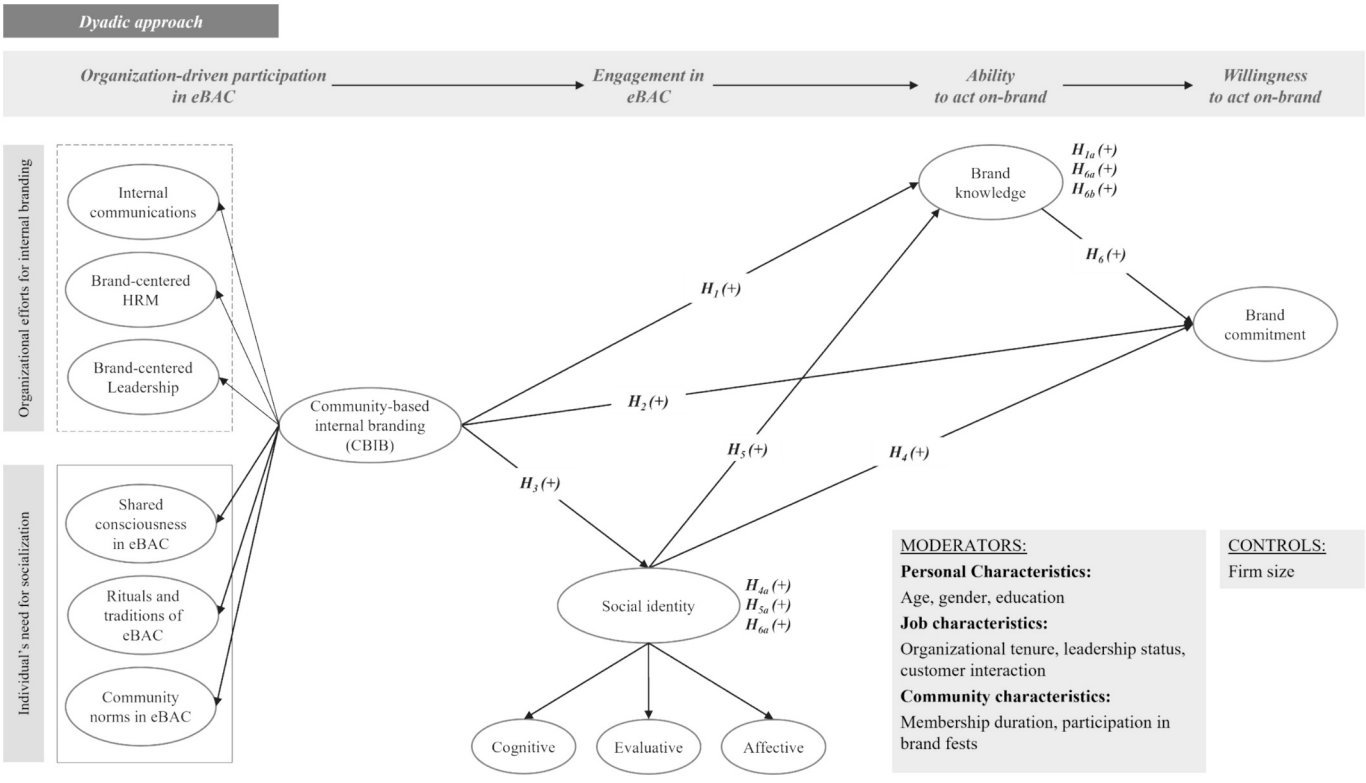


Fig. 2. CBIB – The community approach to building brand commitment (Conceptual model tested in this research).

Rehman, Wong, Sultan, & Merrilees, 2018; Baumgarth, 2010; Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). The primary objective of brand orientation is to ensure that employees have developed brand knowledge and brand commitment and deliver on the brand promise (Saraniemi, 2022; Thomson et al., 1999; Urde et al., 2013). The classical view of corporate branding asserts that if a strategically coordinated effort toward internal branding is made, employees' identification with the organization's brand is nurtured to such an extent that they start 'living the brand' by

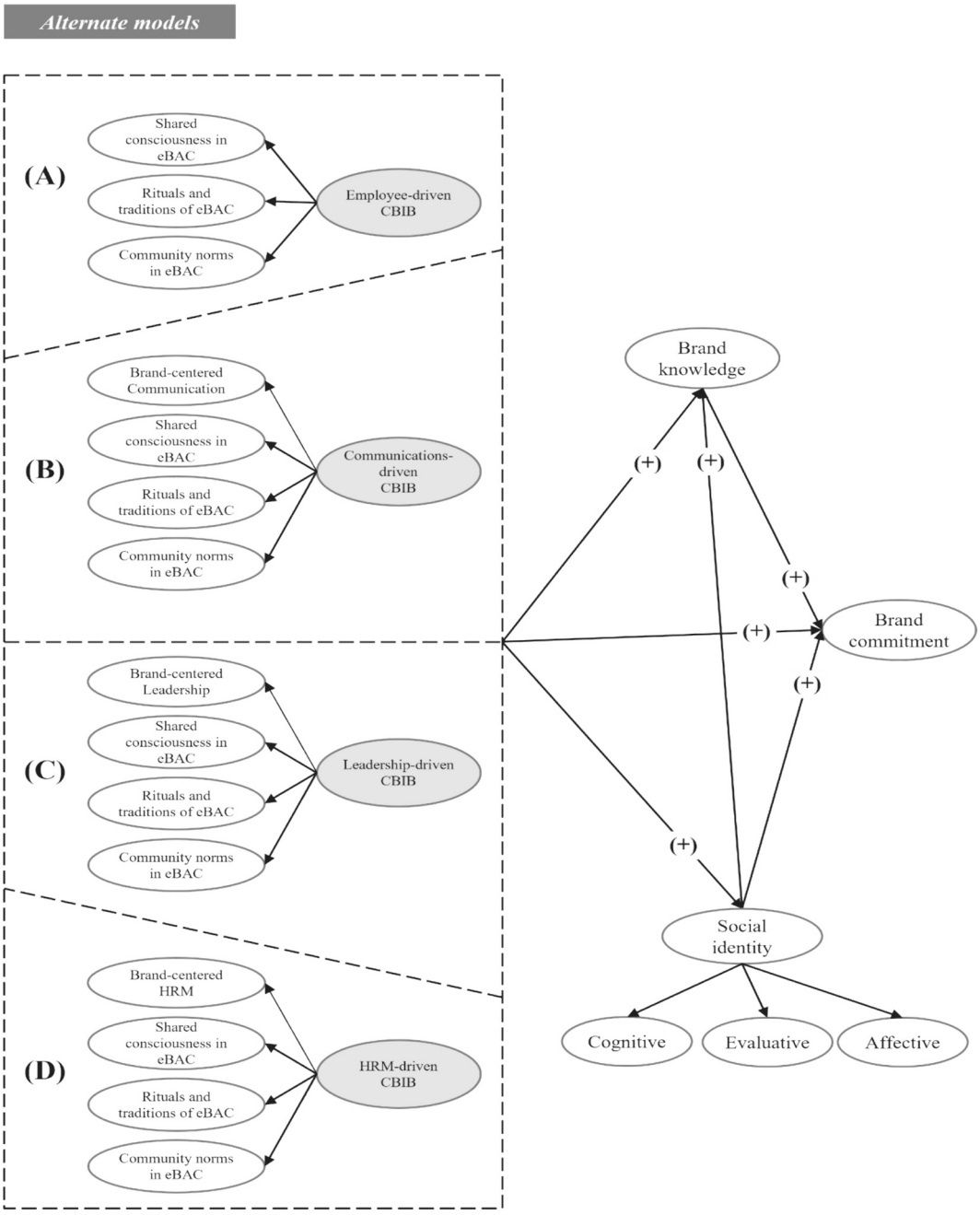


Fig. 3. Conceptualizing four alternate CBIB models* (See Tables 7a and 7b).
Note: * In additional to these four models, we compare all integrated model (proposed model) and classical Organization-driven model.

assimilating and exercising the brand values in their work activities (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Iglesias et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 1999). According to the classical, top-down view (Merrilees, 2016), organizations build internal brand in three possible ways – 1) when leaders exercise brand-centered transformational leadership (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009), 2) when HR function achieves and maintains brand-orientation (Aurand et al., 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), and 3) through brand-centered internal communication (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

The brand-centered transformational leadership style encourages employees to adopt brand building behavior with internalization of the brand identity by positively affecting employee autonomy, role identity, and their connection with internal brand identity (Morhart et al., 2009). Further, by aligning the hiring, training, and development functions with the corporate brand, the brand-centered HR helps employees in gaining knowledge and developing a favorable attitude toward the brand (Aurand et al., 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). This process ensures that the "internal touch points" are brand-oriented via values, norms, and artefacts (culturally-orientated), and eventually, it starts reflecting in the employees' brand behavior (behaviorally-orientated) when they interact with customers (Aurand et al., 2005; Baumgarth, 2010; Urde et al., 2013). Finally, internal brand communication plays an important role in promoting brand identity among employees (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). A strong internal brand communication is instrumental in developing strong customer-brand relationships by ensuring coherence in brand messages inside and outside the organization (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). The organization-driven view is presented in Fig. 1a.

2.3. Socialization-driven view of internal branding

The classical, top-down approach to internal branding has stood the test of time. However, in the current digitalized B2B scenario, greater opportunities for interaction among organization stakeholder groups open new avenues for co-creating brand identity (Iglesias et al., 2020). Their interpretation and development of brand meaning go through a continuous process of communicating (to corporate brand's stakeholders), internalizing (living the brand), contesting (challenging the brand meaning based on perceptions of stakeholders) and elucidating (discuss and reconcile various interpretations leading to a shared understanding) (Iglesias et al., 2020). Proponents of the contemporary school of thought assert that internal branding should align with the evolving co-creative nature of brand management (Hesse et al., 2021; Iglesias et al., 2020; Schmidt & Steenkamp, 2022). This is achievable when employees, acting on behalf of the brand, effectively conveying the brand identity throughout the organization (Hesse et al., 2021). That is, these employees take the role of (internal) brand ambassadors (also called corporate influencers, Hesse et al., 2021, Smith, Jacobson, & Rudkowski, 2021; or brand champions, Thomson et al., 1999) (Hesse et al., 2021; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018; Smith et al., 2021).

2.3.1. Internal brand communities

Saraniemi (2022) asserts that in a B2B setup, internal brand community is a way to enable co-creation of brand identity among employees as they offer a platform where employees enact and communicate brand values, negotiate brand meaning, contribute to and maintain the corporate brand. This essentially happens by way of employee interaction or socialization (Devasagayam et al., 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018). The idea that an individual, whose behavior is driven by his/her beliefs, attitudes, and intentions is reinforced by the "model of goal directed behavior" (built on the foundations of theory of planned behavior and 'social identity theory') (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Social identity theory states that by deriving their identity from group memberships, people attempt to achieve a positive social identity, and this uplifts their own perception of self-esteem (Rupert, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In a work setting, social identity theory drives the reconciliation of an employee's personal identification with social identification (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999), or in branding parlance, brand identification. The theory of planned behavior establishes that employees' brand-aligned behavior is driven by their intention to live the brand values, which, in turn, is a collective function of the degree of their liking of the brand, the social normative pressure on them to be brand-aligned, and their perception of the ease with which they can follow the brand guidelines (Ajzen, 1991). The model of goal-directed behavior explains how, the individual's intentions in brand communities eventually resonate with group intentions or 'we-intentions' (i.e., shared intentions about the brand and among the members of the social set, Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004), and how they collectively activate an individual's 'desire' to perform the behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000).

A significant amount of research on brand communities is based on customer-based, external brand communities such as Harley Owners Group, and Jeep users' community (McAlexander et al., 2002); more recent literature highlights similarities between consumer brand communities and employee brand ambassador communities (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Schau, Muñiz Jr., & Arnould, 2009). Schau et al. (2009) and Nambisan and Nambisan (2008) identify key practice areas typical of any brand community that mark the collective value creation. Some of these generic practices of brand communities such as socializing, acquiring brand knowledge, having fun, and positioning the community to other members (impression management, Schau et al., 2009) are common to internal and external brand communities (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Therefore, the understanding of brand community dynamics from the external brand community literature offers valuable suggestions for employing the concept for internal brand communities as well (see Saleem & Iglesias, 2016, pp. 49). Therefore, it is fair to say that in a B2B setting, these internal communities of corporate influencers or employee brand ambassadors (Hesse et al., 2021; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018) drive employee's positive brand behavior as enactors of brand values (Saraniemi, 2022).

For a corporate brand, the process of an employee's behavioral transformation in an internal brand community starts with the employee's first exposure to the community. The socialization process in the internal brand community creates a sense of belonging with like-minded employees, keeps them engaged in the community, motivates them to share their brand experience through stories and by exercising the rituals and traditions of a community (Saraniemi, 2022). With repeated participation in an internal brand community, a participant gradually develops an "intrinsic connection" among its members, viz., shared consciousness or we-ness (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Similarly, social pressure, realized by means of community rituals and traditions and a member's moral obligation (driven by community norms), also plays an important role in the continuation of one's membership in a community (Ajzen, 1991; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). These factors activate employee's social identity (cognitive, evaluative, and affective social identity (Ellemers et al., 1999), which in turn drives employee's own value perceptions invoking desires and we-intentions to act on brand (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; Saraniemi, 2022) (Fig. 1b).

In sum, both the classical, organization-driven and the contemporary, socialization-driven approaches to internal branding are promising and hold great potential to be jointly implemented in an organization. Further, the internal brand community can help reconcile these two approaches to propose an integrated community-based internal branding (CBIB) approach.

2.4. The integrated community-based internal branding (CBIB)

Iglesias et al. (2020) argue in favor of the value of a multistakeholder approach in the co-creation of a corporate brand identity and contrast it with a more classical, top-down approach. They propose a setup where the brand meaning is reimagined and negotiated among the stakeholders and brand identity stays fluid. The key enabler in the process of co-creation is elucidating, which expects brand managers to listen, discuss, and reconcile the brand meeting with the stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2020). Therefore, we propose to examine the effects of co-creation among two key stakeholder groups – the brand managers and employee brand ambassadors, on their brand knowledge and brand commitment. Hence, we theorize and test a conceptual model (Fig. 2) that offers an integrated (dyadic) approach to internal branding that supplements the organization-driven, top-down approach with a socialization-driven, bottom-up perspective. We argue that engagement in community-based internal branding efforts activates employees' social identity, which in turn builds their ability (knowledge) and willingness (commitment) to participate in shared cause of the community, eventually, impacting employees' commitment to the corporate brand.

The CBIB construct is grounded in the social psychology and organizational behavior literature, and introduces the concept of 'specialized' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) intra-organizational communities of employees in building a strong internal brand identity (Saraniemi, 2022, Schembri & Latimer, 2016). We define CBIB as "*a cross-functional, organization-wide, sociological effort to co-create and maintain the brand identity by engaging employees in internal brand communities, which are not bounded by cultures and geographies*". The 'sociological efforts' highlight the vitality of addressing the socialization needs of employees, and the 'cross-functional' and 'organization-wide' aspects highlight the crucial role played by (brand-centered) leadership, (brand-centered) HR and (brand) communication functions (Burmann et al., 2009; Mäläskä et al., 2011).

The corporate branding literature aligns with postulates of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and establishes that shared consciousness is a key characteristic of a brand community (Schembri & Latimer, 2016), Saraniemi, 2022). Employee's need for socialization, their sense of competitiveness as a group with other communities, and the legitimacy of their in-group camaraderie (owing to exclusivity enjoyed by the employee brand ambassadors, availability of brand merchandize for them, and first-access to brand information) (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Tajfel, 1981), underscore the presence of shared consciousness among the employee members of an internal brand community. It is worth highlighting here that the community acts as a vital source of information about the brand for its members (Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). A key outcome of the existence of shared consciousness among the members of such a community is the propensity of members to share and get information about the brand.

Further, brand rituals and traditions reflect the way an internal brand community celebrates the corporate brand's heritage (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016) during employee-driven brand events and activities. Community rituals and traditions amplify brand characteristics among the community members and thus help in spreading brand knowledge of the corporate brand's heritage (Knop, 2022) in the form of brand stories. In addition, ensuring compliance with the brand values is a key manifesto of such a community, which the community implements strictly by means of its norms. It also reflects in the way the community members help other members in information sharing and branding event activations, eventually building brand knowledge among the members and beyond (McAlexander et al., 2002; Saraniemi, 2022).

Thus, the organization, together with employees, functions as a close-knit community to 'co-create' and 'maintain' the organization's brand identity. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H_1: CBIB positively impacts brand knowledge among employee-members.

An internal brand community offers an employee a place for having fun while also learning more about the corporate brand, and helps build close ties among employee-members of the community. Further, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) assert that a brand community drives a 'triangular' relationship. That is, members of a brand community build close ties with each other (validation of 'we-ness' by Saraniemi, 2022 in B2B context) and with the brand. This relationship is termed as member-brand-member triad (McAlexander et al., 2002). Hence, the need for gaining knowledge about the corporate brand identity by participating in an internal brand community, eventually, not only builds strong ties among the members, but also increases their ties with or commitment to the corporate brand. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1a. *Brand knowledge of employees mediates the impact of CBIB on brand commitment.*

Further, shared consciousness drives member-employees' deeper connection with the brand and with each other (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). So do the rituals, traditions (bringing members closer and making them more committed to the brand by sharing about the brand's heritage using storytelling), and community norms (i.e., developing rules of engagement in the community and employing a compliance-based approach for new members) (Madupu, 2006; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Further, it has been well established and validated in literature that brand-centered leadership, HR, and communication build brand commitment among employees (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Burmann et al., 2009). Therefore, we posit that:

H2. *CBIB positively impacts brand commitment among employee-members.*

2.4.1. Social identity

The need for social identity is one of the key theoretical underpinnings of community dynamics. Tajfel and Turner (1979) theorize that group situations differ from interpersonal situations, and this is explained by the way social identity differs from personal identity. One of the tenets of community interaction is that it must satisfy community members' need for socialization (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Tajfel, 1981). In B2B parlance, Schembri and Latimer (2016) call it the 'construction of self' by associating oneself with the internal brand community. By participating in the community, the employee-members fulfill their needs for socialization in a work setting. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), members' in-group (in our context, the community) experiences drive the members' social identity. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3. *CBIB positively impacts the social identity of employee-members.*

Further, the identification of a member-employee with the community and the corporate brand identity (i.e., cognitive social identity), the realization of self-esteem of the community as a whole (i.e., evaluative social identity), and the emotional commitment (i.e., affective social identity) of the members to the community, are the building blocks that contribute to brand commitment among members (Mousavi, Roper, & Keeling, 2017). Thus, CBIB results in building commitment to the community by means of members' social identification (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Mousavi et al., 2017). Members whose need for socialization is a driver for joining an internal brand community, obtain more opportunities to know about the brand identity than those who choose not to join the community. Even for members who join the community to gain more knowledge about the brand identity, their latent need for socialization, eventually, builds strong ties with both the community as well as the corporate brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). Moreover, Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) validate that internal brand involvement directly impacts brand knowledge. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4. *Social identity of employees positively impacts their commitment to the brand.*

H4a. *Social identity of employees mediates the impact of CBIB on brand commitment.*

H5. *Social identity of employees positively impacts their knowledge of the brand.*

H5a. *Employees' social identity mediates the impact of CBIB on their brand knowledge.*

2.4.2. Brand knowledge

Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) assert that identification of employees with the organization motivate them to demonstrate many brand-aligned behaviors. They also argue that employee's knowledge about the corporate brand identity is one of the three ingredients that channel these brand-aligned behaviors. This knowledge-to-commitment relationship drives affective or emotional brand commitment (Knop, 2022) and identification-based (one that ensures person-brand fit) brand commitment (Burmann et al., 2009; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H6. *Employees' knowledge about the brand positively impacts their brand commitment.*

Additionally, even as employee's intention to gain more knowledge about the brand identity is an important driver of community participation, an internal brand community drives commitment among these (brand-related) information seeking member-employees by creating a closely knit member-brand-member triad (McAlexander et al., 2002). Thus, we posit that:

H6a. *Brand knowledge among employees mediates the impact of social identity on brand commitment.*

Moreover, we cannot overemphasize the role of employees' need for socialization in driving their motivation to gain more knowledge of the corporate brand identity, and building their commitment to the brand (Mousavi et al., 2017). This reasoning offers a strong possibly of a

sequential impact of employees' social identification with the internal brand community, and the resulting level of brand knowledge on the commitment to the corporate brand. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H6b. *Employees' social identity and brand knowledge sequentially mediate the impact of CBIB on employees' brand commitment.*

It follows from the multidisciplinary literature review, presented above, that an integration of organization-driven and community-based approaches toward implementing internal branding activities can holistically drive brand knowledge and commitment among employees.

3. Methodology

Our proposed framework (Fig. 2) includes the following constructs: *CBIB* (second-order construct: operationalized through community oriented first-order constructs, viz., *shared consciousness in an internal brand community*, *rituals and traditions in the community*, and *community norms in the community,* and organization-driven constructs viz., *brand-centered leadership*, *brand-centered HR* and *internal brand communication*); *social identity* (second-order construct: operationalized through first-order constructs viz., *cognitive*, *evaluative*, and *affective social identity*); *brand knowledge*; and *brand commitment*.

Table 1 lists all the first order constructs together with their definitions and measurement scales. All items are measured using a 7-point Likert scale, where '1' = strongly disagree, and '7' = strongly agree. Firm size is taken as a control variable, while employees' personal characteristics (i.e., age, gender, education level), job characteristics (i.e., work status, leadership status, organizational tenure), and community participation factors (i.e., membership duration, participation in brand fests) are used as moderators.

First, we test the assumptions of multivariate analysis, viz., response bias, common method variance, and measurement invariance using IBM SPSS 18 and SPSS AMOS 26. This is followed by testing the measurement and structural models (Integrated CBIB model, Fig. 2), and investigating the mediating role of social identity and brand knowledge. We perform multigroup moderation analysis by binary coding of the categorical moderating variables, and later discuss the implications for managers.

This is followed by breaking the organizational side of the CBIB into multiple alternate models, viz., communications-driven CBIB model, leadership-driven CBIB model, HR-driven CBIB model and a purely employee-driven CBIB model (Fig. 3). We compare all these models for their respective statistical significance (through post-hoc tests; we do not offer specific hypotheses for these models), and later discuss their comparative effectiveness for practitioners.

3.1. Questionnaire and data collection

A survey questionnaire is developed to collect the data. Before using the questionnaire, its content validity is ascertained by presenting it to an academic and a practitioner (experts with >25 years of experience). The initial questionnaire contained 42 items from the measures listed in Table 3. Based on the feedback obtained from the experts, some items were rephrased, and some were dropped because of redundancies. The value of Cohen's Kappa (0.901) (valid cases = 39; asymptotic Standard error = 0.098; t-value = 7.241) obtained is found to be >0.8, confirming significant agreement between the experts (Blackman & Koval, 2000; Mchugh, 2012). The data for the quantitative study is collected between August 2021 and April 2022. Going by the specificity of the research subject, that is, an internal brand community, the respondent selection needs a specific criterion. To ensure the authenticity of the responses, the respondents must have had experience of being a member of an internal brand community.

The unit of analysis in this research is employee brand ambassadors of B2B organizations. This is a type of respondent group that can only be reached by targeted exercises such as snowball sampling and not by mass-emailing. To identify suitable respondents, a thorough search is done to enlist multinational B2B corporations from the information communication technology and telecommunication sectors that employ brand ambassador communities within their organizations. These sectors are chosen for data collection since the firms in these sectors have a large employee base, have one corporate brand, and there exist employee brand ambassadors in these firms, which is our unit of analysis. Extra care was exercised in recruiting respondents only from B2B firms. We ensure this by listing people from the authors' networks (i.e., on LinkedIn, batchmates from graduation and post-graduation, current students and alumni of the leadership development programs in the business school of authors' affiliation etc.) to identify only the employee brand ambassadors across these organizations. Respondent organizations use different terms for these internal brand communities, viz., employee-brand champion network, employee brand ambassadors'

Table 1
Operationalization of constructs.

First order construct	Definition	Code	Scale used
Brand commitment	Degree of psychological bonding that employees build with the corporate brand such that they are ready to walk the extra mile to help fulfill the objectives of internal branding	BrandCmt	Burmann et al. (2009)
Brand knowledge	Degree of employees' brand-relevant knowledge which drives their behavior in line with the brand identity.	Brandkno	Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010)
Brand* communication	The sum of all communication about the corporate brand.	BrandCom	Burmann et al. (2009)
Brand-centered HR*	A philosophy where HR activities are aligned with the brand values.	BrandHRM	Burmann et al. (2009)
Brand-centered leadership*	A transformational style of leadership centered on brand building.	BrandLed	Burmann et al. (2009)
Shared consciousness of internal brand community*	A deep connection with the internal brand community members, it entails how, collectively, the group is different from others.	ShrConsIBC	Madupu (2006)
Rituals and traditions of internal brand community*	The vital social processes by which the essence of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community.	RitTRdIBC	Madupu (2006)
Norms of internal brand community*	A member's sense of responsibility toward the IBC, which drives collective action.	MorCodIBC	Madupu (2006)
Cognitive social identity**	Self-awareness of one's membership in an organization	CognComt	Ellemers et al. (1999)
Evaluative social identity**	Individual's group-based or collective self-esteem, it is defined as the evaluation of self-worth on the basis of belonging to the community.	EvalComt	Ellemers et al. (1999)
Affective social identity**	Sense of emotional attachment with the IBC.	AffeComt	Ellemers et al. (1999)

* CBIB: CBIB is a second-order construct. It is defined as "a cross-functional, organization-wide, sociological effort to co-create and maintain the brand identity by engaging employees in internal brand communities, which are not bounded by cultures and geographies." These six first-order constructs form CBIB.

** Social identity: Social identity is a second-order construct. These three first-order constructs form social identity.

network, people's network of brand guardians, and employee brand advocates, to name a few. The initial respondents are then urged to recommend and introduce subsequent trustworthy respondents from their networks (snowball sampling), who match the respondent profile required for the study. The survey is kept anonymous to motivate respondents to participate and to bring down the chances of getting responses that could display desirability bias. A total of 585 respondents are approached in this manner in a span of nine months, and requests for participation are followed up with emails, and phone calls where necessary; 400 respondents participate in the survey (all responses are valid), showing a response rate of 68.3%. Among the respondents, 32% are females, 67.75% are males and 1.25% prefer not to disclose their gender. The mean age of the respondents is 31.11 years, with 66% of respondents higher than the mean age. Table 2 presents the profile of the sample based on their career-stage[1] (Cohen, 1993).

3.1.1. Endogeneity

Several precautions are taken to control endogeneity. First, care is taken to eliminate non-response bias using both theoretical and non-theoretical approaches. We test the non-response bias using extrapolation and subjective methods as recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977) . In the extrapolation method, we compare the means of predictor variables for respondents and non-respondents. For subjective analysis, we use the age of respondents vs. non-respondents, their education, and length of community membership as three subjective estimates. Upon measurement, it is found that there is no significant difference between the means of the respondents and non-respondents, confirming that non-response bias is not a cause for concern in our research.

Second, we test the measurement model for common method variance using three tests – the Harman's single factor model, comparison of its fit with second order model, and testing three competing models (Cote & Buckley, 1987). It is observed that a single factor explained only 18.2% of the variance, which is not a major part of the total variance (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010) explained. A second order model with χ^2/df = 5.368, CFI = 0.841, TLI = 0.795, and RMSEA = 0.137 performs poorly compared to the single factor model (χ^2/df = 5.720, CFI = 0.856, TLI = 0.848, and RMSEA = 0.063) (Hair et al., 2010).

Finally, we create three competing models recommended by Cote and Buckley (1987). Model A (method) is a single factor model, Model B (trait) is the usual factor model, and Model C (method and trait) is Model B with all items additionally loaded to a latent factor. It is observed that Model B (χ^2 = 1296.791, df = 551 & χ^2/df = 2.354) is better than Model A (χ^2 = 3598.381, df = 629 & χ^2/df = 5.720) or Model C (χ^2 = 2851.425, df = 551 & χ^2/df = 5.175), demonstrating that there is negligible CMV.

Table 2
Sample characteristics.

Industry	Explorers (< 30 years)	Advancers (30–39 years)	Maintainers (≥ 40 years)	Total
Education and Training	21.5%	2.0%	2.3%	25.8%
Financial services	7.5%	1.5%	0.8%	9.8%
Healthcare	2.0%	0.8%	0.3%	3.0%
Hospitality	3.3%	0.3%	0.3%	3.8%
IT products	3.5%	0.5%	1.0%	5.0%
IT Services	5.8%	2.3%	2.8%	10.8%
Manufacturing	3.3%	1.0%	0.3%	4.5%
Telecommunication and Media	4.8%	8.5%	16.0%	29.3%
Others	6.5%	1.3%	0.5%	8.3%
Grand Total	**58.0%**	**18.0%**	**24.0%**	**100.0%**

[1] *We define the following career stages based on the career-stages model (Cohen, 1993): Explorers = Trial and exploration stages of the career, typically < 30 years; Advancers = Establishment and advancement stages of the career, typically 30–39 years; Maintainers = Maintenance stage of the career, typically ≥ 40 years. Cohen's (1993) career stage model uses four subgroups, we combine the 31–35 years (establishment) and 36–39 years (advancement) age groups to ensure enough degrees of freedom for each sub-group.*

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model

Assessment of the conceptual model (Fig. 2) includes testing the measurement model, structural model, mediation, and moderation analyses, all of which are undertaken using SPSS AMOS 26. All fit indices for the measurement model, viz., χ^2/df = 2.160, CFI = 0.950, TLI = 0.942, and RMSEA = 0.054 are acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). We also performed the equivalence testing of the measurement model recommended by Marcoulides and Yuan (2016) by calculating the T-size RMSEA and CFI values. The T-size calculates the minimum population CFI and maximum size of misspecification (T-size RMSEA). We find that T-size RMSEA and CFI in equivalence testing are 0.059 and 0.935 respectively (against the conventionally reported value of 0.054 and 0.950). The cut-offs for T-size for the RMSEA and CFI based on the degrees of freedom (349), sample size (400) and number of observed variables (29) are:

RMSEA: –excellent– 0.022 –close– 0.056 –fair– 0.087 –mediocre– 0.107

CFI: 0.878 –mediocre– 0.9 –fair– 0.934 –close– 0.979 –excellent—

These cut-offs confirm a close fit (Marcoulides & Yuan, 2016). Further, to factor in the impact of measurement quality, we follow the recommendations of Shi et al. (2017) and check if SRMR ≤ R^2 x 0.10; where R^2 = 0.643, average communality across all factor loadings. Here, SRMR = 0.041 (which is <0.064), confirming a close fit. Table 3 presents the construct reliability (Cronbach α), composite reliability, and average variance extracted for all first-order constructs. Cronbach α for all the constructs is >0.70, while composite reliability and average variance extracted are >0.70 and > 0.50 respectively, which are all in the acceptable range (Hair et al., 2010). Table 3 shows that discriminant validity of the constructs is established as all correlations among the variables are less than the square root of average variance extracted for the corresponding constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). (See Table 4.)

4.1.1. Second-order constructs

The present study employs two second-order constructs – CBIB and Social identity. As described in Table 3, CBIB is operationalized through six first-order constructs: *internal communications*, *brand-centered HR*, *brand-centered leadership*, *shared consciousness in internal brand community*, *rituals and traditions of the community*, and *the community norms*. All fit indices for CBIB, viz., χ^2/df = 2.215, CFI = 0.987, TLI = 0.981, and RMSEA = 0.054, are acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, the SRMR (0.032) ≤ R^2 x 0.05 (0.035) confirms an excellent fit (Shi et al., 2017). Social identity has three components operationalized through the first-order constructs *cognitive*, *evaluative*, and *affective*, and exhibits a good fit (χ^2/df = 3.700, CFI = 0.958, TLI = 0.930, and RMSEA = 0.058) (Hair et al., 2010). Moreover, the SRMR (0.052) ≤ R^2 x 0.10 (0.064) reassures a good fit (Shi et al., 2017).

4.2. Structural model

The results of the structural model with (and without) the control variable (Firm size) exhibit a good fit (Hair et al., 2010): χ^2/df = 2.285 (2.329), CFI = 0.936 (0.937), TLI = 0.929 (0.931), and RMSEA = 0.056 (0.055). In the equivalence testing, we find that the T-size RMSEA and CFI are 0.061 and 0.919 respectively (against the conventional value of 0.056 and 0.936), which show that the model is a good fit (RMSEA: 0.068-close fit; CFI: 0.901-fair fit & 0.934-close fit) (Marcoulides & Yuan, 2016). Additionally, the SRMR (0.052) ≤ R^2 x 0.10 (0.073)

Table 3
Reliability and convergent validity.

First order factor	Item description	Mean	Standard Deviation	Factor Loadings (λ)	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Brand commitment [α = 0.908]	*I am proud to work for .....*	*5.710*	*1.181*	*0.758*	*0.884*	*0.605*
	I talk about ..... to my friends as a great company to work for	*5.500*	*1.284*	*0.749*		
	I really care about the future of	*5.770*	*1.206*	*0.778*		
	My values are similar to those of	*5.790*	*1.149*	*0.832*		
	I feel like I really fit in at	*5.980*	*1.133*	*0.770*		
Brand knowledge [α = 0.912]	*I am familiar with our brand communication (e.g., Magazines, Internet, exhibitions,* etc.*)*	*5.680*	*1.149*	*0.746*	*0.913*	*0.600*
	I am aware of the goals we try to achieve through the brand	*5.760*	*1.133*	*0.816*		
	I have sound knowledge about the values represented by the brand [name]	*5.750*	*1.165*	*0.867*		
	I understand howour customers can benefit fromour brand	*5.860*	*1.128*	*0.798*		
	I am familiar with our brand style guide	*5.650*	*1.246*	*0.729*		
	I know how our brand differentiates us from our competitors	*5.730*	*1.147*	*0.695*		
	It is clear to me what is promised to our customers by the brand [name]	*5.780*	*1.129*	*0.760*		
Brand-centered communication [α = 0.826]	*In our company there are stories/anecdotes circulating that express what our brand stands for*	*5.417*	*1.314*	*0.650*	*0.827*	*0.618*
	When I see advertising for our brand, I am proud to be working for my brand	*5.983*	*1.166*	*0.832*		
	What I read in the press about our brand motivates me	*5.945*	*1.204*	*0.860*		
Brand-centered HR [α = 0.828]	*In my organization, annual performance reviews include metrics on delivering the values*	*5.335*	*1.442*	*0.786*	*0.830*	*0.619*
	In my organization, my department's plans include my role in living the brand values	*5.265*	*1.354*	*0.823*		
	In my organization, The skill set necessary to deliver brand values is considered in staffing decisions	*5.113*	*1.446*	*0.750*		
Brand-centered leadership [α = 0.910]	*My manager talks optimistically about the future of our corporate brand*	*5.568*	*1.336*	*0.767*	*0.910*	*0.718*
	My manager lives our corporate brand in ways that build my respect	*5.568*	*1.275*	*0.876*		
	My manager displays a sense of power and confidence when talking about our corporate brand	*5.645*	*1.246*	*0.873*		
	My manager talks about our most important brand values and his/her belief in them	*5.470*	*1.309*	*0.869*		
Shared consciousness of IBC [α = 0.898]	*I have a strong sense of belonging to my brand ambassador community*	*5.450*	*1.323*	*0.943*	*0.937*	*0.831*
	I feel a strong attachment to my brand ambassador community	*5.350*	*1.337*	*0.921*		
	I really feel that I am a part of my brand ambassador community	*5.270*	*1.457*	*0.870*		
Rituals and traditions of IBC [α = 0.885]	*I understand and recognize the special terms or words and symbols used by the members in the discussion forums in the brand ambassador community*	*5.600*	*1.218*	*0.742*	*0.888*	*0.665*
	I know and understand the norms of my brand ambassador community	*5.490*	*1.313*	*0.881*		
	I am aware of the conventions of my brand ambassador community	*5.330*	*1.321*	*0.863*		
	I am aware of the best practices of my brand ambassador community	*5.370*	*1.344*	*0.767*		
Moral code of IBC [α = 0.893]	*Helping other brand ambassador community members with their problems is very important to me*	*5.490*	*1.428*	*0.781*	*0.843*	*0.642*
	It is my duty to help other members of my brand ambassador community when they are in trouble	*5.750*	*1.318*	*0.800*		
	I help other members of the brand ambassador community in their consumption of my brand ambassador	*5.430*	*1.340*	*0.823*		
Cognitive social identity [r = 0.717]	*I identify with other members of my group*	*5.130*	*1.327*	*0.749*	*0.726*	*0.569*
	My group is an important refection of who I am	*4.970*	*1.452*	*0.760*		
Evaluative social identity [r = 0.727]	*I think my group has little to be proud of*	*6.070*	*1.014*	*0.698*	*0.783*	*0.647*
	I feel good about my group	*5.690*	*1.154*	*0.898*		
Affective social Identity [r = 0.799]	*I would like to continue working with my group*	*5.730*	*1.255*	*0.893*	*0.764*	*0.623*
	I dislike being a member of my group	*6.295*	*0.946*	*0.670*		

Note: For social identity variables with only two items each, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) is reported in place of Cronbach's α.

reassures a good fit (Shi et al., 2017). Table 5 presents the standardized regression coefficients (β) for each path in the proposed model that we use for testing the hypothesis. It is interesting to note that CBIB does not directly influence brand knowledge (β = 0.011, t-value = 0.042; H_1 not supported) and brand commitment (β = −0.159, t-value = −0.672; H_2 not supported). However, CBIB activates member employees' social identity (β = 0.944***, t-value = 11.775; H_3 supported). Social identity further positively and significantly impacts brand commitment (β = 0.646**, t-value = 2.442; H_4 supported) and brand knowledge (β = 0.764**, t-value = 2.731; H_5 supported). Therefore, our findings reinforce the hypothesized sequential impact of CBIB on brand commitment through an activation of member employee's social identity and brand knowledge (Mousavi et al., 2017). Next, we test the hypothesized mediation effects.

4.2.1. Mediation analysis

For mediation analysis, we used the contemporary product of coefficients method which is based on bias-corrected bootstrapping with 2000 resamples proposed by MacKinnon, Fairchild, and Fritz (2007). It can be seen from Table 5 that brand knowledge does not mediate the relationship between CBIB and brand commitment (Indirect effect = 0.006^{ns}, Direct effect = -0.158^{ns}; H_{1a} not supported). However, there is evidence of full mediation by social identity in driving brand commitment (Indirect effect = 0.555**, Direct effect = -0.158^{ns}; H_{4a}

Table 4
Discriminant validity - Fornell & Larcker table.

	Mean	Standard deviation	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) **Brand commitment**	5.716	0.901	**0.778**										
(2) **Brand knowledge**	5.262	0.831	0.768	**0.775**									
(3) **Shared consciousness**	5.577	1.235	0.605	0.583	**0.912**								
(4) **Rituals & traditions**	4.995	0.985	0.562	0.617	0.709	**0.815**							
(5) **Moral code**	5.401	0.992	0.778	0.630	0.638	0.653	**0.802**						
(6) **Brand communication**	5.936	0.977	0.733	0.685	0.601	0.518	0.707	**0.786**					
(7) **Brand-centered HR**	5.036	1.004	0.647	0.620	0.501	0.452	0.454	0.559	**0.787**				
(8) **Brand-centered leadership**	5.474	1.047	0.698	0.658	0.580	0.482	0.583	0.698	0.628	**0.847**			
(9) **Cognitive commitment**	5.311	1.014	0.589	0.584	0.611	0.579	0.591	0.599	0.573	0.580	**0.740**		
(10) **Evaluative commitment**	5.822	0.950	0.700	0.737	0.749	0.621	0.681	0.734	0.571	0.704	0.698	**0.805**	
(11) **Affective commitment**	5.583	0.944	0.746	0.656	0.696	0.646	0.714	0.751	0.558	0.580	0.571	0.787	**0.793**

Note: Square root of average variance extracted on the diagonal and absolute correlations between the variables in the table.

Table 5
Hypotheses results.

Hyp.	Relationship	Mediator	Regression test				Mediation				Result
			R^2	B	S.E	t-value	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Inference	
H_1	CBIB ➔ Brand knowledge		0.615	0.011^{ns}	0.219	0.042					Not supported
H_{1a}	CBIB ➔ Brand commitment	Brand knowledge	0.615	0.011^{ns}	0.219	0.042	0.783**	-0.158^{ns}	0.006^{ns}	No mediation	Not supported
H_2	CBIB ➔ Brand commitment		0.803	-0.159^{ns}	0.213	−0.672	–	–	–	–	Not supported
H_3	CBIB ➔ Social identity		0.891	0.944***	0.049	11.775	–	–	–	–	**Supported**
H_4	Social identity ➔ Brand commitment		0.803	0.646**	0.388	2.442	–	–	–	–	**Supported**
H_{4a}	CBIB ➔ Brand commitment	Social identity	0.803	-0.159^{ns}	0.213	−0.672	0.783**	-0.158^{ns}	0.555**	Full mediation	**Supported**
H_5	Social identity ➔Brand knowledge		0.615	0.764**	0.369	2.731	–	–	–	–	**Supported**
H_{5a}	CBIB ➔ Brand knowledge	Social identity	0.615	0.011^{ns}	0.219	0.042	0.740**	0.016^{ns}	0.583**	Full mediation	**Supported**
H_6	Brand knowledge ➔ Brand commitment		0.803	0.431***	0.080	6.014	–	–	–	–	**Supported**
H_{6a}	Social identity ➔Brand commitment	Brand knowledge	0.803	0.646**	0.388	2.442	0.992**	0.656**	0.335**	Partial mediation	**Supported**
H_{6b}	CBIB ➔ Brand commitment	Social identity, brand knwoledge	0.803	-0.159^{ns}	0.213	−0.672	0.783**	-0.158^{ns}	0.284**	Full mediation	**Supported**
Control variable(s)											
	FirmSize ➔ Brand commitment		0.803	0.082**	0.017	2.556					
	FirmSize ➔ Brand knowledge		0.615	0.043^{ns}	0.018	1.130					

Note: ^{ns} Not significant or $p > 0.10$; * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

supported) and brand knowledge (Indirect effect = 0.583**, Direct effect = 0.016^{ns}; H_{5a} supported) of member-employees of internal brand community. These findings indicate the hypothesized significant role of social identity as proposed in the conceptual model.

We further test for the hypothesized serial mediation (H_{6b}), where we find evidence of a moderate yet significant serial mediating effect of social identity and brand knowledge on CBIB-brand commitment relationship (Indirect effect = 0.284**, Direct effect = -0.158^{ns}; H_{6b} supported). Therefore, we demonstrate that social identity and brand knowledge sequentially mediate the influence of employees' participation in an internal brand community on their commitment to the corporate brand. This also validates the tenets of the CBIB framework (Fig. 1), which asserts that CBIB improves the engagement of member-employees around the corporate brand in an internal brand community by activating their social identity.

4.2.2. Moderation analysis

4.2.2.1. Measurement invariance testing. To perform multigroup moderation, groups are created on the basis of employee's personal characteristics (age, gender and education), their job characteristics (organizational tenure, leadership status and customer interaction), and community-related factors (membership duration and participation in brand fests). Results are presented in Table 6. We test the measurement invariance for all the variables that are used as moderators in the structural model, by following the procedure recommended by Putnick and Bornstein (2016). All fit indices for the separate multigroup models show a good fit ensuring that configural invariance is achieved. While testing metric variance by constraining the regression weights, we find that though change in χ^2 is significant for all variables except 'gender' and 'brand fest participation', the change in all other fit indices, viz., $\Delta\chi^2$, Δ CFI (< 0.01), Δ TLI (< 0.01), and Δ RMSEA (< 0.015) are acceptable (Chen, 2007; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). In the test for scalar invariance, we observe that though, for all variables except 'education', the change in χ^2 was significant, all other fit indices are not significant for these variables, confirming overall scalar invariance (Chen, 2007; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Table 6 presents the results of multi-group moderation analysis.

Table 6
Moderation analysis.

χ^2 Test of difference in group [a,b]	Personal Characteristics			Job Characteristics			Community Characteristics	
	Age [c]	Gender	Education	Tenure	Leadership status	Customer Interaction	Membership duration	Brand Fest
	Explorers (e) vs Advancers (a) vs Maintainers (m)	Male vs Female	Graduate or less vs Postgraduate	0 to 5 years vs Above 5 years	Non-manager vs Manager	High vs Low	0 to 5 years vs Above 5 years	BF participants vs BF Nonparticipants
CBIB → Social identity	**0.599***** 0.531***** 0.418***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$, e - m) < 0.10**	0.694***** 0.564***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.627***** 0.658***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.683***** 0.534***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.624***** 0.723***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.543***** 0.762***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.1	0.709***** 0.543***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.630***** 0.676***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1
Social identity → Brand knowledge	**0.957***** **0.618***** **0.939***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$, e - a) < 0.001** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$, a - m) < 0.10**	0.858***** 0.775***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.824***** 0.794***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.841***** 0.732***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.823***** 0.746***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	**0.847***** **0.751***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.05**	0.823***** 0.837***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.802***** 0.771***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1
Brand knowledge → Brand commitment	0.981***** 0.753***** 0.962***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.1	**0.225**** **0.496***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.05**	**0.178**** **0.504***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001**	**0.054^{ns}** **0.715***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001**	**0.276***** **0.605***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.05**	0.367***** 0.397***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.334***** 0.358**** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.342***** 0.467***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1
Social identity → Brand commitment	–	0.702***** 0.459***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	**0.787***** **0.426***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001**	**0.864***** **0.249**** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001**	0.670**** 0.326**** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	**0.632***** **0.502***** **p ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.05**	0.615***** 0.522**** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1	0.617***** 0.444***** p ($\Delta\chi^2$) > 0.1

[a] **CBIB-brand commitment** relationship was not tested for moderation since the direct effect is statistically not significant in the main model.
[b] **Model-level fit indices [χ^2/Df, CFI, RMSEA, p ($\Delta\chi^2$)] :** Age (1.984, 0.906, 0.050; **p < 0.05**); Gender (1.974, 0.910, 0.050; **p < 0.001**); Education (1.957, 0.912, 0.049; **p < 0.001**); Tenure (2.010, 0.905, 0.050; **p < 0.001**); Leadership status (2.066, 0.912, 0.052; **p < 0.001**); Customer interaction (1.923, 0.912, 0.048; **p < 0.001**); Membership duration (1.840, 0.907, 0.047; **p < 0.001**); and Brand fests (2.104, 0.900, 0.053; **p < 0.05**).
[c] **Age** is grouped into 3-levels based on career-stages model (Cohen, 1993) - Explorers mark the trial and exploration stages of the career, typically < 30 years, Advancers mark the establishment and advancement stages of the career, typically 30–39 years, and Maintainers mark the maintenance stage of the career, typically ≥ 40 years. Cohen's (1993) career stage model uses four subgroups, we combine the 31–35 years (establishment) and 36–39 years (advancement) age groups to ensure enough degrees of freedom per sub-group.

4.2.2.2. Personal characteristics. Age, gender and education, all moderate specific path-level relationships. For instance, while explorers (< 30 years) exhibit stronger CBIB-social identity (β = 0.599***) and social identity-brand knowledge relationships (β = 0.957***) than maintainers (≥ 40 years) (β = 0.418*** and β = 0.939*** respectively) and both differences are significant {*p*-value ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001}; their difference with advancers (30–39 years) is insignificant. That is, community-based approach has positive consequence for both advancers and maintainer age groups even as the effect is stronger for social identity-brand knowledge relationship than for CBIB-social identity relationship. This confirms the prominence of a brand community to enable sharing of brand-related information, thus improving the brand knowledge of the members (Saraniemi, 2022; Schembri & Latimer, 2016). For gender, females (β = 0.496***) exhibit stronger brand knowledge-commitment relationship than males (β = 0.225**; p-value ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.05).

With regards to education level of member employees, the social identity-commitment relationship is significantly stronger for employees with a lower level of education (β = 0.787***) compared to those with a higher level of education (β = 0.426***) {p-value ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001}. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that brand knowledge-commitment relationship is significantly stronger for employees with a higher level of education (β = 0.504***) than for those with a lower level of education (β = 0.178**) {p-value ($\Delta\chi^2$) < 0.001}. That is, participation in CBIB activates stronger social identity for employees with a lower education level, and their activated social identity drives stronger brand knowledge and commitment. Alternatively, employees with a higher level of education eventually exhibit stronger brand commitment if their brand knowledge is higher.

4.2.2.3. Job characteristics. With regard to the results of tenure, we note that with continued engagement in internal brand community, new joiners (β = 0.864***) develop stronger brand commitment than those who have already spent time in the organization (β = 0.249**). Conversely, veterans (β = 0.715***) develop stronger commitment to the brand than the new joiners (β = 0.054^{ns}) as they refresh their brand knowledge. This does not affect the new joiners much since they work harder to align with the organization and are already aware of and are passionate about the corporate brand. On similar lines, due to their seniority and experience, managers (β = 0.605***) have deeper knowledge of the brand identity and that translates strongly into their commitment compared to non-managers (β = 0.276***). Finally, in line with past literature, people with regular customer interaction exhibit stronger effect of their activated social identity on both brand knowledge (β = 0.847*** vs β = 0.751*** for employees with low customer interaction) and commitment (β = 0.632*** vs β = 0.502***).

4.2.2.4. Community characteristics. For community characteristics such as duration of community membership and participation in brand fests, even as the group-wise differences were statistically significant, we do not find any significantly different results at the path level.

4.2.3. Alternate models of CBIB

We conduct post-hoc tests and compare alternate CBIB models that approach brand co-creation in different ways and the classical internal branding model (All CBIB model configurations are presented in Fig. 3). We test four such alternate co-creation models – employee-driven CBIB model (driven autonomously by the employees), communications driven CBIB model (driven by internal communications function in an organization), leadership driven CBIB model (driven by the introduction of transformational, brand-centered leadership), and HR driven CBIB

model (driven by the HR function in an organization). Table 7a presents the model fit indices (measurement model, structural model, and structural model with control variables) and R^2 values of the predicted variables in the four alternate models, along with the main conceptual model. Further, Table 7b summarizes the results of the comparison among all CBIB models and the organization-driven internal branding approach. Initiating with the integrated conceptual model, a nested model comparison is conducted using the $\Delta\chi^2$ test. This involves constraining paths deemed not relevant to have zero effect. From Tables 7a and 7b, it is apparent that all alternate models co-exist, are tenable, and are significantly different from each other. We discuss the implications of these models in the Discussion section.

5. Discussion

The concept of internal branding is backed by 45 years of academic research and a great amount of it is empirical, warranting that the concept has received great receptibility among practitioners as well. However, despite the fact that literature is replete with theoretical and practical applications of the construct, the research on internal branding is very dispersed and fragmented (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Further, when it comes to implementation of internal branding in the B2B context, the classical school of thought on internal branding implementation is constantly challenged by the multi-stakeholder co-creation of corporate brand identity. The contemporary school of thought highlights the limited efficacy of control-driven, top-down internal branding in the current B2B landscape that is constantly being reshaped by digitalization and social media. In this scenario, an organization's brand identity is considered fluid and is constantly redefined by the brand managers in conversation with all stakeholder groups. In this study, we attempt to reconcile the classical and multi-stakeholder (or co-creation) approaches to building the corporate brand identity. We study the role of internal stakeholder groups in developing brand knowledge and commitment. We observe several internal stakeholder groups, viz., HR, leadership, internal communications, brand management, and employee brand ambassadors (or corporate influencers are the people who act on behalf of the brand) (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018), and examine how they work in cohesion and in dyads to co-create corporate brand identity.

We introduce the concept of CBIB and validate the benefits of an internal brand community (Devasagayam et al., 2010; Saraniemi, 2022) in an organization. We define CBIB as "*a cross-functional, organization-wide, sociological effort to co-create and maintain the brand identity by engaging employees in internal brand communities, which are not bounded by cultures and geographies*". The definition highlights four key aspects of CBIB. First, CBIB proposes a sociological process of building a strong internal brand identity and assumes employees as primary drivers – 'the main ambassadors' of the brand. Second, CBIB is a cross-functional effort, that although is owned by the executive management, yet is activated collectively by branding, communications, and HR functions. Third, for the multinational B2B firms, internal brand communities are organization-wide, and not necessarily limited to a country or a division. There can be a global virtual community, with its local chapters for internal brand activation. Fourth, the primary objective of such a community is to drive employee engagement across the corporate brand, and its secondary objective is to enable the co-creation of the corporate brand identity.

We postulate and test our hypotheses about how an internal branding effort driven by an internal brand community (Community-based internal branding or CBIB) builds brand knowledge and commitment in a more organic way. The results of this research are encouraging for both academics and practitioners, and we discuss those in the subsequent subsections.

Table 7a
Post-hoc tests of alternate CBIB models (See Fig. 3).

	HR-driven CBIB Model		Leadership-driven CBIB Model		Communication-driven CBIB Model		Employee-driven CBIB Model		Organization-driven internal branding Model		Integrated CBIB (Proposed model)	
Fit Indices	Measurement	Structural with controls	Measurement	Structural with controls	Measurement	Structural with controls	Measurement	Structural with controls	Measurement	Structural with controls	Measurement	Structural with controls
χ^2	922.11	1190.6	926.06	1127.56	936.08	1189.93	753.98	959.67	799.52	901.6	1356.96	1625.35
Df	428	513	459	514	428	513	349	420	349	392	647	724
χ^2**/DF**	2.154	2.321	2.018	2.194	2.187	2.32	2.16	2.285	2.291	2.3	2.097	2.245
CFI	0.944	0.926	0.951	0.937	0.944	0.927	0.95	0.936	0.941	0.934	0.937	0.92
TLI	0.935	0.919	0.944	0.931	0.935	0.92	0.942	0.929	0.931	0.926	0.928	0.914
RMSEA	0.054	0.058	0.051	0.055	0.055	0.058	0.054	0.057	0.057	0.057	0.052	0.056
	Brad	**Brand**	**Brad**	**Brand**	**Brad**	**Brand**	**Brad**	**Brand**	**Brad**	**Brand**	**Brad**	**Brand**
	knowledge	**commitment**	**knowledge**	**commitment**	**knowledge**	**commitment**	**knowledge**	**commitment**	**knowledge**	**commitment**	**knowledge**	**commitment**
R^2	0.62	0.80	0.63	0.80	0.62	0.81	0.61	0.82	0.67	0.82	0.70	0.84

Note: *Brand knowledge, **Brand commitment.

Table 7b
Model comparison* based on $\Delta\chi^2$ test.

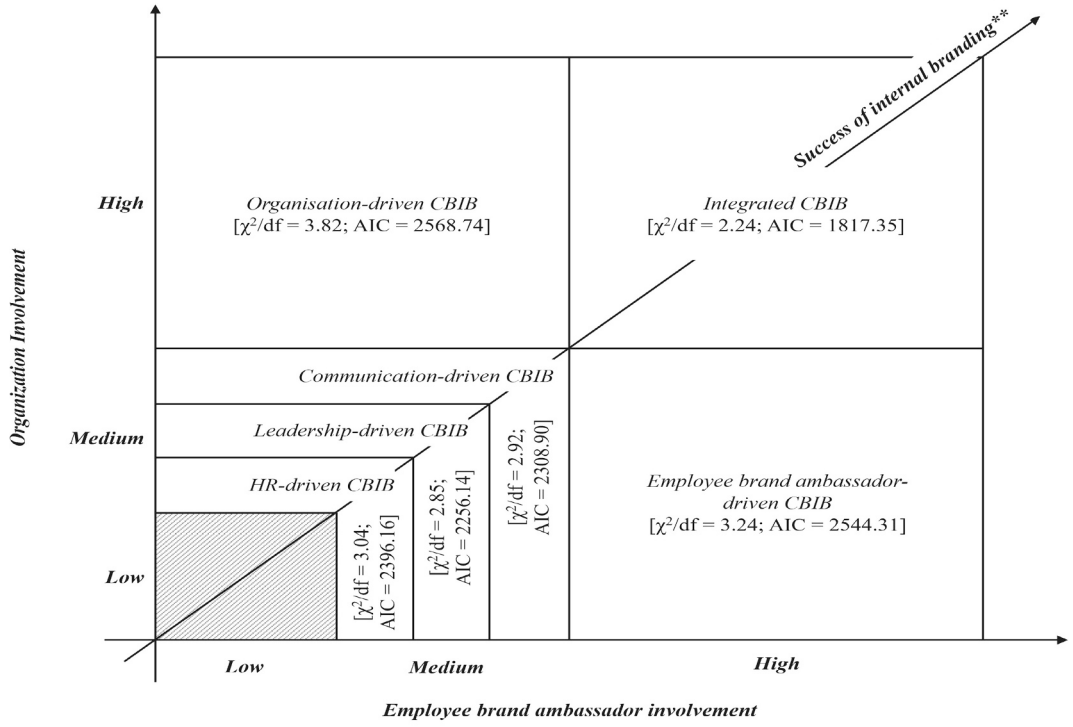
	Employee-driven CBIB	Organization-driven internal branding	Integrated CBIB	Leadership-driven CBIB	HR-driven CBIB	Communications-driven CBIB
Employee-driven CBIB						
Organization-driven internal branding	$\Delta\chi^2 = 429.12$; $\Delta Df = 3$; **$p < 0.001$**					
Integrated CBIB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 732.96$; $\Delta Df = 3$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 1162.08$; $\Delta Df = 6$; **$p < 0.001$**				
Leadership-driven CBIB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 237.41$; $\Delta Df = 1$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 666.53$; $\Delta Df = 4$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 495.55$; $\Delta Df = 2$; **$p < 0.001$**			
HR-driven CBIB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 150.14$; $\Delta Df = 1$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 579.26$; $\Delta Df = 4$; $p < 0.001$	$\Delta\chi^2 = 582.82$; $\Delta Df = 2$; **$p < 0.001$**	*Models with same degree of freedom*		
Communications-driven CBIB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 290.17$; $\Delta Df = 1$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 719.29$; $\Delta Df = 4$; **$p < 0.001$**	$\Delta\chi^2 = 442.79$; $\Delta Df = 2$; **$p < 0.001$**	*Models with same degree of freedom*	*Models with same degree of freedom*	

Note: * Structural model with controls is for each configuration is used for the comparison.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study makes several contributions to internal branding theory and the B2B literature. To the best of our knowledge, the CBIB framework (and the alternate models) presents a maiden attempt at empirically testing the effectiveness of internal brand communities in implementing internal branding. The integrated CBIB model validates the community-driven operationalizations of internal branding – that is, shared consciousness in an internal brand community, rituals and traditions in the community, and community norms. We propose that for a successful implementation of internal branding, the organization should encourage participation of employee brand ambassadors in the community, which leads to employee engagement. As they interact and negotiate the brand meaning, their knowledge and commitment toward the corporate brand increases.

First, the proposed CBIB model extends the concept of brand community offered by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) to include the community of employee brand ambassadors, and significantly advance the internal branding concept from both theoretical and practical perspectives. All the different variations of the proposed CBIB model exhibit a good fit and explain a substantial variation in the predicted variables (see Table 7a and Fig. 4). This extension of the brand community concept is



NOTE:
**Success of internal branding in building brand knowledge (H_1, H_{5a}) and brand commitment (H_{1a}, H_2, H_{4a}, H_{6b}) (see R^2 values in Table 7a);
All models are significantly different from each other [p-value ($\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df$) < 0.0001]

Fig. 4. Successful implementation of internal branding.

aligned with the recent literature on customer-based brand communities. The SEM results validate the significance of some key brand community practices such as socializing and acquiring brand knowledge (Nambisan & Nambisan, 2008; Schau et al., 2009) in the internal brand community as well.

Second, this study tests five co-creation-oriented CBIB models and compares them with one another and with the classical organization-driven model. Not only does this offer practitioners multiple ways of implementing CBIB, but it also presents CBIB as a multi-dimensional, yet flexible strategic approach which enables co-creation at several levels within a B2B organization. Supported by the findings from our empirical study, we present a strategy square (Fig. 4) elucidating the success of internal branding in cultivating brand knowledge and fostering brand commitment (see model-wise results in Table 7a). The strategy square explains the possible effective ways of building a strong internal brand identity as the level of involvement of organization and employee brand ambassadors increases. It can be observed from the comparison of fit indices presented in Fig. 4 (i.e., decreasing magnitude of χ^2/DF and AIC values): as the organizational involvement in the building of a corporate brand identity becomes high, it tends to exercise control over the definition and scope of the corporate brand, and there are limited opportunities for co-creation and adapting the brand to the perceptions of the different stakeholders. On the other hand, as the involvement of employee brand ambassadors becomes high, the success of internal branding co-creation increases but is yet not as effective as it increases across the diagonal. Our empirical finding validates the assertion by Saraniemi (2022) that the prominent effect internal brand community participation by employees in improves their close-knitted relationship. Interestingly, as we align the R^2 values for brand knowledge and commitment from Table 7a with the results of model fit in Fig. 4, we observe that as we move across the diagonal assuming co-creation scenarios of employee brand ambassadors with HR function or leadership or internal communications, the effectiveness of co-creation in building brand knowledge and commitment increases. Finally, the success of internal branding is the most pronounced when all internal stakeholders are involved in the co-creation of brand identity.

Further, in the context of our study, these co-creation models have a profound impact on the resilience of a B2B multinational in the era of digitalization, automation, and artificial intelligence. One direct outcome of increased digitalization is the proliferation of customer choices leading to heightened local competition and employee turnover. In such scenarios, large B2B multinationals feel a constant need to reimagine and communicate the meaning and scope of their corporate brand. Here, the investments in the co-creation pay back in several ways. With a mindset of fluid brand identity at the core and a structure already in place, the firm is able to respond faster to the competitive situation while staying close to its brand purpose. The firm is also likely to deepen its employee and customer relationship by involving these two crucial stakeholders in reimagining the brand identity, thereby staying resilient and exercising faster adaptability.

Third, this research tests the moderating effect of employee's personal characteristics on the CBIB model. While the overall multi-group model is significantly different based on an employee's age, education, and gender, which is in line with past research findings, the contribution of our moderation results lies in the granular analyses of employees' participation in the community. For the results of moderation by age (Table 6), we find that explorers and maintainers (either <30 years, or ≥ 40 years), are the two age groups that exhibit different effects of age on the CBIB-socialization relationship. While explorers experience a pronounced effect of community participation on resulting socialization, maintainers show a weakened effect. On the other hand, both age groups exhibit a strengthening of brand knowledge as a result of socialization in the community. We can also observe from Table 2 that >60% of respondents are from the telecommunications and media, education and training, and IT (products and services) sectors, which are known to be the proponents of remote and hybrid ways of working. With most of their time spent working from home, the opportunities to socialize motivate employees to explore (and thus co-create) the corporate brand meaning. With a higher level of education, the expectation of employees from the organization increases, thus negatively impacting their commitment to the organization (Verma, Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1985).

Additionally, females are expected to have a stronger commitment to the organization than males because females overcome more barriers than males to survive at work (Grusky, 1996). Our granular (path-wise) results reveal that in such cases, the information-sharing advantages of an internal brand community are more effective in building brand commitment of male employees with higher age and education than the socialization aspects. Conversely, the socialization aspects of community participation are more effective for younger employees, and those with a lower level of education.

Fourth, our moderation results for job characteristics are also aligned with past literature. We observe that employee's organizational tenure has the same polarity (but different strength) of effect on the brand knowledge-commitment relationship as age and education have. That is, new joiners are more attracted toward the socialization aspects of the community, while veterans are more motivated by the information-sharing aspects of the community. As regards the leadership status of employees, there are claims in literature that an increase in "responsibility" with higher leadership status also increases the leader's own commitment to the organization (Haque, Fernando, & Caputi, 2019; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Our results show that managers are more attracted by the information-sharing aspects of the community. Therefore, we conclude that this increase in "responsibility" must also be accompanied by a leader's curiosity to know more about the brand for it to significantly influence his/her/their brand commitment. Further, we note that the socialization aspects of the community are also crucial for employees with more customer interaction in building their brand knowledge and commitment. We argue that in a community setup, high customer interaction builds brand commitment for highly socialized employees.

Finally, among the community characteristics, we observe that the two groups for membership duration in the community (long, 31.7% vs short, 68.3%) behave differently for the overall integrated CBIB model. This finding is in line with some speculations in the brand community literature (Algesheimer et al., 2005) that duration of community membership is likely to impact employee commitment. Further, McAlexander et al. (2002) argue that brand fests have a positive impact on the cohesiveness among members of a customer-driven brand community; our findings support these assertions.

5.2. Managerial implications

It is an arduous task for a large B2B organization to build a strong brand identity among its employees so that they deliver on the brand promise with conviction. This challenge is partially due to their large employee base (average number of employees in the top five software and IT service giants is >100,000[2]) and geographical span (on an average the top five software and IT services multi-nationals are present in 150 countries[3]). In this research, we provide empirical evidence that CBIB can be driven in multiple ways (autonomously by community members, or by internal communications function, or by HR, or by leadership, or by all these components together), where all factors significantly contribute toward the goal of increasing brand knowledge and commitment of the employees. Insight from this research offers brand leaders several ways to implement CBIB.

For employee-driven CBIB, employees moderate the community,

[2] Source: Annual reports of Google, IBM Corp., Microsoft, Oracle and HP

[3] Source: Annual reports of Google, IBM Corp., Microsoft, Oracle and HP. Except Oracle, the other four are present in minimum 170 countries.

they recruit ambassadors, they get the brand mandate from the brand management and ensure that all employee engagement efforts are centered on the corporate brand identity. Therefore, even as we say that it is employee-driven, it is not completely autonomous, as the managers/moderators of the community ought to understand and stay updated with the brand guidelines.

For a CBIB driven by internal communications, the community has a mandate to drive communication across the organization, which is a critical aspect of the community. Moreover, internal communications is always updated on the latest brand guidelines, adding an element of authenticity to brand-related communication within the community.

HR-driven CBIB is characterized more by employee engagement since the key motivation for HR function to get involved is their fundamental responsibility – that is, delivering great employee experience. Therefore, it is recommended that HR may wish to collaborate very closely with the brand management function to add an element of brand orientation to employee engagement activities (Rafiq, Ahmed, Rafiq, & Pervaiz, 1993).

Leadership-driven CBIB may be the preferred CBIB for various reasons. Managers act as role models for their followers (Morhart et al., 2009). If they are onboarded to the internal brand community, their teams are likely to be brand-oriented.

Finally, an all-integrated model involving internal communications, HR and leadership function provides the strongest explanation for brand commitment, thereby possibly making it the model of choice for implementing CBIB. The co-ownership by brand, internal communication, HR, and leadership functions ensures that the key functional priorities are aligned to the corporate brand identity.

5.3. Limitations & future research

Our contributions notwithstanding, this research is not without limitations. One limitation of this paper is that the current research has not been conducted across all industry sectors. That is, in the context of the current paper is large multi-national B2B corporations from three industry sectors – software, IT services, and telecom sectors. Nevertheless, given the humongous size and multinational spread of respondent companies across these sectors, we believe that these organizations are representative of large B2B organizations, and our findings are generalizable. Furthermore, internal branding is very popular in the healthcare, hospitality, and financial services sectors as well. We recommend future research to undertake investigations in the context of these industries as well.

Organizational socialization is an integral construct in the implementation of the CBIB model, and national culture has a deep impact on the modes and effects of socialization. In this research, 86% of the sample comprised respondents from Asian and Oceanic countries, with lesser representation from Europe (10%), USA (3%), and Arab countries (1%). Future studies may test the conceptual model in a more multicultural context, and variations across cultures may also be studied.

This study tests the impact of internal branding on brand commitment. Future research may investigate the impact of CBIB on job-related conceptualization of employee commitment (viz. organizational commitment). Such investigations are likely to meaningfully contribute to the organizational behavior literature. Further, the impact of CBIB on brand citizenship behaviors of brand ambassadors may also be explored in future research. Other outcomes of internal branding may include job satisfaction, turnover intention, brand performance, and employee-based brand equity, to name a few – which are pertinent future research questions. It may also be worthwhile to study the impact of brand commitment among employees on the brand commitment of the organization's customers and partners. The study may also be extended to find what drives the participation behavior of employees in an internal brand community. That is, what could be the antecedents of CBIB?

This research assumes that an internal brand community may be either virtual or offline. In the current post-pandemic hybrid working scenario, it would be insightful to test the model exclusively for virtual communities and compare the model across the two modes of community moderation. Further, impact of digitalization can never be over emphasized (for a specific case in point, refer to Li, Guo, Cao, & Li, 2018). We hope this research motivates further research into this domain of inquiry, especially in the interface of human resources / organizational behavior and brand management/marketing.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Atul Prashar: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Moutusy Maity:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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