Role of Internal Brand Communities in Building a Strong Internal Brand - A Conceptual Model

Atul Prashar* and Moutusy Maity

Moutusy Maity is a Professor in Department of Marketing of Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, He can be reached at- mmaity@iiml.ac.in

*Corresponding author: snigdhamayeec@gmail.com (Snigdhamayee Choudhury)

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ABSTRACT

Internal brand Management is a highly researched field with leadership, effective internal and external brand communication and brand-centered human resource management as its proven antecedents (Chang, Chiang, & Han, 2012), and brand commitment, brand knowledge and brand citizenship behaviours as its key consequences (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). The scant research literature pertaining to the role of internal brand communities in the above equation is highly dispersed (P. R. Devasagayam, Buff, Aurand, Judson, & Judson, 2010). In that direction, the study reviews the literature on internal brand management, brand community dynamics and social identity theory and proposes a conceptual model to show the way employee participation in intra-organisational brand communities impacts their brand commitment. This conceptual model gives an innovative yet organic route of building strong corporate brands within the organisations.

*Atul Prashar is a student of Ph. D. Scholar in Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow. He can be reached at - atul.prashar@iiml.org

Introduction

The field of marketing witnessed a fundamental shift of scope from a functional stream addressing traditional marketing mix towards a strategic discipline giving way to the inclusion of action-oriented corporate communication encompassing both external as well as internal branding (Simmons, 2009). Since then, integrated marketing communications is the idea that has gained popularity with both academics and practitioners. When it comes to the communication and branding strategies of today, we can never overemphasize the indispensability of effective internal brand management.

Saleem & Iglesias (2016) define Internal brand management (IBM) as *"… the process through which organisations make a company-wide effort within a supportive culture to integrate brand ideologies, leadership, HRM, internal brand communications and internal brand communities as a strategy to enable employees to consistently co-create brand value with multiple stakeholders"*. It marks a coordinated effort in an organisation to motivate employees into brand co-creation. The definition underscores a brand-centered strategy in managing human resources (BC-HRM) and also highlights internal brand communities among the essential internal branding antecedents.

Internal branding literature highlights that with a positive attitude towards the brand; employees start 'living the brand', and become brand citizens (Chang et al., 2012). This is the result when internal branding is led by human resources (HRM) function (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005). This is termed as Brand-centered (BC) HRM and is defined as *"…HR practices that make employees produce positive attitude and behaviors toward the brands of the firm"* (Chang et al., 2012).

Additionally, community approach in brand building has been practiced successfully since decades across the corporate. Some examples that reinforce the idea are Harley-Owners Group (HOG), Jeep community (Mcalexander et al., 2002), Beetle and Star War's communities (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), Saab, Mac and Bronco communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Nonetheless, such are mainly consumer or company moderated brand communities and there is very little evidence in the literature on employee driven intra-organisational communities and how they impact the internal branding activities. That is, even as there exists a lot of conclusive research that marks the positive impact of consumer-driven brand ambassador communities on building corporate brands, the area of internal brand communities is still under-researched (P. R. Devasagayam et al., 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

Hence, a fresh perspective towards internal brand ambassador communities would, in one way, help the academics in filling the research gaps, and in another way, would offer the practitioners the understanding of the key antecedents and consequences of IBC that impact IBM. In that direction, this paper seeks to explore the brand ambassador community-based antecedents of IBM within an organisation in business-to-business (B2B) context as an innovative, yet organic step. To meet this research objective, it takes a deep dive into the brand community and internal branding literatures and seeks to identify the broad constructs related to these two. This is done through a review of literature on IBM, listing its antecedents and consequences, and an attempt to bring in the social identity theory approach to community dynamics for ascertaining the role IBC plays in making IBM effective in an organisation. Finally, a conceptual model to outline the influence of participation in the internal brand community on IBM is proposed and underlying research propositions are put forward.

Literature Review

The concept of internal branding took birth when (L.L Berry, 1981; Leonard L Berry, Hensel, & Burke, 1976), while investigating the rationale behind the consumerism response, theorized – "… a retail firm's capability for satisfying the needs of its external customers depends in part on that firm's ability to satisfy the needs of its internal customers." Thus, "… by addressing the needs of customer-facing employees, an organisation improves its readiness to satisfy the needs of its customers." The scope of the construct pans across marketing, and organisational behaviour functions (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993). Therefore, first, a systematic review of the marketing literature was performed uncovering the key IBM constructs. Following this, a thorough analysis of past research on brand communities and study of their dynamics from the perspective of Social Identity

Theory (SIT). On the basis of proven IBM, SIT and (customer and internal) brand community constructs, a conceptual model was proposed that has both brand related and job-related consequences of IBM.

Internal Brand Management or IBM

There is no denying of the fact that service or frontline employees are the face of the organisation. Projection of the organisation's brand to the outside world is highly dependent on the effectiveness with which the service staff internalize the brand identity. Therefore, a sound internal branding effort is as important as external branding (Leonard L Berry et al., 1976; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Further, we must not forget that the end-consumers of most multinational corporations are their several hundred thousand employees only. A strong internal focus on branding has as much strategic significance as its traditional external focus.

However, a holistic model of Internal Brand Management is built through Identity-based brand management (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Identity-based branding takes insights from human psychology research and is introduced by (Kapferer, 2012). He stated that a brand is not a product-name but a vision that drives its creation. This vision is the brand's identity. In brand management parlance, in Kapferer's own words "identity precedes image". Therefore, building upon the concept of identity-based brand management, the marketers found conceptually (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) as well as empirically (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009) that the strength of a brand depends on the consistency of the customers' brand experiences along all customer-brand touch-points determined by the brand's identity. This can only be ensured if all employees display 'brand citizenship behaviour' based on a strong individual brand commitment.

It is important to understand the key antecedents and consequences of internal brand management for building a holistic foundation of the concept.

Antecedents of IBM

Saleem & Iglesias, (2016) noted the fragmented scope of the concept with some researchers (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrmann, 2007; King & Grace, 2008; Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999; Vallaster & Chernatony, 2006) limiting its definition and objectives with organisation's internal frame of reference, while others (Asha & Jyothi, 2013; Aurand et al., 2005; Leonard L Berry et al., 1976; King, Grace, & Funk, 2012; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007) extending its scope to include the impact on external stakeholders as well. As a result, Saleem & Iglesias, (2016) studied the congruence of an organisation's vision, mission, norms, and brand values with a participative leadership driven organisational culture and positioning of the brand. Such a concerted and leadership-driven internal brand building effort (Vallaster & Chernatony, 2006) is bound to influence the employee behaviour favorably towards the brand (Burmann et al., 2009).

Additionally, Aurand et al., (2005) found that the management of the "internal touch points" is necessary to deliver on the brand promise, which is the key responsibility of the human resource managers in the organisation. This calls for a brand centered human resource management (HRM), that is instrumental in helping the employees develop a favourable attitude towards the brand. However, it is a tough task for the HRM function in the organisation to align its activities with the external focused marketing organisation. It is successful when employee activities synergize with the brand identity.

Brand communications, especially the internal communication, have a key role in the creation of brand identity among the employees. According to Du Preez & Bendixen (2015), "*while brand Identity and external brand communication play important roles in creating sound Internal Brand Management, internal brand communication is the most important contributor.*" Thomson et al. (1999) reinforced the value of internal brand communication and concluded that if "inside in" communication efforts are not effectively managed in the organisation, the "inside out" communication has minimal chances of success.

Finally, Devasagayam et al., (2010) statistically proved that internal brand communities are the most organic way of positively influencing employee identification with the brand. They concluded that such communities offer a platform for the employees to

share brand related ideas and values. In addition, a strong internal brand community acts as a catalyst for employee's identification with the brand related internal communication. Table 1 shows the key antecedents and consequences of IBM derived from the marketing literature.

Consequences of IBM

The literature is extant with the advantages of building strong brands internally. Nevertheless, the perceived fundamental consequence is a change in employee's favourable behaviour towards the brand. According to Burmann & Zeplin (2005), "the crucial role of employees in brand building is due to the fact that all sources of brand identity are based on the decisions and actions of employees." If a strategically coordinated effort towards internal branding is made, employees' identification with the brand is nurtured to an extent that they start 'living the brand' by assimilating and exercising the brand values in their work activities (Aurand et al., 2005).

Burmann et al. (2009) termed this 'extra-role' behaviour as 'Brand Citizenship Behaviour' (BCB) and described its seven dimensions viz. (1) Helping behaviour (positive & helping attitude towards internal and external consumers); (2) Brand consideration (compliance to brand-related guidelines); (3) Brand enthusiasm (Extra initiative towards brand-related behaviours); (4) Sportsmanship (strong drive towards brand engagement even at high opportunity costs);

(5) Brand endorsement (recommending brands to one's circle of influence); (6) Self-development (eagerness to build brand-related skills); and (7) Brand advancement (help brand identity to adapt to changing market needs).

Building upon the BCB concept of Burmann et al. (2009), Du Preez, Bendixen, & Abratt (2017) further studied the behavioural consequences of internal branding. They statistically proved that whereas internal branding always affects BCB directly and positively, there are some indirect effects of Brand Commitment as well upon the BCB. In fact, brand commitment is the key mediator of the impact of internal branding on BCB (Burmann et al., 2009; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015).

Burmann et al. (2009) identify three drivers of brand commitment viz (1) compliance (behaviours consistent with brand identity to win rewards or avoid penalties); (2) identification (collectivist behaviour towards experiencing the brand); and (3) internalization (integrating the brand identity with self-identity).

Another construct that mediates the impact of internal branding on BCB is 'Brand psychological ownership' of the employees (Chang et al., 2012). Employee's brand psychological ownership is made up of the psychological experiences, which make the employees feel that they own the brand. Chang et al. (2012) concluded that although brand psychological ownership is a partial cross-level mediator of the relationship between Brand-centered HRM and BCB, it directly impacts individual level BCB. Table 1 summarizes broader consequences of IBM based on the review of literature.

Table 1: *Key antecedents and consequents of IBM*

Construct	Definition	References
ANTECEDENTS		
Brand communication	Internal and external communication about the corporate brand. Internal communication is targeted towards employees and external communication is targeted towards customers, partners, and suppliers.	*(Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Leonard L. Berry, 1981; Burmann et al., 2009; Gounaris, 2006; Jou, Chou, & Fu, 2008; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007)*
Training	Brand related training to educate employees about the brand vision, mission, and promise.	*(Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Leonard L. Berry, 1981; Burmann et al., 2009; Conduit & Mavondo, 2001; Foreman & Mooney, 1995; Gounaris, 2006; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Ramos, 2018)*

Construct	Definition	References
Brand-centered HRM	A progressive and business oriented HRM philosophy in which HRM activities around recruitment, training and performance appraisal are aligned with brand values.	*(Aurand et al., 2005;Lombard, M.R., & De Bruin, 2017; Burmann et al., 2009; Tsai, 2014)*
Brand-centered leadership	Brand-centered leadership highlights the role of organisation's leadership including both the executive leadership, and senior and middle level managers in the brand building.	*(Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009; Burmann et al., 2009; Foreman & Mooney, 1995; Ramos, 2018)*
CONSEQUENTS		
Brand commitment	Brand commitment is the degree of emotional commitment of the employee with the corporate brand. It is the willingness of an employee to act on brand.	*(Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2012)*
Brand knowledge	Brand knowledge is the extent of an employee's understanding of brand identity and promise. It is an employee's ability- to act on-brand.	*(de Chernatony, Drury, & Segal-Horn, 2003; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2010)*
Brand citizenship behaviours	Citizenship behaviours are the employee's voluntary extra-role behaviours in relation to the corporate brand. It includes both internally and externally targeted behaviours.	*(Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009)*

Community approach to IBM

A brand's identity is not crafted by the marketers in isolation. It is very much a sociocultural process (Kapferer, 2012). This makes way for the concept of cultural identity that enables various social groups to build stronger communities celebrating their inherent similarities and reinforcing their key differences from other groups. This latter practice of building the 'oppositional loyalty' becomes an effective way to perpetuate their 'we-ness' (Muniz & Hamer, 2001). Hence, brand communities are a potent medium to fulfill the aims of identity-based internal branding effort by providing the necessary behavioural foundation. They contribute towards better engagement and communication of employees not only among themselves but also with their customers. Robust communities influence strong internal brands in a more overarching and beneficial manner (P. R. Devasagayam et al., 2010).

Brand community

The concept of brand communities introduced a paradigm shift in the thinking from consumer-brand dyad towards a consumer-brand-consumer triad, and further into a customer-centric model (Mcalexander et al., 2002; Muniz & Hamer, 2001). Brand community was defined by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) as "… a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded goods or service." The key consequences of brand community participation, proven time and time again are consciousness of kind (shared consciousness), rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility, which eventually lead to the close-knitting of community members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

One aspect of brand communities, which is worth elaboration, is their 'non-geographically bound' nature. The literature revealed a lot of research on the dynamics of online communities, in general and online brand communities (OBC), in particular.

Nevertheless, despite this potential of employee brand communities in fostering better internal branding, there has been very little literature studying their mutual relationship (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Furthermore, the literature suggests that the discussion around brand communities will hold stronger ground

if we try to approach it systematically by understanding the dynamics in a generic community using social identity approach. The idea is to review the social identity theory (SIT) and (brand) community literature together in a holistic manner such that the correct understanding of the point of departure of an 'intra-organisational brand community' (P. R. Devasagayam et al., 2010) is derived from the concept of a generic geographical or non-geographical (online/virtual) community.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a grounded theory research design based on the literature review in the field of IBM and (customer and internal) brand communities. The systematic review of marketing and organisational behaviour literature was supplemented with expert interviews.

Social identity approach is used to build a foundation for identifying the brand community constructs and their interrelationship. Based on the thorough review of the IBM and brand community literature, various research propositions are reported. The resulting framework was proposed to measure the impact of employee participation in internal brand communities on building a strong internal brand.

Antecedents of internal brand community participation

The characteristics that define a brand community are shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility, no geographic restriction, community of limited liability, mass-mediated and commercial sensibility, communal self-awareness and less ephemeral (unlike new-tribes) (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Madupu & Cooley (2010) adopted the model of participation in network- and small-group based virtual communities created by Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo (2004) and applied its five motives as antecedents of participation in (online) brand communities. The motives or antecedents of participation were information, self-discovery, social integration, social enhancement, and entertainment motives. They, however,

divided the consequences of participation into two broad categories – community consequences and branding consequences. The community consequences were essentially the ones theorized and tested by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) – consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and Moral responsibility. Therefore, we argue that:

> PR 01: *Consciousness of kind among the member-employees of an internal brand community is a measure of employee participation in the brand ambassador community enabling a strong employee-brand-employee connection.*

> PR 02: *Rituals and traditions specific to the internal brand community are a measure of employee participation in the brand ambassador community.*

> PR 03: *A shared moral code among the internal brand community member-employees is a measure of employee participation in the brand ambassador community.*

Socialization in an internal brand community

Man is a social animal. He tends to define and reinforce his own identity by associating himself with the people that share his interests, preferences and attitudes. This idea was both reinforced and critiqued in a well-celebrated consolidation of the research on intergroup relations by Henri Tajfel from University of Bristol, England (Henri Tajfel, 1981). The need for one's social identity is one of the key theoretical underpinnings behind community dynamics (H Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1986). H Tajfel & Turner (1979, 1986) theorized that group situations differ from interpersonal situations and this is explained by the way social identity differs from personal identity. SIT proposes that by deriving their identity from group memberships, people attempt to achieve a positive social identity and this uplifts their own perception of their self-esteem (Rupert, 2000; H Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Henri Tajfel, 1981; Henri Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People achieve this by defining their 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' in a three-step process shown in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. *Socialization process according to SIT*

The takeaway from the SIT for community participation is that it leads to social identification of its members and since one chooses his group by categorization and comparison, the result is a strong loyalty with one's in-group. One 'specialized' form of such a community is brand community in which the branded good or service is the force that drives the community dynamics (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). We, therefore, assert that:

PR 04: Employee participation in a cohesive employee brand ambassador community leads to a stronger social identity pertaining to the internal brand community.

Community participation – a holistic internal branding strategy

One facet of the participation behaviour is the members' attitude towards out-group or oppositional brands. It must be noted that the process of in- and out-grouping in a community is in line with the findings by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) about 'shared consciousness' which is reinforced by the perceived 'legitimacy' of their in-group (defining what one is) and 'oppositional loyalty' towards their out-group (defining what one is not). Further, in a study of a special subsets of larger brand related communities called 'small-group brand communities', Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006) identified social identification as key antecedent of brand identification, and eventually, positive brand behaviour in a small social brand group. In fact, there is an (additional) indirect yet substantial impact of social identification in these small group brand communities as social identification positively impacts desire, which incite positive social intentions, group behaviour and finally, causes positive brand behaviour (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Furthermore, Devasagayam et al. (2010) found that a powerful internal brand community ensures that employees are able to connect with and support the brand communication and corporate strategic branding initiatives. Additionally, higher levels of employee-employee and employee-customer engagement were also observed. Therefore, we posit that:

PR 05: By activating an employee-member's social identity, employee participation in a cohesive employee brand ambassador community increases their brand commitment, thus building a strong internal brand.

PR 06: By activating an employee-member's social identity, employee participation in a cohesive employee brand ambassador community increases their brand knowledge, thus building a strong internal brand.

R. Devasagayam & Buff (2008) investigated and supported two-dimensional constructs for the spatial (Physical vs Virtual) and temporal (Synchronous vs Asynchronous) dimensions of the brand communities. Nevertheless, marketers cannot overlook the crucial role that 'brand fests' and 'brand camps' play in spurring community participation. Such activations convert the otherwise dormant and shy consumers into active contributors to the brand communities (Mcalexander et al., 2002). Therefore, we posit that:

PR 07: Brand activations or fests are the temporal activations (mainly face-to-face) that offer increased opportunities of informal interaction among the community members at the behest of the brand; thus, moderating the impact of the member's social identity in the community on their brand commitment.

PR 08: Brand activations or fests are the temporal activations (mainly face-to-face) that offer increased opportunities of informal interaction among the community members at the behest of the brand; and thus, moderate the impact of the social identity of community members on their brand knowledge.

Conceptual framework

The thorough review of the IBM and brand community literature, and expert interviews led to the propositions, which can be visualized in the form of the **Brand Ambassador Community Framework**. Figure 2 shows the proposed framework.

Definitions of proposed constructs

Consciousness of kind signifies the perceived bond and a strong sense of belongingness an employee has with other community members and with the brand. (Madupu, 2006; Mcalexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Moral code of the internal *brand ambassador community* are the collection of subtle group norms that members follow by heart (Dholakia et al., 2004). These norms ensure a collective action by the brand ambassadors.

Rituals and traditions are the subtle practices in an internal brand ambassador community, which function to sustain the consciousness of kind among the community members.

Social identity with its three components - Cognitive or self-categorization (self-awareness of one's community membership); Affective (emotional commitment to the community); and Evaluative (collective esteem of the community as a whole), drives socialization among the brand ambassador community members.

Discussion and implications for brand leaders

This article attempts to delineate a holistic approach to building a strong internal brand by ensuring employee participation in an intra-organisational brand community. The (employee) brand ambassadors are the key in this approach, since they are the most motivated and demonstrate extreme love for the brand. The idea is to engage them in a community to keep them up-to-date on the brand identity and engage them to build and sustain their emotional commitment with the brand. The implications for the brand leaders can be looked from end-to-end perspective:

Key considerations in building a brand ambassador community

Literature stands witness to the fact that brand leadership must facilitate and define the roles the collaborators assume to ensure that the flow of information and organisation of activities in the community is seamless and effective (Morhart et al., 2009). Additionally, both the theory (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Aurand et al., 2005) and the practice confirms that brand ambassadors should be recruited with utmost precision and care. The stitching of the community would be a failure if either the people selected are not motivated or a particular office location has negativity because of some recent business challenges and setbacks. Further,
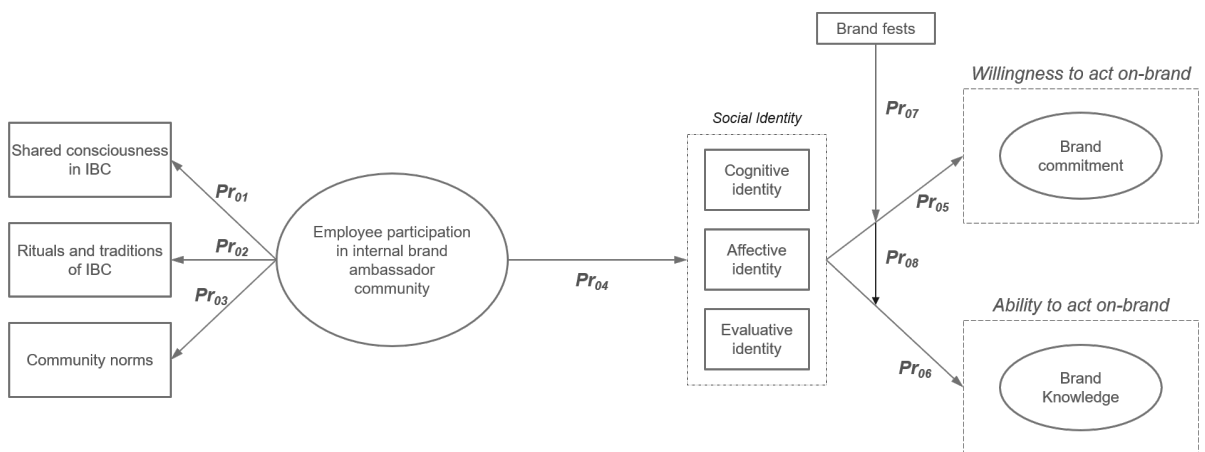
Fig. 2. *Proposed conceptual framework*

while choosing ambassadors, the key is to look for natural leaders or the brand champions who are the collaboration-catalysts in their teams (Thomson et al., 1999). These 'natural leaders' might not hold leadership positions, but can be spotted on the company's intranet, global newsletters and local cultural activities. The expert interviews also revealed that an effective approach could be to recruit people from outside marketing and sales since their word-of-mouth carries more weightage is considered more authentic.

Rewards and recognition are the pillars of internal branding (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Foreman & Mooney, 1995). A symbolic reward, highlighting some aspect of the brand identity; free access to some tools, or product or a component of the product; first to view and try latest features; and front row seats in all employee meets and other events are recommended in the expert interviews.

Key considerations in sustaining a brand ambassador community

Legitimacy and autonomy are the key to a successful and active community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This is because the community, by its very essence, is the group of free thinkers who are bound by a shared purpose - in this case, the brand. Brand leadership has to act only like a facilitator. Expert interviews revealed that holding on to the community control because of the fear of brand non-compliance is a recipe for disaster. Thus, to check the negative connotations to the autonomy of a community, a sense of competition must be introduced among the local sub-communities. Not only this encourages communities to bind better together, but it also stimulates best-practices approaches across the larger community of ambassadors.

Ritual and traditions are at the heart of a community's existence (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). They are manifested in the way members meet and greet, celebrate brand's heritage, tell brand stories, and retain and guide the members new to the community. An effective way to do this is to facilitate the members in defining the brand's personality or to drive local activations around brand's history. Expert interviews suggested that internal communications function can ensure the

rituals and traditions are formalized and communicated across the structure.

A community member feels extremely empowered when s/he gets the opportunity to share her brand knowledge. This can be done in many ways. One prevalent method is to train the members on the latest brand and facilitate them to train people further, maybe starting with their own respective teams.

Further, brand fests are a great way to bring together people from distant community chapters, and they can do wonders. The brand fests section lists numerous advantages of conducting brand fests.

Limitations and future research

Future research is critical in improving the ideas presented in this paper. First, an empirical analysis in a business-to-business context would help validate the propositions. Second, literature is quite fragmented on the type of role played by social identity in a community (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Dholakia et al., 2004; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Even as our expert interviews led us to propose a mediating role played by social identity in our context, some studies also reported a moderating effect of social identity in community participation. Third, it might be worthwhile to apply the conceptual framework in other industry settings.

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