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A conceptual framework for identifying key employee branding dimensions: A study of hospitality industry

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ABSTRACT

The current research adds to the employee branding literature by building a conceptual framework to identify key employee branding dimensions in the context of the Indian hospitality industry that has been overlooked by the previous literature. A survey-based approach is employed on a sample of 421 customer-contact employees of the top ten luxury chain hotels, operating in five major tourist destinations of Northern India. The main thrust of the study is to gauge employees' perspectives concerning internal and external brand management efforts pursued by luxury chain hotels. Thus, a conceptual model was designed and tested through confirmatory factor analysis using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS v. 20). After reviewing the extant literature and conducting an empirical investigation, the study validates employee branding as a five-dimensional first-order reflective construct namely perceived brand-centred human resource management, perceived internal brand communication, perceived brand-specific transformational leadership, perceived brand-oriented support and perceived external brand prestige. The paper concludes with discussion, implications, provides limitations and directions for further research.

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Introduction

In today's era of service marketing, the competitive hospitality industry has done a tremendous job by significantly contributing to the economic growth of the country. For instance, the Indian hotel industry is likely to grow to US$ 13 billion by 2020 as per Indian Tourism Statistics Report, 2018 and moreover, its contribution to country's capital investment is projected to grow to 6.7 percent in next 10 years by 2028 as per World Travel & Tourism Council Report, 2018. This remarkable performance of the hospitality industry has transformed it into a service-dominant industry. Hospitality industry, being a service-dominant industry, is known for its intangibility (Yang, Wan, & Wu, 2015), inseparability (Garas, Mahran, & Mohamed, 2018; Xie, Peng, & Huan, 2014) and heterogeneity of services (Xie et al., 2014), where employees, especially customer-contact employees serve as the foundation of the service brand (Garas et al., 2018). They are generally referred to as boundary spanners (Garas et al., 2018; Miles & Mangold, 2004) since they perform at the organization's boundary. Moreover, they act as a crucial link between internal and external organization's environment (Terglav, Ruzzier, & Kaše, 2016) since they have direct interaction with external customers. The present study focuses on customer-contact employees as they directly influence the other stakeholders of the organization (Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2011). In the hospitality industry, customers' brand experience and hotel brand success ultimately depend on employees' service delivery performance at the time of service encounters. In this context, employee branding serves as a tool that not only enhances employees' brand-building behaviour but also provides an unforgettable brand experience to external customers.

Generally, Employee branding helps the organization in gaining a competitive advantage by positioning the hotel brand in the minds of internal customers and motivating them to deliver the brand promise to external stakeholders (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Employee branding drives employees' brand attitude and brand behaviours (Buil, Martínez, & Matute, 2016; Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007), strengthens the customer-brand relationship (Xie et al., 2014) and reduces service performance gap (Garas et al., 2018). Therefore, employee branding can be used as a positioning tool or it can be used as a source of competitive advantages (Miles & Mangold, 2005).

Also, effective employee branding requires collective efforts of internal as well as external branding initiatives as internal brand management efforts alone do not assure that employees will internalise the desired brand image and exhibit brand-aligned behaviour. Miles and Mangold (2004) argued that employees inter-

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nalize the desired brand image through internal as well as external formal and informal message systems as both internal and external modes of messages shape employees' perceptions (Hofer & Grohs, 2018). Moreover, effective brand management must be internally and externally focused on the competitive hospitality industry (King, Murillo, & Lee, 2017). However, to date, emphasis on employee branding literature has been on the effective management of internal branding efforts. Previous researchers have given hardly any consideration to the role of external branding efforts which are also crucial for effective brand management. Although a recent study by Hofer and Grohs (2018) have investigated the influence of external communication tool sponsorship on employees' brand identification. In this regard, the present research has tried to contribute to this emerging issue that considers both internal and external brand management efforts for a rapidly growing and extremely competitive hospitality industry.

Employee branding is an anecdotal and multifaceted construct, studied by numerous researchers. In this context, rigorous researches (Buil et al., 2016; Burmann et al., 2009; King & So, 2015; Porricelli, Yurova, Abratt, & Bendixen, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Xiong & King, 2015; Kashive & Khanna, 2017; Du Preez, Bendixen, & Abratt, 2017; Garas et al., 2018) have been conducted on exploring employee branding dimensions that drive employees' favourable attitude and behaviours. However, despite a large number of empirical studies, current academic research on employee branding still lacks empirical evidence, since employee branding dimensions have not been fully explored. The present study adds to employee branding literature by introducing holistic employee branding programmes that can craft a highly productive environment for the hospitality workforce as per their expectations.

To achieve this, the present study has tried to explore key employee branding dimensions by developing a conceptual framework, considering both internal as well as external marketing initiatives as suggested by Miles and Mangold (2004). Exploring key employee branding dimensions is imperative for the competitive hospitality industry, because a thorough understanding of employee branding dimensions may help the practitioners in executing employee branding initiatives effectively, for providing a better work environment to the employees. Consequently, this research aims to get a better understanding of employee branding initiatives from the employees' perspective. In a specific term, the purpose of the study is to identify the dimensions of employee branding as perceived by customer-contact employees of luxury chain hotels.

The current research has made its remarkable contribution to the employee branding literature by exploring employee branding practices in the context of Indian hospitality industry. Firstly, after going through the extant branding literature, the majority of the studies on employee branding have been conducted in foreign countries. The researcher found a handful of studies in the Indian context and no study has been conducted on the hospitality industry in Northern India, which seems to be a big research gap. Secondly, it can be observed from the literature review that employee branding dimensions have not been fully explored. Existing studies mainly focused on those dimensions of employee branding which are internally oriented activities, followed in the organization. The existing literature has ignored the relevance of external marketing initiatives in shaping employees' perceptions of the service brand. It indicates a research gap in studying the key dimensions of employee branding. Thirdly, most importantly, in employee branding literature, to date, no previous studies have used perceived external brand prestige as an additional dimension of employee branding. This study is first of its kind which has tried to fill this missing link. Furthermore, this research will give practical implications for practitioners in the hospitality industry.

The present study is structured as follows: it starts with a literature review and a conceptual framework on the given construct is explained. In the research methodology section of the study, sampling design, variable measurement, and data analysis are presented. Then, the paper concludes with discussion, implications, limitations, and scope for further research.

Literature review

Employee branding

Several researchers (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) asserted that employee branding or internal branding shapes employees' behaviour in favour of the service brand. In the service industry, the concept of employee branding has received great attention over the last two decades. The hospitality industry is a labour-intensive industry where employee branding initiatives play a very significant role in transforming employees into brand champions (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009). In consideration of branding literature, numerous eminent researchers have operationalised employee branding in several ways. For instance, previous researchers (Aurand et al., 2005; Hirvonen & Laukkanen, 2014) defined internal branding as those coordinated programmes directed at employees, for educating and providing them brand-oriented training so that they can use in their work. Again, Özçelik and Fındıklı (2014) conceptualized it as a set of corporate strategic activities that provide and ensures intellectual and emotional employees. Buil et al. (2016) considered it as an important source of sustainable competitive advantage. Several authors (e.g. Aurand et al., 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Sujchaphong, Nguyen, & Melewar, 2015) argued that internal branding programmes facilitate employees' brand supportive behaviour by aligning their behaviour with the brand values. Chang, Chiang, and Han (2015) advocated the concept of corporate branding which is conceptualized as a strategic process targeted both internal and external customers by the coordinated internal and external marketing efforts. Following Yang et al. (2015), internal branding is a process by which employees are educated and trained with brand knowledge. Tuominen, Hirvonen, Reijonen, and Laukkanen (2016) defined internal branding as a process that not only promotes brand values among employees but also enhances their commitment towards the organization. Liu, Ko, and Chapleo (2017) described the attention-based view of internal branding where employees play the role of decision-makers in supporting brand-building efforts. Iyer, Davari, and Paswan (2018) used a resource-based view to explain the role of internal branding in attaining strong brand success. The researchers argued that internal branding not only enhances the successful implementation of strategic brand management brand orientation but also enhances employees' brand performance. From the above discussion, it is evident that employee branding has received an important place in the hospitality industry. Although the term employee branding was first introduced by Miles and Mangold (2004) and provided a comprehensive definition of employee branding as 'the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents'. The study conducted by Miles and Mangold (2004) forms the base for the current study. Despite the relevance of employee branding in the hospitality industry, there is a lack of holistic understanding of employee branding dimensions in the present academic research. Therefore, this study draws attention to the comprehensive aspects of employee branding dimensions that affect employee branding outcomes. Therefore, the next section will discuss employee branding dimensions.

Employee branding dimensions

In consideration of employee branding literature, employee branding is modeled as unidimensional (Iyer et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Tuominen et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015) as well as multi-dimensional construct (Buil et al., 2016; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Du Preez et al., 2017; Kashive & Khanna, 2017). However, until now, a single consensus has not been made on the dimensionality of employee branding construct. It still lacks empirical evidence. Existing branding literature described different components of employee branding that foster brand supportive behaviour of employees. For instance, (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Du Preez et al., 2017; Porricelli et al., 2014) argued that internal brand management is a second-order formative construct comprised of brand identity, brand communication, and brand leadership. On the other hand, previous authors contended it as a second-order reflective construct that contributes towards employees' brand attitude and brand performance. Such as Kashive & Khanna (2017) (Training, orientation, and briefing); Garas et al. (2018) (Internal communication, training & orientation, performance feedback and rewards); Chang et al. (2015) (Vision & culture, Departmental coordination, leadership, training & selection, communication); Özçelik and Fındıklı (2014) (HR involvement, internal communication and training); Chiang, Chang, Han, and Mcconville (2013) (Vision & culture, Departmental coordination, leadership, training & selection, communication); King, Grace, and Weaven (2013) (Leadership, HR, standard, empowerment); Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) (Training, orientation, group meeting and briefing). Simultaneously, several studies have taken employee branding initiatives as a first-order multi-dimensional construct. For instance, Caruana and Calleya (1998) have modeled vision, reward, and development as three important dimensions of an internal marketing scale. Burmann et al. (2009) introduced a holistic model for internal brand management based on identity-based brand management introducing brand centered HR practices, brand communication and brand leadership as the important dimensions of internal branding. Similarly, Miles, Mangold, Asree, and Revell (2011) mainly focused on organizational message systems comprised of internal and external (formal as well as informal) messages system that impact employees' understanding of the desired brand image. King and Grace (2012) reported that organisational socialization, relationship orientation, and employee receptiveness as components of internal brand management. Buil et al. (2016) argued that employees' attitude is influenced by internal brand communication, brand centered training and transformational leadership. Likewise, King and So (2015) reported brand-oriented support, brand-oriented recruitment and brand-oriented training as dimensions of internal brand management practices. Therefore, it is evident from the employee branding literature that human resource management activities, internal brand communication, leadership, brand-oriented support have been considered as the most contributing dimensions of employee branding. All these dimensions reflect internal branding initiatives that build employees' perceptions regarding the service brand. Simultaneously, in addition to the above internal brand management efforts, employees also expect self-identity. According to the social identity theory, every employee wants to be self-identified with the organisation for which they work (Chang et al., 2015; Chiang, Han, & Chuang, 2011, 2013; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009). But, the organisation's identity depends on its prestige among the external stakeholders. Moreover, Hofer and Grohs (2018) advocated that the external image builds from external modes of messages lead to employees' strong brand identification. Likewise, organisational behaviour literature suggested that when employees perceive that they belong to that organization which has high external prestige, this will automatically boost their morale and ultimately their performance (Alniacik, Cigerim, Akcin, & Bayram, 2011; Carmeli & Freund, 2002; Fu, Li, & Duan, 2014; Herrbach & Mignonac, 2004; Herrbach, Mignonac, & Gatignon, 2004; Tuna, Ghazzawi, Yesiltas, Tuna, & Arslan, 2016). Therefore, external brand prestige needs to be studied as an additional dimension of employee branding that results from external brand management efforts such as advertising, marketing campaigns, public relations and external stakeholders' views regarding their organization as suggested by Miles et al. (2011) under external formal and informal messages system. Moreover, when employees will perceive external brand prestige positively, in addition to human resource management practices, internal brand communication and transformational leadership, and brand-oriented support, they will exhibit brand-aligned behaviour.

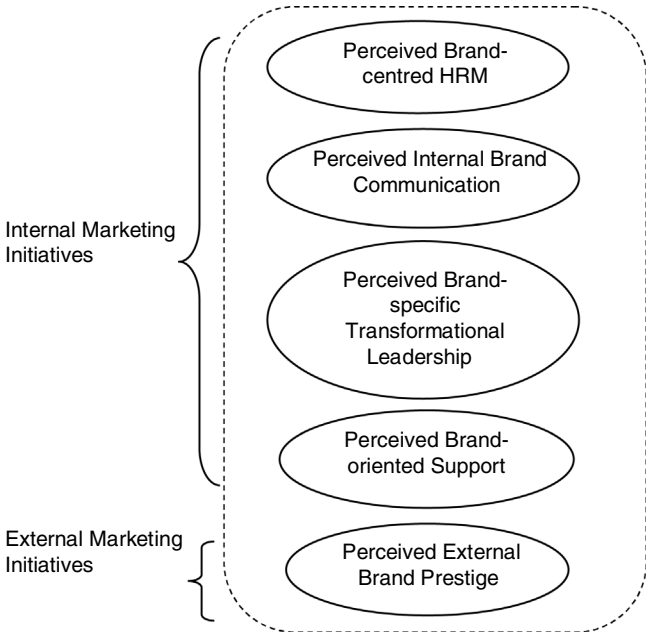

Fig. 1. A conceptual framework of employee branding dimensions.

Therefore, the present study has tried to capture both internal as well as external marketing initiatives of employee branding as suggested by Miles and Mangold (2004) that affect employee branding outcomes. In particular, this paper, based on extant employee branding literature, has identified five dimensions of employee branding namely perceived brand-centred human resource management practices, perceived internal brand communication, perceived brand-specific transformational leadership, perceived brand-oriented support and perceived external brand prestige (see Fig. 1). In the present study, it is modeled as a multi-dimensional first-order reflective construct. In the following section, the researchers have built a conceptual framework on identified employee branding dimensions and provided comprehensive definitions of the latent construct as shown in Table 1.

Conceptual framework

Perceived brand-centred HRM

The hotel industry, being a labour-intensive industry, cannot underestimate the role of human resource management practices for effective utilization of human resources in gaining competitive advantage (Chand & Katou, 2007). Researchers (e.g. Boselie & van der Wiele, 2002; Tsaur & Lin, 2004) highlighted the role of human resource management practices that influence employees'

Table 1
Constructs' definition and related studies.

Constructs	Comprehensive definition	Related studies
Perceived Brand-centred HRM practices	Brand-centered HRM refers to those perceived HR practices that make employees produce positive attitudes and behaviours toward the brands of the firm.	Aurand et al., 2005; Burmann et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2012; Coleman, de Chernatony, & Christodoulides, 2015
Perceived Internal brand communication	Employees' that belief when they feel that brand-oriented internal communication systems enhance their knowledge in delivering the brand promise effectively.	Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Baker et al., 2013; Porricelli et al., 2014; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2014; Buil et al., 2016
Perceived Brand-specific transformational leadership	Employees' own belief regarding his or her supervisor's leadership approach that not only motivates or encourages employees to act in favour of the brand but also inculcates positive values in them.	Morhart et al., 2009; Burmann et al., 2009; Uen et al., 2012; Porricelli et al., 2014; Buil et al., 2016 and Terglav et al., 2016
Perceived Brand-oriented support	Employees that state of mind when they feel relevant for their corporate brand and the corporate take cares about their well-being.	Xie et al., 2014; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; King & So, 2015 and Xiong & King, 2018
Perceived external brand prestige	Perceived external prestige refers to employees' own belief about the organisational image as perceived by external stakeholders.	Carmeli & Freund, 2002; Herrbach et al., 2004; Herrbach & Mignonac, 2004; Carmeli, 2005; Carmeli et al., 2006; Sung & Yang, 2008; Alniacik et al., 2011; Mathe & Scott-Halsell, 2012; Fu et al., 2014; Schaarschmidt et al., 2015; Akgunduz & Bardakoglu, 2017; Tuna et al., 2016

(Source: Literature review).

as well as organisational performance. In organisational behavioral literature, human resource management practices have got an important place that exerts a huge impact on employees' behaviour. Therefore, previous authors conceptualised human resource management practices in several ways. For instance, in a study, Edgar and Geare (2005) segregated the concept of HRM into 'hard' and 'soft' HRM. 'Soft' HRM is concerned about the well-being of the employees whereas 'hard' HRM is concerned about the proper utilization of the human resources. Similarly, Kehoe and Wright (2013) introduced a high-performance HR approach that includes ability, motivation, and opportunity enhancing practices. Besides, recent researchers conceptualized HRM practices as high-commitment human resource management (Chiang et al., 2011), high-involvement HR practices (Yang, 2012). Alfes, Shantz, Truss, and Soane (2013) argued that HRM practices should be considered holistically rather than individually. Chang, Nguyen, Cheng, Kuo, and Lee (2016) identified four aspects of HR practice in primary school setting namely recruitment & placement; teaching, education & career development; support, communication & retention; and performance & appraisal. Likewise, in the employee branding literature, HRM practices were also conceptualized in several ways such as Cardy, Miller, and Ellis (2007) adopted a task-based and person-based HRM framework. In a task-based HRM framework, more stress was given on a functional approach such as recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisal, and compensation, all contributing towards maximizing job performance. The person-based HRM framework highlighted the effective utilization of human resources. The researchers asserted that human resource management practices should be task to people-oriented. Chang, Chiang, and Han (2012) defined brand-centred HRM as those practices that induce employees to exhibit a positive attitude and behaviours towards the brand. King, So, and Grace (2013) considered service brand HR practices in effectively executing service brand orientation. Likewise, Porricelli et al. (2014) also considered brand-centred HRM as one of the important levers of internal brand management practices that ensures brand identity through recruitment, selection, and promotion of employees. Coleman, de Chernatony, and Christodoulides (2015) found human resource initiatives as one of the dimensions of a B2B service brand identity scale that helps in improving employees' job performance. Therefore, the significant amount of studies such as (Aurand et al., 2005; Buil et al., 2016; Burmann et al., 2009; Chang, Chiang, & Han, 2012; King & So, 2015; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009) contended human resource management practices as an important tool of internal brand management practices that transforms employees' perceptions and behavior into positive brand behaviour. Thus, based on the growing importance of HRM practices in employee branding efforts, the present study has taken it as a crucial dimension of employee branding practices.

Perceived internal brand communication

An extensive body of empirical research highlights the positive influence of internal communication systems on employees' brand behaviour. Many researchers (e.g. Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Porricelli et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2017) emphasized that effective internal brand communication is a prerequisite for effective and efficient implementation of internal branding efforts, as it contributes to the clarification of employees' role within their job environment (Garas et al., 2018; King, 2010). Previous authors conceptualized internal communication in several ways such as brand knowledge dissemination and information generation efforts (King, 2010 and King, Grace et al., 2013); internal market orientation (Boukis, Kostopoulos, & Katsaridou, 2014; Boukis, Gounaris, & Lings, 2017; Ferdous & Polonsky, 2014; Gounaris, 2008; Liu et al., 2017; Yu, Asaad, Yen, & Gupta, 2018); internal corporate communication (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2014). Despite several attempts at the conceptualisation of internal brand communication construct in the branding as well as in organisational behavioural literature, all contended that effective internal communication systems, directed at employees can facilitate several employees' outcomes or internal branding outcomes in the form of role clarity (Garas et al., 2018; King, 2010), job satisfaction (Ferdous & Polonsky, 2014; Gounaris, 2008; Jacobs, Yu, & Chavez, 2016; King, So et al., 2013; Pincus, Knipp, & Rayfield, 1990; Porricelli et al., 2014), brand commitment (Burmann et al., 2009; Garas et al., 2018; King, 2010; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009), brand loyalty (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) and brand citizenship behaviour (Burmann et al., 2009; Baker et al., 2013; Porricelli et al., 2014). Hence, based on the extensive literature, the present research has taken it as a second important dimension of employee branding initiatives.

Perceived brand-specific transformational leadership

Leadership has been studied by numerous researchers in the organizational behaviour literature (Braun, Peus, Weisweiler, & Frey, 2013; Griffith, 2004; Joo, Jun Yoon, & Jeung, 2012; Kim

& Brymer, 2011; Men, 2014; Nemanich & Keller, 2007; Nielsen, Yarker, Randall, & Munir, 2009; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Rothfelder, Ottenbacher, & Harrington, 2012; Yang, 2012). Leadership is a tool designed to accomplish organisational goals by influencing team members (Tsai, Cheng, & Chang, 2010). In recent years, numerous researchers adopted transactional and transformational leadership styles in different organisational settings such as public primary schools (Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006); fortune based 500 companies (Joo et al., 2012); hotel industry (Rothfelder et al., 2012). Similarly, in the internal branding literature, researchers and practitioners have also identified effective leadership style as an important mechanism that help employees in aligning their personal values with the brand promise (Burmann et al., 2009; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Morhart et al., 2009; Vallaster et al., 2005; Uen, Wu, Teng, & Liu, 2012). Porricelli et al. (2014) and Buil et al. (2016) advocated it as an important lever of internal brand management practices that encourage employees to live the brand. Chang et al. (2015) stated that brand-oriented leadership and transformational leadership are considered as effective leadership styles that contribute to brand citizenship behaviour. Likewise, Morhart et al. (2009) adopted two leadership styles namely brand-specific transformational and transactional leadership, to check their influence on brand building behaviour of employees. Brand-specific transformational leadership is defined as a leaders' approach to motivate his or her subordinates to act on behalf of the corporate brand by influencing their values and personal convictions. In contrast, brand-specific transactional leadership is defined as a leaders' approach to motivate his or her subordinates to act on behalf of the corporate brand as per the specified conditions and rewards. Wallace, de Chernatony, and Buil (2013) adopted initiating structure and consideration leadership behavior, where initiating structure is defined as leaders' approach to define and organize his role and his followers' role for goal attainment. Whereas, consideration leadership is defined as leaders' approach to show concern and respect for his subordinates, act for their welfare and express appreciation and support. Furthermore, previous branding literature has established the relevance of leadership behaviour in the hospitality industry (Terglav et al., 2016; Tsai et al., 2010; Uen et al., 2012). In addition, the significant amount of researchers (Morhart et al., 2009; Uen et al., 2012; Sujchaphong et al., 2015; Terglav et al., 2016; Buil et al., 2016) have considered transformational leadership style as one of the most effective leadership approach that contributes towards positive employees' brand attitude and brand supportive behaviour in employee branding context. Since empirical evidence has shown a greater impact of transformational leadership than transactional leadership behaviour on employees' performance. Therefore, the present study addresses brand-specific transformational leadership as the third important dimension of employee branding.

Perceived brand-oriented support

Perceived organisational support emerged through organisational support theory (Garg & Dhar, 2014; Liu, 2009) that reflects a quality relationship between employees and the organisation. Perceived organisational support is operationalised as employees' general belief that they recognize for their contribution and care for their well being by the organisation for which they work (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Marique, Stinglhamber, Desmette, Caesens, & De Zanet, 2013). Chiang et al. (2011) noted that employees' performance highly depends on the quality of perceived organisational support. Likewise, King and So (2015) defined brand-oriented support as the extent when employees perceive that the organisation cooperates them in building their brand understanding and enabling them in exhibiting brand-building behaviour. In the field of branding literature, it has become an important tool of employee branding that contributes towards brand citizenship behaviour of employees' (Morhart et al., 2009; King & So, 2015; Buil et al., 2016; Terglav et al., 2016; Xiong & King, 2018). In addition, previous authors (Garg & Dhar, 2014; King ö So, 2015; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Xie et al., 2014; Xiong & King, 2018; Zumrah & Boyle, 2015) argued that when employees perceive extrinsic as well as intrinsic support from their organisation, they will exert positive brand citizenship behaviour as per social exchange theory. Xiong and King (2018) argued that perceived brand-oriented support is crucial for the hospitality industry that advances employees' brand performance as the hospitality industry is a labour-intensive industry where employees face high work pressure. In that situation, perceived brand-oriented support works like a transformer that transforms employees' behaviour in favour of the service brand. Therefore, the present study identifies perceived brand-oriented support as the fourth dimension of employee branding initiatives.

Perceived external brand prestige

In organisation behavior literature, numerous researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the relevance of perceived external prestige in transforming employees' attitudes and behaviour (Tuna et al., 2016). Many researchers have used organisational prestige and perceived external prestige interchangeably, but there is a slight difference between the two. Organisational prestige refers to external stakeholders' beliefs regarding their organisation (Carmeli & Freund, 2002; Akgunduz ö Bardakoglu, 2017; Alniacik et al., 2011; Fu et al., 2014; Herrbach & Mignonac, 2004; Herrbach et al., 2004). Whereas perceived external prestige refers to employees' own belief about organisational image as perceived by external stakeholders (Carmeli & Freund, 2002; Carmeli, 2005; Carmeli, Gilat, & Weisberg, 2006; Herrbach & Mignonac, 2004; Herrbach et al., 2004; Mathe & Scott-Halsell, 2012; Schaarschmidt, Walsh, & Ivens, 2015; Sung & Yang, 2008; Tuna et al., 2016). Akgunduz and Bardakoglu (2017) stated that perceived external prestige leads to organisational identification. It means when employees believe that they are a part of a highly reputed organisation, they are likely to become emotionally attached to the organisation or they identify themselves with the organisation as per the social identity concept (Sung & Yang, 2008). Herrbach et al., 2004; Herrbach ö Mignonac, 2004 argued that perceived external prestige results in different behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction, affective organisational commitment, and organisational citizenship behaviour. Therefore, in the branding literature, the present study is first of its kind which has taken perceived external brand prestige as an additional dimension of employee branding that shapes employees' brand attitude and brand building behaviour.

Research methodology

Sampling design

A survey-based approach was adopted. Using a convenience sampling technique, the researchers targeted 500 customer-contact employees of the top ten luxury chain hotels, working in three departments namely front office, food & beverage and housekeeping (Buil et al., 2016; Punjaisri ö Wilson, 2011). Of which, 439 were returned, 18 questionnaires were discarded from the study due to incomplete or invalid questionnaires. The final sample size was 421, which represents 84.2 percent response rate. Before the final survey, the researchers made some necessary modifications based on pilot testing results and experts' opinions, to make it relevant in the context of the Indian hospitality industry. Based on the

Table 2
Descriptive statistics (n = 421).

Construct	Mean	S.D.[f]	Skewness	Kurtosis
PBTL[a]	3.58	1.22	−0.53	−0.74
PBHRM[b]	3.51	1.30	−0.36	−1.08
PIBC[c]	3.48	1.26	−0.46	−0.80
PBOS[d]	3.49	1.26	−0.48	−0.82
PEBP[e]	3.60	1.26	−0.53	−0.80

(Source: Calculated through SPSS v.21).
[a] Perceived Brand-specific Transformational Leadership.
[b] Perceived Brand-centred Human Resource Management.
[c] Perceived Internal Brand Communication.
[d] Perceived Brand-oriented Support.
[e] Perceived External Brand Prestige.
[f] Standard Deviation.

Table 3
Demographic profile (n = 421).

Sample profile	Descriptives
Age	(21–40: 72.9%)
Gender Male	(62.5%); Female (37.5%)
Highest educational qualification 8.1%	Below Grad. (17.3%); Grad. (39.4%); Masters (35.2%); Others
Current work experience (15%)	1–2 years (11.6%); 2–4 years (48.2%); 4–6 years (25.2%); >6 years
Annual income (7.1%)	<2lacs (11.4%); 2-5lacs (34.2%); 5-10lacs (47.3%); >10 lacs
Department type	Front office (37.5%); F&B (40.9%); Housekeeping (21.6%)

(Source: Calculated through SPSS v.21).

criteria followed by Buil et al. (2016) and ranking given by Hotel's 325 Report (2018), the top ten luxury chain hotels, operating in five major tourist destinations of Northern India have been selected. The reason was that these hotels give much more importance to internal brand management practices to build brand values in their employees (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Moreover, the researchers chose five major tourist destinations namely Amritsar, Shimla, Chandigarh, New Delhi, and Gurugram as these have the highest number of tourists' arrival and presence of the highest number of luxury chain hotels (Tuna et al., 2016).

Measures

Based on prior literature, the present study has adopted well-validated, pre-existing scales relating to the constructs (see Table 4). Responses were obtained on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree = 5 to strongly disagree = 1, the globally accepted scale. To measure employees' perceived brand-centred HRM scale (PBHRM), the authors adapted a nine-item scale from the studies such as (Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2011; Garas et al., 2018) and one item is self-developed based on expert opinion. Similarly, Perceived internal brand communication (PIBC) was measured by adapting a five-item scale from Garas et al. (2018). To measure perceived brand-specific transformational leadership (PBTL), the study adapted a seven-item scale from Buil et al. (2016) measurement instrument. Perceived brand-oriented support (PBOS) was measured by a six-item scale adapted from Xie et al. (2014). Perceived external brand prestige scale (PEBP) was formed by the six-item scale from Herrbach et al. (2004) and Alniacik et al. (2011). Respondents were also analyzed based on their demographics such as age, gender, educational qualification, work experience, annual income, and department type. Please refer to Table 3.

Data analysis and results

Preliminary analysis

Before testing the measurement model, the researcher conducted a preliminary analysis to examine which type of software is suitable for the given dataset. Under preliminary analysis, the researchers carried out a descriptive analysis using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v. 21), to check whether the given data is normal or not. Table 2 shows that the data are normally distributed as indicated by the skewness and kurtosis values of the given constructs. Byrne (2010) suggested that skewness values should be equal to or greater than 2 and kurtosis values should be equal to or greater than 7. The present study meets both criteria for data normality. Therefore, the preliminary analysis indicated that the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS v.20) was the most appropriate software for data analysis in the present study.

Common method biasness

When data is collected from the same respondents and the same source, it always creates a serious problem of common method biasness while analyzing the data. Therefore, it must be resolved before conducting the data analysis. There have been many ways of resolving such a serious issue. However, the most recommended remedies to resolve common method biasness is suggested by Podsakoff (2003). Hence, the present study used procedural and statistical remedies to resolve this issue (Chiang et al., 2011). The procedural remedy used at the time of data collection. In the statistical remedy, the researchers carried out an exploratory factor analysis to obtain factor structure which results in five different factors. Consequently, the variance explained by the first factor was 21.5 percent only which means that the majority of the items did not load on a single factor. After then, the researchers applied Harman's single factor test using confirmatory factor analysis, to resolve the issue of common method biasness (Fu et al., 2014). Harman's single factor test allowed the researcher to compare proposed five-dimensional measurement model fit with a single factor model fit which implied that the proposed five-dimensional measurement model fit is a good model fit as compared to the single-factor model fit. Hence, the common method biasness was not a serious problem for data analysis (Podsakoff, 2003).

Testing of measurement model

After resolving the issue of common method biasness, the study employed confirmatory factor analysis using maximum-likelihood estimation method, to assess the reliability and validity of the given constructs (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Reliability analysis was carried out by calculating composite reliability (CR). Table 4 depict that all the values of composite reliability exceeded the threshold limit of 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) that demonstrate an acceptable level of internal consistency of the given latent construct. Also, convergent validity was checked through average variance extracted (AVE), which depicts that values of AVE of all the constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.50, provided strong support for convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Likewise, discriminant validity was also confirmed by comparing square roots of construct average variance explained (AVE) with their respective cross-correlations. The study obtained strong support for discriminant validity. As shown in Table 5, square roots of AVE (bold diagonal elements) are larger than their respective cross-correlations (off-diagonal elements) of the given latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The study used different fit indices to obtain a good-fit measurement model such as chi-square ($\chi 2$), degree of freedom (df), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index

Table 4
Convergent validity analysis.

First-order construct	SL	CR	AVE
Perceived brand-specific transformational leadership (PBTL) (adapted from Buil et al., 2016)		0.941	0.697
PBTL1 My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future.	0.918		
PBTL2 My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.	0.942		
PBTL3 My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff.	0.892		
PBTL4 My supervisor increases trust, involvement, and cooperation among team members.	0.815		
PBTL5 My supervisor nurtures positive thinking among his team members.	0.759		
PBTL6 My supervisor is clear about his ideas and show openness.	0.750		
PBTL7 My supervisor instills pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.	0.743		
Perceived Brand-centered HRM (PBHRM) (adapted from Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2011 and Garas et al., 2018 and one-item is self-developed)		0.956	0.684
PBHRM1 My hotel uses a variety of selection tools (e.g. interviews, tests, work samples) in talent Selection.	0.801		
PBHRM2 My hotel considers the personal traits of applicants while recruiting employees.	0.896		
PBHRM3 The hotel provides me with appropriate skills concerning delivering the brand's promise based on the brand's standards.	0.910		
PBHRM4 My hotel provides a variety of training opportunities.	0.919		
PBHRM5 Training programs help me better understand the current and future customers' needs.	0.866		
PBHRM6 My hotel considers employees' performance in the process of evaluation.	0.821		
PBHRM7 My hotel pays employees according to their contributions and performance.	0.759		
PBHRM8 My hotel gives us promotions timely, based on our last performance.	0.773		
PBHRM9 My hotel compensates employees for providing brand-related information.	0.744		
PBHRM10 When employees display positive behavior towards the hotel brand, the hotel gives them formal rewards.	0.756		
Perceived Internal Brand Communication (PIBC) (adapted from Garas et al., 2018)		0.911	0.676
PIBC1 My hotel communicates its brand promise well to its employees.	0.832		
PIBC2 The hotel I work for communicates the importance of my role in delivering the brand promise.	0.900		
PIBC3 Internal communications provide all the essential information for me to perform the service according to the brand's expectations.	0.915		
PIBC4 My manager regularly meets all employees to report about issues relating to the hotel.	0.779		
PIBC5 My manager regularly gives me feedback about issues affecting the work environment.	0.657		
Perceived Brand-Oriented Support (PBOS) (adapted from Xie et al., 2014)		0.938	0.719
PBOS1 My hotel considers my opinions at the time of taking decisions.	0.856		
PBOS2 My hotel cares about my well-being.	0.914		
PBOS3 My hotel always helps me in making a balance between my personal and professional life.	0.915		
PBOS4 My hotel tries to make my job as interesting as possible.	0.833		
PBOS5 My hotel appreciates any extra effort from me.	0.804		
PBOS6 My hotel is willing to help me if I need a special favour.	0.752		
Perceived External Brand Prestige (PEBP) (adapted from Alniacik et al., 2011 and Herrbach et al., 2004)		0.939	0.721
PEBP1 People in my community think highly of this hotel.	0.848		
PEBP2 It is considered prestigious in the hospitality sector to be an employee of this hotel.	0.854		
PEBP3 This hotel is considered one of the best hotels.	0.853		
PEBP4 People generally respect my hotel.	0.788		
PEBP5 Employees of other hotels would be proud to work in my hotel.	0.861		
PEBP6 People generally believe that my hotel is trustable, credible and reputable.	0.889		

(Source: Calculated through AMOS v.20).
Note: Goodness-of-fit indices: $\chi^2 = 2231.267$ ($p < 0.05$, df = 514), χ^2 /df = 4.341, NFI = 0.853, IFI = 0.883, TLI = 0.872, CFI = 0.883, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.08.

(NFI), Incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The results showed that the key fit indices ($\chi 2 = 2231.27$; df = 514; $\chi 2$/ df = 4.341; p = .000; CFI = 0.88; NFI = 0.85; IFI = 0.883; TLI = 0.87; RMSEA = 0.08 and SRMR = 0.05) achieved an acceptable measurement model fit as all the fit indices were exceeded the recommended level (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, ö William, 1998; Hu & Bentler, 1995; Marsh & Hocevar, 1985). Overall, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the first-order measurement model is reliable and valid.

Discussion and theoretical implications

The present study has highlighted the relevance of employee branding practices in the rapidly growing Indian hospitality industry. The study seeks to explore 421 customer-contact employees' perspectives towards employee branding practices, followed in luxury chain hotels operating in five major tourist destinations of Northern India. To achieve this, the researchers have built a conceptual framework for identifying key employee branding dimensions covering both internal as well as external branding initiatives as suggested by Miles and Mangold (2004). Based on extensive employee branding literature, the current research has identified five crucial dimensions of employee branding namely perceived brand-centred human resource management practices, perceived internal brand communication, perceived brand-specific transformational leadership, perceived brand-oriented support and perceived external brand prestige. The current study adapted a pre-existing and validated measurement scale from the literature for each of the five dimensions and empirically tested in the context of the Indian hospitality industry. For this purpose, confirmatory factor analysis was applied to confirm the reliability and validity of the given latent constructs. The empirical findings suggested that the

Table 5
Discriminant validity analysis.

First-order Constructs	PBTL	PBHRM	PIBC	PBOS	PEBP
PBTL	**0.835**[a]				
PBHRM	0.345	**0.827**[a]			
PIBC	0.315	0.170	**0.822**[a]		
PBOS	0.339	0.332	0.408	**0.848**[a]	
PEBP	0.451	0.395	0.405	0.313	**0.849**[a]

(Source: Calculated through AMOS v.20).

[a] The bold diagonal elements represent the square roots of Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

first-order measurement model is valid and reliable in the context of the Indian hospitality industry. Moreover, on the basis of extant literature and data analysis, the study also revealed that incorporating brand-centred human resource management practices and effective internal brand communication system, brand-specific transformational leadership, brand-oriented support, and external brand prestige into employee branding programmes may contribute to employees' brand-aligned behaviour (Buil et al., 2016) and reduces service performance gap (Garas et al., 2018). The empirical findings suggest several theoretical and practical implications for the academicians and practitioners to get a deep insight into employee branding programmes.

This study offers several theoretical implications. The present research is the first, to the author's knowledge, that conceptualizes, identifies and empirically validates the five critical dimensions of employee branding. Past researches have ignored the employees' perspectives, fabricating through external branding practices (e.g. advertising, marketing campaign, public relation, customers' feedback) (Miles et al., 2011; Xiong & King, 2013). Although Hofer and Grohs (2018) drew attention towards the firm's external advertising directed at consumers, for shaping employees' perceptions towards the brand. In this context, the current study has introduced perceived external brand prestige as an additional dimension of employee branding, which affects employee branding outcomes. Sung and Yang (2008) asserted that when an organization has high external prestige then its employees feel emotionally attached and identify themselves with the organization and thereby elicit a positive attitude and behaviour towards the organization.

Practical implications

The present study proposed a conceptual framework for identifying key employee branding dimensions, which provides a deep insight into the decision-makers regarding various aspects of brand management practices followed in the hospitality industry. The study offers several implications for practitioners so that they could understand the relevance of employee branding practices in the Indian hospitality industry. As per social exchange and social identity theory, the more an employee perceives hotel brand positively, the more he or she exhibits a positive attitude and behaviour towards the hotel brand. Hence, hotel management should be aware that the competitive hospitality industry requires both internal and external oriented practices for effective brand management (King et al., 2017).

The hospitality industry is a labour-intensive industry where human resource is considered as the foundation of the service brand (Garas et al., 2018). Therefore, hotel management should incorporate flexible & progressive brand-centred human resource management practices that inform brand-aligned behaviour. Moreover, hotel managers should follow transparent recruitment & selection procedure. Advanced training & development programmes could be introduced to encourage employees. Most importantly, timely rewards, bonuses, compensations, and promotions could be useful strategies that must be considered by human resource managers, especially in the context of the Indian hospitality industry.

Internal brand communication has got an important place in the employee branding process as it reduces role ambiguity and establishes a quality relationship between employees and the organisation. Therefore, an effective and two-way internal brand communication system should be followed inside the organisation. A platform should be provided to the employees where they can easily express their views in front of the management on any matter. To achieve this, an equal chance should be given to all the employees irrespective of their differences. It will build confidence among employees and help them in recognizing their roles and responsibilities in delivering brand promise (Xiong & King, 2018). Hotel managers should ensure consistency while delivering brand messages.

Among different leadership styles, a brand-specific transformational leadership style should be adopted by the management. In the Indian hospitality industry, hotel managers or supervisors should set an example of a great leader and contribute towards creating a positive and healthy organisational climate (Buil et al., 2016). Adopting a brand-specific transformational leadership style motivates employees to act in favour of the service brand.

High-quality brand promise delivery becomes possible through brand-oriented support. Therefore, hospitality managers should provide formal as well as informal brand-oriented support to their employees to build confidence among them while delivering the brand promise to the external customers. For instance, hotel management should consider employees' opinions at the time of decision making. Employees should be facilitated by maintaining a balance between their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, they should be given recognition for their extra efforts in favour of the service brand. Likewise, mentoring programmes could also be introduced in the organization to nurture a healthy work environment inside the hotel organization (Xiong & King, 2018).

The researchers asserted that outsiders' views regarding the hotel brand also shape employees' perceptions. Therefore, hospitality managers should not underestimate the role of perceived external brand prestige in promoting employees' brand performance since a good external brand prestige pave the way for sustainable long-term brand success. Hence, hotel organisations should spend more and more resources on external formal and informal messages system as suggested by Miles et al. (2011), for strengthening external brand prestige. Moreover, a favourable external brand prestige of the hotel not only influences existing employees' self-esteem but also attracts and retains new talented employees.

The overall research framework emphasizes that the Indian hospitality industry should focus on every aspect of employee branding to stay competitive in the global market. Based on the above discussions, the researchers stated that a thorough understanding of employee branding dimensions will help the practitioners in implementing a constructive employee branding approach inside the hotel organisation, to facilitate brand-aligned behaviour.

Limitations and scope for further research

Like any other empirical study, the current study has also certain limitations that must be reported in further research. First, the present study is restricted to identifying various employee branding dimensions as perceived by customer-contact employees working in luxury chain hotels in Northern India. The study did not examine the influence of these dimensions on employees' brand attitude and behaviour. Future researchers could also examine the impact of the identified employee branding dimensions on

attitudinal and behavioural aspects of customer-contact employees including brand commitment, job satisfaction, and brand citizenship behaviour. Second, it would be interesting to examine the role of demographics to check whether employees' perception differs as per their demographic profile or not. Third, the present research is cross-sectional. Future researchers could conduct a longitudinal study in the hospitality industry, to examine cause and effect relationships to reduce common method biasness. Fourth, the present study identified employee branding dimensions in the context of a single industry. Other service industries could also be taken into consideration; it would provide more insights on understanding employee branding practices. Fifth, the study is restricted to only customer-contact employees of luxury chain hotels. Future research could consider customer-contact employees across multiple hotel brands such as mid-scale, up-scale and luxury chain hotels.

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