

An empirical investigation of antecedent and consequences of internal brand equity: Evidence from the airline industry

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Internal branding
Management commitment
Prosocial service behavior
Airline
Flight attendant
Iran

ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether and how management commitment to internal branding would stimulate prosocial service behaviors. Through its conceptual model, this study posits internal brand equity as the intervening mechanism which links management commitment to internal branding to role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation. Data were gathered from a sample of flight attendants in Iran. According to the results stem from structural equation modeling, management commitment to internal branding positively affects internal brand equity. In turn, internal brand equity positively associates with role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation. Results further revealed that, internal brand equity acts as full mediator in the relationship between management commitment to internal branding and extra-role customer service as well as partial mediator in the relationships between management commitment to internal branding and role-prescribed customer service and cooperation. In light of social influence theory, this study contributes to internal branding literature through its empirical evidence and managerial implications.

1. Introduction

In the past few years, Iranian airline industry have been experiencing a tremendous growth. According to Iran Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), 16 local airlines namely Ata, Aseman, Taban, Iran air tour, Kaspian, Naft Iran, Mahan and Kish are active and responsible to carry passenger and transport cargo (Omrani and Soltanzadeh, 2016). In terms of market size, Iranian airlines have been transporting increasing numbers of passengers. According to the reports received from Iran's statistic center (2017), a total number of 5332 inbound and 5294 outbound passengers have been transported in 2015 by Iranian airlines through international flights. Comparing to the reports in 2005, with a total number of 2558 inbound and 2609 outbound passengers, there has been an upturn in number of passengers demanding Iranian flight services. To be successful in the fragmented airline market, therefore, managers of airline companies should develop and maintain processes through which delivery of high quality services as well as retention of loyal passengers are warranted (Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2014). Flight attendants are an integral part of this process (Fu, 2013; Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014). They are frontline employees (FLE) who are responsible for assisting passengers and providing a pleasant service atmosphere on board the aircraft. Yeh (2014, p.94) referred to airline industry as “a particularly sensitive service industry” and argued that

due close interaction between flight attendants and passengers during flight, their quality performance has a strong impact on customers' overall perception of service quality. Indeed, review of extant literature suggest that frontline employees are playing an important role for services branding (Aurand et al., 2005; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Burmann et al, 2009a; Gapp and Merrilees, 2006; Pappasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) and aligning their attitudes and perceptions with the brand would positively contribute to organizational success (Tergraglav et al., 2016). With this stated, management of airline companies should invest in processes that would contribute to flight attendants' motivation for a better performance. Internal branding is considered as a managerial tool (Erkmen and Hancer, 2015) that would help employees to develop compatible brand oriented behavior throughout their daily service encounters (Özçelik and Fındıklı, 2014). Adoption of internal branding have been also the case for the victorious airlines (Appelbaum and Fewster, 2002). For example, southwest airlines is known as a successful airline whose competitive advantage is centered on its strong brand position which has been gained by its' employees exemplary service behavior (Miles and Mangold, 2005). Singapore airline is also recognized as a successful airline who owes its success to its employees brand supporting behavior (Chong, 2007). Availability of internal branding increases employees' attitudinal and cognitive alignment with the brand promise (Erkmen

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and Hancer, 2015) and consequently encourages brand supportive behavior (Henkel et al., 2007; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Employees with internal branding are likely to internalize brand values in terms of internal brand equity (IBE). Such employees in turn, engage in prosocial service behaviors (PSBs) which is defined as “helpful behaviors of employees directed toward the organization or other individuals” (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997, p. 41). IBE is an emerging concept in the relative literature that “consists of motivation level of the employees to serve the brand vision along with resource support by the organization to ensure the brand vision” (Ghose, 2009, p.180). According to brand categorization scheme proposed by Burmann et al (2009b), champion brands are characterized with their high internal substance and market acceptance which are centered not only on external brand performance, but also motivate employees to display brand supportive work behavior.

Underpinned by Kelman's (1958, 1961) theory of social influence, this study develops and tests a conceptual model that investigates IBE as the mediator in the relationships between management commitment to internal branding (MCIB) and flight attendants' PSBs. Specifically, the airline industry has been chosen due to its specific characteristics in terms of being resource intensive (Low and Lee, 2014) and offering a highly intangible services (Shostack, 1977) which makes its employees a strong source of competitive advantage and a pivot of success for airline business (Erkmen and Hancer, 2015; Pearson et al., 2015). This study contributes to internal branding literature by addressing the following neglected issues.

First, PSBs as discretionary behaviors are highly valued by organizations (Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016) and have been found to be positively associated with organizational performance (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997). However, antecedents of PSBs among FLEs and the role of management in improving PSBs have been relatively unexplored (Bolino and Grant, 2016; Dudley and Cortina, 2008; Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; Winterich et al., 2013). This gap is also observed with respect to airlines. Therefore, there is a need for empirical research pertaining to PSBs antecedents. Three indicators of PSBs as manifested by role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation have been chosen due to their relevance to in-flight service jobs (e.g. Fu, 2013; Holtbrügge et al., 2006; Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2014; Limpanitgul et al., 2013; Miles and Mangold, 2005; Ng et al., 2011; Solnet et al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2008).

Second, Dudley and Cortina (2008) argue that PSBs are complicate, therefore, investigating the mechanism which facilitate such behaviors enhance our understanding of the variables affecting PSBs (Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; Podsakoff et al., 2009). This study uses IBE as the mediator in the relationships among study variables. According to Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010, p.1250), “internal brand equity is conceptualized as the incremental effect of branding on employee behavior”. Even though the association between IBE and external brand equity have been previously addressed (e.g. Burmann et al., 2009a,b; Henkel et al., 2007), the link between IBE with employees' attitudes and behaviors has not been empirically addressed in internal branding literature (Ghose, 2009; King and Grace, 2009; King et al., 2012).

Third, there's a dearth of empirical research pertaining to distinct role of top management in internal brand building process (Terglav et al., 2016; To et al., 2015). This study uses MCIB in this process because successful management programs are followed by the commitment from top management (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Cascio et al., 2010; Cheung and To, 2010; Heskett and Schlesinger, 1994; Yu et al., 2012). According to Cascio et al. (2010), comparing to the commitment from immediate supervisors, FLEs' perception of management commitment would have a greater impact on their work behaviors. However, review of the extant literature reveals that the knowledge of internal branding effectiveness and its contribution to employees' work behavior is still scarce (Liu et al., 2017) and employee perception of internal branding initiatives has not been fully gauged in the literature (King and Grace, 2010). Therefore, MCIB which is defined as “perceived

amount of management recognition, accountability and willingness to adopt internal branding initiatives” needs further exploration. This paucity of research has been also echoed in Fu's (2013) study by arguing that internal marketing literature overlooked factors determining flight attendant's quality job performance. Using Kelman's (1958, 1961) social influence theory as the theoretical background, this study investigates the effect of MCIB on PSBs as manifested by role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation through IBE to address abovementioned research gaps. By that, this study extends the limited research in internal branding literature (Baker et al., 2014) through its proposed conceptual model and empirical evidence.

2. Social influence theory

Kelman's (1958, 1961) theory of social influence proposes that individuals display change while facing an influence attempt. This process is referred to as “social influence”. According to Kelman (1974), impact of social influence is a function of the “influencing agent power” which “refers to the ability of the influencing agent to impact the employee's capacity to achieve goals” (Baker et al., 2014, p.644). That means, the stronger the power of the influencing agent, the more successful the impact of the influence will be. Kelman (1961) further argued that internalization is a social influencing method which occurs as the result of perceived congruency between individual's value system and organizational values (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986) or other's values (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002). Consequently, they tend to behave consistent with the internalized values (Gagné and Deci, 2005). In response to social influence, therefore, internalization is the change in attitudes. According to Miles and Mangold (2004), internal branding is “the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents” (p. 68). Against this backdrop, this study investigates the impact of MCIB as the influencing agent on flight attendants' work behavior. We propose that, flight attendants' perception of top management commitment to conduct any form of internal branding initiatives engenders IBE via internalization of brand values. Feelings of IBE, will in turn result in PSBs in terms of role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation. It appears that Kelman's (1958, 1961) theory of social influence provides insightful guidelines to assess internal branding processes. That is, this theory is centered on the perceptions of influenced individuals (i.e., flight attendants' being influenced by MCIB) and encompass not only behavioral changes, but also attitude and cognitions (i.e., MCIB impacts IBE and ultimately work behavior). Adopting the social influence theory as the underlying theory is congruent with other studies in the relative literature (e.g., Baker et al., 2014; John et al., 2017; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Rupp et al., 2011).

3. Hypotheses

Important role of FLEs in service branding have been noticed by researchers and practitioners in service sector (e.g. Kim and Brymer, 2011; Terglav et al., 2016; To et al., 2015; Xiong et al., 2013). Management of airline companies should invest in internal branding processes to enhance service performance of their flight attendants. Review of extant literature revealed that application of such activities is widespread across service sectors. For example, King et al. (2013) found that implementation of brand orientation would contribute to the service quality among hotels. In a study of front line service employees in hospitality sector, Baker et al. (2014) found that internal branding would enhance brand citizenship behavior and service performance. Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) assessed application of internal branding in Thai hotels and found that FLEs' brand identification, commitment and loyalty is associated with internal branding activities. Nevertheless, flight attending occupation differs from other front line service positions due the difficulties associated with long shifts, emotional

dissonance and burnout, work-family conflict and jet lag (Chen and Kao, 2011, 2012; Hur et al. 2013; Chen and Chen, 2012; Ng et al., 2011) and the phenomenon of “internal branding” raises a greater concern for service success among airline companies. That is, highly competitive and fragmented air transport market environment (Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2014), numerous touch points passengers experience with flight attendants during flight (Berry and Lampo, 2004) and the intangibility of services provided onboard the aircraft (Shostack, 1977) have made internal branding a critical strategy for airlines to transform employees into “brand champions” and positive contributors to overall organizational performance. Apparently, leading airline companies are benefiting from the application of internal branding initiatives. In a recent work, Erkmen and Hancer (2015) convincingly argued that flight attendants are important pillars of a successful internal branding process and their commitment with the brand would result in brand citizenship behavior. According to Miles and Mangold (2005), successful adoption of internal branding process facilitates airlines' positioning and offerings and contributes to employee satisfaction as well as overall customer satisfaction. However, it should be noted that any successful strategy should be followed by management commitment (Burmamn and Zeplin, 2005; Cascio et al., 2010; Terglav et al., 2016). Top managers are considered as role models (Kara et al., 2013) and a strong source of brand message (Terglav et al., 2016) who can provide guidance to their employees. Accordingly, Xiong et al. (2013) suggest that internal structure should be able to stimulate employees' positive attitudes and behaviors. Without a doubt, top managers are the important building blocks of the brand within organization (Kara et al., 2013; Terglav et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2013). That is, for a successful internal branding program, top managers should be involved in the process and display commitment to it. Review of extant literature demonstrates that top management commitment significantly affects employees' cognitive and affective response. For example, To et al. (2015) found that top management commitment fosters employees' work attitudes. Employee well-being (Kara et al., 2013); brand commitment (Terglav et al., 2016) and job satisfaction (Hee Yoon, Beatty and Suh, 2001) are also found to be positively associated with management commitment. Specifically, Luo et al. (2012) suggest that management commitment affects firm values. It is assumed that, while employees are committed to brand values, they are more likely to deliver brand promises (de Chernatony, 2006). Therefore, brand internalization should become an integral part of internal branding initiatives (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991) to perform quality services accordingly (Berry, 2000). Based on the guidelines provided by social influence theory (Kelman, 1958, 1961), if employees perceive that values of the influencer is consistent with their own values, they would internalize those values and display positive work behavior, in turn. This study builds on social influence theory to propose that MCIB results in IBE among flight attendants. IBE is a relatively emerging concept in the current literature that “is conceptualized as the incremental effect of branding on employee behavior” (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010, p. 1250). According to King et al. (2012), IBE can be appropriately served as a tool to audit internal brand management efforts. Even though, the necessity of employees' positive contribution to external customer satisfaction have been echoed in the extant literature, the role of employees in internal brand building has not been fully gauged (Ghose, 2009; King and Grace, 2010). In particular, the impact of MCIB on IBE have not been addressed in the extant service branding literature. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is developed.

Hypothesis 1. MCIB is positively related to IBE.

A successful branding strategy hinges on the ability of employees to perform as “brand champions” (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). Service employees such as flight attendants act as major influencers of customers' perceived service quality and overall service experience. Under these circumstances, they are served as a strong source of competitive advantage (Burmamn et al, 2009a; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007)

and their ongoing internalization of brand values will contribute to adoption of critical behavioral outcomes (Xiong et al., 2013). Despite this realization, functions of internal branding lacks empirical evidence (Buil et al., 2016) and employees perspective in brand equity literature is still in its infancy (Arendt and Brettel, 2010; King et al., 2012). Recently, positive contributions of IBE have been debated as the outcome of internal branding efforts. For example, Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) assessed the application of IBE in business-to-business sector and found that IBE positively affects firms' external brand equity. In addition, Tavassoli et al. (2014) found that high level of IBE enables firms to pay their executives less. Moreover, King and Grace (2010) referred to Brand citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, employee intention to stay and employee positive word of mouth as the benefits incurred by IBE. Strong IBE aligns employees' behavior with brand identity and encourages them to display positive brand supportive behavior (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010). This is also credible for flight attendants who are responsible for serving passengers and satisfying their needs. It is assumed that airlines can benefit from high IBE among flight attendants who display enhanced service performance. Particularly, service performance is a crucial aspect of flight attending position, because flight attendants are the only referents for passengers on board the aircraft. Therefore, their quality performance, responsiveness and friendliness significantly affect service improvement and passengers' overall perception of service quality. Accordingly it is expected that flight attendants who have internalized brand values, experience brand equity internally, fully cover their role requirements and go above and beyond their prescribed role requirements to meet and exceed passengers' demands. It also appears that strong brand values internalized by flight attendant results in a critical in-flight work behavior in term of cooperation. Configuration of PSBs as manifested through role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation is congruent with other studies in the literature (e.g. Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Limpanitgul et al., 2013). Despite their determining effects and relevance to service sectors, it is still not clear how PSBs are encouraged among FLEs (Bolino and Grant, 2016; Dudley and Cortina, 2008; Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; Winterich et al., 2013). To address this paucity of research, the following hypotheses are developed.

Hypothesis 2. IBE is positively related to (a) role-prescribed customer service, (b) extra-role customer service and (c) cooperation.

PSBs are supporting behaviors that target both customers and employees within organization. Specifically, PSBs have been categorized into two distinct dimensions (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986; Hoffman and Kelley, 1994; Organ, 1988) directed to external customers (i.e., extra-role customer service and role-prescribed customer service) and coworkers (i.e., cooperation). Role-prescribed customer service occurs when the standards imposed by the organization have been fulfilled. This is what is called “positive outrageous service” in southwest airlines (Miles and Mangold, 2005). Extra-role customer service, on the other hand, refers to those discretionary behavior that goes above and beyond determined role standards to serve customers. Cooperation, however considers helping initiatives directed to immediate work group. Team work and cooperative work behavior are among valued service performance for in-flight service occupations (Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2015; Wirtz et al., 2008). According to Bettencourt and Brown (1997) configuration of PSBs in terms of role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation results in customer satisfaction, fosters perceived service quality and favorable word of mouth among customers. Accordingly, There has been a rising concern among academia to develop and manage PSBs (e.g. Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Limpanitgul et al., 2013; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; Winterich et al., 2013). For example, in a study among Taiwanese customer contact employees, Tsaur et al. (2014) found that job standardization contributes to PSBs enactment. In addition, Ackfeldt and Wong (2006) found a positive association between

management strategies in terms of internal communication, professional development and empowerment and PSBs. Malhotra and Ackfeldt (2016) studied UK travel service organizations and argued that internal communication is positively related to PSBs. This is also the case for a sample of flight attendants, where Limpanitgul et al. (2013) revealed that job attitudes in terms of job satisfaction and organizational commitment are major precursors of PSBs. It appears that commitment and psychological attachment to the organization boost PSBs among employees (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986). Against this backdrop, the antecedents of PSBs and the mechanism which contributes to engage in such behavior remained blurred (Bolino and Grant, 2016; Dudley and Cortina, 2008; Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; Winterich et al., 2013). An examination of current literature suggest that several intervening mechanisms have been used to explain PSBs in organization. Job satisfaction (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997), role ambiguity, role conflict and organizational commitment (Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016) and job attitudes (Ackfeldt and Wong, 2006) as mediator as well as Organizational culture (Limpanitgul et al., 2013) as moderator, are the instances to name few.

This study focuses on the mediating effect of IBE, because this phenomenon has not received the empirical attention it deserves as the mediating variable which links internal branding effort to organizationally valued work outcomes. Indeed, Kelman's (1958, 1961) theory of social influence supports this proposition that IBE would mediate the effect of MCIB and PSBs. Specifically, flight attendants' perception of top management commitment to internal branding initiatives in terms of careful selection and training of flight attendants, commitment to communicate brand values and their brand consistent leadership style facilitates brand value internalization in form of IBE. Flight attendants with a strong IBE who believe that top management's internal branding efforts are focused on delivery of high quality services and provision of a friendly work environment would in turn display positive behavioral response such as PSBs.

Treating IBE as the mediating mechanism would also act as the response to the call for more research investigating the critical mediators between internal branding and employees' behavioral response (e.g. Miles and Mangold, 2005; Terglav et al., 2016). Specifically, Terglav et al. (2016) argued that due to few regular personal contact between top management and employees, it seems plausible to investigate mediating mechanism which affects the indirect influence of management commitment on employees' attitude and behavior. Hence, the last hypothesis is developed as follow:

Hypothesis 3. IBE mediates the effect of MCIB on (a) role-prescribed customer service, (b) extra-role customer service and (c) cooperation.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and sample

Study population consists a sample of cabin crews in the public and 3 private airline companies in Iran. According to Iran Civil Aviation report, at the time of the study, target airline companies had the most frequent domestic and international flights. According to Vatankhah et al. (2017) cabin crews are considered as valuable frontline employees whose positive attitude and quality performance would contribute to the overall success of the airline company. In order to collect data, the research team contacted the flight service manager of each airline company and provided information regarding the aims of the study. All managers accepted to take part in data collection process. Hence, the research team personally distributed questionnaire among cabin crews. According to the guidelines provided by Podsakoff et al. (2003), data were collected from cabin crews with a time lag of 3 weeks. In addition, cabin crews were rated on their performance according to the information received from their immediate flight purser. That is, a two waves questionnaire design were applied to collect data. The time 1

questionnaire consisted measures of MCIB and respondents' profile. While the time 2 questionnaire contained measures of IBE. The flight pursers' questionnaire consisted of prosocial service behavior measures in terms of role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation. All questionnaires were followed by a cover letter regarding the aims of the study and the confidentiality of responses.

In order to match time 1, time 2 and flight purser questionnaire, cabin crews' ID number were used as identification code. At time 1, a total of 350 questionnaires were distributed among cabin crews. Three hundred and thirty four questionnaires were returned. At time 2, all received questionnaires were distributed to the same cabin crews. Three hundred questionnaires were returned, however, 12 questionnaires were further dropped due to various missing information. In all, 288 useable questionnaires were retrieved. To assess cabin crews' performance, a total number of 38 pursers took part in data collection process. Descriptive statistics of respondents' profile revealed that 60 (20.8%) respondents were aged between eighteen and twenty-one, while 125 (43.4) respondents were aged between 26 and 35. The rest were older than 35 years. The sample consisted of 65.6% male and 34.4% female. Respondents were spread across educational achievement, 91 (31.6%) respondents indicated high school degrees, 59 (20.5) indicated higher diploma, 100 (34.7) respondents indicated undergraduate degrees and the rest had graduate or doctoral degrees. In terms of organizational tenure, 88 (30.6%) had tenure up to one year, 118 (41.0%) had tenure between 1 and 5 years, 33 (11.5) had tenure between 6 and 10 years and the rest had tenure more than 10 years. A total number of 158 (54.9) were single or divorced while the rest were married.

4.2. Measures

A number of well-established scale items have been used to operationalize IBE and prosocial service behavior in terms of extra-role customer service, role-prescribed customer service and cooperation. It appears that applying well-established scale items would contribute to measurement statistical power (Brock, 2003). Specifically, 8 items from Baumgarth and Schmidt (2010) were used to measure IBE. In order to measure indicators of prosocial service behavior, 7 items each for role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation were adopted from Bettencourt and Brown (1997). MCIB refers to the extent to which top management of an organization understand the vital importance of internal branding and cares about the factors influencing internal branding. Based on the study of Burmann et al. (2009a,b), we have developed 3 items to measure MCIB. An example item of MCIB is "Top management realizes that communicating brand values to employees would be important to create brand awareness and understanding among employees". Cronbach alpha value of MCIB was 88.2. Responses to study scale items consisted of a five-point scale (5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree).

Consistent with extant research, demographic variables were controlled to avoid statistical confounds. All questionnaires were prepared through utilization of back-translation method. Moreover, each questionnaire was subjected to different pilot studies for the understandability of items. 10 cabin crews from each airline company participated in pilot study. No changes were made in the questionnaires as a result of these pilot studies.

4.3. Statistical analyses

This study assessed the measurement model and tested the hypothesized model following the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach. Specifically, assessment of the measurement model in terms of convergent and discriminant validity as well as composite reliability using confirmatory factor analysis were conducted during the first step (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The second step consisted the

test of the associations in the hypothesized model via structural equation modeling. According to the guidelines provided by James et al. (2006), chi-square difference test were used to compare hypothesized model with the alternative models. Both confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling were conducted via AMOS23 (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999). The significance of the mediating effects were tested via Sobel test. The overall chi-square measure, comparative fit index (CFI), parsimony normed fit index (PNFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), were used and reported for the measurement and hypothesized models.

5. Results

5.1. Measurement model

According to the results of confirmatory factor analysis, several items were deleted due to low factor loadings and non-significant *t*-values. That is, one item each from IBE and extra-role customer service and three items from role prescribed customer service were dropped. According to the suggestions given by Hartline and Ferrell (1996), scale purification would discard unnecessary items. Consequently, seven-factor measurement model fit the data acceptably (chi-square = 590.01, *df* = 308; chi-square/*df* = 1.91; CFI = 0.93; PNFI = 0.75; RMSEA = 0.05). The results in Table 2 indicate that all loadings are significant. The average variance extracted (AVE) by MCIB, extra-role customer service are 0.63 and 0.51 and respectively. Even though, AVE by IBE (0.46), cooperation (0.47) and role-prescribed customer (0.42) service are below 0.50, model fit statistics and significant loadings provides sufficient evident for convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) (see Table 1).

In addition, the results demonstrated that discriminant validity of the measures were evident as none of the shared variances between pairs of variables was greater than the average variance extracted by each variable (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In light of the results depicted in Table 2, all measures were reliable. Particularly, each latent variable had a composite reliability score larger than 0.60. Summary statistics and correlations of all variables are available in Table 3.

Table 1
Respondents' profile (*n* = 294).

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| 18–25 | 60 | 20.8 |
| 26–35 | 125 | 43.4 |
| 35 and more | 103 | 35.8 |
| Total | 288 | 100.0 |
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Male | 189 | 65.6 |
| Female | 99 | 34.4 |
| Total | 288 | 100.0 |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| High school | 91 | 31.6 |
| Higher diploma | 59 | 20.5 |
| Undergraduate degree | 100 | 34.7 |
| Graduate/doctor degree | 38 | 13.2 |
| Total | 288 | 100.0 |
| <i>Organizational tenure</i> | | |
| Less than 1 year | 88 | 30.6 |
| 1–5 | 118 | 41.0 |
| 6–10 | 33 | 11.5 |
| 11–15 | 28 | 9.7 |
| 15 and above | 21 | 7.3 |
| Total | 288 | 100.0 |
| <i>Marital status</i> | | |
| Single or divorced | 158 | 54.9 |
| Married | 130 | 45.1 |
| Total | 288 | 100.0 |

5.2. Hypothesized model

The hypothesized model have been compared with the alternative model. As the results in Table 4 demonstrate, partially mediated model seemed to display a better fit through the chi-square difference test. That is, partially mediated model (chi-square = 611.54, *df* = 311, chi-square/*df* = 1.96, CFI = 0.92, PNFI = 0.76, RMSEA = 0.05) fits data better than the fully mediated model (chi-square = 579.42, *df* = 289, chi-square/*df* = 2.00, CFI = 0.91, PNFI = 0.75, RMSEA = 0.05).

The results indicate that MCIB is significantly and positively related to role-prescribed customer service ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 2.91$) and cooperation ($\beta = 0.71$, $t = 9.50$). However, MCIB does not exert a significant relationship with extra-role customer service ($\beta = -0.11$, $t = -1.92$).

Results further revealed that MCIB ($\beta = 0.35$, $t = 4.96$) is significantly and positively related to IBE. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2(a), 2(b) and 2(c) are supported because IBE depicts a significant positive relationship with role-prescribed customer service ($\beta = 0.78$, $t = 7.95$), extra-role customer service ($\beta = 0.76$, $t = 8.47$) and cooperation ($\beta = 0.23$, $t = 4.05$).

These results suggest that IBE plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between MCIM and role-prescribed customer service and cooperation. Our proposition is also supported by the Sobel test. That is, the indirect impact of MCIM on role-prescribed customer service and cooperation via IBE is significant and positive based on Sobel test (*z*-score = 4.67 and 3.26 respectively). Hence, hypothesis 3a, and 3c are supported. However, the non-significant association between MCIM and extra-role customer service suggests that IBE fully mediates the effect of MCIM on extra-role customer service. Thereby hypothesis 3b is also supported. The result is significant based on Sobel test (*z*-score = 4.79). Several control variables were included in the study. However, test of control variables revealed that age is the sole determining factor which is significantly associated with extra-role customer service. That is, older flight attendants are more prone to engage in supportive behavior which are beyond their prescribed role standards and requirements. Generally speaking, control variables did not confound the relationships. The structural parameter estimates are presented in Fig. 2. Based on the results, the structural model explains 12% of variance in IBE, 54% of variance in extra-role customer service, 73% of variance in role-prescribed customer service and 67% of variance in cooperation (see Fig. 1).

6. Discussion

Internal branding is considered as a strategic tool for managers to develop and nurture an organizational environment in which organizational commitment and high quality performance is warranted. Despite this realization, the knowledge of internal branding is still in its infancy (Baker et al., 2014) and the phenomenon of IBE needs further investigation (Ghose, 2009; King and Grace, 2010; King et al., 2012). Based on a data gathered from Iranian airline industry, the purpose of this study was to empirically assess the association between MCIB and PSBs through the mediating role of IBE. Configuration of PSBs as manifested by role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation is consistent with the current literature (e.g. Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Limpanitgul et al., 2013) and well-aligned with in-flight service jobs (e.g. Miles and Mangold, 2005; Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2014; Fu, 2013; Holtbrügge et al., 2006; Ng et al., 2011; Solnet et al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2008). The results suggest that flight attendants' perception of top management commitment to internal branding strongly affects their IBE. Flight attendants who work in an organization in which top managers conduct brand oriented HR practices such as selective recruitment and training, communicate brand values to them and adopt brand consistent leadership would display loyalty to the brand as the result of perceived fit between their own identity and brand values. This process is referred to as "internalization of values" in Kelman's (1958, 1961) theory of social

Table 2
Standardized loading, composite construct reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) of measures.

| | Standardized loading | CR | AVE |
|--|----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Perceived Management Commitment to Internal branding (MCIB) | | 0.87 | 0.63 |
| 1. Top management understands that adopting brand focused HR practices (e.g. selective recruitment, promotion, orientation and training) is important in promoting fit between employees' personal identity and brand. | 0.83 | | |
| 2. Top management realizes that communicating brand values to employees would be important to create brand awareness and understanding among employees. | 0.90 | | |
| 3. Top management understands that brand focused leadership would keep employees satisfied and loyal to the brand | 0.80 | | |
| Internal Brand Equity (IBE) | | 0.83 | 0.46 |
| 1. "My colleagues want to work for our brand respectively our company in future." <i>Intra-role behavior (new scale)</i> | 0.62 | | |
| "In personal conversation with potential customers, my co-workers are willing to... | | | |
| 2. ...communicate the same brand value in the long term." | 0.66 | | |
| 3. to appear personally consistent with other manifestations of our branding (e.g. advertising, exhibitions or the web site)." | 0.62 | | |
| 4. ...to make no statements that are inconsistent with our brand communication in the media (e.g. magazines, Internet, etc.)." | 0.70 | | |
| 5. ...to emphasize the objective-technical (e.g. quality, reliability, etc.) as well as emotional-symbolic (e.g. trust, friendliness, etc.) aspects of our brand." | 0.70 | | |
| 6. ...to underline the advantages of our brand in comparison to our competitors' brands." | – ^a | | |
| 7. ** | 0.71 | | |
| "My colleagues are aware of the fact that everything they say or do can affect the brand image." | | | |
| "My colleagues behave consistently with the brand values, even when they are not controlled, nor rewarded for doing so." | | | |
| "My colleagues work especially diligently and are concerned about quality when it positively affects our brand image." | | | |
| "My colleagues would voluntarily work longer hours if that were to positively affect our brand image (e.g. to complete a customer order on time)." | | | |
| "My colleagues would recommend our brand to friends or relatives in private conversation." | | | |
| "My colleagues try hard to communicate our brand values to new colleagues (e.g. by way of informal chats, or by volunteering for a mentoring role)." | | | |
| 8. ** | 0.67 | | |
| "To better meet the customers' expectation of our brand... | | | |
| ...my colleagues actively ask customers for feedback." | | | |
| ...my colleagues practice voluntary self-education by reading manuals, guidebooks or professional journals." | | | |
| ...my colleagues participate in retraining exercises and skills workshops." | | | |
| ...my colleagues immediately forward customer feedback or reports of internal problems to the people in charge." | | | |
| ...my colleagues develop new ideas for our products or services, and make suggestions for improvements without being asked." | | | |
| Extra-role customer service | | 0.86 | 0.51 |
| 1. This flight attendant voluntarily assist customers even if it means going beyond job requirements. | 0.76 | | |
| 2. This flight attendant help customers with problems beyond what is expected or required of him/her by management. | 0.78 | | |
| 3. This flight attendant often go beyond the call of duty when serving customers. | 0.75 | | |
| 4. This flight attendant willingly go out of his/her way to make a customer satisfied. | 0.66 | | |
| 5. This flight attendant frequently go out of his/her way to help customers. | – ^a | | |
| 6. This flight attendant enjoy going the extra mile to make a customer satisfied. | 0.63 | | |
| 7. This flight attendant does not feel it is necessary to assist customers beyond his/her job requirements. | 0.70 | | |
| Role-prescribed customer service | | 0.76 | 0.42 |
| 1. This flight attendant performs all of those tasks for customers that are required of him/her by management. | 0.64 | | |
| 2. This flight attendant meets formal performance requirements when serving customers. | 0.68 | | |
| 3. This flight attendant fulfils responsibilities to customers as specified in his/her job description. | – ^a | | |
| 4. This flight attendant adequately completes all expected customer-service behaviors. | 0.72 | | |
| 5. This flight attendant helps customers with those things that are required of him/her by management. | – ^a | | |
| 6. This flight attendant rarely goes beyond his/her strict job requirements in serving customers. | 0.56 | | |
| 7. This flight attendant knows what the expected performance requirements for serving customers are. | – ^a | | |
| Cooperation | | 0.86 | 0.47 |
| 1. This flight attendant helps his/her team members who have heavy workloads. | 0.69 | | |
| 2. This flight attendant is always ready to lend a helping hand to team members. | 0.76 | | |
| 3. This flight attendant takes time out of his/her day to help train new team members, although it is not required of him/her. | 0.73 | | |
| 4. This flight attendant voluntarily gives his/her time to help his/her team members. | 0.62 | | |
| 5. This flight attendant willingly helps team members who have work related problems. | 0.69 | | |
| 6. This flight attendant touches base with other team members before taking actions that might affect them. | 0.62 | | |
| 7. This flight attendant shares his/her knowledge and expertise with other team members. | 0.64 | | |

Note: ** The items IBE7 and IBE 8 were both summed to one index, and used in calculation of internal brand equity as single items (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010); KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.91; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 4539.9, $df = 496$, $p < 0.001$.

^a Dropped as a result of confirmatory factor analysis.

influence. Presence of internal branding initiatives is also valid among leading airlines such as Singapore airlines (Chong, 2007) and Southwest airlines (Miles and Mangold, 2005). The results further suggest that high IBE among flight attendants motivates them to fulfill their role standards, willingly serve passengers above and beyond those standards and support coworkers whenever is needed. In all, findings highlight the mediating role of IBE in the MCIB-PSBs relationship. That is, MCIB would result in IBE among flight attendants. In turn, such flight attendants who have successfully experienced brand values, exhibit PSBs in terms of role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer

service and cooperation. These results are in line with social influence theory (Kelman, 1958, 1961) propositions and lend credence to IBE as an explanatory mediating mechanism which convincingly links MCIB to PSBs.

7. Implications

7.1. Theoretical implications

Underpinned by social influence theory (Kelman, 1958, 1961), this

Table 3
Summary statistics and correlations of study variables.

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|-------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|
| 1. Age | 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | 0.15* | 1 | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | -0.12* | -0.16** | 1 | | | | | | | |
| 4. Organizational tenure | 0.32** | -0.21** | -0.17** | 1 | | | | | | |
| 5. Marital status | 0.75 | 0.10 | 0.65 | -0.02 | 1 | | | | | |
| 6. MCIB | 0.11 | -0.01 | -0.12* | 0.14* | -0.11* | 1 | | | | |
| 7. IBE | 0.25 | 0.03 | -0.01 | -0.02 | -0.03 | 0.26** | 1 | | | |
| 8. Extra-role customer service | 0.11* | 0.08 | -0.00 | -0.05 | -0.02 | 0.09 | 0.41** | 1 | | |
| 9. Role-prescribed customer service | 0.03 | -0.00 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.00 | 0.29** | 0.51** | 0.43** | 1 | |
| 10. Cooperation | 0.05 | 0.00 | -0.05 | 0.07 | -0.10 | 0.55** | 0.35** | 0.18** | 0.46** | 1 |
| Mean | 2.38 | 1.65 | 2.34 | 2.22 | 1.45 | 3.66 | 4.32 | 4.65 | 4.35 | 3.90 |
| Standard deviation | 1.12 | 0.47 | 1.11 | 1.19 | 0.49 | 1.01 | 0.63 | 0.50 | 0.63 | 0.81 |

Note: * Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4
Model comparison results.

| Models | χ^2 | df | $\Delta\chi^2$ | Δdf | Model comparison |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----|----------------|-------------|------------------|
| 1. Fully mediated model | 579.42 | 289 | - | - | - |
| 2. Partially mediated model | 563.68 | 287 | 15.74 | 2 | 1 and 2 |

study suggests that MCIB would enhance IBE among flight attendants. Particularly, MCIB has been chosen as the predicting construct due to its established impact on flight attendants' performance (Cascio et al., 2010) and the paucity of research pertaining to the significance of management commitment in internal branding processes (Terglav et al., 2016; To et al., 2015). Moreover, IBE is an emerging concept in branding literature and still little is known about its antecedents and consequences on employees' attitudes and behaviors. Understanding how flight attendants internalize brand values results in a number of helpful managerial solutions. This study suggests that if top management of airlines adopt brand oriented HR practices as well as a brand consistent leadership and communication style would contribute to brand value internalization among flight attendants. Review of relative branding literature confirms a paucity of research in IBE (Ghose, 2009; King et al., 2012). In addition, this study contributes to the relative knowledge base by confirming the positive impact of IBE on PSBs among flight attendants in terms of role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation. Considering specific characteristics of airline industry (i.e. high intangibility of services as well as intense flight attendant-passenger interface) and the important role of flight attendants in shaping passengers' service experience (Fu, 2013; Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014), it seems advisable to investigate the processes which positively affect flight attendants' performance

level. With regards to PSBs, Dudley and Cortina (2008) suggest that such behaviors are complicated in nature and more research is needed to investigate its predictive processes. With this stated, addressing processes which lead to enhanced PSBs is sensible. Accordingly, this study demonstrates that MCIB boosts role-prescribe customer service and cooperation among flight attendants directly and indirectly through the mediation of IBE. In light of social influence theory, this study further revealed that MCIB results in extra-role customer service via IBE. Such mediational relationships are critical since evidence which links MCIB to PSBs is limited. Particularly, endorsed by the literature, importance of flight attendants' quality performance as an important intangible source of competitive advantage (Pearson et al., 2015) made it crucial to investigate antecedents of PSBs. In all, flight attendants are considered as front line employees whose quality performance extremely leads to organizational success. Therefore, extending the theory of social influence in the relationships among MCIB, IBE and PSBs with a sample of flight attendants in Iran would enhance the knowledge base by explaining why and how MCIB would enhance flight attendants' brand equity and performance.

7.2. Practical implications

Based on the results of the present study, a number of useful implications can be proposed to airline managers. As stated earlier, internal branding have been proved to be useful in deriving positive work behavior among employees. This is specifically important for front line service jobs such as flight attending position who's several touch points during service encounters would meaningfully affect passengers' overall satisfaction (Frost and Kumar, 2001). In addition, flight attending position is different from other front line service positions as they perform in a work environment called aircraft. Flight attendants are the only

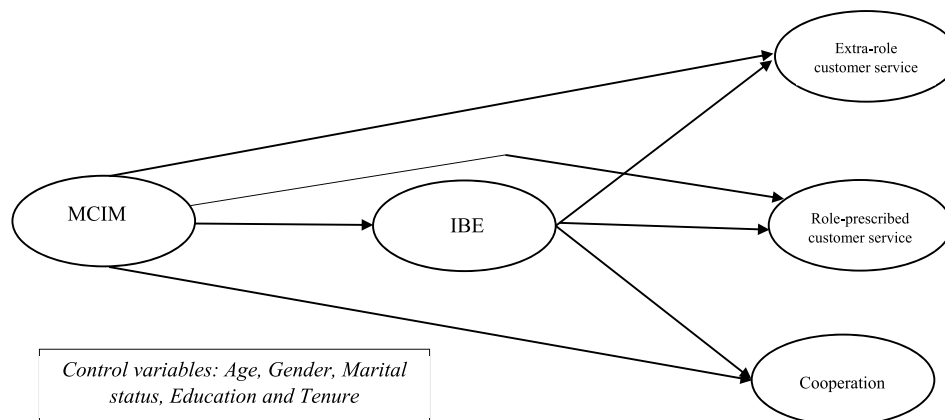
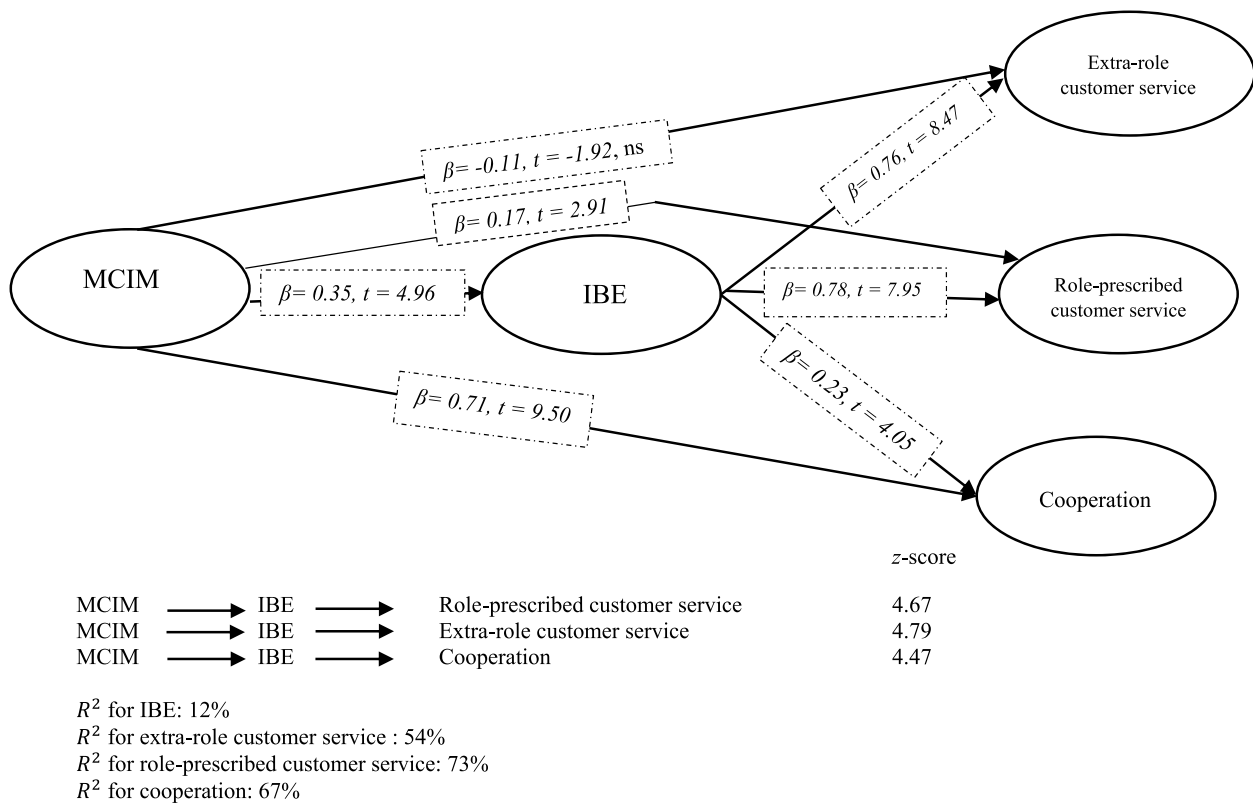


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.



$$\chi^2=611.54, df= 311, \chi^2/df= 1.96, CFI= 0.92, PNFI= 0.75, RMSEA= 0.05$$

Note: All path estimates are significant ($p < .05$). CFI denotes Comparative fit index; PNFI denotes parsimony normed fit index; RMSEA denotes root mean square error of approximation; ns denotes not significant.

Fig. 2. Structural model test results.

references passengers face on board the aircraft and they are usually victims of aggressive passengers' behaviors. Therefore, they need to develop skills to cope with stressful work situation. Presence of internal branding would act as a process which facilitates skill development and motivate flight attendants to go beyond their role standards. Indeed being helpful to coworkers is also an important work behavior for in-flight service jobs. Managers are the important initiators of internal branding processes. It has been argued that top management commitment is associated with employees' work attitudes (To et al., 2015), employee well-being (Kara et al., 2013); brand commitment (Terglav et al., 2016), job satisfaction (Hee Yoon et al., 2001) and firm values (Luo et al., 2012). Accordingly, findings of this study suggest that top management should be committed to internal branding activities as their commitment would foster IBE and PSBs among flight attendants. To do so, top management should be committed to a number of HR practices which contribute to recruitment and selection of right people for the flight attending position. In addition, training programs should be centered on brand values and top managers should be aware of the importance of delivering those values. Promotion and career opportunity have been proved to be an important aspect of HR practices for flight attendants (e.g. Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2015). Therefore, provision of promotion opportunities would motivate flight attendants to enhance performance level. In addition to brand focused HR practices, internal branding encompass positive communication between top managers and subordinates. The communication stream should include communicating brand values to employees. Effective communication positively affects employee work attitudes and job performance (Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016; To et al., 2015; Yu and To, 2013). Therefore, managers of airline companies need to develop their communication skills and open communication channels to their

employees. They need to be in reach more than ever, as their communication skills significantly affect employees' behavior. Finally, it is suggested that managers possess brand focused leadership, as proper leadership styles would contribute to employees' enhanced performance (Morhart et al., 2009; Miles and Mangold, 2004). Taken together, established adoption of internal branding practices would facilitate the internalization of brand values in term of IBE. Flight attendants with high IBE, in turn, contribute to organization via elevated performance and cooperation.

8. Limitations and implications for future research

This study significantly contributes to service branding literature by investigating the impact of MCIB on three organizationally valued forms of PSBs namely role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation, incorporating IBE as the mediating mechanism. Specifically, the mediating role of IBE in the above-mentioned relationship is consistent with the recent claim that mediating mechanisms would help in explaining management practices-employee performance association (Ellinger et al., 2013; Malhotra and Ackfeldt, 2016). Against its strong contribution, however, some limitations are linked to the findings.

First, this study used role-prescribed customer service, extra-role customer service and cooperation as indicators of PSBs among flight attendants. However, due to its determining effect, the phenomenon of PSBs needs broader investigation. That is, mentoring, knowledge sharing and compassion can be also investigated as other neglected types of prosocial behavior (Bolino and Grant, 2016). Second, future research may advantage from incorporation of alternate mediating mechanism to contribute to the processes through which management

commitment influences employee job behaviors. Organizational commitment and perceived organizational support are prudent mediating variables which may link management commitment to PSBs. Third, this study used respondents' demographics as control variable. However, it appears that several moderating mechanism may influence the effectiveness of internal branding on employees attitudes and behaviors (e.g. Burmann et al., 2009a,b; Matanda and Ndubisi, 2013; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Fourth, even though this study used a time-lagged study from multiple data sources, its findings may be prey for common method bias. To ensure that common method bias was not a significant issue, Harman's (1976) one-factor test was conducted to assess the common method variance. Results revealed that common method bias was not a concerning issue (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, future research should benefit from longitudinal research design to establish more rigorous findings. In addition, conducting research in a single service industry (i.e. airline industry) as well as single cultural context (i.e. Iran) may raise the issue of generalizability. Accordingly, it may be prudent to collect data from different cultures (Podsakoff et al., 2009) and multiple service industries (Lages, 2012) to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of top managers' commitment to a number of brand focused HR practices, communication and leadership, which may tackle future research attention to broaden the knowledge of internal branding in service sector. The salient theoretical contribution of this study may rest in its ability to integrate the theory of social influence to explain the effects of MCIB on PSBs through internalization of brand values in form of IBE. Therefore, implications evoked from findings provides useful guidelines for both researchers and practitioners in understanding why and how MCIB improves flight attendants' PSBs.

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