

**“THE SHOEMAKER’S CHILDREN ALWAYS GO
BAREFOOT” - CASE STUDY ON INTERNAL
BRANDING WITHIN A MARKETING AGENCY**

**Jyväskylä University
School of Business and Economics**

Master’s Thesis

2024

**Author: Heta Pellinen
Subject: Marketing
Supervisor: KTT Anna Salonen**



**JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ**

ABSTRACT

Author Heta Pellinen	
Title "The Shoemaker's Children Always Go Barefoot" – Case Study on Internal Branding within a Marketing Agency	
Subject Marketing	Type of work Master's Thesis
Date (month/year) 5/2024	Number of pages 88 + 5
Abstract <p>Internal brand management has been recognized as crucial for building strong brands. Consequently, interest in integrating diverse branding strategies with organizations' human resource management processes has grown in recent decades. Although these internal branding efforts aimed at internal stakeholders have been increasingly studied, a comprehensive and universally accepted definition for internal branding is still lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to establish a cohesive framework for internal branding within the scope of organizations' strategic brand management. This thesis utilizes an extensive literature review and empirical observations to explore organizational antecedents, internal brand management practices, and outcomes associated with enhancing internal brand equity through managerial branding activities.</p> <p>The research was conducted as a single-case study, interviewing supervisors and employees in marketing specialist roles at a Finnish marketing agency. The results revealed that the challenging brand situation within the case company has hindered the implementation of internal branding. Despite the complexity of the company's brand status, the research results reinforce the theoretical foundations of the established internal branding framework, while also introducing novel perspectives and structures that enrich the understanding through practical challenges associated with internal branding.</p> <p>The research findings indicate that internal branding relies on both brand-oriented and internal market-oriented principles. These organizational antecedents should guide internal branding practices within organizations aiming to build internal brand equity by enhancing internal stakeholders' brand attitudes and behaviors. The research suggests that involving the entire workforce in co-creating the brand essence fosters a collective brand identity among employees, thus enhancing their understanding and identification with the brand. To further reinforce employees' brand attitudes and behaviors, systematic and continuous internal cascading of the brand through brand-centered HRM, internal brand communication, and brand leadership efforts is considered essential. Therefore, internal brand management is proposed to positively influence the internal brand equity formed through employees' perceptions, which may further enhance the brand's external position through employee interactions.</p>	
Keywords Brand Orientation, Internal Market Orientation, Internal Brand Management, Internal Branding, Internal Brand Equity	
Place of storage Jyväskylä University Library	

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tekijä Heta Pellinen	
Työn nimi "Suutarin lapsella ei ole kenkiä" - tapaustutkimus markkinointitoimiston sisäisestä brändäyksestä	
Oppiaine Markkinointi	Työn laji Pro gradu -tutkielma
Päivämäärä 5/2024	Sivumäärä 88 + 5
Tiivistelmä	
<p>Sisäisen brändijohtamisen on tunnustettu olevan keskeisessä roolissa vahvojen brändien luomisessa. Tämän ymmärryksen seurauksena viime vuosikymmeninä on kiinnostuttu erilaisten brändäysstrategioiden integroimisesta organisaatioiden henkilöstöhallinnan prosesseihin. Vaikka näitä sisäisille sidosryhmille tarkoitettuja brändijohtamiskäytänteitä on tutkittu enenevässä määrin, ei sisäiselle brändijohtamiselle ole olemassa yhtä kokonaisvaltaista ja yleisesti hyväksyttyä määritelmää. Täten tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on muodostaa kattava viitekehys sisäiselle brändijohtamiselle osana organisaatioiden strategista brändijohtamista. Tutkielma perustuu laajaan kirjallisuuskatsaukseen ja empiirisiin havaintoihin organisatorisista lähtökohdista, sisäiseen brändijohtamiseen liittyvistä käytännöistä sekä lopputuloksista, jotka liittyvät sisäisen brändipääoman kasvattamiseen.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tapaustutkimuksena, jossa haastateltiin yhdessä markkinointitoimistossa työskenteleviä esihenkilöitä ja asiantuntijaroolissa toimivia työntekijöitä. Haastattelujen perusteella kävi ilmi, että tapausyrityksen haasteellinen bränditilanne on vaikeuttanut sisäisen brändäyksen toteuttamista kyseisessä yrityksessä. Vaikka yrityksen bränditilanne osoittautui monimutkaiseksi, tutkimustulokset tukevat sisäiselle brändijohtamiselle muodostettua teoreettista viitekehystä tarjoten samalla uusia näkökulmia ja rakenteita, jotka rikastavat ymmärrystä myös sisäiseen brändäykseen liittyvien käytännön haasteiden kautta.</p> <p>Tutkimustulosten perusteella sisäinen brändijohtaminen pohjautuu sekä brändi-että henkilöstösuuntautuneisiin periaatteisiin. Näiden organisatoristen lähtökohtien tulisi ohjata yritysten sisäisiä brändinhallintakäytänteitä, joiden ensisijaisena tavoitteena on rakentaa sisäistä brändipääomaa parantamalla sisäisten sidosryhmien brändiasenteita ja brändikäyttäytymistä. Tulosten perusteella brändin muotoilu koko henkilöstön voimin näyttää edistävän työntekijöiden brändiymmärrystä ja brändiin samaistumista, kun taas systemaattisella brändijohtajuudella, brändiin sidotuilla HR-käytänteillä ja sisäisellä brändiviestinnällä voidaan vahvistaa työntekijöiden brändiasenteita ja brändi-identiteetin mukaista toimintaa. Täten sisäisellä brändijohtamisella voidaan positiivisesti vaikuttaa henkilöstön brändikäsitysten kautta muodostuvaan sisäiseen brändipääomaan, mikä voi vahvistaa brändin asemaa myös ulkoisesti työntekijöiden välityksellä.</p>	
Asiasanat Brändiorientaatio, Sisäinen markkinaorientaatio, Sisäinen brändijohtaminen, Sisäinen brändäys, Sisäinen brändipääoma	
Säilytyspaikka Jyväskylän yliopiston kirjasto	

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

In the dynamic and highly competitive modern business environment, strategic brand management has emerged as a cornerstone for creating distinctive and strong corporate brands, thereby facilitating organizational identity and performance (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018; Urde, 1994). Based on contemporary view, brands are perceived to participate in a continuous value-creation process that develops through interactions of multiple internal and external stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). To achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the evolving business landscape, organizations strive to shape stakeholders' perceptions of their brand identity through branding initiatives. These branding processes are instrumental in defining how an organization and its offerings are perceived in relation to competitors, regardless of whether the company offers tangible products, intangible services, or both. In other words, the perceived image of the corporate brand identity among stakeholders significantly influences the level of brand equity a company possesses, with successful brands traditionally characterized by high brand equity. Thus, to increase brand equity, it has been suggested that companies should strategically align their branding efforts to ensure that the organizational identity, reflected by the brand, is communicated consistently and effectively to stakeholders. (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018; Kapferer, 2012; King & Grace, 2009; Kotler et al., 2010.)

The organizational identity, along with its associated values, mission, and vision, is incorporated into a company's brand promise, which is conveyed from within the organization to external stakeholders, such as customers. Hence, the brand promise reflects a company's commitment to its customers regarding the value, quality, and experience they can anticipate when engaging with the brand. However, the responsibility of ensuring the delivery of the brand promise often falls on internal stakeholders, particularly employees, who directly shape customers' perceptions through their behavior, or indirectly through their interactions with other internal stakeholders. (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2009; Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler, 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011.) In this context, employees act as a powerful medium for manifesting the brand and contributing to the construction of brand equity. However, despite the recognized significance of consistently fulfilling the brand promise, the complexity of human interactions adds challenges to brand management. Consequently, there has been a growing interest in both literature and practice regarding branding strategies designed to impact employees' perceptions of and responses to the company's brand. This interest is particularly driven by the recognition of the pivotal role employees play in translating a company's brand identity into short-term perceptions and long-term reputation. (Biedenbach et al., 2022; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2009; Garas et al., 2018.)

Given the substantial impact of employees on stakeholders' perceptions of a brand, organizations need to ensure that the brand image projected by employees aligns with the organization's brand identity. This alignment is achieved through effective internal branding, which entails fostering the internal generation of brand value through diverse processes. In greater detail, Internal Branding (IB), also referred to as Internal Brand Management (IBM), encompasses the implementation of various managerial practices designed to make the brand meaningful and relevant to employees, thereby encouraging them to exhibit behaviors that align with the brand's values. Hence, IB efforts directly influence employees' cognitive and affective responses to a company's brand, ultimately shaping how they embody the brand through their actions. This, in turn, can have a significant impact on the level of brand equity. (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Foster et al., 2010; King & Grace, 2009; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Tuominen et al., 2016.)

Recently, there has been increasing interest in Internal Branding (IB), with a focus on developing a conceptual model to identify diverse organizational approaches for effective IB implementation, while discovering the best practices to strengthen the relationship between employees and brands. In addition, researchers have also shown interest in understanding and measuring the possible outcomes of implementing IB efforts. However, while there seems to be a consensus in the literature regarding IB as a mechanism for organizations to foster a shared understanding of the desired brand image among employees and encourage them to embody this image through their actions, there is no single unified definition for internal branding (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Garas et al., 2018). This appears to stem mainly from the varying perspectives proposed by different studies regarding the meaning of internal branding, its objectives, and the organizational prerequisites necessary for its effective implementation. For example, Iyer et al. (2018) states that the current IB literature primarily focuses on comprehending individual-level psychological factors among employees. Building on this suggestion, it is essential to further investigate individual-level factors alongside organizational antecedents to achieve a holistic understanding of the drivers and outcomes of IB.

In light of various organizational practices and perspectives, scholars emphasize the importance of aligning marketing and human resource departments for the effective implementation of IB processes, as IB is closely associated with both personnel and brand management within organizational contexts (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Tuominen et al., 2016). As a result of this understanding, significant contributions have been made over nearly three decades to integrate branding strategies into human resource management (HRM) processes and systems. These integrations, in turn, have shed light on positive brand performance benefits, reinforced employee-employer relationships, and even suggested improvements in financial performance. (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Tuominen et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2019.) Nevertheless, despite the progress and growing recognition of the importance of IB, the absence of a unified understanding hinders the practical implementation of IB initiatives and the achievement of the IB objectives (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Piehler, 2018; Punjasiri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem &

Iglesias, 2016; Sultan, 2022). Furthermore, another challenge in defining IB arises from the lack of clarity and consistency, especially regarding closely associated terms like corporate branding, internal marketing, and employer branding. Despite their close interconnection, these terms differ notably in terms of their scope, focus, objectives, and specific organizational elements they emphasize. Hence, the lack of a holistic and well-accepted definition for internal branding not only prevents its development, but also hinders the comprehension and development of other related concepts (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

Recognizing these limitations, this study seeks to integrate two fundamental organizational assets: the brand, representing an organization, and the personnel, who not only make an organization's existence possible but also breathe life into the brand. Specifically, the objective is to investigate the organizational antecedents, diverse associated activities, and the internal, employee-based outcomes of IB. To achieve this understanding, this study attempts to establish a comprehensive framework for internal branding as a distinct concept. This is done by primarily examining the interplay between two fundamental antecedents presented in academic literature, Internal Market Orientation (IMO) and Brand Orientation (BO), and their influence on the implementation of Internal Branding (IB). In essence, the correlation between various IB activities and the development of Internal Brand Equity (IBE) is illustrated by examining the influence of different brand-related initiatives on employees' perceptions and their collective contribution to build an organization's overall brand equity.

In this study, insights are derived from extensively cited sources and contemporary literature in the field to propose a conceptual framework for IB. Theoretical insights from the literature are enriched by empirical research conducted among marketing professionals within a Finnish marketing agency, aiming to enhance practical understanding of internal brand management from the perspective of employees within a single case company. During the research process, an AI-powered application was utilized to navigate between the research language and the organizational language of the case company. The language model (ChatGPT 3.5) was employed to translate and refine text when needed, as well as to formulate interview questions in Finnish to closely match their English equivalents.

1.2 Research Objective and Research Gap

The purpose of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of internal branding. Initially, the focus is to identify the primary organizational foundations that influence the significance and execution of internal brand management initiatives within organizations. Exploring these premises related to strategic business orientations, it is aimed to further shed light on the fundamental activities that are associated with employee-focused branding. Simultaneously, the study contributes to investigating the impact of internal branding on employees' attitudes and behavior by evaluating the potential outcomes, as well as practical challenges, that are associated with the implementation of internal branding. The main research question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. What organizational antecedents influence the adoption and implementation of internal branding?
2. What is the purpose of internal branding, and what are the key activities or processes involved in managing the brand within organizations?
3. Which organizational challenges may hinder the prioritization of internal branding despite its potential to contribute to positive brand-related outcomes?

Due to the lack of comprehensive conceptualization of internal branding, there is a need to establish a unified understanding of the concept and its various elements. To facilitate an in-depth examination of internal branding as a distinct concept, the term is defined and distinguished from related terms such as internal marketing, employer branding and corporate branding. Hence, this study covers a review of existing literature on internal branding alongside empirical research, which aims to deepen the understanding further from dimensions derived from academic literature. Drawing on theoretical insights, various business orientations are presented, which may enhance organizations' ability to integrate the brand and employees through internal branding initiatives. In addition, the dimensions of various brand management activities are introduced, along with the favorable brand-related outcomes that can be achieved when an organization's branding efforts also take into account its internal stakeholders. Ultimately, the literature review leads to the construction of a theoretical model that visually illustrate the prerequisites, processes, and outcomes associated with internal branding.

The preliminary conceptual framework derived from the literature is further examined through empirical investigation from the perspective of marketing professionals within a single case company. Through empirical exploration, the initial focus is to deepen the understanding by focusing on how supervisors and employees within a marketing agency perceive the significance of internal brand and managerial practices related to promoting the brand internally. A dual benefit is aimed to be achieved through the selection of the case company and interviewees, as the participants represent both managerial and specialist-level employees in a company that provides brand-related services to its customers.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the case company also has specialized expertise in brand management among its operational employees, which could potentially result in the interviewees offering more advanced insights on the topic based on their professional expertise. In addition, this study aims to complement the literature-derived insights by investigating the potential challenges associated with implementing internal branding in practice within the selected case company. This approach may provide a rationale for further integrating marketing and human resource management functions in the future, as recommended by previous studies (e.g., Al-Shuaibi et al. 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson 2007, Punjaisri et al., 2009; Tuominen et al., 2016).

Combining the insights of marketing professionals with an internal perspective on branding creates an intriguing research gap for a topic that is already current and significant, yet fragmented and in need of further investigation. While some frameworks have been recently presented for internal branding, they have either not been empirically tested (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021) or the studies have been conducted by using quantitative approaches across industries, initially in the hospitality, aviation and banking sectors (e.g. Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Garas et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2012; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Sultan, 2022). Hence, this study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of internal branding by conducting a literature review and utilizing qualitative research methods. Due to empirical research, this thesis appears to be one of the first to build and qualitatively examine the framework of internal branding from the perspective of marketing professionals, simultaneously bridging both managerial and operational levels.

1.3 Structure of the Study

This study consists of an introduction to the research area, which is followed by a theoretical framework and empirical research, after which the results of the study are presented. The study is divided into two main sections: theory and empirical analysis. The basis for empirical examination is created through the preliminary conceptual framework gathered from prior academic literature. In turn, empirical research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The theoretical framework is structured in alignment with the research questions. The necessary structures behind internal branding activities are discussed in the first subsection. By examining various organizational conditions, the aim is to develop an understanding of the fundamental principles that companies should follow to implement and ultimately succeed in internal branding efforts. In the second subsection, the focus deepens further into the conceptualization of internal branding and defining internal branding activities, combining both marketing and HRM literature.

With the knowledge gained from the literature, the orientations and practices are categorized under suitable themes, aiming to create a foundation for the development of a comprehensive framework for internal brand management. The ultimate purpose of these sections is to present in greater detail the key definitions, antecedents, and practices for the successful implementation of internal branding, thereby promoting a deeper understanding of the internal perspective as a fundamental aspect of strategic brand management. Finally, in the third subsection of the theoretical overview, the possible employee-based outcomes from successful internal branding are considered with the guidance of the internal branding orientations and activities. The outcomes are explored from the perspective of increasing internal brand equity by shedding light on employee-based branding results and considering the interplay between these internal outcomes and external branding objectives.

The empirical section of the thesis introduces the applied methodological approaches by detailing the phases of data collection and analysis. In this third chapter, an assessment of the study's reliability and validity is conducted, considering the potential limiting factors and sub-factors that may influence the study results. Subsequently, the fourth chapter presents the findings of the study. Based on the empirical evidence and academic knowledge, the conclusions and reflections of the study are discussed in the final chapter. Hence, the objective is to assess the relevance of the gained research knowledge in relation to previous research and literature. The results and conclusions are divided into theoretical conclusions and managerial implications. Finally, the study concludes by addressing and illustrating the constraints and limitations of the research while also offering suggestions for further investigation.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Strategic Business Orientations

Designing a well-defined and purposeful business strategy is imperative for organizations to achieve their business objectives in the evolving market. Through strategic planning, the main principles behind a company's activities and decisions are formed, which navigate the company's operations and direction in the market. In this context, the concept of strategic orientation of a company can be defined as the guiding principles that influence everyday decision-making, thus influencing a company's strategy formulation and marketing (Urde et al., 2013). In other words, strategic orientations are principles that steer and influence a company's behavior and activities, which are designed to secure the sustainability and effectiveness of the company (Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Hakala, 2011). The diverse management practices in business organizations often shape their strategic orientation choices, which in turn are related to factors such as the company's culture, resources, and competencies (Urde et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to Handoyo et al.'s (2023) research, company characteristics, such as company size and industry, significantly influence the choice of strategic orientation. However, as highlighted by Urde et al. (2013), the strategic orientation of a company is not always an explicit choice of the management; instead, it may involve various decisions, be the result of organizational learning, or be influenced by other factors such as pressures from the external environment (Handoyo et al., 2023).

Typically, organizations implement one or more strategic orientations in shaping and developing business strategies. Utilizing several different orientations simultaneously is referred to as hybrid orientation. Such different strategic orientations include for example brand orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, and learning orientation. (Hakala, 2011; Urde et al., 2013.) Specifically, these and other different strategic orientations have been studied in connection with perhaps one of the most utilized orientations, market orientation (Urde et al., 2013). Market orientation, also known as customer orientation, is a classic marketing concept that refers to a company's way of thinking or concrete tools that aim to satisfy customer needs. Although customer-centricity might be the norm in many companies' operations, it has recently been noticed that market orientation alone does not necessarily lead to the most optimal business outcomes. As a result, an increasing number of companies are adopting multiple orientations simultaneously, thereby implementing a hybrid orientation (Urde et al., 2013).

Hakala (2011) argues that leveraging various strategic orientations stems from their ability to complement each other by forming a synergistic connection that can potentially enhance an organization's competitiveness. Furthermore, it is also common for a company's strategic orientation choices to evolve over time (Hakala, 2011). In such cases, following Urde et al.'s (2013) notion, a shift in strategic orientation initiates a transformative process for the adoption of a new or modified mindset. However, during this transformational process, the chosen

strategic orientation must be adopted internally by the entire workforce. In this context, Internal Market Orientation (IMO) is an important antecedent for strategic business orientations, as the success of strategic orientations and organizational operations is significantly dependent on internal stakeholders (Lings, 2004).

2.1.1 Internal Market Orientation

Companies oriented towards the internal market view their personnel as a vital resource and a driving force for the company's success. Building on the foundation of market-oriented management principles, where marketing is not merely a function, but also a fundamental aspect of business operations, it is proposed that managers need to understand that successful external marketing programs are dependent on the company's internal marketing (Lings, 2004; Yu et al., 2022). In this context, Internal Marketing can be understood as a philosophy, where jobs in organizations are seen as internal products and employees as internal customers of these. Related to internal marketing, Internal Market Orientation (IMO) offers a more practical way of understanding the phenomenon: IMO is presented to be an operationalized form of internal marketing, describing such managerial behaviors that are specifically related to the interaction between employer and employees. (Lings & Greenley, 2005; Yu et al., 2019.)

In contrast to customer-based market orientation, IMO emphasizes the importance for company managers to understand the distinct needs that the employees have within the workplace. Therefore, IMO is expected to have positive outcomes for both the company and its employees similarly as the market orientation facilitates positive consequences for the company and its customers. (Lings, 2004; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Yu et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2022.) Based on the market orientation concept, IMO is argued to motivate managers to implement strategic orientations while taking into consideration the company's employees, which in turn is related to leveraging a marketing perspective in managing the company's human resources (Boukis et al., 2017; Iyer et al., 2018; Lings & Greenley, 2005).

At the core of IMO philosophy is the exchange of value between a company and its employees. More specifically, value exchange refers to managerial actions of sharing information and satisfying the needs and wants of employees while also motivating them to participate in achieving marketing objectives. Thus, IMO is related to both employee and customer focus, with a key emphasis on designing jobs that meet the requirements of the company, as well as the needs of the employees. Through various organizational processes and managerial practices, such as fostering open communication and identifying and responding to employees' needs, the value perceptions of the employees can be enhanced, which in turn may affect their loyalty toward the employer. (Boukis, 2019; Lings, 2004; Yu et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2022.) Furthermore, this value transmission within the organization may extend to external customers through employees' brand-related behaviors (Iyer et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2019).

In previous studies, there has been interest in IMO in connection with employees' attitudes and retention (Lings & Greenley, 2005) and employee satisfaction and commitment (Yu et al., 2022). However, while IMO is acknowledged for its significant impact on organizational performance and well-being, it may not inherently translate into tangible business results. In this regard, Modi and Sahi (2018) argue that IMO cannot be thought of as an organization's sole and ultimate orientation; rather it serves as a vital prerequisite for organizational behavior that helps in understanding and addressing the issues that employees encounter when adapting to the organization's business orientation and norms. In other words, when managers comprehend the aspects that employees value in their jobs and the workplace, they can better influence the well-being of the work environment, which in turn has an impact on the company's success. IMO's relationship to operational strategic business orientation with internal and external aspects of organizational performance is shown in Figure 1., as modified from Lings (2004) proposition:

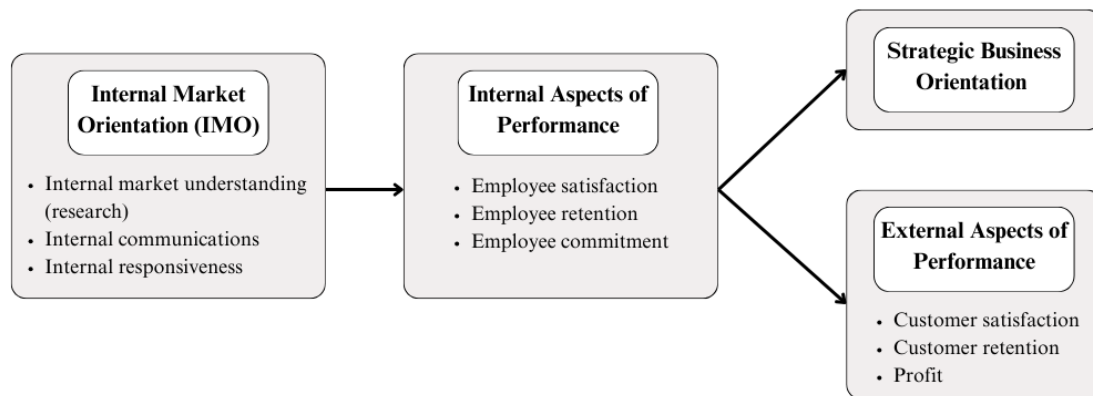


Figure 1: Suggested connections among internal market orientation, strategic business orientation, and the internal and external dimensions of organizational performance (Adapted from Lings, 2004)

As presented earlier, brand orientation represents one of the more contemporary strategic orientations that has been acknowledged to be a suitable strategic starting point for making operative decisions in companies. Recently, there has been a growing demand for organizations to adopt a strategic way of managing brands, thus shifting to a more brand-oriented mindset (Urde et al., 2013; Iyer et al., 2018). However, for these efforts to be successful, employees need to work towards the same strategic goals that are set by the organization (Iyer et al., 2018; Lings, 2004). With this idea in mind, IMO can be understood as an important facilitator of brand orientation.

2.1.2 Brand Orientation

From an organizational perspective, brands can be understood as organizations' offerings, and strong brands significantly enhance a company's performance by reflecting its brand identity (Urde, 1994), whereas for customers brands helps to simplify choice-making and reduce risk-taking (Iyer et al., 2018; Kapferer, 2012). Recognizing the central role brands play in shaping organizational perceptions and influencing consumer behavior, it is widely acknowledged that investing in brands is essential for gaining competitive advantages. More specifically, since the 1990s, organizations have started to recognize that brands are vital assets that need to be strengthened through innovations and value additions (Kapferer, 2012). In relation, Urde (1999) has suggested that directing attention to brands provides a pathway to intangible competition by utilizing brands as strategic resources. Building on these foundations, brands are increasingly being considered from a strategic perspective and nurtured to enhance the long-term value of companies.

Although the importance of brands may have been emphasized, it might be that many companies still view brands merely as tools or necessary components of a company's existence with the strategic nature of the brand often overlooked or undervalued. Therefore, to effectively create and maintain brands in the long run, organizations should have an appropriate mindset to implement the right processes. Such a mindset needed to effectively manage brands is known as Brand Orientation (BO), as presented by Urde (1994, 1999). A brand-oriented strategy represents such organizational culture that strategically prioritizes the brand and emphasizes its significance not only as a marketing tool but also as a vital strategic asset of an organization (Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Urde et al., 2013). Consequently, BO can be understood as a philosophy that is integrated into the organizational culture, thereby acting as a guiding principle for organizational behavior and strategy with the aim of strengthening the brand (Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Iyer et al., 2018).

The foundation for a brand-oriented company lies in its brand mission which reflects why the brand exists, what it stands for and how the brand goals can be achieved. The mission captures the brand's most important core values, identity, personality and brand strategy. In addition to defining the mission, determining the vision is important for the brand's future, as the vision projects what the brand aims to achieve in the future. Thus, the mission and vision of the brand are essential parts of the formation of the brand identity, which guide the core-value-based development of the brand. These core values, in turn, form a framework for the operations of a brand-oriented company. (Urde, 1999.) In this sense, the brand-oriented paradigm differs from the market-oriented strategy, as the emphasis is primarily on the organization's mission, vision and values rather than unconditionally satisfying the wants and needs of customers (Urde et al., 2013). To illustrate the relationship between brand and brand orientation, the figure below shows their connection in relation to market orientation, which is often thought of as a counterpart to other strategic business orientations:

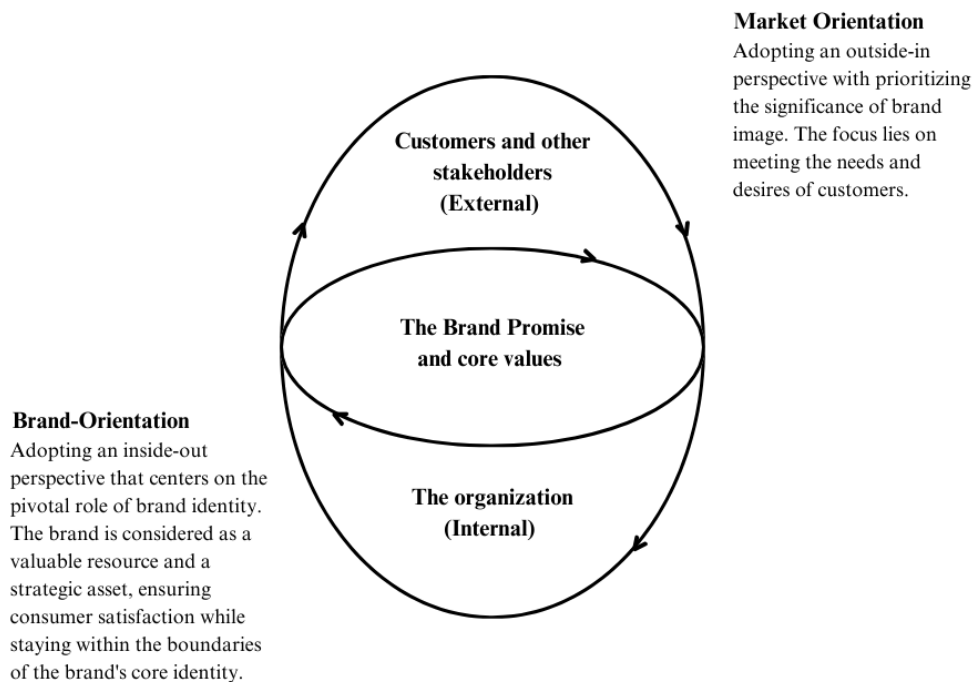


Figure 2: The connection of a brand with internal and external stakeholders through brand-oriented and market-oriented approaches (Adapted from Urde et al., 2013)

Implementing a brand-oriented mindset in organizations involves organizing the operations in a way that adds value (Urde, 1994). Through this managerial strategy and mindset, BO involves aligning the organizational processes with the continuous development, creation and protection of brand identity while understanding the brand as a strategic platform (Urde, 1999; Urde et al., 2013). In this way, brand identity is considered a vital guiding strategic factor from an inside-out perspective (Urde et al., 2013), rather than brand image, that is, a more outside-in type of way of interpreting the brand. Brand identity is created and developed in ongoing interaction with the organization's most important stakeholders, and it is experienced both emotionally and symbolically (Urde, 1999). However, defining brand identity requires a comprehensive understanding from both internal and external viewpoints. In relation to this, Urde (1999) notes that to obtain a holistic picture of a brand, and to achieve brand integrity (Urde et al., 2013), it is necessary to establish a clear internal understanding of the brand. These suggestions seem to align with the idea of IMO – before the brand can be projected and the value to be transmitted to external audiences, it's essential for internal stakeholders, such as employees, to internalize the brand first.

According to Urde (1999), BO is considered a particularly suitable strategy for the survival of companies that are threatened by, for example, decreasing product divergence, rising media costs and market homogenization. Thus, brand orientation is a typical strategic orientation choice especially for companies that compete in a moderate to highly competitive environment (Urde, 1999). However, it is also essential to note that BO might not be a suitable strategy for every

company. Therefore, it is important to implement BO when it aligns with the company's objectives (Urde et al., 2013). In addition, several studies have stated that a hybrid orientation, that combines market orientation and brand orientation, may be the most effective combination to achieve synergistic effects between these two orientations (Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Urde et al., 2013).

2.1.3 Integrating Brand to Internal Market Orientation

As companies integrate brand orientation (BO) into the core of decision-making, they adopt an inside-out approach to managing the brand, thereby expanding the customer-centric perspective of strategic brand management (Iyer et al., 2018; Urde et al., 2013). Prioritizing the brand within the organization, as advocated by Urde et al. (2013), fosters integrity between customer preferences, competitor actions, and internal strategic processes. The success of a brand-oriented company is emphasized to be dependent on the management's efforts in promoting the brand and fostering communication in line with the strategic brand management plan (Urde, 1999; Piha & Avlontis, 2018). Adding to these perspectives, various studies suggest that company management should also pay attention to employees when implementing brand initiatives: to establish a strong and unified brand while serving the customers, it seems to be imperative to influence employees' motivation to contribute to the brand's success by encouraging them to reflect and live the brand.

In this context, internal market orientation (IMO) is proposed to represent employee-friendly managerial behaviors that have various internal and external consequences for companies. Employees are seen to act as brand ambassadors and internal stakeholders that play a crucial role in the implementation of branding strategies by conveying functional and emotional brand values through their interaction with others (Iyer et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2010). Therefore, by integrating the internal marketing principles into primary strategic business orientation, such as brand orientation, the workforce can be more effectively engaged in ensuring the seamless satisfaction of external stakeholders' needs and expectations as well.

Generally, understanding these organizational-level antecedents is needed for the strategic implementation of the brand initiatives, with a specific focus on human capital (Iyer et al., 2018). In the context of brand management, IMO is suggested to be a central prerequisite for internal branding as it ultimately enhances the employees' perceptions of the brand (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Boukis et al., 2017). In turn, BO has also been proposed to be a fundamental prerequisite for implementing IB initiatives by emphasizing the significance of the brand and aligning employee behaviors with the brand's values and identity (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al, 2018; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

2.2 Internal Branding and Underlying Mechanisms

Organizational success is closely linked to the contributions of employees and their adherence to company values, which is also evident in the management of the corporate brand within the workplace. Based on the conceptualization of Iglesias and Ind (2020), brands today are connected to a continuous value creation process that arises from the interaction of both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders' contribution to brand success appears to have gained recognition especially within the service era, where personnel have been seen to play an increasingly important role in strengthening the brand relationship (e.g., Du Preez & Bendixen, 2019; Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) because unlike product brands, service brands lack tangible assets to meet customer's needs (Sultan, 2022). Therefore, previous studies on internal branding have particularly focused on the front-line employees in service companies, as they have a significant influence on how customers experience the brand (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2019; Piha & Avlonitis, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Nevertheless, understanding the internal perspective in organizations can be considered crucial in every context, both product- and service-based markets, as internal branding activities function as a facilitator of brand orientation and strategic brand management within organizations (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018; Piehler, 2018; Piehler et al., 2016.)

Building on this idea, internal branding (IB) is strongly related to broader concept of internal corporate branding (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018), which contains such processes that aim to internalize the importance of brands in organizations (Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Urde et al., 2013). Accordingly, IB includes and combines the perspectives of corporate marketing, corporate management, and corporate human resource management (King et al., 2012; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). In the literature, IB is oftentimes referred to as Internal Brand Management (IBM); however, both of these terms represent managerial tactics that are employed by companies to ensure that the personnel are capable and willing to reflect the company's brand identity ultimately through their behavior (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Garas et al., 2018). Hence, the concept of IB stems from this internal brand management orientation within organizations, which combines both brand orientation and employee-centric perspective.

Recent studies suggest that there is no unified definition for IB, which makes its conceptualization challenging due to frequent confusion with closely related terms such as corporate branding, internal marketing, and employer branding (e.g., Afshardoost et al. 2023, Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Foster et al., 2010; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Furthermore, the analysis of various academic literature sources used in this study also reveals that there are different perspectives on internal brand management. Consequently, there are various approaches to how organizations should internally lead their brand to employees and what can be achieved through this. However, it can be inferred that IB differs from other related concepts, such as internal marketing and employer branding, primarily by

emphasizing the shaping and maintenance of an organization's brand with its current personnel in focus (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). As previously outlined, internal marketing involves a broader spectrum of internal strategies aimed at motivating employees to help achieve the marketing goals within a company (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). On the other hand, through employer branding efforts, organizations aim to differentiate themselves from other employers by creating a perception within the labor market that the company is a desirable place to work, and this is done to attract top talent whose values align with the corporate values (Garas et al., 2018). Although these concepts are closely related to internal branding primarily due to their internal focus and connection to the corporate brand, they are not synonymous with IB. Hence, following Afshardoost et al. (2023) suggestion, IB is distinguished from related concepts as it is merely facilitated through internal marketing, and it specifically focuses on an organization's current employees and their relationship to the corporate brand, rather than primarily aiming to attract new employees.

To foster a company's current employee's brand adoption, there should be an encouraging corporate culture behind IB processes, where managers and employees together convey and embody intangible brand ideologies, namely brand identity and the associated brand values and meanings (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Further to this, Piehler et al. (2018) suggest that IB is relevant to employees in all positions, as well as for supervisors and managers, who support the brand through leadership and execute and develop various structures and processes that are needed for the effective implementation of IB initiatives. Hence, IB as a concept is also increasingly understood as a strategic organizational tool aimed at enhancing the interaction of internal stakeholders in alignment with the brand ideologies. Through brand ideologies, IB practices are targeted to build employees' awareness of brand values that are inherent in brand promise, and thus influence their behavior in delivering this promise (Foster et al., 2010; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Punjaisri et al., 2009). The focus of IB is then to ensure, first and foremost, that there is an internally shared understanding of the desired brand image and then further motivate employees to reflect this image (Garas et al., 2018) by assisting them in aligning their actions with the organization's brand identity.

It has been proposed that systematic and consistent implementation of various IB practices is essential for aligning the organization's brand with the strategic brand plan and vision (Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that a organization's employees not only accept the brand values but also fully commit to representing the brand, which may enable and motivate them to embody the brand willingly and effectively across all touchpoints. Supporting this idea, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that employees actualize the brand values by delivering the brand promise through their behaviors that ultimately shape customer's expectations (e.g., Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Foster et al., 2010; Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). In other words, through IB initiatives employees' behavior can be influenced directly and indirectly (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015), whereby the brand promise communicated to customers can ultimately strengthen the brand

relationship and further lead to a sustainable and long-term business advantage (Sultan, 2022).

Although it has been suggested that IB may have broader positive effects on organizational success through employee behavior, it can be understood that IB activities are directly related to assisting employees in embracing the brand. Hence, different IB initiatives can be categorized into practices that stimulate cognitive reactions, evoke affective responses, and influence behavior (Piehler et al., 2018), as ultimately, IB activities are aimed to increase employees' emotional responses through awareness, which in turn influence their behavior. Developing the human capital in organizations is argued to be realized through training, which typically falls under HR activities, and communication for managing the brand, which again is strongly related to the marketing function (Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Hence, both through training and communication, employees can acquire new skills and knowledge to represent the brand. However, it is also essential for employees to be motivated to contribute to the brand's success. (King & Grace, 2009; 2010.) Therefore, to effectively strengthen the employee-brand relationship within organizations, it is suggested to require corporate-wide efforts and investments, with a particular emphasis on integrating marketing and HR functions (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016) to help employees embrace the brand.

In attempting to create a cohesive and comprehensive framework for internal brand management, several studies have categorized various IB practices under different dimensions that influence employees' responses to the branding initiatives. In this regard, researchers have presented varying dimensions and practices related to the implementation of IB; however, it seems that the IB model proposed by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), and further developed by other authors (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021), has been used in various studies in this area. This multidimensional IB model consists of Brand-centered Human Resource Management, Internal Brand Communication and Brand Leadership. However, it is noteworthy that there have been suggestions in the literature for other distinct dimensions as well. Yet, according to a recent literature review by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021), these dimensions require more empirical evidence to be considered as the main dimensions of IB. Therefore, the three-dimensional model presented above, which integrates various internal activities related to enhancing the employee-brand relationship, appears to be widely supported by current research. Subsequently, each of these dimensions will be further elaborated to provide a comprehensive understanding of their proposed connections to the effective management of the brand within organizations.

2.2.1 Brand-centered Human Resource Management

According to Al-Shuaibi et al. (2016), it is often mistakenly understood that brand management is solely related to the marketing function and is therefore the sole responsibility of the marketing department. Although marketers typically develop the brand essence and branding strategies and tactics, it is often the responsibility of the HR department to guide and train employees in relation to the

brand. Consequently, it has been suggested that HRM practices should be aligned with the strategic orientation of a company, as HRM is a crucial part of company management that has long-term effects on employees' attitudes and behavior (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). In this regard for brand-oriented companies, it is advisable to implement brand-related HRM practices that engage all employees in supporting the brand, thereby ensuring alignment between external and internal branding strategies (see e.g. Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Piehler, 2018; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016, Xiong, 2023).

In line with this idea, Brand-centered Human Resource Management (Brand-centered HRM) has been proposed in several studies as a dimension for IB practices that help to connect the workforce to the brand. More specifically, the construct of brand-centered HRM represents such managerial practices that are related to generating cognitive responses among employees and improving their brand attitudes (Chang et al., 2012). Therefore, brand-centered HRM practices aim to create organizational conditions that build and strengthen brand value by motivating employees to participate in achieving brand-related goals (Chiang et al., 2018). For this to happen, it is important that the workforce understands and accepts brand values to deliver the brand promise through their actions (Foster et al., 2010; Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009), and this process can be promoted and supported by various HRM practices. Such brand-centered HRM activities have been suggested to be related to all stages of employment, from recruitment to supporting employees' work and career development. Specifically, HRM practices that promote the internalization of the brand have been associated with the recruitment and selection of newcomers, as well as the training and development of employees, along with performance evaluation and compensation (see e.g. Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Chang et al., 2012; Saini et al., 2022; Xiong, 2023).

In terms of HRM practices, recruitment is an important area that influences an organization's ability to attract, select and retain qualified and motivated employees. According to Burmann and Zeplin (2005), in brand-oriented organizations, it should be ensured through IB efforts that the personal values of candidates are aligned with brand values already in the recruitment phase. Hence, the value congruence between the recruit and the brand can be established through brand-aligned recruitment practices, which ultimately affects whether the new employee aligns with the job responsibilities and organizational culture, but also with the brand values. (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Saini et al., 2022.; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016.) To ensure this value congruence between newcomers and the brand, the recruiting entity should have precise knowledge of the brand attributes required for the position to select best applicants for the job. Moreover, this information should be conveyed to applicants in the job postings and throughout the recruitment process, which is designed to align with the brand's values, mission, vision and objectives. (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016.)

After the recruitment and selection phases, training new employees on brand values is particularly crucial to engage them with the brand right from the early stages of their careers (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Nevertheless, ongoing brand-centered training and education are crucial for all

staff members regardless of the duration of their employment, as both the brand values may evolve and employees' attitudes and behaviors toward the brand can change. In line with Punjaisri & Wilson's (2007) notion, training is generally agreed to be perhaps the most important method to educate the employees in organizations, especially related to the company brand and the values inherent in it. Training of employees in the IB context is often presented as programs that aim to help employees learn new skills and improve their knowledge and abilities to enhance their brand-related performance. Thus, there seems to be a consensus that through brand-related training, employees can acquire new knowledge and deepen their understanding of brand values and the significance of conveying the brand promise (Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2018; Miles & Mangold, 2004).

Through brand-related training and educational practices, employees can develop a deeper understanding of the brand and its purpose, while monitoring their performance through evaluation and rewarding practices may further motivate them to reinforce the brand through their actions. In addition, employees' strengths and areas of development can be identified through performance evaluation. In relation to this, Miles & Mangold (2004) emphasized brand-centered performance management referring to such activities that are used to monitor the most important key performance indicators (KPIs), set goals, track performance, and provide feedback to employees. Through performance management and rewarding systems based on brand values, the aim is often to strengthen brand reputation by encouraging employees' participation in branding (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Chiang et al., 2018; Miles & Mangold, 2004). As such, through performance management and evaluation, employees' brand in-role behaviors can be reinforced, which are linked to meeting the standards that are set for employees as representatives of the brand, and ultimately brand extra-role behaviors, which refer to voluntary brand promotive actions initiated by employees (Morthart et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Garas et al., 2018, Xiong, 2023).

Xiong (2023) highlights that brand-related extra-role behavior has been suggested to emerge from employees' experiences of the brand's meaningfulness and relevance, as well as from their understanding of their significant role in contributing to the overall success of the brand. Therefore, even though performing extra-role behavior might be oftentimes strongly related to an employee's internal motivation rather than rewards-based incentives, it could still be beneficial to consider integrating such additional brand-building behaviors into the reward systems within organizations. In this regard, according to Al-shuaibi et al. (2016), the brand-related behaviors conducted by the workforce should be comprehensively considered in evaluation practices to develop a fair performance management system. This approach is suggested to be beneficial in integrating performance management and compensation systems, where brand-consistent behavior is considered in both formal and informal reward systems, thereby motivating employees to act as brand ambassadors. (Al-shuaibi et al., 2016.)

2.2.2 Brand Leadership

It has been argued that for brand-centered HRM systems to function effectively, it is essential to have strong support from top management (Al-shuaibi et al., 2016; Morthart et al., 2009). The management's role is emphasized in acknowledging and recognizing the importance of various IB processes, thus facilitating the necessary activities and creating a favorable environment for implementing IB efforts. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in small companies, separate HR departments may not exist, and in such cases, managers are often responsible for activities falling under the HRM dimension.

Brand leadership is suggested to be particularly associated with the leaders' capabilities of fostering the brand and motivating the workforce to do the same (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Consequently, in order to promote the brand objectives, it is necessary for the managers to contribute to shaping the brand vision and providing direction, as well as guiding brand-related communication (Miles & Mangold, 2004). On the other hand, brand leadership requires leaders to not only act as visionary guides but also to have the ability to engage and encourage the workforce to participate in achieving common goals (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Saleem & Iglesias 2016, Xiong, 2023). Therefore, leaders can serve as inspiring role models, in which case the leaders' ability to convey the brand ideologies is emphasized through their behavior. To this, it has been suggested that more favorable outcomes may result from IB initiatives when managers themselves are committed to promoting IB within the organization, thus supporting and assisting employees in understanding their roles as brand representatives (Garas et al., 2018; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Morthart et al., 2009). When employees understand what is expected of them and what brand-related in-role behaviors they need to perform, they are more likely to have the fundamental skills to deliver the brand promise (e.g., Garas et al., 2018; Ghose, 2009; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Tuominen et al., 2016).

More specifically, when managers show direction and commitment to the brand values by communicating and embodying these values in practice, this visible commitment to the brand may also foster employee commitment. In this regard, Xiong (2023) suggests in a recent study that managers can inspire the workforce by effectively communicating compelling and relevant brand visions, but also foster a higher self-involvement among the workforce. This idea is also consistent with Burmann & Zeplin's (2005) earlier insight into effective brand leadership, which can increase employees' identification with brand values, thereby having a significant impact on employee commitment to the values. On the other hand, followers of such motivational leaders may voluntarily use their resources in promoting the brand, namely implement extra-role behaviors, if they only internalize and commit to the brand values and feel that participating in branding is meaningful. In this sense, it can be understood that managers should nurture and develop leadership traits and skills that enable them to encourage and guide the workforce, but also to clearly articulate brand values into reality while guiding the brand in line with the brand vision.

The leadership traits described above are closely associated with a transformational leadership style, which is characterized by motivating and participative approaches adopted by leaders. There has been considerable research attention on transformational leadership within the branding context, especially in fostering employees' brand-supportive behavior (e.g. Chang et al., 2012; Morthart et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Xiong, 2023). Transformational leaders in brand-oriented settings are recognized for their ability to articulate and communicate brand values effectively, while also inspiring employees to do the same (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2013; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), whereas transactional brand leadership is associated to more task-focused performance management and rewarding practices (Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler, 2018). While transformational leadership has been particularly emphasized in the context of IB leadership, situational and contextual factors may influence how and in what contexts leaders should implement transformational or transactional-focused actions. Hence, although transformational leadership is often emphasized as an inspiring and motivating leadership style, in certain situations transactional task-oriented and reward-focused leadership may be more effective, particularly in accomplishing specific tasks or achieving specific results. (Morthart et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2013.) Therefore, leaders should recognize the circumstances and to which extent they should implement these traits related to transformational and transactional leadership to effectively respond to evolving challenges and contribute to the success of the organization in diverse situations.

However, while the managers' role and leadership style has been emphasized in several studies, it has also been argued that brand leadership is not merely limited to leaders themselves, but to everyone in the organization who has the skills to influence others (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Du Preez et al., 2017). Thus, in line with Saleem and Iglesias' (2016) summary, brand leadership involves the efforts of leaders and employees to spread brand ideologies. This notion itself reflects the idea that successful IB necessitates the involvement of the entire organization, as also proposed by Piehler (2018). Instead, to facilitate the entire workforce's brand contribution and simultaneously strengthen the overall sense of community and collaboration, the manager's leadership approach becomes crucial. In addition, to foster brand-supportive behavior in organizations, Anees-ur-Rehman and Johnston (2019) propose that managers should demonstrate pride in brand achievements and share brand-related success stories to reinforce the brand objectives. Simultaneously, these practices may foster a sense of brand pride among all members of an organization. Through their example and skills, leaders can be observed fostering a supportive atmosphere where open discourse about brand goals, successes, and weaknesses can take place. Therefore, managing the internal communication of the brand can be regarded as another crucial managerial practice in the IB context.

2.2.3 Internal Brand Communications

Brand communication has been suggested to be one of the most important dimensions of IB (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015), as communication has a significant impact on how employees understand and experience the brand. Just as external brand communication aims to influence external customers, internal communication serves to engage internal stakeholders in a similar manner: when the brand is communicated effectively to the employees, their awareness and understanding of the brand increase (Du Preez et al., 2017; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), which is often perceived as the initial steps in the development of brand commitment. Through internal brand communication, the branding objectives can be communicated to the employees, which helps them to understand the significant role they play as distributors of the brand promise (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011).

Although external brand communication is not directly targeted at employees, ensuring alignment between external and internal brand messages is crucial. If external and internal messages do not correspond with each other, employees may experience conflict between the messages they receive and perceive. In such cases, employees may experience cognitive dissonance between the delivered brand promise and customer brand expectations (Xiong, 2023), and thus potentially experience distrust towards the brand due to the communication mismatch (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Therefore, maintaining message consistency is vital for cohesive and effective branding, serving as a key factor in fostering employees' comprehension of the brand (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004). On the other hand, Kapferer (2012) suggests that if such inconsistency between internal and external messages occurs, employees should be given the freedom to identify possible misalignments between the messages themselves and seek to correct this information mismatch through their actions, thereby actively contributing to the promotion of the brand.

Internal brand communication consists of formal and informal message sources. Among these, formal message sources include official bulletins from the HR department or managers, and information disseminated through employee newsletters or the company's website, while informal messages are typically transferred through interactions with other members of the organization (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004). Hence, communication can be understood to be closely linked to both brand management and HR practices, as both managers and HR departments of an organization play a crucial role in promoting internal brand communication through formal messages, as well as facilitating two-way interaction. In addition, as informal messages are exchanged in discussions related to work and non-work-related matters among employees, fostering an open and encouraging conversation culture may aid in the transmission of informal brand messages. Creating, maintaining, and developing such a conversation culture may have a substantial impact on internal branding success. In line with this idea, employees also impact how brand messages are conveyed internally (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016) thus indicating that brand communication is not solely the

responsibility of leaders or the HR department. This further reinforces the idea that employees serve as promoters of brand leadership within organizations.

Regarding the academic literature available on internal brand communication, there are references to Burmann & Zeplin's (2005) more detailed distinction between formal and informal communication. The authors further divided the message types into three different forms, all of which should be implemented and managed in organizations to achieve shared brand understanding among the workforce. One of these communication types is central communication, which the authors refer to as formal information that is actively disseminated across the entire organization and often originating from the HR department or individuals in leadership positions. Such messages are distributed through the push and pull principles, making them formal and general-level materials that can be shared, for example, through the employee magazine, intranet, or through various training sessions. Thus, central communication is considered useful for increasing employees' brand awareness. Instead, cascade communication refers to a more time-consuming approach in which communication flows downward from the top of the organization. In other words, brand messages are passed down through the organization, where the entire workforce's active contribution and engagement in receiving, interpreting, and often sharing this information within their respective teams or departments are considered crucial. (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Afshardoost et al., 2023.)

Finally, perhaps the most influential communication type, lateral communication, refers to the horizontal sharing of information among employees regardless of their positions in the organization. Instead of distributing messages vertically from top-down or vice versa, lateral communication flows sideways. (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005.) In this sense, lateral communication refers to employees talking and sharing information with their peers, thus representing informal communicative actions. When employees are motivated to discuss about the brand even during casual interactions, it can be perceived that they are interested enough to discuss about it. In turn, this engagement could lead to increased collaboration, innovation, and a sense of ownership among employees regarding the brand, thereby influencing the construction of a positive brand atmosphere within the organization.

In summary, when it comes to utilizing and refining communication practices within an organization, managers should acknowledge the different types of communication and the diverse channels through which messages are transmitted. Acknowledging these aspects can empower managers to provide the necessary tools and activities to consistently enhance interaction across all levels within the organization. Consequently, employees can better internalize the brand values and effectively manifest them through their behavior. (Afshardoost et al., 2023; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2013.)

2.3 Outcomes of Internal Branding Initiatives

As stated by Tuominen et al. (2016), all employees across organizations are fundamentally brand builders. This notion essentially captures the essence of internal branding: the workforce significantly influences the success of the brand through their perceptions and responses to IB initiatives. However, while there seems to be a consensus in academic research that implementing IB can lead to significant outcomes, different studies have explored and emphasized various internal and external results as outcomes of IB. Therefore, understanding the direct impact of IB activities in an organizational context, as well as their effects on employees, the brand, and potentially other non-brand-related achievements, might be challenging.

Drawing from prior literature, Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) concluded that in order for employees to build brand equity in front of external stakeholders, organizations must first effectively manage the brand internally. According to this perspective, IB is a tool for increasing overall brand equity, which has been proposed to be one of the key outcomes of IB, given that successful brands are typically perceived to exhibit high levels of brand equity (Aneesur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). In line with Kapfer's (2012) conceptualization, brand equity can be understood as the consumer's reflection and mental image of proposed values within brand identity. As such, brand equity is perceived to represent the added value of branding efforts, which arises from differences in consumer response (Kapferer, 2012; Kotler et al., 2010). In light of this understanding, brand equity seems to be often linked to customer-based brand equity because of its external focus. Customer-based brand equity, on the other hand, has been associated with enhanced financial performance and customer retention, among other benefits (e.g. King & Grace, 2009; Tuominen et al., 2016).

However, following King & Grace's (2009) suggestion regarding the dimensionality of brand equity, viewing brand equity merely as a single dimension may fall short of evaluating brand success. That is because within the internal branding context, focusing solely on consumer-based brand equity or financial performance resulting from IB initiatives may overlook the internal stakeholder perspective, and more specifically the employees, who are often the primary targets of such efforts. Therefore, to avoid presenting brand equity solely as tied to external stakeholders' perceptions or financial metrics, the impact of internal stakeholders should be considered in the formation of brand equity. In this regard, King & Grace (2009) presented a more comprehensive view of brand equity, which is built of three components: Employee-Based Brand Equity, Consumer-Based Brand Equity, and Financial Brand Equity. The proposed model for brand equity is illustrated in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Components of brand equity (adapted from King & Grace, 2009)

In previous studies, particularly financial and customer-based equities have sparked interest, as these are often associated with the company's enhanced competitiveness, although overlooking the importance of an internal perspective (King & Grace, 2009). Considering this idea, only a few authors have suggested that increasing internal brand equity is the goal of IB, even though managing the brand within the organization is closely tied to employees (King & Grace, 2009; Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Biedenbach et al., 2022). Although internal brand equity itself may not directly lead to enhanced business performance, it can be considered an essential foundational element for strong and unified brands, both in the eyes of internal stakeholders and external audiences alike.

2.3.1 Internal Brand Equity

In the literature, organizations internally added brand value through branding efforts has been referred to using terms such as employee-based brand equity (EBBE) (e.g. Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; King & Grace, 2009, 2010) and internal brand equity (IBE) (e.g. Ghose, 2009; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010, Biedenbach et al., 2022), which stem from the general concept of brand equity. These terms seem to be used mainly as synonyms for each other, as they are both defined to measure the value that employees add to the brand (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; King & Grace, 2009). In other words, EBBE or IBE refers to a brand's internal value and strength, which is constructed by the personnel's responses to the internal brand management (King et al., 2012), which ultimately may result in brand-aligned behaviors.

King & Grace (2009, 2010), Ghose (2009) and Baumgarth & Schmidt's (2010) contribution to defining employee-based or internal brand equity appears to be among the first conceptualizations, upon which the outcomes of internal branding initiatives have been further investigated. However, while King & Grace introduced the EBBE model in 2009 and empirically tested the model in 2010, their perspective is focused on employee's relationship with the company brand, whereas Baumgarth & Schmidt's emphasis is broader with organizational strategies for internal brand management. In comparison, Ghose's (2009) definition of IBE is primarily employee-centric as King & Grace's, but it also recognizes the organizational strategies in building IBE like Baumgarth & Schmidt's model. Even though these models of employee-based or internal brand equity provide valuable foundation and insights for organizations in leveraging their human capital with managing the brand, it is noticeable that EBBE and IBE differ slightly

from their perspectives and emphasize different factors. Therefore, in this study, EBBE and IBE are not treated as synonyms for each other; rather, both models are utilized and refined to construct a comprehensive model for IB that encompasses both organizational and employee-centric perspectives in building IBE.

Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010) defined IBE to be “the incremental effect of branding on employee behavior”, which in general outlines the intensity of personnel’s internalization of brand identity, which in turn may support the active promotion of the brand internally and to external audiences. According to their illustration, IBE can be increased in organizations through brand orientation (BO), which represents more of an organizational-level mindset in leveraging brands strategically. However, King & Grace (2010) also emphasized the importance of organizations proactively developing a culture that values and supports internal relationships to enhance IBE. This open and supportive organizational culture can also be understood as an organizational factor that supports the implementation of internal branding, thus aligning with internal market-oriented principles.

In addition to organizational factors, Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010) proposed that employee brand commitment, brand knowledge, and brand involvement serve as individual-level antecedents that determine the level of IBE within a organization. In contrast, Ghose’s (2009) previous approach to defining IBE highlights employees’ awareness, understanding, and commitment to the vision of the brand, thus emphasizing similar themes as Baumgarth & Schmidt. These determinants of IBE can be complemented by King & Grace’s (2010) empirical study on the EBBE model, with which they identified different predictor outcomes for EBBE building, such as brand citizenship behaviors, employee satisfaction, intention to stay, and spreading positive word-of-mouth. Through these examples, it is evident that both IBE and EBBE emerge from various organizational and individual-level factors. Therefore, from a redefined perspective of IBE, internal branding can be understood to operate in the interplay between organizational antecedents and individual responses. This view is supported further by Biedenbach et al. (2022), as they confirmed that the core factors of IBE represent brand orientation and employee-related branding outcomes, which assess the overall success of IB. In other words, as IB is aimed to enhance the employee’s internalization of brand identity and their ability to reflect the brand promise, it is vital to understand how brand-centered HRM activities and ways to manage and communicate the brand translates into employees’ attitudes and behavior.

Thus, building on the suggestions of Ghose (2009), King & Grace (2009,2010), Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010), and Biedenbach et al. (2022), the core factors of IBE can be understood to be the employee-based outcomes of internal brand management. Adopting Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali’s (2021) recent conceptualization of employee-related IB outcomes, these individual-level employee responses to IB are referred as internal brand understanding (see e.g. Ghose, 2009; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007), internal brand identification (see e.g. Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Piehler et al., 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007,2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009), internal brand commitment (see e.g. Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Chiang et al., 2018; Du

Preez & Bendixen, 2015, Du Preez et al., 2017; Garas et al., 2018; Ghose, 2009; King & Grace, 2008, 2009, 2012; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009), internal brand loyalty (see e.g. Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; King & Grace, 2010; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) and internal brand citizenship behaviors (see e.g. Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018; Du Preez et al., 2017; King & Grace, 2010, 2012; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018). To further highlight the nature of these employee-related IB outcomes that have been examined at the individual employee level, in this study the employee-centered IB outcomes have been further categorized into cognitive, affective, conative, and behavioral responses (see e.g. Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007).

Cognitive Responses

Employees' cognitive responses, which are related to mental processes, are often considered the most important and determining factor for other responses. In this regard, it is argued that employees are not able to manifest the brand identity or brand promise through their behavior if they do not understand the brand (Piehler, 2018). Thus, brand understanding is presented to encompass employees' cognitive responses: their understanding of the brand they represent and assimilation of brand information, which ultimately shape their behavior (Afshardoost et al., 2023; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018). More specifically, brand understanding is presented to be related to employees' ability to comprehend the significance of the brand for the organization, as well as the importance of their behavior for the success of the brand (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; King & Grace, 2010; Piehler, 2018).

Training and internal brand communication have been argued to be especially important functions to affect employees' brand understanding. Sharing and educating employees about brand-related information enhances their awareness of the brand's values and vision, which enables them to better comprehend the brand's purpose at a cognitive level, acquire new skills and thus more effectively represent the brand. (Afshardoost et al., 2023; Chiang et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2010; Morthart et al., 2009; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011.) Therefore, brand knowledge is argued to be one dimension of brand understanding (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Piehler, 2018), and not so much a separate outcome of IB initiatives itself, as it suggested by some authors (e.g. Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Biedenbach et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2010). Hence, brand understanding can be understood as a multidimensional cognitive representation, which represents employees' initial and fundamental cognitive antecedents for emotional engagement and brand-aligned behavior.

Affective Responses

The aforementioned emotional engagement with the brand refers to employees' affective responses, of which brand identification is another important employee-related IB outcome, but also a consequence of brand understanding (Piehler et

al., 2016; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Following the definitions by Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) and Saleem and Iglesias (2016), affective brand identification represents a psychological bond and sense of belonging to a brand, thus reflecting employees' positive feelings toward the brand (Piehler et al., 2016). It has been suggested that through IB initiatives, employees' brand identification can be enhanced the most (Punjaisri et al., 2009) in a way that they feel the brand is genuine and authentic (Sultan, 2022). Moreover, brand identification has been empirically confirmed to be connected to employees' brand commitment (e.g. Piehler et al., 2016), which is understood as another significant affective emotion-based reaction.

Brand commitment has been referenced in various literature sources related to IB, and it has been suggested to be one of the key factors explaining the behavior. As emphasized by Burmann & Zeplin (2005), brand commitment presents "the extent of psychological attachment of employees to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards reaching the brand goals". As such, it can be noted that employees need to first and foremost grasp the essence of the brand, comprehend what it represents, recognize their individual impact on the brand, and concurrently foster positive emotions towards it. This understanding and emotional engagement contribute to the formation of a meaningful connection between the individual and the brand. These cognitive and affective premises can be understood to relate to the level of employee commitment and loyalty, which have been shown to impact employee brand behavior (e.g. Afshardoost et al., 2023; King & Grace, 2012; Piehler et al., 2016) as well as employees' attachment to the organization (Garas et al., 2018).

Conative and Behavioral Responses

Employee's attachment to the organization can be understood to correlate with their intention to remain with the company. The intention to stay is presented to reflect employees' brand loyalty (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; King & Grace, 2008; Punjaisri et al., 2009), as loyalty towards the brand can be seen as reflecting employees' consistent preference of the brand over time: when they are committed to the brand they are representing, they are more likely to stick with it. Thus, brand loyalty can be understood as indicating employees' conative responses to IB initiatives, as conative outcomes arise from the influence of cognitive and affective routes (Boukis & Christoudoulies, 2020; Piehler et al., 2016), thus forming attitudes. More specifically, as conative responses are often the next step to behavior, brand loyalty may have a strong influence on the intention to act in brand consistent way. On the other hand, employees' behaviors might also influence their conative processes, that is, brand loyalty. For instance, if employees receive recognition for supporting the brand, it can motivate them and others to participate in brand-strengthening actions.

Although Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) acknowledged that brand loyalty is an important employee-related IB outcome, they noted that in previous literature, brand loyalty is often referred to specifically from the perspective of job retention. However, the "intention to stay" factor has been more commonly presented, for instance, to improve an organization's profits by driving recruitment and training costs down (e.g. Punjaisri et al., 2009), and not so much relating

to direct branding impacts such as increasing IBE. As such, from the perspective of internal brand impacts in building IBE, brand loyalty could be defined as influencing employees' consistent intention to act in line with the brand, thereby fostering a strong sense of belonging and dedication to remain within the company.

All the above-mentioned employee responses to IB initiatives can be presented as leading to behavior, as it is known that cognitions (i.e. information and knowledge) and affections (feelings and emotions) form a route to intention to behave in a certain way, which ultimately leads to actions. In the IB literature, brand citizenship or brand ambassador-related behavior is often illustrated as the key or primary behavioral outcome of IB practices (e.g., Al-shuaibi et al. 2016; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Garas et al., 2018; King & Grace, 2012; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). However, there seems to be uncertainty about the specific behavioral outcomes considered favorable within the context of internal brand management. For example, Burmann & Zeplin's (2005) foundational definition for brand citizenship behavior, as an ultimate behavioral outcome of IB efforts, is defined to refer to such brand-related extra-role behaviors that are not specifically related to employees' in-role requirements. Furthermore, extra-role behaviors are often portrayed as primarily linked to brand-promotive actions to external audiences, thus ultimately reflecting brand-customer relationships and the brand image in the eyes of external stakeholders (Chang et al., 2012; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

However, according to a perhaps more defined perspective, IB efforts have the potential to influence not just extra-role behaviors, but also employees' in-role behaviors (Garas et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Based on the suggestions and empirical validation by Piehler et al. (2016) and Piehler (2018), brand citizenship behavior is a three-dimensional construct that is composed of brand compliance, brand endorsement, and brand development. Here, for example, the brand compliance dimension refers to employees adhering to brand-related guidelines and practices, which can be understood to also relate specifically to the implementation of in-role behaviors. On the other hand, employees' positive brand-aligned extra-role behaviors can be manifested, for example, as voluntary advocacy and protection of the brand or active participation in IB activities and brand development. In this way, employees can be understood to contribute to the construction of IBE through brand compliance, participation, and development, which further with voluntary brand advocacy could have a positive effect on customer-based brand equity (see e.g. Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). In summary, the concept of brand citizenship behavior can be comprehended as a multidimensional construct that is linked to organizational achievement, born from employees' ability and motivation to comply and voluntarily promote the brand through actions related to both in-role and extra-role brand behaviors.

2.3.2 Preliminary Conceptual Framework

Internal Branding as an organization-wide process can be perceived as practices arising from the collaboration between marketing and human resource management functions aimed at employees, through which a company's brand is internally managed to build IBE. As emphasized, IB originates from the concept of internal marketing, and it highlights the significant impact that employees have on the brand's success. Thus, Internal Market Orientation (IMO) is suggested to be a vital organizational antecedent for the implementation of IB activities, which together are associated with recognizing the significance of the workforce in brand-strengthening and brand building efforts. With this internal perspective, it is suggested that there must be a comprehensive understanding of the significant relationship between the brand and its success, alongside recognizing how the brand can strategically guide the organization's operations. Therefore, Brand Orientation (BO) has been proposed as another essential component reflecting the company's mindset, with which IB initiatives may be effectively implemented. In other words, these strategic philosophies guiding a company's operations are important prerequisites for managing the employee-brand relationship internally.

With the existing literature, efforts have been made to identify the overarching dimensions for illustrating the functions related to implementing IB within organizations. Based on the identified and supported dimensions, namely Brand-centered Human Resource Management, Brand Leadership, and Internal Brand Communications, along with associated activities, it has been observed that these efforts impact internally on employees' brand-related responses. More precisely, responses related to employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the company's brand, together with organizational antecedents and managerial IB practices, collectively contribute to the formation of IBE. When the brand is internally strong, it is suggested that the company possess high levels of IBE, which is an essential component of the company's overall brand equity. Therefore, by enhancing IBE, it has been suggested that organizations can positively influence the development of external brand equity and financial brand equity as well.

In conclusion, it is argued that to effectively manage the brand internally, the organizational strategic mindsets of Internal Market Orientation (IMO) and Brand Orientation (BO) are needed to effectively facilitate Internal Branding (IB), that is, managerial actions to lead and steer the brand internally to build and enhance Internal Brand Equity (IBE). The IB initiatives refer to Brand-Centered Human Resource Management practices (recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and rewarding), Brand Leadership and Internal Brand Communications. By implementing IB, the employee's cognitive (brand understanding), affective (brand identification, brand commitment), and conative (brand loyalty) processing towards the brand are aimed to be enhanced and reinforced. Through these attitude-related responses, employees are better equipped to act in a brand-aligned way, and ultimately, they may be motivated to voluntarily engage in positive brand-strengthening actions, referred to as extra-role brand citizenship behaviors. Hence, by reinforcing these employee-based brand-aligned attitudes

and actions with appropriate organizational orientations and managerial practices, a strong brand can be achieved internally within the organization.

Ultimately, as robust brands are suggested to possess high levels of internal brand equity (IBE), the presence of IBE not only strengthens their internal brand perception but also has the potential to resonate positively with external stakeholders, ultimately enhancing the company's overall success. The theoretical insights have been synthesized into the preliminary framework of the study (Figure 4), which illustrates IB as an important organization-wide process that constructs brand equity through internal brand equity.

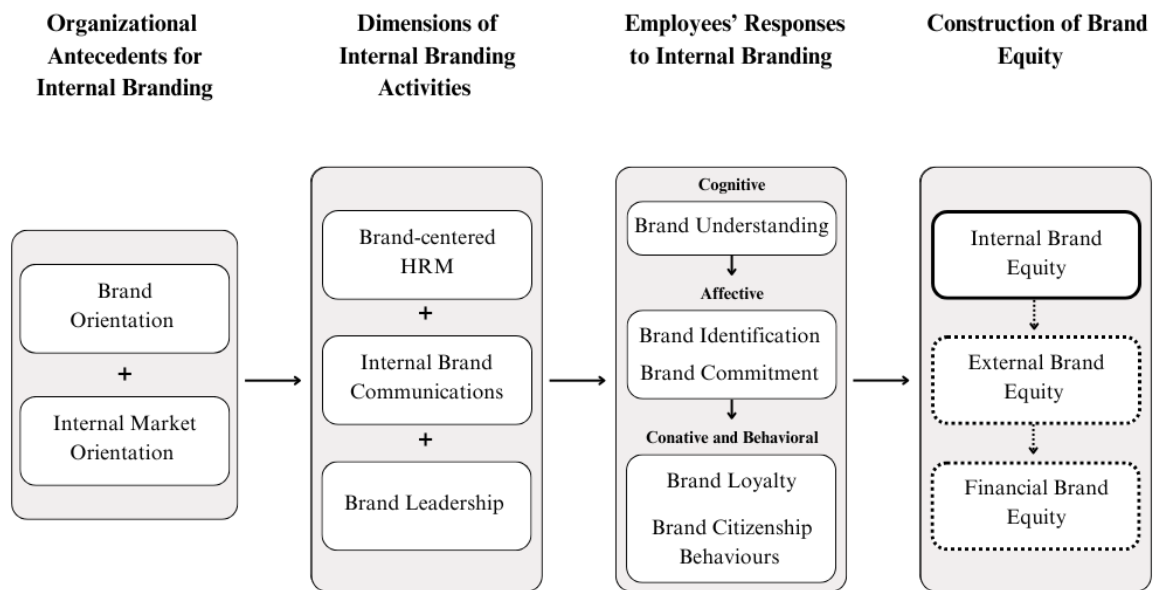


Figure 4: Preliminary Conceptual Framework

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

To ensure that the scientific approach contributes to research objectives, the purpose of the study, research questions, and the chosen research approach should be aligned mindfully. The research methodology can be either quantitative or qualitative or a combination of these, in which case the research logic can follow deductive, inductive, or abductive reasoning. This study employs a qualitative research method to achieve a thorough understanding of IB within the organizational context. Qualitative research can be characterized as a methodology focused on explaining or deepening the understanding of some real-life phenomena, as outlined by Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 162). Oftentimes, the goal of qualitative research is to discover or reveal certain phenomena rather than to verify things that have already been established. Thus, qualitative methods are suitable for studies that involve the observation of qualities and meanings (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, 161-162), as it is also the aim of this study.

Among the methods of qualitative research, a single case study was chosen as the research strategy for this study. In general, a case study can be understood as a rich empirical description of precisely defined phenomenon, the purpose of which is to create theoretical structures and propositions based on empirical observations (Eisenhardt, 1989). Hence, case study methodology is used to interpret real-life phenomena occurring in the present moment and within the specific context, as illustrated by Eskola & Suoranta (1998, 65) regarding the nature of case studies. In addition, O’Gorman and MacIntosh (2015, 81) state that often good case studies are based on a research problem that is not properly understood, and has not been adequately explained, or justified due to conflicting narratives. These same characterizations are also supported by Yin (2018, 14-15), who further suggests that a case study is an appropriate research method when it is assumed that understanding evolves from important contextual conditions relevant to the case.

Consequently, this study is conducted by focusing on a single case company that operates in the field of marketing communication services. The selection of the case company is based on two main perspectives: Firstly, since the selected company has recently undergone an internal brand renewal process with full employee participation, it is interesting to explore how both supervisors and employees have perceived the brand previously and how they perceive it now. This exploration is expected to provide depth and offer diverse perspectives on the phenomenon. Second, the company employs marketing professionals who have experience in conducting brand projects for various clients operating in different industries. Hence, by adopting this dual perspective the chosen methodology seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance of internal branding within the company, drawing from both supervisors’ and employees’ own experiences and their professional insights. The goal of participant selection is to ensure that the research contributes to the improvement of IB practices

within the company. Furthermore, in line with the characteristics of a case study, as presented by Yin (2018, 20-21), based on the insights and interpretations derived from the study, generalized theoretical propositions can be formulated for implementing IB effectively in other organizations as well. Thus, through this study, it may be possible to challenge previously established theoretical relationships and explore new ones, in which case, according to Gustafsson (2017), a deeper understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved.

In the context of this thesis, when exploring a relatively novel and scattered phenomenon like IB seems to be, the dimensions and characterizations of qualitative research align with the objectives of the empirical research. This notion is particularly supported by Eriksson and Kovalainen's (2008, 6) characterization of qualitative research, highlighting the significance of qualitative methods when the phenomenon under review has been explored only to a limited extent. They also emphasize that further research is necessary when addressing issues that remained unclear in previous studies. In line with existing literature on IB, which often is emphasized to lack a unified conceptualization (e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015), this study seeks to contribute to addressing this challenge. Furthermore, academic literature highlights that most of the studies carried out in this field have been conducted by using quantitative methods (e.g. Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Garas et al., 2018; Piehler, 2018). Nevertheless, the selection of the method for this study was also influenced using a similar case study methodology in a few prior studies addressing IB, and these studies have been widely cited as sources in academic literature (e.g., King & Grace 2008; Punjaisri & Wilson 2007). For this reason, a qualitative case study is thought to be a suitable research approach, as these methods have previously made a significant contribution to understanding the phenomenon. In addition, it's worth noting that while case studies on IB have been conducted across various industries, there is no known case study specifically focused on a marketing agency, involving both supervisors and employees as subjects for investigation. Therefore, the choice of the case company considers the industry focus with the selection of participants, which are presumed to be suitable for investigating the phenomenon.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

In gathering data for the research, qualitative methods were used to ensure that the perspectives, experiences, and meanings of the subjects would emerge, as emphasized by Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 16). In line with this objective, individual interviews were chosen as the method for data collection. Interviews are a common data collection method in qualitative case studies, as interviews can provide rich empirical data relevant to the research question (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 79). The purpose of interviews is to explore key themes and questions related to the research topic through interactive discussions between the researcher and the participant, which makes interviews a unique research method (O'Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015, 118). Therefore, interviews were chosen

as the data collection method for this study, as the research aims to explore a fragmented and less understood phenomenon based on the academic literature in a real-life context, thus allowing the participants to share their perspectives on the subject.

More precisely, the interviews were conducted as semi-structured thematic interviews. Thematic interviews are characterized by having predetermined themes that are consistent for all the participants, while the researcher can influence the form and order of the questions during the interview (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 87). The interview protocol for this study is constructed based on the theoretical framework, which consists of the most central concepts related to the phenomenon under investigation. Hence, the interview structure consists of themes, under which the interview questions are targeted to find meaningful answers to the research problem (Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2002, 77). For this study, thematic interviews are well suited as a data collection method, as it is appropriate to cover the same themes with all interviewees, while also providing flexibility for participants to respond according to their unique perspectives and experiences. However, in order to enable the discovery of new insights on the complex research topic, interviewees were initially asked more open-ended questions. These questions guided subsequent probing questions and followed the thematic interview protocol.

The data collected aimed to align with the theoretical framework by identifying the antecedents, processes, and potential outcomes of internal brand management. The transcribed data were analyzed in a theory-driven manner using thematic analysis as the organizing technique. According to Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 178), thematic analysis is a useful technique particularly for solving practical problems, such as in the case of this study. The thematic analysis also necessitates continuous interaction between theory and data, which is why the interview protocol was carefully designed to align with the theory, and the insights from the interviews were strongly reflected upon previous theoretical knowledge. Consequently, the theoretical foundation of the study was utilized to identify the most relevant topics for the research from collected data. Hence, in theory-driven data analysis, existing knowledge guides the analysis of the data collected about the phenomenon under investigation (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 99). Additionally, thematic analysis typically involves the use of quotes to justify the data and interpretations made by the researcher (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 175). In presenting the result of this study, supportive quotations from the interviewees' speeches are also included to reinforce the findings.

In the research analysis, the researcher uses the logic of inference that is employed to analyze empirical evidence (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, 135; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 106). The logical inference can follow a deductive, inductive, or abductive approach, depending on the purpose of the research. Often in the analysis of qualitative research, the researcher uses either inductive or abductive reasoning (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, 136). Inductive reasoning aims to develop new theoretical frameworks from collected data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 23-24) and abductive reasoning is used when the researcher has a guiding idea that enables theory-building and new scientific discoveries, in which case the new theory is not solely derived from the observations (Grönfors 1982, 33; Hirsjärvi &

Hurme 2008, 136). According to Yin (2018, 49), single-case study method can significantly contribute to building theory and knowledge by challenging, confirming, or extending the theory, these same premises are prevalent in this study. Given that IB is examined within the theoretical framework in this study, abductive reasoning is utilized to analyze a specific case by integrating the existing theory with new observations gathered from the research (see e.g. Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, 107). Therefore, it is possible to discover new insights from the collected data, while still leveraging academical knowledge in the data analysis.

The abductive approach is often presented as a spiral process, thereby illustrating the movement and flexibility between the theoretical framework and empirical observations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 23.) The nature of abductive research logic became evident as this study progressed, as it emerged that the initial research problem did not entirely align with the observations gathered from the empirical data as initially assumed. Originally, the research question was divided into three sub-questions, with the third sub-question focusing on exploring the positive brand-related internal outcomes that can be achieved through IB. However, the interviews revealed that in the expert marketing firm, none of the interviewees felt that IB had ever received much attention within the company, contrary to reasonable assumptions. Consequently, it became intriguing to investigate why IB had not been prioritized despite the available expertise at both managerial and operational levels. As the interviews progressed, the questions were reformulated to maintain core concepts while approaching the phenomena from different perspectives based on the interviewees' responses.

3.3 Participant Selection and Interview Procedures

Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 66) emphasize that researchers should carefully consider the selection of participants for the study, since individuals within the same entity may have relatively similar experiences of the studied phenomenon due to their probable knowledge of the research topic. However, in this case study, the focus is specifically on understanding how marketing professionals working in the same agency perceive the meaning of IB in terms of their professional expertise and the company brand they represent. In this context, it is intriguing to explore how the expertise of marketing professionals, extending beyond their corporate branding processes, might enhance their ability to contribute meaningfully to this study. Hence, individuals from the same marketing agency were chosen for the interviews based on their experience in contributing to brand-related projects for external clients and their contribution to IB within the company. The selection criteria for the interviewees were therefore their position within the company, work experience, and the alignment of their job responsibilities with the theme under investigation in this study.

Hence, eight marketing professionals from the case company were chosen through purposive sampling, including two in supervisory roles and the

remaining six in expert positions within the company. For clarity and to ensure the anonymity of the respondents, interviewees are identified either as supervisors or employees. The management-level respondents, consisting of two supervisors within the company, also work as team leaders, while the specialist-level employees work in communication, visual design, or strategy and service design. In the selection of employees, emphasis was placed on their contributions related to brands, along with their diverse job roles and extensive work experience within the company. With this approach, it was aimed to ensure a diverse sample from a relatively small pool of employees within the company. The sample size of eight is expected to provide a representative overview of the company, as the case company is a small to medium-sized enterprise (SME) employing a total of 30 individuals at the time of the study. Hence, with this sample size, it is assumed that saturation could be achieved, especially when studying a group operating within the same organization. In addition, during the interviews close attention was paid to the recurrence of the gathered information, indicating that the saturation point was likely reached after the eighth interview.

Each interviewee has extensive industry experience, either within the company or in similar roles elsewhere, ranging from 7 to 27 years. However, to maintain comparability and anonymity, the lengths of employment within the case company have been divided into three groups: 0-2 years, 2-5 years, and 5+ years. A summarized overview of the interviewees' information and the duration of the conducted interviews is presented in the table (Table 1):

Respondent	Employee Level	Length of Employment (approx.)	Interview Duration
R1	Specialist (employee)	2-5 years	1h 35 min
R2	Specialist (employee)	+5 years	1h 2 min
R3	Specialist (employee)	+5 years	1h 19 min
R4	Specialist (employee)	2-5 years	1h 20 min
R5	Specialist (employee)	2-5 years	1h 5 min
R6	Supervisor	+5 years	1h 20 min
R7	Supervisor	+5 years	1h 15 min
R8	Specialist (employee)	0-2 years	1h 24 min

Table 1: Interview Summary

The interview protocol was constructed based on the theoretical knowledge presented in this study, while also addressing the research questions outlined in the introduction. However, thematic interview protocols were tailored differently for supervisors and employees to their respective roles. Supervisors were presented with more open-ended questions focusing on the company's business operations and the employee-brand relationship to gain insights into supervisors' perspectives on internal branding, its implementation, and associated challenges

within the company. Employees were also queried with general-level questions related to the defined thematic areas, but the focus of employee interviews was particularly on specific outcomes of internal branding and possible missed opportunities within the company. The operationalization table utilized for the research with the interview frameworks can be found in the appendices section of this study (Appendix 1 & Appendix 2).

Interview requests were sent to the interviewees through the company's Teams channel via private messages, after which a suitable time for conducting interviews was agreed upon with each interviewee. In the interview invitation, an estimated duration for the interview was provided along with the research purpose. It was also emphasized how the data would be stored and clarified why the person in question was selected for the interview. The interviews were conducted in Finnish through Zoom calls, as both the organizational language of the case company and the mother tongue of each participant is Finnish. The choice of the interview language was thus an attempt to remove obstacles that could occur when answering interview questions caused by a possible language barrier. Before starting the actual interviews, permission was requested from each interviewee to record the sessions and for the use of direct quotations to better illustrate the research results. After the interviews, the content was transcribed and translated from Finnish to English, and the recordings were destroyed immediately after the translation process.

3.4 Evaluation of Validity and Reliability

When evaluating the results obtained from the research, attention should be paid to the reliability and validity of the results. Reliability refers to the consistency and repeatability of results, thus indicating the ability to produce non-random results. Validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the research method accurately measures what it is intended to measure. In general, the evaluation of reliability and validity is strongly associated with quantitative studies, and in the evaluation of qualitative research, these criteria may not carry the same significance as in quantitative studies. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, 231–232.) Nevertheless, in any study, the evaluation of its reliability, validity and structure is necessary, regardless of whether the research methodology is qualitative or quantitative.

Qualitative research typically involves the researcher reflecting on aspects related to the reliability and validity of the results, thereby acting as the primary evaluator of the research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 20). The researcher also validates the conducted research by openly expressing their stance and explaining how and why alternative interpretations have been excluded from the review (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 189). Hence, the formation of the theoretical framework, the exact description of the research phases and the methods illustrate the reliability and validity of the research. In addition to these perspectives, this study illustrates potential research limitations, as identifying limiting factors may reveal possible needs for further investigation. The research limitations and

suggestions for further research are discussed in the conclusion of this study, in Chapter 5.

Oftentimes, the evaluation of qualitative research is more challenging compared to quantitative research, because qualitative research typically involves subjective perspectives from both the participants and the researcher. Consequently, when assessing the reliability of qualitative research, the focus is typically on evaluating the reliability of the entire research process, as the analysis of data and the assessment of reliability cannot be as distinctly separated (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 210). For this reason, the study should be evaluated holistically in terms of coherence (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 135). Thus, to enhance reliability throughout this study, careful and necessary justifications are provided for how interpretations are presented and what they are based on. Furthermore, both during the initial selection of participants and further throughout interviews, careful attention was paid to assessing the alignment of respondents and their responses with the theory-led interview protocol, as well as to the recurrence of similar themes across the interviewees' responses.

The researcher's objective role has been sought to be enhanced and illustrated for interviewees particularly because the researcher is already a familiar to the participants. Therefore, considerable effort was devoted to formulating interview questions in Finnish, ensuring that they remain as neutral as possible and do not guide the interviewees' responses. In addition, both in the interview protocol and at the beginning of the interviews, participants were informed about the researcher's objective role in the study. Acknowledging these premises, the research design therefore strongly emphasizes promoting the researcher's objective role throughout every stage of the research process. All descriptions and information about the company's operations were provided by the interviewees themselves, and the researcher did not make interpretations based on any prior knowledge she might have had.

In the analysis of qualitative data, reliability mainly refers to the researcher's actions, specifically focusing on the dependability of the researcher's analysis of the research material. In this context, reliability involves considerations such as whether all collected data have been taken into account in the analysis and if the information has been accurately documented (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 189). The data collection for the study was carried out through face-to-face video call interviews in Finnish. This approach aimed to allow the interviewees to respond comprehensively to questions posed in their native language regarding the phenomenon under study. Consequently, considerable effort has been dedicated to transcribing the data and the translations between Finnish and English to minimize potential errors that can arise from language differences in the analysis phase. To ensure accuracy, translation tools have been used in translation work to support the researcher's interpretations. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that not all the terms presented in the study have a direct equivalent in Finnish, which is also why the formulation of interview questions has been done thoroughly, developing as descriptive concepts as possible.

When analyzing qualitative validity, the information obtained from the study can be compared to information collected from other sources. For instance, if the interviewee's interpretation corresponds to information from another

source, the perceptions can be seen to reinforce each other. In addition to this, verifying the reliability of the sources can affect the validity of the research. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 189.) In this study, analyses have been presented and justified by referring only to peer-reviewed academic sources. Furthermore, to support the development of the theoretical framework, literature has been searched from empirical examinations to literature reviews and bibliometric analyses related to the topics of this study. With the literature support, this study uses various widely acknowledged and frequently used sources from the fields of marketing and HRM as references. Additionally, in the context of abductive analysis, Grönfors (1982, 37) emphasizes that the validity of the research is specifically examined from the perspective of the researcher's utilization of the data and presentation of the information. Hence, it can be stated that within abductive reasoning, research data can be considered valid even if it contains contradictions. However, in line with the abductive nature of this study, the sub-questions related to the research question were refined during the interviews to better align with the insights gathered from the respondents, aiming to enhance the validity of the study.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 People, Business & the Brand

The chosen case company for empirical investigation is a marketing agency that offers marketing services to clients of various sizes and industries in Finland. The case company is a subsidiary of a larger media organization, thus serving internal group entities as well as external B2C and B2B clients along with clients operating in the public sector. The agency's service portfolio includes a diverse range of marketing consulting services, including strategic planning, brand development, conceptualization and campaign planning, digital marketing solutions, website development, as well as audio and video production.

The company was founded in 2016, during which the visual and communicative identity of its brand was collectively developed with entire staff participation through workshops. During its years of operation, the case company has undergone two brand transformations: the first visual overhaul in 2020 and a more holistic brand renewal throughout the past year 2023, again with the involvement of the entire staff. Despite being a subsidiary of a parent company, the case company's brand distinguishes itself to some extent from the parent company's brand. Consequently, the company has retained a considerable level of autonomy in shaping its brand identity to this date. The company's newly refreshed brand is supposed to be launched in the upcoming year 2024, however, the exact launch date is currently unknown. The supervisors responsible for the brand, R6 and R7, and one of the interviewed employees' as one of the specialists responsible for the brand strategy work in the company, indicated that various factors originating from the parent company are currently hindering the development and release of the new brand. Hence, the prevailing perception is that the company's new brand is currently on hold.

4.1.1 Guiding Principles of Company Operations

The company's supervisors were initially queried about the strategic business orientation adopted by the company, which refers to the strategic principles guiding the company's operations and decision-making (Urde et al., 2013; Aneesur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019). Supervisor R6 approached the question by stating that the company has historically had strong growth objectives, which it still maintains. According to the respondent, alongside the growth strategy, the company's operational focus lies in the efficiency of daily operations and client engagements, as well as ensuring employee satisfaction:

“--growth and profitability and employee satisfaction are very strongly interconnected. I don't see that growth and profitability are possible if employee satisfaction is not good. And employee satisfaction cannot be good if the processes do not work.

Those processes and the everyday work and everyday management, those are the most important things." -R6, supervisor

In particular, R6 emphasized the importance of the workforce regarding business orientation, even though personnel matters had not been explicitly discussed at this stage of the interview. His responses indicate that both internal market orientation and market orientation are intertwined in the company's operations. Similarly, aspects related to market orientation are strongly evident in the supervisor R7 responses. In addition to these constructs, both supervisors felt that the company brand played a significant role in terms of the company's success. They presented that the company's operations are strongly based on satisfying customers' needs and creating value for customers through marketing communication services they provide. However, both supervisors added that the company's values, mission, and vision should be synchronized with the customer perspective.

One of the supervisors illustrated that the descriptions related to market orientation and brand orientation within the company are linked to each other in a way that the company's strategic decisions are mainly built upon a customer-centric perspective, whereas the company's values are closely associated with fostering collaboration internally and externally. This collaborative nature facilitated by the values is further linked to the company's mission, which focuses on the establishment of marketing partnerships. From the responses of both supervisors, it is evident that they strive to establish partnerships to some extent by the company's values, aiming to genuinely enhance the client's business while also ensuring that it is financially beneficial for the company.

While the supervisors' responses primarily emphasize descriptions of the market-oriented approach, the brand is perceived to be important especially considering that the company is a marketing agency. Both supervisors stated that the brand cannot be a detached component of the company's strategy. When they were questioned about the influence of the company's brand on the business, they both responded that the brand is highly significant in terms of sales and profitability:

"The industry is very competitive and if our brand somehow resonates in the wrong way or gives the wrong impression, then we also lose potential business as a result."
-R7, supervisor

"A good brand also helps the company succeed and thrive in that business. If the brand is appealing, it supports sales activities and brings in new customers and so on. Yes, it [the brand] is right there at the core of the business also in terms of generating profitability and well-being." -R6, supervisor

Accordingly, the responses from the supervisor level suggest that the company's strategic business orientation follows a hybrid orientation in which the perspectives of both market orientation and brand orientation are emphasized (Urde et al., 2013). Additionally, R6 was asked for clarification regarding the question related to brand orientation, more specifically, what they meant by stating that the

brand produces well-being. They explained that by generating well-being, they refer to the well-being of the personnel through the brand, as they believe that well-being within the workforce arises from brand clarity, understanding the brand, and identifying with it. They emphasized that a strong brand emerges from the collaborative development of the brand with personnel participation, which also relates to the workforce's ability to take pride in the brand. Furthermore, they stated that the well-being of the workforce, the brand, and the company's success are strongly interconnected, as the brand influences whether the company makes a profit or loss. According to them, the financial status of the company inevitably reflects on the operational level, which in turn ultimately affects the staff's well-being.

While supervisors were approached with questions regarding the company's strategic business direction and BO and IMO constructs, employees were not presented with questions related to the company's strategy; instead, they were requested to evaluate their own and other staff members' roles within the company, as well as the current state and perceived significance of the company's brand. Furthermore, employees were requested to assess the importance of personnel and branding in business operations to obtain a deeper insight into their perspectives on the interconnection between the company's operations, brand, and workforce.

4.1.2 The Significance of Human Capital

The personnel were found to play a highly significant and central role in the company in question, as well as in the advertising agency industry overall, according to supervisors and employees. In expert organizations like the case company, it was suggested that the sales of services heavily depend on the proficiency of the personnel, as the final work provided to the client is created based on value-driven expertise. In addition, the importance of employees is underscored as they directly interact with clients which makes them a vital link between the company and client organizations. When the interviewees were initially asked about the potential outcomes of personnel-oriented practices, responses emphasized factors such as increased workplace commitment, fostering a sense of community, and enhancing individual motivation and job satisfaction. Furthermore, several respondents, like R5, suggested that when employees feel heard and empowered to influence decisions within their workplace, this engagement and participatory approach also reflects positively on clients. Hence, it was indicated that employee-oriented practices have a significant impact on the company's operations:

"I would say, fundamentally, that when selling expertise, our success essentially relies entirely on the selling of that expertise, so in a way, that's everything, so that our employees can actually make creative, sensible, and efficient solutions for our clients in this current operating environment. So, they really need to have the opportunity to succeed. So [personnel-oriented practices], it's very significant, yeah." -R5, employee

Next, the interviewees were asked whether such employee-centric practices are evident in the operations of the company in question. In response to this, there was some variation and even some degree of contradiction between supervisors and personnel regarding the implementation of IMO practices within the company. At the supervisor level, it was stated that efforts are actively made to listen to and involve employees in the decision-making and development of operational practices. Supervisor responses addressed the team-based organization structure integrated into the company's management system, where team leaders interact with team members on a weekly basis regarding their work-related activities. In addition, supervisors mentioned that they gather feedback from each staff member during monthly one-to-one meetings, and issues raised in these discussions are brought to business development meetings among supervisors. Both supervisors emphasized the importance of employee feedback and stated that they believe the company's development occurs in a highly employee-driven manner. Hence, from supervisors' responses, it can be interpreted that they perceive that employees are heard and valued by the company's management:

"--A large part of the development issues come from the personnel. We definitely aim to listen very strongly. -- At least I myself try to lead this company, my attitude and thought is that I try to listen to people as much as possible, what happens there at the root level and what kind of thoughts are created there, and based on them, activities are then developed. I would say that the staff is very involved in the company's development work, but that's my perspective. Surely there could be more and surely there is room for improvement, and it surely varies from person to person, but there is a willingness on the part of management for the staff to participate strongly in development." -R6, supervisor

"Of course, we aim to take [the personnel] into account and thereby involve them in important decision-making and to listen to them and discuss topics. This cannot be business led from the top in any way, so that it would come dictated somehow. Personally, I feel that [the company] is a very flat organization and I strongly hope that there is a low threshold for coming to discuss matters, even one-on-one. "
-R7, supervisor

On the employee level, however, it was perceived that employee involvement and employee-centricity were to some extent realized, but often perhaps somewhat superficially. Respondent R1 reflected on the company culture in comparison to their previous experiences, stating that they found the work environment to be "more humane and relaxed" compared to their previous workplaces. However, they also noted that while a certain level of the pressure-free atmosphere at the workplace is beneficial, they perceived it as a weakness too: the respondent hoped for more "clarity and sharpness" from supervisors in various contexts, particularly concerning adherence to schedules and organization of tasks. They mentioned that sometimes situations arise where there isn't anyone leading them, which in turn makes things vague and open to interpretation for the employees. Furthermore, the respondent noted that within the work community, they feel that it is noticeable that employees, who have been with the

company for a longer period, may perhaps handle situations more calmly even in unclear contexts, as they are accustomed to the company's practices, management, and leadership style.

On the other hand, respondents R2 and R3, who have been employed by the company for over 5 years, expressed feeling heard and actively involved in discussions concerning company affairs. However, they also stated that putting these discussions into practice seems to be often challenging for the company's management. Respondents R2, R3, R4, and R8 emphasized similar perspectives regarding the feedback culture prevailing within the company in their responses: they expressed a desire for a more tangible application of employee input and clearer communication regarding issue resolution and progress. This, they believed, would prevent matters from remaining merely at the level of discussion. Regarding supervisors' feedback handling, there was also a call for more open communication even in cases where employee requests cannot be fulfilled. According to employees, this would be important to ensure that the feedback provider still feels that their suggestions have been taken seriously and that their feedback is genuinely valued.

In addition to developing the company's feedback culture, clarifying, and updating procedures were recurring suggestions in the employees' remarks. Similarly to respondent R1, respondents R5 and R8 also expressed a desire for more proactive efforts from supervisors to reduce ambiguity in work tasks and execution with clearer processes, role delineations, and resource allocation. The core idea evident in the responses seemed to revolve around the notion that certain contexts require better planning of work to make it easier and more enjoyable for employees to perform their tasks. In this regard, both R4 and R8 also added that supervisors themselves should have more resources so that they can better address issues raised by the employees. However, based on the responses of several members of the staff, it is evident that the company has a strong self-management culture, which is highly valued. Nevertheless, at the same time, there is a hope that supervisors would more concretely address the concerns raised by the personnel and more actively enhance workplace procedures.

Although improvements in the company's internal processes were raised during the personnel interviews, there still seems to be a recognition of the significant role of the personnel within the company, with several practices implemented to ensure that personnel would feel heard. Based on the responses of the supervisors, various aspects related to IMO were presented, such as the idea of employees being more satisfied and committed to their work and the company when they feel that they can influence and participate in collective matters. The sense of commitment and satisfaction was also believed to resonate beyond the company, thus impacting client relationships as well. In essence, it appears that there are efforts to gather information about personnel's needs and wants in the organization, but according to the experiences of the interviewed employees, the issues raised by them are not always addressed or met adequately. Thus, by integrating employees' experiences to follow Lings' (2004) proposal, it seems that the company seeks to understand employees' needs through internal market research practices but according to employees' experiences, the internal

communication and responsiveness aspects are lacking, which appears to impact the level of employees' satisfaction.

4.1.3 Brand Power to Business Performance

During the discussions on business orientations, supervisors were asked about the importance of the company's brand in their day-to-day operations based on their responses. Both supervisors emphasized the central role and significance of the company brand. However, based on their responses, it became apparent that the current state of the company brand is perceived as challenging. In recent years, the company has only begun to define the shared values that embody its brand while also clarifying its mission and vision. Both supervisors and the employees indicated that the company had not previously invested in its brand to the extent of aligning it with its values. This seems to be because the core elements of the brand, such as brand values, mission, and vision, had not been formulated before the initiation of the recent brand strategy work.

Supervisor R7 suggests that the current focus on defining the brand core, rather than addressing it earlier, is a result of skill development and the establishment of new processes as new expertise has been brought into the company. Moreover, apart from these factors, it appears that perhaps the client projects have frequently taken precedence over internal brand development, as strategic brand initiatives for clients have already been implemented over the past few years, as it can be interpreted from R7's illustration:

"-- In its simplest form, why was the core of this latest brand shaped in a certain way and through a specific structure, well, firstly, we've had people here who have executed branding work in a certain way and framework before. Of course, we had some framework ideas ourselves, but we didn't have a specific process to which that framework could easily be connected. Now, as we've had this expertise coming into the company, that's why these things have started to be done. With that, of course, everyone has learned a little more, it's a learning process at the same time. -- This same method has also been used with external clients for the past few years, and now when the situation arose to update our own brand, which isn't public yet, but it was decided that the same process would be good to apply here as well." -R7, supervisor

Based on the responses of the interviewees, the current visible brand of the company, which was shaped during the website update in 2020, is primarily perceived as merely a visual layer. Consequently, it may be quite challenging for the company to truly operate in a brand-oriented manner with the current brand, as the core of the brand has not been defined (see e.g. Urde, 1999). According to the respondents, the company brand is internally perceived to be caught between two brands – the current brand, which is seen as a product of its era, and the new brand, which cannot yet be launched due to various reasons, as indicated by supervisors. The interviewees themselves discussed navigating between two brands, which is why the interview questions were not intentionally tailored to

restrict responses to either brand, the current or the upcoming brand of the company. Frequently, interviewees discussed both brands and their perspectives on each.

Regarding BO and its implementation, insights from supervisors reveal that the company brand plays a significant role in the company's operations, even though the brand is currently perceived to be challenging by many respondents. However, based on the supervisors' responses, it is notable that the company has been taking steps toward more brand-oriented approaches from being strongly market-oriented. According to employees, the brand should be highly significant for the company, with many respondents suggesting it should be just as important as for any other company regardless of the industry. Additionally, employees emphasized the general significance of the company brand as a sort of guarantee of service quality, especially in the industry they represent, where they provide expert services to other companies. It was further emphasized that the brand significantly affects its market awareness and position by setting an example, being appealing, and establishing credibility through its internal branding efforts. Thus, according to the respondents, the company brand ultimately determines the quality of client relationships and thus profitability it can establish in the future.

Nevertheless, the statements made by the personnel regarding the company brand were slightly more negative in tone than the assessments provided by supervisors. The overall perception of the current brand is mainly unfavorable, as all interviewed employees thought more or less that the brand does not inspire them as internal customers and fails in establishing a credible image for external stakeholders either. Concurrently, they perceived that the company brand has not received adequate investment, and the current brand appears outdated, thus not showcasing the expertise that the specialists within the company have in the realm of branding:

"At the moment, our own brand is lagging far behind in terms of our current level of expertise or performance at its best. They are not in balance at the moment" **-R1, employee**

"Well, our own brand is quite vague, you know, we're still kind of in this startup phase, even though we shouldn't be anywhere near that after all these years." **-R3, employee**

"Well, I mean, the company's own brand has always been the last thing that's been paid attention to. At least so far, it seems to me that it hasn't been given any attention, that it's always been sort of a necessary evil that someone might think about in some way, sometime. But to allocate resources to its development, it feels like it's the last thing that's really considered in that regard." **-R4, employee**

"-- Now, the brand, it should have a bigger significance. -- we have a brand, but I believe that the majority are of the opinion that it's old and should be renewed, as has been done, but nonetheless, it's still a burden for us. And this situation isn't good in that sense, in my opinion, because we acknowledge that something needs to

be done, but we haven't been able to do it, so then it's already, fundamentally, a problem." **-R8, employee**

According to respondent R4, the situation appears to indicate that the true significance of the company brand may not be fully grasped by managers, as there hasn't been sufficient attention given to developing the brand, nor have resources been allocated to personnel for brand development, despite their potential enthusiasm to do so. On the other hand, R4 also added that steps have been taken in a better direction, but overall, the brand has been left unmanaged. Respondent R8 also highlighted the situation to be problematic by expressing concern that although the brand-related issues have been acknowledged, necessary steps forward haven't been taken promptly enough, which ultimately affects both the sense of community and the overall atmosphere within the organization. Instead, in R3's opinion, the challenges don't stem from supervisors' lack of comprehension of the brand and branding principles, but rather from prioritizing other internal matters and client projects over dedicating attention to the company's brand. Both R3 and R5 articulated regarding the state of the brand that "the shoemaker's children always go barefoot", thus indicating that while there is extensive expertise in branding within the company, this expertise has not been effectively implemented in the case of the brand they represent. Additionally, both respondents provided very similar responses regarding the perceived shortcomings of the current brand and why operating between two brands is challenging, as the concept of the brand holds different meanings for each employee:

"-- We don't even have a brand book for our current brand. Then it's like, the brand always reflects its contributors. -- It becomes a bit like the Wild West, and then it's probably really scattered for the recipients, like what the brand really is." **-R3, employee**

"-- Now the brand is merely a symbol and then there are people who work under that symbol. In a way, the statement and the essence of the brand are currently completely missing. And because of that, for example, our marketing is really difficult." **-R5, employee**

Each interviewed employee views the current state of the company brand as somewhat unfortunate, with several respondents feeling that internally, the brand is perceived more as a burden than as something inspiring. Supervisor R6 also acknowledged the challenging situation, stating that it is a clear weakness for the company that its brand is currently a very complex subject. In connection to this, they added that it would be very important to get the brand in order, which would also enable marketing to support the company's sales. Nonetheless, supervisors indicated that the promotion of the company brand is currently hindered by factors beyond their control.

On the other hand, it remained unclear whether the employees knew and understood why the company's internal or external branding efforts couldn't currently be implemented. This is because based on the responses of the employees, there is little evidence of empathy towards the brand situation, as the

responses suggest uncertainty about the progress of the company's branding efforts. Additionally, there is a sense that operating between two brands has persisted for too long. Several employee respondents emphasized that insufficient attention has been devoted to the brand, especially because client projects have been prioritized over the company's internal branding efforts. As a result, the company brand has not been given sufficient importance or the necessary resources for its development. Instead, particularly the respondents who have been most closely involved in shaping the future brand of the company, namely the company's supervisors and strategist from the employee level, appeared to know and articulate more precisely than other respondents the reasons why brand work has been initiated within the company and why the process is currently not progressing. Therefore, to ensure that everyone in the workplace has the same understanding of the brand situation, it might be necessary to communicate more openly internally about the matters related to the brand and branding efforts.

4.2 Internal Cascading of the Brand

The existing challenges faced by the case company, particularly concerning its brand, significantly indicate the implementation of IB within the organization, or more precisely, the reasons behind its absence. While the company can be interpreted as increasingly aiming to implement brand-oriented strategies alongside market-oriented approaches and actively involving employees in organizing the company's operations and tasks, it is evident that IB has not been effectively realized within the organization. This is particularly attributed to the lack of clear brand ideologies, resulting in deficiencies in defining the brand identity. Based on this, the response to the failure of internal brand management, especially according to employees, is quite straightforward: the brand has not been attempted to be cascaded down to the staff because there isn't even a brand to manage. Consequently, the discussion initially shifted more toward how important marketing experts by profession comprehend IB, how it should be implemented, and what impacts it may have. Consequently, each participant was initially probed with open-ended interview questions regarding IB and how they perceive the meaning of it.

The insights from the interviewees indicate that IB encompasses various outcomes, including understanding the brand, its adoption, commitment, and alignment with brand values at both individual and organizational levels. Based on the responses, it can be observed that leadership plays a crucial role, both in managing the brand and in leading people. In terms of effective internal brand management, it was considered essential to have a designated individual or team responsible for the brand, who can enable a collective acceptance and understanding of the brand within the organization. Brand Leadership was suggested to be manifested through communication, participation, and internal guidance of the brand, enabling the staff to internalize and commit to it. Additionally, employees were perceived to play a significant role in representing the brand, which

in turn was seen to require employees' individual ability to embody the brand in their work. Ultimately, this ability to embody the brand as brand ambassadors was seen to stem from each employee's understanding of the brand, brand assimilation, and brand commitment, which are fostered and strengthened through IB, as also indicated in academic literature (see e.g. Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018).

Following the definition of the IB as a concept, the interviewees were asked for specific proposals regarding actions or practices that IB entails. Several interviewees referred to a Finnish term that closely resembles "internal cascading of the brand" in English. By using this term, they aimed to describe the methods or practices employed to help employees internalize the brand, thus enabling them to align their actions with its objectives. In other words, the internal cascading of the brand can be understood as processes where the brand values and brand identity are integrated into various levels of the organization, reflecting the concrete actions related to internal branding practices. In connection with this, the interviewees' responses strongly emphasized perspectives related to internal brand communication and brand leadership, as well as some views related to brand-centered HRM activities presented in the theoretical framework. Brand-centered HRM activities, especially employee training, were seen as an important function in cascading the brand internally.

Personnel reflections highlighted that, especially given the challenges with their brand, they believed IB should be implemented strategically, systematically, and in a planned manner to ensure all employees have a unified understanding of the company brand. It was noted that IB thus requires continuous effort and resources to succeed. In addition, leadership was seen to have a significant impact on how leaders support the implementation of IB. However, contrary to the theoretical framework of the study, the co-creation of the brand core with the entire staff was considered an important factor, that was believed to significantly impact aspects such as employees' comprehension of the brand and their identification with it. The responses from the interviewees reveal that each member of the staff should at least have the opportunity to influence the company's brand identity. Since creating the brand appearance or redesigning brand ideologies were associated with brand genesis, it can be understood as a dimension that guides other dimensions of cascading the brand internally. Additionally, while the activities related to brand leadership, brand communication, and brand-centered HRM should be systematically implemented and maintained as an ongoing effort, it was suggested that brand co-creation and subsequent redevelopment are more related to infrequent and need-based brand maintenance and developmental measures.

When interviewees were first asked in a broader sense about their understanding of IB and what dimensions or activities they associate with it, the responses were more goal-oriented. That is, they focused on the employee-based outcomes that can be achieved through internal brand management. Thus, the interview questions were crafted to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' perspectives on the various dimensions of IB (brand-centered HRM, brand leadership, internal brand communication) within the context of the case company, in line with existing theoretical knowledge. Moreover, discussions on

brand formation and co-development throughout the interviews underscored the significance attributed to engagement, employee participation, and collaborative efforts in internal brand management.

The supervisors were asked more detailed questions regarding their perceptions of the importance of various IB practices in enhancing the employee-brand relationship in the company. Similarly, employees were asked to provide insights more specifically about different management practices and the significance of these from their perspective. Additionally, they were requested to assess the implementation of these management practices within the work environment. Employees also proposed suggestions for enhancing internal brand management within the case company, aiming to potentially improve the brand's direction in the future. As a result, the importance of IB became increasingly evident as interviewees felt that the brand they represent had not been effectively or appropriately managed to date.

4.2.1 Brand Co-creation

When exploring the organizational antecedents of the case company, it became apparent that there is a strong belief in co-creation and co-development. Moreover, throughout its history, the company has involved employees in some capacity in all initiatives related to the company brand. On the other hand, co-creating and developing the brand with the entire staff can be seen as requiring certain organizational foundations, where firstly, the strategic significance of the brand (BO) is understood, and simultaneously, the opinions and participation of the staff are valued (IMO). As the interviews highlighted the significance of collaborative creation and collective development of the brand in brand management, it can be understood that successful IB requires both brand orientation and internal market orientation. However, all efforts mentioned by the interviewees primarily focused on revitalizing the company brand, indicating a lack of prior implementation of IB in other contexts within the company. This might explain why each interviewee expressed opinions and justified their viewpoints by closely reflecting on the company's previous brand development processes.

More specifically, the co-creation of brand ideologies and further development of brand identity was highlighted in nearly every interviewee's response. Only R1 suggested, based on their extensive professional experience in other companies, that it may not be necessary for every member of the organization to participate in shaping the core of the brand. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on how the brand is managed internally after the core is shaped to increase the employees' understanding of the brand. However, regarding IB initiatives, R1 also noted that through collaborative efforts, employees can be encouraged and motivated on developing the brand. According to the perspectives of all other respondents, involving staff in the brand-construction phase not only enhances brand understanding effectively but also cultivates a stronger sense of ownership when employees have been engaged in the process from the beginning. In addition, through co-creation of the brand essence, employees are better equipped to internalize and commit to the brand, as they have had the

opportunity to influence the outcome themselves. Brand co-creation was also observed to influence employee enthusiasm and even foster a sense of pride in the company brand.

Despite the company's emphasis on the significance of collaborative creation at both managerial and employee levels, particularly employees voiced criticism regarding the brand co-creation processes that have been implemented within the organization. The most recent comprehensive brand renewal process has evoked emotions, likely due to the participation of every interviewee. Furthermore, with the latest brand renewal, the company seemed to operate in a more brand-oriented manner and strategically planned the branding process to potentially elevate the brand's role in the company's operations. Supervisor R7 illustrated that during the recent brand renewal process, the company's strategy, values, and the essence of the brand were defined in participatory workshops involving the entire staff. Following the formulation of the brand core, employees formed their subjective perceptions of the brand's visual and communication identities in pre-assigned teams, from which a winning option was eventually chosen. However, discussions among employees rarely touched upon the workshops related to shaping the strategy and values, since there was minimal commentary regarding the effectiveness or efficiency of these workshop-based approaches.

Instead, the perceived competition among teams regarding the visual and communicative design of the brand evoked strong emotions in some individuals' responses, prompting several suggestions for improvement. For instance, as stated by R4, the scenarios where "employees are pitted against each other" rarely foster a sense of unity and a positive work environment. Additionally, the respondent mentioned hearing that a similar team-based setup had been used in reshaping the brand previously, which resulted in negative experiences for the employees, which led to the question of why lessons from past mistakes hadn't been learned in the company's management. R2 also found it challenging that teams generated three significantly divergent interpretations of the company's upcoming brand, and now that the decision regarding the brand's visual and communicative identity has been made, it's evident that not everyone has fully internalized it.

On the other hand, when IB efforts to facilitate the commitment of the new brand have not yet been implemented in the company, the groundwork for it may be more challenging. This is because the experience of the brand creation process has left employees feeling somewhat uncertain and even evoked negative emotions towards it. In addition, the process was perceived to have an impact on the entire workforce and thus on the workplace atmosphere. Therefore, the pitfall of the company's implemented co-creation of the brand appears to be that ultimately, the all employees were not collectively involved in shaping the communicative and visual dimensions of the corporate brand; instead, the design was done in teams, resulting in proposals that naturally reflected the interpretations of team members regarding the brand appearance. However, this leads to the realization that other members of the staff may not have had the opportunity to internalize the new upcoming brand or commit to it, as IB hasn't been implemented concerning the brand.

Another characteristic evident in the responses of the interviewed employees regarding the company brand development efforts stemmed, once again, from appreciation matters and resource allocations. Both supervisors mentioned in different contexts during the interview how significant of an investment it was from the company's perspective to undertake such a vast brand renewal process. In the responses from the supervisors, there is an emphasis on their belief in the importance of the entire staff's participation in the process, which in turn has required a significant amount of time and financial resources. In contrast, two of the interviewed employees highlighted the issue of resource allocation for brand management within the company, as they suggested that communication from the supervisory level to the employees has been inadequate in conveying the desired investment in developing the company brand. They mentioned that there has been strong emphasis from the supervisory level on highlighting the significant financial investment made by the company to carry out the brand renewal process. According to one respondent, this has led to more negative feelings towards the brand process rather than a sense that the supervisors genuinely want to provide resources and opportunities for employees to participate in developing the brand. Hence, while supervisors may have intended to communicate through emphasizing resources that the brand renewal and the involvement of the entire staff are important for them and the company, this message may have been misinterpreted by employees.

Based on the responses from the employees and the suggestions they provided, it can be inferred that what is considered more important in shaping or creating the brand is the opportunity for employee-participation rather than forcing everyone to co-create. In this regard, the process might not require such significant resource investments. To engage employees in branding efforts, it was recommended to provide them with opportunities for participation, allowing them to voluntarily contribute to brand development. This approach is likely to foster genuine enthusiasm and willingness among employees to contribute to the development process. Instead, internal cascading of the brand is seen to become crucial after the brand identity is shaped, whereby the IB activities determine ultimately how other employees understand, adopt and commit to the brand.

4.2.2 Fostering Careers through Brand Integration

In the responses of the interviewees, it was emphasized that IB should be implemented systematically and as an ongoing effort, which has not been the case in the history of the company. Thus, practices related to the brand-centered HRM dimension have not been thoughtfully implemented previously. Nevertheless, both supervisors and employees provided various suggestions for different practices that are aimed at enhancing internal brand value, where the company brand and its values can play a central role in supporting and managing employee's work.

Before asking opinions on various brand-centered HRM dimension activities derived from theory, several respondents mentioned that regular brand-related gatherings should be organized to guide the staff on how to utilize the

brand in their work. Therefore, increasing understanding of the brand in the workplace was considered important, which is primarily achieved through diverse training and educational brand practices (e.g. Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Based on the suggestions from supervisors R6 and R7, it was proposed that the brand would be integrated closely into the company's internal meeting practices once the new brand could be launched. R6 expressed the desire for regular company-wide events related to the brand, where issues and suggestions regarding the brand and its management could be discussed collectively. Hence, these events wouldn't be merely top-down training sessions but rather emphasize active engagement and collaboration with the workforce through two-way communication. In this regard, R7 also suggested that supervisors could discuss the brand purpose in smaller settings, such as team meetings, potentially reducing individuals' reluctance to participate in discussions compared to larger company-wide meetings. Furthermore, he proposed that on an individual level, monthly one-to-one discussions could be conducted to allow employees to reflect on their relationship with the brand:

"For example, in a one-to-one conversation, a supervisor can go through, like, now with our brand, as we seek these and these things, how do you perceive in your own work, whether you are able to implement these and if not, why not. And if yes, what have been the successful things or how do you feel about it." -R7, supervisor

Thus, recognizing and nurturing the brand relationship at an individual level by engaging each employee in discussions of how the brand manifests in their work and how it could be improved could foster a deeper sense of employees' ownership and alignment with the brand. Additionally, this individualized approach could allow supervisors to address specific concerns or challenges faced by employees, thereby facilitating a collective learning experience about the brand and its manifestation in the workplace. Furthermore, listening, and voicing the concerns of each member of the staff could promote a collaborative environment where employees feel valued and empowered to contribute to the brand's success.

When queried in greater detail about the employee-oriented events and training practices related to the brand, supervisors' highlighted the importance of creating brand guidelines in addition to guided collective events for enhancing the employees' brand understanding. Training employees on the company brand was also considered important by every interviewed employee. In this context, the responses of the interviewees largely echo the same causal relationships between the cognitive and affective dimensions and behavior as presented in the literature: when various company brand training sessions guide and review matters related to the brand, it significantly assists in employee's brand understanding and brand identification. Furthermore, according to the perspectives of the interviewees, through shared understanding, each employee can identify with and commit to the company brand which enables them to act more coherently in brand-aligned way (see e.g. Chiang et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2018). However, insights from employee interviews regarding brand-related training underscored

the need for leaders to systematically organize and allocate resources for planning and implementing various training sessions and workshops.

Brand-Aligned Recruitment and Onboarding

The interviewees were queried about whether they feel that the company's recruitment processes and orientation phases for new employees should be brand-driven. To this, all interviewees unitedly agreed that it would be important to integrate the company brand and its values into the recruitment phase and the onboarding processes of new employees. According to supervisor R6, incorporating the brand into recruitment and onboarding practices could strengthen new employees' brand understanding already in the early stages of their careers. This, in turn, is closely perceived to be linked to how the brand is ultimately projected externally through employees' actions. On the other hand, according to supervisor R7, ensuring alignment between the values and mindset embodied by the brand and those embraced by the recruits is crucial for fostering a unified work environment and achieving a better fit between individuals and the brand. Therefore, by ensuring that the recruitment phase reflects the company's values and culture, better value congruence between the candidate and the brand can be achieved (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016). Despite these reflections, supervisors acknowledged that the company's recruitment processes and employee onboarding with a brand-centric approach were lacking, indicating a need for improvement within the organization.

Employees, especially those who have been working in the company for 0-5 years, expressed uncertainty regarding the representation of the company brand and its relationship with the corporate group during their recruitment and onboarding processes. Respondent R5 also pointed out that the connection to the corporate group complicates recruitment processes in a certain way, as the case company may not always have control over the individuals being recruited. Furthermore, according to R5, the parent company's brand needs to be visible in job postings of its subsidiaries, which can lead to confusion between the brands. Respondent R3, who has been with the company longer than the previous respondents and has also participated in recruitments, perceived that during job interviews, the company sometimes hides behind the parent company. In addition, the respondent mentioned instances where a job advertisement from the case company did not align with their internal perception of the brand. On the other hand, many respondents emphasized during the interviews the absence of a unified brand resulting from the lack of a defined brand core and, consequently, a clear brand identity. Therefore, perceptions of the brand vary among recipients, indicating that achieving a consistent brand image among current employees, let alone new ones, may not be feasible.

Based on the insights shared by employees, there seems to be an increased demand for more transparent brand communication and the implementation of various strategies, particularly in employee recruitment. This is aimed at ensuring that both new hires and existing employees gain a clearer understanding of the values embodied by the company brand and its relationship to the parent company. In this context, several respondents highlighted the critical role of the

company's website and job postings in the recruitment process, emphasizing the importance of both platforms effectively communicating the company brand identity and core values. In line with R3's illustration, brand-aligned recruitment should be considered important, especially because the prospective employee's brand experience begins with their first encounter with the brand. Consequently, maintaining a consistent representation of the company brand across all touch-points becomes imperative to ensure the desired brand perception among employees. Hence, these suggestions imply that recruitment aligned with the brand significantly influences candidates' perception of the brand, ultimately affecting the congruence between the candidates values and those of the brand, and consequently person-brand fit (Al-Shuaibi et al., 2016; Saini et al., 2022; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Similarly, according to R4, brand-aligned onboarding establishes the foundation for employee engagement and thus organizational success, which is in line with Al-Shuaibi et al. (2016) and Burmann & Zeplin's (2005) notions of training and engaging newcomers to the brand.

Brand-Centric Performance Evaluation and Rewarding

Based on the responses of the interviewees, the company has not previously assessed or monitored employees' brand behavior. Overall, several interviewees found the perspectives on brand-related evaluation and rewarding to be novel and thus evoking thoughts. According to supervisors, monitoring employees' brand-aligned behavior was deemed beneficial, as long as the evaluation solution is also devised and accepted by the employees. In other words, assessment practices should be largely designed with an employee-centric approach. On the other hand, as R7 previously suggested, a solution involving one-on-one discussions between the employee and the supervisor would be enough in their opinion, and there would be no need to monitor staff brand behavior in any other way.

However, according to the interviewed employees, there should be some form of assessment regarding how the company brand is utilized and what actions are taken under the brand. In addition to brand-centered performance evaluation, there was a suggestion that it could be beneficial to monitor how employees have internalized the company brand identity and how this is reflected in their day-to-day tasks, along with gathering employee feedback on the matter. Nevertheless, at the employee level, the question was perceived perhaps complex, as respondents were unable to articulate how the evaluation should be concretely implemented. Of employees, only R8 proposed that brand-behavior evaluation could rely more on employee self-assessment. This perspective is in line with supervisor R7's suggestion, as both emphasize the importance of employee-driven self-reflection and subsequent development.

To reward employees for brand-aligned behavior, however, it requires some level of evaluation upon which the reward is based on. In this regard, supervisors mentioned that the company lacks a formal reward system that would support or reinforce the brand. Supervisor R6 expressed a desire for having a company-wide reward system and mentioned having personally tried to

advocate for it towards the parent company in the past. Instead, supervisor R7 suggested that rewarding incentives may resonate more in larger organizations due to the complexity of managing their brand and perhaps that is why he did not perceive a formal reward system as necessary in the case company:

"In companies of our size, it's kind of part of our daily routine to operate in line with the brand, so if we could somehow reward that, we probably would, but maybe those kinds of things resonate more in bigger companies in a way, where managing the brand is more challenging because there are a lot of employees. And it kind of relates to unit-specific controls, where each unit is monitored in various ways."

-R7, supervisor

Of employees, R8 also stated that they do not feel the need for any kind of reward for acting in line with the brand; rather, it should be more of an intrinsic value to act in a brand-consistent way. On the other hand, the impact of rewards is likely to vary among individuals: some may perceive rewards as a positive incentive, while others may find motivation from different sources. In contrast, other respondents highlighted the significant impact of informal rewarding on both in-role and extra-role brand-related behaviors, while expressing a desire for more recognition and praise for well-done work in the workplace. According to R4, recognition from management would be "an inexpensive way to maintain a positive atmosphere", while according to R1, it serves as a way to build "a sense of unity" in the workplace, where receiving recognition is perceived to have a positive impact both personally for the employee and on the overall work atmosphere. R3 and R5 also emphasized in their responses that giving recognition could significantly influence employees' brand commitment and motivation to engage in brand development practices, thereby fostering their role as brand ambassadors.

"Yeah, I always believe, you know, whether it's about developing the brand or something else, but just, if you come up with something really awesome that brings in revenue, then you should definitely get rewarded for it. At least some recognition, applause, or something. I mean, motivation often grows when others notice, 'Hey, that person came up with this, like a social media campaign for our brand, and then they got something out of it, so maybe I should give it a try too.' Success always breeds more success, so yeah, it would definitely create a positive cycle there." **-R3, employee**

4.2.3 Leadership's Role in Brand Appreciation

The role of leadership was significantly emphasized throughout the interviews, particularly in the statements of the employees but also supervisors themselves acknowledged their substantial impact on the promotion of the brand, employee engagement, and the brand-employee relationship within the organization. However, since IB has not been strategically implemented within the company, it is noticeable that perhaps at the managerial level, there has been a lack of ability

to internally manage the brand. Thus, it is evident that brand leadership is challenging if the company is not genuinely brand-oriented. On the other hand, these observations underscore the significance of leadership in yet another dimension: despite the acknowledged importance of the brand for the company's success and the essential role of IB in brand management, supervisors have not been actively engaged in increasing the internal perception of the brand value, as reported by employees.

Supervisors were queried about their perception of their role in influencing employees' adherence to the brand and whether the leadership style they implement has an influence. Both supervisors emphasized the role of all company's supervisors in leading and implementing the brand at a practical level through the example they set for the employees. In this regard, both supervisors suggested that the responsibility for the brand does not solely rest on the shoulders of supervisors, as employees also were presented to share the responsibility because all employees represent the same brand. Therefore, brand leadership was proposed to be based on interaction and collaboration with employees, thus making all employees brand leaders. The shared responsibility of brand leadership was also emphasized in the responses of employees, suggesting that internal brand management should be delegated to a specific individual or a team, yet it is ultimately a collective effort involving everyone in the organization. Hence, the distinction between the power, influence, and responsibility of actors seems to be significant: based on the responses, it can be interpreted that the responsibility for the brand and IB activities should be assigned to a designated individual or team, whereas the power and influence over the brand lie with all employees of the company.

Employees placed also significant emphasis on brand leadership in their responses, highlighting instances where the company brand lacked clear ownership or was the responsibility of too many individuals, which resulted in each person leading the brand in their own manner. Supervisors were considered to have an exemplary role in embodying the brand values in practice, as indicated by both supervisors themselves. Nevertheless, based on employees' notions, there doesn't seem to be a designated leader or team responsible for the brand. Consequently, even if another entity could be assigned the responsibility for the brand, issues related to the brand and the absence of internal brand management appear to be attributed to supervisors due to their guiding and responsibility-sharing role within the company. Respondents such as R1 and R2 noted that while the supervisors encourage employees to participate in brand development, concrete actions at the supervisor-level are lacking. R2 proposed that supervisors should be more proactive, engage in interaction, and streamline processes to enhance implementation of IB within the company.

In general, employees wished for greater clarity in shaping processes from their supervisors, along with more responsibility and resources for employees to participate in brand-related efforts. Several employees emphasized the need for better recognition from supervisors for their contributions to brand development. Respondents also highlighted that the company brand and IB efforts need to be considered equally important as client projects, even though the internal brand building may not directly generate financial value for the company.

According to several respondents, the resource aspect emerged as the employees felt they were not provided with sufficient resources for building the company brand compared to billable client projects. Participation in brand-related tasks was often portrayed as unrewarding for employees primarily due to the perceived lack of appreciation for the company brand at the supervisor-level, stemming from inadequate resource allocation for IB efforts. In turn, this resource-based view may also explain why internal brand leadership has been lacking within the company. Consequently, from employees' responses, it can be inferred that engaging in brand building is not perceived as rewarding, and there is insufficient recognition for participation in it within the workplace which ultimately affects employees' motivation to enact brand in-role and extra-role behaviors.

"--in here, time is not spent on it [the brand] and time is not allocated for it. It's so hectic that our own internal work gets sidelined." -R2, employee

"This whole branding thing is really tricky for all of us, and it's just that there's no leadership or clear plan for it, and people aren't given resources or time to do it; it's just supposed to be done on top of everything else. In a way, there is a failure to look ahead and make those choices at this moment. So someday it will show in the business results too." -R3, employee

"-- when people are put on the monetary scale, if you do a lot of internal marketing and brand development, you fall behind in terms of euros compared to others. Then it can mean that perhaps in the eyes of management, you're not a top performer. I find that problematic -- that you're rewarded more for external brands, but if you work with internal brand, it might also be very unrewarding precisely for this reason, that if it's not properly managed, most people won't commit to it. But it should also be led very firmly and perhaps recognized, given value, and it wouldn't always be evaluated in relation to monetary measures." -R4, employee

From these employees' experiences, it can be concluded that both the incomplete tasks and the supervisors' appreciation of the brand also influence employees. Based on supervisors' statements, it is evident that they themselves express enthusiasm and pride, especially regarding the company's upcoming new brand and the efforts made towards it. However, employees' responses indicate that these positive sentiments have not been effectively communicated to them. Therefore, even if the managers consider matters important and aim to encourage employee participation in internal brand management, actions will not occur spontaneously, as illustrated by one of the employees. As highlighted in the literature, for brand-centered HRM systems to function effectively, strong support from the management is crucial (Al-shuaibi et al., 2016; Morthart et al., 2009). Furthermore, managers are the ones who ultimately guide brand-related communication in an organization (Miles & Mangold, 2004) and initiate and facilitate brand co-creation, as the interviewees have suggested in this study. To ensure the realization of all these facets of IB, insights from employees highlight the necessity for enhanced communication, support, and encouragement from

supervisors. Furthermore, there is a call for the refinement of processes and, when needed, the delegation of responsibilities related to brand implementation:

“For example, this current situation, [the brand] doesn’t get implemented until certain people give the green light. It just stands there until then, it doesn’t help to think about it, for instance. My personal desire to advance it, well, it doesn’t matter so much. Or rather, I feel it doesn’t matter. -- It could be different: the task, tasks could be more evenly distributed, so it’s not solely up to a small group to decide whether to move forward and how.” -R8, employee

Thus, as suggested in the literature (see e.g. Morthart et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2013), to enhance internal brand management implementation within the case company, supervisors may benefit from assessing when to enact traits associated with both transformational and transactional leadership styles to facilitate the formation of a strong and cohesive brand culture more effectively within the organization.

4.2.4 Company-Wide Brand Communication

Internal brand communication has been proposed to be one of the key dimensions of internal brand management, (e.g. Du Preez & Bendixen 2015; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005) and the significance of communication was also highlighted in the interviewees’ statements. Based on the insights of the interviewees, it is evident that internal communication emerges as a cross-cutting theme that resonates across other dimensions of IB as well. The observations, challenges, and development suggestions arising from the interviews, whether related to collaborative brand development, brand-related HRM practices or management of people and processes, seem to be strongly linked to communication culture within the company.

The interviewees evaluated the company’s feedback culture at the very beginning of the interviews, as they reflected the role of the employees in the company’s success and the importance of listening to personnel’s wishes within the company. Feedback regarding the brand was perceived perhaps more complex: employees suggested that they might not even know how to provide feedback because of the confusing state of the brand. In addition, there seems to be uncertainty about the feedback’s appropriate recipient, suggesting that employees are unsure who within the company would receive and act upon brand-related feedback. In the context of internal brand communication, there was a suggestion for the establishment of a dedicated forum where the entire workforce could participate in discussions on company brand-related matters. This suggestion stemmed from the experiences of employees who felt that information often remained fragmented or confined to only specific individuals, resulting in a lack of company-wide communication of the brand.

On the other hand, concerning brand feedback, it was noted that past experiences have diminished the motivation to offer feedback on the brand, as there is a perception that such feedback is not handled appropriately. Therefore,

without company-wide communication and concrete actions, it was felt that feedback regarding the brand might not be sufficiently valued. As a suggestion for improvement from employees, it was proposed that feedback should be responded to more concretely. This would make individuals feel valued and heard, as feedback was perceived as an indication of care from the feedback provider. Thus, this sense of caring from the recipient of feedback should similarly be conveyed back to the feedback provider. Another concrete recommendation for enhancing the feedback culture regarding the brand included conducting feedback surveys and collectively reviewing them with the entire staff. According to employees, this could foster internal brand communication and potentially enhance staff engagement in brand development.

Both supervisors emphasized the significant role of internal brand communication in shaping the organization's understanding of the brand and conveying it internally and externally. However, both supervisors expressed that there is currently not as much interaction concerning the company brand as there should be. One of the supervisors strongly emphasized that there are clear areas for improvement in the company's internal brand communication and underscored the need to strengthen the brand-related communication culture. However, both supervisors again acknowledged communication challenges due to the company brand situation, as the new brand cannot yet be launched. On the other hand, neither of the supervisors considered communication regarding the current brand. Hence, it can be interpreted that even at the supervisor level, there might be a sense of resignation regarding the current brand, whereas the upcoming brand is not discussed because it cannot be launched.

The interviewed employees also acknowledge that formal message routes are not currently utilized to guide internal brand communication within the company. On the contrary, there wasn't much perceived hallway conversation related to the brand through informal routes either, as illustrated by R1: "We're waiting for the new brand and don't bother with the old one anymore". Thus, based on employees' comments, there is a lack of enthusiasm related to internal brand, which is why brand-related discussions among employees often revolve around branding work done for clients. Furthermore, several employees expressed that the extended anticipation for the launch of the new brand has led to suspicions and a decrease in motivation, as the waiting period has diminished enthusiasm for brand-related matters. Some employees also mentioned being unaware of the status of the upcoming brand and why it has not yet been launched. In this regard, it was suggested that when there hasn't been any communication regarding the upcoming brand, it may be more challenging to internally manage the new brand once it's finally released.

"There's no clarity on what's happening with it [the new brand] now other than, apparently, according to rumors, it's not progressing in any direction. --Now, of course, over time, it will naturally fade from memory, and then we sort of have to start doing that work again from scratch." **-R1, employee**

“There are various reasons why it [the new brand] is being held back, but in a way, communication about why it is on hold has been forgotten, so then of course people start to wonder if there is something wrong with it.” -R3, employee

“Regarding this brand issue, nothing is communicated about it other than; or like, now when there was this branding competition, only the mandatory things related to it were communicated, but nothing else. And then just how little attention it [the new brand] has received afterwards, it has just been forgotten. So, in a way, we make such a big effort and then it’s not carried through.” -R4, employee

Although there could potentially be more internal discussions about the new brand before its launch, from the perspective of the coherence between internal and external brand communication (see Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004), it is understandable that there is no communication about the upcoming brand, as it cannot be communicated externally. However, all respondents, including both supervisors and employees, unanimously believed that internal brand communication should be highly synchronized with external brand communication. According to supervisor R6, internal and external brand communication should be considered fundamentally the same thing because the brand is primarily an internal matter of the company that is subsequently communicated outward. Building on this idea, both R5 and R8 emphasized that internal brand communication serves as a vital dimension for keeping the brand alive in the company’s daily operations. Consequently, they perceived internal brand communication to be vital in fostering a belief in the brand internally by which the brand could be distributed externally. In other words, according to the respondents, it is essential to keep the brand alive through internal communication, thereby enabling the transmission of the brand promise from within the organization to external stakeholders as well (see e.g. Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Iyer et al., 2018; Piehler, 2018).

4.3 Employee-based Outcomes of Internal Branding

Despite the complexity of the company brand situation as described by the interviewees, it became evident already at the beginning of the interviews that IB should be the primary function of the company’s brand management, as it was perceived that people make the brand. Therefore, employees were requested to reflect more deeply on the individual implications of internal brand management for them as the targets of branding. As there was some dissatisfaction towards the current brand and its management, employees shared their perspectives particularly focusing on how they hoped for the upcoming brand to be internalized and cascaded down to employees. As observed, the responses from employees regarding the company’s current brand consistently indicate that the brand is not well understood, lacks employees’ identification with it, fails to inspire them and consequently, they seem to struggle to engage with the brand mainly because of

brand-related matters are rarely addressed within the workplace. However, employees acknowledged their significant role in the brand's success but they expressed their inability to align with the brand's objectives.

The upcoming brand was not fully understood, although there has been some facilitation of brand understanding due to brand strategy work, it remains the only level at which the brand has been addressed within the company. Concerning the new brand, employees claimed to be familiar with the jointly formulated core values. However, three out of six interviewed employees expressed that, in practice, the company's values only seem to exist as "posters next to the coffee machine". With this notion, it was indicated that the values are sort of visible remainders in the workplace but perhaps the connection of these values to one's work, and the brand is not fully understood. Moreover, respondents indicated that they agreed with the company's values, although they perceived that the daily operations of the organization were not primarily guided by these values. In this regard, multiple employees wished for a more individual-level exploration of the employee-brand relationship, alongside the community-level approach, so that they would be able to make brand-related decisions. This idea aligns with King & Grace's (2009) observation that employees must fully understand the organization's brand and its values, as well as their significance in relation to their roles and responsibilities.

Further referring to King & Grace (2009), although understanding the brand and how employees can individually embody it in their work is a critical foundational phase for acting by the brand promise, it is equally essential for employees to be motivated to communicate the brand's values. Hence, brand understanding alone does not result in action, which again was noticeable in employees' responses. Despite employees' awareness of the brand essence and its upcoming communicative and visual dimensions, there is still some hesitation among certain respondents, particularly regarding the visible aspects of brand identity. For example, a respondent who hadn't developed a connection to the upcoming brand expressed the belief that the currently unfamiliar brand could still be internalized and embraced in the future through improvements in the implementation of IB.

However, employees who participated in shaping the chosen new communicative-visual aspect of the brand, understood and resonated with the upcoming brand identity, as it reflected their original vision for the renewed brand. In this sense, it seems that individuals who have contributed to the construction of brand identity are more capable of identifying with it on a cognitive level, as also suggested by Piehler et al. (2016). Furthermore, as affective brand identification has been proposed to reflect employees' psychological bond to the brand (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), it is therefore perhaps natural that employees who have participated in creating the brand identity find it easier to identify with the brand. Therefore, it can be understood that employees' participation in shaping the brand identity facilitates brand understanding and brand identification, while internal brand management, especially through training and communication, plays a crucial role for those members of the personnel who have not been involved in crafting the brand identity, as highlighted by R8:

“It’s also a special situation, you know, if you’ve thought about it [the brand] yourself more than if someone just handed it to you ready-made, so there’s a different perspective there. In a way, then, if you take that into account, it obviously stand out to others that they have to kind of internalize a brand created by someone else.”

-R8, employee

In the same discourse, R8 stated that they are unable to comment on their commitment to the forthcoming brand as it has not been discussed or implemented in any way. Similarly, both R1 and R4 emphasized the importance of brand commitment throughout the interview, but they did not feel committed to the upcoming company brand mainly because it has not yet been launched. Instead, interviewee R2 mentioned feeling a certain level of commitment to the company as they have been employed by the company since its establishment. Nevertheless, in the respondent’s case, job retention appeared to be more associated with the actual work duties and the years of service rather than the company brand, as the respondent further elaborated that they don’t feel a particularly strong connection to the brand.

Although employees did not feel committed to the current brand, and commitment to the upcoming brand was hindered by a lack of brand understanding and brand identification, in some interviews the connection between brand commitment and attachment to the organization was revealed, which has been suggested to indicate brand loyalty (e.g. Garas et al., 2018; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). For example, as previously indicated by supervisors like R6 and employees such as R3, when the brand is considered appealing and employees are committed to it, it likely affects the employee’s job satisfaction and fosters a desire to engage in collective initiatives within the workplace. In addition, R2 and R8 reflected on the impact of the brand on job retention, suggesting that they perceive the brand and its appreciation within the company as influencing how employees perceive the attractiveness of their workplace and the significance of their roles within the company. Moreover, R4 illustrated that the brand encompasses the employee experience, corporate culture, and its values, suggesting that IB also impacts the intention to stay with the employer.

In terms of job satisfaction and retention, when employees were asked whether they would recommend the company’s services or working at the company to others, there was a consistent pattern in the responses: employees had strong trust in the expertise of the company’s professionals, but internal areas for improvement influenced how willingly they would recommend the services and employment within the company. When employees considered recommending, a recurring theme in their responses was a strong willingness to recommend the expertise of the company’s employees, indicating a high level of trust in individuals’ professional competence within the company. Furthermore, respondents also highlighted the diversity of services provided by the company and its collaboration with the parent company, which are considered strong competitive advantages for the case company. On the other hand, according to several respondents, there is room for improvement in certain service offerings of the company that are primarily related to internal project management issues. The

following excerpt from R8's speech aligns closely with similar viewpoints expressed by other respondents as well:

"We have a lot of highly skilled people here. Maybe it's more about why I wouldn't recommend some services; it's because I don't trust our ability to handle that process so well -- Definitely for certain things I would recommend right away, but then in some things it would scare me a bit. Well, it's not related to the competence of individual people in any way, but it's about the whole thing again, so it comes down to things like time resources, project management; these same things that revolves here, so maybe they are more related to those --I could recommend anyone as a person and a professional to another company." **-R8, employee**

On the contrary, every employee-respondent would recommend the case company as an employer with some reservations. For example, both R1 and R3 emphasized the broader context and intricacies of the advertising agency industry, which they believe should be understood by those to whom the company is recommended as an employer. However, both respondents emphasized the positive aspects of working within the company. For instance, R1 mentioned that their experience of working at the company is less stressful than elsewhere, while R3 highlighted the opportunity to engage in a diverse range of impressive client projects, which they believe would not be possible in many other workplaces. Instead, the rest of the employee respondents were currently hesitant to recommend employment at the case company to others. This uncertainty primarily arises from their perception that there are areas for improvement in the company's onboarding practices, as well as in other internal processes.

In certain interviews, the respondents discussed the concept of being a brand ambassador as the ultimate employee-based outcome of IB. In these discussions, employees were also queried about their perception of themselves as brand ambassadors: each respondent indicated that they do not currently see themselves in that role. However, it can be inferred from the responses that employees would be willing to enact brand-aligned in-role and extra-role behaviors if they would only be motivated to do so. However, respondents approached brand ambassadorship somewhat differently: according to multiple respondents, serving as a brand ambassador was portrayed more as part of the job rather than involving voluntarily conducted brand-promoting activities to external audiences. On the other hand, some employees also associated acting as brand ambassadors with brand-aligned extra-role behaviors. Consequently, each employee was asked according to theory-based brand citizenship behavior about their willingness to act in a brand-compliant way, endorse the brand, and voluntarily participate in brand development, involving both in-role behaviors and extra-role behaviors.

In the academic literature on IB, it has been suggested that brand citizenship behavior is the ultimate employee-based goal of internal brand management which is achieved through enhancing employees' brand understanding, brand identification, and brand commitment (see e.g. Piehler et al., 2016). Similarly, in the responses of the interviewees, the significance of these cognitive and affective responses was emphasized in fostering brand-supportive behaviors. For

example, R5 suggested that commitment to the brand manifests even in small details of personnel's brand-aligned in-role behaviors, such as how employees present themselves to customers during phone calls. Regarding the execution of in-role behaviors, the interviews also revealed other nuances, suggesting that the brand could potentially be promoted more effectively if it were to inspire employees better. However, concerning extra-role brand-supportive behavior, none of the employees seemed to be particularly proud of the current brand, and therefore they weren't eager to voluntarily communicate about the brand to external audiences. Nevertheless, as Piehler (2018) noted, employees' personal variables could moderate their engagement in brand citizenship behaviors. Hence, when employee-respondents were asked about their willingness to contribute to brand development initiatives, three respondents believed that the staff members, themselves included, would be eager to participate in the development of the brand. Based on the responses, it can be interpreted that the eagerness for development may also be related to some extent to their professional expertise. Thus, the willingness to contribute to branding efforts may be somewhat linked to internal motivation stemming from employees' professional inclinations, rather than solely being a consequence of internal brand management practices that translate into brand-related extra-role behaviors.

On the other hand, employees' past experiences with internal brand development also seem to influence their eagerness to engage in brand-related initiatives, as two respondents were not particularly enthusiastic about participating in the development of the company brand. In this regard, one respondent mentioned having expressed willingness to voluntarily take responsibility for internal brand management previously, but the matter was left unaddressed by the supervisors, which again affected their motivation to participate voluntarily in brand-promotive actions. In addition, another respondent also mentioned that based on their experiences, they would prefer not to be involved in any way in the development of the internal brand, but rather focus solely on conducting client projects. The respondent proposed that if there were a greater appreciation for the development of the internal brand work and more resources were allocated to it, they might be more willing to voluntarily engage in internal brand development activities in the future. Hence, while the subjective traits and experiences of employees seem to influence their propensity to engage in brand-related extra-role behaviors to some extent, IB efforts can promote and enhance individuals' motivation to endorse and develop the brand.

4.4 Internally Adapted Brand Value

Throughout the interviews, respondents addressed their relationship with the company brand. Already in the initial stages of the interviews, when respondents were prompted to evaluate the relationship between the employees and the brand, as well as the significance of IB within the company, it became apparent that they were dissatisfied with the brand, its current status and how it has been

managed in the past. Furthermore, as it can be inferred from the interviewees' statements, the current brand has not been actively or effectively cascaded, which, however, may be especially challenging or even impossible when the core of the brand has not been defined. In connection with this, as articulated by R5, achieving a strong brand requires the strategic formulation of a comprehensive and cohesive brand identity which is reflected in brand promise, along with ensuring employee commitment to these:

"-- The most important thing about the brand is its core; that if it's utopic, if there's no chance of it to come true, then nobody believes in it. It has to be understood by everyone one hundred percent, they have to believe in it one hundred percent for it to come true. -- The idea that the brand is something external, that it's some visual graphic guideline tucked away in a folder somewhere, that's not the brand, it's just the visual dimension of the brand. The brand is what we do and who we are. -- If our employees don't commit, believe in our brand, then nobody else will either. In my opinion, it's a very important strategic decision, for example, what promise the brand believes in." -R5, employee

Based on the interviews, it is evident that the company has taken steps towards development in recent years and has begun to focus on its brand, although client projects are often prioritized over the company brand. Therefore, the need for a brand renewal is acknowledged within the company and efforts have been made to pursue business strategies that are aligned with a stronger brand focus. The company has implemented a comprehensive brand strategy initiative involving the entire staff, which has resulted in a proposal for a new brand identity. Although employees also perceived the brand renewal necessary, some responses indicate skepticism towards the upcoming brand as well. On the other hand, these responses indicate that this skepticism may be primarily attributed to the lack of prior implementation of IB within the company, rather than a perception that the brand itself is inherently weak. In the employees' responses, it was emphasized that it would be interesting to see how the brand is cascaded in the future, despite the low expectations based on past experiences. Thus, given the lack of strategic brand management within the company, it is evident that the enthusiasm and confidence of several employees have diminished regarding the internal brand and its management.

The status of the brand seems to be quite challenging for the company which is influenced by several factors. To summarize, supervisors highlighted that the parent-company connection complicates various dimensions of internal brand management within the company, such as the launch of a new brand, brand-aligned recruitment processes, and perspectives related to rewarding. Moreover, based on questions related to strategic business orientation, it is evident that the company's operations are highly market-oriented, although it appears that the company is striving to adapt to more brand-oriented approaches. Instead, the recent shift towards a more brand-oriented mindset appears to be associated, as mentioned by supervisor R7, with the company's acquisition of additional resources and expertise in brand strategy functions and this has facilitated the initiation of strategy-driven branding within the company. However,

based on the employees' responses, it can be interpreted that there might be a mismatch between supervisors' and employees' perceptions of how employees are listened to, supported, and involved in the company's initiatives, such as IB efforts. Understanding that employees are the subjects of managerial practices underscores the importance of considering their overall experiences to refine these practices. It seems that, as discussed in the context of IMO, specific human resource management challenges within the case company are also perceived to impact IB, and these challenges may shed light on why IB has not been successfully implemented in the past.

Furthermore, internal brand challenges were seen to significantly impact customer interactions and how external stakeholders perceive and experience the company brand. Hence, the company's brand situation could also be described as unsustainable, as respondents themselves emphasized the importance of the brand especially within the industry where the company's operations are based on selling the expertise of the employees. Thus, if employees perceive the internal brand differently and subsequently implement it in their own way, a unified image of the company cannot be conveyed among the staff, nor can it be uniformly reflected to customers or other external stakeholders. In this case, each employee of the company represents more of their individual expertise rather than conveying expertise at the brand level. R3 addressed this view in their reflections on a brand commitment by suggesting that while employee commitment to the brand enhances their work experience within the company, the value for clients emerges from the work that is provided for them rather than the brand of the company:

"If there's an appealing brand, then for the employees, in a way, it's easy... it's nice to work under this brand or in this company, but then it's our work that ultimately demonstrates its value to the clients, not the brand." **-R3, employee**

On the other hand, if the work produced within the company were perhaps more strongly based on clearly defined values, meaning the company's operations were value-driven and brand-oriented, then the connection between the brand and the value delivered to customers might be easier to perceive. However, the current situation does not align with this observation, as indicated by R3's further reflection regarding the previous excerpt:

"-- the customer doesn't expect anything based on our brand, but employees make a bigger impression. Probably the latter has been the thing in recent years because not much has been done for our brand, so then it has strongly been in the hands of the employees' expertise what kind of impression customers get of us."

-R3, employee

As suggested in the literature, IBE of an organization is built on the value that employees add to it (King & Grace, 2009; Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). In this regard, in the case company where the brand is observed to mean different things to each employee and thus there is a lack of unified understanding of the internal brand, it may be challenging to achieve high levels of IBE. Furthermore,

the responses from the interviewed employees reveal a lack of trust, understanding, and commitment toward the current brand of the company. Negative experiences arising from the absence of internal brand management seem to also impact attitudes towards the upcoming brand. Based on the dissatisfaction of the employees with the brand, it can be understood that the level of IBE in the case company is low, mostly because of the lack of BO and IB, along with other areas requiring development related to implementing IMO principles in practice. Therefore, when employees do not perceive the brand they represent as strong, this can be understood to result in their brand disengagement, inconsistent brand experiences, reduced advocacy, and decreased willingness to participate in brand incentives.

In summary, several interviewees expressed that the brand is, or at least should be, primarily an internal matter for the company because without the employees, there is no brand. Respondents also highlighted the importance of initiating brand management from within the organization, through which it can then be cascaded externally. Thus, it was suggested that the outcomes of internal branding ultimately reflect on the customer interface, while also influencing the company's potential to establish interesting and valuable partnerships and customer relationships in the future. This perspective aligns with the recommendations of King et al. (2012) and Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010) regarding the development of IBE as a crucial component of overall brand equity, which can ultimately lead to enhanced customer-based brand equity and financial brand equity (King & Grace, 2009). However, based on the interviews, it can be argued that the role of IB is, first and foremost, to cascade the brand internally, and thus increasing and building IBE can be considered the main outcome of IB initiatives. It is also worth mentioning that despite the current absence of an inspiring brand within the case company, interviews indicate a shared desire and intention among supervisors and employees to establish a robust and cohesive brand. Hence, in the case of the company, it remains to be seen how the new brand will be managed in the future and what implications this will have on IBE, or in other words - whether the shoemaker's children will perceive that they have valuable shoes in the future.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The purpose of this thesis was to achieve a comprehensive understanding of internal brand management as part of strategic brand management, with a focus on the organization's most valuable asset, its personnel. As reiterated in several literature sources, the present literature on internal branding (IB) might be informative but lacks consistency, coherence, and comprehensiveness (Piehler et al., 2016). Given the apparent absence of a unified conceptualization of internal brand management, this study aimed to establish a cohesive framework for the concept and its various elements. To achieve such a thorough understanding, the primary research question of the study focuses on exploring the organizational antecedents for the implementation of IB, as well as the processes and outcomes that can be achieved in organizations through effective employee-centric branding initiatives. Based on the literature review of this study, the preliminary conceptual framework is analyzed in light of the empirical findings gathered through conducted interviews. The research findings strongly supported the theoretical constructs within the developed IB framework; however, the results also offered new perspectives and structures, enriching the theoretical understanding. The main research question was divided into three sub-questions, each of which will be discussed in the following sections.

With the first sub-question of the study, the aim was to understand the organizational conditions associated with the adoption and implementation of internal brand management within organizations. As illustrated by Handoyo et al. (2023) and Urde et al. (2013), every business organization possesses unique management practices, which are closely linked to company characteristics such as company size and industry, as well as internally to its culture, resources, and expertise. Nevertheless, in the contemporary rapidly evolving and highly competitive business environment, there has been a growing demand for organizations to adopt and integrate such strategic managerial approaches that prompt a shift towards a mindset centered on brands. By implementing brand-oriented (BO) principles or a hybrid orientation that includes BO approaches, business leaders can thus nurture the development of organizational identity and influence the company's performance. (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018; Hakala, 2011; Iyer et al., 2018; Urde et al., 2013.) Hence, for effective internal management of a company brand, managers should consider the brand as a valuable resource and strategic asset, thus adopting an inside-out perspective that centers on the brand's core identity (Urde et al., 2013).

In turn, for the successful implementation of BO principles, it is emphasized that a company's employees must understand, commit to, and consequently work towards the same strategic goals that are set by the company's management (Iyer et al., 2018; Lings, 2004). Therefore, it is suggested in the literature that Internal Market Orientation (IMO) is an important antecedent for strategic business orientations, including BO, since the success of implemented strategic principles

and organizational operations are significantly dependent on organizations' internal stakeholders (Modi & Sahi, 2018; Lings, 2004). In greater detail, as indicated by Lings (2004), by understanding employees' needs (internal market understanding/research), engaging in open communication (internal communications), and addressing the issues that employees encounter (internal responsiveness), internal aspects of performance can be influenced and enhanced. This, in the context of internal brand management, relates to enhancing employees' perceptions of the brand so that they are able and willing to behave in a brand-aligned way (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Boukis et al., 2017). Hence, in the IB context, IMO is proposed to represent employee-friendly managerial behaviors that have various internal and external consequences for companies through branding strategies that are led by brand-oriented principles. In other words, BO has also been identified as an important antecedent for implementing IB initiatives. This involves emphasizing the brand's significance within the company's operations and, when combined with IMO, aligning employee behaviors with the brand values and identity (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al, 2018; King & Grace, 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

The empirical findings strongly support the theory-led proposition of integrating employee-centric practices and brand-driven activities, which significantly shape the implementation of IB. However, in the case of the studied company, such implementation has been notably lacking. Insights from interviewed supervisors at the marketing agency indicate a recent shift in the company's focus from solely market-oriented strategies to increasingly brand-oriented approaches, likely driven by the acquisition of new skills and internal development processes. This transition is in line with existing literature, which indicates that strategic orientations may evolve over time (Hakala, 2011), often as a result of organizational learning (Handayo et al., 2023). However, integrating the insights of Urde et al. (2013) and Lings (2004), the successful shift in strategic orientation requires the internal adoption of a new or modified mindset, which can currently be interpreted as a challenge for the company.

Although based on the interviews, it can be interpreted that the company could benefit from a stronger emphasis on brand management and that the company's brand significantly influences its success, employees presented two potential reasons why the company's branding efforts are overlooked within the organization. Firstly, they suggested that the company's managers may not fully grasp the significance of the brand for business performance, thus failing to adopt a brand-oriented approach. Alternatively, even if the company's management understands the significance of the brand, insufficient attention has been devoted to branding efforts. According to employees, this is because other matters, such as client projects, have been prioritized over the development of the company brand in the past. Therefore, it can be inferred that the company's strong customer focus, driven by a market-oriented mindset, may have hindered the development of the company brand, which, in turn, directly affects the company's ability to operate in a brand-oriented manner. Additionally, given that the essence of the current brand has not been defined and the ongoing brand renewal is still in progress, effectively managing the brand internally has not been feasible within the company to date.

On the other hand, it can also be inferred from the responses that the challenges experienced by employees, particularly regarding the implementation of IMO principles within the company, appear to contribute to the company's challenging brand situation. Within the case company, there are evident efforts to gather information about the needs and preferences of employees. However, according to the experiences of the interviewed employees, the issues raised by them are not always addressed or met adequately. When considering these employee experiences alongside Ling's (2004) suggestion regarding the construction of IMO, it appears that the managers seek to understand employees' needs through internal market research practices, at least to some extent. This is supported by the prevailing perception among employees that they can openly express their opinions and are also asked for their input on collective work-related matters. However, there appears to be some deficiency in internal communication and responsiveness, which in turn impact employees' satisfaction regarding the brand-related matters. Consequently, this may influence how well employees adopt the shift toward a brand-oriented mindset and the effectiveness of internal branding activities targeted at them.

The second sub-research question of the thesis was designed to provide a more detailed understanding of the concept of internal branding and its underlying components. More precisely, it aimed to articulate what internal brand management signifies as a distinct concept and the diverse processes and activities it entails, considering the absence of a unified, widely accepted definition. Based on an extensive literature review, Internal Branding (IB) or synonymously Internal Brand Management (IBM) has been suggested to be related to the broader concept of corporate branding (Foster et al., 2010; Garas et al., 2018), encompassing processes aimed at internalizing the importance of brands within organizations (Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Urde et al., 2013).

Hence, IB can be understood as comprising various managerial tactics utilized within organizations to ensure that the company's personnel are both capable and willing to embody the company's brand identity through their behavior, not only towards internal stakeholders but also towards external stakeholders, in line with the brand promise (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Foster et al., 2010; Iyer et al., 2018; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016; Garas et al., 2018). The focus of IB is to establish a shared understanding of the desired brand and subsequently motivate employees to embody this image (Garas et al., 2018). This is achieved through the systematic and consistent implementation of various IB practices related to Brand-Centered HRM (including training, recruitment, performance evaluation, and rewarding), Internal Brand Communication, and Brand Leadership dimensions to nurture the employee-brand relationship and effectively implement strategic BO principles within the organization (e.g. Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007).

Based on the conducted case study, the failure to implement IB activities within the case company is primarily attributed to the absence of a cohesive brand identity, and as a result, both internal and external brand management are perceived as challenging. On the other hand, the importance of IB became

increasingly evident as interviewees felt that the company brand they represent had not been effectively or appropriately managed to date. Several respondents referred to IB as “internal cascading of the brand,” by which they meant the methods or practices employed within the organization to help employees internalize the brand, thus enabling them to align their actions with its objectives. To cascade the brand internally, respondents strongly emphasized aspects concerning internal brand communication and brand leadership, along with activities associated with the brand-centered HRM dimension, consistent with existing literature. Moreover, concerning the company’s challenging brand situation, respondents placed greater emphasis on the importance of executing IB strategically, systematically, and with careful planning to achieve a unified understanding of the company brand among all employees. This approach aligns with the recommendations of Iyer et al. (2018) and Punjaisri & Wilson (2007), advocating for continuous efforts to effectively implement IB within organizations.

The insights from the interviewees indicate that leadership plays a crucial role in both managing the brand and leading people, thus linking the two together. However, consistent with Tuominen et al.’s (2016) statement, respondents indicated that ultimately all employees of the company are brand leaders. While managers were seen as responsible for implementing internal brand management, employees have the power and influence to shape how the brand is perceived internally and externally by various stakeholders. On the other hand, employees stressed the necessity for stronger brand leadership among managers, indicating that the absence of a designated brand leader responsible for cascading the brand has hindered the successful implementation of IB within the company. Hence, the role of managers in setting an example and guiding other IB activities was perceived as crucial by respondents within the case company. They viewed brand leadership as tightly intertwined with the facilitation of internal brand communication in the workplace and the implementation of brand-centered HRM activities, especially considering that there is no separate HR department within the small case company. Furthermore, the responses indicate that internal brand communication and brand-centered HRM activities are closely intertwined. Consequently, these three dimensions, identified by respondents as fundamental to internal brand cascading within the workplace, were found to be interconnected. Each dimension and activity within were presented to be closely linked and necessary for effectively cascading the brand internally.

However, contrary to the literature, interviewees emphasized the importance of involving the entire staff in the co-creation of the brand core as an additional dimension. The respondents believed that brand co-creation would initially enhance employees’ understanding of the brand and foster a stronger sense of ownership toward it. In this regard, some of the employee respondents proposed that employees should be given the opportunity to influence the formation of the company’s brand identity. In this way, genuinely enthusiastic and willing employees could contribute to the development process, and in turn, this collaborative effort could encourage and motivate employees, who are not as enthusiastic, to participate in branding efforts from the very beginning. Furthermore, through the co-creation of the brand, employees were suggested to be better equipped to internalize the brand, as they have had the opportunity to

influence the brand formation themselves. Nevertheless, despite the respondents emphasized the significance of collaborative brand creation, the process implemented in the company during the recent brand strategy formulation and brand identity renewal process faced criticism, particularly among employees. Hence, while the collaborative development of the brand core with the entire staff during the brand's formative stages was considered important, employees provided several suggestions based on their experiences regarding how brand ideologies should be constructed with staff involvement.

Designing the brand appearance or redefining brand ideologies were associated with brand genesis, and therefore it can be understood to serve as a dimension that guides the implementation of other IB activities. Based on the insights provided by the interviewees, it appears that activities involving brand leadership, brand communication, and brand-centered HRM should be consistently implemented and maintained as ongoing efforts. In contrast, brand co-creation and subsequent redevelopment seem to be associated with less frequent, need-based brand maintenance and developmental measures. The detachment of the brand co-creation dimension from other IB dimensions is apparent within the case company, particularly evident in employees' somewhat negative attitudes toward the collaborative brand identity renewal process. Hence, it may be more challenging to change these attitudes in the future, even if efforts are made to effectively implement the brand internally. Consequently, the internal cascading of the brand, which involves brand-related leadership, communication, and HRM, becomes crucial once the brand identity is constructed. Together, the practices within these dimensions determine how internal stakeholders within the organization perceive, adopt, and commit to the brand, regardless of their involvement in shaping the brand essence. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the initial phase of brand formation offers many opportunities to foster and reinforce positive employee-based branding outcomes. However, any potential negative experiences among employees during the co-creation processes may require greater efforts from other IB initiatives.

To grasp the potential outcomes of implementing IB activities within organizations, as well as to further understand the challenges associated with internal brand management in practice, the third sub-research question of the thesis sheds light on the significance of IB as a fundamental element of strategic brand management within organizations. As illustrated by the literature and the empirical findings, all employees within an organization ultimately contribute to promoting and building the brand. Therefore, when IB initiatives are implemented to enhance employees' internalization of the formed brand identity and their ability to reflect the brand promise internally and externally, it's essential to understand how brand-centered HRM activities, internal brand communication, and brand leadership impact employees. In the literature, there is a growing recognition that IB serves as a mechanism for shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors, ultimately enhancing brand equity, which is considered the primary objective of IB (e.g. Anees-ur-Rehman & Johnston, 2019; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021; Iyer et al., 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011).

However, viewing brand equity solely as a one-dimensional construct, which focuses mainly on the added value of branding efforts derived from

external stakeholders, such as consumers, mental image of the proposed brand values (see e.g. Kapferer, 2012; Kotler et al., 2010), may not fully capture the success of IB. This is because IB initiatives are directly tied to internal stakeholders, such as employees, rather than external stakeholders. Hence, following the suggestions of King & Grace (2009), Baumgarth & Schmidt (2010), and Biedenbach et al. (2022), it is essential to acknowledge the role of employees in building brand equity. Consequently, the development of internal brand equity (IBE) should be regarded as the initial component of overall brand equity, which can subsequently impact the formation of external brand equity (consumer-based brand equity) and further financial brand equity. In this way, IBE can be understood to emerge from employee-based branding outcomes, which, in turn, are the result of IB practices (see Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; Biedenbach et al., 2022; King & Grace, 2009, 2010). Therefore by implementing IB, the employees' cognitive (brand understanding) and affective (brand identification, brand commitment) processing towards the brand can be enhanced and reinforced (see e.g. Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Chiang et al., 2018; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015, Du Preez et al., 2017; Garas et al., 2018; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009). These cognitive and emotional responses shape employees' conative intention to remain with the employer (brand loyalty), and ultimately, may lead to behaviors that ideally encompass continuous positive in-role and extra-role brand-strengthening actions (brand-citizenship behaviors) (see e.g. Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018; Du Preez et al., 2017; Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; King & Grace, 2010, 2012; Piehler et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011).

Building on insights from the literature, the conducted case study revealed complexities surrounding the company's brand status, highlighting various practical challenges associated with implementing IB in practice. As already illustrated, challenges related to the company's operations and its brand emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews, ultimately manifesting in employees' lack of commitment to or advocacy for the brand. Therefore, the study's third sub-question synthesizes, particularly drawing from empirical insights, the challenges and consequently missed opportunities within the case company concerning the development of IBE through employees' attitudes and behavior. The challenges primarily arise from the perceptions of the interviewed employees, suggesting inadequate or insufficient investment in internal brand management within the company. The responses indicate that the lack of attention to IB within the case company is mainly a result of the company's organizational structure and various managerial challenges. More specifically, it was stated that the requirements from the parent company were somewhat complicating the management of the company brand, whereas according to interviewed employees, the lack of strategic brand management within the company is more related to management-level issues regarding the valuation of the brand; that is, how resources are allocated to branding efforts and how internal processes are managed. Based on the employees perspectives, there appears to be room for improvement, particularly in the prevailing feedback and communication culture, management and organization of work, and the allocation of resources within the company. These aspects

collectively impact the implementation of brand management and employees' experiences with these efforts.

However, it is noteworthy that the employee-based branding outcomes outlined in the literature (brand understanding, brand identification, brand commitment, brand loyalty, and brand citizenship behaviors) were similarly validated in the responses of the interviewees, indicating the potential impacts that could be realized if the brand were effectively managed within the case company. Despite the challenges, respondents emphasized that the brand should be primarily an internal matter, as people in organizations make the brand. Based on the respondents' experiences, it can be inferred that by organizing and guiding IB efforts in a more employee-centric manner, such initiatives can significantly impact employees' motivation to promote the brand. In turn, positive brand attitudes and brand-aligned behavior among employees enhance IBE, which is suggested to be reflected in customer interactions, potentially influencing the profitability of the customer relationships the company may establish in the future. This notion underscores the role of IB in fostering IBE, which in turn may have a significant impact on the development of external brand equity (customer-based brand equity) and financial brand equity (see e.g. Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010; King & Grace, 2009, 2010; King et al., 2012).

In conclusion, the findings regarding the challenging brand situation of the case company provided additional support for the foundational structures of the preliminary conceptual framework derived from the existing literature, while providing deeper insights into the proposed dimensions of the IB framework and their interconnectedness. Conversely, while the examined case company may not serve as a role model for internal brand management, and thus best practices cannot be identified from the company's previous initiatives to manage its brand, the conducted research nonetheless provided new insights from experienced marketing professionals about the significance of IB within the organizational context. By integrating theoretical propositions with empirical findings, the preliminary framework of the thesis was enriched, particularly in terms of how and why IB should be implemented and what key practices it entails. Therefore, it is necessary to refine the theory-built preliminary conceptual framework for IB in light of empirical findings. The perspectives of supervisors and operational employees working in the case company are included in Figure 5, which illustrates the revised framework of the thesis in visual form.

Based on the findings of this study, internal brand management relies on an organizational foundation that recognizes the brand's strategic importance to company operations (BO) and fosters a culture valuing and encouraging employee input and participation (IMO). Following these managerial philosophies facilitates the implementation of internal branding (IB). Conversely, without IB, successfully implementing a brand-oriented strategy becomes challenging, as employees lack clarity on how to embody the brand. Hence, it is proposed that the initial IB effort is to define the brand essence to nurture a collective brand identity that resonates with all employees, ideally involving the entire staff in the process. In particular, participation in brand co-creation may strengthen employees' cognitive (brand understanding) and affective (brand identification) responses to the brand from the very beginning of the brand formation. However,

once the brand identity is established, systematic and continuous internal cascading of the brand through various brand-centered HRM, internal brand communication, and brand leadership-related efforts are necessary to facilitate employees' cognitive (brand understanding), affective (brand identification, brand commitment), and conative (brand loyalty) responses. This enhances employees' ability and willingness to promote the brand internally and externally through brand-aligned in-role and extra-role behaviors (brand citizenship behavior). These employees' responses to IB initiatives reflect the internal perception of brand value and strength, essentially indicating the level of internal brand equity (IBE) within a company. Ultimately, IBE extends beyond the boundaries of an organization through employee behavior, potentially enhancing both external brand equity and financial brand equity. Together with IBE, these elements collectively form the dimension of brand equity, which reflects the measure of a company's overall brand value and strength within its market.

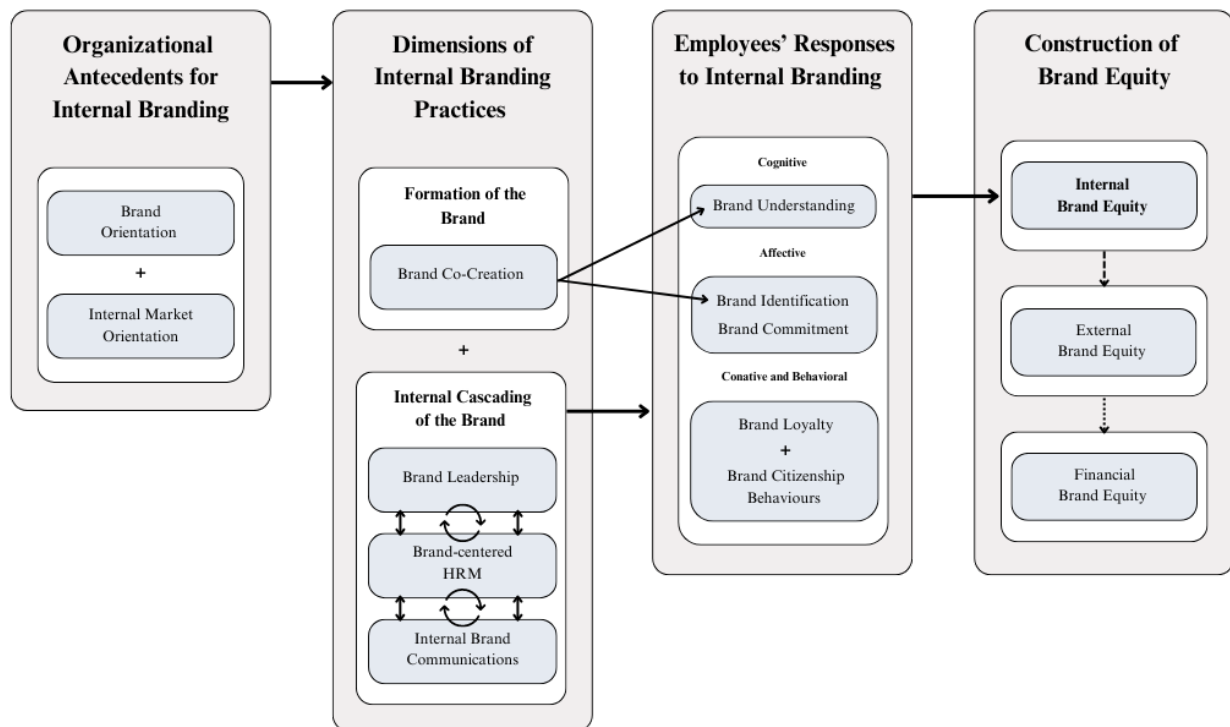


Figure 5. Revised Conceptual Framework

5.2 Managerial Implications

Integrating IB practices into organizational strategies can result in significant benefits across various dimensions of business operations. This chapter highlights several managerial implications derived from the insights gathered in this study, providing guidance for practitioners seeking to enhance the internal brand equity, while also considering external perspectives.

As suggested in this study, through internal brand management, the aim is to strengthen a company's brand from within, with its internally perceived value (internal brand equity) extending beyond the company through employee interactions. Hence, it is essential to integrate the internal dimension into brand management strategies, as internal branding should also complement external branding efforts. Moreover, the internal perception of the brand's value alone can significantly impact a company's reputation and its relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, organizations should acknowledge internal brand management as a strategic, company-wide initiative driven by brand-centric business orientation, following the inside-out principle. Fundamentally, managing the brand internally requires approaches that are rooted in the essence of the brand, encompassing its purpose, core values, mission, and vision, which should also guide business operations in alignment with the demands of a company's business environment. Even if a company adopts a hybrid orientation, where brand orientation is balanced with another business orientation, the core principles of the brand should still steer processes and decision-making to such an extent that the company's operations remain aligned with its values and brand identity. This is crucial for maintaining brand consistency and facilitating effective internal branding practices because without a unified brand identity, the brand experience may vary among staff members. This, in turn, may lead to such internal brand conflicts that hinder staff commitment to the brand and the achievement of common goals.

In addition to embracing brand-oriented principles and leveraging the brand as a strategic asset, effective internal brand management requires fostering a supportive workplace atmosphere that encourages employees to embody and reflect the brand. Therefore, to ensure that employees feel they have a meaningful role in achieving brand objectives, managers should foster a culture where employees are genuinely valued, involved in decision-making, and their suggestions for development are not only heard but also acted upon. For instance, conducting employee satisfaction surveys and engaging in one-on-one performance reviews offer valuable opportunities for managers to gain insights into the organizational atmosphere as well as employees' skills and motivation in translating brand ideologies into practice. Furthermore, by fostering an open communication culture, employees are kept informed about collective matters, while also encouraging them to participate in shaping the work environment, shared processes, and consequently, brand development. Hence, implementing such internal market-oriented principles may not only enhance internal brand equity, but also improve and support overall employee well-being. This, in turn, may significantly influence organizational efficiency, productivity and long-term success.

As indicated, in organizations where processes are driven by brand-oriented approaches and the role of employees as conveyors of brand value is acknowledged, the implementation of internal branding is likely to be more effective when these cross-cutting organizational philosophies are genuinely realized in practice. Supporting employees' participation in co-creating and managing the brand through diverse processes is essential for improving employees' perceptions and attitudes towards the brand, as ultimately, every employee serves as a brand leader through their actions. However, successful internal brand management depends on effective brand leadership from company managers and executives. These leadership traits involve translating brand values into action by providing direction, guiding brand activities, and empowering all staff members to promote the brand. For example, engaging employees in shaping brand ideologies, particularly during brand renewals, can nurture employees' brand awareness and identification with the brand through collaborative development processes. On the other hand, to foster a thorough understanding of the brand and its fundamental principles among employees, organizations should implement a variety of brand-centric internal communication and HRM initiatives under the guidance of inspirational brand leaders. These initiatives, ranging from regular meetings and targeted training sessions to workshops, recruitment procedures, and onboarding processes, can be further enriched by the creation of detailed brand manuals and additional informative materials such as internal bulletins, newsletters, and corporate websites.

In conclusion, there are various ways to implement internal brand management in practice, while the most suitable approaches often depend on the unique characteristics of an organization. Nevertheless, this study highlights the core principles for effective internal brand management that should remain consistent across organizations: it is essential to value and lead, listen and communicate, and involve and co-create the brand with employees through systematic and continuous internal branding efforts. Such initiatives nurture a culture in which the brand is not just understood but also embraced and embodied by every member of the organization, thereby reflecting significant levels of internal brand equity to other stakeholders.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this qualitative study provided valuable insights into internal brand management from the perspective of supervisors and employees within a single case company, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative research approach chosen for this study aimed to provide an analytical understanding of the significance of internal brand management by solely focusing on the perspectives of the personnel within a marketing agency. Hence, although the conducted study offered validation and new insights into the initial theory-based IB framework, broad generalizations cannot be made from this qualitative research data. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the data collection for this study was limited to a short timeframe. Considering the potential variability in the effects of internal brand management over time, future research could explore the topic further through longitudinal studies to gain a deeper understanding of how these effects evolve and unfold over the long term.

With the insights gained from this thesis, exploring the research themes with a larger dataset could potentially yield different conclusions or reinforce the findings of this study. For example, the developed framework for IB could be quantitatively examined across organizations of different sizes and industries. On the other hand, it would be beneficial also to further explore the practical challenges of IB within organizations, as this study was among the first to effectively illustrate the practical challenges and barriers to the implementation of internal branding. Moreover, it's worth considering that the case company operates within a Western context, whereas the interpretation and application of the IB framework may vary across different cultures. Hence, cultural characteristics may influence management practices and interpersonal relationships within a workplace, thereby affecting how the brand is managed within an organization.

Although this study focuses on the perspectives of internal stakeholders, specifically the supervisors and employees of the case company, it is important to recognize the potential for broader internal stakeholder involvement in the context of IB. Therefore, future investigations could explore also how IB impacts a wider spectrum of internal stakeholders, such as company owners, top and middle management and board members. Alternatively, concerning the investigated case company, potential research topics could include the dynamics between the parent company brand and its subsidiary brands, along with the specific challenges and opportunities in managing these brands, both internally and externally. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that this study addresses external brand equity merely as an outcome of internal branding efforts. For this reason, it would be intriguing to compare a company's internal brand management with its external branding efforts and analyze how the perspectives of internal and external stakeholders on the brand relate to each other. Furthermore, it would be valuable to conduct additional research on how internal brand equity may influence financial performance metrics, as previous research has indicated that internal branding may indirectly correlate with financial outcomes, such as turnover and profitability growth (see e.g. Tuominen et al., 2016).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Initial Interview Framework for Supervisors (translated into English)

Background questions:

- Can the interview be recorded?
- May direct quotations be used?
- What is your current role within the company, and how long have you been in this position?
- Do you participate in the branding efforts internally/externally for clients? How?

Strategic Business Orientation

1. What type of strategic business orientation is implemented within the company?

Internal Market Orientation:

2. In general: What impact can employee-inclusive practices have internally?
3. How do you perceive the role of personnel in the operations of the company you represent?
4. Are the employees involved in decision-making within the company?

Brand Orientation:

5. Do you believe that the brand of the company you represent significantly contributes to its success? Please provide further explanation.
6. Are decisions related to the brand important strategic priorities for the company?
7. Do the core values and principles of the brand influence operations and decision-making within the company?

Internal Branding:

8. In general: How would you define internal branding/internal brand management?
 - a. Do you believe that the actions of the employees influence the company's brand? Please elaborate.
 - b. Do you think the brand holds importance for the employees of the company? Please provide rationale.
9. Are the company's management invested in nurturing the relationship between the employees and the brand?
10. Is internal branding implemented within the company? If so, how and in what ways internal branding is implemented?
 - a. How frequently internal branding activities are/should be implemented?

Brand-centered HRM activities:

11. Has the company invested in employee training and development from the perspective of its brand? (Have there been formal collective events where brand-related matters are discussed, and do you believe these have been sufficient?)
12. Do you feel that the company brand should be considered during the recruitment process, personnel selection, and at the beginning of new employees' careers?
13. Do you think it would be important to monitor, measure, and evaluate whether employees are acting in line with the company's brand?
14. Do you consider rewards (both informal and formal) as significant factors in encouraging employees' brand-aligned behavior?
 - a. Do you think evaluation and rewards can motivate employees to engage in branding efforts?
 - b. Is there a reward system that supports and reinforces the brand?

Brand Leadership:

15. As a supervisor, do you believe that the way you lead influences employees to act in line with the brand? How?
 - a. Do you believe that your own actions impact how employees adopt the brand?
 - b. How much have you personally contributed to or supported the development of internal branding in the company you represent?
 - c. In your opinion, who is responsible for brand management within the organization?
 - d. How would you evaluate your relationship with the brand. How do you perceive it?

Internal Brand Communication:

16. Do you consider internal brand-related communication important?
17. What is the prevailing communication culture within the company regarding the brand?
 - a. b. How actively and in what ways do you communicate about the brand or related matters to the employees?
 - b. In your opinion, what can be achieved through internal brand communication (among the employees)?
18. Do you believe that internal brand communication should align with external brand communication?

Outcomes of Internal Branding/Internal Brand Equity:

19. What do you believe is the primary objective of internal branding?
 - a. What outcomes are expected to be achieved through internal branding initiatives? (concerning employees)
20. How significant do you believe internal branding is for the overall success of the company?
21. Do the effects of internal branding also reflect externally on the brand or other business achievements? (Does internal branding influence external brand perceptions?)

Do you have any further thoughts or comments to share?

Appendix 2. Initial Interview Framework for Employees (translated into English)

Background questions:

- Can the interview be recorded?
- May direct quotations be used?
- What is your current role within the company, and how long have you been in this position?
- Do you participate in the branding efforts internally/externally for clients? How?

Internal Market Orientation:

1. What do you believe can be achieved by prioritizing and addressing the opinions and needs of the employees within organizations?
2. How would you evaluate the focus on employee-centric approaches within the company you represent? / Are the employee-centric practices emphasized in the company you represent?
 - a. Do you think the company adequately responds to the needs and desires of its employees? Why or why not?
 - b. Are employees involved in decision-making processes within the company you represent?
3. What qualities or actions do you believe are required from company's leaders in order to better address/meet the needs of employees?

Brand Orientation:

4. How do you perceive the role of the company brand in its overall business strategy?
5. In your opinion, what objectives does the company seek to achieve with its brand?
6. Do you consider the brand represented by the company to be crucial for its operations/success? Please justify.

Internal Branding:

7. How would you define internal branding/internal brand management?
 - a. What do you consider the most important factors in successful internal branding?
8. Is internal branding implemented in the company you represent? If so, how?
 - a. Is there support for employee involvement in developing and maintaining the brand? If yes, in what ways?
 - b. If any, what brand management practices have been implemented in the company you represent during your career?
9. Do you feel that there have been enough branding activities targeted at employees? Please elaborate.

Brand-centered HRM:

10. Do you feel that there is sufficient training opportunities, programs, or events related to the brand?

11. Did you feel that early in your career, you had a clear understanding of what the company brand represented? (including its mission, vision, values)
12. Do you believe that in the recruitment processes, personnel selection, and early stages of careers in the company, the brand values are adequately taken into account? (person-brand fit)
13. Has there been any assessments or measurements of employees' performance in relation to the brand? If not, do you think there should be?
14. Have you received any recognition for your potential contributions to the brand?
 - a. Did the recognition affect your motivation/behavior? If so, how? If not, would it?

Brand Leadership:

15. Do you perceive the way supervisors lead to have a significant impact on how you perceive the company brand? / Does the company's leadership culture support the internalization of brand values?
 - a. In your opinion, how the brand leadership could be enhanced at the supervisor level?
16. Do you feel that employees are actively encouraged to participate in brand development and other brand-related activities?
17. Do you feel that the supervisors support employees' participation in the branding efforts?
18. Do you feel that brand management is the responsibility of an assigned individual or team?

Internal Brand Communication:

19. How actively and in what ways does the company communicate or convey messages about the brand or related matters?
 - a. How is brand communication implemented in your workplace and through which channels? Is the communication sufficient?
20. Do you feel that the internally communicated brand aligns with external brand communication?
21. Do you feel that you can provide feedback on the company's brand strategy or its practical implementation?

Employee-based Brand Outcomes:

22. In your opinion, what impact do various internal branding activities have on employees? (attitudes and behaviors)
23. How often and in what ways do you think internal branding activities should be implemented?

Brand Understanding:

24. How well would you assess your understanding of the brand identity of the company you represent?
25. Do you feel that your actions have an impact on the success of the company's brand?

Brand Identification:

26. Do the brand values reflect your own values? Is it important to you?
27. How strongly do you feel being part of the company's brand?

Brand Commitment:

28. Do you personally believe that the success of the brand is also your own success?
29. Do you view the company brand in a positive light? Does it inspire you/are you proud of it?
30. How would you assess your level of commitment to the brand?
 - a. How could this commitment be strengthened?

Brand Loyalty/Brand Citizenship Behaviors:

31. Would you recommend the company's services or employment at the company to others? Why or why not?
 - a. Does the company's brand influence your decision to remain with the same employer?
32. Do you actively participate in building and enhancing the company brand within the organization?
33. Do you speak positively about the company brand to others?
34. Would you be willing to voluntarily participate in brand development efforts?
 - a. a. How would you assess the willingness of other employees to participate in brand development?
 - b. b. (Do you see yourself as acting as a brand ambassador?)

Do you have any further thoughts or comments to share?