INTERNAL BRANDING AND BRAND CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOUR: DOES TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP TURN EMPLOYEES INTO BRAND AMBASSADORS?

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Abstract

Employees play a critical role in translating brand promises into consistent customer experiences. However, communicating brand values internally does not necessarily ensure that employees voluntarily demonstrate and promote those values in their everyday work. This paper examines the relationship between internal branding, transformational leadership, and brand citizenship behaviour, focusing on the organizational and psychological mechanisms through which employees may become credible representatives of their organizations' brands. Drawing on social learning theory, organizational identification, and internal brand management research, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking internal brand communication, transformational leadership, employee brand understanding, brand commitment, and brand citizenship behaviour. Existing empirical evidence suggests that internal brand management contributes to employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour, while transformational leadership can strengthen the relationship between internal branding and employees' commitment to the brand. A meta-analysis of 38 studies further identifies brand understanding and brand-oriented leadership as important factors in explaining brand citizenship behaviour. The paper argues that employees become credible brand ambassadors not simply through formal communication or promotional incentives, but through a combination of clear brand values, consistent leadership behaviour, organizational trust, and employee commitment. The proposed framework offers practical implications for organizations seeking to strengthen internal branding and develop sustainable brand relationships with customers.

Keywords: internal branding, transformational leadership, brand citizenship behaviour, employee brand commitment, brand understanding, brand ambassadors, brand management.

1. Introduction

In contemporary markets, a brand is shaped not only by advertising, visual identity, or external communication but also by the behaviour of employees who interact with customers and represent the organization in everyday business activities. Employees influence how organizational promises are experienced, interpreted, and evaluated by customers. Consequently, internal branding has become an important component of strategic brand management.

Internal branding refers to organizational activities designed to help employees understand, accept, and consistently demonstrate brand values. These activities may include internal brand communication, training, leadership practices, employee participation, and the integration of brand values into human resource management.

Brand citizenship behaviour (BCB) refers to discretionary employee behaviour that supports a brand beyond the minimum requirements of formal job responsibilities. It may include voluntarily helping

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colleagues deliver the brand promise, taking initiative to improve customer experiences, and consistently demonstrating brand values in interactions with stakeholders. Burmann and Zeplin [1] established an important theoretical foundation for understanding brand citizenship behaviour as the behavioural expression of employees' commitment to the brand.

However, internal branding does not automatically transform employees into brand ambassadors. Employees may understand the brand's stated values without identifying with them or feeling motivated to demonstrate them. This distinction raises an important managerial question: **Does transformational leadership strengthen the ability of internal branding to generate employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour?**

Afshardoost, Eshaghi, and Bowden [2] addressed the relationships between internal brand management, brand understanding, employee brand commitment, and brand citizenship behaviour through a meta-analysis of 38 studies. Their findings identified internal brand management as an important predictor of employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour. Brand communication was particularly important for commitment, while brand-oriented leadership demonstrated the strongest influence among the examined internal brand management dimensions on brand citizenship behaviour.

Furthermore, empirical research in the Indian telecommunications sector found that transformational leadership strengthened the relationship between internal branding and employee brand commitment [3]. These findings suggest that leadership can play a significant role in translating internal branding initiatives into employee attitudes and behaviours.

The aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework explaining how transformational leadership may strengthen the relationship between internal branding and brand citizenship behaviour through employee brand understanding, organizational trust, and brand commitment.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual literature-review approach. It synthesizes established theoretical contributions and empirical research on internal branding, transformational leadership, employee brand commitment, and brand citizenship behaviour.

The literature selection prioritizes studies that directly examine relationships between the principal constructs, including a meta-analysis of internal brand management research, empirical research on transformational leadership and employee brand commitment, and studies investigating the role of trust and commitment in brand citizenship behaviour.

The analysis identifies the principal constructs, compares their proposed relationships, and develops a conceptual framework for future empirical investigation.

No new survey, interviews, or organizational observations were conducted. Therefore, the framework and propositions presented below are theoretically grounded expectations rather than original empirical findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Internal branding as the foundation of employee brand behaviour

Internal branding aims to establish consistency between the brand's external promise and employees' understanding of their organizational responsibilities. Its effectiveness depends on whether employees understand what the brand represents and how its values should be reflected in their behaviour.

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Burmann and Zeplin [1] distinguish brand commitment from brand citizenship behaviour, explaining how employees' psychological attachment to the brand can support discretionary brand-related actions. This distinction is important because commitment represents an employee's relationship with the brand, whereas citizenship behaviour reflects how that relationship becomes visible through workplace actions.

Afshardoost et al. [2] provide further evidence through their meta-analysis, demonstrating that internal brand management is associated with both employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour. Their findings also highlight the importance of brand understanding, indicating that employees' knowledge of brand values is an important element of successful internal brand management.

Accordingly, effective internal branding should not be reduced to distributing mission statements or conducting occasional training sessions. It should help employees understand the brand's meaning, recognize its relevance to their responsibilities, and apply its values consistently in customer-facing and internal activities.

3.2. Transformational leadership as a connecting mechanism

Transformational leadership emphasizes communicating a compelling vision, demonstrating desired values, encouraging innovative thinking, and supporting employees' development. Within internal branding, these characteristics may help managers transform brand values from formal organizational statements into meaningful behavioural expectations.

Leaders influence internal branding through several mechanisms.

First, **role modelling** allows employees to observe whether managers behave consistently with the brand's stated values. Second, **inspirational motivation** helps employees understand how their work contributes to the organization's identity and objectives. Third, **intellectual stimulation** encourages employees to identify new ways of improving customer experiences while maintaining brand consistency. Finally, **individualized consideration** enables leaders to address employees' development needs and strengthen their capacity to represent the brand effectively.

The empirical study by Terglav, Ruzzier, and Kaše [3] examined internal branding, employee brand commitment, and the moderating role of transformational leadership in the Indian telecommunications sector. Its findings suggest that internal branding is more strongly associated with employee brand commitment when supported by transformational leadership.

This evidence supports the argument that leadership may function as an enabling mechanism. However, stronger commitment should not automatically be interpreted as proof that employees will exhibit every form of brand citizenship behaviour. The relationship between attitudes and discretionary behaviour remains an important question for further research.

3.3. Brand understanding, trust, and commitment

Employees are more likely to represent a brand consistently when they understand its values, trust the organization's intentions, and perceive its practices as credible.

Brand understanding provides cognitive clarity: employees know what the brand stands for and how its promise relates to their work. Trust concerns the credibility and consistency of organizational commitments. Brand commitment reflects employees' willingness to maintain a meaningful relationship with the brand.

Research by Aljarah and Bayram [4], based on data from 377 hotel employees in North Cyprus, found a positive relationship between internal branding and brand citizenship behaviour. Their study

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identified brand trust and brand commitment as sequential mediating mechanisms and organizational climate as a moderating factor.

These findings suggest that employees may respond to internal branding not merely because they have received information, but because they trust the brand and become psychologically committed to it.

For managers, the implication is that internal brand communication should be consistent with actual organizational practices. If a company promotes customer care but fails to support employees in resolving customer problems, the credibility of its brand promise may weaken. Conversely, consistent leadership behaviour and appropriate organizational support may help employees internalize brand values.

3.4. From employee commitment to brand ambassadorship

The concept of a brand ambassador is often used broadly to describe employees who represent an organization positively. In an academic context, however, it is important to distinguish formal brand promotion from brand citizenship behaviour.

Employees may comply with prescribed brand standards because their job requires it. Brand citizenship behaviour extends beyond basic compliance by involving discretionary actions that support the brand.

Qureshi et al. [5] examined internal brand management, employee brand commitment, brand citizenship behaviour, and sustainable competitive advantage using survey data from 390 frontline employees in Pakistani hotels. Their findings indicated positive relationships among these constructs and identified mediating roles for brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour in the relationship between internal brand management and sustainable competitive advantage.

This evidence supports the potential strategic value of employee brand citizenship behaviour. Employees who understand and identify with the brand may be more willing to support colleagues, take initiative in customer interactions, and contribute to consistent brand experiences.

Nevertheless, employees should not be expected to promote the brand through unsupported claims or to perform additional promotional work without appropriate support. Credible brand ambassadorship depends on the alignment between organizational values, employee experience, and the promises communicated to customers.

3.5. Proposed conceptual framework

Based on the reviewed literature, this paper proposes the following framework:

Internal branding → Employee brand understanding → Brand trust and brand commitment → Brand citizenship behaviour

Transformational leadership is proposed to strengthen the relationship between internal branding and employee brand commitment, while a supportive organizational climate may help employees translate commitment into discretionary brand-supporting behaviour.

The framework highlights the distinction between communicating a brand and enabling employees to live its values. It also suggests that leadership effectiveness should be assessed not only through employee awareness of brand messages but also through the credibility of organizational practices and the consistency of employee behaviour.

The following propositions are proposed for future empirical testing:

P1: Internal branding is positively associated with employee brand understanding.

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P2: Transformational leadership strengthens the positive relationship between internal branding and employee brand commitment.

P3: Employee brand commitment is positively associated with brand citizenship behaviour.

P4: Brand trust and brand commitment help explain the relationship between internal branding and brand citizenship behaviour.

P5: A supportive organizational climate strengthens the relationship between employee brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour.

These propositions are not presented as statistically verified results of the current paper. They provide a basis for future survey-based research using data from employees and managers in different industries.

4. Conclusion

Internal branding can contribute to stronger brand relationships when employees understand organizational values and are supported in translating them into everyday behaviour. However, communication alone is unlikely to ensure that employees become credible brand ambassadors.

The reviewed literature indicates that transformational leadership can strengthen internal branding by demonstrating brand values, communicating a clear vision, and supporting employee commitment. Brand understanding, organizational trust, and brand commitment provide additional mechanisms through which internal branding may contribute to brand citizenship behaviour.

The principal contribution of this paper is a conceptual framework that connects internal branding with brand citizenship behaviour through employee understanding, trust, and commitment, while recognizing transformational leadership as a potentially important enabling factor.

For organizations, the managerial implication is to integrate internal branding into leadership development, employee training, organizational communication, and workplace practices. Rather than relying exclusively on promotional campaigns, managers should ensure that employees experience the brand's values in the way the organization is led and managed.

Future empirical research should test the proposed framework across industries and organizational contexts. Such research could clarify when transformational leadership strengthens internal branding and how employee brand commitment translates into voluntary brand-supporting behaviour.

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