Internal Branding – In search of a new paradigm: Guest editorial

Internal Branding has come a long way in being accepted as one of the building blocks of the brand management academic domain. When the first scholarly papers around the topic of internal marketing and internal brand anchorage were published (Greene *et al.*, 1994; Richardson and Robinson, 1986; Wasmer and Bruner, 1991), not a few of the established researchers critically assessed this new stream of research (Lings and Brooks, 1998), as being mainly anecdotal, practice-oriented and highly qualitative. They also criticized its lack of sufficient demarcation from disciplines, such as human resource management or psychology (Rafiq and Ahmed, 1993). But those times have long gone.

Internal Branding today is an established subdiscipline of brand management, and studies show how Internal Branding positively affects brand performance (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Iyer *et al.*, 2018; Tuominen *et al.*, 2016). Although many drivers have contributed to the growing relevance and reputation of Internal Branding, two are key. First, service industries have come to dominate in developed economies, which gives emphasis to the key role employees play in defining brand experience in the many touchpoints in customer–brand relationships (Gronroos, 2006; Iglesias and Saleem, 2015). Second, the emergence of the internet and social media have created a hyperconnected and transparent world and exponentially increased the number of touchpoints where employees, customers and other stakeholders can interact and contribute to a brand's meaning (Vallaster and Von Wallpach, 2013). This raises opportunities for brands to establish new communication channels between employees and customers and drive brand equity (Baumgarth and Schmidt, 2010; Burmann Jost-Benz *et al.*, 2009). However, at the same time, it also creates significant challenges. Employees, in the way they behave and communicate, can enrich the brand, but the amplifying effect of social media can also undermine the intended brand meaning (Ind and Schmidt, 2019).

Demarcating the field of internal branding

Over the past two decades, Internal Branding has developed into a hot topic among managers (Piehler *et al.*, 2018), while also gaining increased attention among the research community (Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali, 2021). This has spurred more theory-driven, quantitative and focused academic research, allowing internal branding to gain

greater theoretical robustness. Some works have focused on conceptualizing the internal branding phenomenon and demarcating it from other relevant research domains, such as internal marketing and employer branding (Foster *et al.*, 2010; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016).

Other authors have explored how to conceptualize some psychological constructs which could play a key role in internal branding, such as brand identification, brand commitment and brand behaviour (Piehler *et al.*, 2016; Punjaisri Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2009; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). In parallel, scholars have also studied other dimensions of internal branding, such as brand leadership, internal communication and brand-centred human resource management (Burmann Zeplin *et al.*, 2009). The systematic literature review of Saleem and Iglesias (2016, added to the previous building blocks of Internal Branding, by arguing for the relevance of brand ideologies (a brand's vision, mission, values, etc.) and the management of internal brand communities. By doing so, they developed an integrated framework of Internal Branding within a supportive corporate culture and described the role of internal branding in facilitating brand value co-creation between internal and external stakeholders.

Another stream of literature has focused on analyzing the contribution of internal brand management activities on external brand perceptions and on the brand equity building process (Gelb and Rangarajan, 2014). Last but not least, authors have also used case studies to describe specific practices or environments of internal brand management (Bergstrom *et al.*, 2002; Gapp and Merrilees, 2006; Hesse *et al.*, 2020; Punjaisri Wilson *et al.*, 2009; Schmidt and Baumgarth, 2018).

Challenging basic assumptions of internal branding

Research on internal branding has flourished in the past two decades and the field has gained legitimacy. However, the world is changing rapidly and the academic field of Internal Branding also needs to evolve to maintain its relevance for managerial practice (Ind *et al.*, 2017; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). As editors of this Special Issue, we see at least three central developments that challenge some of the most important basic assumptions of the discipline: First and maybe most relevant, brand management has moved from a more inside-out perspective where closed groups within the company define a brand's identity, to a more balanced and co-creative one (da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Vallaster and Von Wallpach, 2013). Brands are no longer solely created by brand managers and experts within the company. This implies that brand management needs to develop new governance models (Hatch and Schultz, 2010), where the role of managers should no longer be to safeguard the purity of the brand, but instead to facilitate conversations among a wide network of stakeholders (Michel, 2017) who should jointly and organically elucidate brand meanings (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). This view challenges the traditional perspective on Internal Branding and emphasizes the need for a new

approach grounded in empowerment, participation and co-creation.

Second, with Generation Z entering the corporate world (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021), expectations toward employer brands and corporate cultures have changed (Ozkan and Solmaz, 2015). A new type of employee is heading for corporate offices (Özçelik, 2015). They are experienced and clever consumers, distrust brands (Gutfreund, 2016) and their loyalty to brands, retailers and employers is weaker than previous generations though their expectations are high (Priporas *et al.*, 2017). They are highly achievement-oriented (Schroth, 2019) while at the same time they are also less focused on a career within traditional hierarchies. Respect (Schroth, 2019), flexibility and work-life balance (Chillakuri, 2020) are increasingly important for them, and they demand that brands have a purpose and take a stand on controversial social and political issues (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021). Generation Z employees also demand higher levels of engagement with their employer which goes beyond the transactional (based on an economic exchange, i.e. salary). Instead, they demand a relational type of engagement that builds a meaningful relationship with their employer (Francis and Hoefel, 2018) and enables them through their work to feel they can contribute to the betterment of society and the world. This demands that brands combine purpose and profits (McColl *et al.*, 2021) and that employers find ways to engage their employees in the co-creation of the strategic priorities of the brand (Iglesias and Ind, 2020).

Third, the Covid-19 crisis has transformed the traditional work environment (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). Working from home, instead of from corporate offices, has led to a decline in personal contacts with superiors and colleagues, and instead given emphasis to virtual relationships and remote environments (Spicer, 2020). Interestingly, even if the need of working from home was imposed by the pandemic, it can be expected that this "new work culture" where people are rather flexible to choose from where they work will prevail, even in a potential future world without Covid-19 (Aroles *et al.*, 2019). This new context and culture will lead to a loss of control for managers (Aroles *et al.*, 2019; Sewell, 2012), reinforcing the way brands develop organically, increasing the relevance of the co-created perspective (Hewett and Shantz, 2021) and the need to manage networks of employees and collaborators, many times in remote online environments. This will require trust and transparency within a firm's ecosystem of internal and external stakeholders (Pera *et al.*, 2016). In particular, as the boundaries of the firm become more fluid and most corporate brands become platform businesses (Cusumano *et al.*, 2019), reliant on an extensive network of partners to deliver their value proposition, so organizations will have to open up and learn to collaborate within a complex ecosystem (Ripoll Gonzalez and Lester, 2018). Brands will have to work out how to influence and align the behaviour of their employees with that of their partners. This also indicates that the brand purpose and identity should inspire not only the internal brand employees but also the external network of collaborators. Additionally, the pandemic has further raised the expectations that customers and society

have of companies and their brands (He and Harris, 2020; Inhoffen, 2020).

Toward a new paradigm

As the socioeconomic and business context is changing rapidly, so the boundaries of Internal Branding progressively expand. As a result, some of the field's traditional assumptions are being challenged, leading to the need for a paradigm shift in Internal Branding.

Internal Branding has traditionally focused on how to align employees' communications and behaviors with the intended brand identity. Many scholarly articles have used this top-down managerial approach (Merrilees, 2016), to explore the ways in which consumers' brand experience across different touchpoints is aligned with an intended brand identity. From this perspective, internal stakeholders' role in brand building is often seen as a means to an end: senior management define the brand identity that is supposed to be implemented and employees are expected to enact the relevant behaviors.

This instrumentalist view of employees argues for the importance of specific mechanisms: internal communications, together with a set of brand-related human resource management activities (such as training, on-boarding, promotion and remuneration), and a transformational leadership style, to build brand commitment and brand-driven behavior (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Morhart *et al.*, 2009; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006). But what was taken for granted, can now be questioned, as new contexts flourish and challenging perspectives arise. In a world where people are highly connected to their peers, where markets are exceedingly transparent, where consumers are in search of authentic and meaningful value propositions, and where traditional value chains have become value networks, the basic conditions for brand management have changed dramatically. Today, consumers and employees feel empowered (Gill-Simmen *et al.*, 2018) and want to co-create brands (Ind *et al.*, 2013) and their meaning (Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013). This has given rise to the "co-creative school" of brand management (Schmidt and Redler, 2018), which has fundamentally changed the way researchers understand and research the brand management academic field.

Much has been written about this co-creative perspective (Boyle, 2007; Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Ind and Coates, 2013; Ind *et al.*, 2017; Ind *et al.*, 2013; Merz *et al.*, 2009), which argues that managers are no longer in control of the brand management process, even if they can still influence it (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013). According to this current and popular view, brand meaning is permanently negotiated among many stakeholders and can therefore not be predefined in small, inner circles within the organization (Kornum *et al.*, 2017; Von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, the role of managers should be to initiate and facilitate social processes that recognize fluidity and involve multiple stakeholders (e.g. through the management of branded online communities). Brand identity can no longer be seen as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68) and that

stays rather stable over a long period of time, but rather "an ever-evolving connotation, rooted in a brand's history, philosophy, practices and ambitions but subject to constant mediation and re-interpretation as its meaning is co-created by a brand's stakeholders." (Ind and Schmidt, 2019, p. 170).

Overall, it is obvious that a new approach to Internal Branding is needed. The search for the button that needs to be pushed to control the behaviour of employees can be declared over. On the contrary, managers need to find ways to support the development of a brand-oriented corporate culture that can provide guidance to employees, while allowing them to also enjoy high degrees of freedom. On one side, this is about ensuring that there is a core common understanding of what the brand stands for that can inspire employee behaviour. This is why organizations should move from a rigidly predefined brand identity system to a more fluid perspective, grounded in a brand purpose and a set of guiding principles (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). On the other, this is about empowering employees to use their own judgment to decide how to behave in any specific situation. Whenever there is a common shared brand purpose and a set of guiding principles, which are lived by the brand employees and reflected in a supportive culture, a new approach to internal branding can be promoted which is grounded in trust, freedom and empowerment. This approach relies on trusting and engaging employees with the co-creation of the strategic priorities of the organization (Iglesias and Ind, 2020) and empowering them to reinterpret the brand principles and to enrich and develop the brand identity.

In essence, a more fluid, participative and empowering approach to internal brand management is urgently needed. Interestingly, this resonates with the call by Hatch and Schultz (2008, p. 127) who presciently suggested: "[...] stop asking how you can get your employees behind the brand and start thinking about how you can put the brand behind your employees."

Key challenges

Taking into consideration the emerging co-creative paradigm of Internal Branding, we see three key challenges that will demand intense research during the next years. First, brand managers need to empower employees and embrace more participative approaches to Internal Branding, while still ensuring the development of a consistent brand experience. Can a more fluid and participative approach to internal brand management lead to a consistent brand experience? The key question here is: how much freedom can managers promote to inspire their employees, while still aiming for a relevant degree of consistency in the brand experience (Dean *et al.*, 2016)? Maybe, the proposal of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin (2002, to distinguish between negative freedom (in our context, the degree to which employees are free from a too rigid brand identity) and positive freedom (the degree to which individuals are free to determine how they live the brand) is helpful. As Ind and Schmidt (2019, pp. 272–273) put it: "Freedom *from* allows employees and stakeholders to co-create the brand, but it sets some limits – rooted in the vision and values of a brand – to guide decisions and to determine

also where the brand will not go. Freedom *to* [...] gives people the opportunity to decide how they will do things."

Second, as value propositions are increasingly built in complex networks and partnership ecosystems (Merz *et al.*, 2009; Ramaswamy and Pieters, 2021), internal brand management should be more concerned with how to inspire and influence the employees of the brand's strategic partners. The key question here is: how can internal branding reconcile its traditional focus on internal brand employees with the need to embrace a broader perspective, which also incorporates the employees of the brand's strategic partners? Future research will also need to explore how these complex networks influence the brand identity of the focal brand (Uggla, 2004). Additionally, research should investigate how the employees of the brand's strategic partners can be engaged in the co-creation of new and more relevant experiences or in the development of new products and services.

Third, to fully exploit the opportunities of the co-creative approach to Internal Branding, executives will need to build an open and relationship-based corporate culture (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020), based on trust, empowerment and agility, where employees are not afraid of making mistakes. However, future research should further explore which are the key characteristics of a supportive corporate culture for a co-creative approach to internal branding. As Iglesias and Ind (2020, p. 715) suggest, corporates will need to "recruit, promote and foster executives capable of embracing a transformative, responsible, empathetic and participatory leadership style". Here, "transformative" is concerned with balancing profits and purpose and a commitment to a positive transformative change; "responsible" is about balancing short-term and long-term objectives; "empathetic and participatory" recognizes the value of co-creating the brand together with employees and key stakeholders (Iglesias and Ind, 2020). However, more research is needed to understand the capabilities leaders need to support the co-creative approach to internal branding.

Future research agenda

The co-creative perspective of brand management challenges some of the basic tenets of Internal Branding, while a new generation of employees heads off to work (Generation Z) and a so-called "New Work Culture" emerges. The resulting shift in Internal Branding indicates the need for further conceptual and empirical studies, which can contribute to the development of the domain. Generally, internal stakeholders' role in brand co-creation processes and in the co-creation of brand meaning should be further explored. But researchers must even dig deeper. More precisely, we believe that it is essential to conduct research on the following interconnected questions:

Research questions generally inspired by the co-creative perspective
- What is the degree of freedom and empowerment that managers should allow the brand's employees?
- How can brands turn their employees into corporate influencers?

- How should the mutual co-creation of brands and employees' identities be addressed in Internal Branding activities?

Additionally, in line with the organic-view of the brand (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013), if brand value is co-created by multiple stakeholders, Internal Branding should not only consider the role of internal employees but also the employees of the brand's external partners in the brand value co-creation process. This has been neglected in the traditional Internal Branding literature. Some specific research questions are:

- What is the role of the brand's partners' employees in delivering the focal brand experience?
- How can brands influence their partners' employees to align them with the focal brand's intended identity?
- How can brands engage their partners' employees in the co-creation of their brand identity and experience?

Research questions inspired by the needs and expectations of a new generation

- How can Internal Branding build employee engagement with members of Generation Z?
- What is the role of employees in building conscientious corporate brands?
- What is the impact of political brand activism on employee engagement?

Research questions inspired by the new work culture

- How is internal branding being transformed by the emerging new work culture?
- What are the opportunities and risks that the new technologies pose to Internal Branding?
- How can brands create a strong shared corporate culture in a context where there is less face-to-face interaction among employees?

The purpose of this Special Issue of the *Journal of Product and Brand Management* is to ensure the continued relevance of Internal Branding by embracing a paradigm shift driven by a co-creative perspective, the singular characteristics of the new generation joining the workplace, and the rapidly emerging new work culture. This demands rigorous research in the area and for educators to translate the learnings to executives.

Overall, we received 22 submissions, out of which 17 were sent to the review process and were examined and commented by almost 50 experienced and highly qualified peers from various parts of this world. The final five articles presented in this issue attempt to spur the academic debate on the transformation of the Internal Branding field.

The first paper is written by Sonja Sarasvuo and discusses the implications of multiple organizational identities for corporate branding research. She asks for an understanding of corporate identity as a multifaceted entity representing multiple identities. Her research, in contrast to many "classical" brand management papers that are rooted in an enduring and more homogeneous brand identity, develops the proposition that identity diversity should be recognized in Internal Branding processes. She therefore adds an important contribution to this under-researched topic.

We then continue with a paper by Bill Merrilees, Diane Miller and Raisa Yakimova. Building on the paradigm of brand-co-creation, their work focuses on internal stakeholders, namely, volunteers in the public sector, as driving forces in various types of brand co-creation. They also point to the need for managers to include all internal stakeholders – in an interactive process – in the co-creation of brand meaning to engage these internal stakeholders with the brand. Therefore, their research adds to the co-creative perspective of Internal Branding and demonstrates that brands are built organically by interacting and engaging with various stakeholders' groups.

The next two papers analyse the impact of employees' social media activities on brand co-creation by investigating their posts on the social media network Instagram, and both papers show the strong influence that employees exercise on the co-creation of brand meaning. Fathima Saleem and Matthew Hawkins discuss the effect of employee generated content (EGC) on consumers' purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth. They show that EGC can improve favorable consumer behaviors and argue that companies therefore should exploit social media enthusiasm among their staff. An additional and positive effect is that EGC can help expand consumer-brand touchpoints. Employees posting about the employers' products and services create spaces for the co-creation of brand meaning because potential customers may participate in social media discussions through commenting, liking and sharing the EGC.

Donna Smith, Jenna Jacobson and Janice Rudkoeski strive to better understand employees' roles as influencers by linking the concept of employee brand equity (EBE) to employees' social media activity. They argue that companies can learn from their employees' social media posts as to how they contribute to the co-creation of brand value. Using the researchers' operationalization of EBE, employers can assess the level of brand ambassadorship among their staff and maybe find the right measures to support them in embracing, internalizing and identifying with the brand's values.

Finally, the paper by Rico Piehler, Ayla Roessler and Christoph Burmann extends the co-creative paradigm to the unique and under-researched context of internal city branding. Their paper investigates the brand-oriented leadership of a city's mayor and city online brand communication as brand management–related antecedents of residents' city brand commitment. They find that both independent variables have a significant effect on the dependent one, i.e. residents' emotional attachment to a city. Considering the co-creative perspective of brand management, the researchers argue that similar to employees in the corporate branding context, residents are both an important target group of branding efforts and a strategically valuable resource as co-creators in the branding process. The authors also argue that city brands have to be managed in relation to numerous sub-identities of suburbs, city quarters or even streets. Now, we come full circle: The management of multiple identities within one organization was the core idea of the first paper that we introduced above.

We are thankful to the Co-Editors Prof Cleopatra Veloutsou and Prof Francisco Guzmán for their guidance

throughout the process and appreciative of the support of the reviewers who assured the high standard of this Special Issue.

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