Exploring the Alignment of Internal and External Branding: A Grounded Theory Study of Leadership in a South African Organisation

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Abstract: Branding has become essential for organisations to achieve competitive advantage. This research explores how leadership impacts the alignment of internal and external branding within a South African organisation. A qualitative Grounded Theory Method was used to understand the lived experience and perceptions of organisational leaders. Data was collected through unstructured interviews of ten leaders within a large motor retail organisation along with observations, field notes and organisational documents. Using open, axial and selective coding via NVivo 9, key themes and categories were identified. The results indicate that leadership has a significant impact on the development of brand alignment through Communication, Organisational Culture, Employee Engagement and Value Congruence. The results also illustrate the importance of leaders in shaping the brand image of an organisation by establishing a level of trust among employees, creating an environment that reinforces the organisational values of the organisation and facilitating consistent communication at all levels of the organisation. Furthermore, continuing the commitment to leadership will create a sense of ownership among employees for the brand and support the translation of strategic brand objectives into everyday operations of the organisation. The study produced a central construct, which presents Leadership as the driving force behind the effective integration of Internal and External Branding. Based on the findings of this study, a Leadership and Brand Alignment Model (LBAM) was created to combine both empirical insights and theoretical constructs. The study contributes to theory by offering a novel model of brand alignment and extends the limited body of research on internal branding and leadership in South Africa. Practically, the findings emphasise the need for leaders to actively embed brand values within organisational processes to ensure consistency between internal experiences and external brand promises. The proposed model offers organisations a process that can help improve leadership practices, increase the degree to which employees align with organisational values, and reinforce longer-term organisational performance, as well as develop a sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: Branding, Leadership, Organisational culture, Employee engagement, South Africa, Leadership and Brand Alignment Model (LBAM)

1. Background

Corporate branding has become one of the key strategic priorities for organizations that are looking to create sustainable competitive advantage and superior performance (Davis, 2002; Andersen et al., 2023). Internal branding and employee experience are now strongly linked to organisational performance and strategic brand success (Prashar and Maity, 2024; Thokoa et al., 2022). The corporate brand is more than just product-related elements (symbols, logos, trademarks, etc.) and includes the organization's identity, values, and relationships with stakeholders (Aaker, 1996; Nwekeala, 2026; Haddad, 2024). In addition, the corporate brand is not exclusively built through external communications, but it is ingrained in employees' day-to-day experiences of and interactions with the organization (Ind, 1997).

Employees play a significant role in transforming brand promises into customer experiences (Naidoo, 2013). Therefore, they are often seen as the key facilitators of an organisation's brand (Sartain 2005; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025). Another concept closely related to internal marketing is internal branding. Internal branding means the way in which an employee understands, interprets and experiences their organisation's brand (Oakner 2004). Internal branding supports and helps employees to be better equipped to act in line with the organisation's brand identity by placing brand values firmly in employees' heads and hearts (Kinnunen, 2025).

Despite the importance of internal branding, many organisations experience a misalignment between their internal branding and the way they communicate their brand to the external market (Naidoo & Ukpere, 2012). Employees frequently experience a disconnect between how the organisation communicates to the external market and how they experience their organisation's workplace (Turpin 2003). Misalignment results in diminished employee engagement, lower employee morale and inconsistent service delivery, which can result in decreased organisational performance (Naidoo, 2012). As stated by Sartain (2005), the behaviour of employees "makes or breaks the brand". Therefore, organisations that do not have a strong approach to internal branding could ultimately diminish the success of their external branding efforts.

Today, employees of an organisation are increasingly seen as important for understanding and living the brand to customers every day (Smith & Hanstead, 2004). Organisational Culture is Important for Supporting the Alignment between Internal and External Branding. A strong and cohesive organisational culture lays the foundation for sharing values and behaviours, which allows employees to internalise and enact the brand consistently (Onwioduokit and Moavodi, 2026). As Alloza et al. (2004) point out, alignment between an organisation's culture and brand identity is essential for building corporate reputation through consistency of "what is said" with "what is done".

The process of alignment is strongly dependent on leadership ability (Naidoo & Ukpere, 2012). Through their ability to influence workplace culture, inform employees about brand values, and influence employee actions, leaders have a significant impact on employee behaviour (Tshatshu et al., 2026). According to Ulrich and Smallwood (2000), effective leaders live out the brand and they communicate to employees how to deliver a consistent brand experience to customers. Through their decisions and actions, leaders help shape employee understanding and connection with the brand, (Naidoo, 2013. Leaders thus create a context of meaning and direction for employees to connect with and support the brand (Mitchell, 2002).

This research bridges the void by evaluating leader's experiences and perceptions regarding brands from their perspective as leaders at various South African organisations. In particular, it investigates leaders' leaders' brand-related experiences and how they lead to greater coherence between internal and external branding of their organisations. This research develops a conceptual model that incorporates leaders, organisational culture, and employee engagement to promote brand alignment. The study provides both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for organisations on how to achieve greater alignment between their promised and their delivered products/services.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research was conducted in a large motor retail companyin South Africa (Naidoo, 2013). A case study method was implemented to obtain an in-depth understanding of branding practices in a real-life organisational setting.

2.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling methods and theoretical sampling methods were implemented to select respondents who were directly involved in branding decisions and/or leadership. There were 10 respondents in the sample including directors and managers. Data collection continued, until theoretical saturation was reached, which was determined when no new themes were identified from the data.

2.3 Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected using multiple qualitative data collection methods to achieve richness and triangulation (Naidoo, 2013). The three methods of data collection that were used were unstructured in-depth interviews, participant observations, and/or analysis of organisational documents. The use of interviews provided participants with the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions, whilst the use of observations and/or documents provided contextual insight into the branding practices of the organisation.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed through the grounded theory coding methods of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involved breaking the data into separate concepts and then establishing initial themes; axial coding involved grouping the themes into larger general categories as well as determining the relationships between the various themes. Finally, the use of selective coding allowed for the integration and refinement of the categories into a cohesive conceptual framework. Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 9) aided in the organisation and coding of the data.

2.5 Ethical Issues

The study adhered to the ethical standards throughout. The subjects of the study provided their consent for the study via informed consent; the confidentiality of the subjects was assured; and finally, participation in the study was voluntary. Written permission was obtained from the organisations prior to any data collection.

3. Results

This report presents the outcomes of a grounded theory analysis for the ten leaders in the South African motor retail sector regarding their view and experience with branding. The findings from the analysis have been organized into each of the coding phases, providing the themes, categories, and the core construct in sequence.

3.1 Open Coding Results

A word frequency search performed in Nvivo 9 produced 3183 individual keywords from a minimum of two letters in length (including stemmed words). These 3183 keywords were exported into an Excel spreadsheet, which were then categorised into 36 distinct branding themes based on branding knowledge, interview insight, and branding literature. Frequency-orderd and alphabetized, the 36 themes that emerged from an open coding process are provided in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively. Among the more apparent themes were external branding; participants stated that the Company; Professional, Fun, & Passionate; as expressed in the following participant quotes: (3) “I am completely committed to the brand and passionate about the Company. I am the brand.” (4) “My brand is in my blood, when I see my Company I feel good about my brand and company, and the symbol that represents that.” Commitment also emerged as an important theme with participants frequently using words like “dedicated”, “passionate”, “focused”, and “committed.” Participant 1 stated, “The people here are doing this because of love and not at all for the money, and they are super committed.” Similarly, participant 10 stated, “I'm passionate and committed.”

Table 1: Open code categories in frequency order

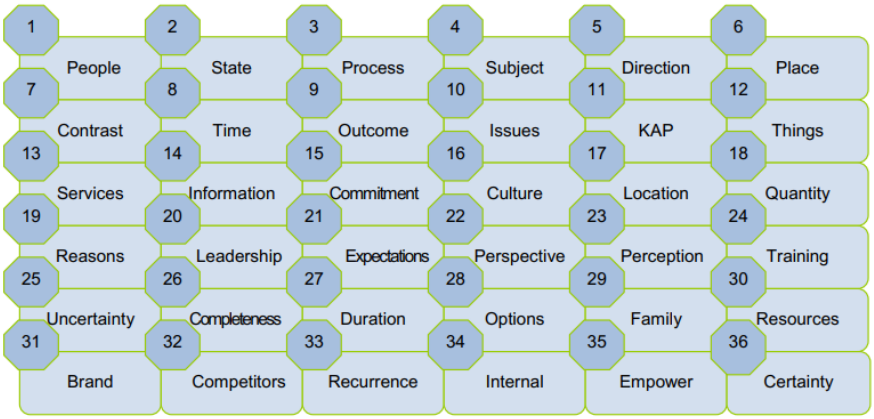


Table 2: Open code categories in alphabetical order

Brand	Empowerment	Options	Recurrence
Certainty	Expectations	Outcome	Resources
Commitment	Family	People	Services
Competitor	Information	Perception	State
Completeness	Internal	Perspective	Subject
Contrast	Issues	Place	Things
Culture	KAP	Process	Time
Direction	Leadership	Quantity	Training
Duration	Locations	Reasons	Uncertainty

Culture was repeatedly identified as an important theme by participants, with many noting a sense of family and belonging at the Company. For example, Participant 10 said, "We consider the Company to be a family and we truly are a family." According to Participant 6, "The sense of belonging we have here is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced anywhere else."

The theme of leadership was another significant theme that surfaced in the interviews with participants making direct references to leadership and management a total of 317 times. One participant stated, "A leader must be willing to serve and that is why they are there. Leaders must also set a good example and treat

everyone with respect." According to another participant: "As leaders we have to constantly remind our employees about how important it is to recognise the brand and being a good motivator to our people."

Empowerment through information and training was also cited as being a prominent theme with participants indicating that there were open lines of communication and on-going training. Participant 3 stated, "There are always open lines of communication in this Company." In Participant 6's words, "We believe in empowering people with training and development; in particular, through self-development courses. The Company spends a lot of money on empowering people."

3.2 Axial Coding Results

The second phase of the coding process required axial coding. Axial coding is where you relate the codes (categories and concepts) to each other through a mixture of inductive and deductive reasoning. There were 15 broad category groupings made from the 36 open codes, based on similarities or commonality in causes or meanings/connotations. Table 3 shows the open-code categories in alphabetical order, as well as how they relate to this research.

Table 3: Open code categories in alphabetical order and their description relative to the context of this study

S.No	THEME CODE	THEME DESCRIPTION
1	Brand	The participants' views and experiences of their brand
2	Certainty	The participants' complete confidence in their opinions
3	Commitment	The participants' sense of devotion, loyalty or dedication to the Company or brand
4	Competitor	Experiences and awareness of competition or market opponents
5	Completeness	Concept of the totality of the group, staff members or employees
6	Contrast	Concepts of comparison and contrast (differences and similarities)
7	Culture	Shared beliefs, customs, practices and social behavior in the Company
8	Direction	Sense of goals, purpose and development of participants and the Company
9	Duration	Concepts of length of service
10	Empowerment	Concepts of need for self-confidence and self-esteem among Employees and their subordinates
11	Expectations	Sense of anticipation and expected standards
12	Family	Sense of belonging to a group with something in common
13	Information	How and what facts are gathered and made known in the Company
14	Internal	Occurring or existing within the Company
15	Issues	Problems, challenges and general concerns
16	KAP	Knowledge, attitude and practice of staff and leaders
17	Leadership	Roles played in guiding, directing and influencing employees and company processes
18	Locations	Geographic sites, positions or settings of company structures and infrastructure
19	Options	Available choices and freedom of choice in the course of action In the Company
20	Outcome	Results or final state of actions, processes and change Management
21	People	Human beings collectively, within and outside the Company
22	Perception	Awareness of participants and their impressions of the Company
23	Perspective	Future projections or assessment of the corporate brand from a Personal point of view
24	Place	Geographic localities (towns, countries, regions) in the lives, history and careers of the participants
25	Process	The day-to-day activities, actions and occurrences in the Company
26	Quantity	Measurable properties of objects or subjects mentioned by the Participants
27	Reasons	Attention to detail and the desire of the participants to give the full picture
28	Recurrence	Established patterns and routines in the Company
29	Resources	Sources the Company draws on for profit, and the importance of Profit to the Company

S.No	THEME CODE	THEME DESCRIPTION
30	Services	What is done for customers or clients
31	State	Conditions of things or people depending on circumstances
32	Subject	Topics or branches of learning that the participants discussed
33	Things	Personal belongings and equipment for company activities
34	Time	Period during which actions, processes or conditions existed or took place
35	Training	The acquisition and maintenance of job skills
36	Uncertainty	Sense of uncertainty, unpredictability and lack of guarantee

The frequencies of theme mentions by each participant are displayed on Table 4. Participant 10 had more mentions than any other participant in the categories of people (409 total mentions), state (366 total mentions), process (334 total mentions), and subject (317 total mentions). Participant 5 had the highest number of mentions for 'brand' (70 total mentions). Additionally, Participant 1 had the highest number of mentions for services (178 total mentions) and process (242 total mentions). The grouping of themes and the creation of 15 themes was done through analyzing these themes after the first round of axial coding.

Table 4: Number of times each theme was mentioned by each participant

THEME	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Brand	7	12	12	18	70	7	5	2	4	45
Certainty	118	42	32	27	72	96	74	15	18	24
Commitment	66	50	46	46	53	56	20	42	55	106
Competitors	26	15	1	0	40	4	1	1	0	30
Completeness	42	54	20	20	23	31	15	16	31	66
Contrast	178	103	72	117	102	131	50	68	92	199
Culture	54	91	44	39	40	42	15	42	23	101
Direction	225	171	98	98	165	155	79	93	89	229
Duration	102	39	20	29	35	55	25	23	46	65
Empower	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expectation	53	35	27	23	43	44	12	25	25	82
Family	57	31	37	29	19	44	23	25	19	54
Information	125	60	39	36	44	85	31	60	31	127
Internal	6	1	1	2	8	6	4	22	11	7
Issues	141	66	48	60	83	119	50	66	55	162
KAP	93	113	31	60	50	101	33	54	68	152
Leadership	39	55	10	22	30	22	10	36	19	84
Location	74	44	41	36	63	72	23	65	45	95
Options	56	42	23	23	17	29	27	35	27	58
Outcome	127	56	39	40	27	66	18	31	42	168
People	241	203	106	148	139	218	64	117	115	409
Perception	62	52	39	33	63	70	25	47	15	71
Perspective	59	48	48	43	44	38	14	39	30	77
Place	161	93	42	59	85	154	62	30	48	204
Process	242	148	119	122	172	161	74	157	80	334
Quantity	92	46	39	59	59	73	20	30	38	95
Reasons	83	48	20	40	50	50	7	19	30	93
Recurrence	20	3	5	3	5	7	7	7	3	23
Resources	30	23	8	16	23	16	3	20	11	51

Services	178	112	62	37	155	59	18	44	63	135
State	232	191	147	211	152	261	82	136	138	366
Subject	160	117	102	127	113	132	49	124	77	317
Things	99	45	40	28	75	92	38	60	35	151
Time	218	86	40	47	68	72	17	54	41	172
Training	65	20	13	19	21	9	9	12	7	68
Uncertainty	50	22	19	13	28	38	10	30	12	67

From 15 categories, a final six "core" category consolidation process was conducted. The "Human Factor" core category consisted of the employees' knowledge, attitudes, practices, perceptions, completeness, and certainty, and during all interviews participants referenced employees 1760 times; notably, Participant 10 contributed 409 of those references. The "Culture" core category was made up of organisational socialisation (family and people), openness, state/condition, and company-specific issues, with 491 references. The "Performance" core category consisted of performance management and time factor themes; there were 81 direct references to processes. The "Leadership" core category included vision, investment, commitment, and environmental knowledge; overall, participants made direct references to leadership 317 times. The "Empowerment" core category encompassed empowerment, information, and training themes; participants made 132 direct references to communication. The "Competitive Forces" core category included participants' concerns regarding competition (121 direct references).

Table 5 presents the connection between the six main categories. Leadership had connections to each of the other five major categories which established that leadership plays a key role in brand development. The Human Factor category was connected to every other core category, further confirming the importance of employees as a central component of successful brand alignment. Culture, performance and empowerment all exhibited strong connections to other categories demonstrating that those influences function as a single unit instead of being independent. The relationship between the categories demonstrating that committed leaders with understanding of their environment develop the organizational family culture, encouraging positive human factors, empowered employees, superior performance, and the ability to overcome competitive forces.

Table 5: The inter relatedness soft-core categories

	HUMAN FACTOR	CULTURE	PERFORMANCE	EMPOWERMENT	LEADERSHIP	COMPETITIVE FORCES
Human factor/employees		X	X	X	X	X
Culture	X		X	X	X	X
Performance	X	X		X	X	X
Empowerment	X	X	X		X	X
Leadership	X	X	X	X		X
Competitive forces	X	X	X	X	X	

3.3 Selective Coding Results

Committed leaders who have an excellent command of the external and internal environment will ultimately become the leaders of the Company and the Brand vision (Naidoo, 2013). Empowering employees results in excellent performance and work output, particularly when dealing with Customers. With truly empowered employees, the Company has the ability to overcome its competitive environment and can ultimately provide excellent customer service to both Current and Prospective Customers. Consequently, the Company will be able to maintain its great and consistent organisational performance. Due to the overall supportive Family Culture within the Organisation and Happy, and Satisfied Employees, as well as a financially healthy Organisation.

4. Discussion

4.1 Integration of First-Order and Second-Order Constructs

In accordance with the first-order/second-order construct typology put forth by Schutz (1962), and Mouton and Marais (1990), the Leadership and Brand Alignment Model (LBAM) was created.

4.2 Leadership

Leadership is defined as the leader(s) vision, commitment, knowledge about the internal and external environments of the organisation, and investment in both the organisation and employees. Leaders with a vast amount of knowledge/experience regarding the external environment will create a positive effect on the organisation and thus, ultimately, the employee-brand identity fit (Naidoo, 2013).

First-order constructs from the research participants: Participant 1 stated, "The people who work here do so out of love for the work, and certainly not for the money; they are extremely committed. I like to lead with direction, and others seem to follow it." Participant 2 said, "A leader should be there to serve; they must provide a guiding example and treat others with respect.

The second order constructs from previous studies were the following: Vallaster & de Chernatony (2006), the vision of leadership provides clarity and consistency to defining and steering a corporate brand/identification; Burmann & Zeplin (2005) argue that leaders need to articulate the brand identification, including its heritage, vision, values, abilities and personality attributes. Valued leaders create energy around the internal branding process (Vallaster & de Chernatony 2006); they are also the 'care factor' in the organisation (King & Grace 2006).

4.3 Culture

Culture includes the aspects of the concepts of socialising (family) within the organisation; being open, state and issues. An employee comes to know and understand the organisational environment through the process of socialising, in that they perceive that the organisation supports their learning of organisational values, beliefs and expectations (Naidoo, 2013).

From the perspective of first-order constructs of those involved in the study, Participant 2 says that there is an inclusive community at this company with humanistic views as a way of relating to one another. Participant 4 affirms that family is where we belong in terms of our relationships with co-workers as well as customers. Participant 10 stated that we consider The Company to be our family and, therefore, we are all connected as a result of that bond.

From second-order constructs associated with literature citations, King and Grace (2006) maintain that the physical manifestations of a service brand are a reflection of the overall company's culture, as well as those who have been trained to deliver it; while Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006) argue that corporate culture is beneficial for building the corporate brand and delivering value-based services to employees; whereas Burmann and Zeplin (2005) express the idea of corporate brand values are instilled within the organisation by means of informal knowledge transfer amongst colleagues/superiors and through formal statements of value to employees within the organisation.

4.4 Human Factor/Employees

The development of employee capability and motivation to acquire and apply meaningfully relevant brand knowledge would be enhanced through a positive internal culture and environment. First-order constructs provided by participants: Participant 3 stated, "We have passion and enthusiasm - I think this is reflected in our employment of character and attitude." Participant 10 commented, "We are constantly told we are the best the company has; therefore, we started to believe we are the best: we believe we are the best!"

Second-order constructs provided by scholars: Vallaster & de Chernatony (2005): "Leaders should trust and empower their employees to perform to their maximum capabilities." King & Grace (2006): "Companies must create an internal environment to foster the capability and motivation of employees so that they may acquire and develop the necessary and meaningful brand knowledge."

4.5 Empowerment

Empowerment refers to providing all employees within the company with more power, training and information about the company’s image and how-to further that image. The first-order constructs that were

identified by some of the participants included: Participant 1 stated, “People in the organisation always pick information up from others and carry it through the organisation;” Participant 2 noted, “We provide a lot of intensive training and that means we have empowered employees;” Participant 6 added, “We have a belief at this company that we empower people through the training and development of them, and particularly through self-development courses. The company spends a large sum on empowering people;"

The second-order constructs from the literature include: Vallaster & de Chernatony (2005), discuss that internal communication is an important factor in creative internal communication and in receiving information on brand-enhancing behaviours are important factors. King & Grace (2006) discuss that training and use of internal marketing are also very important. Burmann & Zeplin (2005) also mention that employees who have a strong fit with the organisation’s brand identity, should be empowered or promoted.

4.6 Internal Brand Building

The basis of successful internal branding is a strong strategic vision, internal family culture, and corporate identity that can be recognised by organisation members. Internal branding that unifies both internal communication and training has a significant impact on employee's brand identity, brand loyalty, and brand commitment.

Literature provided the following second-order constructs: As noted by Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006), successful internal brand development relies on the proper mix between strategic vision and the organisational culture and corporate identity. Furthermore, Punjaisri et al. (2009a) noted that when internal branding incorporates both training and internal communication, it has a positive influence on brand identity, brand commitment and brand loyalty of employees.

4.7 Brand Citizenship Behaviour

Brand identification creates brand commitment, which leads to brand loyalty. Brand commitments to individuals lead to brand citizenship behaviours. Punjaisri et al. (2009b) state that internal branding enables organisations to have an influence on their employees’ identification with the brand, commitment to the brand, and loyalty to the brand. Burmann & Zeplin, (2005) state that developing a strong level of individual commitment leads to brand citizenship behaviours, and that developing a strong level of internalisation has the greatest positive effect on brand citizenship behaviours.

4.8 Enhanced Employee Commitment and Performance, Customers, and Superior Organisational Performance

When a workplace creates an organizational culture, leadership, and team experience that includes the necessary tools for success (training/empowering employees, sharing company and brand message), the employee feels fulfilled, committed, and loyal to the organization and the brand. As a result, the employee will provide exceptional performance, show commitment and loyalty to the brand, and display behaviours that are branded-citizenship. First order Theme Constructs developed by the Participants: Participant 3 commented, "Service delivery and excellence has always been a core value of our company." Participant 10 described, "We have been in business since 1968 - our core values are based on service, integrity, and good value." 2nd Order Theme Constructs developed through the Literature: King & Grace (2006) identified that strong leaders create an organisational culture and behaviour that supports superior organisational performance. According to Vallaster & de Chernatony (2005), an employee's pride and satisfaction with the company's brand leadership is a significant factor for a brand to come to life.

4.9 Enhanced Brand and Company Performance and Greater Competitive Advantage

A brand identifies with employees who exhibit loyalty and commitment; these employees respond positively to the brand from a workplace environment that is family-oriented. By doing so, sales will increase due to the number of stakeholders who want to do business and/or associate with an organisation/brand that presents itself as being significantly "better" than its competitors. Participant responses relating to the first-order constructs: Participant 4 indicated "I worked at a competitor and they had better systems and processes than we do. However, we are still better." Participant 5 said "We are not as large as our competitors but we are better than they are."

Based on previous studies, Punjaisri, Evanschitzky and Wilson (2009) argue that internal branding can create a bond between an employee and a brand through communication of the brand's values; thus, establishing the

company's unique identity from its immediate competitors. According to Burmann & Zeplin (2005), it is imperative to have brand recognition in order to overcome his competitor's brand.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that the role of leadership in connecting both internal and external branding within an organization's structure is fundamental and crucial (Naidoo, 2013). Using a grounded theory method, our findings illustrate how leadership impacts brand alignment through developing the organization's culture, empowering employees, communicating effectively with employees, and developing congruence between the organization's values and its customer value proposition. The new Leadership and Brand Alignment Model (LBAM) identify leadership as the primary driver that connects employee experiences to the promise of the external brand experience. This study also indicates that when employees are fully engaged and empowered, they have higher levels of commitment to the brand and demonstrate higher levels of citizenship behavior associated with the brand (Naidoo & Ukpere, 2012). In addition, a strong organizational culture has been identified as a critical mechanism for the internalization and sustainability of branding values (Naidoo, 2013). This study, therefore, provides a novel theoretical and practical framework for understanding how leadership can facilitate the connection between internal and external branding in organizations in South Africa.

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Ethics Declaration: Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection were strictly maintained throughout the study.

AI Declaration: No AI tools were used in the creation of this paper.

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