

Branding Your Brain: How Internal Branding Creates Unsafe Work Conditions

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Abstract

Individuals' identities are influenced by the social systems they belong to and, therefore, the organizations they work for (Allen, 2005, p. 35; Ashman & Gibson, 2010, p. 133). Many organizations attempt to influence employees' actions through internal branding (Handelman, 2009, p. 51; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 5, Mitchell, 2002, pp. 100-105). Internal branding may include the use of manipulation through marketing to influence employees' values and perceptions of the organization (Handelman, 2009, p. 51; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 5, Mitchell, 2002, pp. 100-105). Since social systems influence social identity, internal branding that uses manipulation may influence individual identity (Allen, 2005, pp. 35-36). Internal branding also includes the organization requiring employees to adopt brand-congruent behaviours in their interactions (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014, Employee Brand-Building Behaviors section, para. 2). Brand-congruent behaviours usually require emotional labour, which has been shown to have psychological and physical ramifications (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012, 'Discordant emotional states' section). Internal branding is also expected of employees outside of work due to social media surveillance by their organization (Jeske & Shultz, 2016; Madera, 2012, as cited in Sutherland et al., 2019). This paper explores the existing scholarship to understand the impact of internal branding on the identity of employees and how it could create mentally unsafe working conditions for employees.

Introduction

Individual identities are strongly influenced by the social systems that make up their everyday lives (Allen, 2005, p. 35). For many working adults, the organization they work for is their primary social system (Ashman & Gibson, 2010, p. 133). Scholarship, blogs, and newspapers alike have begun to advocate for the efficacy of internal branding as a means to influence customers and ultimately improve profitability (Bose & Prakash, 2019, p. 1917; Carter, 2017, para. 1; Mitchell, 2002, p. 99). This paper will explore how internal branding attempts to manipulate employees' identities and how this negatively impacts the lives and health of the employees.

Organizational identity describes the feelings that members have towards the organization and how, if these feelings are positive, they can benefit the organization in many ways, including better customer service and free word-of-mouth advertising (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 357; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 2). Internal branding, sometimes referred to as internal marketing, has many different definitions across the literature but generally refers to the methods used by an organization to influence the behaviour of employees in ways that benefit the organization (Bose & Prakash, 2019, p. 1920; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014, para. 3; Mitchell, 2002, p. 100). Many organizations attempt to influence organizational identity by using

internal branding to create a positive psychological association between the brand and employees (Handelman, 2009, p. 51; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 5, Mitchell, 2002, pp. 100-105). This positive association is meant to influence and limit how employees make decisions, which is a type of manipulative behaviour known as limiting manipulation (Handelman, 2009, pp. 45-48). Another internal branding strategy involves requiring employees to adopt brand-congruent behaviour by ensuring that all employees' personal communication is in line with the organization's branding (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014, Employee Brand-Building Behaviors section, para. 2). Employees are expected to display company values in how they interact with one another and with customers. This requires that employees provide emotional labour; this often involves either surface acting which involves faking the emotion, or deep acting which involves internalizing the emotion (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, Abstract). Surface acting can create emotional discordance that can have adverse psychological or physical effects (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012, 'Discordant emotional states' section). It is also common for organizations to monitor potential and existing employees' social media to make sure employees remain "on brand" or continue to display brand-congruent behaviour (Jeske & Shultz, 2016; Madera, 2012, as cited in Sutherland et al., 2019). The combination of internal branding and social media surveillance means that for many employees, most of their interactions are monitored and controlled by their organization.

Identity

Identity is a concept that has been studied across many different fields. From an ontological perspective, the self has been defined as a relation to oneself and how that relation allows us to relate to others (Kierkegaard, 1849/2004, pp. 40-41). Kierkegaard sees the existence of the self, and therefore identity, as implicit—existing regardless of circumstance. If individuals are conscious of the existence of the self, the relational nature requires that individuals consciously interpret the self in relation to themselves and others (pp. 41-42). This stands in contrast to the social constructionist perspective that implies passivity from individuals in the formation of the self. From a social constructionist perspective, individual's identities are constructed from the meaning they derive from the social systems and dominant discourses that surround them. These identities influence their belief systems and, in doing so, inform their actions and decisions (Allen, 2005, p. 35). Therefore, the concept of the self and identity is changeable and subject to circumstance, and identity tends to be a product of an individual's environment and time (p. 36).

A study on the psychology of inmates in social isolation found that a commonly described symptom of isolation was a lethargic condition that presented alongside "the complete breakdown or disintegration of the identity of the isolated individual" (Smith, 2006, p.53). This emphasizes the role of social systems in constructing identity and could potentially support the theory of social constructionism. However, this result was "commonly" reported but was not observed in all subjects. This result could be described by the concept of ontological insecurity, which refers to when an individual's weakened sense of self makes them more susceptible to existential crisis (Ashman & Gibson, 2010, pp. 130-133). From both perspectives, individuals' social circumstances strongly influence their sense of self and identity. The emphasis on the impact of social interaction, communication, and power in the social constructionist perspective is most relevant to this discussion.

Enculturation and the Psychological Effects of Rhetoric

Enculturation is the process through which individuals absorb the culture of the society or societies they belong to. While enculturation encompasses food preferences and the use of artifacts when used in the context of ethnic groups, the most notable characteristics in discussions of organizations are reaction expectations and dominant discourses (Lateef, 1975, p.72). Simply being a part of an organization does not guarantee that individuals will engage with the enculturation process. To avoid being susceptible to rhetoric or discourses, individuals must actively engage critically with ideas instead of accepting them uncritically (Billig, 1989, pp. 293-295). Thus, the degree to which individuals experience enculturation is influenced by how, or if, they critically engage with the ideas presented to them by the organization.

Manipulation of Identity as Internal Branding

Research in the field has shown that internal branding benefits an organization in many ways. Employees influenced by internal branding are more likely to advocate for the company's growth willingly and provide voluntary word-of-mouth advertising to their friends and family (Mitchell, 2002; Bose & Prakash, 2019, p. 1919). Additionally, employees with positive associations with their organization are more likely to provide quality customer service (Varca, 1999, "Service delivery and a good place to work" section). A strong determining factor of these behaviours is organizational identity. This differs from corporate identity in that corporate identity focuses on the use of symbols for marketing and is fully controlled by higher-ups in an organization. On the other hand, organizational identity is determined by the impressions, thoughts, and feelings that the members of an organization have about the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 357). In other words, an organization's success can be impacted by employees' psychological relationship with their organization (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014, para. 2).

Since organizations do not have direct control over their members' impressions the way they do over corporate identity, they must find ways to influence their members' psychological relationship with the organization. Some organizations use human resources to create a positive association with the organization by offering proper compensation, upward mobility, and employee benefits (Bose & Prakash, 2019, p. 1917; Vance, 1999, pp. 1-25). Another option is using internal branding to influence employee values and behaviour in ways that benefit the organization through marketing (Handelman, 2009, p. 51; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 5, Mitchell, 2002, pp. 100-105). This can be considered a type of psychological manipulation classified as a "limiting manipulation." Limiting manipulations use persuasion, coercion, and trickery to influence a target's decision-making in a particular direction. Organizations use internal branding to influence what their employees value and how they act, which in turn influences the organizational identity (Handelman, 2009, pp. 45-48). Internal branding is often utilized by organizations to try to create a connection between employees and customers (Bose & Prakash, 2019, p. 1918). Psychological manipulation is not unique to internal branding as it is a type of marketing and the goal of marketing in general is to influence the psychological relationship between the audience and a product (p. 51).

Psychological Manipulation in Advertising

Manipulation is used in any interaction intended to motivate individuals to act a certain way, requiring persuasion, coercion, and potentially trickery (Handelman, 2009, p. 21). Limiting manipulations seek to limit the number of options individuals consider in the decision-making process (pp. 45-46). These types of manipulations can be intellectual, encouraging individuals to act based on reason, or emotional, encouraging individuals to act impulsively (p. 46). Marketing tends to fall into the category of limiting emotional manipulation, encouraging the target audience to react impulsively towards the product being marketed and away from other options (p. 51). This is achieved by convincing the target audience that they lack something and that the “something” is the product or service offered. This process has been likened to hypnosis in that it attempts to “impress its objects emotionally and then make them submit intellectually.” This process is meant to “smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer” (Fromm, 1994, as cited by Handelman, 2009, p.51). In internal branding that utilizes marketing, it could be argued that this is only effective if the marketing is successful. Some organizations attempt to use manipulation to establish a cult-like relationship between the organization and employees (Carter, 2017, para. 3).

Emotional Labour and Deep Acting

Many fields that deal with the public expect their employees to provide emotional labour to display brand-congruent behaviour. Emotions and tones used during interactions must support the brand image. If the employee is not genuinely feeling the required emotion, surface or deep acting is required (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, Abstract). Surface acting is when workers experience an incongruence between their genuine emotions and the required emotion for the job. They address this discordance by suppressing their genuine emotions and faking the required one (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011, ‘Surface acting’ section). This discordance of emotional states has been linked to many adverse outcomes, including emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and depersonalization (Lapf et al., 2001, as cited in Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011, ‘Health consequences’ section). In extreme cases, this psychological strain can impact an individual's physical health (para. 4). Deep acting is when employees address this same incongruence of emotion by internalizing the required emotions to resolve the discordance so that the internal and displayed emotions are congruent (‘Deep acting’ section). Due to the negative consequences of surface acting, the sustainable option for employees who do not genuinely feel the required emotion would be to engage in deep acting and, in doing so, adopt the organization's branding into their belief system. If, as discussed in the previous section, employees have a strong sense of organizational identity and agree with the messages they deliver, there is less likely to be discordance. For example, employees who genuinely like a product or service that they are selling are more likely to act excited about the product or service.

Monitoring of Social Media/Living the Brand

Beyond the emotional labour required for many service jobs, employees are expected to display brand-congruent behaviour outside work hours. This brand-congruent behaviour may include promoting the organization in off-hours interactions but in some cases, brand-congruent

behaviours are assessed by organizations based on employees' personal social media accounts. Employers use social media as a means of assessing the behaviour of prospective employees as well as policing the behaviour of current employees (Jeske & Shultz, 2016; Madera, 2012, as cited in Sutherland et al., 2019). This monitoring intends to assess the person-organization fit, meaning how well a prospective employee's values fit with the organization's values. Organizations use this monitoring for those already employed to ensure that their employees continue to display brand-congruent behaviours on their social media (p. 105). Social media is often used as a means of personal expression and exploration and to fulfill feelings of belongingness (Ramelb, 2016, para. 3, 4). However, people do not have total control over what constitutes their social media or online presence. Friends, family, or even strangers may tag them in posts that will appear on their social media or in a Google search (Robards & Graf, 2022, 'Context Collapse, Cybervetting, and Professional Value on Social Media' section). Therefore, any public actions could be documented and uploaded to the internet to be found by potential or current employers. Assuming employees' personal social media are being policed by their employers limits the employee's freedom to express themselves and explore their identity in any public setting, further limiting the time that employees have in their lives to express themselves outside of their organization's brand-congruent behaviours.

Discussion

By engaging in internal marketing and enforcing brand-congruent behaviours, organizations attempt to influence organizational identity through internal branding (Handelman, 2009, p. 51; Mesmer-Magnus, 2012, para. 5, Mitchell, 2002, pp. 100-105). Effective internal branding that utilizes marketing may influence employees' values and actions, which can impact their individual identity (Billig, 1989, pp. 293-295). To display required brand-congruent behaviours, employees must engage in surface or deep acting to meet emotional labour standards to ensure job stability. Since surface acting is more likely to cause emotional discordance that can have harmful psychological and physical impacts, deep acting is necessary for individuals who may be susceptible to these adverse effects to protect themselves. Deep acting requires employees to internalize the required emotions to display them and resolve the emotional discordance (Lapf et al., 2001, as cited in Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2011, 'Health consequences' section). In doing so, they must uncritically accept the organization's dominant discourses and values, and allow themselves to become encultured. Employees are also expected to display brand-congruent behaviours in public spaces due to social media surveillance (Jeske & Shultz, 2016; Madera, 2012, as cited in Sutherland et al., 2019). Therefore, the only interactions where individuals are free from surveillance and are not expected to display brand-congruent behaviours are interpersonal interactions. However, studies have found that workplace interactions have overtaken family as the primary social environment (Ashman & Gibson, 2010, p. 133). It can be deduced that in the majority of employees' daily interactions, they must display brand-congruent behaviours. To avoid the physical and psychological consequences of emotional discordance, employees whose personal values have not been altered through marketing would have to remain in a near-constant state of deep acting.

Based on these findings, organizations that participate in high internal branding and employee surveillance are creating psychologically unsafe work conditions for employees. This is potentially one source of the rising rates of depression, anxiety, and stress in employees in

many countries, including Canada and the UK (McDaid et al., 2005, p. 367; as cited by Ashman & Gibson, 2010; Simpson, 2022). Many organizations are not allowing employees freedom to have their own individual identities outside of the workplace. While employees should be aware of what they post online, some degree of privacy and autonomy should be afforded to employees in terms of their online presence. Canada's privacy laws discuss mobile devices and online services at work and privacy in the workplace, but there are no existing privacy laws protecting off-duty employees from surveillance (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2019). Workplaces should be aware of how surveillance and internal branding may be endangering the mental well-being of their employees (Ashman & Gibson, 2010. p128). While many organizations offer some amount of psychological service compensation or coverage, providing coping mechanisms for the symptoms of the previously discussed ill effects does not address the root of the problem. Due to the current prevalence of internal branding, further research could explore how organizations can protect the well-being of employees while utilizing internal branding.

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