



Internal brand co-creation: The experiential brand meaning cycle in higher education



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ABSTRACT

Higher education (HE) institutions need to adapt to the global environment but the complex nature of HE highlights the role of marketing and the internal market in realizing the brand identity, creating a challenge for developing a shared brand meaning. This research explores how employees co-create brand meaning through their brand experiences and social interactions with management, colleagues and customers. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings highlight that brand meaning commences from historical, superficial brand interactions. Employees then develop brand meaning further through a series of brand interactions and social interactions. Bridging the internal branding and the co-creation literature, this study conceptualizes the evolving, co-created nature of employees' brand meaning in the experiential brand meaning cycle. This study extends Iglesias and Bonet's (2012) work and illustrates the function of employees as readers and authors of brand meaning, emphasizing the crucial role of brand co-creation in guiding employees' brand promise delivery.

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1. Introduction

Brands are strategic assets that provide an organization with an imitable competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996). However, there is scant academic attention to understand how to develop a successful brand in the higher education (HE) context (Chapleo, 2007). Much of the recent literature has emphasized the role of marketing and branding within HE institutions that enables them to adapt to the global competitive environment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Lowrie, 2007; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008; Whisman, 2009:). Research has focused on market orientation in export markets (Assad, Melewar, Cohen, & Balmer, 2013), branding and performance (Chapleo, 2010; Robertson & Khatibi, 2013), corporate branding (Balmer, Liao, & Wang, 2010) and brand image (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Sung & Yang, 2008).

Branding in the HE context is complex as the product offering is intangible (Anctil, 2008; Mourad, Ennew, & Kortam, 2011) and perceived as a high-involvement decision (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Customers (e.g. students) interact with other customers and a range of different employees (academic and non-academic) over an extended period of time (e.g. a 3-year degree). Hence, engaging employees is necessary in the brand development process because they are brand representatives who are at the interface between the HE institution and their customers. Yang and Mutum (2015) argue that brand co-creation in HE tends to

focus on the consumer/student co-creation rather than the academic/employee co-creation process. Therefore, this study focuses on the internal market to understand how employees learn about the university brand, internally co-create the brand, and communicate the brand values to customers and other stakeholders. Specifically, this study seeks to establish how brand meaning emerges through employee engagement in the co-creation process of the university brand identity; to identify where tensions appear when employees' brand perception contradicts with the espoused brand identity; and to determine the role of brand meaning in employees' brand delivery.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand identity

In a competitive market place, the brand is “a distinctive name or symbol” (Aaker, 1996) that adds value “over and above its functional performance” (Knox, 2004). Central to the brand are core values that are functional, emotional, experiential, and symbolic, which develop an emotional connection with consumers and create a unique brand experience (Aaker, 1996; Cova & Cova, 2002; Fournier, 1998; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). These brand values are encapsulated into a simple, consistent message that is delivered to the internal and the external markets (White & de Chernatony, 2002). Brand identity represents the internal perspective of what the brand is whereas brand image reflects how the external market perceives the brand to be (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2001; Dowling & Otubanjo, 2011; Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013;

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Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). In essence, what exists in the stakeholders' mind is the shared brand meaning derived from the interactions between the external and the internal markets (Burmam, Jost-Benz, & Riley, 2009; Dowling & Otubanjo, 2011; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013).

For a brand to be successful, a clear identity shared by all stakeholders is necessary. A strong brand identity captures the brand vision and provides strategic impetus for reinforcing brand values (Asem & Kosteljik, 2008; Balmer, 2012; Vallaster & Lindgreen, 2013; Wallace, de Chernatony, & Buil, 2013a, 2013b). Hence, the internal market must first accept the distinctive brand identity crafted by the brand owner (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; de Chernatony, Cottam, & Segal-Horn, 2006; Nandan, 2005). According to de Chernatony (2002), brand identity is composed of six distinct components, namely vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships and presentation. The brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2001) includes physique to represent a functional element of brand identity. The brand identity prism also illustrates how the external market influences brand identity and suggests that brand meaning represents the external market's brand perception, which is reflected back into the organization. Hence, both the external and the internal markets need to have a shared brand meaning reinforced by the organization's strategic brand strategy.

However, while extant research in the branding literature conceptualizes and operationalizes various brand components, understanding how brand meaning develops and how the internal market is involved in co-creating successful brand narratives is vital (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Ind et al., 2013). This is especially important in the HE sector, where employees are key performers in delivering brand values. The internal market (both academic and non-academic employees) has extensive interactions with external stakeholders through admissions, recruitment, employment, teaching, research, business engagement and graduation (Chapleo, 2010). Many consumers make a high-involvement purchase of a degree once in their lifetime (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Yang & Mutum, 2015). Therefore, the role of the brand in communicating the institution's values and identity to consumers becomes more prevalent as a strong brand reduces risk in decision making. Although there is some resistance to the notion of students as customers (Barrett, 1996; Conway, Mackay, & Yorke, 1994), some authors argue that HE is people-based, reflecting the key nature of services marketing (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol, 1998; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 2003). However, the concept of brand image and reputation may be interpreted differently in HE compared with other services organizations, necessitating studies with a specific focus for the HE context. For instance, a highly reputable HE institution can afford to reject a number of applications and yet still enhance its brand image, which is not the case for most service industries (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

2.2. Brand co-creation and internal market in HE

Due to increasing competition from domestic and international players, HE institutions recognize the need to differentiate themselves from other players in the market place (Chapleo, 2007, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). Similar to most service industries, HE offerings include a series of intangible, heterogeneous and perishable characteristics, all of which highlight the role of employees in delivering the service brand experience to customers (Anctil, 2008; Mourad et al., 2011). In response to the competitive environment, HE institutions have adopted an outside-in approach, such as redesigning logos, straplines and advertising (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008; Whisman, 2009). This approach merely offers short-term benefits, focusing on the visible parts of the brand rather than being part of a coherent branding strategy. Whisman (2009) argues for the internal market's engagement in the HE context because "when communications and marketing professionals develop brand strategies that are not supported internally, consumers feel betrayed and frustrated."

Thus, while HE institutions focus primarily on two key stakeholders; employees (academic and non-academic staff) and students, they should take an inside-out approach. An integrated internal brand co-creation strategy should provide effective and meaningful dialogues about brand values and brand identity to enable employees to actively engage in the co-creation of the HE institution's brand identity (Chapleo, 2011). Indeed, brand co-creation starts with dialogues between internal and external stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), with the brand being a point of access to the inner working of the organization. Through these dialogues, the stakeholders co-create and define brand identity for themselves. Payne, Storbacka, Frow, and Knox (2009) highlight the diverse nature of the core responsibilities of internal stakeholders because customers rarely engage in co-creation alone. Their argument emphasizes the importance of the internal market. Studies in brand co-creation (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Payne et al., 2009; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011) highlight the interactions between internal and external stakeholders. However, an understanding of how brand meaning is created, shared, and co-created among the internal stakeholders before interacting with external stakeholders is limited. This understanding is of particular importance when the internal market's attitudes and behaviors influence those of the external market, which ultimately affects brand co-creation and the co-created brand identity.

2.3. Internal branding

The internal branding literature suggests that the internal market is at the interface between an organization and stakeholders. Therefore, employees play a key role in influencing how the external market makes sense of the brand (Wangenheim, Evanschitzky, & Wunderlich, 2007). Studies (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) illustrate that when employees have a shared brand meaning, they become identified with the brand and are committed to deliver the brand promise to the external stakeholders. Papisolomou and Vrontis (2006) add that employees provide a personal connection between the brand and customers, thus, enhancing customer brand loyalty.

A successful branding strategy must consider the role of the internal market and devise a communications strategy that integrates both external and internal aspects (Hallam, 2003). Internal branding requires an integrative framework between human resource management and marketing in terms of internal marketing communication (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) to influence employees' brand promise delivery. Internal branding advocates two-way (formal and informal) communications between employees and management (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrmann, 2007; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Hence, internal branding encourages social interactions both between management and employees, and between employees to ensure a shared understanding of brand meaning within the internal market. For Payne et al. (2009), employee engagement is important in brand co-creation because the outcome of co-creation is the development of brand experience. This concurs with the internal branding literature that argues that the internal market must first understand and be committed to deliver the brand identity core values to customers to create a shared brand meaning between the internal and the external markets (Balmer et al., 2010; Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011).

However, internal branding studies have not provided an in-depth understanding of how the social interactions among the internal audiences develop into a shared brand meaning. Due to the nature of the HE context that has a diverse staff base and provides a variety of product offerings, understanding how academic and non-academic employees develop, exchange, and co-create shared brand meaning is more challenging. However, no study has explored brand co-creation within the HE context. Therefore, this study focuses upon the internal market to understand (a) how employees develop and co-create the university

brand meaning, and (b) how they communicate this shared brand meaning to customers and stakeholders.

3. Methodology

Brands symbolize meaning in social contexts (Urde, 1999), and these meanings comprise of a phenomenological interpretation within a specific cultural context (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). Meanings are derived from both language and social interactions (Peñaloza & Venkatesh, 2006) and reflect both understanding and the interplay with the individual's lifeworld (Cunliffe, 2008; Edvardsson et al., 2011). While Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that meanings only emerge through social interactions amongst individuals, it is in the production and reproduction of these social interactions where value and meaning are co-created, and finally, a social reality could be understood (Edvardsson et al., 2011). In terms of HE marketing the relevance of phenomenology lies in its ability to explain what constitutes a social consensus, one that shapes interactions and perceptions of individuals and their identities (Lowrie, 2007). This takes place over time, through a series of events and interpersonal interactions, which construct meaning “prior to, during and after the actual exchange and use(s) take place” (Peñaloza & Venkatesh, 2006).

The study was developed in line with the underpinning principles of phenomenology (Moran, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Schutz, 1967; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). Exploratory research was conducted to gain insight into the co-creation of brand meaning, specifically to capture and understand the relationship between the employee, the brand, and the organization. Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants who could contribute to building an understanding of the phenomena (Coyné, 1997; Tongco, 2007). Participants, who have lived experiences with the HE brand meaning development, were recruited from a university in México, which has more than 30 campuses throughout the country (Groenewald, 2004; Laverty, 2003).

A total of 38 in-depth interviews were conducted in summer, 2013. The sample included 21 males and 17 females with different backgrounds and employment duration (See Table 1). To provide enough depth and richness to the unique experiences of the phenomena, certain criteria were used to select the participants (Laverty, 2003). Therefore, they were from different departments with a high-level of contacts with customers (recruitment, marketing, and senior management) and different organizational positions (operative, medium management, and senior management). Finally, given the organization's size, three campuses were selected, and their senior management was invited to participate in the interviews. Each campus selected is of different size. The North, where the corporate office is located, is the largest campus. The Central campus is medium-sized. The Southern campus is the smallest.

The interviews were conducted in a meeting room, or an office at the campus where participants work. Given the native language of the researcher and the participants, all interviews were conducted in Spanish. Interviews lasted 50 minutes on average. Each interview was digitally (audio) recorded (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990; Kvale, 2006;), and then transcribed by the same researcher, analyzed in Spanish, and then translated into English. All personal information was removed from the transcripts to assure the confidentiality of the participants, and pseudonyms were created for each participant.

According to the reader-response theory, an experience is a dialogue between authors and readers, who are capable of making multiple interpretations according to their own contexts (Scott, 1994). This situation leads to the idea of brand experiences as mutable texts requiring an interpretive process, in which the subjects are involved and influenced by their own contexts. This suggests that hermeneutics is the best tool for the analysis of this study. Therefore, the study acknowledged that the notion of a double hermeneutic was necessary in order to interpret the meaning of the subjects under exploration (Cunliffe, 2011; Rennie, 2012). This perspective offers the understanding of a

Table 1
Participant profile.

Alias	Role	Level	Years at university	Alumni	Gender	Campus
Raul	Senior management	S	20	Y		
Esau	Academy	O	5	N		
Eduardo			8			
Alberto		M	24	Y		
Leo	Marketing	M	29	Y	M	
Gabriel	Communication	M	10	N		
Ignacio		M	9	N		Centre
Roberto			3	Y		
Samantha	Recruitment	O	0.1	N		
Maria			1.5	Y		
Carlota			1.5	Y	F	
Deyanira	Marketing	M	12	N		
Adriana	Communication	M	10	N		
Raymundo	Senior management	S	26	Y	M	North
Renan			26	N		
Samuel			42	Y		
Julian			8			
Manolo		S	10			
Jonas	Marketing	M	11	Y		
Jacob			8	N		
Arturo			5			
Luis	Recruitment	O	5	Y		
Milena			7			
Reyna			5			
Alma	Marketing	S	23			
Claudia	Student	O	8	Y		
Zaira	services/admissions		4	N	F	
Alejandra			20	Y		
Gabriela	Scholar	M	23	Y		
Elena	Communication	M	18	Y		
Miguel	Senior management	S	18	Y		
Enrique	Recruitment	O	0.1	Y		
Ricardo	Marketing	M	5	Y	M	
Gerardo		O	1			
Mireya	Academy	M	17	N		South
Catalina		O	1.5	Y		
Ivonne	Recruitment	O	3	N	F	
Adele			2			

subject–subject relationship in a ‘horizon’ of time and expectations (Cunliffe, 2011). The horizon of time considers the interpretation of meaning as an evolving process, resulting from the contemporary significance of collective interpretations over historical moments (Hatch & Rubin, 2006). Based on the work of Scott (1994); Hatch and Rubin (2006) elaborated their theory of brand understanding as texts. They proposed that the Scott's (1994) concept covers an extensive range of theoretical points, establishing a basis for marketing communications as texts and brands as communicative entities.

Regarding brand readings, each brand interaction implies a new interpretation process (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). The brand messages or author's intentions become promises that are interpreted through language and the reader's lens. Most important is that promises must be kept to fulfil the expectations (Brodie, Glynn, & Little, 2006; Calonijs, 2006; Hatch & Rubin, 2006). Each brand interaction implies a re-interpretation and re-evaluation of the expectation of the promise, building a new interpretation of the expectation, reflecting in what Iglesias and Bonet (2012) term the re-interpretation loop of brand meaning. The brand re-interpretation loop takes place at every brand touch point (i.e. employee-brand, customer-brand, and customer-employee interactions). This concept of re-interpretation leads to a new interpretation of brand meaning that captures the brand co-creation process. Most brand touch points in the HE context represent customer-employee interfaces. Therefore, employees play a key role in influencing these re-interpretation loops. However, like other studies in co-creation, Iglesias and Bonet (2012) focus on the consumer perspective. The research followed the hermeneutic method with numerous iterations and “re-interpretations” (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012) to

produce a rigorous and relevant reflection about the participants' development of a shared brand meaning.

4. Findings and discussion

This study shows that the brand meaning that employees develop evolves throughout their brand interactions and experiences with management, other employees, and external stakeholders. The findings support Iglesias and Bonet's (2012) concept of re-interpretation loops and extend this concept to the internal market. Hence, this study contributes to extant knowledge by highlighting how employees in the HE context, co-create their university brand meaning; and explains the stages in the re-interpretation loops of brand meaning.

This study identifies that brand meaning is generated through the experiences people have with the brand, concurring with the propositions of past studies (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Ghodeswar, 2008; Ind et al., 2013; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Through the lived brand experiences, each person kindles their own internal processes of brand meaning construction. However, the experience is the first step in a non-linear process, influenced by contextual issues within an indeterminate time period, and framed within the individuals' social interactions (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). Social interaction is an evolving process that will continue as long as the person has the ability and motivation to participate in such experiences.

This concept includes several important factors relating to how employees construct their brand meaning: a) individuals must interact with each other to live brand experiences, developing a collective brand meaning; b) the experiences represent their interactions in forms of communicative acts that individuals take different roles as authors and readers according to specific activities and intentions; c) individuals adopt their own internal processes to perceive, interpret, and create a brand meaning through their own experiences; d) the brand meaning is then co-created during their social interactions with other individuals; e) the brand meaning constantly evolves in line with individuals' brand experiences and exposure to brand-related communication activities. That individuals perceive and interpret brand experiences through dialogues gives the brand its uniqueness and complexity, characterised by the "re-interpretation loops" of co-creation (Iglesias & Bonet, 2012).

When a person joins a social group, a learning process takes place, leading to an understanding of meaning of the social structures and practices within the group (Edvardsson et al., 2011; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012). This internalisation process combines both macro and micro brand meaning cycles. The macro cycle includes historic brand experiences and internal branding that the employee has been exposed to,

while the micro cycle is an individual dialectic process of evaluating, and re-interpreting the brand information. Hence, employees' brand meaning development combines both macro and micro brand meaning cycles, reflecting how internal branding influences the way individuals make sense of the brand. This process is explained by Alejandra, an alumna who has worked at the institution for 20 years:

When there are newbies, I usually tell my colleagues that we should help guide and orientate them for about three weeks. We cannot let them work when they don't understand how they should represent our brand.

A brand meaning is derived from the history, and evolves over time (Hatch & Rubin, 2006). The evolution of a brand meaning is represented by an arc. The historical brand knowledge (macro cycle) is updated as employees evaluate their interactions with their experiences (micro cycle) of the brand.

Hatch and Rubin's (2006) concept of the arc reflects the hermeneutic category of the horizon of expectations, where there is a trajectory of meaning development in a timeline. One particular participant, Manolo, who has been with the university for 18 years, provides comprehensive insight into how his historical brand awareness evolves over time. The brand messages at the macro level provide him with brand knowledge and experiences based on his interpretation and understanding, representing his self-reflection of the brand meaning. The brand meaning thus developed guides his attitudes and behaviors in living the brand. Fig. 1 presents the arc of internal brand co-creation that summarizes the narratives of Manolo's brand experience.

The arc represents how the macro and micro brand meaning cycles take place simultaneously and also demonstrates how personal and social interactions, and brand experiences influence employees' creation, re-creation, and co-creation of brand values. The brand meaning that employees develop shapes the HE institution's brand identity (Ran & Golden, 2011). The arc of internal brand co-creation reinforces the concept of the re-interpretation loops of Iglesias and Bonet (2012). Based on the findings, this study identifies four stages of the micro brand learning cycles: awareness, interpretation, appropriation, and communication illustrated in the experiential brand meaning cycle in Fig. 2.

4.1. Awareness

Employees discover and become aware of the brand before joining the institution. Each new brand experience acquired perpetuates a micro cycle (i.e. brand evaluation and interpretation). The findings

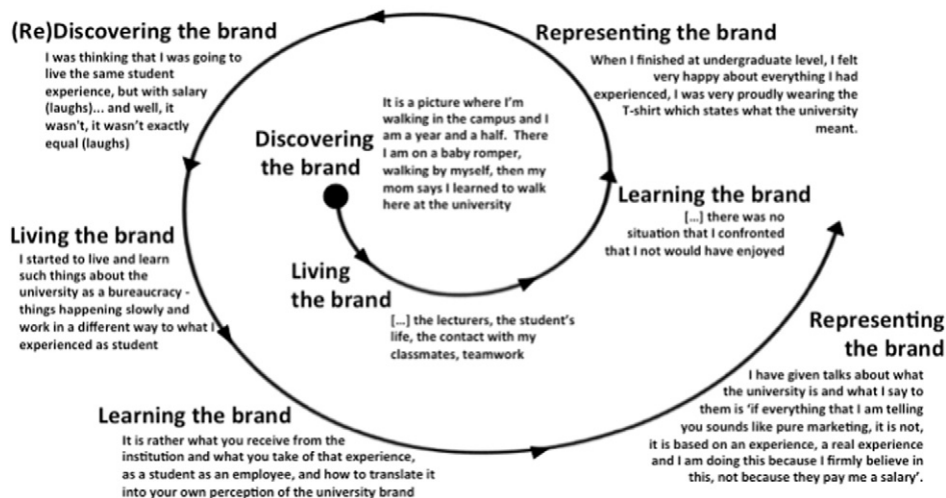


Fig. 1. The arc of internal brand co-creation.

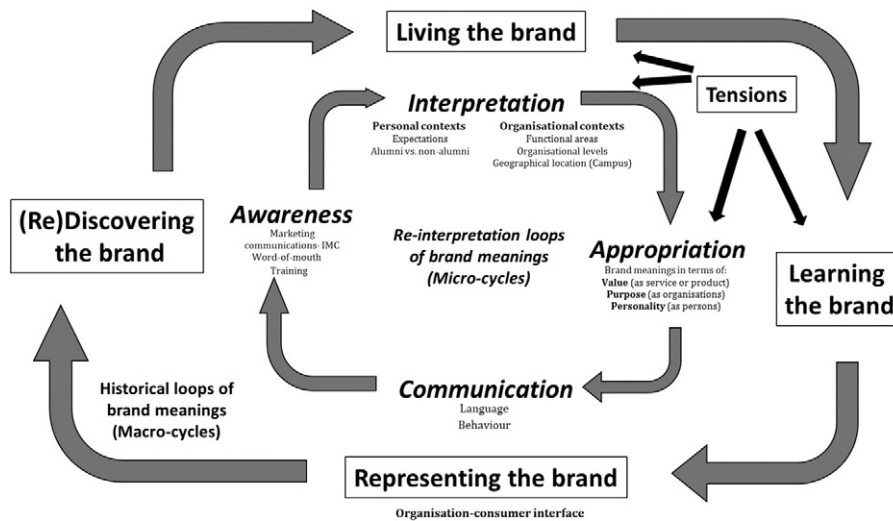


Fig. 2. Experiential brand meaning cycle.

indicate that a mere exposure to peripheral brand cues (e.g. logos, buildings, and campus) may trigger brand meaning development. Individuals may not elaborate on the initial brand meaning created until the brand becomes relevant to them later on. Renan comments

I accidentally learned about this university when I was a child. I found a book of Baldor's algebra, which has the university's logo on. [...] It may have been about 10–11 years ago [...] I didn't notice anything about the university until 1987 when an ex-classmate told me about a job vacancy there. Then, the university became relevant to me again.

The participant acts as a passive reader of brand communications during this initial learning stage. Relevant brand information is stored, even when he does not elaborate on it. This initial stage of awareness is labeled brand discovery as illustrated by Catalina

I did not have personal experiences with the university. I heard the name, and some stories about it through friends. I learnt about its reputation of being really expensive. Unless you're rich, you won't get to study there. That was what I discovered about the university, at the very beginning.

This passive discovery of the brand creates their brand awareness, even without any direct brand experiences. When they become a university employee, a number of brand and social interactions through internal branding activities (e.g. internal communication, orientation, informal communications, and training) enrich their brand awareness. For Luis

I have learned more about the university through such communication channels as emails, meetings, training from the management, [...] also chats with management and colleagues.

When they found that the new brand knowledge was relevant, they became motivated to move to the second stage, interpretation.

4.2. Interpretation

The interpretation stage reflects personal interpretation, analysis, and understanding (micro cycle). At this stage, they remain readers but are no longer passive recipients of the messages. They actively evaluate and interpret the new brand knowledge acquired through brand interactions (i.e. physical environment, and brand communications including brand narratives, metaphors) and social interactions (Alvesson, 2003).

Thus, the personal and the social contexts, where the brand experiences emerge, influence the interpretation stage (Cunliffe, 2011). Participants suggest that they use the brand knowledge stored in their memory and the newly acquired brand knowledge to inform their brand interpretation. For example, Gabriel claims

I came to realize that the university is more than what I thought it was. Ten years ago, I had a pleasant experience with it. Now that I work here and have learned about its culture, its mission, its values, I perceive it to be an ambitious, innovative institution.

However, the change of role from student to employee provides different brand knowledge and experiences. Becoming an employee provides richer brand knowledge, hence it is unsurprising to see the brand meaning begin to change. More importantly, the brand knowledge gained as an employee is more relevant and influential than as a student. Milena suggests

You can see how the university operates as an employee. When you are a student, a consumer, you expect more but once you're an employee, it's different. You understand why there are issues.

Working for the university, employees interact with internal sources of brand knowledge (e.g. other employees across different faculties and roles, management, and internal brand communications) and external sources (e.g. students, business partners, and external brand communications). These sources offer richer and deeper brand awareness, leading to a re-discovery of the brand. For example, Manolo, as depicted in Fig. 1, creates and re-creates brand meaning based on his brand experiences and interactions. From being a student to becoming an employee at the university, he has a good experience as an outsider (being a proud graduate), and mixed brand experiences as an insider (i.e. bureaucratic process, and enjoyable brand touch points with customers and colleagues). He constantly re-interprets the brand meaning based on these brand and social interactions. As a result, he becomes emotionally connected with the brand, which subsequently influences his brand delivery to students, as well as his colleagues.

Employees' co-creation of the brand identity is a result of their personal brand interpretation and social interactions with the internal and the external markets. However, when there are discrepancies between the existing brand knowledge and the new brand experiences, employees experience tensions that create uncertainty in developing the brand meaning and understanding of brand identity. The difficulties in assimilating the new brand knowledge with their current brand

knowledge create some tension. Also, when there are discrepancies between brand information (e.g. internal communication, historical brand knowledge) and brand experiences (social interactions with colleagues and customers), employees interpret the brand meaning based on their own brand experiences. Alana explains

I believed that we have failed to tell the right story of our university. It seems like the story being told by managers is different from colleagues, as if there were two universities. What I see is that there are not two universities, instead, these two stories reflect only one university with two groups taking different perspectives

Indeed, the findings highlight that social interactions between members of close proximity (e.g. positions, faculties, and geographical location) are influential on employees' brand interpretation. As the interpretation continues, some employees play a reader role, some an author role. They share and exchange their brand knowledge and experiences, resulting in co-created brand meaning. Arturo describes

You gain knowledge from the experiences of working here, sometimes through brand manuals, training, advertisements, and chatting with your colleagues. Of course, you accumulate all this knowledge but the real meaning is from seeing their behaviors, from sharing what we believe about the university.

Hence, employees perceive brand meaning co-created through social interactions as the real brand identity, which may not necessarily be the same as the marketing communications strategy. The findings, thus, imply how ineffective internal branding can create tensions for employees, which could jeopardize the brand co-creation process. The lack of a shared brand meaning within the internal market hinders employees from delivering the brand experiences as promised to customers and other stakeholders, which is the desired outcome of brand co-creation (Payne et al., 2009). The interactions between internal and external stakeholders may result in a co-created brand identity that misrepresents the core brand values. Nevertheless, when the co-created meaning is accepted as the brand reality, the appropriation stage of the re-interpretation loops takes place.

4.3. Appropriation

According to Ricœur (cited in Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Tan, Wilson, & Oliver, 2009), appropriation is the stage where employees establish brand associations based on the co-created brand meaning, and develop their brand engagement. When they accept the co-created brand meaning as the brand reality, they fulfill their reader role. For Zaira

That is how it is communicated, that is what I feel and experience.

For some participants, there was evidence of internalization of the university values, showing brand engagement. Maria explains

The longer I am here, the more I like it, and the more I believe in the values and ideology, and the more I believe that they want to make Mexico a better country.

In effect, the appropriation stage reflects the internal and emotional processing of the brand meaning. Brand associations encompass employees' understanding of the brand purpose, personality, and values. The brand meaning induces their emotional brand attachment. Thus, during the appropriation stage, employees internalize the brand and develop brand engagement including brand commitment and brand trust (King & Grace, 2012). The findings illustrate that brand personification facilitates employees' brand engagement, for Eduardo

I view the university as a committed, strong, and honest person. Thinking of the brand as a person helps me identify myself with the brand.

Furthermore, when employees internalize the brand values as a result of their interpretation process, they take ownership of the brand meaning and decide how they would modify it. Roberto suggests that

Based on new experiences with the brand, I may add more brand associations or take some away. People may think my brand understanding is not right, but it's up to me if I wish to change it or not.

When employees do not share their understanding of the brand meaning with management or other colleagues, they face confusion, which may prevent them from being engaged with the brand. Consequently, how employees deliver and communicate the brand to consumers may affect the consumers' ability to live the brand as expected by management.

4.4. Communication

The final phase of the re-interpretation loops identified by this study is communication. This stage represents how employees convey the brand meaning at each brand touch point. Hence, employees radically change their role as a reader to a brand author. That is, from making sense of the brand and interpreting its meaning, they become a communicator of the meaning through dialogues with students and other stakeholders. Employees may adjust their interactions with students according to the students' needs but they will deliver the brand meaning based on their understanding, as Luiz explains

What I try to do is to deliver the brand to prospective students and their parents in ways that they will enjoy the brand as I do. I am an alumni, I want them to have the brand experiences that I had.

Participants imply that this communication stage requires their commitment to play the author role. For Zaira

My boss, my colleagues, and myself, we may have different ways of communicating the brand. We all are the sources of brand information. I am one too and it is a commitment, a very big commitment.

This passage indicates that the communication stage will not be effectively realized if the previous stages are not well developed. Although the communication stage completes the interpretation loop, the macro and micro cycles of brand meaning continue. Therefore, as one interpretation loop completes, the beginning of another loop emerges as long as the social interactions among different stakeholders continue.

Employees, as brand authors, make a conscious or unconscious decision of what and how to express the brand through dialogue during social interactions, reflecting their understanding of the brand meaning. At the same time, they also re-evaluate the brand meaning based on these social interactions, highlighting brand co-creation among stakeholders. Thus, the experiential cycles of brand meaning continue and a new discovery of brand experiences leads to further re-interpretation, appropriation, and communication.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study is to build an understanding of how the internal market co-creates a brand meaning and communicates it with their customers in the HE context. However, specific to the nature of HE, customers interact with the brand with a diverse range of employees. Furthermore, a majority of customer–employee interactions are extensive and last longer than those in other service industries, accentuating employees' critical role in facilitating brand co-creation between the internal and the external markets.

Extending the conceptual work of Iglesias and Bonet (2012), this study reveals that brand meaning is an evolving process. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing knowledge by elucidating four stages of the re-interpretation loops, highlighting that employees develop a brand meaning at both macro and micro cycles. Employees continuously co-create a brand meaning by playing both reader and author of the brand meaning through social interactions. The experiential cycles of brand meaning also reveal the tensions emerging when there are discrepancies between the brand meaning in the internal market's mind, and internal/external brand communications. When experiencing tensions, employees resort to their own brand interpretation to resolve the uncertainty. Whilst internal branding enables employees to deliver the brand promise to the external markets (e.g., Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011), it does not explicitly identify how employees interpret brand messages and develop brand meaning. This study shows that employees act as brand readers in the internal branding process and social interactions (macro cycle). The macro cycle happens together with the micro cycle where employees evaluate, interpret, and appropriate the brand meaning. Then, they become a brand author who communicates their brand meaning with colleagues, and external stakeholders. Hence, this study emphasizes the need for effective internal branding strategies that will enable brand co-creation to develop in ways that create the appropriate brand expectation.

The experiential brand meaning cycle facilitates management in the HE context and other high-involvement service contexts to appreciate the unique role of each employee as a brand reader and brand author. Thus, they should engage employees in co-creating a brand meaning so that employees become committed to live the brand at all brand touch points. Whilst the brand meaning is subjective to individual employees' interpretation, effective internal branding could influence their brand co-creation. Management should provide employees with timely and relevant brand messages, and consistent brand experiences. Consequently, employees will be able to rightly transform the espoused brand identity to brand reality during their interactions with other stakeholders. Thus, the brand meaning co-creation will perpetuate in ways that realize the brand identity. Yet, management should be aware the subjective nature of individuals' interpretation of brand information and experiences. They should constantly monitor potential discrepancies and tensions throughout this experiential brand meaning cycle, namely during their brand delivery.

6. Limitations and further research

This study focused on employees, as brand representatives of HE institutions. However, a HE brand meaning is complex, and co-created by different stakeholders who socially interact with each other and with customers. Therefore, further studies: should explore which stakeholders are key actors in co-creating a brand meaning for HE institutions; examine what brand information and experiences are required and acquired, when they play a role as brand reader and brand author; and finally, seek to extend this study by determining how the reader and the author roles of brand meaning are negotiated during social interactions between the internal and the external market in different service industries.

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