

AWARENESS AND USEFULNESS OF INTERNAL BRANDING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

In service industry the role of employees especially the behavior and attitude of front-liners play a vital role in building a brand's repute amongst stakeholders. To build employees' behavior for the delivery of an organizations' brand promise, role of internal branding and its activities come into play according to relevant and reviewed literature. With previous studies on internal branding confined mainly to private enterprises and service industries, Cahill (1995) included government/public sector agencies in the list of organizations that may derive value from internal branding activities, hence this study focuses on and expands empirical research through delving into the public higher education sector in two highly developed western European countries: Germany and the Netherlands.

This empirical study had two objectives, firstly, to investigate the level of knowledge and understanding of the internal branding concept in two specific case studies (Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt in Germany and School of Governance, Utrecht University in the Netherlands) with respect to the cultural perspective (Christensen et al., 2007) and norms and values communication based perspective (Karmark, 2005), and secondly, the social and scientific testing of internal branding theory (dimensions and factors of failure and success as developed by Mahnert, 2009) particularly in universities and the public sector in general.

In culmination, based on intensified competition developing in public higher education institutions (HEIs), the need for internal branding for the employee engagement was promulgated in the findings with majority approving of the dimensions and factors of internal branding theory (with relevant customization to public sector needs) for improving public service delivery and strengthening public organizations' brand equity.

Keywords: Public Sector Internal Branding, Internal Brand Management, Internal Branding in Public Universities / Higher Education Institutions

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Due to never-ending and ever-pending competition in the global market of the 21st century, there is a dire need of differentiation among competing organizations, their products and services. Precisely, if we talk about service industry, probably gone are the days when organizations relied heavily on old-fashioned cosmetic tactics of differentiation and positioning in the eyes and minds of their stakeholders. Millennium customers who are highly tech savvy understand and have become wise enough to gauge and evaluate brands, due to their ever changing needs and at the same time eliminated barriers to global competition; embracement of branding, easy access to digital marketing, online presence, social and electronic media, discussion forums, reputational surveys of organizations, feedback ratings and reviews of goods and services can be referred as few examples of digital influence and reasons of such transformation. Hence, there is ample opportunity in service industry to probe new mechanisms of differentiation for the success of brands to stay truly competitive, locally and globally. What can service organization ensures to have a real distinctive impact on their customers/clients/citizens? Here, in service industry the role of employees especially the behavior and attitudes of customer-contact employees play a vital role in building brands repute among stakeholders and to build such behavior among workforce to deliver the organizations' brand promise, role of internal branding and its activities come into play (Bergstrom et al., 2002; Judson et al., 2006; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Judson et al., 2009; Whisman, 2009; Kashmiri, 2010, Kaewsurin, 2012). To-date one may find sufficient literature, researches and related work to create and maintain external branding efforts but considerably quite less and vague on designing, maintaining and implementing internal branding activities. After thorough reading on internal branding literature, the researcher decided to take up this notion as a challenge to investigate it further in the higher education sector of public sector universities of two advanced western European economies, precisely Germany and the Netherlands. One of the reasons for this cross-national study is the attention brought by previous studies for future research to be conducted on service industries other than airline, hospitality and retailing such as education, healthcare, financial sectors, and public service sectors. Additionally, most of these studies were for private and third sector organizations but Cahill (1995) includes government/public sector agencies in the list of organizations that may derive value from internal branding activities (a contemporary re-engineered differentiation mechanism) or put differently, it can be believed that the upsurge in private sector branding will also become perceptible in the public sector (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012).

Having said that, the question arises, what is internal branding and what benefit/s organizations may get by designing internal branding policy/strategy and executing it successfully according to the generated literature on the very construct to-date. Mahnert (2009) apprised that according to the existing literature, internal branding is a sub-discipline or tool of internal marketing which is concerned with the expedition of organizational strategy and change. This researcher further apprised that although the literature on internal marketing is conflicting to some extent and some sort of deficiency exist in terms of focus, but on the other hand, there are also certain classifiable developments within the arena of internal marketing and that is evident from the literature on the subject produced to-date. Internal marketing and internal branding may be more valuable to

services than goods producing organizations and the reason behind this is due to higher degree of interaction between customer and employee resultantly grander significance of employees' behavior (Flipo, 1986; de chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001; Farrell et al., 2001; Straughan and Cooper, 2002; Mahnert, 2009). However, Turpin (2003) lengthens the application of internal branding to goods producing organizations due to the significance of internal brand congruence in any stakeholder message, instead of only with customers (Quester and Kelly, 1999). The researcher will shed more light on internal marketing in the following discussion but for a time being its definition and connection with internal branding will serve the purpose, "Internal marketing can be described as accumulation and application of functions and tools aimed at the formation and maintenance of consistent, effective, efficient and customer-oriented workforce. These objectives are achieved through communication with and attraction, retention, motivation, education and management of suitable employees. Suitable employees in this context are those who are conscious of and committed to the needs of the organization and other employees at all levels in the internal value chain, subsequent to this definition, internal branding is put into context as a tool within that function of internal marketing concerned with the facilitation of strategy and change. More to the point, internal branding is defined as concerted, inter-departmental and multi-directional internal communications effort carried out to create and maintain an internal brand. Internal branding attempts to achieve consistency with the external brand and encourage brand commitment and propensity for brand championship among employees. To this end, internal branding is the reflection of the values and realization of the promise of the brand internally and externally", affirms Mahnert (2009, p.12). Another definition which Kaewsurin (2012, p.48) proposed is that it is "a way to enable employees to understand the values inherent in the brand and organization in order for them to deliver the brand promises to the consumers in their day-to-day operations". One of the other definitions picked from Canadian Marketing Association survey (MacLaverly et al., 2007, p.4) on internal branding is "the set of strategic processes that align and empower employees to deliver the appropriate customer experience in a consistent fashion. These processes include, but are not limited to, internal communications, training support, leadership practices, reward & recognition programs, recruitment practices and sustainability factors". Mahnert (2009) further affirms that according to the internal branding theory, employees have considerable influence on the performance of the brand in general through their conduct and feelings towards that brand, particularly in the case of extremely noticeable employee behaviors as in customer services department and high customer/citizen contact service organizations. The foundation of brand equity is based to a vast degree on indescribable, beyond measure assets based within the mind of consumers through vigilant segmentation, targeting and positioning. Additionally, analogy of all messages of the brand becomes essential for its longevity and success. Thus, to evade inconsistent brand messages in inner surroundings damaging external branding attempts internal branding programs are executed in order to make sure that employees comprehend, support and ultimately start living the brand.

Therefore, to successfully execute internal branding programs and in order to engage employees organizations must understand that internal branding is a multi-disciplinary exercise demanding inter-departmental/cross-functional groups to participate in policy formulation and its regulation

and although marketing department performs a chief part in explaining and executing internal branding, an effective internal brand demands the coalition and sincere participation of management executives and human resources too (de Chernatony and Cottam, 2006; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Simmons, 2009; Kashmiri, 2010). Similarly, according to the findings of the study conducted by Groom et al. (2008), the cross-functional element is one of the crucial aspects in brand success and being the bond between organization's policy and execution. And the significant constituent of this bond is the employee hence it also necessitates to comprehend what is essential to employees i.e. the drivers of employees' commitment in addition to practices for designing and supporting internal branding programs. Groom et al. (2008, p.5) further emphasized, "Given that 'brand' has moved towards being a customer experience concept, so the ability of employees to deliver that experience has become increasingly salient. The importance of the role of employees in service and service related industries is immutable". As the core from which all brand initiatives pop up, is the set of values connected with the brand, therefore organizations that wanted to excel must spend considerable amount of resources and energy in designing and spreading brand values. The problem lies within the fact that the brand promise and values are generally brainstormed, developed and disseminated at senior management level but people who actually carry out those values are not well informed and are low paid front-line service providers, therefore in order to execute and sustain internal branding, organizations must understand that internal branding is a cross-functional concern (marketing and human resources are majorly involved teams) where all employees need to be fully conversant of brand values and they should keep on lessening the gap between strategy and implementation, side by side organizations need to inculcate appropriate employee behaviors and for organizations it is crucial to comprehend what is imperative to employees, the drivers of employee engagement concludes Groom et al. (2008). However, Mahnert (2009) is of the view that efficiently and effectively executing internal branding depends on a variety of conditions which are not and disputably cannot all be met all the time, and one of the factor as discussed above is due to the involvement of human resources from diverse background. Aurand et al. (2005) also endorsed that the job of lining up front-line employees' behavior with the brand is not stress-free. Also, Boone (2000) asserts that it gives an opportunity for organizations to tell and show their customers who they are. Hence, it is imperative to encourage employees so that they can comprehend, communicate and perform constantly in alignment with the brand and its values in the moment-of-truth (Henkel et al., 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009a; Morhart et al., 2009; Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009; Almgren et al., 2012). A key to enactment is constantly encouraging and consistently reassuring appropriate employee behaviors.

Thus, it makes considerable sense from the above discussion that organizations which spend considerable amount of resources in designing, educating and regulating brand values are likely to perform better as if compared to those who spend less resources in generating, training and institutionalizing their brand values. Therefore, a key to success for organizations is that their human resources start living the brand and commit themselves with their organizational / brand's identity. But it is easier said than done because of the above discussion of multiple factors involvement and dependency on executing internal branding campaigns successfully. As Internal branding is becoming ever more significant and more all covering around the globe or to put it

more precisely; ignoring internal branding means chances are thick of jeopardizing the brand and ultimately your offerings suggested by Groom et al. (2008), finally drove the researcher to carry out this empirical study, because in the coming time internal branding programs to engage employees at all levels in the private or public sector organizations will be the need of the hour and more all-encompassing. Therefore, according to the internal branding prevailing literature, although it is relatively a new phenomenon/approach researched rarely in higher education sector of advanced economies but if researched well it will draw attention towards the significance of internal branding and customer/citizen promise development, apparently it also seems to help design or re-design the core values of an organization, consistent delivery of services to stakeholders, alignment of internal and external communications, that will most likely result in enhanced brand engagement and overall better brand performance.

Public vs. Private Sector

Christensen et al. (2007, p.4) apprised that around twenty-five years ago, an American political scientist Graham Allison penned down an inspiring article in which he sided with the direction in organization theory that stresses the dissimilarities between organizations in the public and private sectors. The essential elements of the differences are that public concerns differ from private concerns because the public sector has to take into account wide-ranging set of norms and values. Several discussions must be assessed against each other before taking any concrete step or devising any policy, similarly democratic deliberations, statutory values and public prosperity are given more importance in public organizations than in private organizations. Additionally, the leaders of public organizations are held responsible to citizens instead to individuals, distinct groups or boards. Public organizations entail more weight on values such as openness, transparency, equal treatment, justice and predictability. Moreover, they have a citizen-elected leadership, are multifunctional and have to cope with partially conflicting considerations. In short, most public organizations do not operate within a free and competitive economic market, they are multifunctional, own unique values and interests, knowledge, and power base.

On the other hand, Christensen et al. (2007, p.4) further apprised that contrary to this approach is a belief within organization theory that discards the conception of public organizations contrasting from private organizations in any essential respect. The motivation of this type of organization theory is to build models and cultivate understandings that are general and usable for all kinds of organizations hence discharges dissimilarities between public and private organizations as stereotypes. This universalist approach emphasizes resemblances between these two sectors and develop facts that are useable across organizations to evade the division between business-oriented and public-utility organizations. It promotes that variables such as size, tasks and technology can effect organizations more than their status as public and private. The “generic” approach, branded as New Public Management (NPM) mirrors the last twenty-five to thirty years of rapid reformation, transformation and modernization of the public sector. This reorganization of the public sector minimizes the dissimilarities between these two sectors and emphasizes that organizational models and managerial techniques from private sector can be transported to public sector with considerable advantages. The dogma asserting that public

organizations are distinctive and subject to special laws, rules, procedures and forms of organization, is contested by this competing doctrine, for it states that public and private sector organizations have substantial shared features and hence subjected to communal rules and must be organized according to the same standards.

Despite of substantial heterogeneity, between public and private organizations, the researchers' argument is, albeit public sector organizations are poles apart in significant ways from private sector organizations but they can be better organized and articulately governed by borrowing private sector management techniques with some context specification e.g. localization, customization (keeping in mind the structure and size of the organization), hence sides with the theoretical view which emphasizes the significance and benefits of transferring management techniques and organizational models from the private sector. "As public organizations have become ever more concerned about their reputations and reputation management, they have adopted various positive values and identities just like corporate sector to present a good image of themselves for different stakeholders in the environment (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012). This phenomenon is not new, however, and has been identified over many years by various social science theorists and can be traced back to Goffmann's (1959) work on the distinction between front-stage and back-stage in an organization" and similarly by few others reaffirmed by Christensen and Lægneid (2015, p.95).

For this study of internal branding which is considered as an internal marketing facilitating tool of strategy and change in higher education of public universities the researcher's concentration will be on the following perspectives of organizational theory, structural-instrumental approach and cultural-institutional approach by Christensen et al. (2007). A chief distinction between instrumental and institutional perspectives according to Christensen et al. (2007) is that instrumental perspective interprets organization as tool in the hands of leadership. Whereas an institutional perspective permits organization to set its own directions, values and norms, which ultimately produces an autonomous impact on decision-making behavior. Also, internal branding will be studied from the lens/perspective of Karmark (2005) on norms and values communication based perspective for this empirical study.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study has two-pronged purposes, first and foremost, to identify understanding and to explore knowledge or awareness of internal branding concept through prevalent internal organizational practices in two higher education institutions of public sector universities, precisely in Germany and the Netherlands, in order to ascertain patterns of similarities and differences on the subject under study between two national contexts. And secondly to compare/evaluate internal branding dimensions and its factors of failure and/or success (developed by Mahnert, 2009 annexed at A) in relation to public higher education context with the help of respondents from participating institutions to eventually validate or invalidate the dimensions and factors existed in literature. For this study two western European higher education public institutes were chosen for empirical research, specifically the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt in Germany and the Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University in the Netherlands. These two schools were considered particularly suitable

by the researcher primarily due to their operations in public service sector and above all their voluntary willingness to participate in this research project as obtaining access to European higher education institutions was not less than a challenge in itself. Additionally, in the context of this study, the other factors which lead to these institutes' selection was their brand equity and customer awareness as evident through their strong online and social media presence, prevalence of external marketing and branding activities, indication of cognizant or incognizant internal marketing and branding practices, standard operating procedures, codes of conduct and similarly unifying aspects of higher education sector within the realm of public policy and governance. Such information was obtained through preliminary meeting with few of their academic staff members, observation of their digital modes of communication, discussion with their stakeholders and personal assessment.

A written authorization by the researcher through email to utilize the developed tool/list by Mahnert (2009) for this study was taken before commencing the interviews. It is pertinent to mention that the researcher received a prompt response by the author who gave express consent to utilize the developed tool/list within the academic stipulations.

Research for this study was conducted in two extensive stages. The first stage consists of secondary research which incorporates detailed review and analysis of existing literature on internal branding and related concepts. This research was undertaken primarily to construct the theoretical framework in order to grant structure and purpose but also to provide definitions, scope and boundaries for the researched subject under consideration. Whereas the second stage consists of primary empirical research which was conducted in the higher education institutes of a German and a Dutch University.

The primary and empirical research question for this study is:

What are the differences or similarities in the level of awareness and understanding of internal branding concept (phenomenon) in the governance/public policy institutes of two European public sector universities?

And the second more theoretical research question, to which the answer on the first empirical question contributes, is:

What is the relevance of the empirical research for the dimensions of internal branding theory?

In order to answer these two research questions, the following objectives will be addressed from the respondents of participating institutions:

1. Knowledge or awareness of internal brand management within public sector institutes.
2. Significance of internal brand communication and implementation of brand values among employees in public institutes.
3. Reflection of the external brand promise in relation to employees' behavior and attitude of public institutes.

4. Classification and explanation of internal branding concept and its benefits in public sector institutions.
5. Responsibility towards design and execution of internal branding in public sector institutions.
6. Differences and similarities in the practices of internal branding techniques between the two participating cases.
7. Identification of negative effects, risks or limitations of internal branding in public sector institutes.
8. Application and relevance of internal branding dimensions and factors (that may aid or prevent successful implementation of internal branding practices/programs existed in literature) in public sector institutions.
9. To add to the theoretical and practical body of internal branding knowledge.

In total, twenty-two respondents were chosen for empirical research, specifically eleven respondents from each school. Respondents were selected on the grounds of their position and responsibilities within their respective schools regardless of their age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion and experience with the school. Contact and interview arrangements with the respondents in Utrecht School of Governance were made with the assistance of the Secretary to the Head of the Department whereas in Willy Brandt School of Public Policy with the assistance of their Managing Director (Head Administrator). However, due to busy workload and semester commitments of focal person at WBS, it was deemed necessary by the researcher to establish contact through emails as a follow-up with few of the researchers directly. Due to the official commitments of scientific and administrative staff it took approximately nine to ten months for the collection of data from both participating schools.

All participants were informed of the method in which the interview was to take place and were asked to provide signatures on the informed consent encapsulating confidentiality issues before their participation in the interview. Each interview began with a brief introduction, theoretical perspective and the potential benefits of internal branding with a resolve to confirm common understanding of the codes essential for the practice of internal branding between the researcher and the participant. Face-to-face personal interviews were conducted with employees at various levels of organizational hierarchy which include senior management, middle management, scientific staff, administrative staff and even students at each school were approached initially to gauge their understanding and knowledge of the internal branding concept through prevalent internal organizational practices and eventually to evaluate the list of dimensions and facilitating or inhibiting factors of internal branding in relevance/relation to each school under study. In the end, respondents were shown gratitude for their participation and buoyed up to share any further information that may arise following the interview. All of these interviews were recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis, conducted on-campus in the similar working environment of participants and during morning or afternoon timing slots based on pre-scheduled appointments. The primary data for this study was collected exclusively through qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews (annexed at B) due to the exploratory nature of the overall research questions and objectives. The rationale of choosing a research methodology lies in its

ability to provide reliability, validity and coherence to the issue discussed, hence this study required specific input from the leadership/senior management of both schools who were involved in designing and formulating policies, from present employees at different hierarchical levels engaged in delivering and executing such activities and input of the students as one of their key stakeholders who were at the receiving end of service made qualitative method of interviewing the most appropriate.

A comparative research design (this research design entails studying two contrasting cases using more or less identical methods) employing multi-case study approach by using qualitative research method such as in-depth interviews and related documents were made available as sources of data by the participant organizations which helped in addressing the research questions.

The inclination towards specifically choosing qualitative method has to give in-depth written explanations of how people are familiar with the topic in reality across public sector institutes. Through using the qualitative method, the researcher hopes to provide information about not so understandable attitudes, beliefs, opinions and emotions of individuals working in these institutes and hence less likely to be explored through quantitative techniques. Furthermore, most of the studies conducted in the past have chosen quantitative methods to understand the relationship and strength of relationship between internal branding and other constructs, which necessitated larger sample size whereas this study intends to explore in-depth understanding, knowledge or awareness of internal branding concept in two public institutes side by side also compare the results of selected cases in two different national contexts.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- 1.** Even with much to learn from the selected cases through the narrative description of the case study design of analysis this research has been conducted in western European higher education institutions/schools of two public sector universities in Germany and the Netherlands, the implication of generalizability of the findings loom large.
- 2.** The theoretical nature, the second phase (Evaluation of Mahnerts' list) created some uneasiness with the respondents as the terminologies seemed too generic and respondents were hesitant in formulating an opinion. For better understanding of this list, the researcher provided assistance, clarifications were made based on existing literature yet it is believed that this might have created a limitation towards fully responding to the list/tool and respondents may have not provided some additional or related data for fear of being erroneous.
- 3.** Access to important data (e.g. WBS Constitution etc.) in respect of the context proved problematic with the German institute of higher education creating a vacuum where on the contrary if more structural data / internal documents had been made available better assessment and outcomes could have been developed.
- 4.** It cannot be ruled out that although the researcher worked with utmost professionalism and integrity, the analysis and research may be subject to human judgement and personal biases.

RESULTS

Based on the qualitative findings from the empirical research, there are a number of inferences that can be extracted from this research study keeping in mind the research question and its associated objectives. The research findings are analyzed/reviewed and discussed in combination with support from the theory particularly with regard to cultural perspective (Christensen et al., 2007) and norms and values communication based perspective (Karmark, 2005). The results of this empirical study relates to a number of differences and/or similarities in the level of awareness and understanding of internal branding concept among two European university institutes/schools. This research study has also tried to contribute in advancing theoretical and practical knowledge by empirically testing the awareness and understanding of internal branding concept, its associated dimensions and factors of failure and/or success in two European public sector university institutes/schools.

The researcher will address and answer the two research questions followed by recommendations.

RQ 1a: What are the differences or similarities in the level of awareness and understanding of internal branding concept (phenomenon) in the governance/public policy institutes of two European public sector universities?

The researcher finds more differences than similarities when it comes to the comparison of the two HEIs studied. The most common and vividly used term describing their organizational brand by the participants among the different tiers of WBS was “International” whereas USG participants used the word “Community” to describe theirs. In effect, both organizations unknowingly and unsystematically practice some degree of internal branding, yet lack of awareness of the terminology showed relatively lower degree of employees’ understanding, familiarity and appreciation of the WBS brand and the core brand values alignment with the schools’ objectives in and between different layers of organizational hierarchy as compared to USG. Here, the argument of O’Donnell and Shields (2002) on the significance of indemnifying that employees understand the written and unwritten rules of the organization but also the vision, core values and objectives which intrinsically motivate employees to improve their behavior in alignment with the brand of the public organization holds weight. Although internal communication (formal/informal) does take place at WBS but not precisely for the communication of their core brand values, diminishes the concept of shared vision for the employees. Another reason for the disparity between the two case studies can also be that WBS makes no conscious effort for the communication of its brand values nor does it take any special measures for their implementation. WBS appreciate self-education/learning among employees and believe in natural/organic processes and consider measures don’t really work nor are needed. In contrast, USG repetitively communicates/familiarizes its brand values among employees through formal and informal meetings, official documents like its “Strategy Document 2014-19” etc. and through group discussions or talks and tries to implement its values among employees through notable coaching sessions, SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), bi-annual performance talks/meetings and through the process of socialization.

Where public sector organization's measure and establish alignment between the brand promise and employee attitudes and behavior, employees who are already motivated intrinsically (Houston, 2000) to serve the public and deliver their promises which cannot be easily replicated through core business practices and policies but through workforce to attain competitive advantage (Jacobs, 2003); WBS encourages self-education among non-academic employees for this purpose and no formal procedure is in place except for the self-assigned role of the Head Administrator (Managing Director) and the Director / Vice Director/s who work as watchdogs and provide personal (one-to-one) input/feedback to non-academic employees. Resultantly, alignment between the brand promise and employees' on-brand behavior is brought about through a lot of co-supervision in a small/tightly close-knit team of non-academic staff. However, for their academic staff members they have formal course/semester evaluations that creates pressure for the academic staff to conform to the brand promise of WBS. On the contrary, USG achieves this alignment through provision of SOPs manual (Standard Operating Procedures), code of conduct and bi-annual performance talks/meetings with the board members, directors and managers. In these formal/informal meetings, open communication flows between directors/managers and staff and everyone is provided the opportunity to convey their concerns through intuitions, share personal observations and also provide structured evaluations/feedback with the help of MERIT (a customized performance assessment tool). Also, the strong culture and the process of socialization creates moral and ethical obligation or appeal among employees to conform to the standards and the brand promise of USG. Ultimately, all this helps in building pressure from the school for everyone to deliver on the core brand values of USG.

On the basis of the respondent's experiences at WBS with internal and external environment or organizational history, the employees (junior and senior) were unfamiliar with the concept of internal branding indicating that little thought had been dedicated to internal branding in WBS. However, an initial explanation by the researcher helped all of the respondents in better understanding the concept and views about internal branding which resulted in most of the respondents managing to explain the concept in their own words with minor exceptions. In comparison, respondents at middle and senior management of USG were quite clear and had a better understanding of internal branding concept, which also showed a significant amount of thought had been devoted to internal branding (albeit un-systematic) in USG. The rest of their respondents at different organizational tiers did not have a precise idea about the concept mainly resulting from a lack of understanding by the employees of what the brand really stands for, how important it is, and how they can contribute to its success, thus limiting the implementation of the brand (Temporal, 2015), but the initial explanation by the researcher helped the respondents in better understanding the concept and views about internal branding. And resultantly, the respondents attempt to explain the concept of internal branding in their own words was well rounded.

Surprisingly, even without knowing the exact term in certain instances, the overall research findings revealed that most of the respondents at WBS and USG were aware and had a good idea about the benefits of internal branding and were able to share the benefits of internal branding in

their own words perceivably with the help from the initial introduction on the topic at the onset of the in-depth interview by the researcher.

With regard to the onus of IB practice in the organization there was a mixed response from the respondents at WBS. Some informed that internal branding must be practiced by all employees, others were of the view that it is the responsibility of the top leader and middle management officials. However, the majority formed consensus on the fact that everyone in the organization should practice and own the principles and core brand values of the organization although the role of front-line staff members whether academic or non-academic is more crucial and leaders should not only focus on talk-the-talk (filled with empty words) instead walk-the-talk (communication through behavior) especially with respect to core brand values. In comparison, the research findings from USG also revealed that everyone should be responsible for practicing internal branding in the organization and it must be reflected holistically. Respondents also suggested that in order to adhere to consistency it must be a continuous process instead a one-time activity.

As per the argument presented by Morhart et al. (2009) supporting the participation of employees in the internal branding process with the support of their brand-specific transformational leaders gives rise to brand internalization and supportive employee behavior and the notion of person-organization-fit (POF) presented by Vigoda-Gadot and Meiri (2008) justifies the opinion of the employees at WBS that internal branding must be a consultative and cyclical process and input from all layers of employees particularly from people working at middle management (Managing Director) and lower tier (handling/executing operations) should be taken to formulate a comprehensive internal branding policy. All WBS top management officials, especially their Director, should act as focal person/s in designing the internal branding policy-framework. Whereas, USG employees reiterated that IB must be a collective responsibility, a consultative process and input from all layers of employees and rest of their stakeholders (for example faculty, university, students etc.) should be taken to formulate an all-inclusive internal branding policy-framework representing the voice of the organization. Their top management and USG board should be held responsible/accountable in designing the internal branding policy-framework as identified by Vigoda-Gadot and Meiri (2008) cited in Kashmiri (2010, p.10) that, “Transformational leaders in the public sector help match the goals of the individual to the goals of the organization (the brand) and change the perceptions of public sector employees (internalization) and thus affect public sector performance (brand building behavior).”

In conclusion, as per the “Universalist/Generic – New Public Management (NPM)” approach (Christensen et al., 2007, p.4), the implementation of internal branding has the ability to cut across both private and public sector entities, yet majority of the respondents partaking in the research at WBS although in favor of implementation of internal branding in German public sector universities but were against a purely structured and step wise approach to its implementation which was contrary to the observed working environment at the University of Erfurt (bureaucratic in nature). The threat of internal branding having a negative impact due to strict adherence without discussion or consultation was aired by all apart from the top

management who were in all praise of the approach justifying the adoption of private sector techniques to public sector institutions with some context specification e.g. localization, customization. However, whether the effectiveness of internal branding in the complexity of German higher educational system poses a challenge is a question left to be addressed in future research.

Apart from a minor emphasis from one of the respondents about the importance of other more critical issue concerning the universities that held precedence over internal branding, the Dutch too were in favor of the implementation of internal branding in public sector universities of the Netherlands and were of the same opinion as the Germans with regard to the semi-structured approach toward its implementation. The negative impact and the risk or limitation of internal branding as top down strategy limiting employee thinking process was frequently talked about and the suggestion for a two-way consultative process was recommended for achieving positive results. This substantiates Colyer (2006) on his discussion about the dark side of implementing internal and external branding techniques in the public sector and the countless challenges due to structural complications/bureaucracies, governmental concerns, scarcity of resources (technical and financial) to capitalize branding campaigns and decision making authorities. But even with all these hurdles USG airs the growing demand in public sector to bring into line employee's behavior to the government's brand promise and form an attitude of engagement and obligation all over the organization (Eberl, 2006).

The need to employ internal branding as a marketing tool for the promotion by both these professional schools to cultivate efficient systems and practices to encourage employees and academics in improving their performance also refers to the importance of market competition and escalating need for quality and efficacy of their services as also pointed out by Tooley et al. (2003) and Judson et al. (2006). This was seen as a need for collaboration of WBS (in order to get endowments/sponsorships) by the University of Erfurt with Haniel Foundation (WBS chief sponsor) promoting education marketization (Maringe, 2005a, 2010) in the public sphere by developing the WBS as a competitive brand in relation to competing private schools of public policy/governance, for e.g. The Hertie School of Governance (Berlin) and USGs' selection criteria of cherry picking the affluent and well-grounded students in terms of academic and economic conditions for achieving the desired market results along with public-private partnerships (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012) through offering consultancy and targeting the professional education sector by offering executive education in the evenings, resulting in a broadening of their markets.

RQ 1b: Cross-National Similarities and Differences

With respect to cross national differences which although not many as both countries are geographically situated next to each other and share similar roots and language, the researcher experienced a varied response by the participating cases which so as to say was not an offset of the national difference but more due to the difference in availability of resources (in terms of technical, financial, human etc.) when it comes to implementing internal branding. Where the essence of the research was to gauge the internal branding knowledge or awareness of the employee, a secondary sub task although not explicit was to gauge how the employees lived and

disseminated their brand through their everyday interaction. The researcher observed a stark difference between the Dutch and German organizational response towards an external observer, with regard to their behavior and attitude.

Where the German school promotes internationality as one of the core brand values of its organization, the researcher experienced a deficiency in the on-brand behavior and attitude of the employees. As identified by Christensen (2010), the higher education sector has different organizational and cultural customs, fashioned by conditions based on subject specialization, certified knowledge and academic freedom but side by side according to Jevons (2006), if employees do not comprehend the university's brand, their actions may reveal their personal values more than the university's brand values as experienced.

The Germans belief of being straight forward (as also shared by respondent Ac.3) maybe gauged by an international client as welcoming or disturbing and sometimes awkward depending on the clients' cultural and psychological background. But as per the school's motto of "internationality", the brand ambassadors/employees convey limited understanding of individual needs, seemed disorganized as perceived by the researcher and while interviewing respondents which too showed hesitation towards highlighting this issue. Perhaps, the reason being as identified by one of the respondents (L1) was the responsibility of promotion and sustaining of the education system lying with the state (egalitarian state-centric perspective), which deterred the employee from making an effort to provide an empathic culture towards clients. In contrast, although the Dutch school majorly focuses on Dutch community and hold "community" as one of their core brand values, they were surprisingly considerate towards an external observer and worked systematically in addressing the individual needs of the client throughout their interaction. For the Dutch it was about relationship building and not a one-time contribution, which could be felt in the employee's behavior and conveyance of their understanding of the brand towards making an impact in the society.

RQ 2: What is the relevance of the empirical research for the dimensions of internal branding theory?

Since the 80's, contemporary models for running university affairs along the lines of private organizations started appearing in studies on strategy formulation for higher education organizations (de Boer et al., 2007), inciting service delivery "the service model" (Tjeldvoll, 1997; Tjeldvoll and Holtet, 1998; Cummings, 1998a, 1998b) and "the entrepreneurial model" (Clark, 1998) to solve issues plaguing public organizations vertically and horizontally e.g. devolution, service provision and consumer-orientation to name a few (Christensen and Lægheid, 2001a). This research too makes a general addition to empirical knowledge through conduction of interviews, generating qualitative data from respondents of two HEIs in Germany and the Netherlands, expanding on the above mentioned fact that internal branding theory plays a pivotal role in contemporary strategy formulation for HEIs. As per the empirical findings on the academic front and asserted by Karol and Ginsburg (1980), universities are more like corporate organizations now than ever before in terms of having mission statements, employees and management systems than perceived. The pursuit of branding by universities has intensified due to competition in the higher education market (Belanger et al. 2002) and enhanced emphasis on

effective management (Henkel, 1997) is echoed through New Public Management (NPM) reforms which are now a predominant feature of transformation in governance of universities (Christensen, 2010). Standing on the point of Caruana et al. (1998) that enacting the marketing concept has positive effects on the overall performance of departments in universities and it enhances the capability of departments to attain non-government grants and donations, the theory of internal branding with its dimensions and factors with customization to meet the demand and be useful for the public sector HEIs (as already mentioned and recommended for future research) is highly adequate for enhancing overall performance and improve their reputation and to have a constructive influence on rankings and league tables (Bunzel, 2007) as if not explicitly but implicitly indicated by the two studied cases, hence answering the question on the suitability of internal branding for public universities and in a broader sense public service organizations.

Factors such as organizational structure (prevalent bureaucracies), market research, remuneration, brand teams, budget are just a few concerns identified in the comments made by the participants which need reconsideration when reframing the internal branding theory in context of the public sector HEIs. Where the use of marketing research, help universities achieve broad realization and recognition of the micro and macro environment of the institution (Klayton, 1993; Kotler and Fox, 1985), which ultimately develops the institution's ability to provide quality educational service that helps in satisfying customers' expectations (Litten, 1980), market research is constrained by resources available to the public institution coupled by accountability of public assets. Even then public entities are moving towards a more corporate outlook in their functioning (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012), which requires for the internal branding theory to focus on developing factors that pursue incentivizing public sector employees with the aim of building moral and channelizing energies towards adequate brand ownership and personifying core brand values as practiced in the private sector. "Branding should be perceived as participatory and organizations need to engage in continual open dialogue with their employees. Albeit, in some cases, internal branding can both motivate employees and attract external customers. In short, internal branding is a critical management priority", in the upcoming days, asserts Keller et al. (2013, p.125).

With respect to the practical relevance of the empirical research in regard to the theory of internal branding, the research concludes as per findings that obligation for the work of internal branding lies with the leader of an organization, because of the role's rigorous relationship with the organization's strategy and brand (de Chernatony et al., 2003; Lintemeier, 2005) and as the front-runners or leaders have a dual role: supervision of "historical necessities" and "change management" (Christensen et al., 2007, p.47). Walking the talk reinstates the goal of an internal branding process, which is to get the organization and its members to live the brand (Urde, 2003; Karmark, 2005; Ind, 2007; Mondal, 2009; Mahnert, 2009) and how better to make employees live the brand than through promotion of multi-directional communications as prioritized by many respondents and addressed by Mahnert and Torres (2007) as the sustaining force for internal branding.

In the end, the research findings from the two cases under study, stand to generally validate the dimensions and factors of internal branding (Mahnert, 2009), when it came to assessing the

applicability of the underlying factors of the theory in context to public sector higher education institutes. Where majority of the respondents adhered to the acceptance of the practice of the numerous dimensions/factors in some form or the other in the higher education sector: “active indoctrination or passive adaptation” Christensen et al. (2007, p.42), objections were also raised towards some of the factors of failure and/or success of internal branding and their application, specifically in context of budget constrained small scale public organizations having limited capacity and technical expertise in this domain in contrast to the private sector which have cross-functional subject experts and comparatively less budget constraints. Irrespective of the constraints, the growing competition within the higher education industry the world over (Maringe, 2010) and encouragement by government policies for marketization of HEIs (Jongbloed, 2003; Tooley et al., 2003) have created an atmosphere where public sector higher education entities are beginning to feel the pressing need to adopt private sector techniques to keep pace and modernize themselves to meet the challenges of changing organizational culture and structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the analysis and the above stated conclusion to both research questions, the researcher likes to recommend that although German and Dutch schools researched, stand unaware of the IB terminology and are unknowingly practicing a bland version of IB through promoting their brands without structure and form, it would be of great benefit if the public sector universities keeping in mind their business philosophy and cultural settings may adopt a more systematic or semi-systematic approach to the implementation of internal branding in order to attain greater advantage of this theory as also emphasized by Temporal (2015) in his work, according to which engagement with the brand by the employees is highly critical in order to make sure that the customer experience is coped well and it goes one step further than internal communications about the brand, by training and engaging everyone in the organization so that they understand and show involvement with the brand. This means letting organizational workforce know how they can contribute to the development of the brand in their daily working lives and therefore encompasses both training and the creation of brand action plans that have to be carried out at all tiers of the organization but this according to the research findings will result in a mechanical (instrumental) process contrary to the cultural perspective (Christensen et al., 2007) which emphasizes the indoctrination of brand values through socialization of employees into the organizations’ identity. Having said that, even with the emphasis on increased role of internal communication, socialization, cultural management on the brand values, adequate freedom must be provided to employees to develop and help the organization and themselves grow. Therefore, a hybrid model is suggested as per empirical findings (that needs development in future research).

As per Mahnert (2009) list of dimensions and associated factors with regard to implementation of internal branding in public higher education sector goes, the researcher seconds Mahnert’s stance that the list is ambitious when it comes to implementation and testing, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty amongst the respondents due to the broadness and intangible nature of the concepts illustrated. Therefore, further research can be conducted for improvement of the list

and its variables created by Mahnert (2009), as the dimensions and factors highlighted although are not constrained by their applicability in the public sector vis-a-vis as designed and tested in the private sector (retailing and hospitality services), yet research for insight into the better understanding of the elusive nature of the dimensions on the basis of theoretical grounds will prove fruitful.

Following are recommendations in relation to empirical research findings from the case studies on the implementation of the list and its dimensions/factors of IB in public sector HEIs:

1. Welcoming and supportive organizational structure is a prerequisite for success.
2. Organizational culture is decisive factor for acceptance and adoption of IB practices.
3. Due to hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the public sector organizations, open and timely communication can reduce internal myopia.
4. Internal and external market research may it be private or public sector is vital to the development and identification of prevalent values, current attitudes, existing behavioral patterns and unique characteristics associated with IB objectives yet extent and approach of it may vary depending on size and resources.
5. As public sector is known for accountability, therefore measurement and feedback is very important to improve service delivery, the foundation of IB and public sector on the whole.
6. Practicality of jurisdiction and brand teams in small public sector organizations is restrictive in terms of implementation yet necessary for development and dissemination of organizational brand values.
7. Engaged, supportive, and exemplary leadership is the essence of outstanding brands.
8. Communication on core brand values needs to be constant and tailored to individual needs.
9. Alignment is required between organization and brand objectives.
10. Accountability and responsibility of public funds, coupled with channel length/time put excessive pressures on public sector organizations in regard to implementation of IB, hence pre-allocation in budget is necessary for implementation of IB.
11. Employee participation and support in design and implementation is a prerequisite for success.
12. Balance between tangible and intangible remuneration is suggested for best results in public sector.
13. IB is an ongoing process and requires continuous reminder through training and education.

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The dimensions and factors of failure and/or success in internal branding

Dimension	Factor
<p>Organization</p> <p>Issues concerned with the particular way in which things are done in an organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Structure • Culture • Insular thinking and internal competition • Internal myopia
<p>Information</p> <p>Issues concerned with information needs that need to be satisfied, and the impact of their various aspects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market Research • Measurement and feedback • Specific knowledge of brand direction
<p>Management</p> <p>Issues concerned with the manner in which an organization is led at various levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdiction • Leadership support • Deeds communication • Brand teams
<p>Communication</p> <p>Issues concerned with any aspect of communication in and around the organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-directional communication • Formality of message • Discrepancy between internal and external messages • Constancy and Adaptation • Internal Clutter
<p>Strategy</p> <p>Issues concerned with the overall and brand-specific strategy employed in an organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment of organizational and brand objectives • Budget • Timing
<p>Staff</p> <p>Issues concerned with the role and influence of staff in the internal branding process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee participation and support • Recruitment • Remuneration • Segmentation
<p>Education</p> <p>Issues concerned with any relevant gaps in specific knowledge, expertise and know-how</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of legitimacy and acceptance • Lack of guidance • Mental Models
<p>Other</p> <p>Any other issues not associated with one of the seven previous dimensions</p>	

In-depth interview guide

1. Can you describe WBS/USG in three words (Brand Mantra)?
2. What are the core brand values of WBS/USG and how are these aligned with the organization's objectives? (Please share examples to substantiate your response)
3. What measures does WBS/USG take to communicate and implement brand values among employees?
4. How does WBS/USG ensure that employees deliver through their behaviors what is being promised externally?
5. What strikes your mind on hearing the term internal branding?
6. What do you believe are the core benefits of internal branding?
7. Who would you consider to be most responsible for the policy-framework of internal branding?
8. Who would you consider to be most responsible for the practice of internal branding?
9. What is your opinion on the significance of implementing internal branding in public sector universities?
10. Do you foresee any negative effect/s or any risks/limitations of internal branding in public sector universities?