ENGAGING THROUGH INTERNAL BRANDING IN EDUCATION SECTOR

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to study the effect of Internal branding on work engagement and affective commitment in the educational setting. The study used a quantitative survey with a sample of 200 faculty members working in management institutes of Madhya Pradesh (India). The study investigated that internal branding and work engagement significantly affected the affective employee commitment. The study also demonstrated that work engagement mediated the relationship between the two. The result implies that appropriate internal branding initiatives focused in improving the work engagement among the employees is a prerequisite to influence the employees' commitment. A significant managerial implication can be drawn from this study, for example using both internal communication and training dimension of Internal Branding engaging employees to influence employees' brand-supporting attitudes and behaviours. The internal constituents are the prime factor on which the success of brand relies. So, the engaged and committed faculty members may be taken as pivotal for the branding of any educational institutes in developing a long term relationship with the students and alumni.

Keywords: **Internal Branding, Work Engagement, Commitment**

I. INTRODUCTION

The intense competitive environment has increased the complexity of the survival strategy among the competing players. The educational institutes are also prey to this survival of the fittest contest. The target customers of this sector are very young and can be moulded and attracted easily; on the other side they are brand savvy and are loaded with several brand messages. So, for making a distinct brand in the eyes of customers, institute needs proper evaluation of the brand messages (Whisman, R., 2008). The uniformity in the brand messages from different sources will help in getting an edge and distinction in attracting the right candidate. The educational institutes had seen several ups and downs in the name of branding, and amid the turmoil, the institutes have shifted to sustainable branding strategy and now it's the part of institutional lexicon.

Several institutions have drawn the prophecy with the imperfect hold on the branding process. Embracing the brand building strategy in the form of attractive and tangible short cuts had shown the temporariness initially, but, the effects subsided once the customer passes the entry phase. Thus, the educational institution ends up revamping the promotional strategy several times and making the branding reality visible.

The major drawback in the branding process is the temporary brand tactics, which need to be relooked and repaired. The educational institutions are no less than a corporate (Whisman, R., 2008). The institutes are driven by their values as corporate and they too have a market with brand loving customers. The tangible assets to the institutes in the brand development process are their valuable employees when they are engaged it becomes internal branding as the valued intangible assets. Hatch & Schultz (2008) defined this branding in terms of 'Inside-Out' approach, the process that supports the brand development internally. The integration of internal and external participants is required for preparing the brand platform overcoming the silo mindset of the organizations.

Delivery of Brand Promise is central to every brand. Service sector majorly depends on Employees for this consistency to support branding. The institutions' employees who may prominently contribute in the brand development of the institution

are the faculty members. These faculty members are the actual brand champions who can narrate the story of success directly or, indirectly through the internal efforts and contribute to any institution. Internal branding fosters the identity building through formal system by engaging internal participants. Internal branding intends to explain that if all the constituents understand the values and vision of the organization, the uniform identity of the organization will be created. For example the alumni of the institutes, if they develop an emotional connection automatically, they will convey a positive brand image. Thus, brand is having an emotional component too.

Like delivery of every service brand, the institutes too face service complexity in terms of personal interaction. Illustrating the same, for a student to take up a career the faculty become instrumental in helping to pick the right option, the career should be aptly linked to the interest of the students, the interest would have been crafted in every class interaction. Thus, the total service experience involves several factors that dictate on-brand experience.

Engaged employees deliver more consistent result (De Chernatony, L. and Harris, F., 2000). Not only they show a positive service attitude but, develop a distinction style for delivering the service giving a new edge to on-brand experience.

In the field of teaching, the professors' expertise and knowledge as well as the interrelation with the customers define the success of the brand experience. But, Weiner, L. (2005) in services have emphasised more on interpersonal traits creating an environment of trust and commitment rather than technical expertise. In several service experiences it is merely the extension of the operations. But, in profession of education industry, the authenticity of the service experience in terms of functional delivery and emotionally genuine personality both plays major role (Gapp , R. and Merrilees , B., 2006; Smith , S. and Wheeler , J., 2002). Thus, it's the unique cultural values that are to be preached among employees to develop programmed patterned of vision and delivery.

The task of confirming delivery of uniform brand promise by the employees is allocated to Internal Branding which have inside-out approach to ensure similar internal and external brand values (Collins, J. and Porras , J .,1995). The internal branding focus on interventions to shape perception of employees towards brand (Mosley, 2007). This study will empirically assess the relationship of Internal branding in improving employees' work engagement and employees' commitment in educational setting.

1.1 Internal Branding

IB is the connect between organizational strategy and its execution. It promotes shared understanding of brand among employees (Burman & Zeplin, 2005). Drake et. al., 2005 stated that internal branding enables a consistent and uniform delivery of brand experience by using several communication interventions. Through Internal branding processes, organization develops its' recruitment, training, motivation & reward systems, wherein employees are groomed for uniform delivery of promise (Zeithmal, Bither & Gremler, 2006). Internal branding emphasises on training and internal communication within an organization (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006a, Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Punjaisiri & Wilson, 2007 had explained the role of several HR practices (recruitment, selection, training & development) for integrating with the brand. The internal customers improves the brand delivery component by incorporating brand in all HR functions (Aurand et. al., 2005) Thus, it insists on developing brand inside (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003).

1.2 IB and its link with Engagement & Commitment

Internal branding influences the brand behaviour among employees (de Chernatony & Cottom, 2006; de Chernatony & SegalHorn, 2001). The Internal Branding approach needs highly engaged employees. Engagement of employees is not mere satisfaction, it involves a deep concern to establish the brand and be proud of the same. Engagement improves by internal branding (Ahmad et. al., 2014). Employee engagement is beyond employment contracts, it needs more motivation and emotional attachment towards the organization (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010). Internal branding suggests providing employees with value propositions rather than emphasising on technical skills to generate the engaged pool of employees whose values fit with the organizational values (Gaye Özçelik, 2015).

Internal Branding purports commitment among employees through better communication systems (Asif & Sargeant, 2000 & Thomson et. al., 1999). Even Burman & Zeplin, 2005 had proposed and supported the link between internal branding and commitment. Thus, the same links are expected in the education sector.

H1: Internal Branding have a significant relationship with Work Engagement.

H2: Internal Branding have a significant relationship with Affective Commitment.

1.3 Work Engagement & Commitment

Engaged workforce have the ability to take an organization to a competent height. The branding as researched helps in creating the talent pool engaged at their level (Ahmad et. al., 2014). The concept of Work engagement is defined as a Vigor, dedication and absorption towards a job with positive fulfilling state of mind (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). While, commitment highlights the rational & emotional connection of an individual towards an organization (Klein et al., 2012 & Meyer, J.P. et al. 2004).

Hallberg, U. E., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2006) reported that Work engagement is empirically a different construct to Commitment. Engagement is the physical, intellectual & emotional occupancy with the work roles (William Kahn, 1990); while commitment is the willingness to continue and it stresses on reciprocal behaviour. Supporting the same, Social Exchange theory explained that when an individual contribute voluntarily to an organization, they expect the same return from the organization (Blau, 1964). In line with the same, Shore and Shore, 1995 found that individual get more engaged and committed for the support rendered by the organization. Albrecht & Andreetta (2011) showed engagement helps in improving the affective commitment of the employees in service sector. This study is trying to understand the role of branding in creating engaged workers that may improve the commitment. Internal branding may be proposed through the study as one more construct that induces work engagement and better commitment, thus its adding a more dimension to JD-R model of work engagement (Bakker & Demmorouti, 2007) to test the role of branding on job resources for improved engagement and commitment.

H3: Work engagement has a significant relationship with Commitment.

H4: Internal Branding along with engaged employees have a significant effect on Affective Commitment.

II. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The survey data for the study were collected from employees of management institutes and universities offering management course in Gwalior region of Madhya Pradesh. Total of 200 surveys distributed among the faculty members of management institutes and universities. Most respondents (131, 65.5 per cent) were Male and 69 (34.5 per cent) were female.

2.2 Measures

Internal branding was measured with the scale of Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007 with 10- items on Training and Internal Communication; the construct, Work engagement was measured with Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003 with 22-items on Vigor, Dedication and absorption; and Affective employee commitment was measured with 7 item scale of Allen and Meyer, 1990. Responses on the scales where collected using 5-point likert scale from (1) Very strongly disagree to (5) Very strongly agree. The data obtained from the respondents were analysed and tested through SPSS using regression analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Respondent Profiling: The respondents profile conducted on 200 employees comprising of Male and Female working in the management institutes and universities are recorded as shown in the Table 3.1.

3.2 Reliability Analysis: The reliability of the scales was checked by the score of Cronbach's alpha value. The analysis reported that the coefficients for the constructs IB, WE and aEC are .865, .947 and .847 respectively (Table II). The cronbach alpha value for the scales of IB, WE and aEC shows that high internal consistency among the items of the scales is present. Thus, it

TABLE 3.1: RESPONDENT PROFILE					
Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	131	65.5	65.5	65.5
	Female	69	34.5	34.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

supports the Nunnally (1978) proposal that Cronbach alpha coefficient should be acceptable at 0.7 or, more value.

TABLE 3.2: Reliability Statistics		
Variable	**Cronbach's Alpha**	**N of Items**
IB	.864	10
WE	.947	22
Affective EC	.846	7

3.3 Regression Analysis: Further Regression analysis was done to test the hypothesis of the study;

H1: Internal Branding has a significant relationship with Work Engagement.
H2: Internal Branding has a significant relationship with Affective Commitment.
H3: Work engagement has a significant relationship with Affective Commitment.
H4: Internal Branding along with Employees work engagement have a significant effect on Affective Commitment.

TABLE 3.3								
Independent Variable	**H1**		**H2**		**H3**		**H4**	
	β coeff.	R^2/Adj R^2	β coeff.	R^2/Adj R^2	β coeff.	R^2/Adj R^2	β coeff.	R^2/Adj R^2
IB-WE	.677***	.459/.456						
IB-AC			.459***	.210/.206				
WE-AC					.659***	.434/.432		
IB& WE-AC							.022; .644***	.435/.429

***Significant at .005 level

Internal Branding when regressed with Work Engagement supported H1 with 45.9% variance explained and β =.677, t=12.953(p=.000), F=167.768 (p=.000) showing significant effect of Internal Branding on Work Engagement. The finding is in line with Ahmad et. al., 2014. Second hypothesis also showed a positive significant relationship (R^2=.210, β=.459, t=7.260, p=.000, F=52.714, p=.000) of Internal Branding with Affective Commitment supports the outcome of Burman & Zeplin, 2005. Thirdly, Affective commitment was regressed on Work engagement (R^2=.434, β=.659 (t=12.332, p=.000), F=152.086(p=.000)) indicated significant relationship between the two construct. The hypothesis result hence confirms and supports the study of Hallberg, U. E., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2006) and Albrecht & Andreetta (2011)). At next step, the Internal branding along with Work engagement presented a significant positive relationship (Adjusted R^2=.429, β=.644, t=8.844, p=.000 & F=75.743, p=.000) showing increased variance. So, the regression analysis results show that the Work engagement significantly mediate the relationship between internal branding and affective commitment. Thus, the result supports the H4 hypothesis, further the mediation was tested by Sobel statistics.

3.4 Sobel test was applied to check the mediation effect of work engagement between Independent variable and dependent variable.
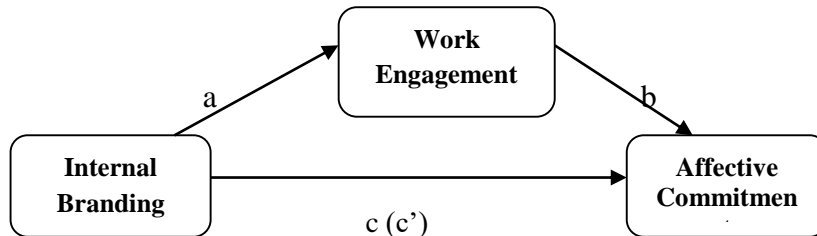

Figure 1

TABLE 3.4				
	Path	**Beta (Unstd.)**	**Std. Error**	**Beta Std.**
Step1	**c**	0.383	0.053	0.459
Step2	**a**	1.548	0.12	0.677
Step3	**b**	0.235	0.027	0.659
Step4	**c'**	0.019	0.061	0.022
Sobel test statistic				7.215038
One-tailed prob.				0.000
Two-tailed prob.				0.000

To test mediation, the indirect effect of internal branding on affective commitment through work engagement a simple mediation analysis was conducted. The regression analyses as indicated in figure1 were tested to calculate the beta and standard error scores. Then finally, through sobel test calculator of Soper, D.S. (2018), sobel statistics value was calculated. The findings indicated sobel statistic is more than 1.96, which is significant at $p<0.05$, confirming the mediation effect of work engagement on internal branding and affective commitment.

IV CONCLUSION

The study investigated the extent internal branding in management institutes is associated with employees' work engagement and commitment. The result is presented in a comprehensive manner for the educational setting. In addition, it also explored the mediating role of employees' work engagement in the relationship between internal branding and the employee commitment. The findings of the study showed a significant relationship between Internal branding, employees' work engagement and commitment. The result of the study is consistent with previous findings. Internal branding reported a significant relationship with work engagement consistent with the findings of Ahmad et. al., 2014. Similarly, internal branding presented a significant relationship with affective commitment supporting the prior work of Burman & Zeplin (2005) and Thomson et. al., 1999. Consistent with the same, Qionglei et. al. 2016 too confirmed on UK universities' employees that there is an effect of IMO as a tool of branding on employees' university brand commitment. Work engagement reflected a fit with the commitment in the study. Literature showed similar results that engaged people of the organization develop affective commitment among the employees (Albrecht & Andreetta, 2011 and Shore & Shore, 1995). The more engaged the employees were to the organizations' brand, they exhibited more commitment. Developing the engaged employees pose a major challenge in front of the employees which have an incremental effect in improving the commitment of the employees in the organization. The finding revealed that if the employees' are ensured to be engaged, they will show a committed brand supporting behaviour through well accepted practices of internal branding.

The study tried to contribute to research field, through including internal branding, work engagement and affective commitment fit in a single frame. The study indicated mediation effect of employees' work engagement in the relationship

between internal branding and affective commitment. The total effect of internal branding along with work engagement on commitment is more than its direct effect, giving a new dimension to the JD-R model of work engagement from the branding perspective. The result may be attributed to the understanding that work engagement concept is being strengthened by better branding among employees which in turn improves the commitment of the employees towards the organization. The study outcome suggests that the management institutions should focus on employee perspective in branding for better serving employees who can contribute in changing the overall sustainable external brand image.

The participants in the sample were restricted to the Madhya Pradesh region, so it can be regarded as a limitation. Further the sampling can be done on specifically selected institutions which are working on the internal branding processes. As the scale developed on Internal branding is more focused on frontline perspective, so for assessing the members of the institutes' employees more dimensions can be included like members' creative aspects, counselling aspects, teaching-earning perspective etc. in the future study. After the suggested development of the scale, the organizations with sound branding initiatives can be assessed for understanding and revealing better possibility of these relationships and other outcomes associated with employees' brand behaviour.

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