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INTERNAL BRANDING STRATEGIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

PANDEMİ SÜRECİNDE İÇSEL MARKALAMA STRATEJİLERİ

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Abstract: For the past twenty years, internal branding has gained academic interest as the interactions between employees and customers shape brand values and brand experiences. As a component of internal branding, external brand communication can have a powerful influence on employees' motivation, attitudes, identification and subsequent behavior. The purpose of this research is to explore external brand communication strategies in times of risk. Working non-remotely during the pandemic was a major threat for employees' overall well-being. Advertisements run during the first six months of the pandemic that directly or indirectly focus on internal stakeholders formed the sample. Data was collected from the websites of two national marketing magazines. The findings reveal how employees' responsibilities were extended during the pandemic and how expressing solidarity during the crisis enabled the communication of these new responsibilities. The study contributes to extant research on internal branding and advertising in crisis.

JEL: M3**Keywords:** Internal Branding, External Brand Communication, Advertising, Pandemic.

Öz: Son yirmi yılda, çalışanlar ve müşteriler arasındaki etkileşimlerin marka değerlerini ve marka deneyimlerini şekillendiren önemli temas noktaları olmalarıyla içsel markalama akademik ilgi kazanmıştır. İçsel markalamanın bir bileşeni olarak, dışsal marka iletişimi, çalışanların motivasyonu, tutumları, kimlikleri ve müteakip davranışları üzerinde güçlü bir etkiye sahip olmaktadır. Bu araştırmanın amacı, risk zamanlarında dışsal marka iletişim stratejilerini keşfetmektir. Pandemi sırasında uzaktan çalışmamak, çalışanların genel refahı için büyük bir tehditti. Pandeminin ilk altı ayında yayınlanan ve doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak iç paydaşlara odaklanan reklamlar örnekleme oluşturmaktadır. Veriler iki ulusal pazarlama dergisinin web sitelerinden toplanmıştır. Bulgular, pandemi sırasında çalışanların sorumluluklarının nasıl genişletildiğini ve krizde dayanışmanın bu yeni sorumlulukların iletişimini nasıl sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma içsel markalama ve krizde reklamcılık araştırmalarına katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İçsel Markalama, Dışsal Marka İletişimi, Reklam, Pandemi.

1. Introduction

Contemporary perspectives on branding and brand development conceptualize brands as cultural and social forms, which are contextually and historically grounded and constructed through dynamic brand stakeholder interactions (e.g., Essamri et al., 2019; Merz et al., 2009; Von Wallpach et al., 2017; Siano et al., 2022). As these interactions shape consumers' perceived brand experience, they need to be managed (Brodie et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2009). Apart from consumers and the other external

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stakeholders, employees are perceived as significant internal stakeholders in the creation, distribution, and communication of consumer value.

Increasingly, internal branding strategies that target employees are used in human resources management systems and processes (Saini et al., 2022). These strategies lead to positive outcomes such as employee attractiveness, commitment, engagement, and productivity (Fulmer, et al., 2003). Aside from assisting the human resources management practices, internal branding strategies enable the development of a shared understanding for the brand that shapes positively employees' relationships with stakeholders within and outside the firm supporting the brand's equity (Barros-Arrieta and Garcia-Cali, 2020; Ragheb et al., 2018; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016).

As a component of internal branding, external brand communication can have a powerful influence on employees' motivations, attitudes, identification and subsequent behaviors (e.g., Hughes, 2013; Piehler et al., 2018). Working non-remotely during the pandemic was a major threat for employees' overall well-being. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to explore external brand communication strategies in times of risk. The contributions of the study are twofold. The paper aims to show how a more holistic approach should be used for external brand communication in times of crisis – an issue not discussed in the prior internal branding literature. Regarding the advertising literature, while crisis is examined in the context of product or firm failures, the paper will explore the reflection of a wider contextual crisis on the execution of communication strategies that target mainly employees rather than consumers.

Advertisements run during the first six months of the pandemic that directly or indirectly focus on internal stakeholders formed the sample. Data was collected from the websites of two national marketing magazines that post recent advertising campaigns.

The paper starts with a critical review of the construct of internal branding. Then information about the research process will be examined, followed by the interpretation of the communication strategies that inform the identified themes. The article concludes with a discussion of theoretical contributions, managerial implications and areas for future research.

2. Internal Branding

For the past twenty years, internal branding has gained academic interest as the interactions between employees and customers shape brand values and brand experiences. Internal branding is defined as “a management tool for ensuring that employees have a shared understanding of the desired corporate brand and that they are able and willing to reflect this image to other stakeholders through their behavior” (Ragheb et al., 2018: 83). Internal stakeholders play a significant role in creating positive, consistent and coherent brand experiences to external stakeholders (Davies et al., 2010; Manolis et al., 2001). Studies attempt to define the construct and explain the contributions of internal brand strategies on employees' brand commitment and on external brand experiences and brand equity (Barros-Arrieta and Garcia-Cali, 2020; Burmann et al., 2009; Gelb and Deva, 2014; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016).

Although there are inconsistencies in the literature regarding the conceptualization, implementation and the internal or external outcomes of internal branding, scholars agree that internal branding refers to the process through which firms enable employees' internalization (Morhart et al., 2009; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). Through this internalization, employees' behaviors align with the brand values when communicating the brand promise (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005). Internal branding increases employees' job satisfaction and thus, decreases employee turnover and enables several positive outcomes such as attachment to and membership with the brand and execution of brand consistent behavior that exceeds required organizational behaviors – outcomes that are theorized with the constructs of brand identification, brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior (Du Preez et al., 2015; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005).

Scholars also disagree on the components that constitute internal branding and incorporate several dimensions such as brand ideologies, brand leadership, brand-centered human resource management, brand communications, and brand communities (Barros-Arrieta and Garcia-Cali, 2020; Saleem and Iglesias, 2016). This study will focus on brand communications towards the fulfillment of internal brand management outcomes. Internal brand communication refers to any form of communication within the organization that aims to communicate to employees a clear and consistent image about the brand and about their role in delivering the brand promise (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). The literature provides a list of techniques that can be employed such as daily briefings, newsletters, notice boards, corporate websites, videos, magazines and brochures (e.g., Hasni et al., 2018; Hoppe, 2017; Punjaisri et al., 2009).

Apart from internal brand communication, some scholars discuss that external brand communication can only have a supportive role as their target audience are external stakeholders (Barros-Arrieta and Garcia-Gali, 2020; Saleem and Iglesias, 2006). However, a different stream of research argues that external brand communication (such as advertising and public relations) can have a powerful influence on employees' motivations, attitudes, identification and subsequent behaviors (De Chernatony et al., 2006; Hofer and Grohs, 2018; Hughes, 2013; Piehler et al., 2018). For example, Piehler et al. (2018) show that external brand communication congruence – that is the extent to which external communication is consistent with products, values, and internal communication – affects cognitive, affective, and behavioral internal branding management outcomes i.e., brand understanding, brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior. This indicates that apart from internal brand communications, external brand communications can also shape internal brand practices and thus, employees' brand values and brand experiences.

Recent studies on internal branding that support the stakeholder approach of brand value co-creation, discuss that internal branding should consider not only the role of internal employees, but also the employees of external brand stakeholders such as suppliers, wholesalers, and retailers (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019, 2021). This is an issue that was neglected in the traditional conceptualization of the internal branding construct. Moreover, the literature on advertising in times of crisis focuses on the executed communication strategies in the presence of product or firm failures (Coombs and Holladay, 2001; Dutta and Pullig, 2011). However, the extant literature does not consider wider contextual crises that do not involve any management failures

as it is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic (Robinson and Veresiu, 2021). Consequently, given the holistic approach to internal branding and the contextual crisis created by the pandemic, the present study explores the external brand communication strategies during the first six months of the pandemic that target directly or indirectly an organizations' employees as well as the employees of external stakeholders – external stakeholders that shape the value chain and thus, consumers' meanings and experiences with brands.

3. Research design

The global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in several disruptions shaping the way consumers, employees and organizations interact. As a result of the global health concern, individuals, employees, firms, and their various stakeholders attempt to develop strategies to cope with the new normal after the pandemic.

Curfews, lockdowns and the “stay at home” call at the macro level affected several industries bringing the economic threat of recession and financial loss (Campbell, et al., 2020). This is a challenging time also for the advertising industry. Until 2020, the spending on advertising worldwide has been steadily increasing (www.statista.com). With the pandemic the growth of advertising spending showed a 9,1% decline over the first year leading to a global loss of advertising revenues (www.statista.com). Scholars call advertisers and agencies to acknowledge and adapt to this uncertain environment (He and Harris, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Increasingly, advertising content shifted towards promoting consumer and employee welfare appeals (Taylor, 2020).

Given the research objective, the paper explores advertising strategies during the pandemic to uncover the themes used for cultivating internal brand management outcomes in times of crisis. The online channels of two national marketing magazines were used to collect data: MediaCat (www.mediakat.com) and Marketing Türkiye (www.marketingturkiye.com.tr). These channels were the most effective way to identify advertisements that communicate internal branding principles as they provide daily news about new campaigns executed in several communication channels (mass media, online and out of home advertising). Data was collected from the 11th of March, 2020, the day that the pandemic was announced in Turkey, until the end of December 2020 as it covers the months with the highest imposed restrictions.

A total of 996 online campaigns from the MediaCat official website and a total of 432 campaigns from the Marketing Türkiye official website were examined to identify advertisements that aim to build internal branding outcomes. The final sample consists of 54 number of national advertisements that directly or indirectly target an organizations' employees as well as the employees of other stakeholders.

The advertisements were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Gorbin and Strauss, 2007). First, each advertisement was analyzed independently, defined as open coding (Gorbin and Strauss, 2007), by observing the executed advertising appeals and creative strategies. Then all resulting open codes were evaluated by rewatching the advertisements to identify similar codes. Afterwards, a more abstract analysis was performed among the similar codes, defined as axial coding (Gorbin and Strauss, 2007), leading to second-order codes. Throughout the analysis, data and literature

were iterated to check whether the identified categories and themes supported or differed from existing literature.

4. Research findings

Firms' internal brand practices will be discussed using the themes of "Business and Responsibility" and "Expressing Solidarity". The first theme discusses employees' extended responsibilities by expressing gratitude for all those who worked during the "dark times" of the pandemic. The second theme explores how expressing solidarity by using the national solidarity campaign enabled the communication of these new responsibilities.

4.1. Business and responsibility

The increased curfews during the pandemic did not only disrupt every day, but also professional practices. Several firms shared images of consumers staying at home and especially consumers that were not able to leave their private environments due to the imposed restrictions. These images assisted brands to communicate how their employees were still working actively in the field to be able to satisfy consumers' needs, but at the same time to help them protect their psychological and physical well-being. Employees wearing masks and gloves were shown in several working environments such as supermarkets, gas stations and retail stores interacting with consumers and other employees following the COVID-protocols. Brands expressed their gratitude towards their employees that continued working despite the risk of the unknown then pandemic. For example, the advertisement of CarrefourSA shows employees that arrive earlier than the working hours to distribute products and prepare the shelves of the supermarket before the opening of the store. The advertisement ends with the messages of the general manager and the head of the board of directors, who state their appreciation for their employees who take not only a job responsibility but also a responsibility for the country (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd7j6lnzGM4>).

Apart from ones' own employees, firms also communicate gratitude towards the employees of direct and indirect external stakeholders, namely, suppliers, competitors, distributors and retailers. For this purpose, brands, not only changed their slogans but even their brand names. The online food and grocery delivery service Getir (literally bring) uses the slogan "Getir Bi' Mutluluk" (literally Bring Happiness). During the pandemic, the devoted couriers of Getir continued distributing packages and apart from happiness they brought hope – hope for the end of the pandemic. The happiness in the original slogan was transformed into hope during the pandemic (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvgBxlgm5LE>). While the online food delivery service Yemeksepeti (literally food basket) changed its brand name to Emeksepeti (literally labor basket) to assist the small food entrepreneurs that despite the pandemic have continued serving their consumers to keep their business running (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcPBnK7PRS4>).

The pandemic is one of the few moments in which brands expressed appreciation for employees working in different sectors. During the pandemic, QNB Finansbank every night at 21:00 flashed the lights of its headquarters' building as an appreciation for all those employees who worked hard. The advertisement explicitly states the professions that they are grateful for: "Employees working in health, supermarkets and

municipalities, all employees working in the production facilities primarily in the food and medicine sector, pharmacists, couriers, media representatives, police and military officers, employees that work for banks and for all employees of QNB Finansbank” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ialr6CLyzRY>).

Like QNB Finansbank, Migros supermarket also expressed their gratitude for all the employees that work in the grocery industry extending internal brand strategies to direct competitors (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6yhkHFavHo>). In times of crisis, rather than communicating differentiation, all employees were portrayed as the heroes of the pandemic.

4.2. Expressing solidarity

Apart from the appreciation towards the internal stakeholders, internal branding strategies focus on how solidarity will shed light on the unforeseen consequences of the pandemic. Firms mobilize all their resources to create even new consumer values. For example, Colin’s used their production facilities to produce masks. The voice over narrates:

“What is the limit of loving a country? Having your flag waved in nearly 40 countries? Adding strength to its economy with record production? Or be one of the best in the world and earn the nation’s admiration? We have not recognized any borders for Turkey until now... We work devotedly by saying that we are adequate for us, we produce millions of masks for our nation. We would like to thank our devoted health workers and all our colleagues. Because our love for our country is boundless” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EI_a65OXwUU).

As depicted in the example, this solidarity extends beyond the devotion to the internal stakeholders towards an attachment and commitment to the country. This patriotic message used in the internal branding strategies reflects the government’s call for national solidarity during the pandemic. In late March 2020, in a press conference the prime minister initiated the “we are adequate for us Turkey” campaign to help primarily blue-collar employees that experienced severe hardships during the pandemic. Donations were requested from representatives of the ruling party as well as from opponents. Especially, a greater emphasis was placed on expected donations from businesses. Given this call, strategies directly or indirectly focus on how employees’ responsibilities were not only part of achieving organizational goals and objectives, but it extended towards a responsibility towards the country.

For example, Migros communicated how all internal stakeholders work for the country’s economic growth by narrating the following message: “We have become more than a chain of markets. In these difficult days, we added thousands of new employees to our 45,000 employees. We continued to supply whatever Turkey needs. We became a force for production, economy, and the future of agriculture... Why did we do this? Because meeting what Turkey needs was our business until yesterday, and our mission today” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6yhkHFavHo>).

References are also made to the past struggles that the country had experienced. This is not a nostalgia for the good old days. But a longing for a bright future that could be achieved “together”. Showing visuals of employees working in the production

facilities the voiceover in Ülker's commercial emphasizes this togetherness ideal: "As Ülker, we never gave up producing for this country, bringing little happiness all over our beautiful country. We will beat this together. Because we are a very beautiful country" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMZQC_RBcwA).

5. Conclusion

The identified themes explain the internal brand communication strategies executed during the time when the highest restrictions were imposed. The findings of the study are in line with previous research showing that during the pandemic firms promoted the welfare of employees by expressing gratitude despite the risk of the pandemic (Hesse et al., 2021; Taylor, 2020). Advertisements called for a redefinition of employees' responsibilities. These responsibilities induce solidarity through messages that focus on caring for one another and strengthening the notion of interconnectedness (Ertimur and Coskuner Balli, 2021), but specifically an interconnectedness in a more macro level (national in this case).

Regarding the internal branding literature, the findings of the research provide evidence on how internal branding strategies do not only target the employees of the organization, but also the employees of other external stakeholders (Sarkar and Banerjee, 2019, 2021). The study specifically shows how external brand communication can be used to target a range of employees from the employees of competitors to the employees of several related and unrelated industries – a point that has been neglected in the traditional internal branding literature. In times of national and global crisis taking a holistic approach to employees allows the communication of solidarity towards a common threat. Especially in Turkey giving references to the national solidarity campaign assisted in empowering employees from the firm as well as from the national level. Consistent with the literature on advertising during crisis, brand communication also assists in reimagining the future (Robinson and Veresiu, 2021). While existing research focuses on advertisements that target consumers in the presence of a crisis (due to product or firm failures or contextual factors), this study contributes to the literature by exploring brand communication that targets employees within or outside the value chain.

In terms of managerial implications, the research findings show that firms should take a more holistic approach towards employees in the presence of a contextual crisis that is beyond the control of firms. Even though the discussed themes focus on responsibility and solidarity, advertisements portray certain industries and mainly blue-collar employees reproducing social class inequalities. Also, targeting only employees that work non-remotely may create perceptions of inferiority for all those employees that kept on working remotely at their homes. Consequently, firms should focus on creating more inclusive messages that will support all employees rather than pave the way for a possible conflict.

In terms of research limitations, international advertisements were excluded from the sample. Cross-cultural research can be employed to explore whether internal brand communication strategies were developed and how they were executed in each specific context. Research on employees' perceptions of these advertisements can be conducted to measure whether firms are able to reach the expected internal branding outcomes.

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