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ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SOES BRANDING: BOILING THE OCEAN WHILE STICKING TO THEIR OWN GUNS

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the pivotal role of leadership in shaping the dynamics of branding within State-owned commercial enterprises of Pakistan (SOEs). The study focuses on the interplay of leadership with key branding elements, including brand identity, culture, and equity. Interviews were conducted as the primary methodology, and the sample comprised brand managers of state-owned commercial enterprises involved in delivering services to the public. The findings shed light on the significant influence of leadership in translating vision and commitment into employee motivation, thereby fostering brand behavior. This process, in turn, contributes to developing a distinctive brand culture and identity. The research highlights how this positive brand identity, rooted in leadership-driven strategies, enhances brand equity. These insights offer valuable guidance for public organizations seeking to fortify their brand presence in an increasingly competitive service sector.

Keywords: Leadership, Brand Equity, SOEs, Stakeholder in Brand Development.

Introduction

The relevance of internal brand creation as a strategy to align employees' behavior with brand values has recently come into focus (Negassa & Japee., 2022., Smith et al., 2021; Yen and Teng, 2020., Xie et al., 2016 and Keller, 1999). This is especially important for service brands because overcoming unpredictability at the "moment of truth" (Jhamb et al., 2022) is a major problem. Employees who know the best ways to represent the values of their brands can assist in solving this issue. Branding is "more about internal consistency, that places more emphasis on managing the total brand experience and is more about social processes" in contrast to service quality, which is more concerned with functional difficulties (Huang, 2017 p. 645., Schmitt, 2007 and Nysveen, 2013).

Aligning employee behavior with an organization's overall brand identity is a strategic requirement for internal brand building. By fostering a strong internal brand culture, this strategy ensures that all employees know and represent the brand's key

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values, mission, and vision. The importance of internal brand development stems from the fact that it helps employees feel engaged and purposeful, which translates into a cohesive brand image. Establishing and maintaining a distinct brand narrative gives employees a compelling goal to work towards, and leadership plays a crucial part in this process (Das et al.,2019; Hongal & Kinange, 2020).

Research Scope

The scope of this research is defined within the context of Pakistan's state-owned commercial enterprises operating in the service industry. The study focuses specifically on organizations under state ownership, delving into the intricacies of their branding strategies. Data collection was exclusively targeted at senior managers within these enterprises to gather comprehensive insights. These individuals were specifically chosen due to their pivotal roles as decision-makers, directly involved in shaping and implementing branding strategies. By narrowing the scope to this subset of the business landscape, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the branding dynamics within state-owned service-oriented enterprises in Pakistan, contributing valuable insights into the decision-making processes at the highest levels of management.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to understand the importance of leaders in brand development and different stakeholders involved in creating a positive brand identity within the context of state-owned commercial enterprises in Pakistan.

Research Question

What is the role and significance of leaders in shaping brand development within state-owned commercial enterprises in Pakistan, and how do various stakeholders contribute to fostering a positive brand identity in this context?

Literature Review

Role of Leaders in Organizational Branding

According to Naidoo et al. (2014), Effective leaders provide an example of the ideal behaviors and beliefs, which helps to maintain consistency throughout the brand. By consistently delivering the brand message, they ensure that every encounter, choice, and endeavor represents the organization's fundamental identity. The workplace culture is shaped by the leadership, which emphasizes the significance of matching individual actions to the overall brand goal. Leaders must actively connect with employees to promote the ideal brand traits by providing ongoing direction and feedback (Fleming & Millar, 2019).

Leaders act as live examples of the brand's identity and motivate employees through steadfast dedication. Their everyday decisions and behaviors uphold the brand's principles, generating a feeling of legitimacy and trust among employees and customers (Wei et al., 2023; Fuschillo et al., 2022; Yohn, 2022). The brand culture is eventually shaped by a leader's consistent commitment to it, even in the face of

difficulties and adjustments, which makes it an essential component of the organization's identity (Lasrado & Kassem, 2021., Schrage et al., 2021).

Furthermore, leaders can navigate bureaucratic hurdles, streamline decision-making processes, and allocate resources strategically to invest in branding efforts. A leader who understands the significance of a strong brand can inspire the organization to communicate a compelling narrative to consumers, fostering trust and loyalty. In state-owned enterprises, where the impact of leadership is magnified due to the complex organizational structure, a proactive and visionary leadership approach is vital to overcoming obstacles and elevating the importance of branding for long-term success.

Good leadership skills are essential to successfully creating a brand culture (Bhaduri, 2019; Figurska & Matuska, 2013). As a result, to promote brand culture, a common knowledge of the brand's values must be established in the minds and hearts of employees. As businesses grow, this internal brand-building process gets increasingly difficult (Garas et al., 2018). Therefore, a leadership role is also crucial at this point. (Dirani et al.,2020).

A strong brand culture is built and maintained on the core principles of leadership vision and commitment. A leader's vision establishes the fundamental values and guiding principles that will characterize the brand culture and provides the organization with its overall direction and purpose (Munifah & Purwaningrum, 2022., Tran, 2017; Bowers et al., 2017).

The importance of branding and the role of leadership in shaping brand identity through internal consistency among employees and their practices cannot be underestimated in private and public sector organizations. According to Lin et al. (2020), governments have been branding since ancient times, with early empires featuring the king's visage on coinage—an arguably primitive form of branding. However, over the past 3,000 years, private enterprises, notably super-brands like Coca-Cola and McDonald's, have elevated and perfected the concept, originating in the United States and gaining global prominence. While governments historically prioritized external branding to attract tourism and investment, a recent shift has recognized the importance of internal branding to influence the perceptions of citizens and employees. There is a growing awareness that, in a world inundated with commercial advertising, governments must leverage branding to ensure their messages resonate effectively (Zhou et al., 2019; Sithomola, 2019; Borah et al., 2022)

Overview of SOEs in Pakistan

A government-created legal organization that engages in economic activity on the government's behalf is known as a state-owned business (SOE). A government may own all or part of it, and it is usually designated to engage in particular business activities. Pakistan inherited twelve SOEs upon its independence. Due to the establishment of several development bodies and organizations (such as PIDC and WAPDA), this number increased slightly in the 1950s and 1960s. The nationalization of large-scale corporations, banks, insurance firms, and educational institutions in the 1970s caused a surge in their numbers. In the end, a reversal process started in the 1990s. Up to 172 privatization operations were finished between 1991 and 2015. After

that, the process stalled, and the government currently has 212 SOEs. These are separated into the following categories: There are 44 non-commercial entities (such as trusts, foundations, regulatory authorities, universities, research and training institutes, promotional and advocacy bodies, and others) in addition to the 85 commercial SOEs:8 are wholly involved in Business to consumer transaction and providing goods and services., and the 83 subsidiaries that are linked to one or more SOEs.

The 85 commercial SOEs are primarily engaged in the following industries: manufacturing, mining, and engineering; power; oil and gas; infrastructure transport and communication; industrial estate development and management; wholesale, retail, and marketing.

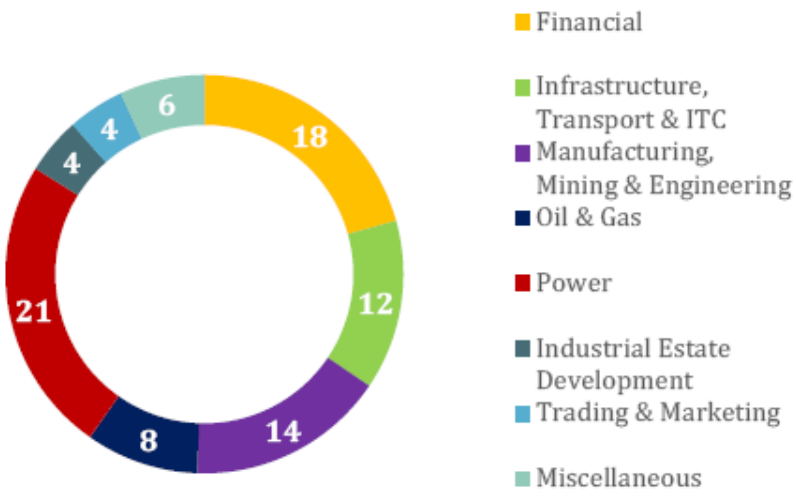


Figure 1: Commercial SOEs Sectoral Classification

Pakistan's state-owned companies occasionally face challenges, including inefficiency, bureaucracy, and financial constraints, although they are important. Over the years, the government has made initiatives to privatize and reform some of these firms to boost their efficiency and reduce the burden on public resources.

Challenges faced by SOEs in Branding

Due to different reasons, SOEs face challenges in developing strong brands and maintaining a positive image in the minds of consumers.

Firstly, the major reason faced by SOEs in brand building is the misconception and mistrust of customers on SOEs due to transparency, misconduct, and a customer-centric approach towards the public, which leads to the compulsion to avail of resources. Secondly, SOEs have limited budgets for marketing and branding compared to private organizations, and besides that, the lack of awareness of branding results in ignorance towards branding initiatives. The foremost obstacles that SOEs face are

bureaucracy and red tape, which impact the Performance of SOEs, and any innovative initiatives are being killed due to tedious processes and centralization.

In Pakistan, the strategic planning of the SOEs shifts with each change in the government. Each new state leadership happens within less than five years, and the brand communication and strategic priorities change. This makes the branding less consistent, which is a bad thing. People have a negative perception of the brand because the branding is inconsistent and stops and starts (Tang, 2019; Geng & Pan, 2019).

Pakistan's state-owned businesses put much emphasis on the role of leaders in building brand equity. Commercial enterprises develop a more comprehensive strategy to promote a positive brand culture, leading to a positive brand image. It describes how culture may affect the development of a common understanding of a brand and then considers how leadership relates to this process. Qualitative research has highlighted that leaders in multicultural service organizations are responsible for making sure that employees behave in a way that supports the brand.

The situation is made even more difficult by the huge difference in finances between SOEs and private companies. The bureaucratic maze, which is made up of too much red tape, is a strong enemy that makes branding efforts less efficient and effective. At their core, these problems create a rough whirlwind that makes it hard for state-owned businesses to build a strong brand identity (SOEs).

Internal Brand Building: The Significant Role of Staff

Let us explain what service, brands, and internal brand development mean. At first glance, these appear to be practically interchangeable, but the efficacy of employee participation, along with the leader's vision and commitment to internal brand creation, is what drives brand success (Afshardoost et al., 2023 and Barros-Arrieta & García, 2021)

According to de Husain et al. (2022), brands are collections of practical and emotional qualities that guarantee distinctive experiences. Consumers' perceptions of brands are socially built through factors including employee demeanor, personal appearance, and tone of voice (Lu et al., 2022 de Chernatony, 2001). Thus, employee reinforcement of the required behaviors by the leaders is crucial to the development of brands.

Employees must internalize the brand values and strongly believe in them to serve as "brand ambassadors," in addition to having the necessary skills and organizational support. Successful internal brand construction is connected to employee commitment and identification (Meyer et al., 2002; Xiong & King, 2019; Mazzei & Quaratino), according to studies on the causes and effects of employee attachment to organizational ideology.

As a result, internal brand creation in the services industry involves more than just functional service quality concerns; it also consists of fostering employee commitment and identification through social interaction procedures that explain, promote, and reinforce the right behavior of employees (Ahn et al., 2018 and Wombacher & Felfe et al.,2017)

Employee performance consistent with the brand's values enables stakeholders and all other parties engaged in the business to be informed about the brand's promise. Employees must firmly believe in them before the brand's values can become an edge over competitors. Peng et al. (2022); Hoang et al. (2022)

Learning about employees' perspectives is crucial in ensuring that employee behavior consistently reflects corporate values. Based on the authors' ((Duh & Uzezi Wara, 2023)cognitive agreement, the study holds that employees can only engage in consistent brand-supporting behavior if they have a shared understanding of their brand.

The role of Brand Culture on Brand image

As Sudaryanto et al. (2021) indicated, social processes involve comprehending and learning about brand values. Glukhova (2021) highlights that the cultural background impacts these processes. A broad, complex, and ubiquitous network of social factors that shapes and directs people's lives and offers a structured framework for navigating their environment is known as culture (Anning-Dorson, 2021; Lee et al., 2020).

Table 1: Sampling Frame

According to Wilson (2020), culture provides an empirical basis for understanding, which helps people make sense of their environment. Williams (2022) defines culture as a dynamic notion comprising a shared knowledge and symbol system. Culture makes developing a common concept of a brand much more difficult. Understanding how communicative, cognitive, and emotional processes change in response to cultural factors is crucial for the effectiveness of shared brand understanding, which we will discuss next (Haider et al., 2022; O'Madagain & Tomasello, 2022).

Methodology

The study undertook an investigation based on a grounded theory approach (Ancillo et al., 2022) to better understand the function of leadership in internal brand creation within an international setting. Given that the research field was still in its early stages, this was deemed suitable—ten in-depth interviews with middle and senior management workers from five Pakistani public companies in the service industry.

The businesses ranged in size from approximately 400 employees involved in banking, courier, airline, oil & petroleum and insurance services that are SOEs of Pakistan (State-owned commercial enterprises). To give insightful information about how the internal branding process was conducted, interviewees had to present themselves as "experts," holding the highest-level brand management role. Despite the limited sample size, the study agrees with Hennink & Kaiser (2022), who claimed that the insights from the interviews were enough to form hypotheses about the empirical connection between internal brand creation and leadership in public sector setup.

Table 01: List of Industry		
S.No	Industry	Enterprises
1	Infrastructure and Transport	PIA, Pakistan Railway
2	Communication	Pakistan Post
3	Oil and Gas	Pakistan State Oil
4	Finance	House Building Finance Company Limited National Bank of Pakistan"
5	Insurance	State Life Insurance, First Women Bank
6	Industries and Production	Utility Stores Corporation (Private) Limited

The Interview Guide was theory-driven yet semi-structured (McDonald et al., 2019), and it focused on the role of leaders in internal brand building in public setups. Every interview was recorded and then transcribed. Transcripts were emailed to each responder, who was requested to verify any statements made to increase credibility.

Leader mindset, its commitment to brand building, developing brand culture, and its impact on the brand image were found using an iterative method of sorting and establishing theoretical categories (Kuckartz, 2019). These were then "tested" and improved in light of new information learned from the interviews. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022) and Maxwell (1996), this is congruent with using a grounded theory methodology.

Sample Description

The Federal Government-owned and controlled commercial SOEs that

(i) "have a substantial revenue stream from their services/user charges that substantially cover their costs" make up the sample frame for quantitative data collecting.

(ii) "Participating in the business-to-consumer sector"

The entities in the following categories have not been included in this analysis:

(i) "Universities, as well as academic, training and research institutions"
(ii) "Regulatory Bodies"
(iii)"Funds, trusts, and foundations"
(iv)"Federal Authorities"
(v) "Commissions"
(vi) "Monopolistic state-owned-enterprises"

Findings and Analysis

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure begins with data familiarization from the interview transcript, and after that, common themes are generated. Afterward, the process of coding starts, where it systematically labels and categorizes data segments based on recurring themes or patterns.

Once coding was complete, categories and themes were created. This stage involves organizing the data into a coherent structure that encapsulates the key findings. The subsequent step is data interpretation, where the patterns and relationships derive meaning.

The study synthesized the important factors and how the role of leadership impacts other stakeholders, such as employees, the organization, and its customers. Figure 1 results from an extensive review of the existing literature and in-depth interviews. It illustrates the stakeholders involved in the brand management process that helps achieve brand equity. This begins with the vision and dedication of leadership, which is subsequently transformed into motivating employees and establishing brand-oriented behavior. This, in turn, contributes to cultivating a brand culture and identity. Ultimately, this favorable brand identity serves to elevate the brand image.

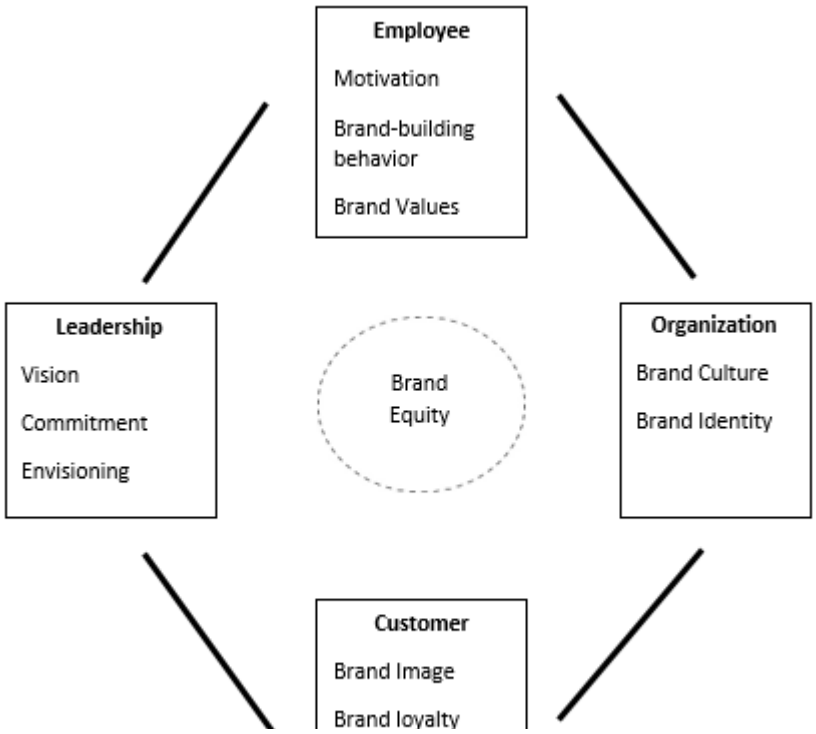


Figure 1: Stakeholders in Brand Management

Has a clear Brand Vision

Internal brand creation develops when friction between the real and ideal work environment drives individuals to collaborate to close the gap. Successful leaders are frequently regarded as inspiring and visionary, according to several scholars (Kim et al., 2023; Atthirawong et al., 2021., Men et al., 2018., Yakimova et al., 2017; Chhotray et al., 2018). According to Chai (2017), vision was rated as the most significant in terms of its direct and indirect impacts on follower behavior and attitudes. According to Steinmann et al. (2018), the responses to the following questions represent a distinctive brand vision.

- What fundamental principles does our brand uphold?
- What does our brand stand for?
- What kind of future does the brand hope to create?

The study suggests that elements of an inspiring brand vision are closely connected to fostering greater employee dedication, aligning with Baum et al.'s research from 1998. This brand vision should resonate with all employees within the organization, whether it originates from upper management or evolves through a collaborative effort where they play a significant role as co-authors. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), a brand's vision "must outgrow the needs of the entire organization and must be 'claimed' or 'owned' by all important actors" (p.109) for an organization to be successful.

The corporate policy in each firm under investigation instructs workers to apply the same brand vision globally. ***"The brand "defines the room for maneuver and stipulates the form of behavior across the entire global value chain," as the branding manager of a courier company put it. This implies that our German workers should, in theory, act similarly to those in the USA***. Conversely, managers stated there is some opportunity for uniqueness and interpretation within the established brand-related constraints.

"***Attempting to eliminate 'chaos' to ensure consistent brand behavior also entails attempting to eradicate human behavior. Internal branding, on the other hand, is about the individual and their distinctive behavioral traits, according to a senior vice president of an airline business".***

The majority of the participants, however, expressed unease when asked where the boundaries for brand-adequate behavior begin and finish. The marketing manager of a banking company said, ***"The study does not want to be perceived as a sect... The study does not want to control our people... The study does not want them to lose their personality..."***

The extent to which the brand vision has to be shared among employees to ensure brand-adequate behavior was unclear, even though the managers who participated in the interview knew that not having a defined brand may generate uncertainty among employees in a multicultural situation. Leaders must develop the tools to achieve these goals, especially steps that can be implemented immediately to increase morale and guarantee that these values become important for their workforce.

Brand Commitment

As outlined by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), brand commitment is frequently defined as the extent of emotional connection that employees have with a brand. Employee brand commitment is key to creating and sustaining a robust brand culture inside a firm. Employees who are devoted to the brand become its most powerful evangelists. Along with improving client experiences, their excitement and drive also help the workers feel united and purposeful. "***A dedicated employee is more likely to match their behavior and choices with the company's guiding principles and mission, strengthening the brand culture from within. A good brand culture, therefore, encourages employee brand loyalty through a positive feedback loop".***

To instill brand commitment amongst employees is the key role of leadership. If leaders are not brand-committed, it will not be translated into their subordinates. ***When employees are not genuinely engaged with our brand, it becomes challenging to maintain consistency in our customer interactions and messaging. This lack of alignment with our brand values results in confusion and a diluted brand image in our customers' eyes, as the airline service brand manager mentioned***.

Brand Culture

A strong brand culture has been identified as a key factor in company success, helping to boost profitability, promote consumer loyalty, draw in top talent, and forge fruitful alliances (Diallo & Seck, 2018). In this environment, the significance of leadership in creating and maintaining brand culture has grown. The positive brand vision and brand commitment of a leader form a brand culture (Schroeder et al., 2006). Culture is a broad notion that includes all of the information, beliefs, conventions, rituals, and other habits that people acquire as members of a certain community (Gao et al., 2020)

A culture largely functions by establishing flexible rules for personal conduct. In essence, culture provides the foundation for how people and households behave. Culture has a significant effect on both individual and institutional consumption habits. The patterns of purchasing that consumers prefer to follow depend on the underlying cultural ideology. Successful businesses have integrated their brands into the fabric of culture by adopting branding tactics consistent with this prevailing cultural attitude (Fernández,2011).

Companies that effectively cultivate a brand culture exhibit various qualities, making them more inclined to outshine their rivals in the long run. While asking interviewees how brand culture impacts organizational performance, a petroleum company's Senior brand performance manager stated: ***"A robust brand culture helps in elevating profit margins, fostering customer loyalty, attracting top talent, and***

forging valuable collaborations. As more companies recognize the significance of brand culture, they and the economies they operate within experience growth".

Another senior manager from the Insurance industry further shed light on brand culture by expressing his opinion when brand culture is not strong in the organization: ***"Of course, the business would succeed. It may, however, be a longer and bumpier road fraught with inefficiencies and more years."***

Brand Image leading to brand equity

An organization's brand culture, brand identity, and positive brand image are intricately connected, and the role of leadership is pivotal in shaping this relationship. One of the brand managers stated, "***Encouraging employees with a strong and authentic brand culture instills values, a sense of purpose, and a shared vision."*** Leadership that continuously exemplifies and upholds these values via actions and decisions contributes to creating a unified and cohesive corporate culture, shaping the brand identity, which comprises the visual and emotional components that stakeholders use to define the organization.

Effective leadership ensures that the brand identity aligns with the culture and appeals to the target audience. When these components come together cohesively, a favorable brand image inspires loyalty, trust, and goodwill in the eyes of the public, workers, and consumers.

Positive brand perception, ultimately driven by leadership's efforts to define brand identity and culture, turns into a significant asset known as brand equity. The capacity to weather market storms and retain a strong market position can result from this equity. It can also increase consumer loyalty, premium pricing, and premium products. As a result, "***the leadership's dedication to cultivating a favorable brand image is not only a marketing strategy but also an essential business strategy for long-term success."***

Conclusion

The goal of building strong brands should be to get employees to act in a way that is consistent with the brand's basic values, especially within service businesses. Aligning employees with brand values is one of leaders' main responsibilities for ensuring consistent brand behavior. The task of creating a unified framework to define what the brand stands for. Leaders must first use a top-down strategy to create widespread shared brand knowledge.

Building the internal procedures and structures that enable internal branding is largely the responsibility of leaders or top management. Furthermore, because they significantly impact how employees perceive the brand, leaders are the most important role models for every firm member. Only if leaders speak and act in favor of internal branding initiatives will they be regarded seriously (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Kim & Brymer, 2011). If employees feel that leaders sincerely believe in the principles of the brand and exhibit brand-consistent actions, they will embrace the brand values and align their attitudes appropriately (Lee et al., 2013).

The process must begin at the top, with management buying into the value of a strong brand and the brand identity idea for internal branding to be successful (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Top management personnel play several crucial leadership responsibilities, such as motivators and visionaries (Ubaidillah et al., 2019). The vision setter function articulates an organization's essential purpose and future orientations.

To encourage employees to achieve the organization's goals and uphold its values, the motivator function entails fostering a sense of enthusiasm and energy (Jensen et al., 2019). As a result, leaders mentor employees and serve as positive role models (Kara et al., 2013). They are in charge of developing the company culture, communicating the company vision, and instilling the company values in staff members (Lee et al., 2013).

Research findings show that leadership vision and commitment are crucial for shaping brand-building behavior, which in turn influences the creation of a distinctive brand culture and personality and maximizes brand equity. Effective leadership inspires and guides employees toward a shared goal with a compelling vision, integrating their activities with the brand's fundamental values and mission.

This alignment encourages brand-building behaviors, including keeping promises to customers, being consistent across touchpoints, and going above and beyond to improve the business's reputation. These actions then influence the company's brand culture, reflecting the common values and identity established from the leadership's vision. A strong and consistent brand culture shapes the brand's personality, which affects how customers and stakeholders view the brand.

These characteristics improve brand equity by fostering consumer trust and loyalty and boosting employee engagement and productivity. The outcomes include a favorable consumer perception and a brand that is flexible and resilient in the long term, continuously keeping its promises and maximizing its market equity.

Recommendations

A few areas need to be investigated further to broaden the body of knowledge on the leadership role in branding in the context of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Pakistan. First, learning more about how leadership philosophies affect branding efficacy may yield insightful information. Examining how charismatic, transactional, or transformative leadership affects the growth and management of brands in SOEs may provide a more complex picture of the dynamics at work.

Comparative studies between the branding practices of state-owned enterprises and their private counterparts in Pakistan could offer insights into the distinctive challenges and opportunities in different ownership structures. Lastly, exploring the impact of external factors such as political influences, regulatory frameworks, and economic conditions on the leadership's ability to build and maintain strong brands in SOEs is essential. Understanding how leaders navigate and respond to external pressures can illuminate strategies for effective brand resilience in dynamic environments.

Overall, these suggested avenues for future research aim to deepen our understanding of the intricate relationship between leadership and branding in state-

owned enterprises in Pakistan and contribute valuable knowledge to both academic and practical domains.

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