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“ An investigation into Internal employer branding initiatives on employee satisfaction and consumer experience within the luxury retail environment”

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Declaration form

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Abstract

Branding has become a strategic forefront in the minds of most business owners. Yet, while a more established brand name creates connection and consumer loyalty, often, the employee is forgotten. Within brand advertising, these creative campaigns and messaging are usually made with the consumer in mind, but how can employers look towards attracting prospective staff while engaging and creating a brand community internally.

Understanding the links between employee perspective, employer relationship, and communications can be critical to modern marketers in creating successful and performing business ventures. The purpose of this study is to explore the luxury retail industry, with its fast-paced, experimental and competitive environment, to examine what employees value and consider to be their store's branding initiatives. Next, motivation and retention will be explored to gauge its effects on employee satisfaction, and finally, the consumer experience will be explored.

Qualitative primary research with an inductive approach was chosen to be the primary source of consideration for this study, with the secondary research of academia as a grounding. The data were analysed through a thematic approach. The findings concluded that employers with more vital and more communicative relationships with their employees built more brand loyalty. While other results found that the more trained and engaged the employees were to their brand, the more confident and better they performed with consumers. Further research was needed around the blurred lines of internal branding with considerations for the post covid environment, which may change consumer demands. Research around experiential design may also be considered as a future venture within this area.

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Abstract

Branding has become a strategic forefront in the minds of most business owners. Yet, while a more established brand name creates connection and consumer loyalty, often, the employee is forgotten. Within brand advertising, these creative campaigns and messaging are usually made with the consumer in mind, but how can employers look towards attracting prospective staff while engaging and creating a brand community internally.

Understanding the links between employee perspective, employer relationship, and communications can be critical to modern marketers in creating successful and performing business ventures. The purpose of this study is to explore the luxury retail industry, with its fast-paced, experimental and competitive environment, to examine what employees value and consider to be their store's branding initiatives. Next, motivation and retention will be explored to gauge its effects on employee satisfaction, and finally, the consumer experience will be explored.

Qualitative primary research with an inductive approach was chosen to be the primary source of consideration for this study, with the secondary research of academia as a grounding. The data were analysed through a thematic approach. The findings concluded that employers with more vital and more communicative relationships with their employees built more brand loyalty. While other results found that the more trained and engaged the employees were to their brand, the more confident and better they performed with consumers. Further research was needed around the blurred lines of internal branding with considerations for the post covid environment, which may change consumer demands. Research around experiential design may also be considered as a future venture within this area.

1.Introduction

The luxury retail industry has grown drastically within the last five years as social media platforms have become enormous advertising platforms (Maltz,2017). As a result, individuals are flooded with several adverts of their favourite celebrities and influencers wearing luxury products. This ideology behind experiential marketing and the quality association with this industry has, in turn, created a more competitive and fast-paced environment(Harrison,2021).

These changing environments create the need for more brand individuality (Arthurs,2018) and more knowledgeable and better-trained employees(). The competitive advantage of vital performing employees has been recognized by Barrow et al (2016), while Armstrong (2009) highlighted the challenges of creating this brand loyalty from the inside–out.

Internal employer branding essentially marketing the business messaging and quality to the employees to create a more loyal, satisfied workforce (Collumb,2018) while increasing retention and attracting prospective employees(Hall,2016). Although this challenge has not consistently been recognized as a strategic need by businesses, with most branding activities being tailored towards the consumer. The implementation of employee bonding initiatives, communication improving and training programs are often cited as popular approaches to internal employer branding with the overall aim to improve the employee's welfare at work(Abel,2013)

The mismatch of executing successful employer branding initiatives throughout current academia has needed more research(Mahnert et al,2007). The aligning of strategic business functioning and employee satisfaction is often argued within academia as many employers fail to recognize the employee as an asset. Kotter(2008) highlighted those strong employees determine a business's success. While Todor(2014) argued that the competitiveness of the modern-day labour market is due to a more educated workforce, employees are pickier on their place of work, and internal employer branding is key to this identifiable and desirable culture. The aim of this study is to explore primary and secondary research sources around the topic of internal employer branding and examine the perspectives of employees from the luxury retail sector. The employer relationship will be examined through explorations of communication, training and workplace scenarios, with consideration for the overall impact on consumer experience. Chapter one will begin to outline these research aims and objectives in more detail.

Chapter two will then explore the existing academia around branding and the rising effects of technology on the pressure of market brands. Chapter three will then go on to examine the research approach and philosophy while chapter four and five will allow the author to discuss and challenge the existing ideology and findings.

It is desired that these findings will provide an insight into the large world of internal employer brandings with the viewpoint of strategy with the impact on the employee and consumer experience also noted.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1.1 Research Aim:

This research aims to explore the impact of internal employer branding initiatives on the variables of employee satisfaction and consequential outputs on consumer experience within the luxury retail environment. This area has gaps identified, as internal branding is often confused with general functional training and misrepresented for its potentially strategic influences. This study aims to expand the lack of understanding from management around internal employer branding while collecting data around employer perspective and overall business aims. In addition to this, the study explores the development of luxury retail through technology advancements and the depleting environment of traditional retail environments on consumer experience. Through the development of this study, insights into the varying perceptions and individual employer branding may create valuable research that can make long-term impactful changes by chosen employers. Finally, the research will examine the topic of internal branding to be explored with a specific qualitative approach.

1.2 Research Title

“ An investigation into Internal employer branding initiatives on employee satisfaction and consumer experience within the luxury retail environment”

The above title was finally chosen after several considerations. First, the following sub-objectives of the research were considered, such as the impact of Covid 19 on the luxury retail environment and the corresponding employer efforts that affected training and development of employer branding. A second consideration was also given to the potentially harmful development of technology on the consumer experience. While these topics will be explored as a sub-objective discussion within this research, the overall title chosen above was argued to be the most thorough exploration of the desired aim.

1.3 Research Objectives

This section will outline specific points of the study that aim to answer the overall research question proposed. Within these sections, other information may arise as the study flows; this will be discussed within the analysis and findings section.

Research Objective 1

To determine and compare various understandings of internal employer branding through the employer to employee relationship. This will allow a natural flow to the conversation as participants are encouraged to explore their basis for their individual role opinions and perception. This objective is essential in creating a definite aim of exploring the implementation of internal branding initiatives in the chosen environment of luxury retail.

Research Objective 2

To determine the impact of these internal branding initiatives on the individual employees' role and overall satisfaction. This objective allows a more personal aspect as the direct relationship between branding and satisfaction is examined. This area will also enable a more critical research approach as opinions vary, and unforeseen topics may be brought to light that may not have been considered within the competitive luxury retail environment.

Research Objective 3

To examine the direct output of these internal branding initiatives on the consumer experience. This objective is crucial in the study as it aligns the employee perspective and variables to the overall business functionality and strategic needs affecting consumer experience. This aspect will allow the business values and operations through internal branding to be examined against how the employees perceive it. Allowing consumer experience to be explored will give a more accurate representation of internal branding from input (employee investment) to output (consumer experience).

1.4 Research Sub objectives

Sub Objective 1

The developing evolution of luxury retail and its corresponding relationship with technology. As stores become more tech-savvy, how does this correlate with positive brand experience? Through the data analysis, key pointers will be determined through employee perspective to gain traction on the relationship between the two. In addition, key points around the employee role and satisfaction will be considered.

Sub Objective 2

The impact of Covid and its relationship with internal employer branding. Points around training and development before Covid 19 and after will be examined. Potentially this will be an area where interviewees can discuss their own thoughts around the changing evolution of their role post pandemic and the long-term effects of this in terms of retention and satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literature Review

To fully understand this topic, several areas will be explored in further detail below. These will include current academic stances and opinions on the research area outlined. While these can be compared and commented on, this will build a base to research and identify potential gaps.

2.2 External Branding

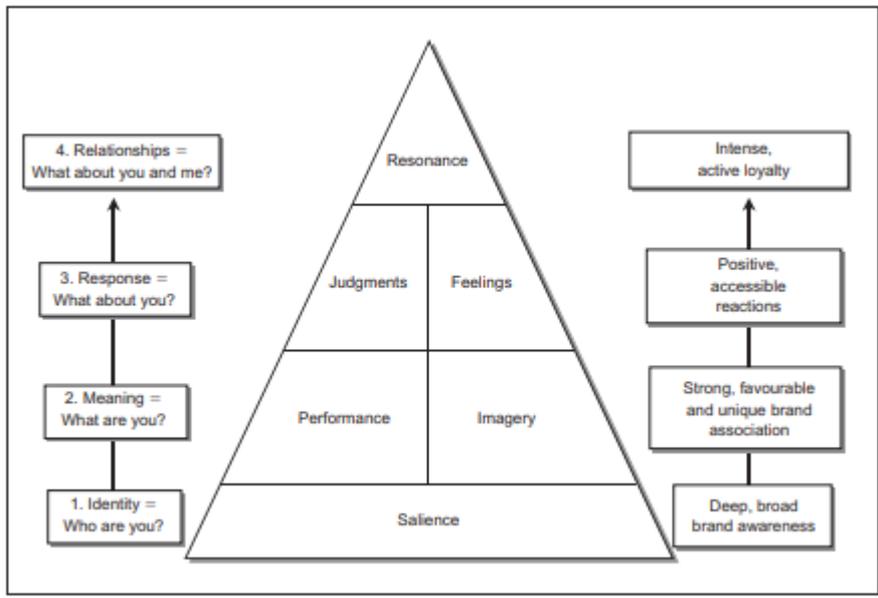
As organizations compete for market space, their branding strategies are now more strategically developed than ever. The evolution of technologically enhanced global marketing has driven this corporate desire to stand out from the crowd. In comparison, questioning how brands can create loyal relationships with consumers is now more critical than ever (Gajo,2019). Technology has enhanced how people market their businesses and has allowed market space to be grasped by competitors more quickly. Brands are fighting to stand out as major social media sites now allow tailored business platforms and personalized analytical insights (Todor, 2014). The umbrella of branding seems to encapsulate many aspects of a business, from imagery such as logos and recognizable color themes to the messaging and portrayal of the business visions. The external brand is developed for the consumer, with attractiveness lying around their perception and willingness to purchase one brand over a competitor.

While others, such as Aacker (1997), argue that there is much more than imagery and messaging to a brand. Often brands can evoke emotions from their consumers through their development of a “brand personality.” While some brands may leverage advertising to tug on emotions and lead to purchases from their consumers, others invest more into creating personas and catchy tag lines that give their brand more fun and quirkier image(Aacker,1997). Branding allows differentiation in competitive market spaces, but it can also determine the value of a business from a consumer perspective and internal—the ideology of “brand equity,” which is created from the extra individualism through unique branding creation. To make the right brand equity balance, Keller (2003) argued that a four-step process should exist when creating a valuable brand, from establishing strong reasoning behind why the brand exists to connecting this vision to how the business wants people to feel about them. However, Rowley (1997) argued that determining a brand's equity can be challenging due to the variables they may be examined under.

Vargo and Lusch(2004) argued in agreement with this ideology, claiming that consumer emotions should be considered heavily, with them acting as a “co-producer” in business functionality. The overall link of external branding is to establish the brand's personality, equity and to determine how they market themselves to their consumers. Branding allows the business to create a social bridge in how they communicate and are placed among their competitors in terms of competitiveness and differentiation(Saraneimi,2011). Keller outlined a brand-building pyramid based on consumer equity within the development of branding. Figure 2.0 below outlines the questioning around social responsibility, imagery

associated with brand personalities, and the sensory feedback consumers will accept (Keller,2003).

Figure 2.0 “Customer-based brand equity pyramid” (Keller,2003)



While there are many consumers targeted benefits to investing in branding, many challenges face businesses surrounding branding. Creating a well valued, established brand can be challenging to obtain as external costs and investments attract extra pressures for start-up businesses. The maintenance of branding can also be a considerable challenge. When a brand is established, often their messaging must stay similar in sounding and imagery to try retaining remembrance by their consumers. Balancing this challenge of acceptable and fitting advertising can often be difficult for businesses, even with more significant resources(Rowley,1997). Another disadvantage associated with external branding is the lack of change that creates a limited brand. While it can be a strong point for a business if their brand is placed within a market and regularly associated with a product, it can leave the brand to become “stuck” and therefore more challenging to update changes or brand extensions (Jones,2004).

2.3 Defining Internal Employer Branding

Definitions around internal branding seem to vary within academia. This can be seen through Punsari et al. (2009) argument that internal branding allows businesses to create a self-valued and desired image to attract their own individualistic business needs. Others such as Hall(2016) argued that employer branding makes sense of community by enabling a corporate connection with employee value. Thompson (1999), in line with these definitions, discussed the creation of employer culture to foster employee mindsets and dedication while also mentioning the varying emphasis that businesses fail to place on employer branding. Research around unpredictable economic turmoil faced companies to reevaluate their marketing tactics and keep employees motivated, focusing on their internal functioning such as employer branding(Martin,2011).

Recently, the hit of the covid 19 pandemic has caused employers to communicate and interact with employees in a more challenging, virtual environment(Forbes India,2020). Due to many employees being furloughed by government schemes during the pandemic, this has also directly impacted their motivation to work. Employees earning a wage through these subsidy schemes have left employers looking for new ways of engaging and keeping dedicated staff, especially within the retail and hospitality environment (The Sunday Times,2021).

It is suggested that this changing economy will continue to impact the relationship employers value with their employees while also considering the lack of motivation to work in the current economy. This employer branding ideology has caught traction with many business professionals even from the recruitment stance “how you behave towards your people will shape how customer audiences, just as much as candidates, perceive you are moving forward” (Harrison,2020). This approach may not have been a strategic focus for employers, while it may become a more forefront approach into the future(Hall,2016).

Examining the use of internal employer branding, it can usually be grouped into two categories, a strategic business aim or the employee focus(Heilmann et al,2013). Looking at internal employer branding as a business aim, there are multiple benefits to introducing the initiatives. There are numerous business advantages linked, such as improved recruitment success(Minhington and Thorne, 2007), higher profitability in marketing tactics due to more robust company culture(Maheshwari et al,2017) and finally improved branding awareness as communicative methods are better(Ritson,2002). Shafique (2012) highlighted that candidates are more difficult to attain as the employment market becomes more educated through government and technological enhancements. Rising pressures around attracting prospective candidates while balancing existing employee welfare have become an echoing problem for employers. This research suggests that the business advantages mentioned can also translate to better external marketing tactics. Martin et al(2011) highlighted that better internal branding radiates to external communications and therefore improves the business from the inside out.

With consideration for the employee perspective, internal employer branding has many strong links to improving company culture. Company culture is described as the internal organization and community which a brand builds (Kotter,2008). While highlighted that company culture is determined by the level of communication that employers and employees create together. Due to the competitive environments many industries face, company culture has become a primary focus of improvement. Flamholtz (2001) described the role company culture has in the overall business performance, from the general environment's employees work into external output they can create around their workplace. Corporation culture has also been linked to brand loyalty. McGregor et al(2015) argued that consumers are often proactive in researching brands before purchasing. This may include the business environment and employee treatment. Gajo (2019) highlighted that as a decision-maker in transactional processes. From the above findings, more attractive company culture can highlight the business's quality of service from internal to external identity. This research also highlights the suggestion of improved company culture and its positive effects on employees as they are more satisfied at work.

2.4 Internal Branding Strategies

The employer typically develops internal branding strategies with the employee as the primary focus. Employee benefits such as improved retention rates (Huang et al,2010), stronger communicative relationships (Kaplan et al,2017), higher motivation levels, and improved customer interactions have been associated with these initiatives. Punjaisri et al (2008) argued that successful internal branding works through the designing of employee behaviour. This, in turn, allows employers to shape the beliefs and visions of an individual. Others, such as Abel(2013), agreed with this ideology, stating that keeping employees satisfied is one of the most profitable ventures an organization can create. Barber et al(1992) highlight that satisfied employee lead to better engagement, profitability, and overall retention.

Research conducted by Collumb (2018) divided internal branding into in three different types, "top-down internal communications, upward internal communications, and lateral communications." Communication is a common theme among these initiatives in academia as it acts as the bridge to develop the employer-to-employee relationship. Others, such as Sharma(2012), argued that top-down communication could create blurred messaging and often lose the brand's designed strategy. Manhart et al (2007) highlighted that lateral communication is most effective in building employee trust through internal focusing. This examining of communication is then pushed to create development programs and employee incentives as part of the internal conversion, explored below.

2.5 Training and development

Internal employer branding is often gauged first by the human resource department within the organization, as factors such as training and onboarding drive the business's mission and values to the individual (King et al,2008). In comparison, others such as Vargo and Lusch(2008) argue that internal initiatives cannot be defined and encapsulated in the employee life cycle as they learn how the business operates and its contribution. Training and development are a huge factor of internal branding and often are the leading player in business strategy(Armstrong,2008). Jain (2019) outlined that investing in training and development programs can lead to depreciation in supervision. Trained employees are confident to work independently while representing the brand in their best capacity. Training usually includes information surrounding the brand image, messaging, and desired actions of the employees.

Existing research around this area suggests that internal branding training most regularly occurs within the onboarding process of the employee lifecycle(King et al,2008). However, others such as Lawson(2016) argue that an employee development program should have them confident in their brand knowledge at any stage of their time within the workplace. Training resources commonly chosen by employers include infographics, informational booklets, and online training portals(Atwood et al.,2009).

Most widely used within the retail sector are employee training days, which involve employees traveling to external venues to meet their brand community and learn more(Smith,2018). Training in this area is often associated with the brand meaning and reinforces the business's identity to the employee(Spacey,2018). Through bridging this gap, employees can be expected to be more confident and informed in their role within the business but also in how they present this to the consumer(Hosmer,2015). In addition, the training is often focused on community building, another common theme as individuals who are better educated around their workplace feel a sense of belonging (Nicholas et al,2016).

High-quality training is especially desired within the luxury retail sector due to its ability to increase employee confidence and build strong knowledge teams. Sutherland(2017) outlined those varying strategic methods may be used in how internal branding training and development programmes are designed, but the message remains the same. Through education and invested resources in workforces, employees are more knowledgeable in their roles and more invested in a brand(Middleton,2010). As organizations develop this training with the employee in mind, employers build these programs with employee input. An employee's opinion can be just as valuable to a business as a consumer's thoughts due to the inside product knowledge and brand vision the employee will have experienced within their daily role. (Spacey,2018). Employers who allow their employees to be involved within business decisions and functioning were described as more trustworthy, practical (Kotter,2018), and successful in their role (Persson et al, 2015).

2.6 Employee Incentives

Research also suggests that employee incentives are developed in line with employer strategies to improve the internal culture of the workplace(Lauby,2015). Employee incentives have been described as “advertising internally” as brands push the ideal imagery and messaging of the brand to keep employees engaged and motivated as a workforce(Keller,2003). Employee incentives such as employee day-outs, staff parties, and education through more fun community engaging activities are effective ways of building this advertising inside the business(Putzier,2011). Employee Days out and activities have become more popular as the benefits such as team bonding (Stack et al,2013)and morale improvement(Podmorff,2015). Focusing on the retail sector, employees are gifted free merchandise from their corresponding brand and entitled to employee discounts. These methods not only allow the consumer to explore the quality and experience that their consumer receives. While intrinsic motivation is essential for employees, extrinsic motivation can also create value association to a brand(Heneman,2002).

2.7 Technology and the Development of Retail

As part of this secondary research, it is crucial to explore the chosen sector. Technology is constantly evolving as businesses are being met with higher demands of becoming tech-friendly. Lee et al (2013) argued that companies could maximize profitability through leveraging technology; however, their focus on the customer experience is often blurred. Others such as Reynolds (2000) also commented on this dominance of technology in retail environments as a potential negative “it has been consistently suggested that its emergence as a competitive channel to market in practice presents a threat to conventional retail businesses as well as an opportunity for new entrants into the marketplace.” The consumer interaction is affected by intelligent technologies and the need to reassess where value creation from the retailer is within the shopping experience (Foroudi et al,2018). The development of self-checkouts, automated product scanners, and online shopping has meant face-to-face interaction with employees has also changed. From entering the store to the purchase, consumers are faced with several messages and potential contact points for the company to gauge value from. While these disruptive technologies are created to improve the experience, often, the consumer may be left with minor face-to-face interaction.

Hopping (2000) argued that technology had evolved retail massively from their supply chains right down to payment. Many authors have mentioned the potential negative of this reduction in face-to-face interaction. Arthurs (2017) and Decker(2014) both mentioned concerns around the fast-paced rate technology is overhauling how we work. In contrast, companies scramble to embrace this pressure in developing the most advanced AI to keep up with consumer demands. Global tech company Apple can leverage these technologies by creating “Apple pay,” which allows users to pay seamlessly for items through card information stored within their mobile devices(Apple,2020).

Liu et al. (2019)described apple pay as a “double-edged sword” due to the personalization of till experiences that can be diminished through fast-paced payment opinions. In

comparison, Apple brand their competent payment opinion as offering convenience and security through double verification options(Apple,2020).

Disruptive technology increases the retail experience, but other platforms such as eCommerce are drastically evolving. Figures published by Statista last year found that ecommerce sales equated for over “4.2 billion us dollars” in the retail sector alone(Statista,2020). This suggests that growing pressure on traditional luxury retail experiences is evolving, and a need to recreate an equilibrium of value between the consumer and employee relationship. In addition, unexpected changes in economies such as Covid 19 may push retailers to consider eCommerce options sooner than imagined(Chang et al,2021).

2.8 Consumer Expectations and the need for change

As consumer needs evolve, it is also essential to understand the changes technology will have on their expectations. “Time and convenience are the new currencies for today’s consumers”(Hopping,2000). While it is argued that consumers expect technology as part of many of their shopping experiences, often with these enhancements, gaps are still present.

Bustamante(2017)argued that consumers expect specific touchpoints within their retail experiences, whether it is the human interaction of a greeting or their engagement. Research shows that consumers still value in-person shopping experiences. For example, “54% of Irish consumers still shop in-store weekly or more often”(PWC,2019). In addition to this, research conducted by Google around consumer shopping habits also found that “61% of shoppers surveyed would rather purchase from a brand with a physical location than stores that are based online-only”(Google,2018). This research suggests that many consumers still look to shop within physical retail stores. With retail having to explore eCommerce options and online consumer relationships, they also need to examine traditional approaches to bringing value and consumers to physical stores(Carton,2019). Another finding by Healy et al (2007) found that often consumers base their retail experience on how they were able to engage with the employee, not on how their actual purchase performed. Others such as Vargo and Lusch (2008) argued in agreement with this ideology, claiming that consumers are “co-producers” within value creation and should be engaged with them at all times.

2.9 Conclusion

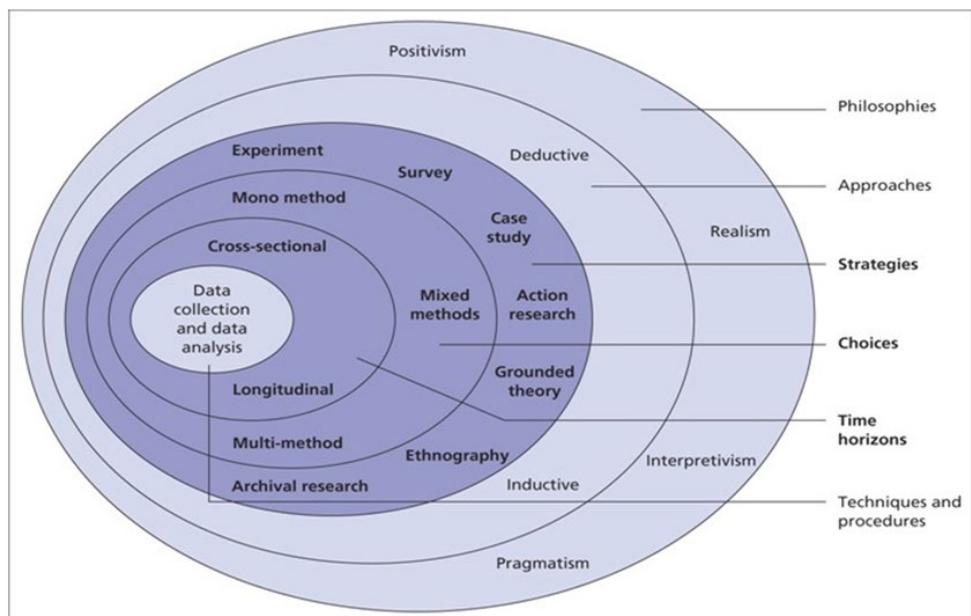
The findings of the above secondary research conducted established several conflicting variances between the current internal branding literature and external branding approaches. The influence of the luxury retail sector has also experienced developments in which the need to reassess the current strategic methods that businesses are implementing. Communication and relationship building were highlighted and linked with positive outcomes such as employee retention, satisfaction, and confidence. The importance of brand knowledge was evident in the research while also accounting for the technological developments and post-pandemic environments shoppers will now face. As consumer demands evolve, employers will explore new strategic ventures, and the research above may suggest that internal branding is one of those.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

The purpose of exploring research philosophy is to effectively understand the best approach to collecting the data to analyze it. Saunders argued that research philosophy is more than outlining the author's approach to managing data but the process of understanding the “beliefs and assumptions” that accompany a researcher’s design approach(2009). In comparison, others such as (Boyd et al,2019) define research design as the process of strategically developing a link between data collected and the execution of it in real-life practices and outcomes. Several research design academia was considered. The author thought more decision-making within research design theories such as those developed by Blanche et al (2006) and shown in figure 1.0 below with special attention taken to the purpose of the study. However, after consideration, a more detailed approach was taken to understand the research design philosophy better. The research onion (figure 1.1) was developed by Saunders et al and was used as a basis of the author's knowledge of existing research theories. The onion was grown to create a visual representation of approaches to research design, with the outer layer made up of philosophies. The diagram leads the researcher to consider, with the last step being the actual data collection(Saunders,2009).

Fig 1.1 “The Research Onion” (Saunders et al,2009)



3.2 Choosing a philosophy

Examining Saunders' research onion (2009), philosophies such as "Positivism, realism, interpretivism and pragmatism" are all outlined. Positivism involves examining information that already exists in terms of if an individual was to research a chosen area. This philosophy supports that the hypothesis can be tested and is consistent. Ryan (2018) argued that positivism is often associated with quantitative methods and does not involve any individual bias the researcher may put forward. Another philosophy outlined within the research onion is realism, described as a continuous approach. Realism is based on the ideology that research must be updated and conducted regularly around an area to be accurate. This method also encourages using new techniques to conduct research and believes in improvement (Saunders,2009). Finally, interpretivism is more accurate when used to analyze people in the study as it bases its outcomes on people's thoughts, actions, and predictive action strategies.

Ryan(2018) argued that interpretivism understands that researchers' methods and design will always contain bias due to their individualistic nature in data. Finally, the last philosophy outlined by Saunders is the ideology of pragmatism. This method involves viewing research as a contrasting debate through understanding stakeholders and creating the most practical point of view. With pragmatism, viewpoints are often interpreted and viewed under different aspects to gauge a conclusion(Sarstedt,2011). After consideration, the researcher chose to adapt elements of the realism approach while mainly gaging an interpretivism philosophy. This was due to the researcher's understanding that the information gathered within this dissertation will need to be continually reviewed and questioned to create a real impact in areas such as internal employer branding where existing research resources are minimal. However, the researcher will take an overall interpretivism approach. Saunders argues that this approach is practical when working with varying opinions and allows the researcher to gauge and question interviewees' data. As the aim of this study is to gage varying perspectives from employer and employees' actions, predictions will be interpreted on how this correlates with the consumer experience, and this is best translated in interpretivism (Adams et al,2014)

3.3 Inductive Vs. Deductive approaches

Another aspect of being considered was the style of “reasoning” applicable for this study. Often associated with John Stuart Mill (1843), the inductivist method relies on predicting outcomes through observation and general collection of individual happenings. Usually, if something happens numerous times, the assumption will occur again. On the other hand, the deductive approach was most recently developed by Karl Popper (1934), who outlined this approach as more effective for known data. Through understanding the philosophy that already exists, the most logical process is taken to develop and create a new outcome. Adams et al (2014) argued that both approaches could be used within data collection due to their similarities as research often collaborates the two. While data currently exists regarding employee satisfaction and retention variables, there are still gaps regarding the link between internal branding at all stages of the employee lifecycle, particularly within the service industry (Yadav et al,2017). For this research, the author chose to consider both reasoning’s focus on a more inductive approach. This allows the author to observe and gather the employees’ opinions reasonably while understanding the previous research that exists on IEB. Deductive aspects may be considered the information should consider the logical route; however, the study aims to dive deeper than surface-level on this interview group(Berkman et al.,2004). An inductive approach allows the author to consider relevant theories around employee satisfaction and global marketing while introducing the opinions of the interviewees.

3.4 Chosen Methods

The chosen method for research is key in how successful the researcher can interpret and use the data towards gaining valuable insights (Blanche et al,2006). The researcher has chosen to adapt a mono method approach to collecting this data due to the variable of time constraints in conducting multiple procedures, with the understanding that for this outlined research, one method will give a more authentic experience of the chosen aspects to explore and information collected to be examined in depth (Saunders,2009). Therefore, quantitative methods were the first consideration by the researcher. This involves collecting data through tools such as surveys and using statistical evaluation of numbers to evaluate trends (Blanche et al,2006). This method has advantages due to the easy distribution of surveys. In addition, the online environment means a collection of data in large volumes is more accessible. However, quantitative data can often give predetermined answers, as certain aspects and data comparisons may go amiss in the collection process(Rajen et al,2015).

On the other hand, qualitative data is defined as the method of observation and collection of spoken data. This is usually conducted within interviews and categorized by creating reoccurring themes(Walle et al,2015). Examining this type of research, there are numerous advantages to be explored. Beth et all (2016) stated that qualitative data allows more specific conversations, as participants are not limited to one answer. Expressionism and more directive opinions can flow between the interviewer and interviewees as discussions

occur more naturally and more detailed research is uncovered(Quimby,2012). Horn(2012) also suggested this, who argued that flexibility is vital in creating and collecting effective research, and qualitative is the most vital method to conduct this. Another advantage of completing a qualitative approach to this research is the relevancy of the data collection to the sector. While information received can be practical in terms of participants' opinions, it allows the industry to be seen in a specific light(Mason,2017).

The researcher chose to take a qualitative approach as there were several advantages aligned to the overall aim of the dissertation that this method accompanied. Patton(1980) and Ezzy (2013) suggested that qualitative data collection will allow the researcher to gauge a deeper understanding of the luxury retail environment by allowing the free flow of employees' opinions. The depth of qualitative data collected for this study will be more beneficial for future recommendations as employees' direct responses are considered and the ability to target a smaller group and get a more precise data collection(Saunders,2009). Data collection through this method also supports the inductive approach chosen, as themes and assumptions can be explored through creating stronger arguments(Mason,2017).

3.5 Qualitative Approach - Semi-Structured Interviews

With consideration for the secondary research conducted around research methodology, it was decided that these interviews would be semi-structured. This allows the conversation to flow smoothly between the interviewer and participants and stays on a topic as the broad area to examine. The researcher was able to identify critical areas through the literature review and explore internal employer branding to understand better the best way to direct the conversation. Semi-structured interviews benefit the interviewer as they stay on track to the chosen topic at hand and allow the participant to give the best amount of information within the time frame given(Mitchell et al,2010). As the structure acts as a support, the participant is more relaxed in providing information along the guidance of the questions and researchers support(Blanche et al,2006). This research aimed to gauge the best amount of information surrounding employee perspective and create conclusive themes from this interview process. While understanding this, the semi-structure outlined above was the most accommodating and effective method to be chosen by the researcher for this particular study(Saunders,2009).

3.6 Research Sample

Correct sampling is considered essential in research design due to the failures when conducted wrongly (Saunders,2009). Sampling involves choosing a direct group of individuals relevant to a study with consideration given to their experiences, varying opinions, and other aspects that may arise in their data(Mitchell et al,2010). For this study, the sampling group chosen was key to ensuring the correct perspectives were When examining the suitable sample to conduct this research from several variables were considered. Firstly, the sample had to have relevant experience within the luxury retail environment and obtain a strong understanding of their expected individual role within this competitive sector. Phillip(2020) argued that knowledge could play a huge factor in the changing viewpoints of individuals through negative and positive experiences. Others such as Rajagopal (2018) stated that when conducting sampling around workplaces, it is essential to understand the environments one may experience to another; seniority and rewards can affect the responses that can be expected.

A primary consideration was given to gathering participants from different roles to gain an overall perspective from the employee and effectively contrast and compare them within their individual opinions. The number of participants needed was also given to gathering the correct sample before conducting this research.

Examining sample sizes, Sharma(2016) argued that the larger the sample size, the more broad and accurate insight into the industry could be discovered. While this was the desired approach, it was finally decided that eight participants would be the final number to be interviewed. This smaller number may have more limitations; however, it allows participants to have more assigned time (Eugene et al,2020) within these interviews to discuss their topic (Phillip,2020) openly and for the researcher to explore common themes at a deeper, more flexible level than having large numbers where information may be lost(Mitchell et al,2010). Finally the sample was divided by job title and role of the employee. The researcher chose the sample of employees to be divided by seniority level to gauge differentiating opinions effectively. This started from low seniority sales associates to mid-level supervisors and assistant managers to high responsibility such as store managers. The varying sample chosen will allow contrasting opinions and perspectives to be examined at a more individual level(Saunders,2009).

Example of Chosen Sampling Group

Interview 1	Sales Associate
Interview 2	Sales Assistant
Interview 3	Sales Assistant
Interview 4	Sales Associate
Interview 5	Stock room sales assistant
Interview 6	Assistant store Manager
Interview 7	Store Manager
Interview 8	Supervisor

3.7 Research Instrument

Through outlining the researchers chosen approach of a qualitative, interpretivism philosophy and inductive approach to this study, the final decision of semi-structured interviews was determined. However, this also created several challenges. The first challenge was the accessibility of in-person interviews. Due to the current health crisis and pandemic Covid 19, government regulations have enforced social distancing, and the recent vaccine rollout is still in progress within Ireland. Therefore, accessing employees who are willing to participate in these interviews proved more difficult (Dodds et al, 2020). Due to reasons as such, the chosen instrument to facilitate these interviews over was Microsoft teams. Remote interviewing has been described as a more complex (Mills et al, 2014) and less humanistic approach (Ezzy, 2013) to gathering data. However, in these unprecedented circumstances, safety was a top priority for the author and participants. With the above considerations, it was then decided to conduct the interviews remotely, ensuring participants' comfortability and making for a safer, more relaxed environment to gauge conversation.

3.8 Pilot Testing

The remote interviewing was the first pilot-tested by the researcher and willing sales associate to gauge the best methods of using Microsoft teams' platform and ensure any technical errors etc., could be accounted for in the actual interviews. Saunders et al (2009) outlined that pilot tests are essential in ensuring the smooth collection of data, as often unpredicted errors may arise even in the most precise, planned research methods. Outcomes of the pilot test included the use of cameras slowed down the internet speed of the interview, and often it was better if the interviewer asked the question and then muted their mic to ensure the information could be recorded without any background noises. Although technology is a valuable tool in the research collection, it can also bring external

issues such as unstable accessibility, sound and display errors, and other unforeseen problems that can cause difficulties(Dodds et al,2020). Extra time was allocated for these circumstances allowing a smoother process from start to finish. Another observation was given to the link-sharing of the platform. For the first test, the link had been copied wrong, causing a delay in the participant joining. This was resolved but was noted for the following interviews to avoid any errors repeating. Predicting and identifying unforeseen errors before conducting research is crucial(Saunders,2009), while others such as Mason (2017) argue that mistakes are inevitable, but it is more important to avoid repeating them.

3.9 Limitations of the study

The first limitation the author found was in conducting remote interviews. Due to unforeseen technical issues, the disconnect of online discussions can cause participants to be less willing to partake in the interview. The interviews were scheduled in the early weeks of May when the Covid 19 cases were still high across the country. This meant many employees were only recently back at work from the lockdown, meaning longer hours, etc., and less availability. As a result, participants were less motivated to engage in interviews around the topic of work. Due to this, the author had to gauge a smaller sample size than initially planned; although this meant more time to conduct detailed interviews, the original plan of 15 candidates was no longer feasible. In hindsight, discussions may have been better completed earlier within the year when many employees were on leave, as candidates were accessible and had more free time to engage in research.

Quinlan(2015) highlighted the importance of unpredictability in conducting interviews, stating that individuals' motivations and situations can change at any time, which may affect the willingness to be involved in research. Although Rajen et al (2015) also defined this level of uncertainty that many researchers fail to account for, it is crucial that authors create a sense of understanding in the unfeasibility of data collection that occurs within even the more advanced planned research collection.

Another limitation the study faced was the timeframe in which these interviews were conducted. Due to the effects of Covid 19, stress levels for employees were at an all-time high, and many employees were unmotivated or in slight contact with their employers for long periods. Although this mismatch made some interesting points in the study, the information collected may have been very different if the economic environment for employees was stable. Saunders (2009) argued that the environment in which participants are in widely affects variable data due to financial and personal factors. Economic changes can also affect the feedback collected due to the changing impact on the individual's view of their workplace(Quinlan,2015).

A final limitation that was faced was the sector chosen of luxury retail. Due to the massive global enterprise that luxury retail entails, it would be impossible to gather precise information for this sector. However, the author is aware of the limitations of a small sample group and that luxury retail is a massive sector with different components. While the ideology of internal employer branding is not a new focus for businesses, it is not always equally applicable with other brands. Although the focus of luxury retail is a factor within this study, ideally, the researcher would have liked to interview employees from classic retail environments and compare the two to analyze the varying internal branding perspectives and initiatives. Unfortunately, time constraints and lack of willing participants at this time meant this was unfeasible to conduct. Time constraints can create rushed and stressful data collection situations for researchers and may skew the data to portray unrealistic insights(Phillip,2020). These time constraints also meant the author had to engage with participants familiar with previous work experiences. As these relationships already existed between the author and participants, considerations were made for the bias and honesty around opinions that would be given. Quinlan(2015) argued that the pre-existing relationships in research collection could cause the participant to speak more highly or sway their opinion on a topic to agree with their interviewer. To avoid this occurring, participants were asked to complete the ethical forms that they would state to completely honest within and reassured by the interviewer at the beginning of the interview to be completely transparent in their information(Saunders,2009).

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research allow the researcher to consider the best and most appropriate way to conduct research, eliminating bias and other unforeseen variants(Mitchell et al,2010). For this research, the National College of Irelands code of ethics was considered in every process. In addition, the purpose of an ethical guideline means that the validity and safety of the participants involved (Blanche et al,2006).

With this study involving workplace topic data collection, data protection was essential for employee participation(Quinlan,2015). Although, as suggested above, participants and their named workplace needed to remain anonymous, this ensured the safety of their employment, employer relationship(Sharma,2016), and the overall comfortability of the individual in giving honest data(Saunders,2009). Existing regulations such as GDPR and data collection protocols were also considered when collecting data. This included consent forms (Appendix 1) distributed and signed by participants before interviews. This allowed the participant to understand how their data would be used within this research and how it's protected throughout the process.

The form also notified all participants that they could withdraw their data at any chosen time. In addition, from the ethical guidelines distributed by The National College of Ireland, all interview subjects would be categorized by their interview number and job title. They were also informed that interview data would be recorded and transcribed by the author to be evaluated correctly. Considerations were also given to ethical guidelines after the

interviews had been conducted. This included removing all personal information and data collected after this research had been submitted, and participants would be notified through email of this data removal.

3.11 Methodology Conclusion

As determined, the author chose to consider several varying academia around research methodology and the ethical considerations. The author decided to follow a qualitative approach underpinned by an inductive and interpretivism outlook. This allowed the free flow of participants' opinions in an open and discussion-based environment. Through the choice of semi-structured interviews, the author could collect data most effectively with the environment and time constraints faced. Although there may have been challenges such as covid 19 regulations and the decision to conduct interviews in a complete remote setting, it was deemed that this was the most effective way of gathering the primary research. Sampling allowed the author to evaluate the most suitable and precise group for this study who would create the best insight into the diverse industry of luxury retail—finally choosing to interview based on different job titles allowed varying opinions to be collected and a successful insight into the external factors that can be explored in the workplace. While challenges were faced around technology and other issues, it allowed the author to be educated in unpredictability, building trust with participants and the overall philosophy of research collection.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Findings and Analysis

This chapter will explore the findings of the primary research method chosen to examine the data received from participants critically. This research will be investigated by assigning commonly arising themes and discussions of the formed opinions received. As previously mentioned, the thematic approach was chosen for analysis due to its open nature in allowing expressions(Quinlan,2015) to be collected and examined clearly and effectively(Saunders et al,2011). The themes listed below were decided from the authors' evaluation of coding throughout their data analysis. This involved analyzing the transcripts to identify common and repetitive language used by the employees. From this coding, the author grouped the language into themes. In addition, they also chose to express the findings with the piece of an inductive approach, as this also allows the primary research to be given its basis for discussion while understanding the critical thinking of existing academia(Blanche et al,2006).

For these interviews, a total of 8 participants were interviewed from the luxury retail sector. This included stores that retailed clothing and accessories. Although a more significant regional insight into multiple luxury retail stores was desired, the author then decided to keep it more localized due to their familiarity with the stores and the accessibility of the participants. Therefore, for data reasons, these participants were labelled 1 – 8 and were not named throughout this study, nor was their workplace. Three were senior staff members, including an assistant manager, store manager, and supervisor labelled as participants 6,7, and 8. The remaining participants were labelled 1 to 5 and consisted of sales advisors, sales assistants, and a stock room assistant.

These interviews were conducted over two weeks and facilitated remotely through Microsoft teams. Although the small number of willing participants was an unforeseen setback for the author, it allowed more open and structured interviews. Critical aspects of the research were the employee and employer relationship, the employee perspective on their current workplace initiatives, and the overall effect it had on the consumer. With these aspects identified, the author chose to discuss findings from the following themes: employee and employer relationship, onboarding, motivation and retention, and consumer experience. The author will discuss this primary research through themes explored with the literature review examined earlier, acting as a basis and contrastive method for this analysis process.

4.2 Relationship with Employer

Hosmer(2015) argued that employment relationships are vital in fostering workplace loyalty with employees. Others, such as Ritson (2002), highlighted the importance of building trust, credibility with employers(Armstrong,2009), while another Tusmasjan (2016) commented on the difficulties of development in relationship making the long-term process it ensues.

Fisher (2013) highlighted that an individual's opinion on their workplace could be swayed by many factors such as responsibility in their role and the communication in the relationship with their employer. In conducting the research, it could be seen that those of lower seniority had more issues in their relationship with their employer and their viewpoint of their brand. Three out of four participants commented on the unsureness and communication issues with their employer around internal branding. The participants mentioned within this group are sales assistants, advisors, and stock room assistants. Participant 2 stated, *"I'm aware of what internal employer branding is, but my employer has never openly communicated with me. Unless the implementation of it is going to help my development, I'm not that interested"*.

While another Participant 3 stated that *"Internal employer branding is how my manager brands our business to us, I think I had some training when I first started my role, but I would have forgotten the information now."* Vary (2002)highlighted that internal employer branding is a continuous development path employers must embrace and cannot be left at one stage as brands will inevitably change.

The evidence above suggests a divide in communications between employees and employers in defining their workplaces brand information. If it had been implemented, it was no longer a focus. It is argued that effective communication is also a critical factor in how much employees buy into employer ideas(Churchman et al.,2015). In contrast from the five sales assistants asked, only one responded positively to their defining of internal employer branding Participant 1 stated, *"To me, internal employer branding is our trust in the business, and they present it to us as employees, my relationship with my manager is good, and I do trust their opinion as they communicate honestly and openly."* From participant 1, it is evident that building a strong communicative relationship with their employer may contribute to their understanding of internal employer branding.

It can be evident that communication was not standardized and weak between employee and their employers mentioned above. For example, participant 3 stated, *"I do think my employer wants us to complete more training within our roles, but more recently, there has been a push just to drive sales and worry about that later."*

Research around communication has been highlighted to have positive linking to a strong company functioning. Armstrong(2009) highlighted. In comparison, Churchman(2015) commented that standardization within employer communication creates a more open-ended communication flow and allows employees to question and develop. Therefore, it can be suggested that participant 1 responded more positively in defining their branding methods due to solid communication in their employment relationship.

Understanding the employee

It can also be suggested that internal branding may exist within their workplaces but is tailored towards a more consumer-based viewpoint. It can be indicated from the data that the employee perspective may have been more positive towards internal employer branding when initially asked if they know what the advantages are for them individually but also the development it can bring their role. Participant 4 stated, *“My understanding of the topic was further product knowledge and training for us to help consumers, it often seen as extra work within our normal shifts and isn’t something we necessarily enjoy.”* Employers need to understand that their employees have individual concerns and needs and what may motivate them to work towards a business strategy can be varying(Lewis et al,2002). Participant 3 stated, *“In my daily role, I don’t think we use much branding, but from my understanding, internal employer branding is how we market ourselves from the inside out. My store is more focused on the consumer with these initiatives”*.

Participant 1 suggested, *“The branding training and updates are never portrayed in an exciting way for us employees. It always seems like it’s really only being done for the customer’s sake”*. Internal employer branding is a strategic strategy that focuses on the employee as the primary stakeholder in aligning business goals. While the business advantages are a positive outcome of the process, it is not always the focus(Scott et al,2013). In addition, Fisher (2013) argued that internal employer branding encompasses the employee welfare and performance as a KPI, the positive impact on the business should follow. The above data suggest that the lack of understanding from employees may be due to a more consumer focus deliverance of their training which may be viewed as unmotivating.

Participant 2 stated, *“Our manager never drove the benefits of every training session with us, and sometimes we just wouldn’t be interested after a long shift.”* Participant 3 details, *“we are just so busy in our shifts, it sometimes seems like we are stuck in our ways and while the brand evolves externally in global communications and developments, we see little change in store.”* This group of employees seems to be more of a customer focus without their welfare in mind from their employer. Gehrels (2019) argued that branding is encapsulated by the ideology of getting consumers and employees alike to buy into the visions and messaging of the business. Grigg et al. (2011) also highlighted the importance of understanding the work-life balance needed for individual employees when creating branding initiatives to accommodate the relaxed learning environment and mutual respect for the brand.

The participant's responses suggest that fewer senior staff members, such as participants 1,2,3, and 4, may have weaker relationships with their employer. This, in turn, translated to their disinterest in internal branding, with mixed communication driving this to be a more consumer focus within their workplaces.

Responsibility

Factors such as responsibility in their roles and the distribution of branding communications were also explored. Branding is often pushed to the marketing team to communicate; however, Verčič (2018) argues that branding is an individual aspect that plays a considerable part in employee performance. While sales associates were aware of their training and development to understand store functions, they lacked knowledge around their brand's identity.

Balta (2004) argued that successful employees often create their career motivations with the brand in their development, which involves self-awareness. Participant 4 defined internal branding as “all employees having the same training and view of the brand; this is our management responsibility.” While another participant, 6, defined internal employer branding as *“the process in which we convey the message of what our company stands for and how our role communicates that image.”* It can be argued that employees, while primarily unfamiliar with the term, understood the communication stance involved within internal branding and their role in executing it.

Participant 5 *“Typically, my manager will give us directives about brand updates, and they are then forgotten as we are so busy with the customers.”* The data suggests a lack of accountability in participants' stores in implementing branding visions in their roles. Another participant 3 stated, *“I don't think its within my role to communicate brand messaging daily, my manager communicates this mainly, but it's not a day-to-day occurrence, and often there is too much information to keep up with.”*

Another interviewee cited the involvement of the human resource team. With this contrasting information, there was an apparent discrepancy in clear responsibility. “Participant 3 stated, *“I would assume our HR team handles all the branding for new starts as this is what I experienced when I first joined.”* While human resource teams are often global touchpoints in branding experience due to the prominent roles in onboarding and talent attraction, they may not always be the direct developer of branding initiatives. However, this involvement of human resource teams was only cited by one participant, so this may be only relevant to specific organizations.

However, there were contrasting opinions given from the viewpoint of the senior staff, with all three participants accepting the responsibility of having to communicate internal branding to some degree. For example, participant 8 stated, *“My role is heavily emphasized by our brand's values and visions; it is my responsibility to communicate this with staff so in turn our brand is represented effectively and competitively.”*

Participant 7 discussed internal branding as *“how the brand promotes our business internally, how we engage our staff daily within the business, and how we create clear and successful business communications and training.”* Participant 6 stated that *“the company drives the vision of aligning their goals to who we are as store managers. We are the direct visuals”*. The points mentioned suggest that employees at less senior levels are unsure about the role or responsibility they should approach in their branding initiatives. In comparison, senior staff accepts their responsibility in communicating these branding messages, as seen from participants 7 and 8 above.

Communications

Exploring the area of responsibility within the communication of internal branding may also lie with a mismatch of communication from global to local levels. Participant 1 stated, *“there is a clear discrepancy of the training we received within my store when I joined to larger stores in the business, it seems as if our global team focuses more on the stronger performing stores with internal branding initiatives.”* While participant 2 mentioned the global team being the *“main distributor of information for my onboarding experience, including log ins to online portals and printed booklet resources. While it was helpful, most of the information was irrelevant to our store in Ireland and was a more UK tailored program”*. The responsibility of internal employer branding should often be focused on the brand at a smaller level to keep brand visions standardized and allow training to be distributed more evenly (King et al, 2008).

In contrast, the senior staff was seen to have stronger relationships with their global employers and brand HQ. For example, participant 7 stated, *“Communication between global teams and us is weekly and allows us to prepare effective and influential training programs for our employees.”* While participant 6 said, *“As a senior staff member, we have bi-weekly global calls that help us keep informed on global initiatives, product launches, and employee culture initiatives.”* The varying contrast of senior relationships with the global team may account for their more positive viewpoint on their organization.

Varying factors such as training and development were also explored within the employer and employee relationship. There was a direct link between this and the positive or negative experience associated with the participants' viewpoint of internal employer branding. When asked about their individual opinions of internal employer branding, the responses were a lot more confidently received by the senior staff.” Participant 7 stated, *“my training with the brand was extremely positive. It was conducted in an overseas visit to our HQ in Italy; this allowed me to view the quality creation up close but also build connections with the business owners who value us”*.

The detail and positive associations senior staff created within their definitions may have been impacted by previous factors such as responsibility and job expectations. For example, while another participant 6 stated, *“My company arranged six weeks off in-store brand training through funding me to attend workshops and top stores around Ireland to be*

introduced to our brand, with any queries I had the global team were so supportive with communication and advertising their resources available to us senior staff.” This was not the same as the other five participants as highlighted above, where there was not one mentioned detailed interaction with their company.

Participant 8 stated, *“As a store manager, I understand that communication can be a tricky one. My manager makes sure to communicate with me honestly, even if it’s something we don’t always want to hear, but it builds the respect, this attributes to the high expectations of me performing strongly in my role”.*

Examining the responsibility in defining internal employer branding, several participants cited strong involvement in delivering this essential brand information to their employees daily within the store. Seniority within a role can change the absolute idealism an employee attaches to their workplace. The sense of power attached to more senior positions is driven by extrinsic rewards from their colleagues and the need to lead other employees to the end business goal (Moriones,2001). Participant 7 stated, *“Communication between global teams and us is weekly and allows us to prepare effective and influential training programs for our employees.”*

4.3 Onboarding

The onboarding process within the employee lifecycle is considered a crucial aspect of the long-term retention of valuable employees(Stein et al,2010). Lawson(2016) highlighted that the onboarding process is the first insight employees have to the brand, communicating and supporting them as a new start to the business. While Armstrong (2020) outlined the strategic link between communicative inductions and employee effectiveness, arguing that better-trained employees trust their employers more in the long run. The secondary research conducted around this area also found that successful onboarding processes create more attractive recruitment opportunities for perspective employees and tur(Beardwell et al, 2014).

The author explored questions within this area such as “ How much emphasis has been placed on internal branding within your onboarding process?” this question allowed the introduction of the employee-to-brand relationship to be explored. With consideration for the employee opinion on the success of the internal branding experiences their employer may have initiated by asking, “Do you view internal branding as an important factor in your successful onboarding?”. Throughout this data collection, standard coding arose around visions and values, brand history, and imagery.

Visions and Values

The visions and values of the brand were a forgotten concept passed their onboarding process and with some even mentioning the lack of brand building even in their early stages. Participant 3 stated that *“ The induction was quite brief, merchandising was probably the nearest understanding I had to the brand's image, but little information on their messaging. I'm still unfamiliar with the brand history and other global factors, which is a pity as I spend so much time at work it would be nice to know more about the business,”*. While participant 2 argued in the agreement stating, *“ There was no clear information from the induction given to me, it was like we were pushed onto the shop floor and just expected to pick it up.”*

In contrast, participant 1 commented that *“ My induction experience was good, the visions and values were displayed to us more thoughtfully, my manager described it as crucial in our success as sales associates. I do think the luxury environment put more emphasis on this kind of vision outlook in inductions. In my previous roles, the visions and values were forgotten, and I don't think it was something we ever considered within the day to day”*. The intricate details of brand identity within an induction can determine the employee's long-term success within the workplace (Hasanali, 2005).

Management gave a different perspective. Participant 7 stated, *“ The visions and values are key to everything I do as a store leader; they are engraved in our brain from day one and something we need to strive towards to achieve success. We have five KPIS competencies as results-focused, teamwork, and entrepreneurship. These are things we expect at the minimum in our daily functionality, and something that my induction communicated to me”*. In agreement, participant 8 said, *“ My induction was interactive and involved meeting other senior staff to discuss our previous management experiences and how we could drive the brand vision to build loyalty in our staff. I think a massive learning step for me within this role was understanding that without the genuine belief of us as leaders in the brand's visions, the employees won't follow”*.

Research around leadership from Caldwell et al (2020) highlighted that solid leadership and perspective have suggested must be developed within the workplace, while Tredgold et al (2013) argued that leadership can strengthen the employee's perspective on their brand. While Shiel (2004) argued that creating leadership within senior staff takes belief and dedication in the brand they work for and the messaging it entails, and this can be a difficult balance to achieve. Participant 6 highlighted this factor of difficulty when stating, *“ My induction contained a lot of information, and with the seniority of my role, it can often be difficult to balance understanding it myself and demonstrating the brand's values and messaging correctly as a store leader.”*

Store functionality

In exploring this research conducted around employee onboarding, Tumasjan et al (2016) found that trained employees better around their store operations had more precise and more confident ideas of their role within their workplace. While others, such as Hoyle et al (2013), argued that store operations and internal branding should be kept separate, stating that store operations will help an individual do the basics of their role, but may not allow them to build brand loyalty understand the contribution they bring to the company.

Five out of the eight participants mentioned the focus of store operations within their onboarding, with mixed opinions around the actual brand training. For example, participant 2 outlined that *“training was based on daily tasks, such as till work, banking procedures and overall operations.”* Similar to this, participant 3 stated, *“Our store is so busy and fast-paced that my onboarding consisted of a lot of store tasks such as store opening and closing, banking and refunds. So, while there was a brief introduction on the brand, it wasn’t an area of concentration”.*

While training around store operations helped the named employees reach their daily performance indicators, many lacked basic knowledge around the community they had joined. For example, participant 5 stated, *“from what they thought me, yes I can open and close the store, etc., but I don’t understand some of the global communications that come in around brand messaging, it was never made a focus for us in my onboarding.”* Participant 1 also mentioned the heavy emphasis on operational factors; however, they did mention that their manager had given them more insight into the brand community. *“My manager introduced us to the basic expectations of my role. For example, folding clothes, answering the store phone and email queries around deliveries, and serving customers; however, they then marketed the brand values and visions as part of the store operations. So, while we do these tasks repetitively in our shifts, it is the pride in our workplace and brand community that help us do them better”.*

This appreciation for the brand community and expectations stayed consistent within the senior staff interviews. While the senior staff acknowledged that store operations are a heavy part of their training initially due to the increased responsibility of ensuring employees follow in line and the handling of cash etc. which was mentioned. Participant 8 stated, *“The functionality of store operations is crucial to me leading the team. Understanding that I need to know how to do their roles so I can communicate effectively is important. Other factors like banking, etc., have to be handled very carefully, so this was a huge aspect of my onboarding, emphasizing our relationship with global teams and updating our store numbers weekly. While these are important parts of my role at the end of the day, I am representing the brand as a supervisor, and it is crucial I understand how the brand's way of doing things is how I approach all tasks”.*

Participant 7 outlined, *“The brand messaging should go hand in hand with how we approach the functioning of the store. So, for example, within my role, I need to engage with customers and employees. My onboarding involved a focus on bringing the two together, so I don’t communicate by my deciding, but rather a collective vision pre-decided by our brand”*.

Merchandising

Several of the participants highlighted the merchandising of store layouts and brand imagery as an aspect of their onboarding to the brand. Slade (2016) argued that brand imagery is often developed for the consumers eye to attract them and convert them to loyal consumers. However, Everett (2016) stated that brand imagery is a factor of internal branding for the employees to understand and see the visual through brand representation. The creative and intricate details seen within luxury brand imagery can often be the most attractive point for external customers and employees alike (Scholz, 2014) as factors like recruitment and (Shafique, 2012) come into account.

Participant 4 stated, *“ In my first two weeks of induction, I was given infographics surrounding the branding tactics store layouts. After that, a massive focus of my training was on the appearance of employees, including uniform regulations.”* Participant 3 stated, *“ In the beginning, our training was largely brand focuses, how we should display the luxury accessories and how they should be styled in the brand's way of doing things.”*

It can be suggested that this focus on imagery and tailored training around merchandising is beneficial for the store functioning but may contribute to the lack of knowledge employees have around the existing brand and its identity. Participant 2 stated, *“Due to the strict process around merchandising in our store and the luxury image we must keep to, often our team would forget all the details given and have to be shown again how to restock, etc. This kind of left less time for us to understand why things are placed where they are placed. The blur between the two was confusing in my first few weeks.”* Participant 3 also suggested, *“I’m not sure on the brand's way of doing things all the time, mostly we just do the transactions without thought and fold the clothes in our trained way, it’s been like that since I started.”*

Participant 4 highlighted, *“Our manager is rigorous on maintaining our successful brand in luxury retail market, so we received a lot of training around product handling and display to make sure the standard was kept in line with the company’s expectations.”*

The points raised may also be determined by the type of sector this research was conducted in. For example, luxury retail focuses on delivering exceptional quality for a higher price and an experience almost expected from the consumer when entering larger branded stores (Kompella, 2014). Participant 5 stated, *“The focus on maintaining our quality and luxury brand image is significant to our success as sales associates. This is reiterated to us daily in terms of store appearance and maintenance procedures”*.

The secondary research outlined the differences in consumer demands from traditional retail and luxury, which may equate to the significant emphasis in the induction training employees received around brand imagery. Although, participant 5 suggested, *“In my previous roles, there was nowhere near as much emphasis and time spent on brand imagery, the detail that goes into our daily roles including store appearance is huge.”*

Maltz (2017) outlined that branding often involves creating a familiarised logo, but the messaging and driver, such as company culture, attract consumers. While employees weren't hostile towards this focus on merchandising, it suggested a desire to know more about the brands from participants. For example, participant 4 stated, *“If we had a stronger knowledge of the brand background and additional information, I think I would have been more confident as a new start in my role.”* While Participant 5 cited, *“In my induction, I received imagery from global stores of how we should maintain the store, it wasn't an intensive dive into how the brand and other than knowing it was a UK brand, I knew very little else which did make my first weeks a struggle.”*

This emphasis on standardization of quality within the brand imagery and merchandising was highlighted further by senior staff. In agreement with the previous citations from employees, participant 7 argued *“As a store manager, I have monthly, unscheduled visits from head directives across the company. I put so much time into merchandising training and store layout because we can not only be inspected at any time but because our store is just one of a chain. One bad experience for a consumer as they enter our store not being in line with others can cause us to lose in many ways”.*

While participant 6 highlighted, *“Within my role as assistant manager, I did receive detailed training around how we should display our store in line with the global way and how to communicate this to our employees during shifts. While I understand that this can often leave less time for the important brand messaging, the luxury retail industry has high standards and to deliver this experience means our store design, etc. must be kept perfect”.*

However, participant 8 contrasted these points, stating, *“While I understand the importance of maintaining our high-quality merchandising, this is only motivated through the communication of our internal branding. Employees should not be folding their clothes a certain way just for the task to be done; they should understand why they are doing what they do, is that product is leather, etc . My onboarding involved extensive focus on our brand's portrayal to the employee and consumer; while the imagery was a focus, it wasn't the complete brand's outlook”.*

4.4 Motivation and initiatives

Throughout the secondary research conducted, internal employer branding initiatives were linked heavily to their positive effects on employees, such as motivation(Hall,2016) and retention(Harrison,2020). Throughout exploring these aspects, all eight participants stated that they did some internal branding initiatives following internal branding initiatives were mentioned most commonly, team bonding exercises and training development programs both online and offline. Having explored these initiatives in the secondary research conducted, the factors of motivation and retention were examined within these.

Team bonding exercises

Exploring the team bonding exercises, all four participants who were not senior staff mentioned the positive aspects, and culture participant 3 stated, *“My employer organizes monthly team bonding exercises, this could be a zoom quiz or employee lunch which we do ice breaker activities at to get to know my co-workers more. It creates a sense of fun and culture. The quizzes are competitive but enjoyable”*. Another participant 4 stated, *“Our company funds different group challenges online which are fun, our last one involved a quiz on product knowledge which there were prizes for including free lunch and dinner, it keeps it competitive and motivates us.”*

In agreement, participant 1 highlighted, *“The activities we have every Friday is what keeps our team spirit alive, through this fun culture we have. The fun is honestly what has kept me within this role so long; the team we have are amazing”*. While participant 2 highlighted the ease these initiatives gave them when meeting the team, *“In my first week, I got to be involved with my manager in planning our team activity for that month. It was great and allowed me to have a discussion opener to chat to my colleagues and hear their interests and what motivates them within their roles”*.

This motivating and engaging culture was also seen to be supported by the senior staff. Participant 8 stated, *“As a store manager, the team bonding exercises we have been crucial in motivating our employees. Without them, the environment is tougher, and our brand messaging does work along the lines of “work hard play hard.” In terms of culture, these aspects are needed, the fun and comfortability of our employees allow them to view their workplace as a more interesting aspect of their life, it also makes them want to stay here longer”*. While another senior staff member, Participant 7, commented, *“We organized zoom quizzes with the staff while on furlough due to Covid 19, it kept the brand culture in line with the unprecedented events that had been occurring, it is so important for us as a global brand to acknowledge the struggles our employees may be facing out of work and have these small gatherings to keep morale up”*.

Another senior staff member mentioned the willingness managers must have to effectively conduct these initiatives *“To keep my team motivated, we need these times away from shifts to bond and keep a team morale alive. Not only do they allow a fun culture, but as a manager, I get to step away from my strict persona and have the laugh with the staff, and that’s what the brand’s vision is all about”*. In addition, the team lunches allow us to chat, and also more recently, we’ve begun to use these to speak about global launches; it makes the employees feel more connected with the brand as they get to see early products before there even on the market, we have to be willing to do them”.

Training and development

All eight participants mentioned the introduction of training and development. However, the author noted the mixed opinions about the employees' value in these initiatives to motivation and retention.

Two out of four participants who were not in senior roles had mixed outlooks on their store's introduction of these initiatives. Participant 1 stated, *“My manager has training Tuesdays every second week. It is good to hear about the brand and get updates, but often I forget the information or customers have queries and interrupt, and then we lose track. I think my manager needs to schedule an external time to do this as it just doesn’t work”*. Participant 2 cited similar issues *“At the start of the year, we were told we would have an internal rebrand in training, and this would be fun and allow us to connect with the brand. However, I still haven’t learned anything relevant to our business from what I’ve seen so far. Giving me an online login to training videos won’t motivate me to spend extra time out of work and do it”*.

In contrast, other employees commented on the success of the development programs in place. Participant 5 *“My old job had a basic training plan, and I hated it. In my role now, my manager has a tailored plan for my role. This keeps me motivated, and knowing they want to invest in me makes me want to stay there longer. I think it’s what keeps staff so long in our store. The online training videos help us too as I can’t concentrate for too long after my shifts”* Participant 4 was neutral in their feedback. *“I understand our training is based on whatever resources our global team gives us, and sometimes we are forgotten. However, my manager tries their best, and the online activities we get through email help. For example, last week, we directly linked to a fashion show in Paris with our brand involved. It was great”*.

Examining the senior staff, all three participants also had mixed opinions towards their brand's training. Three of the participants mentioned the difficulty in motivating employees to do the exercise. Participant 7 stated, *“We have an online university, which allows employees to log on at any time and do courses in brand knowledge, product detailing, etc. It’s beneficial as it does sell the brand quality to the employee. Still, it’s hard to get them to do the training”*. Participant 8 cited in agreement, *“The initiatives we run as a company is pushed by global. We receive communications to online links and in-store infographics to use for training employees. However, it can often be hard to gauge interest and keep employees*

engaged around this due to the fast-paced nature of our store". Participant 6 argued, "For internal branding, we focus on developing programs to educate and build brand relationships with our employees. While this has proved difficult in executing, it can depend on the individual's motivation and willingness to learn".

4.5 The Consumer experiences

The final theme from the author's findings to discuss is the output of internal branding on the consumer experience. The insights given are all from the employee's perspective only. While the author had initially wanted to receive feedback from consumers, it was unfortunately unfeasible due to the closing of retail stores across Ireland as per the government's response to covid 19 within Ireland. However, several of the employees mentioned their insights into their shopping preferences.

Quality

Participants mentioned the difficulties and high standards of expectation within their roles in the luxury retail sector. Participant 1 stated, *"The quality of our consumer interactions are competitive; we have to make sure to engage with consumers three seconds after they enter our store, with a warm welcome. It is the small things like this are basic but makes an impact"*. In addition, participant 3 cited the difficulty of the consumer's needs *"comparing my job now to my old one in traditional retail, the expectation as a sales assistant is different, we can't just ignore customers or not engage in conversations. The demands are a lot more difficult too. People are paying a lot more and expect it. If a consumer is going to spend 600 euro on a luxury accessory within our store, they expect a 600 euro experience"*.

Participant 4 also highlighted this experience-based consumer expectation based within this sector. *"The consumers don't enter our store to buy; some like to chat etc. Often they have this expectation of service from the moment they browse, looking at our competitors even I know some stores serve champagne, etc. So while it may sound "extra," I do think this social status kind of engagement we give consumers does translate to sales."*

The senior staff also supported this level of quality. Participant 8 highlighted, *"The expectations are higher; our consumers want an experience. They are spending large amounts of money for quality, assurance, and reliability. This monetary value they place within the brand also accounts for how our employees act with them. Even in my own shopping experiences, the more I spend, the more I expect"*.

Participant 7 argued that quality starts with the employees. *"Our team needs to be experts in the products and messaging they convey to our customers, essentially there representing our brand."* While participant 6 outlined the pressure of maintaining this quality *"when a customer enters any of our stores, the customer experience should be the same. Maintaining this quality and reliability is essential; they expect the same service across the brand"*.

All eight participants mentioned pressure, competitiveness, and employer expectations within their insights around the consumer experience. Maltz (2017) argued that luxury retail is a difficult and demanding environment while Hopping (2020) stated that consumers vary from industry and employees must adapt. It is evident that this work environment may be challenging for employees with quality as a driver.

Employee Confidence

The conversational value and openness the internal branding initiatives gave individual employees were highlighted through competencies listed by the individuals. Problem solving, teamwork, and confidence were all behavioural outcomes of the training received. Two out of the four sales assistants mentioned these above. Participant 3 stated, *“The brand knowledge we received did help my confidence with customers. The more I know about the products we retail, the better I can work out solutions for them and close a sale. Consumers within our store usually ask more detailed questions about handling the clothing, materials, and production factors, so we need to be as confident as possible”*.

In addition to this, participant 1 stated, *“The more training we receive around branding, the more information we can create customer conversations with. It allows us to have confidence in creating this dialog and closing a sale. This makes my shifts go smoother, and I feel happier within my role. While training can be boring, it is in these customer experiences I can understand the benefit”*. The employees relationship with their brand is usually reflected in how they speak to consumers, disinterested employees may undersell products due to their lack of genuine connection with their workplace(Collumbo,2018)

In contrast to this, two participants highlighted the falseness felt within these directed training. Participant 2 argued, *“While the internal branding training we got was good, it can often be so scripted. It doesn’t feel real to insert these long-winded sentences about our brand. Most times, customers aren’t even interested; they want to know about the product. If someone enters our store, they usually are aware of our luxury brand already”*. Sutherland (2017) argued that genuine connections are more desired by consumers in the modern retail experience, due to the large amounts of advertising pushed through social media, consumers are more aware of business competitiveness.

Similar to this, Participant 5 highlighted, *“ Sometimes these consumer experience expectations mentioned are just not realistic. We have a short time to engage, and I’m not going to sell by rambling about brand history. From my perspective, the brand training we’ve received is to motivate us in the behavioural competencies we should have and don’t directly affect the customer experience. Sometimes the suggested customer way can just feel fake”*.

It is evident from the findings that while internal employer branding has had a positive impact on selected employee confidence in these customer experiences, others have a varying perspective. The contrast of this fictitious described dialogs suggested by the brand may indicate that employees are not always as engaged and motivated by their brand's way of doing things, especially from a consumer aspect.

It was evident among the senior staff that this understanding of conversational brand advocacy within customer interactions wasn't as accepted by sales assistants. Participant 7 highlighted *"The brand works towards making our job easier, while the training can be heavy it is these informational. Often employees complain, stating that it makes the sale process longer end to end and often customers aren't interested. Unfortunately, as managers sometimes we have to bite back. Consumers need to know the quality etc before they buy, its what differentiates us"*.

While Participant 8 stated *"Every consumer interaction is different, while we cant please everyone we can represent the brand correctly in every conversation. This responsibility is pushed to us senior staff and it does make a difference"*. It is evident that the three senior staff place a strategic importance on this creation of brand representation within dialog. As seen within participant 6 feedback *"It may seem false, but if branding knowledge is retained correctly and executed, the information wont seem as forced. Employees have to be willing to become apart of the brand when they join our company, and this includes the consumer experience expectations"*.

The insights above concluded to the evidence of a contrast in opinions between senior staff and employees regarding consumer experience and brand training they have received. While the strategic importance was acknowledged by management, employees within sale assistant roles argued that it was unrealistic to convey within real life consumer interactions.

DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion

The author will explore the findings and themes of the interviews conducted with the primary research within this chapter. The secondary research was conducted by analyzing existing academia, while the primary research was created through semi-structured interviews. The discussions took place over two weeks, with a total of eight participants involved. Through the use of sampling, participants who are currently employed within the luxury retail sector were contacted. Several employees were engaged with roles varying from sales assistants to more senior titles such as store manager. For example, employees 1 – 5 were in positions such as sales assistants, while the remaining three participants labeled 6 – 8 consisted of senior staff. The interviews took remotely through the facilitation of Microsoft teams and were transcribed in due course by the author.

The data was then analyzed through the use of a thematic viewpoint(Saunders,2009). An inductive approach was considered while examining this data, with the author regarding the secondary research already conducted within the literature review. For this discussion, the author will present the overall findings alongside their corresponding research aim.

5.2 Research Objective 1

To determine and compare various understandings of internal employer branding through the employer to employee relationship. The initial findings indicated that there was a common mismatch between the employees and senior management. The earlier research showed the strategic need for aligned communication flow between these subgroups to build brand loyalty among employees(Rowley,1997). This divide was highlighted in insights such as Participant 3, who stated that *“Internal employer branding is how my manager brands our business to us. I think I had some training when I first started my role, but I would have forgotten the information now.”*

Communication

A key finding of the secondary research was the decisive playing factor of communication for successful internal employer branding. It was evident within this exploration that the employment relationship and the corresponding workplace view of the employee were related. The more distant the relationship, the less understanding the employee seemed to understand around their branding. While research has indicated a general lack of knowledge from organizations in the potential strategic alliance of internal employer branding and success(Colombo,2018), it suggests that not all businesses may be driving the branding at the same level. Exploring this further, senior staff was knowledgeable and confident in their definitions and reasoning within the industry of internal branding. It can be suggested that the responsibility of senior positions and their more considerable individual investment through the choice of a management role may affect their belief in internal branding practices.

The communication divide arose between employees and senior staff in exploring the need for internal employer branding. Employees' understanding of the business aims is crucial to them wanting to engage for the greater purpose (Khan et al, 1999). The issue of consumer focus also arose as employees within sales assistant positions mentioned their disinterest in internal branding due to their suspected employers' underlying motive. This evidence suggested that employees need a stronger communication relationship to be engaged within these approaches. Through a better understanding of the employee needs and communication issues, it can be suggested that management would have a more engaged and knowledgeable team in internal branding initiatives (Stack, 2013).

Onboarding

Another finding that arose from the research was the critical role of onboarding within the employee's workplace perspective. Lawson (2016) highlighted the importance of impactful onboarding within the successful creation of loyal and engaged employees. The findings suggested that there was a difference in the onboarding training received among employees and management.

Management highlighted the in-depth knowledge they had attained from experiential learning within their onboarding experiences. For example, two managers mentioned meeting other senior leaders, while one said an abroad visit to their business HQ. These positive experiences could be seen to link to their knowledge and motivation towards their workplace directly. Fisher (2013) argued that employers who invest in employee development would have more engaged staff. The training received by management was also commonly associated with the messaging and values of the brand.

In contrast, the employees 1 – 5 who were not in management positions had varying experiences. All five participants noted some aspect of brand training within their training, but most of their employers focused on more store functionality. Although essential to the business success (Smith et al, 2018) this may suggest the lack of interest and knowledge depth of brand messaging from these employees. participant 4 cited, *"I'm not sure on the brand's way of doing things all the time, mostly we just do the transactions without thought and fold the clothes in our trained way, it's been like that since I started."* As mentioned in the secondary research, the management onboarding process was more aligned to the strategic aims and communications of internal employer branding. This may be due to the role of a senior member within these retail stores in advocating the brand to their employees (Stein et al, 2010). In addition, Ritson (2002) suggested that employers are the communication bridge between global and localized employees.

To conclude, the author found several notable aspects within this aim. Employees were less motivated and engaged when the brand benefits and employee benefits were communicated poorly. Another finding was the notably contrasting perspectives between

management and employees towards internal branding. This was evident from the positive experiences management had within their brand training and the expected brand advocacy within a store manager role. The interior branding focus also loses employee interest when its communicated in a consumer-directed way.

Finally, the onboarding process was biased towards more functionality than a brand experience for employees. At the same time, management contrasted this; it was evident there was a gap in communication somewhere among this group.

5.3 Research Objective 2

To determine the impact of these internal branding initiatives on the individual employees' role and overall satisfaction.

This aim was explored by examining existing internal employer branding initiatives employees may have been introduced to. The relationship between positive inner workplace experiences and employee satisfaction is cited by Armstrong (2009) who highlighted the advantage of increased employee retention. Others such as Collumbo (2018) argued that these experiences create an attractive company culture for recruitment purposes and determine the business's long-term success.

Positive branding experiences

The findings were evident that all eight participants had positive experiences concerning the listed employee bonding experiences. In addition, themes such as communication and teamwork were highlighted, with the employees feeling a stronger connection to their workplace. For example, Participant 1 cited, *"The activities we have every Friday is what keeps our team spirit alive, through this fun culture we have Senior staff were seen to be supportive in this element while highlighting the need for these practices."*

The employees also noted the learning aspects they had encountered within these experiences, such as the listed examples of zoom quizzes, etc. Selected organizations within this study aimed to build a more robust culture through internal branding initiatives, with the mention of team lunches, etc. While others incorporated branding updates and communication within these events as mentioned by participants. Management also highlighted the need for these activities during the unprecedented circumstances of covid 19. Baker et al (2011) argued that team bonding is essential for strategic importance as employees build better relationships within difficult times.

The research aim of employee motivation was explored through these positive relations in internal initiatives experienced by these employees.

Training and Development

Training and development was also explored as a team within this aim. The findings indicated that the majority of employers involved were offering online solutions to training platforms. Feedback from employees were mixed to this approach with several outlining the

difficulty and demotivation to complete these tasks in their non-working time. Descriptions of stress and mentioning of no time was common among the employees within sales assistant roles. However, management were confident in their advertising of these, it was evident communication barriers had been recognised by employees.

Kaplan (2017) argued that internal branding training should not be a complete separate entity from the normal work environment, its evident this line was blurred for employees and management. Management was supportive of this training “just needing to be done – Participant 7”. It can be argued this approach may have not been effective as management assumed, with 3 out of four participants commenting on the lack of time they had to complete it.

5.4 Research Objective 3

To examine the direct output of these internal branding initiatives on the consumer experience.

Quality and Employee Confidence

Within this final aim the author chose to examine the insights given under the themes of quality expectation and the employee perspective on consumer engagements. Most notably, all eight participants mentioned the high pressure and competitive environment the luxury retail sector conveyed. This often left them stressed with descriptions of feelings overwhelmed mentioned among employees. As highlighted within the secondary research, the employer must create understanding for employees within their individual roles (Caldwell,2020)

This relates back to the secondary research which also described the luxury retail environment as fast paced and demanding. The level of perfection was also highlighted by management who supported this ideology of demanding consumers and delivering quality.

A key finding among this data highlighted the realistic use of the branding training received and suggested way of interacting with customers within a real-life setting. While management drove the vision of a perfect brand experience, employees argued that often times the consumer really has no interest in the brand history etc and its relevant to closing the sale.

However, while this mismatch of understanding is acknowledged by employee, half of participants argued that the branding training had created stronger and more impactful consumer interactions with mentioning of confidence within being new starts in the first introduction to the brand. Participant 3 *“The brand works towards making our job easier, while the training can be heavy it is these informational.”*

5.5 Conclusion and Future Research

This study set out to explore the strategic impact of internal employer branding within the competitive luxury retail environment. The main initial findings suggested to the author that there is still research needed around the correct communication approaches and strategic focus of business functionality and internal employer branding.

The contrast between the employee's perspective and management was often challenging, and it is evident that communication did foster how participants viewed their workplace. However, the impact of culture through fun and motivating team challenges and bonding activities were the highlights and team structuring of the participant's positive feedback. While management was seen to be supportive, often their employee's viewpoints varied.

The impact of the brand could be seen across all participants involved to varying degrees. While management had more specified brand knowledge with existing global relationships affecting their involvement, employees often disconnected the real strategic benefits of vital internal employer branding initiatives.

As highlighted in the secondary research, internal employer branding has and will continue to become a strategic focus for future employers (Cable et al,2013). Furthermore, this internal marketing should consider modern marketeers in designing programmes and prospective employers as they face a more educated and culturally conscious workforce(Balta et al,2018).

While the author intended to explore the customer experience output at a deeper level, it was mainly the employee and management perspective explored through the data analysis. However, this limitation may be studied in future research and management buy-in to invest in internal employer branding.

Overall, there was an indication within the findings that the employer-to-employee relationship is a decider of how the employee views their workplace. Therefore, while essentially fun initiatives and engaging training can occur, the brand's interest and community around their messaging will retain and motivate their staff members.

This impact of this research concludes back to the main employee perspectives determined initially by the author. At the same time, there are still improvements that could be made, such as feedback loops(Armstrong,2009) and more employee involvement within internal branding design(Todor,2014). In addition, the research above has indicated that there are gaps with existing literature around the importance of internal employer branding and communications.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Participant name and number:

Job Position/title:

Date of Interview:

Consent form submitted : y/n

Theme 1 - Internal Employer Branding

1. What is your role within the organisation and a brief overview of your daily tasks within this role.
2. What is your understanding of the definition of Internal employer branding?
3. How much emphasis has been placed on internal branding within your onboarding process? Has this changed since you have remained in the role for a longer period?
4. Do you view internal branding as an important factor in your successful onboarding?
5. Does your organisation have an internal branding strategy you are aware of?
6. If yes, what internal employer branding initiatives are in place in your organisation?
7. Who would you describe as the key stakeholders involved within your internal branding experience at your role?

Theme 2 – Impact on Employee

8. Do you feel that internal employer branding has made your role easier?
9. Do you feel that internal employer branding impacts employee satisfaction within your company?
10. Do you feel that internal employer branding impacts employee retention within your company?
11. Do you feel that internal employer branding initiatives have impacted the overall stores performance?
11. From your own perspective, what elements of your own companies approach to internal employer branding do you think could be improved for the employees?

Theme 3 – Covid 19 and IEB

12. Has Covid 19 forced your company to become more technologically friendly? If so, how has your individual role been affected?
13. Do you think that Covid 19 and the impact of individual store changes has changed, how would you describe your companies more recent view on IEB
14. Do you think that Covid 19 has impacted emphasis on training you receive around your companies' brand, if so how?

Theme 4 – Customer Experience

15. Do you think that internal employer branding has an impact on the employee to consumer experience? If so, is this a positive or negative?

17. Do you think there is a difference of emphasis on internal employer branding within the luxury retail outlet compared to normal retail stores?

18. From your own perspective, what elements of your own companies' approach to internal employer branding do you think have been successful/unsuccessful?