

# Internal Branding in Tourism: A State-of-the-art Review

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## **Internal Branding in Tourism: A State-of-the-art Review**

Internal branding initiatives have different impacts on employees and on customers. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive framework to understand internal brand management initiatives in the tourism context. Therefore, this paper reviews and analyses existing literature on internal branding in tourism that has been published in the last 20 years. Internal branding research in tourism is described and analysed in historical and geographical contexts. The key contribution of this review is that it provides a conceptual framework of actions and strategies of internal brand management in tourism, influencing factors, and consequences that can serve as a point of departure for future research endeavours.

*Keywords: internal branding, tourism, literature review*

*Track: Tourism Marketing*

## **1. Introduction**

Branding is an essential part of the service quality concept because a strong brand may influence customers' trust and satisfaction by reducing the risk in psychological and financial terms (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009). Brand-related attitudes and behaviours of employees have a strong influence on customers' brand perception and the success of services branding outcomes (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003). Therefore, companies must use strategies that ensure that employees communicate in line with and live up to the brand promise.

Internal branding has been recognized as a strategy to impact employees' brand behaviour and deliver brand promises to foster customer satisfaction (e.g., Chiang, Han, and McConville, 2018). Several authors (e.g., Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Hui & Honggang, 2021; Piehler, King, Burmann, and Xiong, 2016; Xiong & King, 2020) have realized the importance of internal branding in the tourism and hospitality industry. In the last decade the internal branding concept has, therefore, been viewed as a strategic tool to increase not only employees' brand-centered behaviour but also customer satisfaction.

Given the existing studies and the different perspectives on internal branding, it appears timely to deliver a conceptual paper that reviews existing literature on internal branding in the tourism context and provides an overview of future research activities. The key contribution of this paper lies in its conceptual approach that develops a framework of actions and strategies of internal brand management in tourism, influencing factors, and consequences on employees and customers. To achieve this objective, a state-of-the-art review was carried out.

## **2. Theoretical Basis**

### *2.1 Internal brand management*

In the last two decades internal brand management (IBM) has been recognized as an effective organisational strategy to strengthen brands from within and to influence service performance (e.g., Kim, Kim, Kim, and Kruesi, 2020). As such, IBM represents a "source of sustainable competitive advantage including the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers' expectations is enacted and delivered by employees" (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011, p. 1523).

When reviewing the literature on IBM, it becomes apparent that three initiatives of IBM are dominant: brand-centred HR activities, brand communication, and brand leadership (e.g., Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Brand-centred HR activities focus on initiatives that are related to human resource processes, e.g. recruitment policies, training and development of employees,

and career programmes (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) in order to align HR policies and practices with brand values (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). Closely linked to HR activities is brand communication, which helps to align employees' behaviour with the corporate values (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003). This includes the decision about what is communicated, and which channels are used for dissemination of brand messages internally to make sure that employees are loyal and well identified with organizations' values and goals (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). Finally, the leadership concept is key to IBM, as it influences behavioural patterns that ideally match the desired brand identity (Terglav & Kaše, 2016; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Transformational leadership is an approach to convince employees to act based on corporate brand guidelines (Morhart, Herzog, and Tomczak, 2009).

Internal branding outcomes mainly focus on employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses concerning the tourism brand and performance-related consequences (Zhang & Xu, 2021). In particular, researchers investigated the effects on employees' responses to IBM initiatives concerning attitudes toward the organisation (Watson, Taheri, Glasgow, and O'Gorman, 2018), brand-related attitudes (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015), brand-related behaviour (Piehler, Schade, and Burmann, 2019), and organisational outcomes, e.g., service performance (Baker, Rapp, Meyer, and Mullins, 2014). Some authors demand more empirical evidence to better understand the dimensionality of internal branding outcomes and the relationships among them (Piehler, Grace, and Burmann, 2018).

## *2.2 The importance of internal branding in tourism*

Successful tourism brands have one thing in common, that is, their employees make a significant contribution to a unique brand experience (King & Grace, 2010) because they act as surrogate in delivering the spirit, culture, orientation and meaning of the brand. Therefore, companies in the tourism industry heavily depend on branding their products and services from the inside perspective (Punjaisri, Wilson & Evanschitzky, 2009) to achieve service performance and customer satisfaction. What makes the tourism product unique is the simultaneous value co-creation process (Prebensen, Woo, and Uysal, 2013) between employees and customers, which requires a high level of social interaction. Tour guides, skiing instructors, or climbing guides, for instance, contribute very strongly to the co-creation of the tourism product (Teng & Tsai, 2020) as they actively engage with the guests providing a unique experience.

### **3. Methodology**

To synthesise and analyse current literature on internal branding in tourism, a state-of-the-art literature review was carried out. This research method represents a systematic way to reveal patterns in existing literature, interpret and connect previous knowledge in an alternative and newly constructed way and help identify gaps in the body of existing research (Fink, 2010). Therefore, as Grant and Booth (2009, p. 95) point out, a state-of-the-art review synthesizes and combines existing knowledge and integrates current developments and current approaches. A great advantage of a systematic literature review lies in its methodological rigour and thoroughness, which impacts scientific quality criteria such as legitimacy and objectivity.

In the vein of Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003, p. 215) who postulate that a “comprehensive, unbiased search is one of the fundamental differences between a traditional narrative review and a systematic review”, the process started by identifying relevant keywords and search terms. The main keywords “intern\*” or “employ\*” and “brand\*” were combined with the keywords “tourism”, “hotel”, “hospitality” or “travel” in order to include different subfields of the tourism branch. Four online databases and search engines (Ebsco, ProQuest, Science Direct, Google Scholar) were searched for matching titles, abstracts and keywords of articles and conference proceedings that were published in the last 20 years.

The database search resulted in 685 articles that matched the defined search terms in titles, abstract and keywords. Only original contributions that were limited to peer-reviewed publications were included in the sample. As suggested by Fink (2010), the next step was to screen the papers’ abstracts according to their content to fit within the predefined topic which resulted in a pre-full text sample of 167 items. A screening of full texts and content analysis resulted in 47 articles, an additional screening of references included in these publications resulted in 5 additional articles. In sum, 52 articles were included in the subsequent analyses.

### **4. Results**

#### *4.1 Article characteristics*

Internal branding is a relatively young field in tourism research that has significantly developed during the last twenty years. The first article on this topic can be traced back to Bowen (1997) and provides us with a conceptual paper on internal marketing and the critical influence of employees on the success of service companies. Almost 90% of the articles were published since 2010, and nearly one third was published since 2019. The 52 articles in the

review were published in 25 different journals. Most publications on internal branding in tourism come from the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management (13 articles), International Journal of Hospitality Management (5 articles) and the Journal of Brand Management (5 articles), which together account for 44% of all included articles.

30 articles appear in journals that focus on tourism and tourism related themes, discussing various topics from hospitality, hotel, food service, tourism management, and travel. Publications on internal branding in tourism also appear in journals with a focus on branding, services, general marketing (20 articles), and general management (1 article), but also in specific journals with an innovation focus (1 article). This distribution demonstrates the relevance of IBM for different research disciplines while also showing the diversity of topics in this research area.

37 (7) articles use a quantitative (qualitative) research design, and 5 articles adopt a mixed-methods approach. 3 articles are conceptual papers. Regarding geographical regions, more than half of the empirical papers (27 of 49 studies) are from Asian countries, with data collected mainly in China (8 studies), Thailand (6 studies), and Taiwan (5 studies). 7 empirical papers use European data, collected mainly in Germany (4 studies), 6 empirical papers rely on U.S. data, and for 3 empirical papers data was collected in Australia.

#### *4.2 Initiatives of IBM in tourism*

Tourism companies employ several IBM initiatives to enhance various brand-related behaviours of employees. Brand-centered HRM and brand-related HR activities relate to recruiting, training, reward, compensation, and talent management (Buil, Martínez & Matute, 2016; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Burmann, Zeplin & Riley, 2009; Chang, Chiang & Han, 2012; Chiang et al., 2018; Murillo & King, 2019). Communication is responsible predominantly for a successful implementation of specific IBM strategies (Chong, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009), focusing on brand knowledge dissemination (Baker et al., 2014; King, 2010) and communicating via digital tools (Li et al., 2018). Leadership activities are considered essential and impact the effect of IBM initiatives on internal brand-related outcomes (Burmann, Zeplin & Riley, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2019; Uen et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Xie, Li, Chen, and Huan, 2016). These findings from tourism studies are in line with research in other product and service domains.

However, more recent studies that investigated IBM actions in tourism extend these established initiatives. In particular, additional initiatives focus on social exchange and social

integration of employees as social interactions play an important role in providing the tourism product. Such initiatives echo Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos' (2014) call for research on social exchange in the internal branding process to increase employees' willingness to deliver brand promises and achieve customer satisfaction. Existing studies include employees' positive psychological capital (Lee, Hsiao, and Chen, 2017), level of flow and personal motivation (Watson et al., 2018), relationship orientation (Murillo & King, 2019; Xiong & King, 2019), feeling trusted (Abudoukadierjian & Yongli, 2021), and self-leadership (Zhang & Xu, 2021).

#### *4.3 Factors influencing the success of IBM in tourism*

The articles included in this review identified several factors that influence the relationship between IBM initiatives and its consequences in the tourism context.

Job-related variables include role clarity (King, 2010), available resources (Burmam et al., 2009) and physical facility quality (Liu, Hsu, and Fan, 2020) as important factors that influence brand-related behaviour of employees. We know, for example, that physical surroundings make a difference in customer evaluations of service encounters (e.g., Bitner, 1990), but there is hardly any research on moderating or mediating roles of physical quality in the relationship between IBM and employees' behaviour.

Individual-related variables include pride in the organization (Arnett & McLane, 2002), self-esteem (Murillo & King, 2019), employee know-how (Burmam et al., 2009), work engagement (Park, Johnson, and Chaudhuri, 2019), pro-brand motivation (Murillo & King, 2019) and intrinsic motivation (Xiong & King, 2019), employee sense of brand community (Xiong & King, 2020), and perceived insider status (Abudoukadierjiang & Yongli, 2021).

#### *4.4 Consequences of IBM in tourism*

Tourism research in the past 20 years has established interrelationship between IBM initiatives and employees' brand-related attitudes and behaviours in terms of brand commitment (Bonhak & Curtis, 2019; Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Terglav & Kaše, 2016), employee brand equity (King & Grace, 2009; Liu et al., 2020; Tsang, Lee, and Li, 2011; Xiong, King, and Piehler, 2013), brand belief (Xiong & King, 2020), brand trust (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015), brand/service/organizational citizenship behaviour (Buil et al., 2016; Burmam et al., 2009; Hui & Honggang, 2021; Kim et al. 2020), and brand consistent/supportive behaviour (King,

2010; Xiong et al., 2013) as well as brand performance (Cheung, Kong, and Song, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2012; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Xiong & King, 2015).

Tourism research in the past two years shifts the focus on investigating effects of IBM initiatives on employees' organization-related behaviour, such as job pursuit intention (Bonhak & Curtis, 2019; Kanwal & Van Hoyer, 2020), word-of-mouth behaviour (Kanwal & Van Hoyer, 2020), and taking charge behaviour (Abudoukadierjiang & Yongli, 2021). Interestingly, so far only few empirical studies focused on the positive effects of IBM on service-orientation outcome variables like service improvement (Baker et al., 2014; Bowen, 1997; Kim et al., 2020) or service quality (Chong, 2007).

Finally, in tourism the effects of IBM on customers are underresearched. Only one study focused on customer-based brand equity (Liu et al., 2020), and one study on customer value co-creation (Lee et al., 2017). In addition, Xie et al. (2016) investigated effects of IBM initiatives on customers' perceived brand image, and Burmann et al. (2009) examined effects of IBM on the quality of the customer-brand relationship. Although customer satisfaction is one of the outcome variables that is heavily researched in the service/tourism context, in connection with internal branding the variable was examined in only two studies (Chang et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2018).

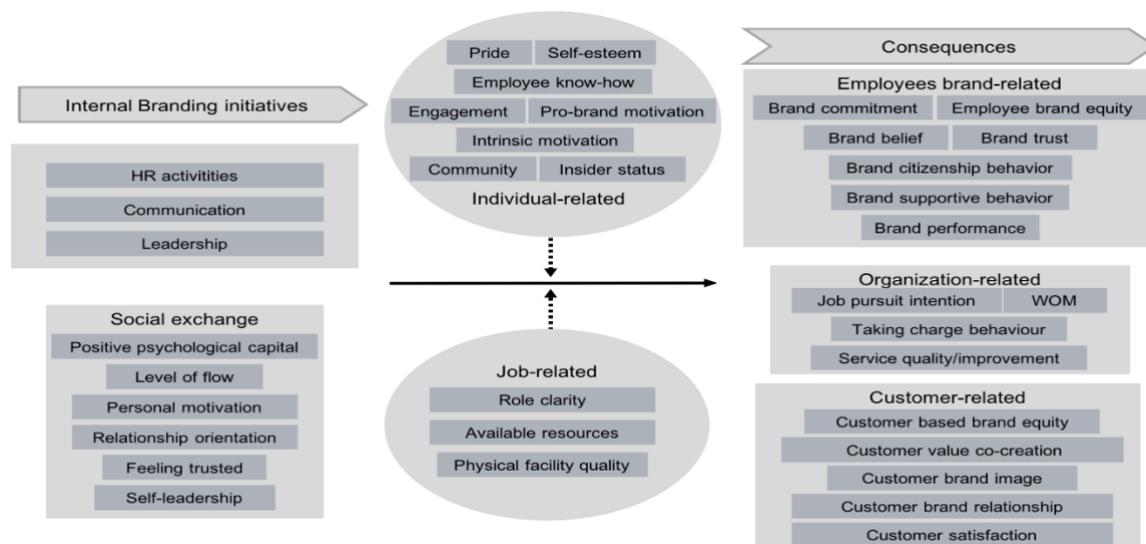


Figure 1: IBM initiatives, influencing factors, and consequences in tourism

## 5. Conclusion

Internal branding in tourism is a research field that has gained considerable attention in the last twenty years. Our literature review provides a framework of internal branding initiatives, influencing factors, and consequences of internal branding in tourism research.

From this literature review, we identify three areas for further research that is particularly needed in tourism contexts: 1) Examining how social exchange IBM initiatives affect employee attitudes and behaviours; 2) investigating job- (e.g., physical facility quality) and individual-related (e.g., perceived insider status) moderating and mediating effects on the relationship between IBM (especially social exchange) initiatives and their outcomes; and 3) exploring interrelationships among different outcomes of IBM initiatives, in particularly employee-, brand-, organizational-, and customer-related outcomes. Obviously, many more as well as more specific research areas can be identified, yet we hope that this review provides an interesting starting point for future research studies in tourism contexts.

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