The Role of Internal Branding for Corporate Success. Employees Perspective from a Multinational Organization in Ghana

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Abstract

The study examined the role of internal branding to understand how the practice was used as a strategic tool to empower and support employees' building of brand supportive behaviors for corporate success. An inductive approach was adopted, and data was collected from twenty respondents via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was employed as this technique enabled the conscious engagement of targeted respondents (both senior and junior staff). The grounded theory approach was used in analyzing data collected. Study findings revealed that internal branding played both an enabler and a differentiator role. As an enabler, internal branding initiatives enhanced employees' brand understanding, facilitated employees' internalization of corporate values, and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors. Additionally, the practice empowered them to act as brand ambassadors and inspired them to achieve desired goals. With regards to the differentiator role, internal branding efforts promoted the alignment of internal processes and culture with desired goals, which enhanced the identity, image, and reputation of the establishment. This suggests that internal branding practices contributes greatly to building strong brands as the practice helps provide the point of differentiation for the organization. The research approach adopted limits generalizability of the findings. It is suggested that future research consider a wider company or sector coverage and much larger sample size. The paper highlights the important role of internal branding initiatives for employees' acquisition and display of brand supportive behaviors for sustained competitiveness and corporate success. It thus contributes to the limited empirical literature on internal branding in Africa.

Keywords: Branding, Internal Branding (IB), Brand Performance, Employee Brand Supportive Behaviors.

Introduction

The increased competition amongst businesses has resulted in organizations adopting diverse strategies to better position themselves in the market for survival and growth (Urde, 1994). A widely recognized approach by academics and researchers the world over is for firms to adopt branding strategies for enhanced performance (King, 1991; Aaker, 1991/1996; Harris, 2007; Figiel, 2012) The concept of branding has evolved as a major component of marketing strategy and is increasingly being adopted by organizations as a strategic tool and a powerful approach to enable firms differentiate themselves from others, and to gain competitive advantage (Urde, 1994; Aaker, 1996; Khan, 2009). Brands are increasingly being considered as part of an organization's valuable resource and a part of the major strategic management tools necessary for

building strong brands for enhanced overall business performance (Aaker 1996; King and Grace 2008; Urde et al 2013). Branding activities when effectively implemented have also been noted to enhance employees' commitment and engagement, and organizational image and reputation (Kapferer, 2012). Ind (2003), and Punjaisri et al. (2009), assert that managing an organization's brand should be considered from both an internal and external viewpoint, but more importantly, an organization should focus on aligning employees' attitudes and behaviors with corporate values for branding and corporate success.

Today, the application of branding principles as a strategic tool is been noted to extend beyond the marketing function to other departments such as Human Resources for corporate success (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). The initiative which targets both internal and external

customers, is aimed at differentiating a firm's brand from its rivals through the creation of desired images in people's minds (Aurand et al, 2005). This is because organizations are increasingly realizing the need to invest in both their internal and external customers for enhanced brand performance and sustained success (Mitchell, 2002). Employees are increasingly being recognized as valuable assets of every establishment and thus require that organizations treat them as internal customers to ensure employee satisfaction and commitment, and increased customer consciousness for improved performance across the business (King and Grace, 2008/2012). Employees' acquisition of brand knowledge via internal management of the brand, results in the enhancement of brand equity (King and Grace, 2010; Yang et al, 2015). Also, employees' values alignment with that of the organization influences their attitudes and behaviors, and results in their empowerment to deliver on the brand promise. The enhancement of employees' knowledgebase and skills also promotes the building of mental associations and images in the minds of employees, and the development of emotional connectivity and relationships (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; King and Grace, 2008). These activities tend to inspire and empower employees, and positively influence the power of the brand, hence, rendering internal branding (IB) activities as necessary measures for strategic goals to be realized (Iyer et al, 2018).

Despite the importance attributed to IB efforts, a review of empirical literature show that majority of IB studies have focused on understanding mechanisms and outcomes with very little known about the role IB plays with regards to employees' empowerment and display of brand-supportive behaviors for corporate success (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2009; Santos - Vijande et al, 2013). Secondly, most of these studies have been conducted from a non-African context as studies from Europe, Asia and the USA dominate extant literature (Amegbe, 2016). Additionally, the very few studies that reflect the role of IB have approached the subject from slightly different perspectives (Iyer et al, 2018: Punjaisri and Wilson, 2008). Towards this end, this paper examines the role of IB from the employees' perspective in an African setting. Specifically, it examines how IB practices tend to motivate and empower employees to deliver on

the brand promise, and ultimately corporate success. This paper's contribution to IB literature is thus in two folds. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature on IB in Africa. It demonstrates the important role employees play via internal brand building efforts, and its impact on the brand and overall business performance. Additionally, study findings provide unique insights from a manufacturing set up in an African setting to enrich knowledgebase on the role IB plays for corporate success. From a managerial perspective, this study draws attention to the positive influence of IB on employees' attitudes and behaviors and endorses the practice as crucial to employees' internalization of corporate values and empowerment, and delivery of an organization's brand promise.

This first section forms the introductory part of the paper. Sections 2 presents the literature review, specifically, rationale and role of IB, theories underpinning IB efforts, and empirical literature relevant to the study. Section 3 outlines the research aim and design, and section 4 presents study findings. This is followed with the discussion section, study limitations and managerial implications, and finally a conclusion is offered.

Literature Review

Internal Branding (IB)

There is increasing emphasis on IB efforts as a necessary measure for building strong brands and corporate success (Keller, 2009: King and Grace, 2010). Punjaisri and Wilson (2011: 1523) define Internal Branding as "*activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that sets customer's expectations is enacted and delivered by employees*". Similarly, Miles and Mangold (2004:68) define internal branding as "*the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents*". These definitions portray IB as a strategic approach to consciously increase employees brand understanding and get them to align their attitudes and behaviors to that of the brand. Some researchers (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2008/2011; LePla, 2013; Iyer et al, 2018) have suggested the need to invest in activities that help align employees behaviors and attitudes with corporate values, so that they could act as brand

ambassadors for the achievement of desired organizational goals. Within the academic literature, scholars such as Burmann and Zeplin (2005), King and Grace (2008/2010), and Xiong and King (2013/2015/ 2019), have identified IB as a strategic initiative targeted at employees to promote the brand from inside the organization. They indicate that IB efforts facilitate the creation of a right mindset and right processes for corporate success as the practice is based on the notion that investing in the right personnel and creating desired images in the minds of employees is necessary for building brand supportive behaviors, and enhanced business performance (Punjaisri et al, 2009). Similarly, scholars such as Golant (2012), Srivastava and Thomas (2010), Maxwell and Knox (2009), and Mitchell (2002) all advocates of IB practice, acknowledge employees as key stakeholders due to the important role they play in brand building for distinctive performance and sustained competitiveness. Miles and Mangold (2005), and Dickson (2015), emphasize the need to equip employees with the requisite skills and knowledgebase to create the desired uniqueness for increased competitiveness and organizational excellence. They recognize IB initiatives to positively influence employees' brand-supportive behaviors which ultimately enhance an organization's image and reputation. Furthermore, Punjaisri et al (2008), point out that employees' internalization of corporate values shapes their perceptions and reflects in their attitudes and behaviors, which translates into how employees project the organization, and consequently how they meet or address customer concerns. Employees' values alignment with that of the organization gets them better equipped to deliver on the brand promise and ensures that their mind set and actions are all geared towards fulfilling the organization's promise (De Chernatony, 2002; Keleman and Papasolomou, 2007). Employees also tend to act as brand ambassadors via the display of brand supportive behaviors which makes them feel confident to deliver the appropriate customer experience for corporate success (Bergstrom et al, 2002; De Chernatony and Cottam, 2006; Mohart et al, 2009). Strategically, managing employees to effectively deliver corporate goals also results in superior brand performance (Khan, 2009). Scholars such as Aurand et al (2005), Patla and Pandit (2012), and Foster et al (2010), have also

argued that IB practices positively impacts employee productivity and satisfaction, which are very necessary for delivering exceptional customer experience, and an enhanced corporate image and reputation. Equipping employees with knowledge and capabilities ultimately gives them a sense of direction and purpose, and gets them emotionally connected, engaged, and involved. Additionally, internal brand building activities results in employees' display of brand-supportive behaviors and inspires them to deliver desired goals (King and Grace, 2008; Maxwell and Knox, 2009). One can thus conclude that the viewpoints expressed suggest that IB initiatives increase employee skills and knowledgebase and promotes employees' building of brand-supportive behaviors for corporate success.

Bowen (2015) presents a theoretical perspective on the role of IB and indicates that the practice enables employees play different roles for corporate success. He points out that IB initiatives enable employees act as innovators when they are guided and empowered to display creative and innovative skills. The is based on the notion of exploitation of employees' creativity and innovative skills to enhance the organization's uniqueness, its competitive edge, and overall business performance. Bowen (2015) also indicates that IB efforts facilitate employees' brand-supportive behaviors, in that, the practice serves as powerful means of continuously educating, emotionally connecting, and guiding employees' actions to deliver desired organizational goals. Furthermore, Bowen (2015) notes that IB efforts make employees' play coordinator role due to their interdependencies, and differentiator role when they internalize the organizations corporate values. The acquisition of brand knowledge and the inculcation of corporate values he notes, promote employees' display of brand-supportive behaviors, and portray them as brand ambassadors. Bowen's (2015) assertion aligns with scholarly views such as Burman and Zeplin (2005), who remark that employees contribute to the credibility and image of an organization's brand when their interdependencies and display of consistent brand behaviors cut across all customer touch points. Additionally, scholars such as De Chernatony (1999), De Chernatony and Cottam (2006), and Madden et al (2006), have highlighted brand building, relationship building, and strengthening of the corporate identity and reputation as

benefits organizations enjoy when employees are considered in promoting corporate values. Also, Kaufman et al. (2012), and Hatch and Schultz (2009), posit that when employee brand–building behaviors consistently align with desired values, it promotes growth, sustainability, and increases the organizations visibility, recognition, and reputation.

Taken together, the viewpoints expressed suggests that IB initiatives when effectively implemented enhances employees brand orientation and overall brand performance. As such, IB must be promoted for successful operations as it enables employees understand better management's expectations and actively work at delivering the brand promise (Santos Vijande et al, 2013). Improving employees' knowledgebase increases their understanding, boost their confidence, and motivates them to work towards desired goals. Empowerment of employees for the delivery of successful operations is crucial to brand success and thus cannot be underestimated (Maxwell and Knox, 2009). Effective management and implementation of IB activities result in the co-creation of value, increases employees' identification with the brand, and commitment and loyalty which is vital for corporate success (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2008/2011). Additionally, the practice better equips employees with relevant knowledge, values, and skills, and gets them empowered and motivated to deliver desired goals. Also, IB enables employees project a positive image of the organization to external customers via the exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors (King and Grace 2008/2010). Furthermore, IB initiatives facilitate employees' ability to deliver the brand promise to customers as the practice is aimed at building employees' brand understanding for successful delivery of desired organizational goals (Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Hence, IB activities must be endorsed by businesses that expect to have competitive edge over their counterpart.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Resource-Based View

The resource-based view emphasizes the exploitation of a firm's strategic resources to its competitive advantage. This is based on the notion that firms are endowed with a unique bundle of resources, capabilities and competencies which when strategically managed create sustainable competitive advantage for the organization. According to Barney (1991), competitive advantage could be gained from valuable organizational resources that are intangible, non-substitutable and inimitable. Such valuable resources are mainly knowledge-based and can exploit opportunities and overcome threats in a firm's environment (Barney, 1991). This understanding suggests that the strategic management of human resource could create distinctiveness for a firm, an element which is very essential for corporate success. Hence, a firm must consciously manage and exploit workforce skills and capabilities to its competitive advantage. Scholars such as Penrose (1959, cited in Kor and Mahoney 2004), Grant (1991), and Wernerfelt (1984), have advanced arguments which corroborates Barney's (1991) viewpoint. They all emphasize the importance of deliberately developing and managing a firm's strategic human resource to its advantage. Thus, making more relevant IB strategies as necessary initiatives for establishments that seek to create distinctiveness in work practices and in the marketplace to sustain corporate success.

Human Capital Theory

This theory which shares similar thinking as the resource-based view emphasize resource heterogeneity as a vital foundation for performance differences across firms. Scholars such as Brymer et al (2014), Presbitero et al (2016), and Allen et al (2017), believe that firms can create distinctiveness through the mechanisms underlying human capital acquisition and accumulation. These processes which differ across firms result in the heterogeneous management of human capital and facilitate the development of tacit knowledge to a firm's advantage. Human Capital theory thus aligns with the resource-based view in that both theories are of the view that intellectual capital and knowledge management remain valuable assets of a firm. Therefore, they advocate for the exploitation of employees' skills and competencies to a firm's advantage. Additionally, they recognize also that individual competencies and capabilities enable an organization to differentiate itself from rivals. Hence, measures such as IB campaigns that exploit human capital to enhance firm differentiation must be encouraged and pursued.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory also proposes that an individual's sense of self-worth depends on groups that he/she associates with or belongs to (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). This theory highlights the effect of the individual's identification with the social group as an important element for the attainment of self-satisfaction. In other words, IB efforts promotes the individuals desire to associate with and to identify with groups they perceive as important in their quest for self-expression and belongingness. Punjaisri et al (2009), indicate that IB activities enhances employees' sense of belonging as it fosters employee identification with an organization's brand, and motivates employees to exhibit brand-supportive behaviors that enhance group goals. Altogether, the theories discussed promote IB efforts for enhanced brand performance and business success.

Empirical Literature

Despite the popularity of the subject area, there is very limited empirical literature that emphasizes the important role that IB plays for employees' empowerment and delivery of desired goals for corporate success. Very few studies such as Iyer et al (2018), and Punjaisri and Wilson (2007) reflect the role of IB in facilitating brand performance. Also, these studies have been conducted from a non-African context thus creating a gap worth exploiting to confirm study findings.

Iyer et al's (2018) study in the USA on IB was conducted from an organizational perspective to understand the role of employees in improving brand performance. A survey-based design and key informant approach (Qualtrics Panels) was used in collecting data from respondents mainly made up of Brand/ Marketing Managers, Product/Service Managers, and Assistant Managers. Questionnaires were distributed to 534 respondents out of which 218 responses, representing 218 organizations were used. Study findings revealed that IB was viewed as a mechanism for effectively executing the brand's vision and strategic brand plans over a period. Employees were noted as crucial in the creation and sustaining of strong brands. Accordingly, IB's role in brand management was linked to an activity that enhanced employees brand orientation mindset and ultimately brand performance. The results also highlighted the importance of brand orientation and strategic brand management initiatives which suggest that IB practice facilitates employees' alignment to brand and strategic plans. IB initiatives thus acted as an enabler (a bridge) for executing brand orientation values and strategic brand management goals.

Piehler et al's (2016) study in Australia which shares similarities with Xiong and King's (2015) study in USA, examined the dynamics of four important internal brand management outcomes (Brand understanding, Brand identification, Brand commitment and Brand citizenship behavior). Purposive sampling was employed, and data was collected via online survey using an Australian web-based market research list. The sample comprised of entry-level, supervisory, middle management, and senior management positions. 3,000 email invitations were sent out, and 678 responses were received out of which 375 valid responses were used. Study results revealed that brand understanding, a cognitive outcome of internal brand management (IBM), was an important antecedent of brand citizenship behavior (BCB). And BCB, a behavioral outcome of IBM was shaped by brand understanding through two-related routes, firstly through brand understanding which is the foundation for both, and secondly through both brand commitment and identification. The study identified brand understanding as fundamental to employees' identification with the brand and exhibition of brand commitment. Brand understanding and brand commitment were identified as two immediate antecedents of BCB. Brand identification was included in the study to show its indirect effect as personal interest was noted to drive connectivity to the brand. The study noted that brand understanding afforded employees the ability to identify with the brand after which brand commitment was achieved. This is so because when employees have sufficient brand knowledge, it boosts their emotional attachment and confidence as to what to do (role clarity) which leads them to exhibit brand-aligned behaviors (Piehler, 2016: 1588/1589). Employees act as brand ambassadors or brand champions when they know what to do and are committed to delivering desired goals. Which suggests that IB efforts facilitated brand understanding, brand identification and commitment and brand-aligned behaviors.

Xiong and King's (2015) study in the USA examined how employees' motivation informed their brand performance. Specifically, the study explored how employees are motivated to act as brand champions/ambassadors. Data was collected via online self-reported survey from 202 US based hotel employees. The study identified employee perceived brand meaningfulness, and employee perceived brand value fit, as two key motivational drivers that underpinned employees' brand alignment and enhanced brand performance. Xiong and King (2015: 60/61) define employee perceived brand meaningfulness as "*the extent to which employees perceive that delivering the brand is meaningful and valuable to them*" which suggests that employee motivation (which is crucial to excellent service delivery) is underpinned by the brand's meaningfulness and personal relevance. Additionally, it is suggested that motivated employees exhibit brand-aligned behaviors for brand success. Employee perceived brand value fit was also defined as "*the extent to which employees perceive their values are consistent with the brand's value*" which also suggests that value congruence propels employees to act authentically as they feel a sense of belongingness which can be equated to employee empowerment. The study findings also imply that employees become brand ambassadors when they perceive the brand as meaningful and relevant, and their personal values aligned with that of the brand. Which suggests that IB efforts promoted brand meaningfulness and relevance and facilitated brand-aligned behaviors for enhanced brand performance.

Punjaisri and Wilson's (2007) study in Thailand which shares similarities with that of Punjaisri et al (2009) study also in Thailand, examined employees' perceptions towards their role and organizational practices that enabled them deliver on the brand promise. A mixed approach (Quantitative/Qualitative) was adopted, and study findings revealed that IB practices (mainly internal communication and training) influenced employees' actions and brand attitudes, and ultimately their service delivery. Employees' perceptions with regards to the role they play to enhance the brand's value were aligned to that of management. Employees' regarded their behaviors and actions as significant and crucial to brand and overall business performance, which suggests that IB efforts facilitated employees' brand understanding and brand-supportive behaviors for corporate success.

Even though research interest has resulted in a plethora of investigative studies on IB, majority of these studies have been conducted outside of Africa (Amegbe, 2016). Also, empirical studies conducted from the employees' perspective have largely focused on understanding IB mechanisms and outcomes rather than the role of IB (King and Grace, 2008/2010/2012). Furthermore, the very few studies that reflect the role of IB have approached the subject from a slightly different perspective as they do not clearly spell out the different roles IB efforts play in employee inculcation of brand values, their empowerment, and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors (Iyer et al, 2018: Piehler et al, 2016; Xiong and King, 2015).The knowledge gap identified presents an opportunity to conduct a study from employees' viewpoint, and from an African context, to augment current literature and add to the limited studies in Africa. Hence, this paper examines the role of IB from the employees' perspective in a manufacturing set up in Ghana.

Methodology

Following recommendations by Saunders et al (2007), and Bryman and Bell (2011), a qualitative approach was adopted to explore employees perceptions on how IB efforts contributed to their acquisition of brand knowledge, empowerment and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors for the delivery of brand promise. The sampling technique adopted was influenced by the study's aim of consciously engaging employees at all levels. Hence, purposive sampling was employed to enable data to be collected from both senior and junior staff to ensure the collection of diverse views, and to get the most information from the sample considered from the study. Face-to-face semi-structured interviewing technique was used to collect data from 20 respondents in the selected multinational organization. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews was considered very appropriate as it allowed for flexibility and further probing to unearth new findings. It also promoted dialoguing with informants for better understanding and to clarify issues where necessary (Walker and Myrick, 2006: Saunders et al, 2007).

The grounded theory approach was adopted in analyzing data collected. This analytical

technique is by far the most prominent approach for analyzing qualitative data and involved coding, identification of themes, and textural explanation of feedback obtained from respondent (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Firstly, face-to-face interviews recorded were transcribed after which responses were manually coded in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet. Data was then categorized based on clustering and thematic coding, and finally textural explanation of the information obtained. With the objective of understanding how IB was used as a strategic tool to empower and enhance employees' brand-supportive behaviors the following research question was posed: - How do employees perceive the role of internal branding in the organization's strategy formation?

Findings

Data analyses revealed two common themes, internal branding played 'an enabler' and a 'differentiator role' for corporate success. These will be discussed next.

The "Enabler Role"

Respondents unanimously revealed that IB activities championed by HR enhanced their knowledgebase, guided their actions, and equipped them to perform their jobs. For instance, respondents mentioned that new recruits go through induction training and specific training programs to learn what the company stands for and to align their values to that of the company. Leadership activities were also noted as playing significant role in employees' inculcation of corporate values for organizational success. Respondents indicated that leadership's directives, support, and interaction with them inspired and empowered them to build brand-supportive behaviors and to achieve desired goals. Leadership's influence guided their actions and supported employees' understanding and inculcation of corporate values.

Also, the attitude and behavior of the workforce (managers, supervisors, and colleagues) helped to implicitly inculcate brand values. Respondents indicated that interaction with peers also helped employees align their attitudes and behaviors to that of the organization and encouraged and reinforced the exhibition of expected values. Respondent's opinions arguably suggest that IB played an 'enabler "role as it supported employees' internalization of the

corporate values, employees building of brand-supportive behaviors, and ultimate delivery on the brand promise. IB activities helped employees align their individual values with that of the organization and facilitated employee involvement and engagement. The practice also empowered them to act as brand ambassadors and to achieve desired goals. This is evidenced by the following statements.

Taken together, respondents' views suggest

"Looking around daily how employees go about their processes, how they implement these core values in their various day to day operations. I believe the message has gone down with every single one"

"Well the awareness and knowledge gained is something that has moulded me to fit into the organization. The knowledge gained has actually helped me to fit myself into the organization and whiles I get myself relating well within the organization its helping me to do my work as I am supposed to do"

that IB initiatives enhance employee brand orientation and understanding which is crucial to employees' display of brand-supportive behaviors. The practice also contributed to building a strong brand and an enhanced overall business performance. The findings concur with studies such as Burmann and Zeplin (2005), and Punjaisri and Wilson (2007; 2011), as they state that internally organized activities targeted at employees such as coaching, training and developmental programs, enhance employees' knowledgebase and skills, and helps build brand-supportive behaviors. The findings are also consistent with studies such as Iyer et al, (2018), who assert that IB efforts facilitated employees' alignment to brand and strategic plans. In that, the practice enhanced employees brand orientation mindset and reflected in their attitude and behaviors which ultimately enhanced the brands performance. The findings also concur with Xiong and King's study (2015) which identified perceived brand meaningfulness and perceived brand value fit as core elements that motivated employees to build brand-aligned behaviors and enhanced brand performance. Similarly, study

findings confirm the results of Piehler et al (2016), as they also noted brand understanding as fundamental to employees' brand identification and commitment, and brand citizenship behaviors. Altogether, study findings suggest IB efforts to promote employee-based brand equity and exceptional service delivery which is consistent with scholarly views such as King and Grace (2010/2012). Respondents' views also imply that IB efforts support businesses to achieve desired goals and thus require effective implementation of such initiatives as they impact employee attitudes and behaviors, brand performance, and consequently ensure corporate success.

The "Differentiator Role"

Majority of the respondents perceived IB initiatives as contributing to the organization's attractiveness, enhanced image, and reputation. Respondents linked the organization's current overall outstanding performance to their alignment with the internal processes and culture which have been put in place by management. Respondents believed that their actions have contributed greatly to the outstanding performance, positive image, and enhanced reputation enjoyed by the firm. The respondents mentioned that the organization currently stands out due to employees' commitment and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors. Respondents also felt proud to be a part of such a prestigious organization as their responses suggests identification with the company. For instance, respondents mentioned that living the corporate values has improved customer feedback and word-of-mouth communication about the company. Additionally, it has built trust, respect, increased credibility, enhanced identity, image, and reputation of the organization. This is evidenced by the following statements:

The opinions expressed by respondents suggest that IB initiatives helps to differentiate the organization from others. In that, the brand knowledge acquired contributed to the creative and innovative skills displayed by the workforce. IB efforts thus inspired and guided employees' actions and assisted in building brand-supportive behaviors which enhanced the organization's identity, attractiveness, distinctiveness, and sustained competitive advantage (De Chernatony and Cottam, 2006). The organization is perceived

as unique via customer experience and interaction with employees. The findings also suggest that IB

> "Currently you will realize that you would not really hear any negativity in relation to the company. Another thing too that you will realize is that each and every individual tries to live and abide by these values because we get to understand from the very word go that these values are core to your behavior and conduct in the company".
>
> "I was actually considering today about how the values have driven the growth of the company over the years. We don't joke when it comes to the values and that is what sets us apart from other companies."

efforts contribute to exceptional performance and competitive edge over rivals. It also contributed to the building of a strong brand equity which is reflected in the overall brand performance. Furthermore, IB practices exploit employees innovative and creative skills, and empower them to act as brand ambassadors. Consequently, the image and reputation of the establishment is enhanced via employees display of distinctive qualities. The findings also agree with Bowen's (2015) view that IB initiatives make employees display creative and innovative skills which enhances their brand knowledge and overall business performance.

Discussion

Whereas most of the existing studies on IB have been conducted outside of Africa and have largely focused on understanding mechanisms and outcomes, this study has considered the role of IB from an African context in a manufacturing set up, in Ghana. It is evident from the research findings that employees working with the multinational organization under study in Ghana perceived IB as playing two key roles: - an enabler role and a differentiator role. The enabler role emanates from the practice empowering them to internalize corporate values and build brand-supportive behaviors. Respondents indicated that HR's consistent training and communication programs increased their knowledgebase and understanding of the corporate values which equipped them to perform assigned tasks. HR trainings had a major influence on the socialization process as it

positively impacted their brand understanding and promoted values alignment for corporate success.

Leadership's directives, support, and influence was also noted to have positively shaped employees' attitudes and behaviors and ultimately impacted employee brand performance. Leadership's continuous interactions, encouragement, and reinforcement of the values empowered employees to live the brand and to display brand-supportive behaviors. Leadership's influence also facilitated employer–employee relationship which was necessary for building employee confidence to live the brand and to deliver required goals. In other words, IB efforts equipped employees with the requisite knowledgebase and skills to deliver on the brand promise. This finding concurs with the views of scholars such as Bowen (2016), Iyer et al (2018) and Punjaisri et al (2008), who acknowledge that IB efforts facilitated employee empowerment and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors which improved overall brand performance. Study findings also identified IB to have played a differentiator role as it increased the distinctive qualities of the organization and made it stand out. Employees noted IB efforts to have increased their creative and innovative skills which contributed greatly to the exceptional service delivery and distinctive overall business performance. The organization's attractiveness was linked to the enhanced identity, image and reputation enjoyed by the organization. This finding is consistent with Bowen's views (2016) on IB practices promoting creative and innovative skills to enhance brand performance and corporate success.

Limitations/ Managerial Implications

The study was conducted in only one establishment and was based on a small sample size thus limiting generalizability of the findings. It is suggested that future research consider a wider company or sector coverage and much larger sample size. The paper also seeks to draw management's attention to the positive influence of IB initiatives on employees' attitudes and actions. The study findings demonstrate the important role employees play in the delivery of an organization's brand promise. The study endorses the effective management and execution of IB programs, and the conscious exploitation of

employees' skills and competencies for enhanced performance and realization of corporate goals.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

The study findings demonstrate how IB initiatives support strategic management decision making and ultimately brand performance. Employees would act as brand ambassadors if they are empowered to live the brand and exhibit brand-supportive behaviors. This is made possible when employees' skills and competencies are consciously exploited to exhibit distinctive skills and services. Having established that IB efforts positively influence employees' actions and gets them empowered to live the brand, this paper recommends that IB practices be encouraged for corporate success. The study also endorses the results of previous empirical literature that promote IB efforts as playing an enabler and a differentiator role. The enabler role is linked to equipping employees with the requisite knowledgebase and skills to empower them to live the brand. The differentiator role strengthens the corporate identity, reputation, and image of the establishment. Given that there is very scanty literature on the role IB plays in employees' empowerment and exhibition of brand-supportive behaviors, this paper recommends more studies be conducted from an African context to increase knowledgebase, and to guide and enhance the practice in Africa.

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