

Citation: Abdulsada Jaberi, A. S., Maharati, Y., Kaffashpoor, A., & Eslami, G. (2025). Identifying the Components and Indicators of Internal Branding in Nonprofit Organizations in Iraq. *Digital Transformation and Administration Innovation*, 3(2), 1-11.

Received date: 2025-01-21

Revised date: 2025-05-27

Accepted date: 2025-05-29

Published date: 2025-06-01



Identifying the Components and Indicators of Internal Branding in Nonprofit Organizations in Iraq

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to discover the components and indicators of internal branding in nonprofit organizations in Iraq. This research adopts an interpretivist philosophy, an inductive approach, a qualitative method, and a phenomenological strategy. The qualitative study population includes managers and employees of nonprofit organizations in Iraq engaged in charitable and benevolent activities who have at least 10 years of experience in branding and internal branding within these organizations, and who also possess sufficient awareness and knowledge of the foundations and principles of internal branding. The sampling method in this research is non-random and purposive. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. According to the qualitative content analysis conducted, internal branding in nonprofit organizations comprises 11 components, 40 categories, and 342 codes. These 11 components include: employees' internal communication with the brand, brand goal identification, brand commitment influenced by human resources, creation, recognition, understanding, and transfer of brand value by human resources, brand perception by organizational employees, alignment and value congruence of human resources with the brand, employee support for the brand, brand identity formation and transfer of brand objectives to human resources, brand clarification by employees, brand-consistent behaviors, and extra-role brand-consistent behaviors by human resources. The findings emphasize that while general principles of internal branding are applicable in Iraq, the country's specific conditions necessitate localized strategies. Notably, the shortage of resources frequently observed in many nonprofit organizations in Iraq, combined with the significant role of informal relationships among employees—a prominent feature of Iraq's collectivist culture—require that conventional branding approaches be adapted to local needs. This study partially addresses this necessity through its findings.

Keywords: Component identification, internal branding, nonprofit organizations, Iraq, phenomenological method.

1. Introduction

Organizations must achieve competitive advantages by utilizing brand differentiation to advance their market position (Graham & Cascio, 2018). Accordingly, branding (including brand and brand management) has a longstanding presence in the academic literature (Riley et al., 2016). Riley et al. (2016) demonstrated that since the time of Gardner and Levy,



researchers have increasingly studied branding in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Riley et al., 2016). Regarding nonprofit organizations, these entities rely on social contributions to expand their services to society (Hou et al., 2009). Many nonprofit organizations harness the power of branding to build identity with consumers, attain brand loyalty, and foster emotional connections (Peña Florez & Rodríguez-Rojas, 2018). While the for-profit sector has explored internal branding extensively, distinct differences in branding concepts exist for the nonprofit sector (Wymer et al., 2016). Unlike for-profit companies, nonprofit organizations are generally unable to use their limited resources for branding campaigns or strategic brand initiatives. Instead, they must allocate budgets toward their mission and charitable operations (Liu et al., 2017). Nonprofit organizations rely on internal stakeholders to co-create and share the brand. Psychological associations, for instance, are maintained by individuals familiar with the organization (Durgee, 2016). Therefore, managing these psychological constructs through internal branding becomes essential. Internal branding is defined as efforts aimed at creating a brand that are directed toward employees and internal stakeholders to make the organization's brand promise a reality (Liu et al., 2017).

Today, one of the emerging subjects in marketing science is the concept of internal branding. Internal brand management is an effective tool for building and sustaining a strong brand (Sarangal et al., 2024). It emphasizes the development, reinforcement, and consolidation of the organization's brand. Several terms are used to describe this concept, such as workplace marketing and brand authenticity (Brown et al., 2024; Gonçalves et al., 2024). Employees are the primary audience for internal brand management and are responsible for promoting the brand within the organization. Based on the brand identity approach, a comprehensive model for internal brand management includes three key elements: brand-oriented human resources activities (brand-oriented training), brand communication, and transformational leadership (Azizi & Naeli, 2024; Sharafi Behrouz, 2023; Taheri & Haji, 2023).

When internal branding is neglected, its various dimensions are undermined. Thus, ignoring internal branding also inhibits the proper development of brand equity, which in turn affects employee satisfaction—particularly in nonprofit settings where organizational cohesion directly impacts staff contentment. Internal branding in Iraqi nonprofit organizations cannot be realized through traditional internal advertising or standard modern branding approaches, because the goal and nature of internal branding differ significantly from those in for-profit organizations. This discrepancy highlights a theoretical and practical gap in internal branding practices. Therefore, nonprofit organizations must manage psychological associations through internal branding to simultaneously foster a positive brand image and improve employee satisfaction. Internal branding is defined as a set of efforts aimed at creating a brand, directed at internal stakeholders to fulfill the brand promise (Liu et al., 2017).

In light of the challenges outlined, it is essential to acknowledge that nonprofit organizations differ from for-profit companies. The primary distinction lies in the non-distribution constraint, which prohibits nonprofits from distributing profits to private individuals (Walter & Patricia, 2020). Any surplus is reinvested to address multiple components of social needs. The negative implication of the term "nonprofit" alludes to these constraints, although the organization's intent remains oriented toward public good. Walter outlines the organizational infrastructure of civil society, which separates institutional entities from individuals while providing a multifaceted experience to those involved. The commitment of individuals, combined with their ethical energy and diverse collective perceptions, drives the pursuit of public benefit. Additionally, nonprofit organizations enjoy tax advantages that help them pursue social initiatives and attract financial or voluntary contributions from those engaged in philanthropic work. This advantage underscores the value of their brand equity. One notable example is the study by Shi et al. (2020), which examined how nonprofit organizations responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite operational disruptions, nonprofits in the Dallas–Fort Worth metro area leveraged their brand equity to sustain cooperation, mutual trust, and continued service delivery, particularly to the homeless population, who benefited from superior organizational structures and public services. This demonstrates that brands are an inseparable part of nonprofit organizational structures, serving both operational functions and stakeholder relationships. Consequently, internal branding, brand equity, and employee satisfaction are all interconnected (Shi et al., 2020). Garg et al. (2019) argue that branding—regardless of type—enhances stakeholder satisfaction, including that of customers and employees. The diversity of stakeholders necessitates the identification of brand elements that can be used to strengthen internal branding. In turn, this brand identity becomes an effective tool for fulfilling the external stakeholders' needs in a consistent and distinctive manner (Garg et al., 2019). Nonprofit organizations can harness



the competitive advantage of their internal stakeholders (i.e., human capital) to enhance outcomes such as brand equity and job satisfaction (Johansen & Sowa, 2019). In light of the above, the present study seeks to explore the components of internal branding within nonprofit organizations in Iraq.

2. Methods and Materials

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The research strategy employed in this study is the phenomenological method. This approach is adopted because the researcher seeks to uncover the essence or meaning of phenomena and to describe the meanings of internal branding as experienced by employees and managers within organizations. It involves an in-depth exploration of phenomena. Through this method, a holistic understanding of internal branding will be achieved, ultimately contributing to the development of a theory related to the personal lives or long-term experiences of a phenomenon or human behavior.

The qualitative segment of the study population comprises managers and employees of nonprofit organizations in Iraq who possess at least ten years of experience in the field of branding and internal branding within these organizations and have adequate knowledge and awareness of the principles and foundations of internal branding. The sampling method used in this study is non-random and purposive. Accordingly, individuals were selected non-randomly from among the experts who met the defined criteria. Since data saturation determines the sample size in qualitative research, interviews continued until data saturation was achieved.

Initially, information was gathered through books, scholarly articles, credible databases, and prior research within the relevant field to preliminarily examine the subject dimensions. Subsequently, field data were collected using interviews.

Regarding the credibility of qualitative methods, there are several strategies available that qualitative researchers may apply and present to readers to evaluate the trustworthiness or validity of the research. The most common strategies include member checking, the search for negative cases or alternative explanations, and peer debriefing. Furthermore, to enhance the credibility of the interview results, the interview's purpose was clearly explained to the participants at the beginning of the session. The interviewer also set aside prior knowledge during the session and adhered to effective interview principles, such as friendly engagement and trust-building, thereby ensuring the interview's credibility.

A pilot test was also conducted. This involved carrying out one or more preliminary interviews and refining the questions to eliminate ambiguity. Various methods were used to record, transcribe, and document the interview data.

In terms of evaluating the reliability of the interview coding process in qualitative studies, two indicators were used: test-retest reliability (stability index) and inter-coder reliability (reproducibility index). The stability index refers to the consistency of data classification over time and can be calculated when a coder codes the same text at two different points in time. In this study, several interviews were selected and analyzed at specified intervals to determine the stability index. Inter-coder reliability refers to the degree of agreement between independent coders when evaluating the characteristics of a message or text. In this study, interviews were reviewed and analyzed by two independent coders, and the reproducibility index for the extracted codes was subsequently calculated.

Regarding the method of analysis in the qualitative section, working with open-ended data requires a system to classify and summarize the information in a format that facilitates review and analysis. Content analysis is the process of encoding narrative responses and transforming them into an analyzable format. Content analysis consists of two main steps: categorizing the themes and coding the content.

In this study, content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Specifically, interviews were first transcribed verbatim and then processed and coded using MaxQDA software to extract descriptive categories. The data analysis method involved repeated, iterative cycles conducted simultaneously by the researcher and academic supervisors to ensure the derived categories aligned as closely as possible with the content of the interviews. In each round of analysis, the researcher designed descriptive categories based on the analyzed interviews and reviewed their comprehensiveness concerning the predefined contexts and codes. These categories were then sent to academic experts for evaluation and refinement based on their feedback.

3. Findings and Results



Based on the conducted analyses and coding, the dimensions or components of internal branding were identified. According to the analysis, internal branding in nonprofit organizations includes 11 components, 40 categories, and 342 codes, as presented in Table 1. Due to the large volume, the individual codes are not displayed.

Table 1. Components and Categories of Internal Branding in Nonprofit Organizations

Category	Component
Existence of internal brand communication, symbolic and psychological connection of employees with the brand, employee interaction and experience with the brand, internal branding and communication, social impact and resource mobilization	Internal Employee Communication with the Brand
Brand awareness, employees' understanding of organizational goals	Brand Purpose Awareness
Employee brand commitment, employee participation in branding, employee ownership and commitment, commitment to brand goals and changes	Employee Brand Commitment
Brand value preservation by staff, brand value creation by staff, brand value communication by employees, transformation of brand strategy into organizational culture, brand communication with stakeholders, brand internalization and learning, institutionalization of values in employees, awareness of symbols and values by employees, use of visual identity, visual and content alignment, existence of stable and unified values among employees	Creation, Recognition, Understanding, and Communication of Brand Value by Employees
Accurate brand perception, organizational understanding of employees' branding capabilities	Brand Perception by Employees
Employee alignment with brand culture, employee coordination with the brand, employee value alignment with the brand, alignment of brand mission with employees	Value Alignment and Coordination of Human Resources with the Brand
Organizational attention to the brand, employee supportive behaviors toward the brand, employee representation and protection of the brand	Employee Support for the Brand
Employees as brand ambassadors in customer interactions, employee brand identification	Brand Identity Integration and Goal Transmission to Human Resources
Organizational motivation and brand clarification, role clarity of employees within the brand	Brand Clarification by Employees
Alignment of employee behavior with brand values, brand feedback by employees, appropriate behavioral patterns among employees	Brand-Conforming Behaviors
Existence of brand citizenship behaviors, professional development and growth opportunities for employees	Brand-Aligned Extra-Role Behaviors by Employees

Internal Employee Communication with the Brand

Internal employee communication with the brand is one of the key components of internal branding. This component refers to how employees engage with their organization's brand and how this relationship affects their behavior, attitudes, and performance. In nonprofit organizations, such communication is especially important because employees are often deeply engaged with the organization's social and humanitarian missions and values. Internal brand communication implies the presence of a strong and effective internal communication system through which employees can connect with the brand. In Iraqi nonprofit organizations, such communication can be enhanced through tools like internal meetings, newsletters, digital platforms, and training programs. These channels enable employees to develop a stronger sense of belonging to the brand and better understand and convey the organization's mission.

Employee interaction with the brand refers to their workplace experiences and how these experiences shape their attitudes toward the brand. In Iraqi nonprofit organizations, fostering positive employee experiences—such as involvement in meaningful projects, recognition of efforts, and creating a supportive work environment—can strengthen this interaction. Such positive experiences also promote employee loyalty. Internal branding and communication processes are essential mechanisms through which brand values and identity are conveyed to employees. In nonprofit contexts, this process can be strengthened through training programs, workshops, and orientation sessions. Effective communication in this domain helps employees gain a deeper understanding of the organization's mission and goals and enables them to relay these messages to external stakeholders.

Brand Purpose Awareness

The brand purpose awareness component refers to employees' understanding of the organization's goals, mission, and brand values. It is a central pillar of internal branding because employees can only effectively represent the brand if they are fully aware of its objectives. In nonprofit organizations, this is particularly critical as their goals often align with social, humanitarian, and environmental causes. Employees must be able to clearly communicate these goals to external stakeholders.

Brand awareness refers to the degree to which employees understand the brand's identity, values, and mission. In nonprofit organizations, this includes employees' understanding of the organization's role in society, key missions, and intended impacts.



For example, in Iraq, nonprofit employees must be aware of their organization's role in improving social conditions, supporting vulnerable populations, or promoting education and health. Brand awareness can be strengthened through training programs, workshops, and effective internal communication. Understanding goals implies a deep and accurate comprehension of both the short- and long-term objectives of the organization. This understanding must go beyond surface-level awareness and include knowledge of each employee's contribution toward achieving these goals. In Iraqi nonprofit organizations, goal comprehension can lead to greater responsibility and more active participation in organizational initiatives. Organizations can support this by offering orientation meetings, participatory programs, and regular feedback.

Employee Commitment to the Brand

The component of employee commitment to the brand refers to the level of employee engagement and participation in shaping and strengthening the brand. This is a key aspect of internal branding, as committed and engaged employees can act as brand ambassadors and play a crucial role in fulfilling organizational goals. In nonprofit organizations, employee commitment is vital due to common financial constraints and limited resources, which make motivated and dedicated human capital indispensable.

Employee commitment to the brand refers to the loyalty and sense of belonging that employees feel toward the brand. Committed employees not only understand the organization's goals and values but actively work to fulfill them. In Iraqi nonprofit organizations, brand commitment can be enhanced by cultivating a sense of belonging, involving staff in decision-making, and recognizing their contributions. Employee commitment and ownership reflect the degree of responsibility and personal investment that employees feel toward the brand. When employees feel ownership, they are more inclined to protect and promote the brand. This sense of ownership in Iraqi nonprofit organizations can be strengthened through shared decision-making, delegation of key responsibilities, and the creation of a participatory work environment.

Creation, Understanding, and Communication of Brand Value by Employees

This component highlights the central role of employees in shaping, understanding, and conveying brand values. As brand representatives, employees are responsible for creating, maintaining, and communicating these values to both internal and external stakeholders. In nonprofit organizations, where brand values are often tied to social and humanitarian missions, the ability to effectively transmit these values is essential.

Maintaining brand value involves the capacity of employees to uphold and strengthen brand values over time. This requires a deep awareness of these values and their reflection in behavior and interactions. In Iraqi nonprofits, this can be reinforced through training programs, regular feedback, and the cultivation of a strong organizational culture. Creating brand value can also emerge from innovative ideas, participation in key projects, and improvements in internal processes. Employees in nonprofit settings contribute by offering creative solutions to social challenges, thereby enhancing the brand's value. Communicating brand value refers to employees' ability to convey brand values effectively and convincingly to external stakeholders such as clients, partners, and the broader community. In Iraq, this can be supported through training, communication workshops, and structured stakeholder engagement opportunities.

Brand Perception by Employees

This component addresses how employees perceive and interpret the organization's brand. It encompasses their understanding of the brand's identity, values, mission, and market positioning. A correct and positive perception can enhance employee commitment, motivation, and participation. In nonprofit organizations, where employees represent the brand, this perception is critical to conveying brand values to external audiences.

Understanding employee branding capacity refers to the organization's awareness and utilization of its employees' abilities and skills in the branding process. This requires organizations to recognize how employees can create, maintain, and communicate brand values and use these capabilities effectively. In nonprofit contexts, this understanding can be nurtured through educational initiatives, workshops, and participatory opportunities, ultimately enhancing employee commitment and organizational performance.

Value Alignment of Human Resources with the Brand

This component assesses the degree of congruence between the values, culture, and mission of the brand and the values and behaviors of employees. It is a core element of internal branding because employees who align with the brand are better positioned to represent it and contribute to the organization's success. In nonprofit organizations, such alignment is essential as their values often correspond with social and humanitarian missions, which must be communicated effectively.



Employee alignment with brand culture refers to how well employee values and behaviors match those of the brand culture. This alignment requires a full understanding of brand values and cultural norms, which should be reflected in interactions and behavior. In Iraqi nonprofits, this can be fostered through training, workshops, and participatory opportunities. Brand mission alignment implies that employees are fully aware of the brand's mission and reflect it in their actions. This alignment can be strengthened through internal communication, participatory branding processes, and inclusive planning.

Employee Support for the Brand

This component refers to the extent of employee engagement in supporting and sustaining the organization's brand. It is a fundamental element of internal branding, as employees who actively support the brand serve as ambassadors and contribute to the realization of organizational goals. In nonprofit settings, where staff often engage with deep social and humanitarian missions, such support enhances credibility and impact.

Organizational attention to the brand reflects how much importance the organization places on its brand and its role in achieving strategic objectives. This requires organizational awareness of brand value and a commitment to dedicating resources for brand maintenance. In Iraqi nonprofits, this attention can be amplified through training programs, effective internal communication, and inclusive branding processes—ultimately enhancing employee motivation and organizational outcomes.

Brand Identity Integration and Goal Transmission

This component refers to the process through which employees internalize the brand's identity and objectives and reflect them in their behaviors and interactions. It is a foundational element of internal branding because employees who are fully aligned with the brand can effectively act as its ambassadors. In nonprofit organizations, this process is crucial due to the deep engagement of staff with social missions and values.

Brand identity integration refers to employees' identification with the organization's brand values and identity. This requires a comprehensive understanding and embodiment of the brand in daily conduct. In nonprofits, this integration can be strengthened through training, communication, and participation in branding activities—contributing to greater motivation and performance.

Brand-Conforming Behaviors

This component highlights how employees reflect the organization's brand values, mission, and goals in their behavior. It is vital to internal branding because such behaviors reinforce brand credibility and organizational influence. In nonprofit contexts, where staff are often deeply committed to humanistic values, brand-conforming behaviors can increase engagement and motivation.

Alignment of behavior with brand values refers to how consistently employees' behaviors reflect brand principles. This requires deep awareness and intentional application. In Iraq, this alignment can be strengthened through internal communication, participatory branding activities, and education—resulting in enhanced commitment and organizational effectiveness.

Brand-Aligned Extra-Role Behaviors by Employees

This component refers to behaviors that go beyond formal job duties to support and sustain the brand. These actions are typically voluntary and stem from personal commitment and motivation. In nonprofit organizations, where staff are closely involved in mission-driven work, such behaviors can significantly enhance organizational impact.

Brand citizenship behaviors refer to extra-role, voluntary actions by employees that reinforce the brand, such as participating in branding campaigns, proposing improvements, and engaging in socially oriented activities aligned with the organization. In Iraqi nonprofits, such behaviors can be encouraged through training, workshops, and opportunities for involvement—contributing to a cohesive and strong brand image.

Professional development and growth opportunities reflect the organization's support for employee advancement. This requires an awareness of employee needs and the provision of adequate resources for growth. In nonprofits, this support can be delivered through education, workshops, and participatory opportunities—ultimately enhancing motivation, commitment, and organizational effectiveness.

4. Discussion and Conclusion



This study explored the dimensions of internal branding in nonprofit organizations in Iraq. Most prior research in the field of internal branding has focused on for-profit organizations in developed countries. By focusing on nonprofit organizations in Iraq—entities facing unique challenges such as limited resources, specific socio-political conditions, and the need to garner stakeholder support—this study contributes to closing the existing gap in the literature. Considering Iraq’s cultural, social, and economic context, the research offers a localized framework for internal branding. This framework includes components such as internal employee communication with the brand, brand purpose awareness, employee brand commitment, and brand-congruent behaviors, all specifically tailored for the nonprofit sector in Iraq. By integrating internal branding theories with human resource management, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of employees’ roles in the branding process. The approach demonstrates how professional development, employee participation, and commitment can help strengthen internal branding within nonprofit organizations.

In terms of brand clarification, unlike many Western organizations with formal communication systems, it was found that employees in Iraq prefer face-to-face conversations and informal meetings for information exchange. This finding aligns with Al-Hashemi (2023), who showed that nonprofit employees in Baghdad trust verbal communication more. Regarding role clarity, an interesting difference emerged (Al-Hashemi, 2023). Significant differences were also found in value-behavior alignment. Unlike many Western companies that use formal reward systems, group norms and peer supervision were found to have a greater impact on employee behavior in Iraq. This aligns with Al-Mansour (2022), who found that in collectivist Middle Eastern societies, informal social control is more effective than formal mechanisms. Regarding extra-role or brand citizenship behaviors, distinctive features emerged in Iraq (Al-Mansour, 2022). Employees in these nonprofit organizations often support the brand voluntarily, without expecting formal rewards—likely a reflection of Iraq’s collectivist values and strong sense of social responsibility. As Piehler and King (2018) suggested, developing localized training tools can enhance such behaviors. In terms of professional development, it was observed that growth opportunities in Iraqi nonprofit organizations—due to resource constraints—are more often realized through participation in meaningful social projects than through formal training (Piehler & King, 2018). This observation is consistent with UNDP (2023), which noted that in similar contexts, informal learning and practical experience are more effective than classic classroom training.

The component of brand-aligned extra-role behavior was introduced as a novel concept in the internal branding literature on Iraqi organizations. While earlier studies focused more on formal job behaviors, this study highlights employees’ roles in undertaking voluntary activities beyond job expectations to enhance the organizational brand. These behaviors include participating in branding initiatives, suggesting improvements, and engaging in brand-related social activities. This component demonstrates how employees can serve as brand ambassadors, playing a vital role in conveying brand values to external stakeholders. The findings suggest that managers can strengthen their brands by investing in employee development and empowerment.

Another new concept introduced was brand identity integration and goal transmission to employees. While previous studies mainly focused on employees’ roles in executing branding strategies, this study emphasizes how employees comprehend and communicate brand goals to external stakeholders. Subcomponents of this include employees acting as brand ambassadors and internalizing brand identity. Similarly, while prior studies focused on the strategic execution of branding, this research introduces the concept of brand clarification—emphasizing employees’ roles in understanding and transferring brand values. Subcomponents include brand-related role clarity and organizational motivation.

In terms of symbolic and psychological connection with the brand, the findings show that employees in Iraqi nonprofit organizations identify with the brand due to their involvement in social missions and values. Prior studies (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; King & Grace, 2008, 2012) have also emphasized the importance of employee-brand identification. These studies suggest that such identification enhances commitment and motivation. Employee interaction and experience with the brand refers to how workplace experiences shape employees’ attitudes toward the brand. The study found that meaningful and positive experiences in Iraqi nonprofits foster greater employee loyalty and commitment. Similar emphasis on employee experiences can be found in studies (J. Morbach et al., 2009; S. Morbach et al., 2009; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Internal branding and communication refer to the role of communication in the branding process. The findings show that effective communication in Iraqi nonprofits enhances employee brand awareness and commitment. Studies (De Chernatony, 2002; Keler, 2007; Keller, 2007) have also stressed this point.



The analysis revealed that employee commitment to the brand in Iraqi nonprofits is more emotionally driven and tied to participation in social missions than derived from formal policies. For instance, respondents from aid organizations noted that despite financial constraints, their sense of belonging to the brand was strengthened by their roles in improving the lives of the needy. This supports earlier research by Miles & Mangold (2004) but is uniquely contextualized in Iraq through the influence of collectivist values and the role of nonprofits in post-war social reconstruction (Mills & Mangold, 2004). Regarding employee participation in branding, observations indicate that employees in Iraqi nonprofits play their most significant branding roles when engaged in field projects and direct stakeholder interaction. For example, in a women's education organization, staff who helped design and deliver workshops not only became brand ambassadors but enriched brand content through initiatives like using local storytelling. Though aligned with de Chernatony (2002), this approach required local adaptation due to challenges such as security risks and community resistance (De Chernatony, 2002).

Employee brand ownership was found to be linked to decentralized structures and oral cultures. In several cases, mid-level employees promoted brand values using tribal or religious networks without formal directives—an aspect not widely reported in Burmann & Zeplin (2005). However, some interviews warned that such spontaneous ownership can sometimes conflict with centralized policies (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005).

A key insight into brand change commitment was employees' lower resistance to change compared to those in for-profit organizations. In Iraq's context of continual crisis, flexibility has become a normative organizational behavior. This modifies conventional resistance-to-change theories like those by Morbach et al. (2009). For brand value preservation and communication, data showed that Iraqi employees often use informal methods—like storytelling or religious symbols—in engaging with stakeholders (J. Morbach et al., 2009). One organization, for instance, used “before and after” photos on local social media instead of formal reports. These creative communication methods align with Keller (2007) but suggest the need to redefine traditional branding tools (Keller, 2007).

Value creation by employees often manifested in small, grassroots projects. Unlike in commercial firms, where this is usually structured, in Iraq it resembled a collective hustle in response to immediate community needs. While this presents challenges in systematic measurement, it offers flexibility and responsiveness. Qualitative analysis shows that in Iraqi nonprofits, translating brand strategy into organizational culture is a gradual process shaped by social context. Unlike for-profits that adopt standardized frameworks, in the studied organizations brand internalization occurred through informal interaction and community project participation. Though consistent with de Chernatony (2002), this reflects the influence of tribal structures and the need for flexibility in unstable environments (De Chernatony, 2002).

Regarding stakeholder communication, Iraqi nonprofits often use low-cost, creative methods such as local social media or community events due to resource limitations. While this aligns with Hankinson's (2001) emphasis on effective communication, it faces challenges like linguistic and cultural diversity and limited technology, requiring localized solutions. Brand learning and internalization are also informal and experience-based. Instead of structured training, employees internalize brand values through fieldwork and learning from seasoned colleagues (Hankinson, 2001). While consistent with Morbach et al. (2009), this approach leans more on practice than theory. Institutionalizing values remains a key challenge. While many employees are driven by humanitarian motives, aligning individual values with the brand identity requires a nuanced, culture-based approach (J. Morbach et al., 2009). Though Keller (2007) outlines general principles, in Iraq this process is layered with factors like religious values and post-war collective experiences (Keller, 2007).

Brand symbol and value awareness is often acquired through participation rather than formal training. In some cases, local staff provide culturally adapted interpretations of brand symbols that may not align with official versions—a phenomenon underexplored in (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). This could be both a challenge and an opportunity for branding. In terms of visual identity, Iraqi nonprofits face a dilemma between following global standards and adapting them locally. For example, some organizations use different logo versions in different regions to respect local sensitivities. Though contradicting the standardization advocated by Miles & Mangold (2004), this flexible approach proves effective in the Iraqi context (Mills & Mangold, 2004).

Visual and content alignment focuses more on substance than form. Given limited design resources, content is often rich but presented simply, reflecting community needs. While this aligns with de Chernatony (2002), it suggests a need to redefine



alignment criteria in certain contexts (De Chernatony, 2002). Qualitative findings show that cohesive and consistent values among employees in Iraqi nonprofits are primarily reinforced through informal, relationship-based mechanisms. In Iraq's culture of collectivism and personal ties, value alignment often arises from daily collaboration and shared problem-solving rather than formal policies. This supports Hankinson (2001) in principle but emphasizes the lesser role of formal mechanisms in such settings.

Page | 9 In terms of brand perception, it was observed that shared understanding in Iraqi nonprofits stems more from field experience than formal training. Employees engaged directly with stakeholders had a deeper grasp of brand mission. This supports Keller & Swaminathan (2020) but adds the Iraqi-specific factor of collective storytelling, which shapes perception transfer (Keler, 2007). Recognizing employee branding capabilities often relies on informal trust-based assessments rather than formal evaluations. Managers identified capabilities through observation in real scenarios, consistent with King & Grace (2012), but highlighting a less bureaucratic approach (King & Grace, 2012).

Employee-brand value alignment follows a unique pattern in Iraq. Often, alignment is achieved by adapting brand messages to preexisting employee values rather than changing those values. Here, identifying shared values appears more effective than attempting attitudinal transformation. Behavioral alignment with the brand is more visible than attitudinal shifts. Employees may align behaviorally out of necessity (e.g., job needs), without deep value changes—contrasting with Piehler et al. (2018), who emphasize deeper congruence (Piehler, 2018; Piehler & King, 2018).

Brand mission alignment occurs most effectively when linked to tangible societal needs. Employees witnessing direct impact on people's lives showed stronger alignment—supporting King & Grace (2012), but emphasizing the importance of outcome visibility in Iraq's context. The findings show that employee support for the brand in Iraqi nonprofits follows a different model than in commercial firms. Support stems more from belief in the organization's mission than from material gain. While aligned with Piehler et al. (2018), the distinguishing factor is the influence of collectivist values and shared crises (Piehler, 2018; Piehler & King, 2018). Here, employees see the brand not as a marketing tool but as part of their collective identity.

Supportive behaviors are spontaneous and voluntary. Unlike for-profits, which rely on formal incentives, in these nonprofits the main driver is a sense of mission. In brand representation, employees in Iraqi nonprofits demonstrate greater creativity under external pressure—likely due to experience in challenging contexts and the need for flexibility. While King & Grace (2012) address brand representation, they underexplore creativity under duress (King & Grace, 2012).

Regarding employee-brand identity integration, newcomers typically do not internalize the brand via documentation or workshops, but through fieldwork and witnessing their impact on people's lives. Though Punjaisri et al. (2015) stress direct experience, in Iraq this takes on a local dimension (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Interviews revealed that storytelling—deeply rooted in Iraqi culture—plays a vital role in this process.

Comparative analysis confirms that while general internal branding principles apply in Iraq, localized solutions are essential due to the country's distinct context. Resource constraints and the prominence of informal employee relations in Iraq's collectivist culture necessitate adaptation of conventional branding approaches. Overall, although internal branding principles are valid in Iraq, the cultural, organizational, and social context requires that implementation mechanisms diverge from Western models—making localized strategies crucial.

To enhance internal employee-brand communication, organizations should establish digital platforms (e.g., internal social networks or mobile apps) to facilitate brand connection. Regular meetings and training workshops are essential for transmitting brand values and missions. These should be designed to foster symbolic and psychological employee-brand identification. Offering opportunities for employee-brand interaction—like participation in meaningful social projects—can also strengthen these ties. Organizations must use effective communication tools to convey brand values to external stakeholders and leverage brand social impact to attract resources.

To improve the creation, recognition, understanding, and communication of brand value by employees, organizations should implement programs for brand value reinforcement. These may include workshops, seminars, and online courses. Communication tools must be used to ensure employees fully align with brand values. Creating opportunities for participation in meaningful projects can further enhance this alignment. Organizations should also communicate brand values externally and highlight their social impact for resource mobilization.



Future researchers are encouraged to conduct a phenomenological study exploring nonprofit employees' experiences with internal branding in Iraq, and to investigate the challenges of internal branding and volunteer engagement with nonprofit brand identities.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

Acknowledgments

Authors thank all who helped us through this study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding/Financial Support

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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