

Co-creating consistent brand identity with employees in the hotel industry

Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates how brand identity is co-created, with a specific focus on how employees contributed to the process in a five-star hotel setting. The focus of this study is on understanding how two hotels planned and executed their brand identity strategy simultaneously, differentiating one from the other, and how employees actively participated in this process.

Design/methodology/approach – A longitudinal case study approach was adopted, centred on building the identity of two luxury hotels owned by a single company in Seoul, Korea. Various organizational documents were collected and analysed in order to understand the brand identity of the hotel and how brand co-creation has been implemented. In addition, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 employees in order to understand the brand co-creation process from their perspective.

Findings – The brand co-creation process of the hotels was conducted simultaneously and evolved over the following four phases, with employees' roles varying in each phase: 1) establishing a clear brand identity strategy; 2) designing and selecting sensory identity; 3) aligning organizational identity; and 4) delivering brand identity through external communication. Employees that participated in brand co-creation enhanced their brand knowledge, developed emotional bonds with the brand, and were motivated to deliver the brand identity. Furthermore, those that immersed themselves in the new brand identities were able to enable positive guest perceptions towards the brand image, which consequently enhanced employees' pride in their work.

Research limitations/implications – This research advances the brand management

literature in defining branding and brand identity elements, as well as emphasizing the importance of consistent branding. In addition, the current study expands the scope of internal branding, highlighting the process of brand co-creation and the role of employees as active participants. Moreover, it reveals that employees' participation enhances not only their brand knowledge but also their emotional bonds with the brand. The proposed conceptual framework demonstrates the flow of branding elements, brand identity elements, and the 'infinite loop' of employee participation in brand co-creation.

Originality/value – The case study approach adopted here enables an in-depth investigation of employee participation in brand co-creation, including their different roles and activities in the process; a phenomenon that has not been adequately explored in previous research.

Keywords Brand co-creation, Brand identity, Case study, Branding, Hospitality, Five-star hotels, Sensory elements

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In a review article focused on the hospitality sector, King (2017, p. 128) emphasizes that future research should investigate the ‘dual-approach’ to brand management, which involves both the external management of brand identity, as well as its internal organization which reflects employee actions. Employees, whether working in a back-office function planning and executing brand identity or interacting with customers front-of-house during service encounters, are portrayed as important assets playing a critical role in brand management, as they operate as brand ambassadors, positioning the brand image in customers’ minds (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009; Xiong and King, 2019). Brand identity management is thus a key internal driver of employee identification with the organization (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Effective brand management enables employees to develop a strong sense of attachment to, and pride in, the organization; while also enabling other stakeholders to build positive perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Bravo *et al.*, 2017).

In addition to its role as an enabler of consistent brand management, internal branding encourages employees to identify themselves with the brand and to align their attitudes, demeanours, outward appearance, and the language they use with the brand for which they are working (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Mangold and Miles, 2007). Moreover, an increasing number of studies suggest that strong brands are a result of a co-creation process involving various stakeholders (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Kennedy and Guzmán, 2016; Rihova *et al.*, 2013; Zhang, 2020). As co-creation encourages stakeholders to participate and be involved in the branding process, it is viewed as the antecedent of forming an emotional bond with the brand (Leckie *et al.*, 2016). While customers are regarded as taking an important part in brand co-creation among various stakeholders, employees’ roles in brand co-creation has been limited (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012).

The aim of the paper is to investigate how two luxury hotels in Seoul, South Korea, planned and executed their brand identity strategy with consistency and involved employees in the brand co-creation process. Various studies relating to branding (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Heding *et al.*, 2016; Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020), sensory brand identity (Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011), and brand co-creation (Dean *et al.*, 2016) inform the theoretical background of this study, which lies in brand identity strategy and the role of employees in the branding process. Through participation in brand co-creation activity, employees can build emotional bonds with the brand (Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Leckie *et al.*, 2016), which eventually impacts positively on their behaviour (Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

The main contribution of the paper lies in discussion of how employees play a significant role as brand co-creators, as well as representing and reinforcing the organizational brand. In the following section, relevant literature from the domain of branding and brand co-creation is reviewed. Following this, the paper's case study methodology is set out in terms of overall research design, data collection and analysis. The findings section focuses on the phases of branding and internal brand co-creation; from establishing brand identity elements and delivering brand identity through to external communication. Finally, in the discussion and conclusions section, a conceptual framework, which encapsulates how brands should be managed consistently with the involvement of employees, is proposed. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed, and suggestions for further research are also set out.

2. Literature review

As branding is a holistic process that entails the management of a brand, understanding

the concepts of brand identity and brand image, as well as the relationship between them, is beneficial if effective branding is to be implemented. In addition, as employees are important assets that represent a brand, how they understand and perceive the brand is crucial in brand management. This section deliberates on the importance of branding, its constituent elements, and the importance of branding with consistency. The role of employees as brand co-creators is then set out.

2.1 Branding and its elements

Branding is a creative process, with organizations typically outlaying significant capital on planning and implementation. Identity is crucial in branding as it is the core of a brand's existence (Ind, 1990) and a central idea of a brand is to differentiate one from another (de Chernatony, 2010), whether that brand is a product or an organization as a whole. This should be devised based on clear brand strategy, which forms the foundation of the brand and perceptions towards the brand (Heding *et al.*, 2016; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). Brand identity should convey the brand owner's will and focus on the internal aspects of branding (Aaker, 2012); however, the need to weigh how various stakeholders will perceive the brand (brand image) must also be central to the development of any brand identity (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). Due to this 'double-sidedness' of brand identity, there is a blurred distinction between brand identity and brand image, with the latter referring to 'target [stakeholders'] overall perception of the brand', which is the perception of both internal and external stakeholders (da Silveira *et al.*, 2013, p. 29). Acknowledging the difference between brand identity and brand image is important in understanding the nature of branding. As a process, branding aims to minimize the gap between the brand identity (intended projection) and brand image (stakeholder's perception) in order to maintain consistency between the two (de Chernatony, 2010).

Based on previous literature (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011; Heding *et al.*, 2016; Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020), branding elements can be categorized into three: principal, translating, and resulting. Principal elements are the core of brand identity, translating elements are those which support the expression of brand identity that translates identity into image, such as internal and external communication; and resulting elements refer to the outcomes of various interactions between the organization and stakeholders over time. These different elements of branding are now considered in turn.

Firstly, principal elements are those that form the central part of brand identity, including strategic, sensory, and organizational identity. These include the brand's essence, a reflection of the brand owner's will (Heding *et al.*, 2016), and a common cultural model formed by multiple stakeholders, which may be fluid and evolve over time (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). Strategic identity, the core of the brand identity, should be established in the initial stage of branding in order to set the concept and style of the brand, such as the vision, mission, top management's strategic intent, values, brand promise, and strategic formulation and implementation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). When establishing this, market information and market orientation need to be considered and discussed in order to understand target markets, which are then of benefit in developing various competitive strategies and marketing activities (Iyer *et al.*, 2020). Brand positioning and brand personality can also be included in this category, since both are planned and managed in order to build the brand's functional and emotional values. Brand positioning manifests the brand's functional values (de Chernatony, 2010); whereas, brand personality encapsulates the brand's emotional values by characterizing it as if it were a person (Kapferer, 2012).

Sensory identity incorporates the visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory components of identity (Bartholmé and Melewar, 2009). Visual identity is the most frequently recognized sensory element and refers to the visual expression of the brand, including the logo, symbols, typeface, colour, and others (Heding *et al.*, 2016; Kapferer, 2012). Visual identity ‘tangibilizes’ the intangible brand identity strategy (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012) and is the most prominent manifestation of how the brand is managed externally (King, 2017). Various researchers have emphasized that knowledge of non-visual cues related to branding is limited compared to visual elements and have highlighted the importance of managing various sensory identity elements for effective branding (Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011; Schmitt, 1999), creating a unique customer experience (Clegg, 2006). These include olfactory elements – which have long been held to be one of the most significant features of branding influencing customers during purchase decisions (Kotler, 1973). By way of example, the smell of coffee beans in a café or the signature scent of a store can stimulate consumer emotions (Bosmans, 2006) and trigger a memory of desire that impacts customer decision making (Chatterjee, 2015). Auditory elements include background music or sounds that reinforce branding (Schmitt and Simonson, 1997). While corporates like IBM, Intel, Apple, and Nokia use sonic branding by creating a jingle or corporate anthem to contribute to a unique brand identity (Gustafsson, 2015), a hotel’s choice of background music in public areas, as well as any audio used on websites, contributes to building brand. Tactile elements are also important sources of brand identity (Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011) and relate to materials such as the texture of furniture, linen, uniform, and printed collaterals, amongst others.

Organizational identity is formed based on strategic and sensory identity, and a common mental model of the brand develops among members of the organization through social interactions (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). Whetten (2006) has described how organizational identity

contains three principal components: the ideational; the definitional; and the phenomenological. The ideational component is related to members' shared beliefs on "Who are we as an organization", the definitional component is characterized as the central, enduring, and distinctive features of the organization, and the phenomenological component is associated with various identity-related dialogues in conjunction with profound organizational experiences (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). Organizational identity is also related to behavioral and cultural aspects such as employee performance and commitment (Heding *et al.*, 2016) and incorporates employees' feelings about the company, which may be moulded through the values, attitudes and behavior of it (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Hatch and Schultz, 2001). In addition, organizational identity continuously evolves based on employees' knowledge and how they perceive the brand through social interactions with multiple stakeholders (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020).

Secondly, the translating elements of branding relate to communication, which translates brand identity into brand image (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Xiong and King, 2019). This contains both internal and external communication, depending on the target audience to whom the brand message is being delivered (Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012), whether it is employees or the customer. Multiple stakeholders (i.e. employees, customers, and others) participating as brand co-creators play an important role as principal intermediaries who communicate and represent the brand identity to other stakeholders; therefore their understanding and perception towards the brand is crucial (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). Internal communication is crucial if employees are to understand the brand identity strategy and sensory identity, allowing them to identify themselves with the brand and formulate organizational identity (Xiong and King, 2019). External communication enables expression of the brand identity to customers through the brand's marketing activities, promotions, and during service encounters (Bravo *et al.*, 2017). In addition, this can also occur between

customers as a form of word-of-mouth (WOM) and eWOM, both face-to-face and via social media (Buhalis and Leung, 2018; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). In particular, online communication plays a critical role in transferring brand identity into brand image and building brand reputation (Buhalis *et al.*, 2019; Buhalis and Leung, 2018).

Finally, the resulting elements relate to the overall impressions and perceptions of multiple stakeholders, such as brand image and brand reputation, which are developed towards the brand based on various messages delivered through brand communication and experiences (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020). Brand image refers to both internal and external stakeholders' perceptions and impressions of a brand (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). This may comprise the immediate mental picture (Gray and Balmer, 1998) or a 'mosaic of brand associations' (Heding *et al.*, 2016, p. 52) that audiences have towards the brand. This is built in the mind of stakeholders based on the identity designed by the brand owner and expressed by the brand co-creators (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). If the brand identity is unclear or expressed ineffectively, discrepancies may occur between the brand identity and brand image (Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). Brand reputation is a more long-term gathering of impressions and evaluations of brand image on various activities of the organization (Kapferer, 2012). It is recognized as one of the key foundations for success of a brand and regarded as a construct representing aggregated perceptions of stakeholders towards the brand (Verčič and Verčič, 2007).

2.2 Importance of consistency in branding

In order to deliver unified communication of a coherent brand identity to stakeholders, which allows brand image and reputation to be aligned, a consistent approach is important (Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). This should involve aligning and integrating the various constituent branding elements identified above (Heding *et al.*, 2016).

Simões et al.'s (2005) research in the context of hotels identified three main drivers in consistent branding: employee' understanding and dissemination of the organizational mission and central values, consistency in brand identity and image through communication, and the implementation of a consistent and sustainable visual identity. Various studies have highlighted how congruency between communication and the actual brand identity can be a critical issue in brand management, which may lead to brand equity deterioration (Bataineh *et al.*, 2017); thus it is important for the organization to manage brand communication and for it not to be exaggerated (Celsi and Gilly, 2010; Piehler *et al.*, 2019). Managing a coherent and distinctive brand identity can add value not only to the company's products (Coleman *et al.*, 2011), but also can increase employee motivation, attract more qualified applicants for vacancies, and increase brand equity (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Müller, 2017).

Effective branding also enables employees to develop a strong sense of attachment to, and pride in, the organization; while also enabling other stakeholders to build positive perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Bravo *et al.*, 2017). As consistency is a critical component of effective branding, employees need to comprehend appropriate behaviours or actions, basing these on core organizational values when interacting with customers (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). However inconsistency in the performance of tasks by employees is inevitable as their level of understanding and image towards brand may different, which can cause variation in the delivered outcomes (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000). To help maintain consistency in delivering the service, strategically involving employees to participate in the brand creation process, emphasizing integrated and consistent brand management, is critical (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Dean *et al.*, 2016; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). This highlights the importance of employees' roles in branding as brand co-creators.

2.3 Employees as brand co-creators

Employees are viewed as playing a crucial role in brand management as they facilitate the interface between the organization and the market (King, 2017; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007) and deliver the brand promise to customers (Heide and Grønhaug, 2009). Hotel employees play a particularly important role, due to the intangible nature of the product; therefore, the success of a brand depends significantly on the delivery of an appropriate experience that is largely a result of human interaction (Xiong and King, 2019). This interaction is not only formed face-to-face but also online using smart technologies and social media (Buhalis and Leung, 2018). The specific manner in which employees interact with a customer in a given service encounter, as well as their knowledge and commitment, determine the overall perception of customers towards the brand (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006), also known as moments of truth (Wirtz and Lovelock, 2017). Various technologies are applied in brand co-creation, and social media provides a ‘real-time interactive platform’ to communicate with both existing and potential guests in the three stages of service consumption: pre-arrival stage; service encounter stage; and post-purchase stage (Buhalis and Leung, 2018, p. 44). Neuhofer *et al.*’s (2015) research on smart hospitality discusses the moments of truth and brand co-creation activities formed via smart technology in service consumption processes. They emphasize how smart technologies can enhance guests’ experiences and brand competitiveness in ‘a smarter, more efficient, useful and effective manner’ (Neuhofer *et al.*, 2015, p. 247). It is employees who plan and implement this personalized interaction with the guests and apply smart technology; therefore, employees understanding of the brand identity is crucial.

Internal branding has been an essential topic in the services and marketing literature,

emphasizing the importance of sharing information, internal communication, training, and top management's transformational leadership (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007; Terglav *et al.*, 2016). However, in the organization studies literature, concerns are raised regarding the passive roles of employees that are subject to brand-centred control (Kunda, 2009; Müller, 2017). The view of employees adopted in this paper, however, eschews notions of employees as passive recipients, and instead views them as active participants and partners in brand co-creation – is an active, creative, and social process in which different actors share information, learn, and interact with the brand in order to design and co-produce value (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Ind *et al.*, 2013; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2012; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). While the concept of co-creation has been applied in the marketing, hospitality, and tourism literatures, it tends to emphasize the role of interacting with customers (Fetscherin *et al.*, 2019; Grönroos, 2011; Rihova *et al.*, 2013; Zhang, 2020), rather than the role of employees as brand co-creators.

Iglesias and Bonet (2012) have emphasized the importance of persuasive management through every touchpoint that employees experience, in order to encourage them to become active brand citizens and ambassadors. They emphasize that employees, as internal stakeholders, play a crucial role in the brand co-creation process as ultimately, customer satisfaction depends on every single interaction that they provide. Santos-Vijande *et al.* (2016) define co-creation as frontline employees' collaboration in all stages of the new service development process, working as essential partners. Wang *et al.* (2019) proposed a six-dimensional framework for implementing internal branding within a hotel setting, expanding it by highlighting the importance of employees being proactively involved and facilitating interaction among individuals and across different departments.

Dean *et al.*'s (2016) 'Experiential brand meaning cycle', is of significant relevance here.

This cycle includes both macro and micro brand co-creation elements, and demonstrates how personal and social interactions, and brand experiences, influence employees' creation, re-creation, and co-creation of brand values. The macro cycle, termed 'the arc of internal brand co-creation', is an 'infinite loop' of employees (re)discovering, living, learning, and representing the brand, which is continuously developed and upgraded by employees' interpretations (micro cycle). This micro cycle is a re-interpretation loop where employees evaluate their interactions with their experiences of the brand and includes four phases: awareness; interpretation; appropriation; and communication (Dean *et al.*, 2016). As Kunda (2009) has highlighted, employees are active participants, and Dean *et al.* (2016, pp. 3045-3046) also show how the role of employees changes from being 'passive' to active: as a 'passive reader of the brand communication' or 'passive recipient of the messages' in the awareness stage; through actively evaluating the brand in the interpretation stage; actively developing their emotional bonds in the appropriation stage; before becoming a 'brand author' and 'brand communicator', i.e. being aware of, understanding and interpreting the brand message to various stakeholders, in the communication stage.

The internal branding literature emphasizes the role of employee brand understanding, namely their internal brand knowledge, as a prerequisite of delivering the brand promise to stakeholders (Xiong and King, 2019). Hence organizations try to internalize the brand with employees through various communication and training activities (Murillo and King, 2019; Xiong and King, 2019) and aim to have a positive impact on them. Through internal branding efforts, organizations can help employees to increase their brand knowledge and effectively deliver the brand message by transforming it into a brand reality for customers and other stakeholders (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Xiong *et al.*, 2019). Various studies have identified that successful internal branding increases employee identification, engagement, commitment, and loyalty to the brand (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Papasolomou

and Vrontis, 2006; Piehler *et al.*, 2019). Given that participation and involvement have been portrayed as the antecedents of brand engagement (Leckie *et al.*, 2016), encouraging employees to act as brand co-creators, may influence them positively. In previous literature, brand engagement is defined as a multidimensional concept “comprising, cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions” (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 260), which enhances people’s identification with the brand (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Kumar and Nayak, 2019), brand attachment (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016), and brand loyalty (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). The more employees *identify* with the brand, the more stable and consistent the identity becomes, and the more employees are likely to convey brand citizenship behaviours that contribute to the brand development and its values (Buil *et al.*, 2016; Stuart, 2002).

3. Methodology

In order to investigate the role of brand co-creation with employees, this study involved longitudinal in-depth case study research within two five-star hotels, owned by a single company, that were establishing new brand identities simultaneously. These new brand identities aimed to differentiate from one hotel from the other, with employees heavily involved in the brand co-creation process. The research adopted an interpretivist approach, which aimed to ‘get close’ to the research participants (Creswell, 2013) and develop theory through social interactions (Walliman, 2011).

3.1 Research design

Case study research is a methodology suitable for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within a real-world context (Yin, 2014) and starts from the desire to derive an in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases (Bromley, 1986) in order to gain

a rich, detailed understanding by examining aspects of the case in detail (Thomas, 2013). Interpretivist case study research aims to develop a theoretical framework that is suitable for explaining the holistic quality of an observed social system and the practice of the case (Scapens, 1990; Yin, 2014). The case study organization owns two hotels in Seoul (anonymized here as Hotel A and Hotel B), which are located in the same district and use the same brand name. When the hotels were constructed (Hotel A in 1988 and Hotel B in 1999), each had its own concept and identity, especially in terms of interior design. However, the identity of each hotel had become diluted over time due to various ad hoc renovations without any aligned brand management. This occurred due to inconsistency in the application of both strategic and sensory elements. The former management thought renovation would be an easy way to increase guest satisfaction and revenue; however, they disregarded the importance of undertaking the renovation based on a clear brand identity strategy. Those in charge of previous renovations had not considered the overall brand identity of each hotel, leading to confusion amongst both customers and employees.

The management of the owning company acknowledged the importance of co-creating the brand with employees, which allowed the project manager, who was tasked with devising the new brand identities, to involve them in the branding process. The unit of analysis in this research, which Yin (2014) defines as a ‘case’, is the hotels’ brand co-creation process with employees; and is split into two stages. In stage 1, the process of co-creating the brand with employees is revealed. This involved a four-year process, starting with building strategic identity (year 1-2), developing sensory identity (year 2-3), and aligning organizational identity (year 3-4). The first named author was the project manager with oversight of the hotel branding and left the organization towards the end of stage 1, but returned to undertake further data collection in stage 2. In stage 1, various documents and objects were collected and analysed in order to develop in-depth understanding of the brand co-creation process.

Stage 2 of the research was conducted in order to understand how employees were actually involved in the process and the impact of brand co-creation on them, and was carried out after the initial branding co-creation process had been completed.

3.2 Stage 1

Various documents and objects were examined in this stage of the research, including company reports, consultant reports, historical and contemporary artefacts, company magazines, photographs, and field notes (Bowen, 2009; Wolff, 2004). Table 1 shows the various data sources examined and how they were used in the analysis. Company reports are those produced by members of the organization, while consultant reports are those that were generated by the consultancy and design agencies commissioned to work on the project. Graphic design materials included brochures, flyers, and posters produced by the design team that were based on the brand standard that emanates from HQ. Historical artefacts included actual samples of sensory elements, such as furniture materials, linen, uniform, operational equipment (OPE), and scent; while contemporary artefacts are the various materials that were developed in order to visualize the strategic identity. These were developed by a ‘Task Force Team’ (TFT) which consisted of representatives from various departments, and who were selected by top management to be involved in the brand co-creation process. Photographs also featured, and these pre-existing visual representations, including historic photos captured before the research commenced, can be regarded as a type of document (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). Field notes were taken by the first-named author throughout stage 1, and enabled the systematic recording of pertinent aspects of the case study hotels (Creese *et al.*, 2008).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 1: Data sources utilised for hotel branding

Documentary analysis, a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating texts in a printed form or in an electronic file (Flick, 2009), was used as it enables rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization or program (Bowen, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The analysis involved ‘skimming’, ‘reading’, and ‘interpreting’ (Bowen, 2009, p. 32) documents. First, skimming the documents entailed deciding which should be read thorough and which should be ignored, and grouping them into related categories. Categorized documents were then carefully read through, compared and interpreted in order to achieve description derived from multiple sources of evidence (Rowley, 2002).

3.3 Stage 2

Semi structured in-depth interviews (*Alfakhri et al.*, 2018; *Cachia and Millward*, 2011) were conducted with 42 employees in order to investigate their involvement in the brand co-creation process and its impact on them. Qualitative interview methods can be categorized as unstructured, structured, and semi-structured; as well as according to the level of depth of the interview (*DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree*, 2006; *Flick*, 2009). Semi-structured in-depth interviews entail talking naturally of a topic and eliciting narratives that can be highly meaningful (*Mahat-Shamir et al.*, 2019). Table 2 shows the interview participants, who were mostly departmental managers within each hotel or supervisors who had a significant role in their department. The participants’ involvement in brand co-creation activity varied: some were heavily involved as TFT members; while others selected FF&E or were involved in training sessions. Interviews were conducted in a coffee shop or a meeting room and averaged 60 minutes (*Whiting*, 2008; *Wood*, 1997). Initial themes to be explored in the interview were prepared in draft form, drawn from *van den Bosch et al.*’s (2006) study of

organizational characteristics affecting identity. With the permission of participants, interviews were recorded, subsequently transcribed, and anonymized.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Table 2: Interview participants

Thematic analysis (Ten Have, 2004) of the interview data was undertaken in order to uncover employees' perceptions of brand co-creation activities and their actual behaviours, attitudes, and motives. The textual data were analysed through a six-step process (Braun and Clarke, 2006), starting with transcribing the interview data; gathering initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Following transcription, initial themes were coded and subsequently organized into four, namely the phases of the branding process implemented by the hotels: strategic identity establishment; sensory identity design; organizational identity alignment; and communication delivering brand identity. Mind mapping techniques were used to analyse and organize the data after extracting the main themes, in order to increase efficiency in grouping, modifying, and shaping the interview dialogues for further analysis (Davies, 2011).

4. Findings

Since construction, and in common with other hotels operating under a multinational brand, the case study hotels had followed a clear brand standard from HQ relating to graphical elements, such as the hotel's logo, colour, typeface, and symbol. However, sensory elements such as the interior design, furniture, staff uniforms, floral arrangements, artworks, scent, and OPE, were at the discretion of the owning company. Over time, and as mentioned above, the identities of both hotels had become confused, prompting the need for a brand

identity formation process in the early 2010s. The process was essentially one of property-level branding, i.e. specific hotel properties in a chain rebranding without the entire chain doing so, focusing on sensory elements. The CEO of the owning company initiated the change to co-create new brand identities, instigating the involvement of employees in the process, and proactively supporting branding activities through frequent communication and encouragement (Dean *et al.*, 2016). The brand co-creation process was planned and executed simultaneously in order to differentiate the two hotels (de Chernatony, 2010; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020) and for employees to effectively internalize each hotel's brand identity (Terglav *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2019). The process took place over four phases: 1) establishing a clear brand identity strategy; 2) designing sensory identity; 3) aligning organizational identity; and 4) delivering brand identity through external communication (Figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: The brand co-creation process in Hotel A and Hotel B

4.1 Phase 1: Establishing strategic identity

In this phase, the employee TFT was directly involved in the process of establishing a clear brand identity strategy. The TFT consisted of representatives from various departments (corporate planning, design, sales, procurement, asset management, housekeeping, and stewarding), who had been working in these hotels for an average of ten years. The work of the TFT entailed in-depth analysis of target guests' preferences, verifying the dominant sensory identities, generating keywords, building concepts and suggesting photo images. Verifying the dominant sensory elements mostly focused on visual elements at this stage and members took photographs of the attention-grabbing spots or motifs of each hotel and tried to

devise the main concepts and points-of-difference of each hotel. This was a crucial step in establishing the keywords that can maintain consistency with existing elements (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020), since the hotels were unable to conduct a complete renovation due to the costs involved.

The TFT participated greatly in establishing the strategic brand identity through various activities that enabled them to ‘discover’ and ‘learn’ the brand. These activities allowed them to ‘interpret’ and ‘appropriate’ the essence of each hotel when establishing the brand identity strategy; which also allowed them to form an emotional bond with the brand (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Leckie *et al.*, 2016). First, weekly meetings were held in order to discuss and generate ideas. Following this, workshop activities involving the external design consultants and TFT members were implemented in order to establish and co-create the strategic brand identity of each hotel. As they were closely involved in these activities, the TFT members’ brand knowledge increased (Murillo and King, 2019; Xiong and King, 2019) and they could acknowledge the brand’s current status and the problems that needed to be solved. In addition, members were able to understand the importance of strategic brand identity and the essence of the two hotels’ brand identity. Moreover, they not only played a key role in the co-creation process, but also became a ‘brand communicator’ (Dean *et al.*, 2016) actively sharing the brand identity strategy with their colleagues (King, 2017) as a part of persuasion brand management (Iglesias and Bonet, 2012).

4.2 Phase 2: Designing sensory identity

In phase 2 of the brand co-creation process, a design planning team was formed, consisting of employees skilled in interior design, fine art, and marketing; which was charged with designing various sensory elements for both hotels, based on the previously developed

strategic identities. Given that brand standard guidelines precluded any changes to the fundamentals of the sensory brand identities, the team's work focused on applying the established strategic brand identity to interior design, uniform, OPE, decorations, artworks, floral arrangements, employees' grooming styles, and scent (Bravo *et al.*, 2017).

Other employees also participated in this process, supporting the design planning team as they devised and selected sensory identity elements. Prior to formation of the design planning team, managers would typically select sensory elements based on their personal taste, focusing primarily on functionality and price, which had led to dilution of the hotels' brand identity (Bataineh *et al.*, 2017). In order to overcome this issue, frequent meetings between the design planning team and front-of-house managers were put in place to allow the managers to collaborate on and 'learn' the suitable concept for each hotel (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Xiong and King, 2019). These enabled managers to not only express their opinions around functionality but also to 'appropriate' the knowledge when selecting items. Managers' participation in the co-creation process increased their brand knowledge (Murillo and King, 2019). Eun-Jung, who was in charge of Hotel A's deli shop and was involved in selecting new sensory items with the design planning team, related her experience as follows:

"I selected items like bread baskets, plates, utensils, and cake boxes with the design planning team members when we were undertaking renovation of the deli shop. We had several meetings and even visited vendors and stores together to find the right item for the deli. (...) I learned a lot about the concept of Hotel A and how we [the deli shop] should build our identity."

(Eun-Jung, F&B)

Taking part in brand co-creation, being aware of and learning the brand identity strategy, along with designing sensory identity; enabled employee brand knowledge to be enhanced (Murillo and King, 2019; Xiong and King, 2019). Participants emphasized how their increased brand knowledge helped them to deliver the brand message effectively (Wang *et al.*,

2019; Xiong *et al.*, 2019) as illustrated in the following quote:

“We can deliver appropriate service by knowing the brand identity of the hotel. (...) I think there is a great difference between delivering the service with no definite idea and fully understanding the brand concept.”

(Soo-Min, Sales)

In addition, when selecting OPE for the Japanese restaurant, a design planning team member visited the vendor in Osaka, Japan accompanying the Director of F&B, the Head Chef of the Japanese restaurant, and a procurement team member in order to involve them in the selection process. As he was closely involved in the process, the Director of F&B could clearly understand the importance of aligning sensory elements with strategic identity and subsequently aimed to share information with his department during meetings. One colleague, Woo-Jin, emphasized that he started to build an emotional bond (Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2016) with the brand, as follows:

“The F&B director telling us about brand identity really helps a lot to understand the brand and I got interested in it. (...) I also tried to explain it in detail to my team.”

(Woo-Jin, F&B)

Involving managers in the selection of sensory elements enabled them to ‘learn’ and clearly understand the brand identity of each hotel, which allowed them to subsequently ‘interpret’ and ‘appropriate’ the brand identity. They consequently became a ‘brand communicator’, through cascaded brand training with their individual teams (Dean *et al.*, 2016). At first it was difficult to narrow the gap between the two competing visions as their foci differed: managers concentrated on aspects of functionality, while the design planning team was more focused on aesthetic matters and applying a consistent style. However, as the practice recurred, managers understood the importance of aligning sensory elements with strategic elements and also tried to ensure consistency when selecting various elements of sensory identity (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Buil *et al.*, 2016; Simões *et al.*, 2005).

4.3 Phase 3: Aligning organizational identity

Phase 3 centred on employees ‘learning’ and ‘living’ the brand through involvement in various information sharing and training sessions (Dean *et al.*, 2016). Employees at all levels were able to acknowledge and learn about the brand identity through internal branding activities that were devised and executed across both hotels during “town-hall” meetings, brand training sessions, and new starter inductions. Various brand co-creation activities and frequent communication allowed employees to understand the brand identity and build an aligned brand image towards the hotels (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020), so that they ‘interpret’ and ‘appropriate’ the brand, and then align their attitudes and behaviours with the organizational culture by ‘living’ the brand (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Dean *et al.*, 2016).

Data from the interviews revealed that, as employees’ brand knowledge increased, they altered their responses to guest enquiries about the hotels, and conveyed the hotel’s brand identity (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Xiong *et al.*, 2019). Participants emphasized how fully understanding the strategic and sensory identity of each hotel was beneficial in explaining the difference between the two hotels to guests, as follows:

“When guests used to ask ‘what is the difference between the hotels?’ I didn’t know what to answer because I wasn’t sure about the concept of the hotels. Now I can explain the unique concept of each hotel with confidence. The guests are amused when I explain the difference of the hotels including Hotel A is classic and Hotel B is a trendy and modern hotel.”

(Yoo-Jin, Sales)

In addition, as different grooming styles were applied to each hotel, in line with the distinctive uniforms that were designed for each one, the participants frequently emphasized the importance of consistency (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Iglesias *et al.*, 2020), as the following excerpt demonstrates:

“When talking about consistency in a hotel, it means employees using the same language, tone, words and having the same style of grooming. (...) It is obvious [we need] to control grooming because we represent the hotel.”

(Sung-Soo, F&B)

Moreover, by learning and understanding the different hotel concepts, employees aimed to match their service style to the one to which they belonged (Dean *et al.*, 2016; Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). Employees could ‘interpret’ the brand identity through ‘learning’ and then align their attitudes, behaviours, and service styles (i.e. ‘live’) with the brand identity (Dean *et al.*, 2016), as illustrated here:

“When I work for Hotel B, I try to match the identity of it, that is being young, trendy, and active. In Hotel A, I try to be graceful and elegant when dealing with guests, to match the concept of Hotel A.”

(Eun-Joo, F&B)

Participants noted that the brand co-creation activities helped form the basis of their attitude – particularly in terms of their service style. There were frequent rotations of employees between the hotels, and participants mentioned that they found themselves adapting their behaviours accordingly (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Heding *et al.*, 2016).

4.4 Delivering brand identity through external communication

When communicating brand messages to the outside world, employees at all levels participated, thereby ‘representing the brand’ (Dean *et al.*, 2016). With their enhanced brand knowledge, employees were able to build emotional bonds with the brand and deliver the brand identity to stakeholders during their daily work (Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006; Piehler *et al.*, 2019). Employees’ external communication centred on delivering the brand promise and values, which may ultimately impact on brand

image (de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020). External communication of the brand identities with stakeholders was apparent in two ways: first, through marketing and communications activity and second, through service delivery (Bravo *et al.*, 2017). Following the brand co-creation process, the marketing and communication team developed related materials and promotional activities:

“We tried to develop differentiated promotions for each hotel. (...) We developed special packages containing signature service and products for Hotel A that matches the taste of the target guests. (...) We also tried to conduct various activities related to art in Hotel B. The target guests are younger than Hotel A’s and have kids, so we developed a kid-friendly package for local guests and it was a huge success.”

(Yoo-Jin, Sales)

As well as being influenced by marketing communications, brand image is also heavily influenced by communication by service personnel during service encounters. Employees with increased brand knowledge and commitment had a positive impact on guests' perceptions towards the brand (Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). The following quote illustrates how participants 'delighted' guests by emphasizing brand identity when interacting with them:

“I think knowing various information on our brand is useful when communicating with guests. I can actually utilise it. (...) Guests listen to the property concept of each hotel and see the interior design when doing a sales inspection, I can see they’re delighted. Some guests said ‘Is this a historic hotel? A hotel with these stories must be a historic hotel.’ (...) foreign guests are fascinated by the brand story and the interior design motifs (...) Frankly speaking, guests normally don’t know much about design. They can’t feel it much. But when we explain the interior concept and meanings behind it, I think this can add additional value for them. It really helps when I actually do sales.”

(Min-Suh, Sales)

Moreover, participants acknowledged the positive feelings they experienced due to their involvement in brand co-creation (Leckie *et al.*, 2016) as one noted they “*felt proud “being a member of this hotel”* (Ju-Hee, F&B) in relation to learning brand identity, and another “*felt*

proud when guests showed interest and paid attention to what I say" (Soo-Min, Sales).

Participants also emphasized that: "*I became loyal and feel proud of the hotel. I think being involved in this process is a non-monetary benefit*" (Hyun-Joo, Rooms), which may increase their pride and loyalty (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, participants regarded themselves as brand co-creators and tried to identify themselves with the brand (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Kumar and Nayak, 2019), which also impacted positively on guests (Simões *et al.*, 2005) as demonstrated in the following:

"As we are fully aware of the [hotel's] identity, we are able to express the [brand] identity and guests seem to be more engaged. By knowing the target guests, our attitude and language also varies when working in Hotel A or B."

(Eun-Jung, F&B)

It was apparent that employees acknowledging and internalizing the brand had a beneficial effect, even though not all employees may fully embrace it (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000); as one participant intimated:

"I think brand identity training sessions are important. There may be some deviation in utilising what we have learned, (...) but I found it useful."

(Min-Suh, Sales)

Employees with an ambiguous understanding of the organization's brand identity and their roles, will eventually deliver a different brand message to guests, which can lead to brand equity deterioration (Bataineh *et al.*, 2017). In this case, however, employees were generally able to deliver a clear and consistent brand identity to the guests, which they felt resulted in positive guest responses, influencing guests' perceptions positively towards the brand (Bravo *et al.*, 2017; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000).

5 Discussion and conclusions

This research has demonstrated the importance of consistent brand management, as well as internal brand co-creation, through a longitudinal in-depth case research within two five-star hotels that were establishing their brand identity simultaneously. As a key outcome of this research, a conceptual framework has been developed that includes the three branding elements (principal, translating, and resulting elements), the brand identity components (strategic, sensory, and organizational) and the flow of brand identity formation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011; Heding *et al.*, 2016; Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020); as well as the infinite loop of internal brand co-creation (Dean *et al.*, 2016). This is shown in Figure 2. The aim of the framework is not only to illustrate how to align branding and brand identity elements, but also to highlight the collaboration and brand co-creation activities that are required in order to manage a brand with consistency.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2: Branding and brand co-creation framework

This demonstrates that, in a scenario such as the one presented and analysed herein, strategic, sensory, and organizational identity elements should be devised holistically and logically inter-relate. The framework further highlights how the components of sensory identity can be categorized into three: basic; applied; and extended. Basic components are those that form the very fundamentals of sensory identity and which represent the strategic identity, such as the logo, font, symbol, and colours. Typically, in a multinational organizational scenario, such as the one outlined here, they are clearly stated in the brand standard, but can then be extended to applied and extended sensory identity contexts (Melewar and Saunders, 2000). The applied components are mostly graphical, and entail

application of the basic components to various items which individual franchisees or properties have the latitude to determine. Finally, extended components are those which are based on brand identity strategy and pertain to the style of components. In the main, these are not specified in a five-star hotel brand standard and there is a degree of freedom in selecting or designing these components due to the importance placed on each property's authenticity.

The judicious selection and design of these extended components helps connote uniqueness in a luxury hotel context (Manthiou *et al.*, 2018), thereby helping to avoid a standardized 'cookie cutter' approach and enhancing the delivery of value for guests. While this freedom to choose may enhance authenticity, the lack of a clear brand strategy for individual properties in the absence of guidelines for extended components can cause problems due to their inconsistent application across properties under the same multinational hotel brand. This may increase confusion among employees and guests, and may eventually lead to the dilution of brand identity (Bataineh *et al.*, 2017; Phillips *et al.*, 2014).

Given that both internal and external stakeholders play significant roles in brand co-creation (Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), the various facets of brand identity should then be aligned through consistent internal communication as shown in Figure 2 (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). This is not only in order for employees to fully understand the brand identity but also to encourage them to identify themselves with it (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Stuart, 2012). The aligned brand identity should then assist positively with the formation and enhancement of brand image and reputation among guests and other stakeholders; which can then be communicated externally to them through various marketing and other activities, as well as during service encounters involving employees (Kapferer, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020). In addition, this can be actively communicated and transferred among guests through word-of-mouth and eWOM, by

sharing their experiences face-to-face and using various smart technologies. In particular social media enables real-time interactive communication and provides immediate feedback to the hotel and other existing and potential guests (Buhalis and Leung, 2018).

Besides internal communication, employee participation and collaboration is crucial; therefore, in this framework, the infinite loop of internal brand co-creation has been incorporated and underpins the brand co-creation process (Dean *et al.*, 2016). At the start of the brand co-creation process, principal elements should be developed with employees in order for them to *discover* and *learn* the brand identity. In so doing they can then *live* the brand by aligning organizational identity with strategic and sensory identity. Employees may also co-create the translating elements shown in Figure 2, such as external and internal communication, and in which they can *represent* the brand to various stakeholders. The main contribution of the paper lies in examination of how employees play a significant role as brand co-creators in the branding process, while also representing and reinforcing the organizational brand. In this regard, the study has various theoretical and managerial implications.

5.1 Theoretical implications

First, in terms of theory, this study advances the definition and categorization of the elements of branding and brand identity, and also emphasizes the importance of consistent branding. In the branding literature, managing a brand with consistency is critical for effective branding, since it helps various stakeholders to build their image toward a brand as the brand owner intended (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; de Chernatony, 2010; Heding *et al.*, 2016; Kapferer, 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta, and Shaalan, 2020). There is an emerging stream of literature that views brand identity as fluid, dynamic, and having polysemous meanings that

are co-created by multiple stakeholders; which differs from the more traditional view of it being stable and unilaterally determined by managers (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, 2018). While we recognize this, a stable and core essence of brand identity as a fundamental and principal component of the brand, which can guide brand actions, remains crucial. Others identify how establishing a clear strategic identity and designing sensory identity impacts positively on employees and enables them to align their behaviours (Suvatjis *et al.*, 2012; Tourky, Alwi, Kitchen, Melewar, and Shaalan, 2020). The evidence from this case reveals the importance of aligning the core elements of brand identity, which enables employees to deliver the brand message through various external communications.

The current study also advances the internal branding literature by expanding its scope to incorporate the role of internal brand co-creation. In this case study, employees were actively involved in the brand co-creation process from beginning to end, which allowed the authors to investigate their pivotal roles as brand co-creators. This responds to calls by Kunda (2009), Iglesias and Bonet (2012), and Dean *et al.* (2016) for the roles of employees in brand co-creation to be accounted for; noting the need for a paradigm shift from regarding employees as ‘passive recipients’ of branding activities to ‘active brand co-creators’. In this regard, the current research also extends work on internal co-branding by Santos-Vijande *et al.* (2016), Wang *et al.* (2019), and Dean *et al.* (2016) by identifying the brand co-creation process with employees and the impact of the activity on them. Drawing on Dean *et al.* (2016) our conceptual framework demonstrates how employees’ change as they learn, and adapt to, the brand identity. However, we characterize employees as *discovering*, *learning* and then *living* and *representing* the brand, while Dean *et al.* (2016) suggest that living the brand precedes learning it.

This study provides further evidence that employees' participation as brand co-creators enhances their brand knowledge and emotional bonds with the brand, which consequently impacts on their behaviour (Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Leckie *et al.*, 2016). This supports previous findings in the literature that participation and involvement are portrayed as the antecedents of building emotional bonds with the brand, such as attachment, engagement, and commitment (Leckie *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, employees' participation enhances brand cognition, and enables the development of emotional bonds, which consequently motivates them to actively share with others. This is consistent with previous literature emphasizing the importance of involving customers in brand co-creation (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Kaufmann *et al.*, 2016; Kumar and Nayak, 2019; Leckie *et al.*, 2016).

5.2 Managerial implications

Beyond the theoretical implications, this paper offers several practical implications for current brand management practice. This study reveals that branding is not solely determined by management, but employees can also play an active role in the branding process as co-creators. Managers should bear in mind that the level of employee participation should vary, depending on the activity proposed. For example, when establishing strategic identity, key personnel can be involved in framing and building the core essence and guidelines of the brand. When designing sensory identity, brand managers can gain insights from a wider pool of employees, to determine questions around functionality and also to channel customer feedback. However, in aligning organizational identity and delivering the brand message, it is arguably not management but employees, in service contexts such as hospitality, that are the key players as they 'interpret' and 'appropriate' the brand identity by living and representing the brand to the outside world.

Second, the brand co-creation process (Figure. 1) may benefit brand managers involved in co-creation of brand identity with their employees. Managers should understand the various elements of brand identity, including how they are aligned and inter-relate, in order to build a consistent and strong brand (Aaker, 2012; Heding *et al.*, 2016). In addition, managers must understand their brand positioning and manage the brand so that it embraces their market's expectations (Wang *et al.*, 2019), since employees that clearly understand their target guests may adapt their attitudes and behaviours accordingly. Moreover, the four phases of the brand identity formation process involving employees identified in this research allows managers to easily understand how to plan and execute consistent and distinctive brand identities, which include the involvement of employees.

Finally, the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 2) provides a holistic understanding of the brand co-creation process to brand managers. This can enable those charged with developing brand activity to understand the complex elements of branding, and both customers and employees' roles as brand co-creators.

5.3 Limitations and future research directions

Although this research has shed light on co-creating brands with employees, there are limitations. First, the empirical data focused primarily on employees, which has provided rich understanding of the phenomenon; however, it has not examined the impact of internal brand co-creation on guests. Second, the research was limited to two hotels in a specific region. Therefore, future research might focus on: investigating the impact of brand co-creation from the perspective of guests as well as employees; exploring the co-creation of brands with employees' involvement in other locations and different hotel classifications; broadening the scope of investigation to include other sensory elements such as tactile, gustatory and

auditory ones; and applying the brand co-creation framework in actual branding practice.

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Table 1 Data sources utilised for hotel branding

Data source		Details	Role in the analysis
Company reports	• Renovation plans	Contains concepts and detailed plans for renovation	To understand strategic & sensory identity of the hotels
	• Global brand standards	Indicates the vision, mission, value, strategic intent of the brand, and detailed guidelines for graphic elements and amenities	
	• Minutes of TFT meetings	Contains agendas, plans, dialogue, and actions of TFT members undertaking brand co-creation activity	To understand the roles and processes employees undertook during brand co-creation
Consultant reports	• Interior concepts upon opening	Contains concepts suggested by the design agency	To understand strategic and sensory identity of the hotels
	• Renovation design intentions and plans for rooms/ food and beverage (F&B) /banqueting	PPT file & PDF files that contain overall design concepts, motif, materials, and example images	
	• Furniture, fixtures and equipment (FF&E) specifications	Detailed specification and example images of FF&E suggested by the agency	
	• Brand identity strategy • Characteristics of current and potential target guests	Contains each hotel's vision, mission, target guest definitions suggested by management consultants and based on current and potential guests	To understand strategic identity of the hotels
Graphic design materials	• Brochures	Produced by the design team based on the brand standard from HQ	To understand sensory identity of the hotels
	• Flyers		
	• Posters		
Historical artifacts	• Three-dimensional pictures (perspective drawings)	3D rendering and interior design plans drawn up by the design agency	To understand sensory identity of the hotels
	• Material boards	Examples of furniture design, props, fabrics, and plants for overall verification.	To understand sensory identity of the hotels
	• FF&E boards	A more detailed explanation (size, vendor, characteristics, etc.) and samples of materials used for FF&E.	
Contemporary artifacts	• Mood boards	Visualizes the target guests' preferences in PowerPoint files, including images sourced from websites	To understand strategic and sensory identity of the hotels
	• Concept and indicative images	Visualizes the defined concept and indicative images	To understand the process of brand co-creation with employees
	• Design applications	Sample photograph images of applications for interior design, uniform, OPE, and decorations	
Field notes	• Personal notes	Daily to do lists, summary of the result of the actions, feelings about the job, notes on physical artifacts, important notes from meeting with employees	To understand the roles and process of brand co-creation with employees

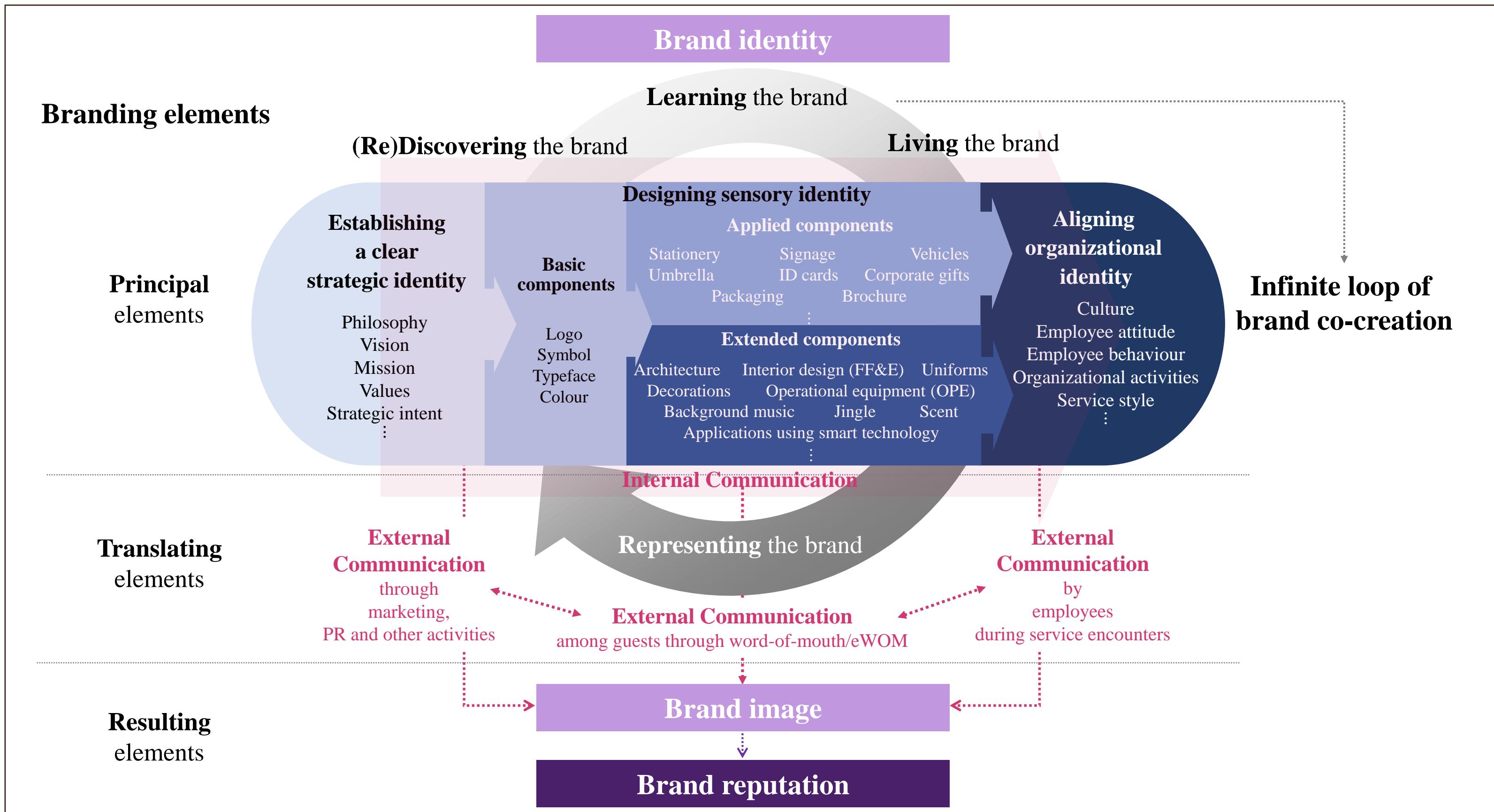
Table 2 Interview participants

Department	Role in Hotel A			Role in Hotel B		
	Pseudonym	Yrs of work	Gender	Pseudonym	Yrs of work	Gender
Design planning team	Jung-Hoon		M			
	Mi-Young		F			
	Ji-Eun	1.5-14	F	(Members work across both hotels)		
	Si-Yoon		M			
	Hyun-Woo		M			
(Food and beverage (F&B))	Sung-Ho		M	Joong-Ki		M
	Jong-Soo		M	Young-Ho		M
	Eun-Jung		F	Ju-Hee		F
	Soo-Jin	16-27	F	Sung-Soo	7-27	M
	Woo-Hyun		M	Sung-Jin		M
	Woo-Jin		M	Eun-Joo		F
	Ji-Yoon		F			
Rooms	Sang-Hyun		M	Na-Hyun		F
	Young-Jin		M	Ji-Hoon		M
	Min-Jung	16-27	F	Min-Ji		F
	Sung-Min		M	In-Sung	16-27	M
				Hyun-Joo		F
				Hee-Sun		F
Sales and marketing	Joon-Hyuk		M	Seung-Hyun	16-24	M
	Yoo-Jin	5-18	F	Joon-Woo		M
	Min-Suh		F			
	Soo-Min		F			
Back office	Si-Eun		F			
	Ji-Hye		F			
	Hye-Won	11-20	F	(Members work across both hotels)		
	Ye-Jin		F			
	Joon-Suh		M			
	Min-Jae		M			
General manager	Ryan	4	M	Soo-Hyun	27	F
Total	42					

Figure 1. The brand co-creation process in Hotel A and Hotel B

		Brand identity co-creation activities		Employee involvement										
		Hotel A	Hotel B											
Phase 1 Establishing Strategic Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision: The utmost prestigious hotel Target guests: Old prestige (age 55-75) Target guest preference: Conservative, sophisticates, classic Dominant sensory identity: Korean lattice patterns, sleek and curved hallways, dark and warm coloured marble, wooden materials Keywords: Traditional, delicate, dignified Concept and detailed keywords: Traditional Korean, prestigious, warm, relaxing, grande, sophisticated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision: A trendy hotel for society leaders Target guests: Wealthy achievers (age 35-55) Target guest preference: Open-minded, trendy Dominant sensory identity: Light coloured marble, glass materials, vivid colours and dramatic patterned carpets, modern atmosphere Keywords: Contemporary, dynamic, unique Concept and detailed keywords: Modern, Dynamic, Cool, Dreamy, Minimalistic, Variety 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Task Force Team (TFT) members from various departments TFT members' roles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analyse the current and potential target guests - Devise overall brand strategy of each hotel - Verify existing visual elements - Draft future brand strategy Activities (year 1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weekly meetings to discuss and generate ideas: create mood boards & collages consisting of images, text, and samples of objects - Workshop sessions with the design consultants involving various brainstorming activities and discussions: photo/image collaging, persona development, customer journey mapping 										
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic and applied components: Following brand guidelines (no changes) Extended components: Developed applications for interior design, uniform, OPE, and decorations that matches each property's brand identity Scent: <table border="1"> <tr><td>Woody</td></tr> <tr><td>Balsamic</td></tr> <tr><td>Powdery</td></tr> <tr><td>Floral</td></tr> <tr><td>Citrus</td></tr> </table> 	Woody	Balsamic	Powdery	Floral	Citrus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic and applied components: Following brand guidelines (no changes) Extended components: Developed applications for interior design, uniform, OPE, and decorations that matches each property's brand identity Scent: <table border="1"> <tr><td>Citrus</td></tr> <tr><td>Aromatic</td></tr> <tr><td>Fresh spicy</td></tr> <tr><td>Balsamic</td></tr> <tr><td>Sweet</td></tr> <tr><td>Woody</td></tr> </table> 	Citrus	Aromatic	Fresh spicy	Balsamic	Sweet	Woody	
Woody														
Balsamic														
Powdery														
Floral														
Citrus														
Citrus														
Aromatic														
Fresh spicy														
Balsamic														
Sweet														
Woody														
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees' perception Traditional, prestigious, classic, grand Grooming style: Conservative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Male: double breasted suit, handkerchief, hair parted 2:8 - Female: hair tied into a bun, elegant makeup Service style Graceful, formal, elegant service style 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees' perception Young, casual, modern, stylish, dynamic Grooming style: Semi-casual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Male: open-necked shirt, short and trendy hair - Female: ponytail, vivid and intense makeup Service style Semi-casual, trendy, active service style 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees at all levels Activities (year 4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information sharing sessions on strategic and sensory brand identities during "town-hall" meetings - Brand induction for newcomers - Brand internalization training with employees - Aligning their attitudes, behaviours, and service style 											
Phase 4 Delivering brand identity through external communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing & public relations activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tagline: 'The True Luxury' - Promotion packages match the tastes of older and business guests Delivering service based on the identity of the hotel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing & public relations activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tagline: 'Delightful Experience' - Promotion package for art & entertainment, kid-friendly package for local guests Delivering service based on the identity of the hotel 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees at all levels Activities (year 4 ~) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employees deliver the brand identity to related stakeholders during their work 										

Figure 2. Branding and brand co-creation framework



Source: adapted from Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Bartholmé and Melewar, 2011; Buhalis and Leung, 2018; Dean et al., 2016; Heding et al., 2016; Suvatjis et al., 2012; Tourky, Foroudi, Gupta and Shaalan., 2020