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BRANDING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: ADVANCES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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INFORMAÇÕES

Palavras-chave:

Governança;
organizações
públicas; marca.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa o branding no setor público como um instrumento estratégico de comunicação e governança. Por meio de uma revisão sistemática da literatura, fundamentada na base de dados Scopus e apoiada pelo uso do software SWIFT Review para mineração e categorização textual, foram analisados 110 artigos científicos. As publicações foram organizadas em cinco eixos temáticos: branding em instituições educacionais, branding para locais, branding interno e cultura organizacional, mídias sociais e branding público, e branding em campanhas de conscientização pública. Os resultados indicam uma expansão significativa do interesse acadêmico nos últimos anos, refletindo a consolidação do branding como ferramenta estratégica de governança voltada ao engajamento de stakeholders, à construção de identidade institucional, ao aumento da competitividade e ao fortalecimento da confiança pública. A análise demonstra que o branding no setor público ultrapassa a dimensão estética e comunicacional, posicionando-se como mecanismo central na promoção de valores institucionais, na conformação de percepções coletivas e no estímulo à transformação social. Estratégias como narrativas, engajamento digital por meio das mídias sociais e parcerias intersetoriais mostraram-se fundamentais para ampliar o alcance e a efetividade das iniciativas de branding. Entretanto, foram identificados desafios persistentes, tais como a sustentabilidade das campanhas, resistências internas e limitações orçamentárias. Ademais, permanecem lacunas relevantes, especialmente quanto à avaliação de impactos de longo prazo e à identificação de boas práticas em diferentes contextos institucionais. Tecnologias digitais emergentes e abordagens inclusivas configuram agendas promissoras para pesquisas futuras. Em síntese, o branding no setor público é compreendido como uma estratégia de governança capaz de fortalecer a legitimidade institucional e consolidar as relações entre Estado e sociedade.

ABSTRACT

This study examines branding in the public sector as a strategic instrument for communication and governance. Through a systematic literature review based on the Scopus database and supported by SWIFT Review for text mining and analytical

Keywords:

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Governance; public organizations; brand.	categorization, 110 peer-reviewed articles were analyzed. The publications were organized into five thematic clusters: branding in educational institutions, city branding, internal branding and organizational culture, social media and public branding, and branding in public awareness campaigns. The findings indicate a significant expansion of academic interest in recent years, reflecting the consolidation of branding as a strategic governance tool aimed at stakeholder engagement, identity construction, competitiveness enhancement, and the strengthening of public trust. The analysis demonstrates that public sector branding extends beyond visual identity and promotional communication, positioning itself as a central mechanism for articulating institutional values, shaping collective perceptions, and fostering social transformation. Strategies such as emotional storytelling, digital engagement through social media, and cross-sector partnerships emerged as critical factors in maximizing the reach and effectiveness of branding initiatives. Nevertheless, persistent challenges were identified, including sustainability of campaigns, internal organizational resistance, and budgetary constraints. Furthermore, relevant research gaps remain, particularly concerning long-term impact assessment and comparative best practices across institutional settings. Emerging digital technologies and inclusive approaches represent promising avenues for future research. Overall, public branding is framed as a governance strategy capable of reinforcing institutional legitimacy and strengthening citizen–state relationships.
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1. Introdução

Branding has rapidly moved from being a concern exclusive to profit-driven firms to a strategic priority in the public sector (Reghunathan, 2021). Once regarded by many as only a private-sector activity, branding is now recognized as a “fast-growing global trend” in government and public services (Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Public institutions around the world are investing in brand management to communicate their value and mission more effectively. For instance, national governments are treating their country’s image as a valuable brand asset the United States’ nation brand was recently valued at over \$32 trillion (Brand Finance, 2023) in efforts to attract tourism, investment, and talent. Similarly, city branding has become a mainstream practice, with major cities reportedly spending on average €400,000 per year on branding campaigns and some investing up to €10 million (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) to boost their appeal and competitiveness.

The growing importance of branding spans multiple public sector contexts, from education to civic administration. In the education sector, public universities and schools have embraced branding to differentiate themselves and remain competitive. In recent years, many universities have undertaken major rebranding initiatives to enhance their reputational capital and student appeal (Chapleo, 2015). Internal branding ensuring that faculty and staff embody the institution’s values has emerged as a critical factor for delivering on the brand promise in higher education settings (Leijerholt et al., 2019). City and regional governments are likewise adopting sophisticated branding strategies (often termed *place branding* or *city marketing*) to cultivate attractive images for tourists, investors, and residents. For example, even medium-sized cities in emerging economies like China are engaging stakeholders in branding efforts to spur economic development (Ma et al., 2020). Government agencies and public services are also building coherent brand identities. Public hospitals, universities, and regulatory agencies now “seek to express their identities through marketing and branding” (Wæraas & Maor, 2014), using logos, slogans, and coordinated messaging to shape public perceptions. Real-world campaigns such as nation-brand slogans (e.g., “Incredible India” or “Malaysia Truly Asia”) and city taglines (e.g., New York’s “I ♥ NY” or Amsterdam’s “I amsterdam”) illustrate how public sector branding has become integral to how governments communicate their values and offerings. Across these contexts, branding is increasingly seen as essential for engaging stakeholders, improving competitiveness, and fostering a strong organizational identity all of which are vital for public institutions facing resource constraints and scrutiny (Perry & Rainey, 1988).

Accompanying this expansion in practice, academic interest in public sector branding has surged globally. Scholars in both marketing and public administration fields have turned their attention to how branding concepts translate into the public domain. This interdisciplinary interest is reflected in the growing number of publications on topics like city branding, nation branding, and organizational identity in government. Notably, researchers have pointed out that branding in the public sector is not a simple transplant of corporate branding techniques—there are fundamental differences in objectives, values, and stakeholder dynamics between public and private contexts. For example, public organizations often pursue social legitimacy and trust over profits, involving a broader set of stakeholders (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). As a result, established branding theories developed for competitive

markets may not fully apply to government agencies or public programs. Indeed, a recent systematic review observed that while public organizations are increasingly adopting corporate branding principles, prior studies report “*contradictory evidence and opposing recommendations*” on how to do so effectively (Leijerholt et al., 2019). This inconsistency in findings suggests that branding strategies must be adapted to meet sector-specific challenges - such as public accountability, political influences, and public service ethics - yet there is debate about how much adaptation is needed (Leijerholt et al., 2019). Overall, the literature indicates that branding can yield significant benefits in the public arena (such as higher citizen trust, engagement, and clearer organizational identity), but applying branding in practice requires careful consideration of the public sector’s unique context (Wæraas & Maor, 2014).

Despite the growing recognition of public sector branding’s importance, clear gaps remain in the scholarly understanding of this phenomenon. In top-tier public administration journals, researchers have emphasized that organizational reputation is a critical asset for public agencies and is closely tied to how these agencies present and communicate their brand (Carpenter & Krause, 2012). Yet, bridging the perspectives of public administration (which stresses public value and trust) and marketing (which provides branding frameworks and tools) is an ongoing challenge. The existing research on public sector branding remains somewhat fragmented studies tend to focus on specific domains in isolation, lacking an overarching integrative framework. Moreover, as noted above, the evidence on best practices is often mixed or context-dependent (Leijerholt et al., 2019). This has created a research gap: public managers and scholars still have limited guidance on how general branding principles should be modified or applied across different public sector settings for maximum effectiveness.

The present study directly responds to this research gap by providing a timely and comprehensive review of the public sector branding literature, coupled with new insights to guide future research and practice. By synthesizing findings across disparate contexts and analyzing emerging themes through a rigorous systematic review, this paper aims to clarify the state of knowledge and identify a unifying framework for public sector branding. In doing so, it highlights how and why branding has become an indispensable tool of public governance and communication in recent years, while also pinpointing the unanswered questions that merit further scholarly attention. In particular, the study proposes an agenda for future research that bridges marketing and public administration perspectives, for example, by examining how branding efforts can enhance public trust and stakeholder engagement without compromising public values. By articulating this agenda and illustrating the evolution of public sector branding with contemporary examples and data, the introduction positions the paper as a timely contribution to both theory and practice.

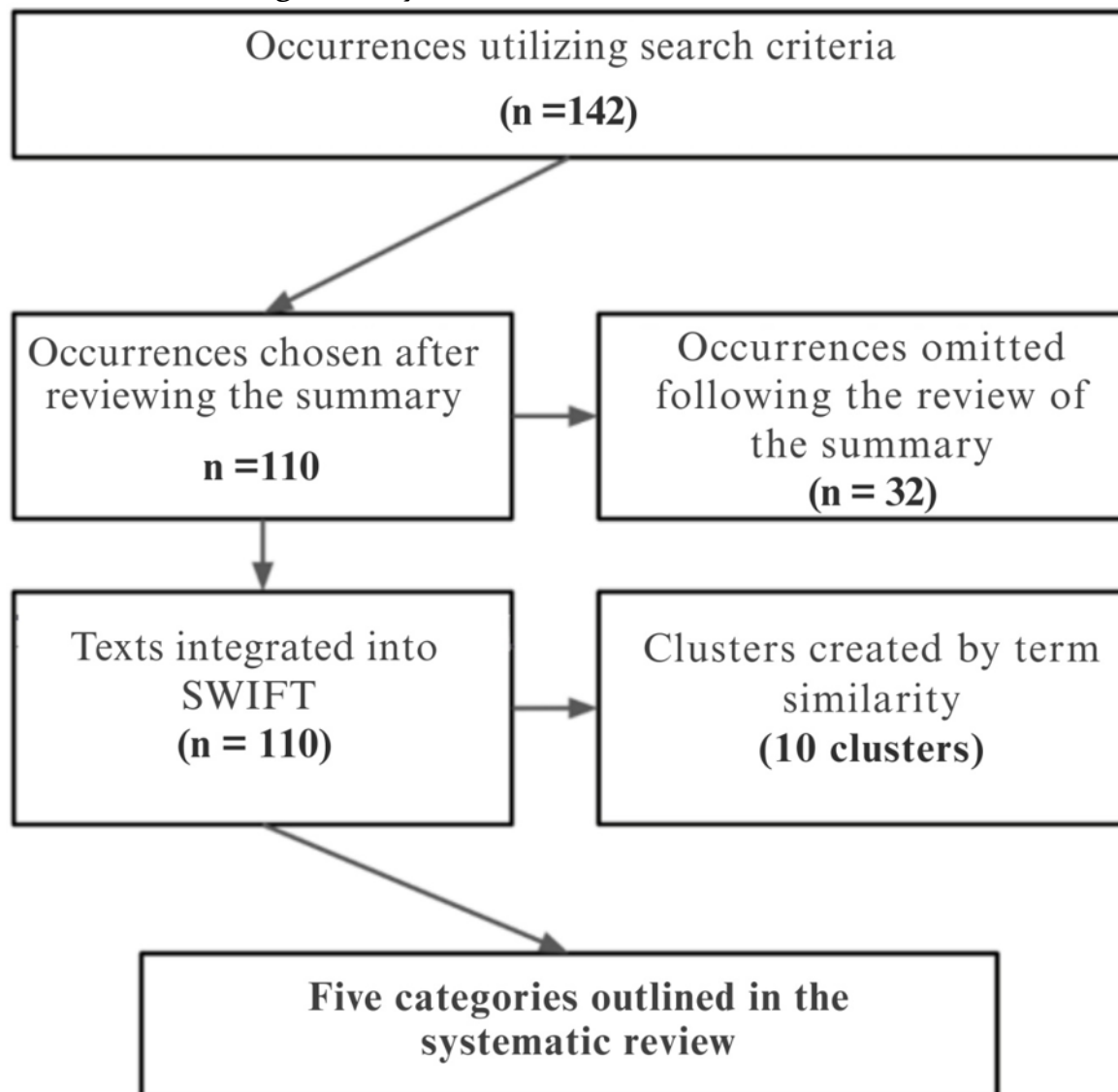
2. Method

For this literature review, the Scopus database was used as the primary source for mapping academic articles published between 1996 and 2024. The following search operators were applied: “brand*” AND (“public adm*” OR “public sector” OR “public organ*”) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, “BUSI”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)). A total of 142 English-language articles were identified.

After the initial search, the articles were reviewed to eliminate duplicates and filtered based on their relevance, using titles, abstracts, and keywords as criteria. A total of 110 articles were imported into the Scione Workbench for Interactive computer-Facilitated Text-mining (SWIFT) Review software to pre-filter references related to the present study’s research question (Howard et al., 2016).

In summary, SWIFT Review (SR) includes predefined literature search strategies (“filters”) that can be customized by users to separate literature based on recurring terms. The software uses Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to model topics and uncover common concepts within the document set (Howard et al., 2016). These filters operate as a standard search strategy in which studies are classified into a specific category if the search terms are found in the title, abstract, or keywords.

SR classifies articles within each group by assigning a prediction score from 0 to 1. For this research, a new filter was created within SR to divide the articles into 40 groups, and groups with fewer than 10 occurrences were subsequently eliminated. Additionally, during the initial validation, clusters with only generic terms were also deleted. The twelve resulting clusters were grouped by similarity into five categories, which are discussed in this review (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Systematic literature review workflow

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

3. Results

The twelve generated clusters are presented in Table 1. After analyzing the grouped documents based on the clusters, the main areas of discussion identified were: branding in educational institutions; branding in the context of cities and territories (smart cities, public services, place promotion); internal branding and organizational culture; social media and public branding; and branding in public awareness campaigns (politics, the COVID-19 pandemic, prevention and health, etc.).

Table 1 - Clusters and grouping of articles formed by SWIFT

Keywords	Occurrences
Branding, management, internal, higher, education, stakeholders, challenges, strategy, implementation, case	34
Cooperation, development, services, local, identified, influence, key, identify, opportunities, potential	33
Corporate, communication, process, identity, case, multiple, initiatives, building, promote, achieve	31
Business, management, strategic, resources, urban, view, cities, global, evolution, sem	29
Employee, brand, engagement, employees, commitment, psychological, states, equity, empowerment	27
Product, marketing, brands, products, consumer, market, authors, consumers, high, counterfeit	19
Employer, branding, organizational, talent, organizations, attract, culture, presents, results, made	18
Government, agencies, supply, management, chain, federal, organizations, intervention, capacity, chains	16
Media, social, brands, employees, apparel, platforms, purchase, networking, influencing, drawing	16
Regional, management, innovation, analysed, south, tyrol, regions, development, territorial, system	15
Place, rural, stakeholders, region, nordic, regions, show, experts, coffee, America	15
Internal, branding, satisfaction, sector, public, customer, employees, employee, performance	14

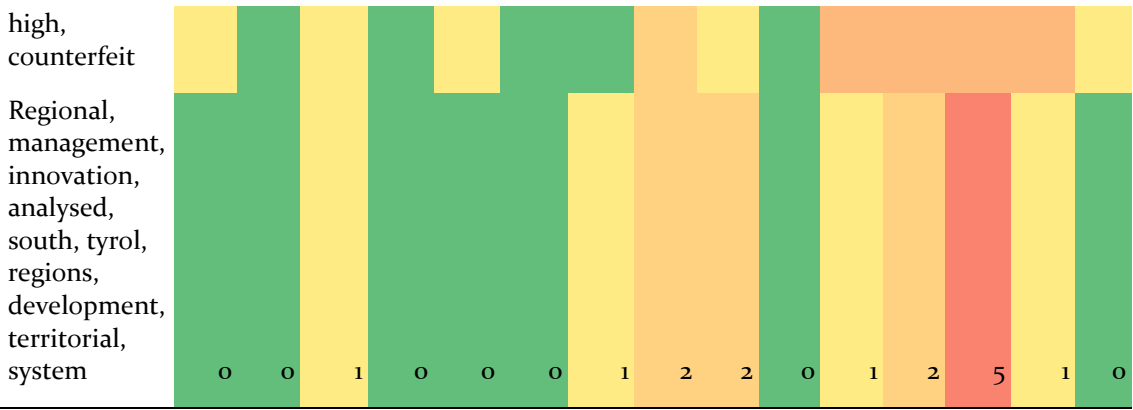
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The results of this systematic literature review demonstrate a relatively low overall frequency of publications per year, reaching its peak in 2021 with 38 articles (Table 2). While a few articles were published in the 1990s, the first included in this review dates back to 1996 the field gained momentum starting in 2015.

Table 2 - Occurrence map of clusters over the analyzed period

	199														
	199 6-97	8- 99	200 0-01	200 2-03	200 4-05	200 6-07	200 8-09	201 0-11	201 2-13	201 4-15	201 6-17	201 8-19	202 0-21	202 2-23	202 4
Branding, management, internal, higher, education, stakeholders, challenges, strategy, implementati on, case	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	3	4	5	11	5	0
Business, management, strategic, resources, urban, view, cities, global, evolution, srm	0	1	0	0	1	0	4	2	1	3	5	3	6	3	0
Cooperation, development, services, local, identified, influence, key, identify, opportunities , potential	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	3	2	2	6	2	7	5	0
Corporate, communicati on, process, identity, case, multiple, initiatives, building, promote, achieve	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	2	1	1	4	7	7	3	1
Employee, brand, engagement, employees, commitment, psychological , states, equity, empowermen t	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	5	10	6	0
Employer, branding, organizational	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	3	1	6	4	0

[illegible]



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Considering the changes in frequency, it is evident that interest in public sector branding research has grown substantially over the past ten years (2015–2024). In total, 86% of the articles included in this literature review were published during this period, with approximately 74% of them published in the last five years (2020–2024).

4. Discussion

4.1 Branding and public educational institutions

This area highlights the need for educational institutions to establish a strong brand identity and positioning in order to attract students and stakeholders. Building a compelling brand image for educational institutions not only promotes a sense of identity and pride within the institution but also influences the perception and decision-making of prospective students, faculty, and other involved stakeholders (Clark et al., 2020; Dholakia, 2017).

In the past, branding in the educational sector was primarily focused on creating distinct visual identities and logos for institutions. However, the understanding of branding has evolved, and it is now recognized as a dynamic and co-created process involving both internal and external stakeholders (Sataøen, 2019). Traditional commercial branding approaches have often been seen as non-transferable to public education due to internal resistance and complex brand architectures (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020; Kuoppakangas et al., 2020).

In recent years, however, universities have increasingly engaged in rebranding efforts to enhance their brand equity in the competitive academic environment. Internal branding has emerged as a critical aspect, ensuring that the brand promise is delivered by employees in setting expectations for stakeholders such as students, alumni, senior management, external consultants, civic leaders, and the business community (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020; Kuoppakangas et al., 2020).

This involves aligning employee understanding and commitment to the brand, as well as implementing effective internal communication and training programs to promote brand-related attitudes and behaviors among staff and faculty (Chapleo, 2015).

There is growing focus on e-marketing and leveraging online channels such as social media and virtual marketing to emotionally connect through online communities, targeting cost-effectiveness and broader reach. External branding activities, although often constrained by limited budgets, are observed across various public school admission levels, with each school implementing its own branding initiatives. A strong brand image can also differentiate an educational institution from its competitors, thereby increasing its competitive advantage in the market (Clark et al., 2020).

This is particularly true as higher education branding often leverages regional characteristics to advance the institution’s mission. This understanding underscores the importance of a well-defined brand and its direct influence on stakeholder perceptions, including students and faculty (McGee, 2015a, 2015b).

Understanding the role of branding in the educational context involves exploring several elements such as brand values, positioning, communication strategies, and engagement with students, faculty, alumni, and the broader community.

Maintaining the identity of higher education institutions involves, in most countries, leveraging national values, traits, and characteristics in their branding efforts. The study concludes that although institutional dynamics predominantly explain the relationship between higher education branding and the use of national traits, rational and cultural dynamics are also at play (Sataøen, 2019). The article highlights the democratic implications of this trend, noting that the responsibility for promoting the sector often falls to individuals external to the education domain itself, thereby subordinating political aspects to the logic of reputation and communication.

From the analysis, it becomes clear that maintaining a strong brand and implementing effective branding strategies are critical for public educational institutions. Internal and external factors such as organizational brand commitment, employee voice, faculty quality, curriculum, placement and internships, pedagogical innovation, public sector values, and internationalization are essential elements in developing and sustaining a robust brand in the public education sector (Kuoppakangas et al., 2020; Leijerholt et al., 2019).

Future studies could explore the impact of branding principles on stakeholder perceptions, the reconciliation of internal brand management and brand architecture, and the dynamics of rebranding efforts in educational institutions. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that influence public sector educational branding and its various organizations is crucial for comprehensive research.

To gain deeper insights and more conclusive results, more thorough and comprehensive studies both qualitative and quantitative are needed to address the nuances and dynamics of branding in public education sectors, as the current literature remains limited and focused on isolated case reports.

Moreover, the educational context presents unique challenges and opportunities for branding, given the intangible nature of the educational experience and the diversity of stakeholders involved. Overall, public sector branding is gaining increasing importance in higher education, as it fosters a sense of identity, builds trust and credibility, differentiates institutions from competitors, and enhances the reputation and overall perception of the institution.

4.2 Branding in the context of cities and territories

The second cluster focuses on city branding. City branding is a strategic approach aimed at creating a unique and favorable image of a city to attract tourists and investors, while also improving the location's overall reputation and competitiveness (Zahrah, 2023). This cluster emphasizes both the theoretical framework and practical applications of city branding, particularly in the context of tourism marketing and investment attraction. It also highlights the role of branding in improving internal municipal perception among residents and fostering collaboration with internal and external entities for regional promotion.

Branding applied to urban contexts has gained increasing relevance as a strategy to enhance the competitiveness of cities in a globalized environment where locations compete for investments, tourists, events, and talent (Stevens et al., 2021; Thokoa et al., 2022). This approach goes beyond promoting tourist attractions and encompasses the creation of a unique identity that reinforces residents' sense of belonging and positions the city as a strategic location for business and quality of life (Magnus, 2016).

Building a strong city brand contributes to strengthening its image at both national and international levels. Studies show that successful city branding campaigns help attract tourists, investors, and new residents by promoting the area's cultural, economic, and environmental assets (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2001; Pechlaner et al., 2012; Thokoa et al., 2022). A classic example is the case of Barcelona, Spain, whose repositioning as a cultural and sports destination after the 1992 Olympic Games elevated the city to a global level of urban competitiveness (Belloso, 2011).

In the tourism marketing context, city branding is widely used to showcase local attractions and improve external perceptions. Additionally, strategic branding actions help position the city as an investment hub by offering infrastructure and a favorable regulatory environment (Ma et al., 2020; Pechlaner et al., 2012). For instance, Dubai employed aggressive branding strategies to consolidate its image as a global hub for business and tourism, creating a strong identity built around luxury, innovation, and hospitality (Alsayer et al., 2022).

Collaboration among municipal governments, private companies, NGOs, and citizens is essential for building an authentic and sustainable urban brand. Stakeholder involvement in the branding process promotes alignment between the city's values and the expectations of various publics, and it fosters strategic partnerships that benefit the community (Teodoro & An, 2018; Zahrah, 2023). This participatory model has been successfully applied in cities across New Zealand, integrating sustainability and quality of life into their urban brand (Li et al., 2019).

Urban branding also plays a crucial role in strengthening civic pride and social cohesion among residents. When branding initiatives are consistent with the perceptions and aspirations of residents, they can improve quality of life and foster a stronger sense of belonging (Kavoura, 2012).

Despite its potential benefits, city branding faces significant challenges. First, there is a risk of superficiality in campaigns that rely solely on slogans or logos without aligning with public policies and residents' lived experiences. Moreover, smaller cities often lack the resources necessary to run effective branding campaigns, creating a gap compared to global metropolises that have greater access to funding and expertise (Lucarelli & Olof Berg, 2011). Some research gaps deserve attention in future studies, such as:

- How does city branding quantitatively impact well-being indicators such as access to public services, urban mobility, and safety?
- How does the effectiveness of city branding campaigns vary across cities of different sizes and economic contexts?

- How can city branding strategies effectively engage marginalized communities and ensure the equitable distribution of branding-related benefits?

4.3 *Internal branding and organizational culture*

Internal branding refers to the initiatives and practices adopted by an organization to communicate and align its brand values and identity among its employees. The goal is to ensure that employees understand and embody the essence of the brand, which, in turn, enables them to consistently deliver on the brand promise to clients and other stakeholders.

Internal branding strategies often include activities such as training employees on brand values, developing internal communications (such as newsletters, memos, or workshops), and fostering a culture that reinforces the brand message. This process helps employees become brand ambassadors, representing and embodying the brand in their interactions and daily work (Clark et al., 2020).

Internal branding understood as the set of practices that align a brand's values and identity with employee actions and behaviors plays a central role in consistently delivering the brand promise to external audiences (Leijerholt et al., 2019; Matos et al., 2020). In the public sector, where institutions often face budget constraints and management challenges, internal alignment may be even more crucial to ensuring effective communication and stakeholder engagement (Cordes & Vogel, 2023; Dholakia, 2017).

Internal branding practices include actions that promote employee alignment with the organization's values and identity, such as training employees on brand values and their role in fulfilling the institution's mission, which is essential for strengthening internal branding (Eid et al., 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021); communicating clear and consistent messages about the organization's vision, mission, and values to foster a sense of belonging and shared direction (Eid et al., 2019); and creating opportunities for collective reflection on the organization's values to encourage engagement and reinforce organizational culture (Hardaker & Fill, 2005).

In addition, developing brand ambassadors employees who live and exemplify institutional values is seen as an effective practice for spreading the brand essence internally and building external credibility (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020; Hardaker & Fill, 2005; Merrilees et al., 2021).

Internal branding not only promotes alignment among employees but also contributes to the development of an organizational culture that consistently reflects institutional values. This is particularly relevant in the public sector, where external perceptions of trustworthiness and competence are directly linked to citizens' interactions with public servants (Eid et al., 2019; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Luke et al., 2010).

A strong organizational culture guided by brand values tends to increase employee engagement, reduce turnover, and improve service quality (Hardaker & Fill, 2005; Merrilees et al., 2021). Furthermore, research shows that alignment between employees' personal values and the organization's values leads to greater commitment and job satisfaction, which positively impacts the brand experience delivered to external audiences (Goud & Sheena, 2024).

Despite its evident benefits, internal branding faces significant challenges, especially in the public sector. Long-tenured employees may resist internal branding initiatives, perceiving them as imposed or disconnected from institutional realities (Kuoppakangas et al., 2020). In addition, public institutions often face financial and staffing limitations that hinder the implementation of comprehensive internal branding programs (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020; Luke et al., 2010). Finally, complex hierarchical structures and diverse areas of operation make it difficult to build a unified brand identity in large, multifunctional public organizations (Pepermans & Peiffer, 2024).

Leadership is an essential component of successful internal branding. Effective leaders act as living examples of brand values, inspiring their teams and fostering engagement at all organizational levels (Ind, 2007). In the public sector, leaders who demonstrate commitment to institutional values help build a consistent and authentic narrative that connects employees to the organizational mission (Jørgensen, 2016; Panda, 2020). Despite the growing body of literature on internal branding, some research gaps remain:

- Which internal branding activities (e.g., training, workshops, internal communications) have the greatest impact on employee alignment with organizational brand values?
- How do internal branding practices differ between public and private sector organizations?
- What are the effects of internal branding initiatives on organizational performance and stakeholder satisfaction over time?

4.4 *Social media and public branding*

Social media has transformed the way the public sector interacts with citizens by offering accessible, dynamic, and two-way channels for building and strengthening public brands. These platforms serve as strategic tools that help expand the reach of branding initiatives, enhance public engagement, and communicate institutional values in a direct and personalized manner (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013).

Social media is used as an effective means of conveying institutional messages and creating a consistent digital identity. Different platforms serve distinct purposes for public branding. X (formerly Twitter) and LinkedIn focus on institutional communication and the sharing of official news. Facebook and Instagram facilitate public engagement through visual and interactive content such as photos, videos, and livestreams. And TikTok is gaining traction in the public sector due to its ability to attract younger audiences and increase accessibility through creative and informal content (Zhang & Sahli, 2024; Zhang et al., 2021).

These tools enable institutions to communicate campaigns and institutional values at relatively low cost, especially when compared to traditional media such as television and radio. Social media allows public institutions to build virtual communities around their brands, values, and objectives (Lovari & Valentini, 2020). These communities function as spaces to promote engagement, co-create messaging, and disseminate information (Hansen et al., 2001; D'Anselmi, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

By facilitating dialogue between citizens and institutions, a sense of belonging and trust in the public sector is strengthened. Using social media to create online communities also helps amplify the reach of public campaigns, improving the dissemination of institutional messages (Lovari & Valentini, 2020).

Digital platforms allow messages to reach broad and diverse audiences, including groups that are traditionally excluded. Real-time feedback enables institutions to quickly adjust their strategies and respond to citizen needs. Another advantage is the lower cost compared to traditional campaign formats, which is especially beneficial for public organizations operating on limited budgets.

Although social media offers powerful tools, it also presents challenges. First, maintaining a presence across multiple platforms requires an integrated communication strategy to avoid inconsistencies and misunderstandings (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Second, negative comments and criticism on social networks can spread quickly, potentially damaging institutional reputations (Hansen et al., 2001; Luke et al., 2010). Finally, the use of social media involves handling sensitive data, which requires strict compliance with data protection regulations (e.g., GDPR).

Even so, several public institutions have used social media innovatively to strengthen their brands and interact more effectively with citizens. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) used Twitter to counter misinformation and share public health guidelines (Azzopardi-Muscat & Kluge, 2020). Other medium- and long-term public health initiatives have also employed these channels in less developed countries (Olson et al., 2022). Although the use of social media in public branding has progressed, there are still important gaps to be explored, such as:

- Which social media platforms are most effective in engaging different types of audiences and achieving specific institutional goals?
- How can the impact of public branding strategies on social media be consistently measured in terms of citizen perception and behavior?
- How can barriers to digital access particularly among vulnerable populations be reduced?
- What strategies can mitigate reputational damage during communication crises on social media?

4.5 Branding in public awareness campaigns

Branding applied to public awareness campaigns plays a crucial role in building emotional connections with citizens and increasing the impact of government initiatives. These campaigns, which address topics such as health, safety, the environment, and citizenship employ branding principles to convey clear, consistent messages aligned with institutional values, fostering engagement and social transformation (Dibb & Carrigan, 2013).

Branding in public awareness campaigns goes beyond the use of logos or slogans. Empathetic messaging and compelling storytelling help bring public institutions closer to citizens, strengthening perceptions of trust, encouraging public engagement, and promoting behavioral change (French et al., 2009).

Successful campaigns generally combine branding and strategic communication to maximize their impact. Among the strategies used, the emotional appeal such as fear, hope, or pride can be particularly effective in capturing attention and encouraging behavior change. One example is the “This Girl Can” campaign in the United Kingdom, which used stories of everyday women to promote physical activity (Hull et al., 2021).

Another example is the “Pink October” campaign conducted in various countries, which uses strong visual identity and partnerships with healthcare organizations to raise breast cancer awareness. In Brazil, the campaign led to a significant increase in mammograms over consecutive years across different regions and age groups (Antonini et al., 2022).

While public awareness campaigns are effective tools, they also face specific challenges, such as poorly planned messages may lead to confusion or even public resistance (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020); ensuring consistency and continuity in messaging can be difficult, especially in contexts of political change or budget cuts. Although the literature on branding in public campaigns is expanding, several gaps remain and can be explored in future studies:

- What types of emotions (e.g., fear, empathy) are most effective in fostering adherence to positive behaviors across different audience segments?
- How do public branding campaigns influence citizens' attitudes and behaviors over time?
- What strategies can be employed to ensure the long-term relevance and consistency of awareness messages in contexts of financial constraint?
- How can emerging tools such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence be integrated into public campaigns to enhance citizen engagement?

5. Conclusion

This study presented a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of branding in the public sector, exploring its application in various contexts, including educational institutions, cities, organizational culture, social media, and public awareness campaigns. The systematic review revealed a significant increase in academic interest in the field in recent years, reflecting the growing relevance of branding as a strategic tool for stakeholder engagement, identity building, and the reinforcement of public trust.

The results demonstrated that public sector branding goes beyond aesthetics and basic communication, positioning itself as a central element in the promotion of institutional values and social transformation. The use of strategies such as emotional narratives, social media, and strategic partnerships proved essential to maximize the impact and effectiveness of branding initiatives. However, challenges such as campaign sustainability, internal resistance, and limited resources in some contexts underscore the need for more integrated and adaptive approaches.

Despite recent advancements, significant gaps remain to be explored particularly in the long-term evaluation of branding strategies and the identification of best practices across different institutional contexts. Future studies could focus on emerging digital tools, such as artificial intelligence and augmented reality, as well as inclusive approaches that ensure representation and reach among vulnerable populations.

Based on the evidence presented, it can be concluded that branding in the public sector is more than just a communication practice; it is a governance strategy that, when well implemented, can strengthen the relationship between institutions and citizens, promoting social transformation and mutual trust. The findings of this study contribute to the field of public branding by offering a conceptual foundation for future investigations and practical applications.

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