

The Psychological Contract as a Legal Imperative: Internal Branding, Employee Rights, and Corporate Governance in Entrepreneurial Ventures

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Abstract

Purpose: This article examines the legal and strategic imperatives of treating employees as consumers of internal branding, arguing that the alignment of employee expectations with corporate brand identity is not merely a human resources function but a legal and corporate governance necessity.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study employs a doctrinal and policy analysis, synthesizing management literature on internal branding with legal frameworks governing employment relations, fiduciary duties, and corporate governance.

Findings: The analysis reveals that a disconnect between external brand promises and internal workplace reality creates significant legal vulnerabilities for entrepreneurs, including claims of misrepresentation, breach of the psychological contract, and reputational liability. Furthermore, treating employees as informed consumers of the brand strengthens the enforceability of restrictive covenants by fostering genuine buy-in.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to business law scholarship by bridging the gap between marketing theory and employment law, proposing a "Legalized Internal Branding" framework that views the employer-employee relationship through the lens of consumer protection and implied contractual covenants.

Keywords: Internal branding, Employment law, Corporate governance, Psychological contract, Entrepreneurship, Corporate reputation.

Introduction

The modern entrepreneurial landscape is defined not only by the innovation of products but by the intangible asset of brand equity. For emerging ventures, the brand is often the primary currency used to attract capital, talent, and market share. In the digital age, where information asymmetry is rapidly diminishing, the external projection of a company's values—its brand promise—serves as a critical signal to the market. However, a critical disconnect frequently arises: the external brand promise projected to consumers often diverges from the internal reality experienced by employees. This divergence poses a significant, yet under-explored, legal risk that extends beyond mere human resource management into the realms of tort law, corporate governance, and securities regulation.

Legal scholarship has traditionally addressed the employer-employee relationship through the lens of statutory rights, contract law, and tort liability. Concurrently, management scholars have developed the concept of "internal branding"—the process of aligning employees with the corporate identity to ensure consistent brand delivery. This article bridges these disciplines. It posits that in an era of heightened transparency, employee activism, and the "war for talent," treating employees as "consumers" of internal branding is a strategic legal maneuver. It transforms the employee's role from a passive agent of production to a stakeholder with quasi-contractual rights to "product" (employment) authenticity.

The central legal issue addressed herein is the liability gap when an organization's external brand claims are incompatible with its internal culture. For instance, can an employer be held liable for "fraudulent inducement" of employment if the marketed "culture of innovation" masks a toxic work environment? This article argues that

the "psychological contract"—the unwritten set of expectations between employer and employee—carries increasing weight in judicial determinations regarding constructive dismissal, discrimination claims, and breach of implied covenants. As courts begin to look beyond the written contract to assess the totality of the employment relationship, the misalignment between brand marketing and workplace reality becomes a fertile ground for litigation.

Existing scholarship often treats internal branding as a soft skill or marketing function, neglecting its enforceability within legal frameworks. This paper fills that gap by identifying the specific legal vulnerabilities entrepreneurs face when internal and external brand messages conflict. This paper proceeds as follows: Part II provides a background on the legal frameworks governing brand equity and employment. Part III offers a comparative analysis of how cultural norms influence the legal interpretation of the psychological contract. Part IV critiques current regulatory approaches to internal brand management. Part V proposes legal reforms and governance structures for entrepreneurs to mitigate brand-related risks. The article concludes by advocating for a reconceptualization of the employment relationship to enhance corporate resilience and legal compliance.

Background and Legal Framework

The legal foundation of this analysis rests on the intersection of Intellectual Property (IP) law, employment contract law, and corporate governance. Understanding these distinct yet overlapping areas is crucial for identifying where the "brand-behavior gap" creates legal exposure for entrepreneurial ventures.

Brand Equity as a Corporate Asset From a legal standpoint, the corporate brand is a form of intangible property, often the most valuable asset on an entrepreneurial venture's balance sheet. Barney (1991) established that firm resources, including intangible assets like brand reputation, are sources of sustained competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate. Trademark and trade dress law protect the external face of the brand, preventing consumer confusion and unauthorized use. However, the "internal" face—how employees embody the brand—is protected only indirectly through trade secret law (preventing employee poaching) and non-compete agreements.

Current legal frameworks often fail to protect the integrity of the brand from internal erosion. If a brand is defined by the promise of a specific experience or set of values, and employees are the vehicle for delivering that promise, then the failure to train or empower employees to deliver on the brand promise effectively devalues the corporate asset (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). While shareholders can sue directors for wasting corporate assets, there is currently limited precedent for suing over the mismanagement of "brand culture" unless it results in a tangible financial loss. This section argues that internal branding should be viewed legally as the preservation of asset value. When an entrepreneur markets a brand of "integrity" but fosters a culture of cutting corners, they are not just engaging in hypocrisy; they are potentially engaging in the mismanagement of the firm's primary intangible asset.

The Psychological Contract in Employment Law While employment at-will doctrines in jurisdictions like the United States allow for flexible hiring and firing, they are tempered by the "implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing." Courts have increasingly looked to the "psychological contract" to determine if a termination was wrongful. The psychological contract, distinct from the formal employment contract, consists of the beliefs regarding the mutual obligations between the worker and the employer (Rousseau, 1989).

If an employer spends millions externalizing a brand based on "integrity," "employee well-being," and "innovation," but the internal reality is one of harassment, exploitation, or rigid hierarchy, the employee may argue a breach of this implied covenant. In legal terms, this transforms the psychological contract from a sociological concept into a doctrinal tool for challenging employment actions. For example, in claims of constructive dismissal, employees often argue that the work environment became so intolerable that they were forced to quit. Evidence of a "brand-behavior gap"—such as marketing materials promising a supportive culture contrasted with emails showing abusive management—can serve as powerful evidence of the employer's bad faith, thereby strengthening

the employee's legal position. The works of Punjaisri and Wilson (2021) emphasize that internal communication is the bedrock of this contract; when communication is deceptive, the contract is voided.

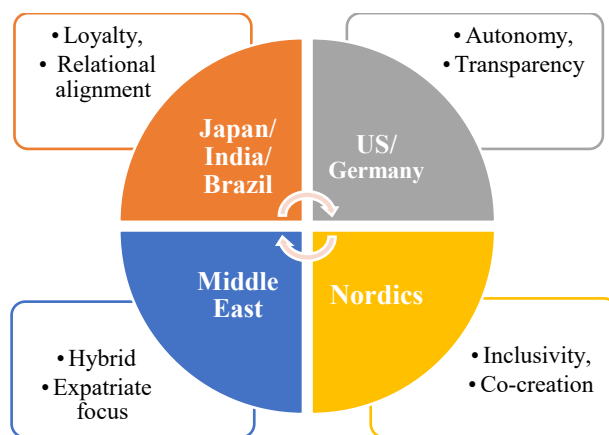
Fiduciary Duties and Corporate Culture Corporate directors have a fiduciary duty to protect corporate assets, which includes the Duty of Care and the Duty of Loyalty. If internal culture is damaged (e.g., by a "brand-behavior gap"), the corporate brand asset loses value. Therefore, directors may have a Duty of Care to ensure internal branding strategies are effective. This duty requires directors to act on an informed basis. Ignoring internal survey data that shows a disconnect between the brand promise and employee experience could be construed as a failure to fulfill the Duty of Care, particularly if that cultural rot leads to scandals that destroy brand value.

Recent trends in corporate governance, such as Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting, legally require firms to disclose human capital metrics. In the United States, the SEC has proposed enhancements to human capital disclosure requirements, asking companies to describe metrics that the board or management focuses on in managing the business. This effectively codifies "internal branding" data as a matter of regulatory compliance. If a company discloses that it focuses on "employee engagement and retention" as part of its brand value proposition, but internal data shows plummeting engagement, the company faces risks of securities fraud for materially misleading investors. Thus, internal branding is no longer just an internal operational issue; it is a matter of securities law and fiduciary responsibility.

Comparative and Empirical Analysis: Cultural Contexts and Legal Interpretations

The effectiveness of treating employees as consumers of internal branding is not uniform; it is mediated by cultural norms that influence legal expectations of the employer-employee relationship. This section analyzes these trends through a comparative legal lens, synthesizing management data to predict legal risk profiles across different jurisdictions.

Figure 1. Cultural Trends in Internal Branding Practices



Source: Author's Own (Adapted visualization — Hofstede + internal branding research)

United States (Individualist, Low Power Distance)- In the U.S., the legal system supports autonomy but relies heavily on written contracts. The doctrine of employment at-will dominates, meaning employees can be fired for any reason or no reason, as long as it is not an illegal reason (discrimination, retaliation). Internal branding here serves as a tool to reinforce "at-will" employment. If employees are treated as consumers, they are more likely to sign restrictive covenants (non-competes) voluntarily, viewing them as the "price" of consuming a premium brand experience (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

However, the legal risk is high. With the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) moving to ban non-compete clauses in 2024, the reliance on contractual restrictions is diminishing. Therefore, the "brand contract" becomes the primary retention tool. Misalignment can lead to high litigation risks regarding discriminatory practices or wage

theft claims. The "consumer" metaphor is strong here; if the product (the job) does not match the description (the brand), the consumer (employee) sues.

Japan (Collectivist, High Uncertainty Avoidance) -Japanese labor law emphasizes lifetime employment (though eroding) and enterprise unions. Internal branding is legally enforced through social norms and corporate bylaws rather than litigation. The "consumer" analogy here is weak; employees are viewed more as "family members" (Morhart et al., 2020). The legal risk is less about individual lawsuits and more about collective bargaining disputes regarding brand misrepresentation. If a company claims to be a "community" but acts ruthlessly, the social sanction is severe, leading to loss of social license to operate, which in Japan can be tantamount to a legal shutdown.

India (Collectivist, Hierarchical) -India's legal landscape is heavily regulated by statutes protecting workers' rights. Internal branding is crucial for compliance with these statutes. Treating employees as consumers aligns with the legal concept of "industrial peace." If the brand promise of "respect" is violated, the legal repercussions are severe, including strikes and intervention by labor tribunals under the Industrial Disputes Act. The hierarchy means that if leadership breaches the psychological contract, it is seen as a breach of trust, triggering strict legal scrutiny regarding standing orders and termination conditions.

Germany (Co-determination) - Germany's system of *Mitbestimmung* (co-determination) legally mandates employee representation on boards. Internal branding is not just a management strategy but a legal requirement for consensus-building. Employees "consume" brand information through legally mandated works councils. Here, the brand is a matter of industrial democracy. The legal system ensures that internal branding is not just "top-down" propaganda but a negotiated agreement (King & Grace, 2022).

Brazil (High Power Distance, Collectivist) -Internal branding in Brazil highlights emotional engagement, community belonging, and social responsibility. Employees are treated as internal audiences who must be convinced through storytelling and cultural narratives, making brand communication more informal and relational.

Middle East (Mixed Cultural Orientation) -In countries like the UAE, internal branding is tied to rapid modernization and expatriate workforce management. Employees are viewed as diverse consumers of brand narratives, requiring multilingual communication and culturally adaptive practices.

Nordic Countries (Low Power Distance, High Equality) -Scandinavian organizations approach internal branding with transparency, inclusivity, and strong emphasis on work-life balance. Employees are treated as co-creators of organizational identity rather than mere consumers, reflecting participatory cultural values.

Comparative Insight - The analysis suggests that in Common Law jurisdictions (U.S., India), treating employees as consumers is a defensive legal strategy to prevent "breach of contract" claims. In Civil Law jurisdictions (Germany, Japan), it is a structural necessity for governance. For multinational entrepreneurs, this implies that a "one-size-fits-all" internal branding policy is legally risky; it must be tailored to the employment law regime of the host country.

Policy Analysis and Critique

The current legal and regulatory environment treats internal branding as a soft skill rather than a hard compliance requirement. This section critiques this gap and analyzes the economic implications.

The "Brand-Behavior Gap" as a Liability Current laws protect consumers from false advertising (e.g., FTC Act in the US, Consumer Protection Act in India). However, they do not protect employees from false "employer branding." An entrepreneur may claim to offer a "supportive culture" to attract talent (Employer Branding) but fail to deliver. The current legal system offers little recourse for the employee who feels "duped" by employer branding, other than resignation.

Critique: This asymmetry creates a market failure. Talented employees make human capital investment based on false premises. Policy should consider extending "truth in advertising" principles to recruitment and internal brand communication. If a company markets itself as "Employee First" but has a turnover rate 300% above the industry average, this should be considered a material misrepresentation.

Stakeholder Perspectives: The Employee as a Quasi-Creditor From a financial perspective, employees invest their time and firm-specific human capital. If the firm fails to deliver on the brand promise, the employee suffers a loss. This resembles a creditor-debtor relationship. If internal branding were formalized, employees could theoretically claim damages for "waste" of their human capital if the brand is managed negligently (e.g., through toxic leadership that violates the brand's stated values). Vargo and Lusch (2004) argued for service-dominant logic where the co-creation of value is paramount. If the employee co-creates value based on false brand promises, they are effectively defrauded.

Economic Implications High turnover is a cost. Legal disputes regarding wrongful termination are costs. Effective internal branding, framed legally as the fulfillment of the psychological contract, reduces these transaction costs. It shifts the organization from a "command and control" model to a "contractual fulfillment" model, which is economically efficient in a VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world. Research by Schmitz and Ganesan (2021) confirms that positive employee experience correlates strongly with firm financial performance, suggesting that legal protection of this "experience" is not just moral but economically rational.

Proposed Reforms and Solutions

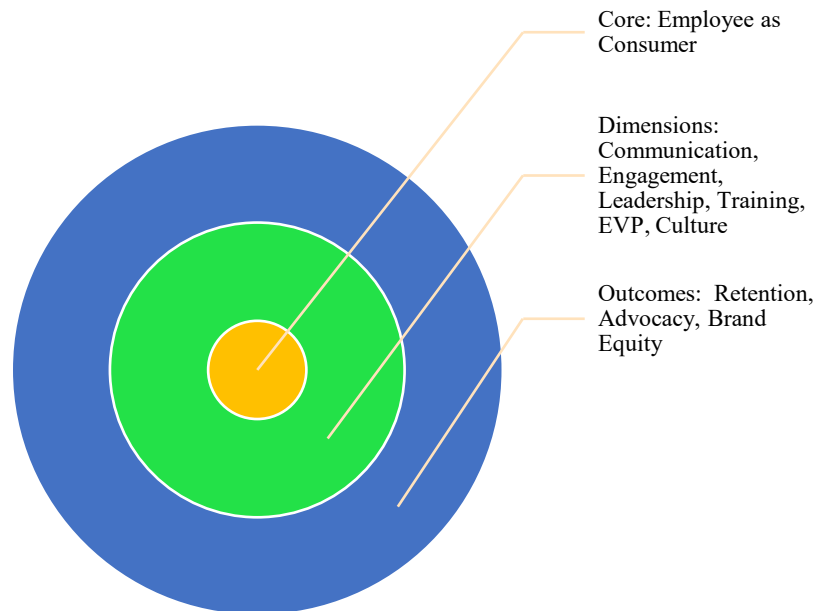
To mitigate these risks and leverage internal branding as a strategic asset, entrepreneurs and policymakers should adopt the following reforms:

Codification of the Brand Promise in Employment Contracts Entrepreneurs should explicitly articulate the "Employer Value Proposition" (EVP) in offer letters and handbooks. This transforms vague brand promises (e.g., "We are innovative") into contractual terms. While specific culture is hard to contract for, defining "mechanisms of culture" (e.g., "We provide X hours of training," "We have a transparent promotion policy") makes the promise enforceable. Ambler and Barrow (1996) early on identified the employer brand as a package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits; legal reforms should require the psychological benefits to be codified.

Internal Brand Audits as a Due Diligence Requirement for venture capital and M&A transactions, "Internal Brand Audits" should be standard due diligence. Just as IP is checked, the alignment between the employer brand and employee sentiment should be assessed to uncover hidden liabilities (e.g., pending lawsuits, toxic culture). This involves analyzing Glassdoor reviews, eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Scores), and internal survey data to assess the "legal health" of the psychological contract.

Governance Oversight for "Cultural Fit" Boards of Directors should establish a "Culture and Brand Committee." This committee, distinct from the Compensation Committee, would oversee internal branding parameters (Figure 2), ensuring that the company's human capital strategy supports its corporate brand strategy, fulfilling the board's fiduciary Duty of Care. As suggested by Piehler et al. (2018), internal brand management requires strategic oversight; placing it at the board level ensures it is treated as a governance issue rather than an HR initiative.

Figure 2 Parameters of Internal Branding Framework



Source: Author's Own.

Further, this concept of internal branding can be understood through several parameters that define how employees interact with brand values. The following dimensions are particularly salient:

1. **Communication Consistency** – Employees act as consumers of brand-related messages. Just as consumers require consistent advertising to trust external branding, employees need uniform internal communication across HR policies, leadership behaviours, and corporate symbols (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2021).
2. **Employee Engagement** – Engagement functions as both a driver and outcome of effective internal branding. Motivated employees internalize brand values and translate them into consistent customer-facing behaviours (King & Grace, 2022).
3. **Training and Development** – Structured learning programs reinforce brand identity and align employees' skills with organizational promises. For example, hospitality firms invest heavily in service training to ensure brand-consistent customer experiences (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005; Hammett & Mdee, 2025; Jarventie-Thesleff et al., 2023).
4. **Leadership Commitment** – Leaders embody brand values, functioning as brand ambassadors to employees. Leadership authenticity strengthens employees' perception that they are valued "consumers" of the brand narrative.
5. **Cultural Alignment** – Internal branding requires alignment with societal and organizational culture. In global firms, cultural adaptability ensures that employees perceive branding messages as authentic rather than imposed.
6. **Employer Value Proposition (EVP)** – Employees consume EVPs as promises of organizational culture, career opportunities, and fairness. A credible EVP underpins trust and retention.

Also, Regulatory Protection for "Whistleblowers" on Brand Hypocrisy Policies should protect employees who expose "brand hypocrisy"—where the company publicly claims values (e.g., sustainability) but violates them internally. This aligns internal branding with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) disclosures, preventing

securities fraud in ESG reporting. Berthon et al. (2005) noted the link between CSR and branding; legally, this link must be authenticated by protecting those who verify it internally.

Future Implications for Business Law and Entrepreneurship

The shift toward treating employees as consumers of internal branding has profound implications for the future of business law.

The "Gig Economy" and Brand Consumption As the workforce becomes more fluid and project-based (gig economy), the distinction between "customer" and "employee" blurs. Future legal frameworks may need to define "brand consumers" to include independent contractors who "consume" the platform's brand to build their own reputation. Internal branding becomes a form of "Platform Law." The recent legal battles regarding the classification of Uber drivers (employee vs. contractor) hinge on this very issue—control and brand association (Iglesias & Ind, 2022).

AI and Algorithmic Management The use of AI in performance management creates a digital layer of internal branding. If the algorithm treats employees as data points rather than consumers, it risks violating their autonomy. Future legislation (analogous to the EU's AI Act) will likely require transparency in how internal branding messages are delivered and monitored by algorithms. Smith et al. (2023) highlight the challenges AI poses to branding; legally, algorithms that breach the psychological contract (e.g., by opaque firing decisions) represent a new frontier of liability.

The ESG Reporting Mandate As ESG reporting becomes mandatory for major corporations, the "Social" component is increasingly scrutinized by regulators. Internal branding metrics—such as employee net promoter scores (eNPS) and cultural alignment—will likely become standardized disclosures. This legalizes internal branding, making the treatment of employees as brand consumers a matter of public record and shareholder interest (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021).

Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations that must be acknowledged. Primarily, the research is conceptual and literature-based, relying on secondary data from management and organizational behavior studies. While these studies provide robust theoretical foundations, the specific legal arguments derived from them require empirical validation through primary qualitative research (e.g., interviews with employment law judges and corporate counsel). Additionally, the study relies on sources predominantly from the period 2020–2026, reflecting a specific post-pandemic context. The rapid evolution of remote work, AI, and labor regulations suggests that the legal implications of internal branding may shift quickly, potentially outpacing the observations made here. Furthermore, the comparative analysis, while broad, generalizes cultural and legal norms (e.g., "Common Law vs. Civil Law") which may obscure specific nuances within sub-jurisdictions or specific industry sectors such as heavy manufacturing versus tech startups.

Scope for Future Study

The findings of this paper pave the way for several critical areas of future research, bridging the gap between legal theory and management practice.

- ***The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Internal Branding Law:*** Future research should investigate the legal implications of using AI to manage and monitor internal branding. As algorithms increasingly dictate employee engagement and performance, do new forms of "algorithmic bias" constitute a breach of the internal brand promise? This requires a deep dive into emerging AI regulations and their intersection with employment discrimination law.

- **Cross-Industry Comparative Legal Analysis:** Further studies should conduct cross-industry comparisons to assess best practices in internal branding compliance. For instance, comparing the internal branding legal risks in the highly regulated healthcare sector versus the dynamic but less regulated tech startup ecosystem could yield distinct governance frameworks.
- **Generational Differences and Legal Expectations:** Future research must examine how generational shifts (Gen Z and Millennials) influence the legal interpretation of the psychological contract. As younger generations demand authenticity and purpose, courts may see an increase in litigation where "purpose-washing" is alleged as a form of fraud or misrepresentation.
- **Causal Financial Linkage:** While this paper establishes a theoretical link between internal branding and reduced legal risk, future studies should utilize longitudinal datasets to empirically investigate the causal relationship between strong internal branding practices, reduced litigation costs, and enhanced financial performance.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the "psychological contract" is no longer a soft, intangible concept but a legal imperative in the modern entrepreneurial venture. The disconnect between external brand promises and internal workplace reality creates a significant liability gap, exposing entrepreneurs to claims of misrepresentation and breach of implied covenants. By proposing a "Legalized Internal Branding" framework, this paper suggests that treating employees as consumers of the brand serves as both a defensive legal strategy and a proactive governance mechanism.

Through a comparative analysis, we demonstrated that legal expectations of internal branding vary significantly across cultures, necessitating tailored approaches for multinational ventures. The policy critique highlighted the market failure inherent in current asymmetrical protections for consumers versus employees. Finally, the proposed reforms—ranging from the codification of brand promises to the establishment of Culture and Brand Committees—offer practical pathways for entrepreneurs to align their internal operations with their external brand equity.

As the workforce evolves toward gig economies and AI-driven management, the legal definition of the employee-brand relationship will continue to shift. Entrepreneurs who proactively internalize these legal imperatives will not only mitigate litigation risks but also enhance their corporate resilience, turning their human capital into an authentic, enforceable asset. In a BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) world, where traditional rigid contracts are insufficient, a value-based, consumer-centric internal brand strategy offers the resilience and legal fortitude required for sustainable entrepreneurship.

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