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# To be or not to be...green, that is the question

A qualitative study on the roles of brand culture, brand image and brand vision in the context of “green” corporate brands, and the pitfalls when these elements are not aligned

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** To explore the roles of brand culture, brand image and brand vision in the context of “green” corporate brands, and identify pitfalls when these elements are not aligned.

**Methodology:** Qualitative research method using primary data (interviews with former and current employees) and secondary data.

**Findings:** In this paper, there are several findings derived from an employee perspective and related to “green” culture, “green” image, and “green” vision, the three main elements of corporate branding. Considering these elements in the context of “green” branding within organizations, numerous examples of inconsistencies become evident. These stem from misalignment between internal elements such as corporate culture (values and behaviors) and vision, and external elements such as brand image. This results in tendencies such as “green cynicism” among employees, perceptions of “green hypocrisy” and “green labeling”. On the other hand, lack of communication when it comes to “green” shared vision is reflected in unclear goals and guidelines regarding “green” behaviors, which in turn lead to poorly managed “green” expectations and inconsistency in “green” employee behavior.

**Originality/value:** The originality of the paper is manifested in its unique approach to exploring concepts such as green corporate branding, for which there is limited research available. This study provides value by combining well-established models of corporate branding with more recent research on the "green" aspects of brand vision, culture and image. Simultaneously, it views these topics in a unique perspective by identifying pitfalls in relation to green corporate branding, a subject that has not been researched before.

**Keywords:** Corporate branding, green brand culture, green brand image, green shared vision, green corporate branding

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

Corporate branding, from a managerial point of view, is defined as a continuous strategic process of capturing the identity of an organization and communicating it in an attractive and consistent way in order to receive the support of the internal and external stakeholders (Balmer, 2011; De Roeck, Maon & Lejeune, 2013). The ultimate goal of corporate branding is to create competitive advantage through the gained stakeholder support (De Roeck, Maon & Lejeune, 2013). Gaining stakeholder support includes, among others, gaining support from both customers and employees. Previous research has demonstrated that for a brand to be strong in the eyes of consumers, it needs to be strong internally (Melin, 2002).

Furthermore, Hatch and Schultz (2001) argue that there are three elements that need to be aligned in order for a corporate brand to be strong. The elements proposed by Hatch and Schultz (2001) are culture, image and vision.

The element of culture refers to employees' feelings about the company. According to De Chernatony (1999), there is a need to align the values and the behavior of the employees with the values of the organization, which underlines the significance of corporate culture. The employees are also seen as instrumental to the relationship-building process with all stakeholders (Balmer and Soenen, 1999). Furthermore, employees need to be recognised as a brand's "ambassadors" (Hemsley, 1998). Employees constitute the interface between a brand's internal and external environments and can have a powerful impact on consumers' perceptions of both the brand and the organization (Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991). The brand image is, as put by Hatch and Schultz (2001, p.130) is referred to as "the outside world's overall impression of the company". Brand image is

thus concerned with the outside, the external side, how external stakeholders perceive the brand (Kapferer, 2012). Furthermore, the vision is all about "top management's aspirations for the company" (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, p.130). The brand vision is tied with the brand purpose, and it has been argued that the brand "derives its energy from its specific niche, vision and ideals" (Kapferer, 2012, p.32).

Recently, "green variants" of these concepts have emerged. Within this paper, green refers to being environmentally sustainable, which is about "acting in a way that ensures future generations have the natural resources available to live an equal, if not better, way of life as current generations" (Evans, 2020). Needless to say, this is something many companies implement today within their business.

The three concepts that will be discussed are thus the "green" variants of the three elements proposed by (Hatch and Schultz 2001).

First, "Green Corporate/Organizational culture" is a relatively new topic of research, and there is a scarcity of studies on the topic. It is referred to by numerous terms such as "pro-environmental", "sustainable", or "eco-friendly" (Imran & Jingzu, 2022). Second, the emerging concept of "Green brand image", is defined as "a whole range of impressions, conceptions and apprehensions towards a brand in the customers' memory which is correlated to the sustainability and eco-friendly concerns" (Chen, 2010, p. 309). Third, "Green shared vision" has been described as "a clear and common strategic direction of collective environmental goals and aspirations that has been internalized by members of an organization" (Chen, et al. 2014 p. 1170).

However, more recently, it has been shown that companies tend to highlight their "green" aspects of the business to be seen in a more

favorable light among employees (Sulich, Sołducho-Pelc & Ferasso, 2021). Thus, it might be problematic for companies who highlight their “green-ness” more than what it actually is. This is because if the image, culture and vision does not resonate, the brand is weakened (Hatch and Schultz 2001). Moreover, it is crucial for the brand’s desired values to be in line with the employee’s values (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). If this does not happen, there can be a detrimental effect on the brand image’s credibility (Garas, Mahran & Mohamed, 2018). It is therefore of interest and practical relevance for managers to become aware of these “new” green versions of misalignments between the three elements, and therefore be able to detect such pitfalls before they weaken the brand. This study aims to add to the limited research available and aims to fill the gap by identifying pitfalls in relation to green corporate branding, a subject that has not been researched before. Within this paper we will therefore look at these concepts in terms of green corporate branding, and outline pitfalls when these elements are not aligned.

## **Purpose**

To explore the roles of brand culture, brand image and brand vision in the context of “green” corporate brands, and identify pitfalls when these elements are not aligned.

## **Literature review**

### *Corporate branding*

Hatch and Schultz (2003) proposed a model for identifying the dimensions of the corporate brand, and a direction for alignment of these elements. The framework identifies three dimensions that constitute the corporate brand - strategic vision,

organizational culture and corporate image (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). Below, the role of these three elements are placed in the context of green corporate brands. The literature review is divided in three parts, with a focus on discussing what nowadays is referred to as green corporate culture, green brand image and green brand vision.

### *The role of brand culture*

Corporate culture is claimed to be one of the driving forces for brand building (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Graham et al. 2022). According to Hatch & Schultz (2001), corporate culture encompasses the organization’s values and behaviors. This approach is echoed in the research done by Graham et al. (2022), which distinguished between ideals that the employees strive to fulfill (values), and living the values on a daily basis (behaviors). Therefore, we can conclude that values and behaviors of employees are the elements that shape corporate culture.

Chernatony (1999), was among the first to place emphasis on employees as an integral part of the brand building process, considering the role of culture and aligning the values and behaviors of the employees with the ones that the brand desires to project. This idea is further explored in a research by Garas et al. (2018) who argue that a strong corporate culture can enhance the consistency of brand supporting behavior of employees. Managers first need to define a brand’s values and then ensure employees’ values and behavior are consistent with them.

According to the available research insights, green corporate culture outlines the strong willingness of an organization and its employees to prioritize looking for solutions to environmental challenges (Roscoe et al. 2018). Roscoe et al. (2018) also suggest that any research that does not take into consideration corporate culture when

exploring the green behavior of employees, is incomplete.

When it comes to the link between corporate culture and green branding, the more the organization communicates and raises awareness about its green practices to its employees, the more they are likely to support with green behavior (Fok, Zee & Morgan, 2022). Ways to involve the “green” aspect in the organizational culture consist of creating a safe workplace for open communication, self-expression and idea exchange about the influence of the company’s actions. In that way, employees can feel involved in the process of becoming “green” and are more likely to support with green behavior (Gupta & Kumar, 2013). In some cases, however, if there is a discrepancy between the communicated green corporate culture and its execution on a daily basis, instability occurs (Sulich, Sołoducho-Pelc & Ferasso, 2021).

### *The role of brand image*

Jeanquart and Mangold (2004) discusses how the desired brand image can be internalized by employees and motivating them to project that image in contact with other stakeholders. Thus, how much employees consider their organization fulfilling what Jeanquart and Mangold (2004) calls the “psychological contracts” i.e. perceptions of what the employees expect from their employer, is key. This is because the desired image the organization wants to portray, can indeed be communicated to employees through these psychological contracts. Furthermore, Jeanquart and Mangold (2004) argues for the importance of consistent messages as being pivotal in order for employees to understand the brand image they are being a part of portraying.

Aivazidou (2018) noted that a solid green corporate image is essential, especially in industries with high negative externalities

and gave the example of firms with high water wastage. A green brand image is helpful to a brand to enhance its competitive advantages (Zameer et al. 2020). Previous studies showed that having green brand image influences perceptions positively (Jeong et al. 2014; Zameer et al. 2020). However, Hatch and Schultz (2001) concluded that when stakeholders find that an organization's culture does not match their subjective image, it often spells disaster for the company. Misalignment usually happens because the departments do not talk to one another. Employees are the interactor with stakeholders, which means the employee is the core to making stakeholders emerge the company's brand image. Moreover, Hatch and Schultz (2001) noted that to identify image-culture gaps, managers must compare what the employees say with customers and other stakeholders. Managers must ensure employees' behavior coincides with the company's culture and image.

### *The role of shared brand vision*

A brand’s vision is a pivotal part in forming a corporate brand’s identity, and serves to inspire employees (Greyser and Urde, 2019). In addition, Larwood, et al. (1995) found that vision is perceived among executives as being strategic and should be shared and communicated, and the same is true for green shared vision (Chen, et al. 2014). Furthermore, Chang (2020) concluded that when the green shared vision of a company is aligned with employee aspirations, employees are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behavior for the environment, i.e. to engage in “green” activities beyond what is required to keep their job. Furthermore, Afsar et al. (2019) tested the association between pro-environmental behavior and green shared vision, and found a stronger association for employees with “high environmental locus of control” (Afsar et al. 2019, p.308), the latter

referring to how much individuals consider themselves responsible for an outcome.

Moreover, if management creates a vision for a brand that employees do not support nor understand, a vision-culture gap occurs. This can result in employees experiencing emotions such as frustration, suspicion, and cynicism, as management oftentimes are prone to blame and label the employees as the problem (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). Furthermore, organizational cynicism is about the negative attitudes that employees can have towards their organization. Organization cynicism tends to make employees likely to resist change, and oftentimes managers are the subject of cynical attitudes (Wanous, et al. (1997). Such cynical attitudes among employees have been found when the organization is involved in greenwashing behavior (Li et al. 2022). Li et al. (2022) also found that the effect was stronger for employees with strong green values, compared to employees with less strong green values. Subsequently, Li et al. (2022) also found that cynicism leads to a decline in work performance. In addition, Al-Swidi et al. (2021) found that employees play a crucial role when it comes to the improvement of an organization's environmental performance.

## **Methodology**

### *Research design*

The research strategy chosen for this study was qualitative, as the research area of green corporate brands together have created a plethora of “new” concepts by adding the

word “green” before. Even more so, the phenomena of brand culture, brand image and brand vision in the context of “green” corporate brands together with the pitfalls when these elements are not aligned, remains unexplored. Thus, the qualitative research strategy was chosen to study the phenomena more in depth. Moreover, to generate an understanding of why it is a certain way (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019).

The research method chosen was semi-structured interviews and secondary data. The argument for choosing semi-structured interviews is that it would provide different opinions and variation in the answers (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019), which would help answer the research question. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, focus groups were not deemed appropriate as respondents might feel uncomfortable sharing “negative green experiences” with others. Additionally, the interviews were conducted online to make it possible to reach people that otherwise would not have been able to participate. Furthermore, the reasoning behind choosing secondary data is to complement the answers with relevant material that would provide further understanding into the topic.

### *Operationalisation*

The operationalisation table is used in order to convert theories and/or concepts from the literature review into observations and/or variables (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Within this study, interview questions were written out of the concepts and sub-concepts, which were derived from the literature review.

**Table 1.** Operationalisation table

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Subconcept</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Brand Culture</b>	Green corporate culture	To what extent do you think the value “green” is embedded within organization X, externally and internally?	(Imran & Jingzu, 2022) (Roscoe et al. 2018) (Hatch and Schultz, 2001)
	Green brand supporting behavior	In what ways do the employees of the company act/do not act green? Can you give some examples?	(Harris & Chernatony, 2001) (Fok, Zee & Morgan, 2022) (Garas, Mahran & Mohamed, 2018)
<b>Brand Image</b>	Psychological contracts (“green” expectations not fulfilled, becomes a gap)	Is the company consistent in delivering green messages and/or meeting green expectations to the employees? How so?	(Jeanquart and Mangold, 2004) (Hatch and Schultz, 2001)
	Perceptions about culture/image mismatch	To what extent do you perceive that the green image the company communicates externally matches the employee behavior and values? Can you give some examples?	(Zameer et al. 2020) (Jeong et al. 2014) (Aivazidou, 2018) (Hatch and Schultz, 2001)
<b>Brand Vision</b>	Green shared vision	Do you feel that the company inspires you to partake in green activities towards reaching green goals? How/How not?	(Greyser and Urde, 2019) (Chen, et al. 2014) (Larwood, et al. 1995) (Hatch and Schultz, 2001) (Chang, 2020)
	Organizational cynicism - Attitudes towards organization	Do you feel that the organization is honest and sincere in their efforts for being green/sustainable? Why?/Why not?	(Hatch and Schultz, 2001) (Wanous, et al. 1997) (Li et al. 2022) (Al-Swidi et al. 2021)

### *Sample Selection*

The sampling method chosen was generic purposive sampling. This sampling method was chosen as it is done with a purpose (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Respondents were selected a priori with the following criterion; the respondent had worked for, or were currently working for an organization where employees felt disconnected from the “green” initiatives. To explain this criterion more; the disconnection could take shape in the form of employees feeling distrust towards managers' capability of following through on “green goals”, or a general

tendency for employees to want more green initiatives, while not feeling heard by management. It could also be employees who have worked for/or are working for an organization which upholds a “green image”, while employees do not consider this consistent throughout the organization. The table below shows the respondents' age, gender and current working status, that is, if they currently are working at the company where they felt disconnected from the “green” initiatives, or have worked at such a company before. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the companies were given coded names.

**Table 2.** Respondent table

<b>Respondent number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Work status</b>	<b>Company coded name</b>
Respondent 1	Female	33	Former employee	Real Estate Company X
Respondent 2	Male	62	Former employee	Organization X
Respondent 3	Male	25	Employee	Volunteer Management Company X
Respondent 4	Female	25	Employee	Agricultural Company X
Respondent 5	Male	29	Former employee	Bank Company X

The secondary data chosen was conducted with a search strategy, with Google as the main search engine. All information was fact checked with various sources to confirm that there was some consistency. For example, blog posts or news articles were compared and decided to be used only if the content

could be found in for example, other blog sports and news articles as well (Hox and Boeije, 2005).

### *Data Analysis Method*

The data analysis method was inspired by grounded theory. An iterative approach was



taken, where the empirical material was analyzed simultaneously as the data collection and coding took place. Open coding was used, where the researchers were looking for categories, as well as possible

connections between them (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Below, the concepts, categories together with a description is shown.

**Table 3.** Coding table

Concept	Category	Description
<b>Behavioral inconsistency among employees</b>	Inconsistency	<b>Behavioral inconsistency among employees refers to:</b> Green efforts of employees differ. Some employees tried, however, some employees did not care at all about green activities. Some had their own initiatives.
<b>Green cynicism</b>		<b>Green cynicism refers to:</b> Respondents feel that nothing is done or communicated towards the employees in terms of sustainability; companies did not meet green expectations among employees
<b>Green hypocrisy</b>		<b>Green hypocrisy refers to:</b> Discrepancy between internal/external in terms of communication, behavior, efforts and activities; the efforts are strongly focused externally, the company's brand image being perceived as "green", establishing themselves as "green" brands to the stakeholders and consumers.
<b>Green bragging</b>	Green puffery	<b>Green bragging refers to:</b> How an organization has green vision and culture, but chooses to

		<p>portray an even more green image to reach certain environmental classifications; how a company talks about what it achieves abroad, but does not do it in its home country.</p>
<b>Green labeling</b>		<p><b>Green labeling refers to:</b> companies use CO2 compensation in order to easily place the "green" label on the brand; concerns about the organization using the "green" agenda for economic purposes; how a company talks about what it achieves abroad, but does not do it in its home country</p>
<b>Green guidelines</b>	Lack of communication	<p><b>Green guidelines refers to:</b> Employees feel there is lack of guidance when it comes to "green" behavior. They believe that if there are some clear rules and guidelines of what is required to be "green", that would help.</p>
<b>Unclear goals</b>		<p><b>Unclear goals refers to:</b> Guidelines no one reads, were not talked about or considered important. Sense of feeling that we cannot do so much; Sometimes people were praised for their pro-environmental behavior, while also considering that the green tendencies are not always followed.</p>

## Empirical investigation

### *Primary data*

The interview with respondent 1, who worked at real estate company X stated that the company did not talk much about green goals with the employees. Thus, employees were not aware of the organization's green goals. However, some employees did try to do their own green initiatives, but it was more because these employees themselves wanted to. Other employees did not consider it as important. The company also did not address employees who were considering some aspects of the organization as "not green", as seen in the quote by respondent 1 (real estate company X) below.

"I know one employee after the centralisation of the organization, who felt that she had to drive a lot everyday as she had to work in regions that were rather far from each other. She realized she was driving so much and felt like it was not very green. She did not feel good about that. But she did not question it but tried to do the best of it. The company kind of forgot this aspect, how the employees feel about it."

In the interview with respondent 2 (Organization X), the following quote was stated.

"It was not that they did not want to be green, because they did, and the organization was classified as green, mainly due to producing its energy from renewable sources. But seeing it from a wider perspective the organization was not better than many other similar organizations, due to that there were limitations in taking care of its residual waste. Those limitations were not spoken about. The organization has an efficient solution, taking care of a valuable resource (the residual waste), so it is not the solution itself that is bad. It is just that the organization

chose to blow their own horn and praise itself as "greener" than others, while at the same time paying a company in another region to burn its residual waste, which is more or less buying itself a cleaner environmental classification, due to the lower classification when burning residual waste."

In the interview with respondent 4, who worked in an agricultural company X, it was stated that the company has partly realized "green" and "sustainable". The company has a "paperless" rule, and asks employees to turn off the lights or air conditioning immediately after using. The respondent thinks that the company is struggling to be a green company, and not all employees care about "green" activities. Respondent 4 (agricultural company X) stated:

"My company often calls on the employees to consistently save electricity and water from delivering green expectations. It has some effect. Our company encourages the employees to participate in environmental activities. For example, the management may verbally praise employees for their environmental behavior. But sometimes in the company, the air conditioning temperature will be turned on too low, which I consider that it consumes more unnecessary energy and it is not environmentally friendly."

In regards to respondents 3 (Volunteer Management Company X) and 5 (Bank Company X), both organizations are regarded by stakeholders and customers as a "green" standard for their industries. Both respondents use the terms "internal" and "external" to describe the "green" efforts of the organizations. There is a strong opposition between the external and internal aspects in terms of communication, behavior, efforts and activities. In both cases, the efforts are strongly focused externally, the company's brand image being perceived as "green":

Respondent 3 (Volunteer Management Company X) states; "The external extent of the value "green" goes to the point of which the brand is considered, and rewarded, for being the most sustainable, even the first circular brand in the industry."

Respondent 5 (Bank Company X) states; "Company X is perceived externally as one of the most sustainable banks in the Netherlands/Europe. Committing to a greener future has always been one of the company's mottos and it takes pride in positioning itself as an example in the green fight in the fintech and traditional banking industries."

However, when considering the "internal" aspect (the culture and vision) of the "green"-ness of those brands, there is surprisingly little that the (former) employees can think of:

Respondent 5 (Bank Company X); "...I can't think of any (green) initiatives, and this is for the 2 years I've been working there. I also can't think of any (green) activities initiated by the employees themselves."

Respondent 3 (Volunteer Management Company X); "Almost nothing is done or communicated towards the employees in terms of sustainability."

Moreover, respondents feel there is "lack of guidance" when it comes to "green" behavior. They believe that "if there are some clear rules and guidelines of what is required to be "green", that would help". Additionally, Respondent 3 (Volunteer Management Company X), expressed their concerns about the organization using the "green" agenda for economic purposes. For example, it was mentioned: "...the green label is used as a reason to overprice the users and underpay the employees for any green product" On the other hand, according to both Respondent 3 (Volunteer Management Company X) and Respondent 5 (Bank Company X), it is

hypocritical that the companies use CO2 compensation in order to easily place the "green" label on the brand.

### *Secondary data*

The following quote was translated from Swedish, from an article published in 2019 in a Swedish agricultural newspaper, where a co-owner of the Swedish dairy brand Arla was interviewed. Gustawson, (2019) states:

"My own company Arla compensates for the climate by planting trees in a developing country?! Why Arla even compensates for the climate is a mystery to me. Sure, trees are needed in the world, but more cows are needed in Sweden, that's for real. It would have been very much appreciated by me as a co-owner if they had communicated their climate compensation by saying "If you buy our Swedish dairy products, you are ensuring the preservation of invaluable important crop rotation on Swedish farms. You ensure the preservation of threatened Swedish biological diversity". Even if one finds it easier to adopt climate measures abroad, for some strange reason, we all have to talk about it here at home, this is where we can make enormous climate benefits through the simple act of choosing Swedish ingredients."

## **Analysis**

### *The role of culture*

Employing the results from the interview and the secondary data, several insights in relation to the role of culture in developing green brands were derived. Firstly, based on the idea that corporate culture consists of values (ideals that employees strive to fulfill) and behaviors (living the values) (Graham et al, 2022), a clash between these two elements of corporate culture can be observed in several of the interview cases. Green hypocrisy, for instance, is a tendency common in most of the interviews, referring

to the employees questioning how “green” the culture of their organization really is. Misalignment between values and behavior is researched by (Sulich, Sołoducho-Pelc & Ferasso, 2021), also observing that instability occurs when there is a discrepancy between the communicated green culture and its execution. Another insight stemming from this is that employees seem to regard “values” as something that the company communicates only externally, rather than something it tries to infuse in the organization itself. This opposition of internal/external is also often related to brand image, as outlined below, and it shows that employees perceive “green” values mostly in terms of corporate brand image, rather than “green” corporate culture.

The other pillar of corporate culture, brand behavior, relates to the tendency of behavioral inconsistency among employees. Connecting this to the notion that a strong corporate culture leads to consistent brand supporting behavior of employees (Garas, Mahran & Mohamed, 2018), we can argue that in fact, the opposite is in effect concerning green corporate culture. Thus, a weak corporate culture results in inconsistent “green” brand behavior. Moreover, the more the company ignores employees’ green efforts and needs, the less encouraged they are to exhibit “green” brand behavior. This becomes evident in some of the interviews where respondents report that the organization did not pay attention to how employees feel about their green needs not being met. Additionally, (Fok, Zee & Morgan, 2022) argued that communication from the organization’s side to the employees about green practices and goals causes increased support and green behavior. In this case, the research reveals that behavioral inconsistency results from lack of communication by the organization’s leadership in the form of clear guidelines, goals and support.

### *The role of brand image*

It has been observed that there often is an inconsistency between the external brand image and employees’ green brand expectations. Thus, as employees’ “green” expectations are not fulfilled, negative attitudes are prone to arise. This is in alignment with the discussion by Jeanquart and Mangold (2004), who asserts that if expectations are not met, i.e. the “psychological contracts” between employee and employer are violated, the company’s internal reputation will be damaged. Moreover, as employees whose expectations are met tend to internalize the brand image and project it to other stakeholders (Jeanquart and Mangold, 2004), it can be assumed that the reverse is also true. Thus, it can then be argued that unmotivated employees are unable to project a green image in contact with other stakeholders. This could prove detrimental for the brand, which is then not only failing to meet the expectations of employees, but also to uphold a “green” brand image in the eyes of other stakeholders.

Furthermore, one interesting aspect found was that sometimes even though some green initiatives were undertaken, they were not really always understood or supported by employees. Perhaps this could somehow be related to the different industries that these interviewed employees were working/had worked in. Moreover, as industries with high negative externalities generally need a “stronger” green brand image in the eyes of the public (Aivazidou, 2018; Zameer et al. 2020; Jeong et al. 2014), it might be deduced that the employees working within such industries tend to become more critical as well, if the external brand image does not match the internal. In this way, employees working within industries with less negative externalities might also, on a general level, be less invested in these issues. However, this

remains a recommendation for further research to study.

Another tendency was inconsistent “green” behavior inside of the company. It could be that the company had a green vision, but either managers or employees “acted green”, or that some employees acted “green” and others did not. Furthermore, it could be that sometimes managers encouraged employees to “act green”, while at other times themselves not displaying “green” behavior. This can be connected to the findings by Hatch and Schultz (2001) who argue that image-culture gaps often occur because departments do not talk to one another. Moreover, to ensure that employees' behavior coincides with the company's culture and image, managers must compare what the employees say with customers and other stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2001). It can thus be argued that when discussing gaps related to image and culture, it is very much also relevant in the context of green brands, as when it comes to green image and green culture, there are oftentimes green-image and green-culture gaps.

### *The role of shared brand vision*

One clear tendency that was seen was a lack of guidance and shared goals. Moreover, it was stated by several respondents that there was an ambiguity in what should be done, what was done, and/or how, and even if, the respondents as employees could, or even should, partake in these activities. In terms of green shared vision (Chen, et al. 2014), it can thus be argued that the lack thereof contributes to the aforementioned situation. Indeed, this ambiguity was also paralleled with another tendency, namely, cynicism toward the organization, where employees exhibited negative attitudes to what was, or what was not, being done. This cynicism (Wanous, et al. 1997; Li et al. 2022; Hatch and Schultz, 2001), was frequently found to be directed towards the tendency of the

organizations to brag, or label themselves as greener than they actually were.

However, it was also discussed that some employees within the organizations appeared to care more for being green than other employees, which can be argued to be connected to the findings by Afsar et al. (2019), who found that individuals with “high environmental locus of control” (Afsar et al. 2019, p.308), showed a stronger association between pro-environmental behavior and the green shared vision. Thus, it appears that if employees felt that they could affect the “green” outcome, it is likely that a green shared vision could motivate them to engage in pro environmental behavior. Indeed, this is in line with what a vision should do, inspire employees (Greyser and Urde, 2019). For this reason, it can be argued that some employees might consider their efforts to be “a drop in the bucket”, and therefore simply not choose to become invested in the green aspects of the company. In this sense, to overcome this challenge, it can be suggested that companies should put more effort into showing employees that their efforts matter. However, this only works if the vision is communicated (Larwood, et al. 1995), and not only externally but also internally. Thus, as it was also found that the green aspects often were communicated more externally than internally, this discrepancy can be argued to be the reason that employees considered some organizations hypocritical. The suggestion to overcome the challenge of this is thus to communicate the vision more internally. This can be somewhat related to the findings by Li et al. (2022), who found that employees tend to get negative attitudes towards organizations involved in greenwashing, and that the effect is stronger for employees with strong green values. In this light, it can be argued that employees with strong green values can even be considered a strong green resource, who organizations would be better off involving

in their green efforts. This is supported by Kaid Al-Swidi et al. (2021), who found that employees play a pivotal part when it comes to the improvement of an organization's environmental performance. In a similar manner, aligning employee aspirations with the green shared vision is also likely to inspire employees to partake in organizational citizenship behavior (Chang, 2020), further adding support to the pivotal part employees with strong green values play in an organization.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, several key findings are discussed in relation to the roles of culture, brand image and shared vision of a “green” corporate brand.

Firstly, in light of the role of corporate culture, it becomes evident that misalignment between values and behaviors is a huge hurdle in the process of building a green corporate culture. As such, it can cause inconsistency in wanted behaviors and mistrust. It results in employees perceiving the organization's green behavior as “green hypocrisy” as it only manifests itself externally, rather than internally. Similarly, among employees there appears to be a pattern of confusion when defining corporate values, as they are seen mostly as something relating to external communication, and not to internal dissemination. Another observed tendency among employees is behavioral inconsistency related to “green” values. Weak corporate culture is likely to result in inconsistent brand behavior. By the same token, if the company ignores the green needs and efforts of employees, they will lose their support and therefore, they will cease to realize the “green” values. On the other hand, lack of communication by the organization's leadership in the form of clear guidelines, goals and support results in behavioral

inconsistency. Based on these tendencies, it is therefore advisable for leaders to take action on clearly identifying, communicating, as well as activating the “green” values internally. Moreover, emphasis should be put on encouraging and facilitating green behavior by providing clearer communication, guidelines and goals related to wanted “green” behaviors.

Secondly, an inconsistency between the external brand image and employees' green brand expectations has been observed. This can in turn be a problem for companies, as it is argued that unmotivated employees fail to project the desired green image to other stakeholders. It is therefore advised that companies enhance communication with employees and discuss “green” expectations with them. Furthermore, even though some green initiatives were undertaken, they were not really always understood or supported by employees, and it was discussed that expectations are likely to matter depending on industry. However, this remains a recommendation for future research to look into. In addition, it appears to be that a behavioral discrepancy oftentimes is causing problems, as employees differ in how much they “act green”, and are not consistently supported in their “green behavior”. It is therefore advised for companies to enhance the guidance internally with a focus to motivate employees to be willing to partake in green activities. In summation, it is key that the employees act green internally, if the brand image externally is going to be perceived as consistent.

Lastly, regarding the role of the vision, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it was found that organizations tend to fail to include employees in their green shared vision, which can be deemed to be creating an ambiguity when it comes to green goals. This can furthermore be argued to be associated closely with organizational

cynicism, as employees often exhibit frustration, especially when organizations “brag” or “label” themselves as greener than they actually are. A tendency for inconsistency among how engaged employees are in the green efforts of the company was also found, where some employees were more engaged than others. It is therefore advised that companies focus on showing employees that what they do matter, and that they can be a great resource in the firm’s green endeavors. In this vein, as it was concluded that employees with strong environmental values can be argued to be a strong resource for the company, it is furthermore advised that organizations focus more on the internal communications, and engage employees with strong green values in their quest for becoming green/er.

## **Implications**

### *Theoretical implications*

This paper builds on the corporate branding theory of Hatch and Schultz (2001), while adding to the research of the newer concepts of green brand culture, green brand image, and green brand vision. Therefore, it adds to the consistently growing number of research papers on “green” branding. However, while the focus of the majority of the research is on defining what green corporate branding is and makes attempts at identifying different elements of it, this paper contributes by exploring the pitfalls related to this process. As a neglected aspect of green branding, we believe that this study will serve as foundation for future research on how these challenges can be tackled.

On the other hand, there was hardly any research done on both green corporate culture and green brand image, and the research that was available was very recent and limited. A green corporate culture was found to be a relatively new topic of research, and most of

the studies did not mention any pitfalls. For green brand image, most of the research was based on consumer responses to green brands. Consequently, this research contributes with a perspective from a different angle, namely, the one of the employees, who are considered to be an invaluable part of building a “green” vision, culture and image. These employees/former employees often saw issues that are rarely discussed in other studies and these insights hold the potential of being a valuable resource for building future conceptual frameworks on the subject.

### *Managerial implications*

Nowadays, the importance of building green brands is becoming more and more defined. Companies are putting emphasis not only on chasing green agendas and goals, but also on incorporating the “green” aspect as an integral part of their corporate brands. Managers are increasingly trying to build a “green” brand culture, vision and image. However, one aspect that has been neglected from managers, is the employee perspective on these three aspects. Our study attempts at understanding and identifying what the pitfalls are, and most of the time these pitfalls are also related to mismanagement. In this light, we can argue that this study can serve as a stepping stone for building awareness on this issue among management and inspire further investigation on what can be done to address these pitfalls.

## **Future research**

As already alluded in the “implications” chapters, there are several suggestions for future research in relation to the topic of this study. One suggestion is using the results of this study as a starting point for future research on how the identified pitfalls can be addressed and managed by the organization’s leadership. To this end, potential focus of



future research could be placed on the methods for fulfilling employees' green expectations. Moreover, in consideration of green brand culture, an exploration of the various strategies, practical methods and principles of aligning external and internal values and behaviors can be pursued. Another suggestion is deep diving in case studies using corporate examples of how these pitfalls are addressed, and how the newly-formed strategies be implemented in order to achieve stronger alignment between "green" brand vision, culture and image.

## Limitations

Since the study is qualitative, there is no generalisability. In addition, the result is therefore not representative of any industry or region. Other limitations include access to respondents, as it is a sensitive topic to criticize one's current or former employer. For this reason, it was difficult to find respondents. It was also difficult to find secondary data, as the topic is not spoken openly about. Moreover, it was easy to find access to data on media criticizing large corporations, but it was rarely from the perspective of employees within the organization.

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