



SCHOOL OF  
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# Exploring Corporate Brand Orientation in a Retail Setting

A Qualitative Case Study in the Swedish Grocery Retail Industry

by

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# Abstract

**Title:** Exploring Corporate Brand Orientation in a Retail Setting – A Qualitative Case Study in the Swedish Grocery Retail Industry

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**Keywords:** *Retailing, Corporate Brand Orientation, Corporate Branding, Corporate Brand Identity, Internal Branding*

**Thesis Purpose:** The purpose of this thesis is to explore what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization. We explore the factors of internal corporate brand identity elements, internal corporate brand image and internal branding, while also considering retail-specific characteristics. To do so, we investigate the internal perspective of the corporate brand at various organizational levels.

**Theoretical Perspective:** The study applies a theoretical framework that combines the intersection of retailing, corporate brand orientation and internal branding to address the research questions.

**Methodology:** A qualitative single case study was conducted with the Swedish grocery retailer City Gross. This study adopts a research philosophy of constructivism and relativism and follows an abductive approach of reasoning.

**Empirical Material:** Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees at different organizational levels within City Gross, ranging from top management to store employees. Interview transcripts served as the foundation for our findings and analysis.

**Theoretical Findings:** The retail organization's corporate brand identity elements, internal corporate brand image and retail characteristics mutually contribute to achieving a stronger corporate brand orientation. Internal branding has the potential to shape the desired alignment between the corporate brand identity elements and the internal corporate brand image. Multiple facilitators and inhibitors related to the corporate brand orientation in the context of retail were identified.

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We hope this study provides new insights and perspectives that will help retailers in navigating the constantly evolving landscape and inspire you as a reader.

Lund, Sweden

31 May 2023



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Julia Hüsam



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# 1. Introduction

*This first chapter serves as an introduction to the subsequent chapters of this thesis by providing essential background information, contextual understanding of our research topic and relevant research gaps. We briefly introduce and problematize the research fields of (corporate) brand orientation, internal branding, and retailing, the intersection of which forms the basis of our study. We then elaborate on the purpose as well as the research questions that guide this study. Lastly, we present the research delimitations and end the chapter with an outline of this thesis.*

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## 1.1 Research Background

Covid-19. War in Europe. Record-high inflation. The last few years have proven challenging to the retail industry, demanding extreme adaptability, and forcing the industry into a metamorphosis.

*During my 32 years in the retail industry, I have never seen these kinds of changes in customers' reactions and behavior. These last few years have been more like a chaos for us. First sales went up, then sales went down, then up, then down. It has been super crazy. I've never been in a situation like this before, when the prices are increasing like 20%. It was 50-60 years ago since that kind of price increase happened in Sweden. So of course, the focus has been on plan B, not plan A, during these 6 months, and more short-term plans.*

*Anders Wennerberg, CEO City Gross*

When external chaos disrupts an entire industry, leading to drastic price increases, empty shelves and store closures (Svensk Dagligvaruhandel, 2023), a critical question arises: what should remain? What does plan B look like in a rapidly evolving market? How can a retail organization sustain its competitive advantage and stay true to itself, while also balancing the immense pressures from the external environment and satisfy the needs of its stakeholders? One answer may be found in the intangible asset of the corporate brand, to provide the organization with guidance, leading it through the storm (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Balmer, 2008).

For some retailers, this equation appears to be more straightforward than for others. The low-priced grocery retailers in Sweden, Willys and Lidl, have rapidly gained market shares as the new price-sensitive consumer behavior is in their favor, given that it is aligned with their already established corporate brand (Herin, 2022; Lysell, 2022). Other grocery retailers have been forced to reevaluate their corporate brand promises to meet the changing demands of their customers, as they cannot compete on price. To remain competitive in this new landscape where price has become the customers' main decision factor (McKinsey & Company, 2022; MarketLine, 2023), the need for additional differentiation points becomes vital (Schmidt, Mason, Steenkamp & Mugobo, 2017). Such differentiation points may be leveraged through the corporate brand, which has proven to be of significant importance in times of crisis and uncertainty (Greyser, 1999; Bauer, Kullmann, Küpper & Matthey, 2021), such as the current economic downturn (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022). This increased focus on the brand can be explained by its ability to impact customer preferences and loyalty (Barich & Kotler, 1991; Ailawadi & Keller, 2004), ultimately increasing financial performance (Roberts & Dowling, 2002).

The need for a distinct and appealing corporate brand is further strengthened by the competitive grocery retail landscape in Sweden. As the market is saturated and dominated by a few larger companies, ICA (53%), Axfood (19%), Coop (18%), Lidl (6%) and City Gross (4%) (DLF, 2022), the competition intensifies. A point of differentiation rooted in the corporate brand may be created through the store atmosphere, to attract customers based on the employees and the service provided (Schmidt, Mason, Steenkamp & Mugobo, 2017). This makes the retailers reliant on the customer-facing employees in consistently delivering on the corporate brand promise, as they are the embodiment of the brand (Burt & Sparks, 2002; Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). Such consistency becomes even more challenging in an industry notorious for its high turnover rates (Foster, Whysall & Harris, 2008; Svensk Handel, 2022). All of these complex challenges facing retailers today result in a new dynamic landscape where many of the conventional truths no longer apply, making the role of corporate brand and internal brand equity interesting topics of investigation.



## 1.2 Problematization

As previously stated, organizations are increasingly recognizing the potential gains and competitiveness of corporate brands, resulting in an extensive amount of academic research within the field. However, despite the significant recognition of corporate brands, few researchers have explored retailers' corporate brands from an employee perspective.

Retailers can be seen as corporate brandings' most extensive advocates (Burt & Sparks, 2002), being known to possess some of the strongest corporate brands globally (Mårtensson, 2007; Burt & Davies, 2010). Such organizations can be expected to demonstrate a brand orientation (Bridson & Evans, 2004), placing their corporate brand at the center of all strategic decisions (Urde et al., 2011). Considering how retailers allocate substantial budgets in building and maintaining their corporate brands (Schmidt et al., 2017), it is remarkable that empirical evidence of how a brand orientation may be established in the retail industry has yet to be further explored (Bridson et al., 2013; Anees-ur-Rehman, Wong, Hossain, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2017). The lack of retail-specific research creates challenges in the complete application of the findings (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004), given the industry's unique characteristics. Firstly, retail differs from other sectors by its high competitiveness (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Burt & Davies 2010). Secondly, the industry is distinguished by its homogeneous assortment among the retailers reselling manufacturer brands (Bridson & Evans, 2004). Third, retailers are known for their relationship-oriented nature (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Burt & Davies 2010), emphasizing the importance of customer-facing employees (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002; de Chernatony, 2002). These unique characteristics of the retail industry offer the potential for significant benefits from a brand orientation (Bridson & Evans, 2004), as it may provide a retailer with distinct competitive advantages that may otherwise be difficult to achieve (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Burt & Davies 2010). This competitive advantage may be built on the brand, guiding the retailer's decisions regarding assortment depth and breadth, pricing, and store atmosphere to create points of differentiation within the competitive landscape (Bridson & Evans, 2004; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, Wilson, 2009). The potential benefits associated with adopting a brand orientation within retail, combined with the limited existing research, provide an interesting topic worth exploring.

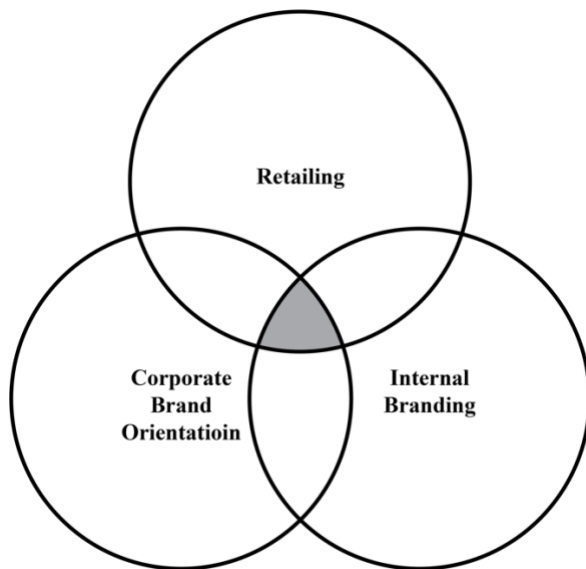
Employees become key in delivering the corporate brand promise through their behavior and interaction with external stakeholders, making them the embodiment of the corporate brand (Burt & Sparks, 2002; Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Foster, Punjaisri &

Cheng, 2010). Thus, employees become a branding device central to the internal side of the corporate brand, i.e., the corporate brand identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Roper & Fill, 2012; Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013). This is particularly applicable to the retail industry, where customer-facing employees play a crucial role in delivering the corporate brand promise to external stakeholders (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002). Such delivery should align with the retail organization's intended corporate brand and do so in a consistent manner to enable the organization to fully leverage on its corporate brand (Balmer, 2001, Kapferer, 2012). However, in retailing, achieving such consistent behavior throughout the entire organization is challenged by the significant distances between individual stores and the corporate headquarters (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013) as well as by a high staff turnover (Foster, Whysall & Harris, 2008). In response to these challenges, internal branding has been identified as an effective mitigation strategy. By strengthening employees' corporate brand understanding and commitment, internal branding facilitates a stronger corporate brand and enhanced internal brand equity (Saleem & Iglesias 2016; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). However, there is a lack of empirical research on the link between the concept of internal branding and the corporate brand in the retail industry (Papasolomou & Vrontis, 2006). Through an exploration that encompasses the wide spectrum of employees in a retail organization, ranging from top management and customer-facing employees, we aim to fill this research gap.

Lately, in line with the increased recognition of the corporate brand, there has been a growing interest in more explicitly emphasizing the stakeholder, particularly employee, involvement of achieving brand orientation. Balmer (2013) has therefore extended the notion by proposing the concept of corporate brand orientation. To expand on the understanding of what contributes to such orientation, Balmer and Podnar (2021) have developed a framework with the orientation's facilitating factors. As the framework is solely based on conceptualizations, it becomes interesting to empirically test its applicability and uncover additional contributing factors as suggested by the authors. We chose to do so in the context of retail, given the aforementioned significance of the corporate brand and employees in the retail industry.

In summary, this study addresses the gap of empirical research within the context of retailing in relation to the (corporate) brand orientation. We do this by investigating employees' understanding of and commitment to the corporate brand and how it may be impacted by internal branding. Overall, this intersection between retailing, corporate brand orientation and

internal branding (see Figure 1) offers the opportunity to enhance the understanding of corporate brand orientation in retail. Thus, the interest in understanding what may facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation in the context of a retailer marks the beginning of this thesis.



*Figure 1: Positioning of Research*

### **1.3 Research Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the key factors identified in previous literature and to uncover complementary factors that facilitate or inhibit to corporate brand orientation within retail. To achieve this, we will investigate the internal perspective of the corporate brand at various organizational levels. The following research questions have been formulated to achieve the purpose of this study:

***RQ1: How are the elements of the corporate brand identity being perceived and practiced by employees at different organizational levels within retail?***

In order to answer this question, we will investigate the corporate brand identity elements to develop an understanding of employees' perceptions of them and how they are translated to daily retail practice. Focusing on the main elements *core values, vision, competences* and *culture*, allows us to explore the cornerstones that form the basis of the corporate brand identity in the specific context of retail. We explore how the perceptions of the importance and understandings may vary across different organizational levels, as there is a significant distance

between the stores and corporate headquarters in retail. Additionally, the retail stores offer an unique opportunity for the elements to be incorporated, setting them apart from other industries and making them relevant for employees at all levels of the organization. We choose to investigate how they are perceived and practiced in parallel, as the retail-specific context makes them closely intertwined.

***RQ2: How is the internal corporate brand image being perceived by employees at different organizational levels within retail?***

To address this question, we seek collective perceptions of the organization among the employees. Such organizational stereotypes make up the organizational internal corporate brand image that influences the corporate brand orientation according to Balmer and Podnar (2021). To uncover the conscious part of the internal corporate brand image, we will ask the employees of their perceptions of what defines the organization. We will also take into account the employees' general attitudes and commitment to the organization to find larger collective patterns of potential unconscious parts of the internal corporate brand image. The investigation of the internal corporate brand image becomes particularly intriguing in a retail context, considering that store employees are typically associated with a single store. This creates an interest to explore how collective perceptions are formed across the entire organization and how the internal corporate brand image may be formed by retail characteristics.

***RQ3: What is the role of internal branding in supporting the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image within retail?***

In answering this question, we aim to investigate the role of internal branding, namely brand-centered HRM, internal brand communications, and brand leadership, in supporting the desired alignment between the corporate brand identity and the internal corporate brand image. By applying this to the retail-specific context, we aim to examine which internal branding dimensions successfully contribute to a strong internal brand equity, considering the significant distance between the top management as the initiator of such efforts and store employees. This is particularly important given the recognition of customer-facing employees in this sector.

With this study, we aim to empirically apply previous conceptualizations within corporate brand orientation and internal branding to propose an extended framework specific to retail based on our empirical findings. Our research will be based on a qualitative study of a Swedish

grocery retailer, conducting semi-structured interviews with employees throughout the organization to gain insights for theoretical and managerial implications.

## **1.4 Research Delimitations**

This study aims to explore what may facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation in a retail organization based on empirical data from different levels of the organization. As such, the external stakeholder perspective and thus corporate brand image lies beyond its scope. The delimitation is motivated by existing literature, which emphasizes the significance of establishing corporate brand identity prior to corporate brand image (Urde et al., 2003; Hulberg 2006; Kapferer, 2012). Therefore, employees' perceptions and understandings of the corporate brand constitute the foundation of this study. Furthermore, the study's scope is limited to the grocery retail industry, given that the chosen case study company is active within that sector. For the same reason, the study solely regards the Swedish market, as this is where they operate. Furthermore, we only consider the physical market and not the online market, as this is where the case company's strategic focus lies. This is further motivated by the direct impact corporate brand identity has on the customer's multisensory interactions and overall retail characteristics in physical stores and vice versa, which is less evident through online channels (Krey, Picot-Coupey & Wu, 2022).

## **1.5 Outline of the Thesis**

This study is organized in six chapters. The first chapter introduces the reader to the topic of corporate brand orientation, a background to the Swedish retail industry and this thesis' purpose as well as its guiding research questions. The second chapter systematically reviews academic literature concerning the fields of corporate branding, internal branding and retailing. We further introduce the framework applied to investigate corporate brand orientation in the context of a retailer. The third chapter explains our methodological approach in regards to research philosophy, research design, data collection and analysis as well as an assessment of the quality of the study. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings and subsequent analysis in relation to theory. The fifth chapter discusses the results and broader implications to the retail industry. Finally, the sixth chapter concludes this study by summarizing our findings and contributions according to its purpose and acknowledges the limitations of our study and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theory

*This chapter provides a systematic literature review and introduces the theoretical concepts that are essential for this thesis. First, we present previous research on corporate branding and (corporate) brand orientation to provide an overview of the research field. Subsequently, we focus on internal branding and how the (corporate) brand may be affected by internal branding efforts. This provides a contextual foundation for our research, in which we narrow our focus to the specific context of the retail industry. Thus, we present the unique characteristics of retail and previous research within retail branding. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the conceptual framework that forms the basis for our study.*

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### 2.1. Corporate Branding

The corporate brand has been argued to be the company's most valuable asset as it creates a competitive advantage that is difficult to imitate (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Urde & Greyser, 2019). Based on the field's recognition of the importance of a well-defined corporate brand, for example through the extensive work of Urde (2003, 2009, 2013, 2021), we will start by defining the concept. Subsequently, we will distinguish corporate brand identity from corporate brand image to argue for why we have decided to focus on the internal side of the corporate brand. As the internal corporate brand identity consists of multiple elements, we will delve deeper into the elements we have distinguished to be most relevant for this study. Lastly, the notion of corporate brand orientation, a strategic approach that is centered around the corporate brand, will be introduced.

#### 2.1.1. Definition of Corporate Brands

A corporate brand is defined as the sum of values representing the organization (Ind, 1997), acting as its focal point and attraction center for all its stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Thus, "organizations with strong corporate brands have succeeded in embedding their values in multiple products and services" (Tarnovskaya, 2017, p.45). It is present in all companies, although its distinctiveness, recognition and function may vary (Urde 2009; Urde, 2021). It has a significant positive impact on the brand's visibility, recognition, reputation, and consumer perceptions (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Ultimately, corporate brands therefore assist in achieving improved operational efficiency and financial performance (Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Miller,

Merrilees & Yakimova, 2014). In addition to enhanced performance, corporate branding fosters an internal environment that enables and motivates the employees around the corporate brand, leading to higher consistency when delivering the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001, 2012; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Kapferer, 2012).

Corporate brands differ from product brands by their broader scope, longer temporal base (past and future), multidisciplinary roots and larger organizational involvement. They are also distinguished by their desired composition (Balmer 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Balmer & Gray, 2003). Furthermore, unlike product brands, corporate brands must not only address customers but multiple stakeholders, increasing their complexity (Ind, 1997; Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Greyser, 2003). Employees in particular are emphasized as vital stakeholders, as their commitment is required to build a strong and successful corporate brand (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

The complex and multidimensional nature of corporate brands has resulted in several conceptual frameworks and definitions over the last decades (Buil, Catalán & Martínez, 2016). When discussing the concept of corporate branding in literature, corporate brand, corporate brand identity and corporate brand image have been used interchangeably. This is unfortunate (Kennedy, 1977) as the identity is perceived from the sender's side, i.e. organization, and the image from the receiver's, i.e. external stakeholders (Shee & Abratt, 1989; Kapferer, 2012). Corporate brand identity defines the organization (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012) as it is formed and rooted internally within the organization (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Roper & Fill, 2012). It concerns questions such as who the company is, where it comes from and what the company stands for (Urde & Greyser, 2019). The corporate brand identity acts as a guiding, unifying purpose internally and provides the foundation of the differentiated value proposition (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2011; Urde, 2021). A corporation may have different types of brand identities simultaneously (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer, 2012), as stakeholders hold different expectations (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013). Extensive dissonance may be harmful for the corporate brand and demand alignment (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Balmer, 2012). While some scholars assume that stronger perceptual alignment results in stronger corporate brands (Hatch & Schultz, 2001, 2003), others claim that alignment may not be desirable, instead suggesting a mixed context-specific approach (Mingione, 2015).

The corporate brand identity delivers a promise to its customers (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2011; Urde, 2021), creating the corporate image. The image is related to all the corporate

brand's external impressions such as its reputation and positioning (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013). Therefore, it impacts customer behavior (Barich & Kotler, 1991). The identity and image influence each other and are both crucial components to the corporate brand (Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013; Rodrigues & Krishnamurthy, 2016). Yet, there is a consensus among multiple prominent scholars that the corporate brand identity precedes the corporate brand image, representing the foundation of the image's construction. Thus, the management of the corporate brand identity is crucial to ensure a consistent and articulated corporate brand image that projects the corporate brand's defined promise and core values (Balmer, 2001, 2012; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Kapferer, 2012). Additionally, it has been claimed that a corporate brand cannot be stronger externally than internally (Urde, 2003). We therefore ground our study within the theoretical field of corporate brand identity, recognizing its significance to the organization and examination of the corporate brand.

### **2.1.2 Dimensions of Corporate Brand Identity**

There is a lack of consistency among academic frameworks regarding the elements which should be included in the corporate brand identity (Buil, Catalán & Martínez, 2016). We have chosen to examine the corporate brand's internal elements as proposed by Urde (2013), based on his categorization of internal and external corporate brand elements, clearly distinguishing the elements relevant to our thesis.

The first internal component is the *mission and vision*. The mission explains why the company exists and thus tends to be based on the organization's history. It should engage its stakeholders (Urde 1999; Urde, 2003). The mission is extended by the vision, which is defined as "the starting point for developing and sustaining a brand" (de Chernatony, 2010 p.157). Organizations should seek to develop a vision that is desirable, inspiring while achievable, stretching and communicable in the sense that it is easily comprehensible (de Chernatony, 2010). A successful vision guides the corporate brand's stakeholders by providing a common focus and sense of purpose (Jones, 2010), enabling the employees to better understand the company's intended direction for moving forward (de Chernatony, 2001). To do so, it should be grounded in the shared organizational values and overall culture, and thus resonate with and inspire all subcultures in the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Managers should therefore base the vision on an understanding of the currently shared practiced values throughout the entire organization to gain support and understanding from the employees (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). The inclusiveness may also be seen in the understanding and execution of the vision as



it is welcomed to be interpreted differently among stakeholders and constantly adapt to its changing external environment. This approach enables the organization to unite under one common vision, while still maintaining flexibility in how it is realized (Jones, 2010). Furthermore, the vision should be measurable (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; de Chernatony, 2011; Urde, 2013) and unique (de Chernatony, 2010), differentiating the company from its competitors (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Urde, 2021).

A strong corporate brand identity is further heavily reliant on the internal *organizational culture* (de Chernatony, 2001), as it serves as the foundation for the corporate brand (Kapferer, 2012). The culture explains “the way we do things here” (Rashid & Ghose, 2015 p.12). It reflects the organization’s attitudes, beliefs, and values, ultimately leading to its behavior and differentiation (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Urde, 2013). A strong organizational culture facilitates the crucial interaction between the corporate brand identity elements (Rashid & Ghose, 2015). Specifically, a culture that is consistent with the vision allows the organization to fully leverage on their corporate brand (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; de Chernatony, 2010).

Moreover, a strong organizational culture has the opportunity to influence employee involvement, motivation and engagement (Rashid & Ghose, 2015). The employees’ motivation impacts their behavior (de Chernatony, 2010; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and work ethics (Urde, 2021). Thus, a strong organizational culture enables coherent employee behavior that supports the desired corporate brand values, enhancing the corporate brand consistency. A united cultural behavior across organizational divisions therefore becomes desirable. Several factors may contribute to the development of a corporate brand-supportive culture and reduce cultural inconsistency and a silo-mentality between departments. Some of these factors are under the control of the organization, i.e., internal communications aligning and appreciating the employees in relation to the corporate brand (de Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015) tactical HR processes, strong leaders and cross-functional projects building trust (de Chernatony, 2010). Such internal branding processes will be explained in depth in the following subchapter. The employees’ themselves also shape the construction of the organizational culture through their personal values (de Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015). These may be influenced by the organization through recruitment and internal branding efforts, i.e. consistent reinforcement of the corporate brand identity elements. However, communication is not enough, as the elements need to be appreciated through employee behavior to provide value (de Chernatony, 2010).

The last internal element is the *competences*. It refers to the organization's distinctive capabilities and processes (Urde, 2013) resulting in particular ways of working, strengths and differentiation points against its competition (Greyser & Urde, 2019). The competences should be dynamically integrated with the corporate brand identity as they are required means to fulfill the corporate brand promise (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). Thus, the employees' skill sets should be developed in accordance with the other corporate brand identity elements (de Chernatony, 2010).

At the center of the corporate brand identity are the *core values* (Ind, 1997; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003, Urde, 2012). The core values define and sum up the corporate brand and support its promise to the stakeholders (Roper & Fill, 2012; Urde, 2001, Abratt & Mingione, 2022). They should explain why and how the corporation conducts its business, determining how it should achieve its vision (Burghausen & Fan, 2002). These values guide the organization internally and represent the main external perceptions (Urde, 2013). Thus, they should resonate with the values appreciated by the stakeholders (Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008; Roper & Fill, 2012), especially the employees (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001) as their commitment determines the core values' credibility (Urde, 2009).

Core values tend to derive from the corporation's origin (Urde, 2003) and should represent values that are already established in the organization to become credible (Urde, 2013). They should have functional, emotional, and symbolic dimensions (Kapferer, 2012). Urde (2021) similarly refers to a balance of logos (logic), ethos (trust) and pathos (emotion). The core values should be distinctive, substantial, apprehensible, and consistent (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). Core values must not be unique, but their interpretation and expression should be (Urde, 2011). In order to remain consistent, they are advised to be abstract and broad, to make them more agile and dynamic to future change (Urde 2003; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). A narrow scope restricts the opportunities of a differentiated and convincing value offer and may restrain stakeholder buy-in and implementation (Miller, Merrilees & Yakimova, 2014). Additionally, the core values should be coherent with the other components of the corporate brand (Urde, 2013) and guide all internal and external brand-building processes (Urde, 2009) by acting as a reference point (Burghausen & Fan, 2002). Consequently, the other elements should reflect, resonate with, and support the core values (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser 2019).

In addition to core values, an organization may also adopt organizational values. They have intrinsic value, solely affecting the organization itself by guiding how processes and principles are conducted. Organizational values should unite the organization and be few and timeless. They act as a foundation to the core values (Urde 2003).

The elements of the corporate brand identity should be seen as a dynamic, constantly evolving process constructed by its multiple stakeholders (Kapferer, 2001; Da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). Recreation is necessary to remain relevant (Aaker, 1991). It may either be evolutionary through a minor and gradual development, or revolutionary implying major and identifiable changes fundamentally redefining the corporate brand (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). A need for change typically stems from misalignments or environmental forces (Abratt & Mingione, 2017). External pressures include political, legal, economic, technological, and competitive market changes (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Abratt & Mingione, 2017), and recently also sustainability and ethics (Abratt & Mingione, 2017). The misalignment refers to multiple contradicting corporate identities, or other internal constructs (Melewar & Akel, 2005) such as managers' decisions (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000), under-performance (Kapferer 1997) or mergers and acquisitions (Muzellec, Doogan & Lambkin, 2003; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006).

### **2.1.3 Definition of Corporate Brand Orientation**

Corporate brand orientation may be seen as an extension of the widely recognized strategic orientation brand orientation (Balmer, 2013; Balmer & Podnar, 2021). A strategic orientation guides the corporation's marketing and strategy decisions, ultimately affecting corporate performance (Noble, Sinha, & Kumar, 2002). Organizations may either be characterized by emphasizing the brand identity, resulting in a brand orientation, or the brand image and the external stakeholders, resulting in a market orientation (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). Both orientations aim to satisfy the customer, but brand-oriented organizations do so "within the limits of the core brand identity" (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013, p. 745), perceiving brands and their management as crucial to their performance (Urde, 1999; Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). The organization is thus managed based on the perspective of the brand (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). Therefore, the brand identity, including internal elements such as the mission, vision, and core values, are regarded as the organization's most vital resource for attaining competitive advantage (Urde, 2013). Organizational culture also plays a vital role (Urde, 2013), making the support and identification of organizational members significant in achieving the orientation (Urde, 1999).

The corporate brand orientation was first introduced by Balmer (2013). A corporate brand orientation implies that the corporate brand is the focal point of the organization, guiding and informing its culture and activities. The orientation is dynamic since the corporate brand is constantly evolving due to its various stakeholders. According to Balmer (2013) it is distinguished from the brand orientation by emphasizing the organization's philosophy, employees, identity, strategy, management vision, and stakeholder focus. Balmer and Podnar (2021) describe corporate brand orientation as the most powerful brand orientation, as it accounts for the entire organizational culture and thus acknowledges employees' centrality to corporate brand building and success.

In their framework, Balmer and Podnar (2021) highlight three factors preceding a corporate brand orientation as summarized in Figure 2. Firstly, the importance of corporate brand identity and its aforementioned elements are emphasized, as it provides the central platform of how an organization is developed. The corporate brand orientation should therefore be embedded in the corporate brand identity and all its organizational activities. Secondly, the orientation is influenced by the internal corporate brand image. The internal corporate brand image is defined as the employees' shared perceptions of the organization. The collective perceptions result in a stereotypical image that shapes employees' cognitions, behaviors, and commitment, ultimately impacting organizational performance. The internal corporate brand images may be conscious or unconscious, and form through interactions with the corporate brand and corporate communications. The internal corporate brand image can be said to be positive when it is dynamically aligned with the corporate brand identity. Thirdly, the authors acknowledge the significance of internal corporate brand identification. Employees that identify with the organization internalize the characteristics of the corporate brand, developing a sense of belongingness and ownership towards the organization. The identification fosters a strong organizational culture grounded in the corporate brand, which is required to realize a corporate brand orientation (Balmer & Podnar, 2021).

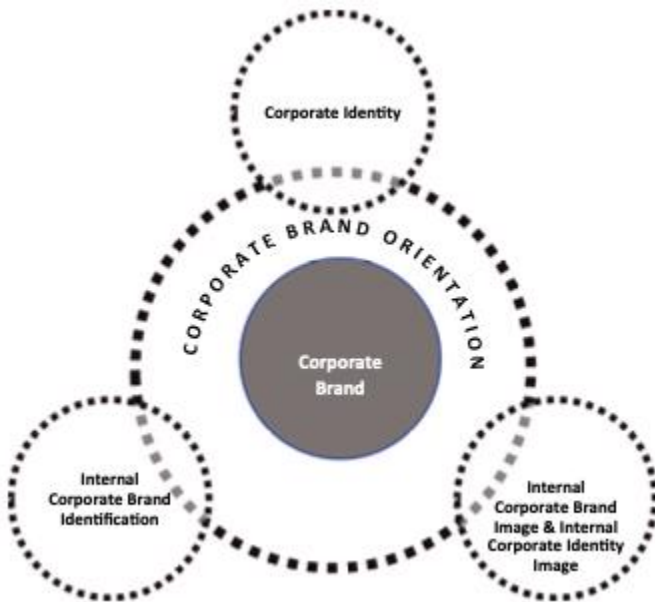


Figure 2: The Corporate Brand Orientation Factors According to Balmer and Podnar (2021)

Balmer and Podnar (2021) expand on their theory by suggesting a causal relationship between the three introduced factors as seen in Figure 3. The authors suggest that the corporate brand identity allows for positive internal corporate brand images which in turn facilitates an organizational-wide identification, enabling a corporate brand orientation, as seen in Figure 3. The authors stress the role of senior managers, especially human resources, and corporate communications, in assessing and achieving a corporate brand orientation. They further claim that there might be additional significant, currently uncovered, factors contributing to the establishment of a corporate brand orientation, which forms the basis for the purpose of this study (Balmer & Podnar, 2021).

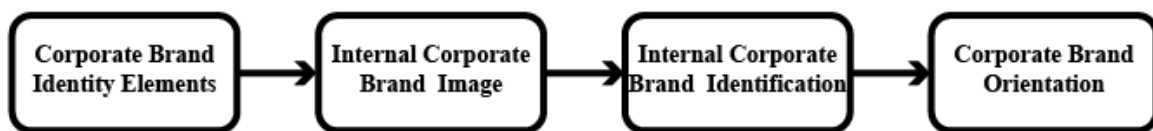


Figure 3: The Relationships Between Corporate Brand Identity, Internal Corporate Brand Image, Internal Corporate Brand Identification and Corporate Brand Orientation According to Balmer and Podnar (2021)

## 2.2 Internal Branding

Internal branding has a significant impact on employee identification and commitment to the brand and plays a critical role in promoting a company's brand orientation (Iyer, Davari &

Paswan, 2018). The objective of internal branding, i.e. internal brand equity, is the integration of the brand identity on the internal level within an organization, thereby ensuring that employees effectively deliver the brand promise through their interactions with external stakeholders (Biedenbach, Biedenbach, Hultén & Tarnovskaya, 2022). Internal branding is described by Saleem and Iglesias (2016) as an organizational strategy “to enable employees to consistently co-create brand value with multiple stakeholders” (p.50). Several key dimensions of internal branding, such as brand-centered human resource management (HRM), internal brand communications, and brand leadership have been identified to contribute to strong internal brand equity (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). To better understand what constitutes successful internal branding, the next sections discuss the elements of internal branding as well as its antecedents and desired outcomes. We follow a conceptual framework proposed by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) (see Figure 4). The framework was chosen as it is based on a systematic literature review consolidating multiple prominent scholars’ findings within the internal branding field such as Burmann and Zeplin (2005) and Saleem and Iglesias (2016). Furthermore, it acknowledges the role of brand orientation in internal branding, increasing its relevance to our specific study.

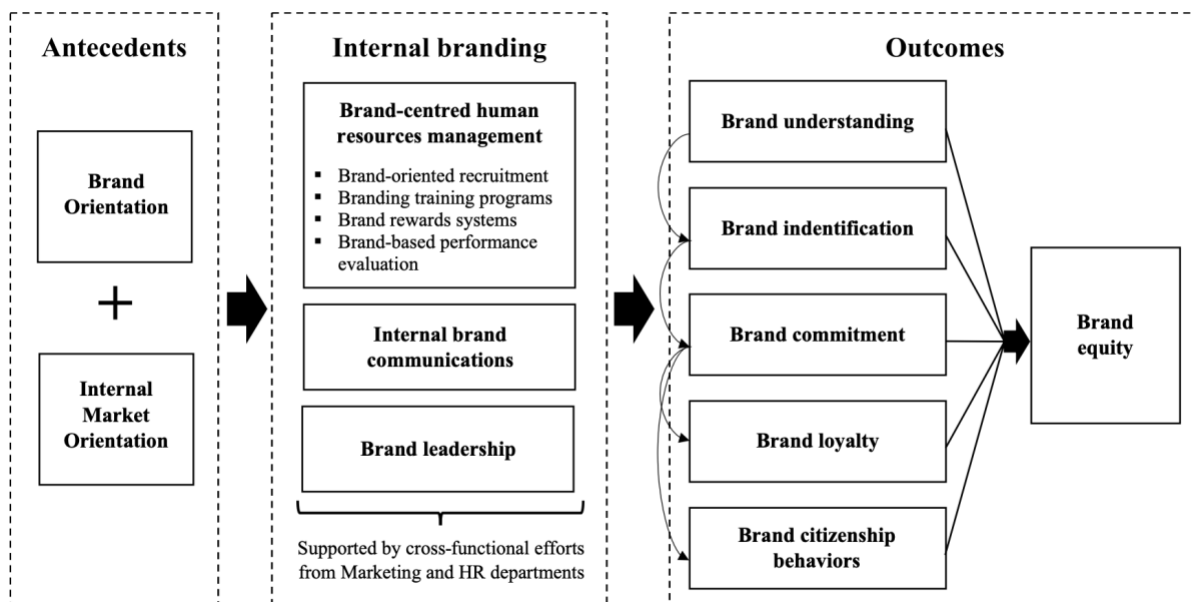


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework Internal Branding (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021)

### 2.2.1 Antecedents to Internal Branding

Brand-oriented organizations are more willing to adopt internal branding programs, as they consider brand management a crucial element for organizational performance. Thus, managers

will be more likely to allocate resources to implement the brand throughout the organization and subsequently internal branding (Iyer, Davari & Paswan, 2018). A strong brand orientation is correlating to a strong employee identification with the brand (Huang & Tsai, 2013). The extent of brand orientation behavior tends to differ at various organizational levels, where managers typically express a stronger sense of brand orientation, while customer-facing employees are closer to a market orientation (Wallace, Butts, Johnson, Stevens, & Smith, 2016) due to their prioritization of daily operations (Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013) and what is “here and now” (Elg & Welinder, 2022 p. 7.) Such internal subcultures are referred to as functional and divisional silos. Such silos may hinder the implementation of an aligned brand orientation despite active management commitment (Aaker, 2008; Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013). The internal branding initiatives therefore should be contextual to successfully promote the brand orientation. To do so, the management should recognize and cooperate with silos rather than resisting them while developing brand identity elements. It is not sufficient to strive for organizational agreement of such elements, but they must be translated into functional behaviors and concrete objectives to create meaning for all levels of the organization (Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013).

Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) further argue for internal market orientation as an antecedent of internal branding. Since this study investigates (corporate) brand orientation, we consider this orientation to be outside of our scope.

### **2.2.2 Key Dimensions to Internal Branding**

There are three key dimensions to internal branding according to (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021), namely *brand-centered human resources management (HRM)*, *internal brand communications*, and *brand leadership*. As established by Burmann and Zeplin (2005), the first dimension highlights the importance of a *brand-centered human HRM* to recruit, select and promote candidates who have a strong match between their personal identity and the brand identity. Thus, the elements of the brand need to be at the core of HR management practices, combining HR activities with marketing activities (Gapp & Merrilees, 2006). Brand-centered HRM encompasses a wide range of practices such as employee recruitment, training and rewards. Furthermore, it is beneficial to institutionalize the corporate brand’s core values by making them the basis of appraisal systems, career development and shared best-practice reports (de Chernatony, 2010). By implementing such brand-centered practices, employees’ identification with and commitment to the brand’s values can be strengthened (Burmann &

Zeplin, 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). To evaluate the integration between the employees and the corporate brand elements, organizations should introduce regular reviews. The measurements should both be based on intellectual buy-in assessing employees' awareness and alignment, as well as emotional buy-in investigating employee commitment to the brand (de Chernatony, 2010).

*Internal brand communications* is seen as one of the most important dimensions of internal branding among scholars (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015). It is commonly categorized into four types of communication: (1) formal and internal, e.g., HR memos, (2) informal and internal, e.g. interactions among employees, (3) formal and external, e.g. advertising, and (4) informal and external, e.g. customer feedback (Miles & Mangold, 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Through the different types of internal brand communications, companies can generate awareness and understanding for the brand and its values. Communicating the brand identity is crucial to ensure that employees at all levels of the organization are aware of it (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005) and to enhance employees' comprehension and expertise of their contribution to the successful delivery of the brand promise to external stakeholders (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) suggest that open communication methods that convey a clear and relevant message for the employees are essential for internal brand communications to achieve the desired effectiveness.

The dimension of *brand leadership* concerns the role of leaders of different organizational levels in the process of internal branding and in establishing a shared understanding of brand elements among employees (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) highlight that leaders at all organizational levels have a significant influence on internal branding processes. Since they function as role models for the brand, employees will show an increased brand commitment if the leaders act in accordance with the corporate brand identity. Through a strong brand leadership, the brand's core values can be internalized and employees' identification with such values can be supported (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

### **2.2.3 Outcomes of Internal Branding**

Following the conceptual framework by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021), the outcomes of internal branding are *brand understanding*, *brand identification*, *brand commitment*, *brand loyalty*, *brand citizenship behavior*, and ultimately (*internal*) *brand equity*.



*Brand understanding* can be defined “as employees’ comprehension of brand-related information” (Piehler, King, Burmann & Xiong, 2016, p.1580). Due to its multidimensional nature, brand understanding is often used synonymously with other terms. For example, the term *brand knowledge* is often used to refer to the same concept (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). As a desired outcome of internal branding, brand understanding is accomplished when employees demonstrate in-depth brand-related knowledge, i.e. about the corporate brand identity elements and about their own impact on brand success (Murillo & King, 2019; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). The need for such knowledge should receive additional consideration in brand-oriented organizations to minimize the establishment of silos which may hinder the consistency of the brand (Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013).

*Brand identification* is an important outcome of internal branding and can be described as “an employee’s psychological membership with the brand” (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016, p.44). Brand identification consists of a cognitive component which refers to the degree to which employees view themselves as part of the organization, and an affective component which pertains to the level of positive emotions that employees demonstrate regarding their affiliation with the organization (Piehler et al., 2016). Communicating unique and distinct corporate brand identity elements through internal branding is an important factor in enabling employees’ internalization of the elements and identification with the brand (Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010).

*Brand commitment* is defined as “the extent of psychological attachment of employees to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards reaching the brand goals - in other words, to exert brand citizenship behavior” (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005, p.284). Employees who demonstrate commitment are anticipated to possess a favorable view of the organization, leading to better performance, more satisfied customers, and a positive impact on the brand’s success (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). To achieve the desired brand commitment, it is necessary that the corporate culture and structure are aligned with the corporate brand identity (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Commitment to a brand is seen as a crucial prerequisite for brand loyalty, as it promotes employee retention and can reduce turnover rates (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky & Wilson, 2009; Watson, Taheri, Glasgow & O’Gorman, 2018).

A key aim of internal branding is to foster *brand loyalty* among employees and ensure that their behavior allows them to effectively convey the brand to customers (Poulis & Wisker, 2016). Brand loyalty pertains to an employee's intention to stay within the organization, which

highlights the important role of internal branding in building long-term commitment to the brand (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021).

*Brand citizenship behavior*, as a result of strong brand commitment, can be described as employees “living the brand”. The term encompasses “brand consistent behavior that goes above and beyond required organizational behaviors and is internally and externally targeted” (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016, p.44). Thus, it involves employee behaviors that are consistent with the brand identity (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005), especially towards external stakeholders to deliver on the brand promise (Poulis & Wisker, 2016).

The ultimate objective and final consequence of internal branding is to attain *internal brand equity* (Poulis & Wisker, 2016; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Since this study focuses on the internal aspect of the brand, we use the term *internal brand equity* instead of the term *brand equity* used by Barros-Arrieta and García-Cali (2021) in their framework. Internal brand equity can be conceptualized as “the incremental effect of branding on employee behavior” (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010, p.1250). Although the authors of the conceptual framework refer to this as brand equity (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021), we choose to refer to it as internal brand equity, given this study’s focus on the internal perspective of employees. The organization’s internal brand equity can be defined as the extent to which the workforce has internalized the brand identity and is able to support it effectively at the customer interface (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010). As this is impacted by employees’ alignment with the corporate brand identity (Baumgarth & Schmidt, 2010), “each employee’s perceptions of, and responses to, internal branding are central for building a strong organizational brand” (Biedenbach et al., 2022, p.421).

### **2.3 Branding in Retail**

Retail brands have developed from being mainly product-oriented to being increasingly brand-oriented (Urde, Baumgarth & Merilees, 2013). As a consequence, the retailer’s brand identity has become more prominent, shifting the focus to the retail organization in its entirety (Burt & Davies, 2010). Consequently, retailers are emphasizing the overall store experience, rather than merely product-related factors, indicating their dependence on customer-facing employees in delivering the brand promise to external stakeholders (Burt & Sparks, 2002). Given the distinct and complex characteristics that make retail branding a unique case, we will first discuss these

before looking at corporate branding in retail and addressing the important role employees play for a retailer.

### **2.3.1 Retail Characteristics**

The field of retailing has received extensive research attention, with researchers examining various aspects of the retail image such as the role of store atmosphere, price and promotion, brand and product assortment, service, loyalty, consumer behavior, distribution channels, organization, and e-commerce (Grewal & Levy, 2007). Given the recognition of brands as crucial assets, Ailawadi and Keller (2004) highlight the importance of establishing a strong brand in the retail industry. This is further reinforced by the retail industry's competitive nature (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). A better comprehension of the retail-specific characteristics provides us with a basis for our further discussion of retail corporate branding and its links to corporate brand orientation within retail. Therefore, this section will focus on the dimensions that underpin the retailing industry's uniqueness and play a critical role in retail branding, closely the dimensions proposed by Ailawadi and Keller (2004), i.e. store atmosphere, price and promotion, product and category assortment, and brand assortment.

*Store atmosphere* is an important factor in retailing and expresses the need for retailers to carefully consider and strategically manage its stores' look and feel for gaining competitive advantage (Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss, 2002). The perception of a retailer's store atmosphere has significant effects on consumers' shopping behavior, the time they spend in the store, the amount of money they spend and the choice of retail store (Baker et al., 2002; Grewal, Gauri, Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2021). Store atmosphere can be classified into four main factors, i.e., design, ambience, social, and trialability (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). Design factors include visual elements as well as the general store layout and style. Ambience concerns the background conditions of the store, such as the lighting, colors, scents and music. Whereas the factor of trialability refers to the ease with which customers can try products and may only concern very distinct forms of retail, the social factor is highly important for a retailer's store atmosphere and customers' evaluation thereof. Social factors encompass the other customers in the store, but more importantly, the store employees (Baker et al., 2002; Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). Grewal and Levy (2007) state that excellent customer service is an important way for retailers "to differentiate their retail offerings, build customer loyalty, and develop sustainable competitive advantage" (p.449). Besides the friendliness of the service staff in the retail store, the convenience offered

by the staff is another important factor for high-quality customer service and satisfied customers (Grewal et al., 2021). Grocery retailing has undergone a significant transformation, with retailers focusing on creating unique shopping experiences through store atmosphere to adapt to the changing needs of more demanding, less loyal customers (Marques, Santos & Trindade, 2016).

Incorporating a carefully chosen and well-defined *price and promotion* strategy is vital for retailers (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Simon & Fassnacht, 2018). Due to generally lower margins in the retailing industry, pricing is often the most important and the most effective competitive tool for retailers. This is especially relevant to retailers in the grocery sector as margins are low and the pressure from consumers as well as competition is high (Simon & Fassnacht, 2018; MarketLine, 2023). Price strategies define the average price level, the variation in prices over time, the frequency and depth of promotions as well as the positioning of the retailer on a continuum ranging from Every Day Low Price (EDLP) to High-Low Promotional Pricing (Hi-Lo) and hybrid strategies thereof (Gauri, Trivedi & Grewahl, 2008; Fassnacht & El Husseini, 2013). While EDLP stands for a strategy of low prices with little price variation and little emphasis on promotions, the Hi-Lo strategy implies that prices vary from high to low due to frequent discount offers and price promotions (Simon & Fassnacht, 2018).

*The product and category assortment* is of fundamental importance to retailers and has an impact on consumers' shopping behavior. As stated by Grewal et al. (2021), "the merchandise and services offered by retailers are part of their core value proposition" (p.9). In order to enable meaningful relationships with customers, retailers need to be aware of the image conveyed by the product assortment and be able to find a balanced assortment strategy that fits the retailer's identity and is relevant to its customers (Grewal et al., 2021). Thereby, the cross-category assortment and within-category assortment determine the breadth and the depth of a retailer's offerings respectively (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). In the grocery sector, most retailers carry identical categories. Hence, the diversity of product selection is primarily achieved through differences in category assortments (Briesch, Chintagunta & Fox, 2009).

*Brand assortment* is an important aspect for retailers and has an impact on the image they convey to their competitors and customers. The brand assortment becomes particularly important for retailers operating with a homogeneous assortment, such as grocery retailers (Bridson & Evans, 2004). The need for differentiation explains the rise of private label brands (PLBs), as it is one of few tools that allow for a distinctive assortment that sets them apart from

competitors in addition to having a positive impact on customers' perceptions (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Grewal et al., 2021).

### **2.3.2 Corporate Branding in Retail**

Retailers can be seen as corporate brandings' most extensive proponents (Burt & Sparks, 2002), being known to have some of the strongest corporate brands globally (Mårtensson, 2007; Burt & Davies, 2010). Given the characteristics of retail, this development appears natural. Retailers often provide generic products that are commonly produced and branded by other manufacturers. This results in an assortment which is easily copied, creating a need for resilient differentiation points, e.g., the corporate brand (Burt & Sparks, 2002; Burt & Davies 2010). The importance of strong corporate retail brands is further reinforced given the highly competitive retail landscape (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004).

The nature of retailing also results in challenges for corporate branding, as the multisensory customer experience itself becomes the product and the brand (Burt & Sparks, 2002; Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). The store therefore becomes an asset in itself, making its design and layout crucial to the corporate brand's distinctiveness (Bridson et al., 2013). Thus, the retail business model becomes fundamentally concerned with its relational construct with multiple stakeholders, especially customers (Burt & Davies 2010). The high intensity of relationships is maintained and delivered by the organization's employees (Einwiller & Will, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002). There has been a growing recognition of the role that employees play in the corporate branding process (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010) as co-creators of the brand identity with other stakeholders (von Wallpach, Voyer, Kastanakis, & Muhlbacher, 2017). As a result, retailers are fully reliant on their store employees to transfer and reflect the corporate brand's core values (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002), making them the embodiment of the brand (de Chernatony, 2002). Achieving this becomes challenging for retailers given the high staff turnover and recruitment issues they typically encounter, especially concerning customer-facing store employees (Foster, Whysall & Harris, 2008; Svensk Handel, 2022). However, accomplishing employee loyalty can prove to be a valuable source for gaining competitive advantage (Foster, Whysall & Harris, 2008).

This strong reliance on employees poses a challenge for retailers due to the corporate brand's need for consistency and coherence to deliver a positive impact (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Burt & Sparks, 2002; Mårtensson, 2007). The internal consistency is further complicated by a

variety of store formats and a mix of centralized and decentralized decision-making. A well-functioning organization and internal implementation of the corporate brand therefore becomes crucial for success. Further challenges for retailers may rise because of a search for productivity gains and economies of scale, which could conflict with the corporate brand's need for consistency (Burt & Sparks, 2002).

## **2.4 Conceptual Framework**

In order to make sense of corporate brand orientation as a research phenomenon and gain an understanding of what facilitates and inhibits the notion internally in the retail context, a theoretical framework will be applied and adapted based on our empirical findings. The theoretical framework aims to integrate some of the main academic findings discussed in our literature review. Thus, learnings from the fields of retailing and internal branding are applied to the corporate brand orientation framework by Balmer & Podnar (2021). We argue that in order for this thesis to fulfill its purpose, a rather loose framework is adopted as it allows the empirical data to not be constrained by a predetermined model that may or may not be suitable in the context of retail. Hence, by applying parts of the corporate brand orientation framework by Balmer and Podnar (2021), serving not as fixed factors but rather as topics for discussion, we argue that such a framework enables us to generate theory and make better sense of what factors facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation.

However, we have some objections towards the framework. While we support the author's interest in empirically exploring the corporate brand orientation, we express reservations regarding the authors' pronounced distinction between corporate brand orientation and brand orientation. We perceive that previous research papers on brand orientation, for example Schmidt et al., (2017), have implicitly examined the corporate brand rather than the (product) brand by acknowledging multiple stakeholders and other characteristics associated with the corporate brand, although they do not explicitly use the term corporate brand orientation. Therefore, we believe our research on corporate brand orientation to be closely positioned to the more widely recognized brand orientation. The motivation for adopting the corporate brand orientation framework to guide our study is based on the fact that the factors outlined in the framework have derived from consolidated previous findings on brand orientation. It thus becomes interesting to empirically test if the proposed factors are applicable in a retail setting. We choose to still use the authors' terminology "corporate brand orientation" to maintain

consistency with their original framework and to emphasize the significance of the organizational members.

Furthermore, the authors of the model make the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the three distinguished factors leading to corporate brand orientation. However, we object against this assumption that such transfer would happen naturally and without any strategic efforts. Therefore, we empirically investigate how such transfer is enabled within a retail organization. Specifically, we focus on the link between the corporate brand identity and the internal corporate brand image (RQ 3) as we expect internal branding to contribute to their alignment.

We aim to empirically examine the factors identified through the conceptual framework by Balmer and Podnar (2021). Specifically, within corporate brand identity, we will examine the perception and practice of corporate brand identity elements (RQ 1), i.e. *core values*, *mission* and *vision*, *culture*, and *competences*, as well as the internal corporate brand image (RQ 2). When discussing their alignment, we adopt Balmer & Podnar's (2021) proposal that an alignment is desirable, and do not engage in the academic discussion on general alignment and misalignment within organizations in relation to the brand. We have decided to exclude the factor of *identification* from our study, as we see it as a consequence of a positive internal corporate brand image, in line with Balmer and Podnar (2021) and a psychological process within the individual as a final stage of internal branding (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Instead, we have chosen to concentrate on the first part of the framework, i.e., the first two factors of corporate brand identity elements and internal corporate brand image.

We seek to uncover complementary findings in the intersection of the academic fields of corporate branding, retailing and internal branding, to investigate what factors facilitate or inhibit a successful corporate brand orientation strategy. Therefore, we integrate elements emphasized in the retail literature that characterize the retail industry, i.e. store atmosphere, price and promotion, product and category assortment, and brand assortment to the model of corporate brand orientation. We furthermore integrate elements of internal branding into the linkage between corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image (see Figure 5). We believe that such an empirical application can lead to academic and managerial contributions of what may facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation in a retail organization.

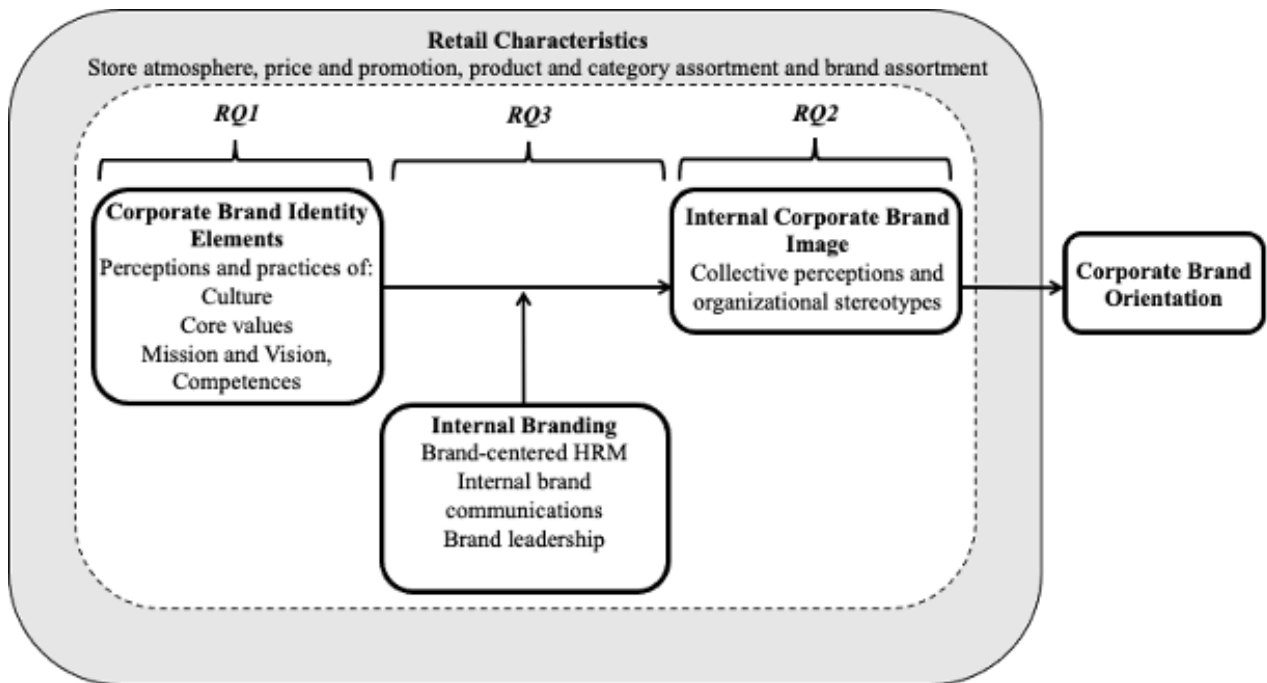


Figure 5: Conceptual Framework on Corporate Brand Orientation in Retail

When referring to the framework, we use the term “factor” exclusively for larger concepts (the boxes) in the figure, i.e. corporate brand identity elements, internal corporate brand image and internal branding.



### **3. Methodology**

*In this third chapter, we delve into the methodological approach employed in this study to answer the research questions. To provide a comprehensive rationale for the decisions made in this study, we begin by elaborating on the underlying research philosophy and strategy. We then provide insight into the research design and sampling strategy. This is followed by an explanation of how the data was collected and subsequently analyzed. Lastly, we thoroughly discuss the quality of our data in terms of trustworthiness and authenticity, before concluding the chapter with the ethical considerations underlying this study.*

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#### **3.1 Research Philosophy**

Researchers' perceptions of reality and truth impact how research is conducted and how knowledge is produced (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This creates a need for us to discuss our philosophical perspective of the relationship between data and theory. Our ontological and epistemological assumptions impact the choices and evaluation of our research design and determine the proper methods for answering our research questions. Awareness of these assumptions can enhance the quality of research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018).

Ontology regards our assumptions about the nature of reality, impacting what questions we as researchers ask (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This study investigates how retail employees perceive the organization's corporate brand. We are interested in understanding the individual's perception and experiences with the corporate brand, and to explore how these truths might vary among employees at various organizational levels who are exposed to different parts of the corporate brand. We are therefore not searching for one single perception or reality of the corporate brand, but rather the nuances within the organization. Based on these assumptions of multiple, coexisting truths, we adopt a relativist ontology for our study of the retail corporate brand identity (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

After having established our assumptions about our reality, we need to understand how to produce knowledge within that reality. Such assumptions are determined by the epistemology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). As we study how employees make sense of the retailer's corporate brand, we aim to understand why and how those perceptions have formed. Our choice of method therefore has to allow for a rich exploration of what internal

stakeholders are feeling and thinking and how they communicate with each other, both individually and collectively as well as formally and informally. By gathering and appreciating different experiences, we aim to increase the general understanding of corporate brand orientation in a retail context. Thus, we examine this complex situation from a position towards constructivism, placing the employees' interests at the center of our research. In accordance with this epistemology, it becomes apparent why it is necessary to obtain various perspectives of employees at different levels of the organization, which aligns with the purpose of this study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

We acknowledge that we are part of what we observe when conducting our research. A close collaboration with the practitioners through an engaged style will provide positive value. The need for engagement is further strengthened by the complexity of the organization and corporate brand orientation. Therefore, it influences the choice of research design, as the method has to allow for interaction. Following this engaged constructionism, we take on a rather pragmatic approach. Thus, the findings should be constructed on the lived experiences of the employees, which is in line with our purpose (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

### **3.1.1 Research Strategy**

To explore the corporate brand orientation in a retail context, there is a need for a method that allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex, limited researched phenomenon. A qualitative study enables the collection of our desired detailed and rich data, with the ability to capture contextual nuances of the employees' lived experiences with the corporate brand. Further investigation is allowed through follow-up questions and close interaction, which would be limited with a quantitative method. It would furthermore not be well-suited to quantify or measure the subjective meanings of the employees based on our research objective, as we are searching for a profound comprehension of the employees' experiences of the aforementioned complex and dynamic phenomena (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

The need for a reflective process is additionally strengthened by the limited existing empirical research within the context of retail and corporate brand orientation. The unique characteristics of retailing in combination with the various factors that may influence the employees' understanding of the corporate brand require openness to unexpected findings. A qualitative method is further motivated by our purpose to include employees at various organizational levels to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the corporate brand orientation, making it necessary to tailor the data collection accordingly (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

How this empirical data is interpreted depends on the reasoning employed in our qualitative research. We will originate from a preliminary theoretical basis of corporate branding, internal branding and retailing in an attempt to develop the theories further based on our empirical findings. We therefore engage in abductive reasoning, the most common in qualitative research. An abductive approach allows us to connect our observations from the employees to existing theory through plausible interpretation. Our knowledge is enhanced in a cyclical manner as we interact with the retail employees, enabling us to systematically engage in a back-and-forth process between our observations and theoretical framework. Adopting this approach is beneficial to help us achieve our research objective of discovering complementary findings to build on the corporate brand orientation theory. Our study is thus grounded in an abductive logic, aiming to expand the current theoretical understanding of how employees understand the corporate brand in the retail industry (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

To examine the corporate brand in a retail context, we conducted a qualitative single case study. The study involved semi-structured interviews with a range of employees, from the top management to store employees to explore various truths within the organization. Following abductive reasoning approaches, this study seeks to enhance the understanding of corporate brand orientation frameworks empirically, within the unique context of retail.

## **3.2 Research Design**

Building upon the elaboration of our research philosophy, our way of reasoning, and our decision to collect qualitative data with a single case study, this subchapter provides a comprehensive overview of the research design. As the research design forms the foundation for the data collection and the analysis thereof (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), this serves to give the reader a thorough understanding of the subsequent course of this study. We will start by discussing our rationale for conducting a single case study, followed by a section on the selection of our sample and a description of the case organization.

### **3.2.1 Case Study**

For the purpose of this study and based on our epistemological orientation, we are conducting a single case study of a Swedish grocery retailer in order to explore what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization. As we are taking a relativist perspective, we are seeking to capture the different internal perspectives of employees

at different organizational levels. Therefore, our study is guided by “what” and “how” questions, which typically serve as the rationale for employing case study research (Yin, 2014). As defined by Yin (2014), “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p.16). The specific nature of employees’ perceptions of a retail organization’s corporate brand requires such a detailed approach that is grounded in the real-world context of a retailer. The choice of a single case study approach allows us to richly describe the complex phenomenon of the role of employees for an organization’s corporate brand orientation while maintaining a holistic perspective. Whereas multiple case studies may offer more robust results (Yin, 2014), applying a single case study enables us to base our research on the unique characteristics of a grocery retailer, with the goal of conducting an extensive analysis of this particular case and providing a foundation for theoretical insights (Flyvbjerg 2006; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

The case study approach comes with concerns related to external validity and generalizability (Yin, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, advocates of case studies emphasize that the main strength lies in the particularization of the findings (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Thus, rather than striving for statistical generalization, i.e. generalizing findings to wider populations, case study research endeavors to make analytic generalizations, which involves making inferences to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2014). This means that case studies should be viewed as an “opportunity to shed light about some theoretical concepts or principles” (Yin, 2014, p.40). Exploring the perceptions of internal stakeholders from this perspective is thus appropriate to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, the organization’s corporate brand orientation and employees’ experiences are extensive and particularly individual, making generalizations to the broader population improper.

### **3.3 Sample Strategy**

Prior to data collection, the approach of a single case study requires an elaboration of the applied sampling strategy. This includes insights into the decision process concerning the sampling unit, the number of sampling units, and the criteria for the sampling (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). For this study, purposive sampling, a non-probability form of sampling, was applied. Therefore, we selected both the case organization and subsequently the respondents within the case on a strategic basis and with the research questions at the core of our sampling

considerations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Given our single case study design and the interest in the internal perspective of employees, we first address the sampling process of the case to then elaborate on the sampling of respondents.

### **3.3.1 Sample Case Organization**

As this study employs a single case study approach, the sample consists of one company within the Swedish retail industry. The purposive sampling method of a single case for specific reasons is in line with our constructivist approach (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). To identify an appropriate company for our research objective, we formulated specific criteria for the case selection. The first criterion was that the case company should be located in Sweden, as both researchers currently live in Sweden, giving us the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews with employees and visit the stores ourselves to gain a better understanding of this particular retailer. Another criterion was that the organization exhibits characteristics of a corporate brand orientation and internal branding efforts. In order to gain an understanding of potential companies, *Karriärföretagen's* ("career companies") list of companies acted as an initial guide. *Karriärföretagen* awards employers that offer unique career and development opportunities (Karriärföretagen, 2023), thus acknowledging companies with a strong internal brand. This is typically found in companies demonstrating a strong brand orientation (Iyer, Davari & Paswan, 2018), which is in line with our research objective. Furthermore, we specifically aimed to identify an organization within retailing where the role of employees was highly recognized and which operates in an environment with high external pressures, making a strong corporate brand even more important (Bridson et al., 2013). As City Gross demonstrated interest in investigating its corporate brand with an open mindset and willingness to collaborate, they were chosen as this study's case company.

City Gross Sverige AB, in this study referred to as "City Gross", is a Swedish grocery retailer with the headquarters located in Hässleholm and around 3300 employees (City Gross, 2023a). Currently, City Gross operates 42 stores, mainly located in southern and mid-Sweden, as well as e-commerce. The company was established in 1993 by the Swedish family-owned company Bergendahls. Today, the third and fourth generation of the family are active majority-owners of the company. The grocery retailer offers a wide food and non-food assortment, and the stores constitute a mix of a fresh food hall and wholesale (Bergendahls, 2022a). Therefore, all stores offer fresh Swedish meat that is chopped and packed in the store, fresh fish and seafood, and in-store bakeries (City Gross, n.d.). The retailer places great importance on providing personal

service and manual counters (Bergendahls, 2022a). City Gross is reportedly pursuing a Hi-Lo price strategy, with average prices 10% higher than EDLP competitor Willys in 2022 (Matpriskollen, 2022). City Gross' *klipp* ("campaign prices") are a large part of the price strategy (Nyman, 2022).

City Gross currently holds a market share of 4% (DLF, 2022). The first quartal of 2023 proved to be challenging, with reduced customer loyalty and average purchase value (Beslic, 2023). According to the retailer's CEO, Anders Wennerberg, the results can be attributed to external factors, changing customer demands, and store conversions to comply with Axfood infrastructure (City Gross, 2023a). The Swedish food retail group Axfood acquired a minority stake in City Gross corresponding to 9.9% of City Gross' shares in 2021, with an option to increase its shareholding to 30% within 5 years. While Bergendahls remains the majority owner, the strategic partnership is intended to strengthen both parties through synergy effects and increased competitiveness for City Gross' future expansion (Axfood, 2021).

The presence of clearly defined corporate brand identity elements at City Gross makes the company an interesting case for our study. Four core values were implemented by the Bergendahls family a few years ago, i.e. *customer-focused*, *results-driven*, *responsible* and *inclusive* (see Table 1). The company does not have a mission, but its vision states "Sweden's most satisfied food customers" (City Gross, 2023a; Bergendahls, 2022a). Furthermore, City Gross was recently granted the Swedish award *Karriärföretag 2023* for offering great opportunities for the younger workforce and having an attractive, unique employer brand, caring for their employees, and promoting internally (Karriärföretagen, 2023). As an example, City Gross has implemented the internal training program *Ung Talang* ("young talent") to motivate and develop young talents within the company (Bergendahls, 2022b). City Gross regards its staff as the core of the company, which is evident through their emphasis on personal customer service and awards such as *Karriärföretag 2023*. This emphasis on employees aligns with our interest in examining corporate brand orientation within a retailer from an internal perspective. Therefore, in studying the intersection between corporate brand orientation, internal branding, and retailing, City Gross serves as the ideal case organization to build our research on.

*Table 1: City Gross' Brand Identity Elements in Swedish and Equivalent English Translations*

	<b>Swedish (original)</b>	<b>English translation</b>
<b>Core Value 1)</b>	Kundfokuserade	Customer-focused
<b>Core Value 2)</b>	Resultatdrivna	Results-driven
<b>Core Value 3)</b>	Ansvarstagande	Responsible
<b>Core Value 4)</b>	Inkluderande	Inclusive
<b>Vision</b>	Sveriges mest nöjda matkunder	Sweden's most satisfied food customers

### **3.3.2 Sample Respondents**

Given the study's purpose of investigating the key factors that facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation internally, the employees' perspectives on and their experiences with the corporate brand are central to this research. To better understand this internal perspective of the corporate brand, we aimed to select a sample of a wide spectrum of internal stakeholders, ranging from top management to customer-facing store employees. Therefore, we had vivid discussions with City Gross at the beginning of the process to establish some criteria for our sample. This resulted in several criteria that are consistent with our purposive sampling strategy. Most importantly, respondents in the sample should be full time employees, hold different roles within the company and come from different organizational levels to maximize not only the richness and depth of data, but also to ensure the wide range of internal perspectives. To further ensure a diverse range of insights, we expanded our criteria to include respondents with various job tenures and from stores in different geographic locations. Subsequently, we began using a non-probability, purposive sampling strategy to select a sample of those employees who met the predefined criteria. Additionally, we employed a snowball sampling strategy containing purposive elements as we initially approached one contact within City Gross, who then provided us with additional contacts to employees with characteristics relevant to our research topic (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). As we continued and conducted our first interviews, we also asked our new contacts to reach out to their employees, especially store employees who interact with customers on a daily basis and are therefore particularly valuable to our study. While the snowball sampling strategy allowed us to reach respondents that met our criteria efficiently, we acknowledge that it may limit the diversity of perspectives as the selection of respondents is influenced and potentially biased by our contacts within City Gross.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted with respondents from various organizational levels within City Gross (see Table 2). As highlighted by Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019), sample size is a crucial aspect in qualitative research. As reaching saturation is central to obtaining high-quality data, the sample size for this thesis was based on the principle of saturation. Consequently, the process of contacting new participants continued until saturation was seen in the dataset meaning that no further major insights could be gained (Saunders et al., 2018).

All respondents of this study are full time employees at City Gross, representing diverse roles across various organizational levels and various lengths of tenure. The top management respondents consisted of key individuals such as the CEO, as well as managers from departments such as Marketing, PR & Communications, and Human Resources. This selection was motivated by their significant impact on the corporate brand orientation (Balmer & Podnar, 2021) and internal branding (Iyer, Davari & Paswan, 2018). Additionally, we interviewed some employees in support functions at the corporate headquarters. In order to achieve an appropriate representation of employees in relation to the company structure, the majority of respondents consisted of store managers or assistant store managers and store employees, some of whom had personnel responsibility and some of whom did not. To provide a comprehensive overview of respondents' experiences at City Gross, we have added their job tenures in Table 2. We have categorized them into specific groups to preserve the anonymity of respondents. The groups are delineated as follows: 0-2, 2-5 years, 5-10 years, and 10+ years.

*Table 2: List of Respondents, the Organizational Level and Job Tenure*

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Organizational Level</b>	<b>Job Tenure</b>
Respondent A	Store Management	0-2 years
Respondent B	Store Management	10+ years
Respondent C	Top Management	5-10 years
Respondent D	Store Employee	2-5 years
Respondent E	Top Management	0-2 years (previously part of Bergendahls)
Respondent F	Store Employee	5-10 years
Respondent G	Top Management	0-2 years (previously part of Bergendahls)



Respondent H	Store Employee	2-5 years
Respondent I	Store Management	10+ years
Respondent J	Employee	0-2 years
Respondent K	Employee	0-2 years
Respondent L	Store Management	5-10 years
Respondent M	Store Employee	5-10 years
Respondent N	Top Management	2-5 years

### 3.4 Data Collection

A crucial aspect of any research project is the collection of data (Bell, Bryman & Harely, 2019). Depending on the fundamental assumptions of the research project concerning its ontology, epistemology and methodology, different methods and techniques may be applied to collect data and enable a subsequent analysis. One of the most well-known methods of qualitative research is the interview method (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Qualitative interviews are “directed conversations evolving around questions and answers about a certain topic, whereby rich and detailed information can be gathered from respondents on their experiences and understandings” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p.46), making them an appropriate technique for our study.

#### 3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Given the study’s purpose, the internal perspective, namely the employees’ perceptions of the corporate brand, are at the heart of our research. Therefore, qualitative interviews are the chosen method for this research project as it allows us to explore the phenomenon of corporate brand orientation from the internal perspective of employees (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As interviews may be more or less structured, we decided to apply the method of semi-structured interviews. This provides us with the opportunity to remain flexible, keep an open mind (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019) and to discover new findings complementary to existing research, while remaining structured and focusing on predetermined topics (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This choice of method is consistent with our abductive approach, in which we draw on theory in the interview questions to gain relevant insights, but do not let ourselves be confined by it. Conducting semi-structured interviews allows us to

engage with a number of employees from different organizational levels in an exploratory manner. Such exploratory conversations may lead to a better understanding of how employees of City Gross perceive the corporate brand. This may result in insights that would otherwise not be available for us (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Prior to the interviews, we developed an interview guide (see Appendix A). When conducting semi-structured interviews, the use of an interview guide is a common technique to provide the interview with some structure while allowing for flexibility in the order of questions. Based on the literature review and extant theory relevant to our research question, we centered our interview guide around some focus areas. Following the theory of corporate brand identity, one area of focus included the elements of City Gross' corporate brand identity. Specifically, this involved examining the four core values and the vision by gaining insights into how employees perceive these elements, how they practice them in their work, and how they are communicated internally. Moreover, we focused on employees' perceptions of the retailer's competences and the characteristics of the organizational culture at City Gross. Following the suggestion of Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), we divided the interview guide into three sections, namely opening questions, questions about the key focus areas, and closing questions. With the research purpose in mind, we formulated open-ended questions and avoided leading questions as well as preconceived notions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). This approach encourages respondents to openly reflect on their experiences and allows us as researchers to ask relevant follow-up questions using laddering-up and laddering-down techniques (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This allowed us to improve the quality of our data by enabling a spontaneous and open-ended conversation that led to the revelation of aspects that we did not expect and therefore would not have otherwise come to light.

To encourage this open and unbiased dialogue, we did not provide respondents with the interview guide, or any other information closely related to our research questions prior to conducting the interview. When contacting the respondents, we communicated to them that we were interested in learning about their experiences with City Gross and what City Gross stands for in their opinion. Additionally, we informed them that the interview would last approximately one hour and that we would conduct it in English, unless they were not comfortable with that. In this case, we offered to conduct the interview in Swedish, since one of the researchers is Swedish. In such instances, the transcription of the interview was subsequently translated into English to allow for thorough review by both researchers.

We conducted the majority of the interviews in-person at the respondents' offices in Hässleholm or at their workplaces in the Skåne region. Due to inevitable circumstances on the part of the respondents, we conducted four interviews online via Teams. However, we only let this occur in exceptional cases, as personal encounters provide the best conditions for social interaction and for building a sense of trust (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). To create an open and trusting environment nonetheless, we conducted the online interviews via video call and gave the respondents a comprehensive introduction to ourselves. However, all interviews with store managers or store employees took place in person, since visiting the respondents' workplaces allowed us to make observations of the work or store environment. This provided us with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which the employees operate and the dynamics, interactions, and overall atmosphere of the different stores.

The beginning phase of each interview entailed acquainting the respondent with the researchers by giving them some background information about our master's program and our thesis. Subsequently, a consent form (see Appendix B) was presented to the respondent, indicating that their responses were anonymous and the participation voluntary. Additionally, respondents were informed that the interview would be recorded for transcription purposes. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to maximum 60 minutes. While one researcher took on the role of the primary interviewer, leading the conversation and asking the questions, the other researcher took field notes to augment the transcription and note any non-verbal cues. The aim was to get the field notes as precise as possible to capture the employees' rich descriptions of their experiences. We alternated between the roles, which proved particularly beneficial as some interviews had to be conducted in Swedish, and only one of the researchers speaks the language fluently.

### **3.5 Analysis of Data**

Our intention with the analysis was to develop and build upon existing corporate branding theory in the specific context of retail by identifying patterns, resulting in larger categories, and themes (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The analysis method was determined by our abductive reasoning. Therefore, the collected data was related to the theoretical frameworks through a continuous back-and-forth process. While the conceptual framework acted as an underlying structural frame of the analysis, outlying findings were anticipated and desired as we wished to remain open for potential unexpected factors contributing to the corporate brand orientation.

Consequently, our aim was not to seek uniformity but rather to embrace contradictions, aligning with our philosophical assumptions that the perception of the corporate brand is subjective. This underscores the importance of investigating the perspectives of employees who provide meaning to it (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

The analysis started by thoroughly reviewing the empirical material in its entirety to further familiarize ourselves with the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018) and create an intimate knowledge (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Next, we initiated the sorting process as suggested by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) to reduce the data's complexity. Data was broken down into codes, identified and labeled descriptively to summarize their meaning (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The conceptual framework acted as an overarching base for the sorting process, providing larger groups of corporate brand identity elements and internal corporate brand image. The group corporate brand identity also included intrinsic elements from the literature, i.e., core values, vision, competences, and culture. Data labels that intuitively belonged under these groups were part of this initial sorting.

The next phase of the sorting had a more open, explorative form. Through constant comparison and examination, patterns were uncovered, some characterized by their similarities and some by their contradictions. We then entered a more selective coding phase, where some codes were reevaluated. The systematic organization enabled the codes to be divided into larger meaningful categories (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The process both applied within the already established groups deriving from the conceptual framework, and to codes that were yet to be clustered. The created categories identified larger, more abstract themes of how employees made sense of the corporate brand. Larger patterns were identified illustrating how themes were related, intertwining the theoretical fields of branding and retailing. The sorting process ensured that the categories were meaningful in relation to our conceptual framework, whilst remaining open to ensure fair representativeness of the data.

Following the sorting, the data was reduced to create a more manageable set of data when conducting the analysis, as all findings cannot be presented given the limitations and purpose of this thesis. When reducing, we aimed at retaining the contradictions to ensure the data was still representative of the individual perspectives. Firstly, a categorical reduction was conducted through continual discussions. We made a conscious effort to recognize our own biases that might impact the final representation to ensure reflexivity. The categories that provided the richest information possibly contributing to our research objective were kept. Secondly, we

performed an illustrative reduction within the remaining categories. Direct quotes from the respondents were highlighted based on their ability to clearly illustrate the employees' perceptions and experiences of the corporate brand (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015).

### **3.6 Quality of Data**

The interpretive nature of qualitative studies often raises concerns about the validity, reliability, and generalizability of findings (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). As stated by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018), qualitative research may often not be replicable and acknowledges its subjectivity by aiming for internal generalizability rather than statistical generalizability. In line with this, Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) highlight the need for alternative criteria when evaluating qualitative research, as the terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability are more appropriate in the context of quantitative studies but have limited application in qualitative studies. Therefore, they refer to Guba and Lincoln (1994 cited in Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019), who propose that trustworthiness and authenticity serve as appropriate alternatives for assessing the quality of qualitative research.

Trustworthiness describes the level of trust that a study elicits and involves four components, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is the equivalent criterion to internal validity and emphasizes the need to acknowledge the multiple accounts of reality (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In line with our ontological approach, we ensure credibility by obtaining as many and as diverse perspectives as possible from a range of employees who hold different positions, have different tenures, and represent different levels of the organization. However, we acknowledge that the snowball sampling strategy may have resulted in a biased sample, potentially affecting the credibility. In an attempt to mitigate the potential negative impact of bias on the credibility of our sample selection, we applied specific sampling criteria as previously mentioned. To further establish credibility of our findings, we asked detailed and thorough questions to ensure that our understanding of the topic under investigation was accurate. However, as most interviews were conducted in English, we acknowledge that the accuracy of the answers might have been affected negatively as it was not the respondents' first language. Despite that knowledge, we opted to proceed with the interviews in English to capture dual perspectives in the responses. Additionally, most respondents were able to express themselves effectively in English. Those who faced difficulties or preferred otherwise, communicated in Swedish instead.

Transferability concerns the potential applicability of the findings to other studies or settings. In this study, we follow the recommendation to apply a thick description (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We do so by conducting an intensive single case study in the specific context of retailing and on the perspectives of a small but diverse group of employees. Although this study examines a unique case, the detailed description of the case and the respondents leads to a rich account, enabling others to assess the transferability of the findings to other studies or contexts.

As an equivalent criterion to reliability, dependability concerns the audit approach of the research process, encompassing a record of all stages involved (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To increase the dependability of our study, we recorded the interviews and prepared thorough field notes in addition to the transcriptions. After completing the interviews, we carefully listened to the recordings and reviewed the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the data. Moreover, by taking on the role of auditors, we reviewed the transcriptions for possible links to existing theories to justify theoretical inferences and increase the dependability of the results.

While we acknowledge that being fully objective is impossible, we recognize the importance of confirmability in preventing personal values or theoretical biases from influencing the findings (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The auditing process conducted during the interviews allowed us to ensure that our preconceived notions did not affect our findings. In addition, by having each researcher review the interview transcripts individually first, we ensured a degree of reflexivity regarding our role as researchers, thereby mitigating the potential risk of biased findings based on subjective values. Ensuring the trustworthiness of our study is critical to making a significant contribution to advancing the theory and understanding of corporate brand orientation in the context of retailing.

The second notion, authenticity, describes the extent to which researchers are able to capture the diverse viewpoints of the study's respondents (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In order to ensure authenticity in our study, we included employees from different organizational levels to gain an authentic and varied picture of the internal factors contributing to corporate brand orientation. Additionally, we informed the interviewees about their anonymity prior to the interview to encourage open and honest responses and prevent any apprehension they may have had about the publication of their quotes. While we acknowledge this case study's limited generalizability, it provides a reliable examination of what may facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation internally in the specific case of a retail organization, which can serve as a basis for future studies.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are key when conducting business research. The research participants must be protected (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), and therefore all employee identities included in the research were anonymized. Only necessary demographic questions were included, formulated in a wide manner to prevent any possibility of tracing the responses back to the individual. As a result, employees were registered by their geographical region instead of their specific store, as this was deemed sufficient for a comprehensive analysis and not compromising quality. The participants were informed of the confidentiality in the initial invitation email together with information about the topic of the study, us researchers and our contact information. The same information was shared at the beginning of the interview, together with a consent form (see Appendix B). The consent form was designed to be easy to comprehend. Furthermore, it included information regarding the conditions for recording and transcription including data storage and protection, and emphasized that participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time. We believe that these measures ensured that participants had enough information to make an informed decision of their participation, and that no ethical principles were violated in this research.

## 4. Empirical Findings & Analysis

*In this chapter, we present the empirical findings obtained in this study, along with a comprehensive analysis of those findings. The key themes presented emerged from a systematic process of coding and categorization directly related to the conceptual framework and our three research questions. Therefore, we first begin by presenting the employees' perceptions and practices of City Gross' corporate brand identity elements. Next, we present employees' collective perceptions of the retailers' internal corporate brand image. Lastly, we focus on the role of internal branding in supporting the alignment between the internal corporate brand elements and the internal corporate brand image of City Gross employees previously analyzed.*

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### 4.1 Corporate Brand Identity Elements

The corporate brand identity elements should serve as a central platform for the organization's strategic development. To act as the intended foundation of the organization, the elements need to be embedded in all organizational activities (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). We therefore analyze how the corporate brand identity elements are perceived and practiced within the organization, in relation to our first research question: *How are the elements of the corporate brand identity being perceived and practiced by employees at different organizational levels within retail?* We start by discussing City Gross' *core values*, followed by the *vision*, *competences* and last *culture*.

#### 4.1.1 Core Values

City Gross practices four core values, i.e., *customer-focused*, *results-driven*, *responsible and inclusive* (Bergendahls, 2022a; City Gross, 2023a). The core values were renewed a couple of years ago, a process which was initiated and controlled by the Bergendahl family. We investigate how they are being perceived, practiced, and appreciated within City Gross, to understand whether they succeed in acting as a reference point for the organization and the other corporate brand identity elements (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Urde, 2009).

##### 4.1.1.1 Customer-focused

The perceptions and practices of the core value *customer-focused* were naturally centered around customer satisfaction. Most practiced examples were found in the store atmosphere through its social and design elements.



All respondents related the core value to satisfying the customers' needs:

*Everything we do is for the customer. Everything has to be customer focused, even for a small decision we need to ask ourselves: what is best for the customer? If a product is sold out, we have to replace it or tell the customer why. If a customer isn't happy, we need to solve it. If we don't focus on the customer, we don't have a job. (Respondent I)*

The *customer-focused* attitude was explained by many respondents as something that comes naturally, and a behavior that they also demonstrated in their previous retail roles. When asked what a *customer-focused* behavior means in practice, multiple respondents mentioned common activities not specific to City Gross, such as greeting the customer or looking them in the eye. It appears obvious that a retailer should consider its customers, making it questionable whether the interpretation of the core value can be described as distinctive (Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Urde, 2011). Yet, City Gross' choice in including *customer-focused* as a core value may have influenced the organization's strategic decisions. Some respondents pointed out that customers express higher customer service satisfaction at City Gross compared to other grocery stores, indicating that the company has succeeded in making *customer-focused* a differentiation point to the store atmosphere (Grewal & Levy, 2007).

In addition to creating a satisfying store atmosphere through social elements in relation to customer service, one store manager further linked the core value to its design elements:

*It needs to be simple to go shopping, that the customer gets a good experience. If they need help, we need to help them, but we should also offer no interaction if desired. We try to make it easy to go shopping, for example through correct signs or by making sure that we have the shopping carts easily available. (Respondent A)*

The emphasis on the importance of store atmosphere is in accordance with academic literature to build a strong brand (Burt & Sparks, 2002) and gain competitive advantages (Baker et al., 2002). The store atmosphere's impact on customer shopping behavior (Baker et al., 2002; Grewal et al., 2021), exaggerates the importance of efforts to the store's design factors as well as the recognized importance of customer service overall.

#### **4.1.1.2 Results-driven**

The employees' perceptions and practices of the core value results-driven were based on financial performance or non-financial performance, related to sustainability and the handling of food waste.

Most respondents linked the core value *results-driven* to financial results and profitability. It suggests that City Gross places a significant emphasis on financial performance as a measure of success. Respondent H stated that "we have to reach our goals, it doesn't just have to be sales but also margins and volume". A store manager continued:

*We need to be more profitable, but it's difficult in these times. We have to reduce cost and also staff, while also increasing sales. It's important to continue to talk about the results, also the bad ones. (Respondent B)*

The respondent acknowledges the need for organization-wide involvement when presenting the results. Such information may facilitate employee commitment to the results and thus the core value, as they become aware of their role in achieving them. The respondents' efforts in spreading the results further down the organization imply their perceived importance, which appears natural given their responsibilities as store management.

Some respondents viewed *results-driven* from a non-financial perspective. Respondent K stated that "in one way it's not just about money but also about doing better things." Multiple respondents highlighted the example of food waste:

*Food waste is our main priority right now. We can't control the prices, but we can control the volumes, to not waste anything unnecessary. That's not good for the resources on earth and also doesn't feel good, so we need to think about it every day. (Respondent D)*

Respondent D further explained how the stores can easily compare their amount of food waste each week on the intranet. The topic of food waste was mainly discussed by the store employees. It seemed to engage them due to their ability to influence the results and witness the direct consequence, in comparison to the financial results. This interpretation of results-driven as a core value related to sustainability may be attributed to external pressures on retailers to embrace ethical practices (Abratt & Mingione, 2017).

#### **4.1.1.3 Responsible**

The respondents connected the core value *responsible* to how it was practiced in their daily operations. Moreover, there was a perception of City Gross' being sustainable, for example in regard to food waste and assortment. The perceptions were further formed based on historical incidents where City Gross had demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility.

The core value *responsible* was mainly associated with the execution of work tasks and the behavior towards colleagues by the respondents. However, to be responsible was seen as a given behavior at any workplace by many organizational members:

*I need to show responsibility, I can't blame anyone else. I don't connect it to our values but we talk a lot about it anyways [...] we need to focus on what we do and deliver a good store. (Respondent B)*

Others perceived City Gross as a *responsible* retailer through its efforts within sustainability. The respondents mentioned how City Gross facilitates sustainability for its customers by providing recycling machines in store and exclusively selling Swedish meat, thus affecting the store atmosphere and assortment. Other rather internal measures were also discussed such as working actively to reduce food waste:

*We need to show responsibility towards the planet and think of sustainability. To yourself, towards your colleagues, the workplace itself and the planet [...]. We have so many Swedish products in our assortment, that is a good value when it comes to responsibility and CSR. (Respondent E)*

The assortment decisions of consciously supporting Swedish products and farmers therefore become part of City Gross' unique value proposition, corporate brand identity and external image to the customers (Grewal et al., 2021).

Another perspective of City Gross as a *responsible* retailer was explained by Respondent C: "we don't take any shortcuts, we do things in the right way". The same perception was shared by Respondent J, explaining:

*Last summer we had a bit of a newsflash because we made some errors in our meat packaging instructions, we wrote the wrong dates on our meat. That became big in media. Afterwards City Gross really took responsibility, we went a step further than we had to,*

*we took a stand. Now we have more education than is necessary to avoid it happening again. Responsibility is one of the things I really notice. (Respondent J)*

Thus, the handling of the scandal appears to have had a positive impact on the perception of being *responsible*.

#### **4.1.1.4 Inclusive**

Most respondents related the core value *inclusive* to a feeling of community throughout the organization. Practical examples were tied to diversity, which was both evident in their recruitment processes and communication strategies.

The respondents all shared the perception that City Gross is an *inclusive* organization. Respondent J even highlighted how City Gross is “more inclusive than other companies I’ve been at.” The most common understanding of how the organization is *inclusive* was based on its collaborative nature. Through the interviews, we uncovered a shared perception of a flat organizational structure, as expressed by an employee: “you can talk to everyone, no matter if it’s the store manager or someone who works extra in the cashier” (Respondent D). It is further manifested in how the stores are managed, as managers are present in the operational work. The openness and inclusiveness were tied to a feeling of community. The word was strongly recurring, for example by Respondent D: “everyone should feel like they are part of the community, I feel like we succeed on that”. Multiple respondents further linked *inclusive* to the previous core value *ombryddhet* (loosely translated to “caring for”), a word made up by the Bergendahl family to show a compassionate behavior towards the colleagues, customers and planet: “I still haven’t lost that word, I say it every week to someone. When you have worked here for so many years it’s something you take with you” (Respondent I).

The meaning of the core value was also related to diversity by multiple respondents. A top manager explained “we need diversity and different minds to develop great things for the future” (Respondent E). The need for diversity was highlighted in relation to gender equality, age and nationality, and most examples considered recruitment:

*When recruiting we consider all ages and all nationalities, the whole spectrum. We complete each other, I’m young and strong but others have qualities that I lack. It’s important that we have everything. (Respondent A)*

The interpretation of the core value as diversity was also noticed when developing its communication:

*City Gross is a company of many people, but it's easy to just show one part of the company. It's important who we highlight and how we do it. It's easy to take someone who is blond. This is important to me, to not just to give one picture of City Gross, also in our external communication. (Respondent G)*

By including the core value in the external communication, inclusiveness further obtains meaning among external stakeholders. Customers see evidence of City Gross's *inclusiveness* through their assortment and employees:

*Nationality is important for us, that is also seen in the assortment. We got customers from all over the world that is why we need employees from all over world. (Respondent A)*

That City Gross' promotion and assortment reflects their corporate brand identity of being *inclusive* may be seen as a strength, as it influences what corporate brand image is conveyed to its customers (Grewal et al., 2021).

Overall, the respondents expressed an aligned view of how being *inclusive* is interpreted throughout the organization, making it a strong core value through its consistent presence (Urde, 2011).

#### **4.1.1.5 Integrated Analysis of all Core Values**

The core values are supposed to create a link between the internal and external side of the corporate brand (Urde, 2013). However, after discussing the core values with the employees and investigating how they are perceived and practiced, it is doubtful to what extent the core values of City Gross generate any value outside of the organization. The core values rather provide guidance to internal processes and how employees should behave, than offer visible points of differentiation to the customer. Although traces of some core values, especially *responsible* and *inclusive*, may influence the assortment and emphasis on customer service as part of the store atmosphere, they mainly represent hygiene factors that are expected to be present in all Swedish grocery stores. Therefore, it could be argued that the core values should rather be interpreted as organizational core values (Urde 2003).

Regardless of whether the core values should be considered organizational core values or not, their purpose should be to unify the organization (Urde 2003). Their generic characteristics and cruciality to the practices of retailing creates a false optimism to the results. The organizational members appear united around and committed to the values, without even being aware of their existence. When the respondents were asked to name City Gross' core values, only a few could recall even one of them. As explained by Respondent L: "If you would ask anyone working here I don't think anyone would know all of them." However, it appears as if the employees are aware of the importance of being *customer-focused*, *results-driven*, *responsible* and *inclusive* even without formal training. This suggests that the core values may be internalized to guide the organization to some degree (Urde, 2013), but that it rather originates from adapting to surrounding colleagues' behavior and retail industry norms than from strategic efforts.

The recall rate was highest among the top management, which is understandable as most of them were part of developing the renewed core values a few years ago. All other respondents claimed that they recognized all core values when they were mentioned to them during the interview. However, it is possible that their recognition was influenced by a perceived expectation to know them, potentially making them feel forced to affirm their awareness due to social desirability bias.

Irrespective of their actual awareness, all employees could make sense of the core values, both in how they perceived and practiced them. It appears as if that stems from their overall general applicability to retail and customer service:

*The values are part of the organization subconsciously, if you don't work according to the values, you won't have any result in the end, and unsatisfied employees. [...] The stores I've worked at before were concerned with the same type of values, you need to be responsible and results-driven to survive, but maybe they used different wording. I still think the values are good, I think they should be there, but they are still pretty obvious.*  
(Respondent H)

Despite the recognition of how the core values are not unique for City Gross, and the low recall-rate, most store employees and store management expressed a positive attitude towards them. They explained how they shared the same personal values, which may facilitate organizational commitment (de Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015) to the core values. Such employee

resonation with the core values results in a high credibility (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Urde, 2009; Roper & Fill, 2012).

The optimism towards the core values was not enough to motivate the store employees and most store managers to initiate strategic discussions around them. There was a shared perception that trainings regarding “those specific four words” (Respondent L) would not provide any value as the employees were already committed to the intended core value outcomes in terms of attitude and behavior:

*I don't think there are any values that would represent us better, these are good enough [...] even if we don't explicitly say that “now we're talking about values or goals” they are still with us naturally. Employees identify with the values even if we don't talk about it. (Respondent B)*

However, a few store managers suggested how they would like to work more with the core values with their employees. One store manager called the combination of the daily work and designated time for discussing the core values “one of the main conflicts I have” (Respondent A). The conflict was elaborated upon by another store manager:

*We have more short-time horizons now than before because of the inflation, one year feels very far away. [...] In these pressured times when we have the choice of either filling up the ketchup or having a staff meeting, the answer is simple. That pushes the work with such things [core values] to the side. (Respondent B).*

Those perceptions of the importance of the core values were in line with the top management's, where all respondents expressed a need to increase the overall emphasis of the core values to guide internal decision-making processes, and thus increase their role as an organizational reference point (Burghausen & Fan, 2002):

*We should lean on them [core values] when we take decisions, they create a strong sense of community. We need them to guide us internally. To practice them and talk about them gives a lot, it makes us see the company from the same angle. But they still have different meanings for different people, that's interesting. (Respondent G)*

This openness towards individual interpretations of the core values was expressed by multiple top managers. This desire for individual interpretation motivated their positive attitude towards

the core values' generic design. "I like that they [core values] are generic. The broadness is a strength, because everyone can interpret it" (Respondent G). The broadness therefore facilitates employee buy-in, implementation (Miller, Merrilees & Yakimova, 2014) and commitment (de Chernatony, 2010). It further makes the core values more agile to change which has proven beneficial for City Gross during times of inflation, as the core values may be interpreted through the lens of the price-conscious consumer (Urde 2001; Kapferer, 2001; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). The lack of uniqueness of the four words does therefore not seem to be an issue, which was also suggested by Urde (2011).

It appears as if City Gross' challenge lies rather in the lacking unique interpretation and expression of the core values (Urde, 2011), failing in explaining why and how they conduct their business (Burghausen & Fan, 2002). While the core values do guide their activities and behavior (Urde, 2013) and resonate with the employees and how they work (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Tarnovskaya, Elg & Burt, 2008; Roper & Fill, 2012), their practice becomes too general, for example by greeting customers to demonstrate *customer-oriented* behavior or attempting to increase sales to be *results-driven*. Such practices can be seen as a hygiene factor in retail rather than guiding principles specific to City Gross.

However, one exception was identified. To the core values where the respondents related its practice to sustainability, the core value obtained emotional and symbolic values (Kapferer, 2012). Evidence of the commitment and emotional involvement could be witnessed in the store atmosphere and assortment, making the core value credible (Urde, 2009) and distinguishing City Gross' place in the market, both as an employer and a grocery retailer (Burghausen & Fan, 2002).

Overall, while the core values may not differentiate City Gross from other grocery retailers in terms of the general perceptions and practices, they are perceived to be "lived" by the organization.

#### **4.1.2 Vision**

City Gross' vision states "Sweden's most satisfied food customers". As the company does not have a corporate mission, our study will solely analyze their vision. Most respondents liked the fulfillment of the vision, to a wide range of price levels and broad and deep assortment. The perception of whether the vision was inspiring varied among employees, mainly based on their organizational levels.



The general price levels were mentioned as the main barrier of customer satisfaction. All organizational members had noticed a more price-oriented customer behavior, making the price the determining factor when shopping for groceries. As expressed by a store manager:

*The most satisfied customer today is the one that spends the least money. Usually, they would look for the best quality, meat etc, but now we need to shift focus. The most satisfied customer is not the same as two years ago, the game plan has changed. (Respondent A)*

Several other respondents noted the customers' price-sensitivity as City Gross' largest challenge right now, and how their previous differentiation points to satisfy customers, the fresh food assortment and customer service, were not as valued anymore. As a consequence, City Gross has put a larger emphasis on campaign prices to increase customer satisfaction and thus the fulfillment of the vision:

*It has been difficult lately because of what is going on in the world, the rising prices, the customers aren't satisfied about that. They think it's our fault, that we are overpriced. I try to tell them that it isn't us. [..]. That is tough right now. We try to have as many campaigns as possible to be perceived as cheap, we work a lot with that in store, for the customers to see what's cheap. (Respondent M)*

However, internal conflicts were uncovered concerning if City Gross' should aim at being perceived as cheap or not. The top management appeared hesitant to whether that was in line with City Gross' more premium corporate brand, while the store employees and managers were positive towards lowering the general price level to obtain more satisfied customers. The store managers and store employees also shared a frustration towards the pricing, and how it had become more centralized since the Axfood acquisition:

*To get there [vision] we need to have more attractive prices in comparison to our competitors, that's extremely important right now, but I can't control that because it comes from above. (Respondent B)*

The same frustration relating to increased centralization was noted among the store managers. Multiple store managers explained how they were no longer allowed to make individual purchases for their store, for example for local *klipp*. They believed that this new restriction from Axfood hindered their ability to satisfy customers and thus fulfill the vision.

However, other parts of the current assortment were seen as successful means to fulfill the vision, as expressed by respondent L: “We are not there, but on a good way. We fulfill it in some parts, like the meat where we are market leaders.” The meat and general fresh food assortment were mentioned by multiple respondents in creating customer satisfaction. Both because of the assortment’s high quality, but also because of its breadth and depth, that “you can get everything you want” (Respondent K). Nevertheless, the high cost associated with maintaining a fresh assortment was highlighted, which had resulted in some store modifications:

*We have not planned to reduce the fresh assortment, but we have had to make some changes, for example in our scheduling. [...] But the assortment is still the same, there’s still a lot of focus on service. But we need to act faster, have a broader assortment of the groceries that last longer. [...] We also have a cheaper assortment, budget groceries, private label groceries. Now we have Axfod such as Eldorado, that you can find throughout the store. People buy that more, they are more price-conscious than they were before. (Respondent L)*

City Gross has thus chosen to maintain what is referred to as its primary strength, the fresh food assortment (Bergendahls, 2022a). The decision goes against the rest of the grocery market according to Respondent D, explaining how “many competitors have closed their manual desks since it is very expensive. That differentiates us a lot.” Its motivation may be derived by the previous interpretation of the meaning of satisfied customers. As a result, City Gross maintains its unique profile and differentiation points in relation to the vision (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; de Chernatony, 2010; Urde, 2021). The prioritization ensures that the currently established store atmosphere is maintained, with regard to customer service and manual desks (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). However, the retailer simultaneously strives for a new assortment balance in an attempt to preserve their corporate brand identity while becoming more relevant in accordance with the new customer behavior (Grewal et al., 2021), with larger emphasis on cheaper products and private label brands.

Several respondents of the top management mentioned how the vision inspired them in their daily work to continuously improve: “It [the vision] is really inspiring because at the moment we are far away” (Respondent E). The answer signals that the vision fulfills its intention of being both inspiring and desirable (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; de Chernatony, 2010). However, it

did not seem to inspire all organizational levels (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Most store employees and store management could not recall the vision and referred to it as too obvious in the retail industry to create a sense of inspiration:

*It comes naturally. If you work in a store you want customers to leave feeling satisfied, no matter where you work. But it [vision] isn't anything I think about every day, I just try to meet the customers in a nice and respectful manner. This is true for all service employees, no matter the store. (Respondent D)*

Despite their low awareness of the vision, all employees could still make sense of it, proving its comprehensibility (de Chernatony, 2010). They also expressed a positive attitude towards the vision because of its adaptability, for example:

*We shouldn't change the vision, it's always been relevant, and it's gonna stay relevant for another 100 years. But the meaning of what a "satisfied" customer is will have to change. (Respondent A).*

The same positive attitude was seen by a member of the top management:

*I think it's a great vision when you're the smallest. We can't be the biggest but be the one that people like. It says something about our personality, to be a place where you want to be. [...] It means that we set our goals high, we want to make a mark in the food landscape in Sweden, distinguish ourselves from our competitors. That's inspiring. (Respondent G)*

The respondent's answer indicates that the vision is perceived as achievable for City Gross (de Chernatony, 2010), as they have the potential to accomplish the highest level of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction may also be measured, which is in accordance with directions from literature (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; de Chernatony, 2011; Urde, 2013). The respondents further connected the vision to other corporate brand identity elements, such as a welcoming culture, as well as the assortment. A vision that has the ability to support such elements of the retail brand is desirable (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser 2019).

In general, it appears as if the vision does fulfill its main purpose of providing a common focus and sense of purpose throughout the organization (Jones, 2010). However, it is questionable whether the adaptations of the retail characteristics are due to the actual vision, or its general nature in the retail industry. The strong emphasis on prioritizing the customers' needs is

repeatedly evident in the respondents' answers, suggesting how the vision is in line with the employees' shared values (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Simultaneously, the claim *satisfied* is broad enough to allow for different interpretations among employees and to adapt in accordance with external pressures (Jones, 2010), such as evolving customer demands. It appears as if such customer changes have resulted in a more differentiated interpretation of the vision throughout the organization than prior to the inflation. Especially, it seems like the perception of what satisfied customers translates to varies depending on the organizational level. The recent changes to the pricing strategy and assortment can be said to be motivated by the vision, justifying those efforts as part of the intended direction for the corporate brand's path forward (de Chernatony, 2001).

#### **4.1.3 Competences**

In general, City Gross' competences appear to meet the demands of the corporate brand identity elements and thus fulfill its promise to the stakeholders (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). The strong focus on customer service and customer satisfaction is ensured through a large working force. The customer-facing employees' helpfulness is recognized by the customers:

*We have a great relationship with the recurring customers. Customers say that we have better service and more staff than our competitors. Therefore, we need to keep that, have staff from when we open until we close. It's really important. (Respondent H)*

The large stores facilitate the broad and deep assortment, multiple manual counters, and in-store production, resulting in a "concept that is not found elsewhere in the market" (Respondent C). The retailer has actively expanded on its fresh food assortment, distinguishing City Gross from its competition:

*We can't really impact the dry goods, flour is flour. But what we can develop, how we can distinguish ourselves, that is the manual counters, fish and how we chop our own meat. That makes us unique compared to Coop, [ICA] Maxi and all of those. (Respondent L)*

The retailer has further developed the employees' competences in-house to ensure they have educated bakers, butchers, and other fresh food experts to fulfill the customer promise of a fresh food hall with knowledgeable staff. This further facilitates the accomplishment of the vision of satisfied customers:

*I think we are the ones who would like to have our employees as educated employees working with production inside the stores. And that's the opposite trend of all the other companies. That part is, I think, one of the only things we can be unique on. (Respondent N)*

City Gross thus has developed notable unique competences among its store employees, differentiating the retailer from its competitors (Greysen & Urde, 2019). The presence of an extensive workforce within the stores contributes to the retailer's distinctiveness. The employees' unique competences are strengthened by internal training, resulting in specialized knowledge among the staff that is directly aligned with the company's specific assortment categories and corporate brand (de Chernatony, 2010; Bergendahls, 2022a). The extensive knowledge enables the customer-facing employees to successfully deliver the brand promise, further motivating its importance in retail (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002). The staff, in combination with the spacious stores, therefore contribute to a differentiated store atmosphere (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020) and ultimately corporate brand identity (Grewal et al., 2021). The store atmosphere is further distinguished by the large fresh food assortment in the manual counters. City Gross has therefore managed to create additional differentiation points based on its corporate brand identity elements (de Charoney, 2010; Balmer & Podnar, 2021) in an otherwise homogeneous grocery retail assortment (Bridson & Evans, 2004).

#### **4.1.4 Culture**

The perceptions and practices of the organizational culture naturally varied between respondents. However, we found evidence for a generally positive understanding of the organizational culture and a strong sense of belonging among City Gross employees. Most respondents highlighted the organization's family feeling and flat hierarchy as the most prevalent associations.

The sense of being part of a family seems to play a central role in defining and characterizing the culture of City Gross, as Respondent C expresses, "family is a big part of our culture". Numerous respondents further highlighted this "family feeling", like Respondent K when stating:

*We are owned by a family, from the beginning it's a family business and it feels like also the company wants to get this feeling, this heritage that this is a family business from the very beginning. (Respondent K)*

In addition, many respondents acknowledged the flat hierarchy at City Gross, allowing employee involvement at all organizational levels. Evidence for this can be found in the close interactions between employees within one store and their store manager. As Respondent L highlights, this close relationship and the flat hierarchies are particularly noticeable in the store between store managers and store employees:

*To always have a dialogue with the group is very important. I'm also working on the floor; I work at the office as well, but I try to be there when it's calmer and to be around 80 percent in the store. I think that is common in City Gross, of course it may be different at different stores, but us who have been part of the organization for longer are trained that way. I think it creates more job satisfaction, we get a stronger relationship and more understanding for each other that way. (Respondent L)*

Thus, by showing presence and being approachable, store managers lay the foundation for open communication where store employees can easily interact with them and find ways to get involved. Such flat hierarchies and the prevailing open approach grant all employees the opportunity to express their ideas and to develop within the company:

*Our promise is to offer a fair work environment, and it's a great way to advance. Most of our managers are actually from the floor. Most people started like me. We started from school [...], our first jobs and just continued to advance. (Respondent A)*

This perception of City Gross' culture as a "good culture for personal development" (Respondent B) is consistent with the strong emphasis of City Gross on employee development and with initiatives like the *Ung Talang* program. This is further illustrated by Respondent N stating: "You have so many areas where you can develop as an employee, the opportunities are bigger in our stores than in other companies".

Overall, the cultural characteristics of City Gross, i.e. a culture with a strong family and community feeling, flat hierarchies and an open as well as inclusive approach, foster a culture that is strong and distinct:

*I think it's very warm. And I think everyone just wants to make a good job. I have always felt very safe, felt like they really believe in me. When we have been challenged, I think we have come together really much as a group and that makes you safe, you are never like alone and you never stand alone. For me that's the strongest feeling of coming to City Gross. (Respondent G)*

By conveying such a strong feeling of affiliation through the organizational culture, City Gross becomes a strong corporate brand for current employees at all organizational levels as well as potential employees:

*The culture, that was what attracted me to the company first because I think there's a very warm and open culture. It's easy to get to know people, you are welcome everywhere. [...] A culture where you are welcome and people feel like it's important what all different areas work with. (Respondent C)*

The internal organizational culture serves as the foundation for a strong corporate brand (Kapferer, 2012) and is thus an important factor in establishing a strong corporate brand (de Chernatony, 2001). The interviews revealed a consistently positive perception of City Gross' culture and showed that the cultural elements are a strong focal point for employees' behaviors across all levels of the organization. As such, the respondents' positive perceptions of City Gross' culture appear to be primarily driven by the strong "family feeling" that permeates the organization. Although the recent integration of Axfood has led to changes in centralization, many respondents indicated that this has not affected the strong culture. As stated by Respondent F: "It [the culture] didn't change because of Axfood. A lot of it is dependent on the people working here, the age and the store management". Although most respondents claimed that the acquisition had not significantly affected their daily work, and expressed confidence that the most prominent part of the culture, the family feeling would remain, some expressed a fear towards which changes were to come due to the fundamental differences of the companies: "City Gross and Axfood are two completely different worlds, that need to come together. [...] Axfood is very structured and basic, like boxy" (Respondent L).

Despite the perceived presence of a family culture, our interviews revealed discrepancies between employees at different levels of the organization in terms of the degree of cultural similarity between different stores. For example, one respondent from top management said that "the local leadership affects the culture, there are very much differences" (Respondent C),

while a store employee expressed that “we have the same culture in all stores” (Respondent F). This finding highlights the potential for misalignment between different levels of the organization, primarily due to the mental and physical distance between corporate headquarters and individual stores that is characteristic of the retail industry. It also highlights the influence that store management and store characteristics exert over each stores’ culture, creating the risk of a silo-mentality that can hinder coherent representation of the corporate brand across stores.

Moreover, the interviews seemed to reveal differences in the perception and evaluation of the family culture at the various organizational levels. Although the majority of employees in the stores had a positive attitude toward the family culture, the following statement from top management indicates a less positive view of the family culture:

*We are in a change from this small company to a little bit bigger company. The owners has been the family and talked a lot about family. There is some kind of a family culture, but we need to change that to a more up to date culture. We come from a culture where you do everything different in each stores, you don’t have manuals of how to handle things like fresh food or price increases, so the future for us is to do more the same in all the stores, and that’s a big culture change because it’s been a historical thing in City Gross that you are doing business on your own, you are buying a lot of products on the side of the central purchase organization, and that’s a huge difference, I’m trying to start to work with a more up to date culture, a more modern culture. We call it to be more chain driven.*  
(Respondent N)

Thus, there seems to be an intention to move from the independence among the City Gross stores to a more centralized approach, not only in terms of store characteristics such as assortment and price, but also in terms of cultural aspects. This finding emphasizes that there are different views of organizational culture depending on the organizational level of the respondent. However, as the culture has a direct impact on the social aspect of the store atmosphere (Rashid & Ghose, 2015), this observation underlines the importance of communicating an organization-wide direction as to where the company is heading.

Overall, the culture of flat hierarchies and inclusiveness at City Gross not only reflects one of the company’s core values, but also has a significant impact on employee involvement, motivation, and ultimately employee behavior (Rashid & Ghose, 2015). By feeling valued and acknowledged, the respondents demonstrated a high level of involvement and motivation to



actively contribute to the success of the company. As the literature shows, such a culture has a positive impact on employee behavior and work ethic (de Chernatony, 2010; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). This is particularly important in the retail industry, where store employees' interactions with the customers shape the overall store atmosphere and experience and thus deliver the retailer's corporate brand promise (Grewal & Levy, 2007). Instances of flat hierarchies and inclusive managerial behavior, such as the close interactions between store managers and employees and the active integration of employee opinions, serve as concrete examples illustrating how employee motivation can be fostered through organizational culture (de Chernatony, 2010) and how a strong culture can cultivate a positive and dynamic atmosphere within the store (Rashid & Ghose, 2015). The evidence gathered from the interviews imply that the strong organizational culture not only contributes to attracting employees who align with the company's core values, but also plays a critical role in employee retention, which is particularly noteworthy in an industry characterized by high staff turnover (Foster, Whysall & Harris, 2008). This insight from the employee perspective underscores the positive impact of City Gross' corporate culture on the overall corporate brand identity. However, the discrepancy identified between various organizational levels and stores emphasizes the need to promote a cohesive approach regarding the desired essence of City Gross' corporate culture.

## **4.2 Internal Corporate Brand Image**

We discuss how employees perceive the corporate brand image of City Gross to contribute to our understanding of research question two: *How is the internal corporate brand image being perceived by employees at different organizational levels within retail?* As the internal corporate brand image is formed based on the collective stereotypes in the organization, it naturally, and ideally, overlaps with the corporate brand identity elements. Such alignment is desirable, as it means that the intended corporate brand identity is reflected in the employees' collective perceptions, thus resulting in a positive internal corporate brand image (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). The main collective perceptions of the internal corporate brand image we identified among the employees were: high-quality, good values, Swedish and underdog.

The respondents expressed a strong internal corporate brand image of City Gross as a high-quality grocery retailer: "We are not the cheapest, but we offer the best quality to a good price" (Respondent B). This internal corporate brand image appears to stem from the retailer's

characteristics in terms of the wide fresh food assortment, service-influenced store atmosphere and price strategy:

*We give the customer a deep and wide shopping experience in our stores, they can buy both a cheap and premium basket, we have a wide variety. [...] We want to make them think that we have an extraordinary food assortment that is exciting. (Respondent E).*

Another collective perception regarded City Gross' values: "it is a really good company in Sweden that stands for good values" (Respondent E). The description of what "good values" are, were often related to supporting Swedish farmers and promoting the Swedish assortment, as explained by respondent A: "We wanna make a difference in the grocery industry, we wanna promote local, the Swedish distributors". This strong internal corporate brand image of City Gross as a responsible retailer, which is in line with the corporate brand identity as a core value, was also related to the company's track record:

*We have taken strong stands throughout the years. Political stands, for the farmers, we are a brave company. We only sell Swedish meat, even if it's costly. The competitors aren't as responsible, especially the low-priced ones. (Respondent G)*

The respondent noted the challenge in conveying an external corporate brand image of being both responsible and cheap. This highlights City Gross' complex situation in determining its future direction in order to strike a balance between a desirable assortment in line with its corporate identity and an attractive pricing strategy according to the customers. It further highlights the contradictory stakeholder interests of a corporate brand, especially in retail, and how external changes put pressure on City Gross to initiate a recreation process to remain relevant to its customers (Aaker, 1991).

The family feeling was further unveiled as a collective stereotype. It appears as if the family ownership by the Bergendahl family, collectively referred to as "the heart of the business" (Respondent B), reinforced this internal corporate brand image:

*I think City Gross as a company we got a bit of a family feeling. It's like we are owned by one family and that feeling has spread all over the company. (Respondent A)*

Moreover, this shared perception of City Gross as a family business led to a stereotypical internal corporate brand image that portrayed the company as a small player within a large

industry. As highlighted by Respondent A, it creates an internal image of City Gross as an underdog: “I would say that we are a pretty small actor in a very large industry, it creates a culture of being an underdog.” (Respondent A). Such statements reflect respondents’ collective perceptions of the corporate brand, creating a distinct internal corporate brand image of an underdog or a “small rebel” (Respondent K). Consequently, the strong organizational culture actively contributes to the creation of a distinct internal corporate brand image that is shared by City Gross’ employees at all organizational levels.

### **4.3 Internal Branding**

Following the analysis of City Gross employees’ perceptions and practices of the corporate brand identity elements and their perception of City Gross’ internal corporate brand image, we analyze our third research question: *What is the role of internal branding in supporting the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image within retail?* As such, we investigate brand-centered HRM, internal branding communications, and brand leadership within the case of City Gross.

Brand-centered HRM includes a variety of practices, combining HR activities with marketing activities, such as employee recruitment, training and rewards (Gapp & Merrilees, 2006; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). The results of our study did not provide consistent evidence of the existence of brand-related training and reward initiatives. While some respondents claimed to have brand-related trainings mostly “during the introduction of new employees, especially for management roles” (Respondent I), there was no consensus among the interviewees. Although respondents named weekly staff meetings, their primary function was described as a platform for sharing operational results rather than emphasizing the corporate brand. However, in their recruitment approach, City Gross seems to demonstrate awareness of the crucial role employees play in shaping the corporate brand identity:

*We look at their previous competences when recruiting but it isn’t the determining factor, the personal competences are more important, like how they work in a group, that they understand how we work here. (Respondent L)*

As such, City Gross appears to acknowledge that the employees’ themselves and their personal values contribute to the development of the corporate brand identity (de Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015). Rather than focusing solely on the competences of potential

employees, the respondents claimed to recruit based on the individual's personality and values, as well as their fit with the corporate brand identity elements.

Regarding the internal brand communications, no informal discussions of the corporate brand identity elements were mentioned by employees. When respondents were asked how the core values and vision were communicated to them or if and how they communicated them to their staff, their answers varied considerably. While we could identify different channels of communication throughout the interviews, we could not find evidence of channel alignment. Many respondents named the *medarbetarsamtal* ("annual employee performance review") as the primary channel through which the corporate brand identity elements were communicated. Many others referred to "value walls" displaying the core values in the office hallways, which we also witnessed during our visits to the stores. However, it is noteworthy that while nearly all offices showed such a value wall, the core values depicted were the old ones. Occasionally, they were placed behind inventories, physically blocking their message (see Appendix C1). The issues concerning the value walls' message were further illustrated by Respondent B:

*We have our old values on the wall, but nothing has happened, they could easily be updated. It even says Bergendahls Food and not City Gross. We call it the value wall, it's been a thing, if you have a new employee you show them. I think they fit well here, but they should have the right message, they aren't correct right now, it becomes wrong.*  
(Respondent B)

Other channels that were mentioned by the respondents included the retailer's intranet, the code of conduct, documents such as PowerPoints and presentations as well as e-learning and trainings as mentioned before.

Despite the importance of internal brand communications, it is essential to recognize the significant impact of the company's external brand communications, particularly on the employees who interact directly with customers in the store. Both informal and formal external communication channels help shape the perceptions and experiences of these employees (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). The customer-facing employees explained how they constantly received informal and external corporate brand communication through face-to-face interaction with customers and feedback stations in store (see Appendix C2).

Formal and external brand communication through in-store advertising signs designed by the headquarters appeared to be the main source of information for the store employees of the

adaptation of the corporate brand to the changing customer behavior in combination with the assortment changes. Such communication was especially tied to the vision, with signs stating, “always low price” and “price matched”, with the aim of increasing customer satisfaction by exposing them to the campaign groceries (see Appendix C3).

During interviews with top management, we encountered evidence suggesting that they acknowledge the lack of consistent internal brand communication, as well as a possible explanation for this finding:

*When they were realized, we had this huge release for them and I think it was a bit disrupted by the sale of Bergendahls Food. We didn't launch them all through, because I thought there was just this huge plan for it where we should do this playground, have a lot of workshops around them, but then Bergendahls Food got sold. So then they just, we had them, but we need to work with them because I think that we missed that when everything happened. (Respondent G)*

This statement highlights the lack of internal branding efforts and the resulting lack of communication of the corporate brand identity elements. It appears as if the inadequate communication stems from the Axfood acquisition, rather than insufficient knowledge or motivation among the top management.

Moreover, there seems to be a misalignment in how the presence of corporate brand identity communication is perceived in the headquarters and how it is perceived in the stores. This is in line with our previous findings of internal discrepancies given the distance between corporate headquarters and stores, often encountered in retail. Respondents from top management generally found the elements important and stated:

*We have done a couple of communication efforts, but I believe the best way to make sure they are implemented is to make sure they are integrated in all processes of the daily work. We have done workshops, movies, and sent it out to all employees. Implement them in the leadership process, medarbetarsamtal, yearly salary reviews, discuss areas of improvement connected to the core values to make them alive in the business. (Respondent C)*

In contrast, some of the store employees saw less priority in the communication of corporate brand identity elements when stating, “values are part of the *medarbetarsamtal*, but is the last

thing we talk about” (Respondent H). This shows that while the top management intends to communicate and institutionalize the elements of the retailer’s corporate brand identity to all employees, this was not consequently implemented.

This fragmentation in the way that the corporate brand identity elements are communicated is further highlighted by the inconsistencies in communication strategies between individual stores that we found in the interviews:

*We have PowerPoints but I’m not involved on that level, that is management to employee. When it comes to core values it is of course good to have a common understanding, but it’s fine to have an individual take on them, like how do I take responsibility, you’re allowed to have a personal take on them. (Respondent C)*

This quote highlights how the formal communication strategy of the corporate brand is dependent on individual managers and how the top management is not involved in this process. Consistent with previous research on the importance of brand leadership in achieving brand commitment (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), our findings illustrate the influential role of retail store managers in shaping employees’ brand understanding.

The overall inconsistent approach of internal branding observed at City Gross is visible throughout all dimensions of internal branding, i.e. brand-related HRM, internal brand communications and brand leadership. The specific characteristics of the retail sector, such as the significant distance between retail stores and corporate headquarters and the reliance on individual store managers in addition to different store environments, pose challenges to the effective cascading of internal brand management across the organization. As a result, day-to-day operational tasks and external factors take precedence in stores, leading to a certain disregard of the corporate brand identity and its elements.

## 5. Discussion

*In the following chapter, we reflect and discuss our empirical findings in relation to previous research on corporate brand orientation, internal branding, and retailing. We explore what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization by discussing the factors of corporate brand identity elements, internal corporate brand image and internal branding. Applying the conceptual framework to a retail-specific context forms the foundation for our extended framework “Corporate Brand Orientation in Retail with Integrated Facilitators and Inhibitors”.*

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### 5.1 Generic Corporate Brand Identity Elements - A Blessing and a Curse

According to Balmer and Podnar (2021), the corporate brand identity should act as the foundation of the corporate brand orientation. Evidence of how the corporate brand identity elements were perceived and practiced internally was revealed for all elements - *core values, vision, competences* and *culture*, enabling us to answer our first research question: *How are the elements of the corporate brand identity being perceived and practiced by employees at different organizational levels within retail?* However, the corporate brand identity elements’ perceived importance, interconnectivity and alignment differed among the *core values, vision, competences* and *culture*.

Within City Gross, culture was the most prominent corporate brand identity element affecting the corporate brand identity. Given the low awareness and interest among store employees regarding the elements *core values* and *vision*, such a development appears to be expected. It is likely that the long distances between the top management and store employees in retail contribute to such attitudes. Still, the positive, strong, and unified culture seems to compensate for the lack of employees’ awareness of the corporate brand elements *core values* and *vision*. In line with previous literature, the strong organizational culture of City Gross leads to an enhanced involvement, motivation, and engagement among employees (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Thus, culture becomes the central platform of the corporate brand identity (Balmer & Podnar, 2021) in explaining how things are done (Rashid & Ghose, 2015), and guiding their activities and interactions with external stakeholders. As such, the culture facilitates the desired corporate brand consistency both internally and towards customers (de

Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015) through brand citizenship behavior (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

However, for the company to fully leverage on their corporate brand, the culture needs to be consistent with the other corporate brand identity elements (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; de Chernatony, 2010). The top management indicated that the strong family-feeling that distinguishes the culture was not in line with the new chain-driven organization after the acquisition. Other practical results of the acquisition, such as outsourcing of some support functions, can also be anticipated to have a negative effect on the current family-based culture. Thus, it appears dangerous to allow culture to act as the main basis of the corporate brand. If the culture increasingly differentiates from the other elements of the intended corporate brand identity, City Gross' entire corporate brand would progressively be weakened through its inconsistency.

City Gross' culture and competences exhibited uniqueness, but the perceptions and practices of the core values and vision were characterized by their generic nature within the retail industry. The core values and vision therefore largely failed in creating differentiation points to the organization both internally and externally (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Urde, 2013), as only some parts of the assortment and store atmosphere could be vaguely linked to the elements. However, the genericness and broadness resulted in a high degree of adaptability of the elements. This agility proved beneficial to City Gross during times of inflation and changing customer preferences (Urde 2001; Merrilees & Miller, 2008). It appears that such adaptability in the perception and practice of the core values and vision holds extra significance for retailers, given the multiple stakeholders involved and intense external pressures. However, the constant adaptation to external elements poses a challenge to the establishment of a corporate brand orientation, as modification to City Gross' retail characteristics are motivated by market changes. Within City Gross, the top management demonstrated a larger commitment to maintain the corporate brand identity than the store employees, which is in line with previous literature on retail given their closeness to the customers (Wallece et al., 2013; Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013).

Store employees' limited interest in the core values and vision may further be attributed to how they were developed. When these corporate brand identity elements were revised a few years ago, store employees were not allowed to co-create them. Additionally, they lack an evident link to City Gross' origin. In contrast, both the culture of family feeling and the strongest core



value in terms of knowledge and emotional involvement, *inclusive* stemming from *ombryddhet*, are based on the history of the company. Given the importance that especially the store management and store employees placed on the Bergendahl family, heritage appears to be a main contributing factor to how the employees embody the corporate brand identity elements. Therefore, it seems like it would be beneficial for City Gross to base more of the corporate brand identity on the company's history, which is in line with current literature (Urde, 2003).

## **5.2 The Power of a Unified Internal Corporate Brand Image**

The internal corporate brand image further appeared to play a large role in defining City Gross' corporate brand, which is in line with the framework developed by Balmer and Podnar (2021). The employees' answers in relation to our second research question: *How is the internal corporate brand image being perceived by employees at different organizational levels within retail?* revealed a sense of organizational coherence. In general, the respondents expressed a cohesive internal corporate brand image, mainly connected to high quality, good values, Swedish and underdog. It appears as if the transition between the corporate brand identity and the internal corporate brand image is mainly enabled by two factors, namely the tangible retail characteristics and the strong organizational culture.

City Gross' internal corporate image seems to be mainly formed based on interactions with the corporate brand. Within the context of a retailer, most of such corporate brand interactions naturally take place in the store, especially for store employees and store managers. As a consequence, the internal corporate brand image becomes sensitive to changes of the retail characteristics. Potential changes to City Gross' assortment and store atmosphere, driven by external pressures, may undermine the current strong collective perception of City Gross as a provider of higher quality compared to competitors. Less emphasis on the local assortment, which has already been executed due to the increased centralization, may further diminish the collective perception of City Gross as a retailer with good values. The Axfood acquisition and planned expansion may also impact the shared stereotype of City Gross as an underdog. That may have larger consequences on the overall family feeling within the culture. However, it seems like the united internal corporate brand image around the Swedish identity could remain despite changes in retail characteristics. This collective perception appears to be more resilient as it is rooted in the company's history with deep connections to Skåne, the Bergendahl family and political stances for the Swedish farmers. Therefore, it seems like the top management should nurture and value that part of the internal corporate brand image with greater emphasis.

Surprisingly, internal branding only played a minor part in the transfer of the corporate brand identity to the internal corporate brand image. This indicates that the internal corporate brand image has formed informally, leaving the top management with limited control over its establishment. Yet, the internal corporate brand image demonstrated dynamic alignment with the corporate brand identity elements, making it a positive image according to literature (Balmer & Podnar, 2021). It appears as if the alignment arises from the generic nature of City Gross' core values and vision, making them relatable to any employee in the retail industry and thus allowing for such aligned transfer to subconsciously happen collectively within the organization. Additionally, the store environment seems to play a crucial role in cultivating collective perceptions that align with the corporate brand identity elements. However, it appears problematic that the collective stereotypes are based on the culture and the retail characteristics rather than the corporate brand identity elements, as they are expected to be more subject to change.

Noteworthy and perhaps a little unexpected, the internal corporate brand image appears to be more distinct and consistent compared to the perceptions and practices of the corporate brand identity elements. This appeared to be true among employees across different organizational levels. This is particularly remarkable considering the long distance between top management and store employees in the retail industry, as well as the limited interaction between different organizational levels and store locations. It therefore indicates that the strong organizational stereotypes, i.e. the internal corporate brand image, compensate for the lacking knowledge of the corporate brand identity elements, as long as the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image are aligned.

### **5.3 The Opportunities of Internal Branding**

Achieving effective alignment between corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image, as proposed by Balmer and Podnar (2021), seems to require the adoption of a coherent internal brand strategy as an additional factor. However, the analysis of our third research question: *What is the role of internal branding in supporting the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal brand image within retail* in light of existing literature, revealed City Gross' deficit of a consistent internal branding approach that promotes a unified awareness of corporate brand identity elements. Consequently, this hinders the desired outcomes of brand understanding, identification, and commitment with the corporate brand

identity of employees at all organizational levels (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Most significantly, the findings revealed a notable lack of consistent internal brand communication at City Gross, a dimension often highlighted in academic research as the most important aspect of successful internal branding (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015).

In the highly competitive and relationship-driven retail industry, customer-facing employees' awareness of the corporate brand identity is of critical importance to enable the necessary alignment between corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image according to Balmer & Podnar (2021). Insufficient brand understanding can lead to inconsistent brand behavior and thus hinder the effective transfer of the corporate brand identity to the internal corporate brand image. To mitigate negative consequences for external stakeholders and improve overall internal brand equity, City Gross should prioritize consistent internal branding efforts. Consequently, developing a robust internal branding strategy is essential to institutionalize the elements of corporate brand identity and promote their internalization among employees to foster cohesive brand citizenship behavior (Iyer, Davari & Paswan, 2018; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). As retailers are reliant on their store employees to effectively communicate and embody the corporate brand identity (Burghausen & Fan, 2002; Burt & Sparks, 2002), achieving internal brand equity through internal branding is particularly important in this context.

However, supporting such alignment through internal branding seems to be challenging in the retail specific context of City Gross. The interviews with City Gross employees revealed little communication between the stores. While store management mentioned regular meetings with managers from other stores, store employees seemed to rarely interact. For example, this discrepancy led store employees to believe that all stores had a uniform culture, while store management pointed out differences between individual stores. This shows that the nature of physical retail appears to facilitate a larger risk of harmful silos in relation to the corporate brand identity, internal corporate brand image, and its communication.

Additionally, the significant mental and physical distance between the retail stores and the corporate headquarters seems to impede the establishment of unified internal branding efforts. This appears to increase the reliance on individual store managers in taking on the role of brand leaders to create awareness and understanding among their employees for the corporate brand identity. Therefore, City Gross should put greater emphasis on ensuring the store managements' understanding of and commitment to the corporate brand, fostering a stronger

internal brand equity (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). A stronger commitment among store managers would further reduce the inconsistency among stores in regard to the distribution of the formal internal brand communication. To rely less on individual store managers, City Gross should continue its work in institutionalizing the corporate brand identity elements, as they already have with the core values in the *medarbetarsamtal*. In addition, through consistent brand-related trainings and improving internal brand communications, managers' understanding of the corporate brand could be strengthened. Despite previous research emphasizing the importance of brand leaders in establishing a shared understanding of brand elements among employees (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), we saw a discrepancy between theory and practice within City Gross. This led to noticeable inconsistencies between different stores and employees and highlights the potential role of internal brand communication as an enabler in transforming managers into effective brand leaders, thereby positively impacting their employees' awareness and understanding of the corporate brand (Saleem & Iglesias, 2016).

The low awareness and engagement may be traced back to how the employees viewed the core values rather as words than applicable behaviors. To increase the store employees' and managers' perceived value of the internal branding initiatives, the communication should be more contextual and adapted to functional behaviors and operational objectives (Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013). That would allow the core values and vision to be translated into actual behaviors among customer-facing employees, providing it with a deeper meaning across the organization. Thereby, a more active practice of the core values and vision would be enabled, resulting in increased visibility of these corporate brand identity elements to the external stakeholders.

By stronger connecting the core values to individual performance and career development, the overall organizational awareness, identification, and commitment may increase (Burmamann & Zeplin, 2005; de Chernatony, 2010; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016), enabling the employee's understanding of their own impact of the embodiment of the corporate brand (Murillo & King, 2019; Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021). Such employee buy-in should then be measured to a larger extent than today to strategically target individual stores that are underperforming, and thus reduce the silo-mentality in relation to the corporate brand (de Chernatony, 2010). An overall increased knowledge of City Gross' corporate brand identity elements among store employees and store management would increase the consistency of the interpretation of the

corporate brand, and lead to a more united corporate brand-oriented approach across the whole organization (Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013).

Thus, to achieve the desired outcome of fostering a positive internal corporate brand image through corporate brand identity as proposed by Balmer and Podnar (2021), we suggest that the concept of internal branding is given critical importance. In order to establish an internal branding strategy that allows City Gross to facilitate the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image, the retailer should implement more consistent brand-related HRM, internal branding communications, and brand leadership (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021).

#### **5.4 Uncovering the Facilitators and Inhibitors**

In exploring what establishes a corporate brand orientation in a retail organization across all organizational levels, we discuss the potential facilitators and inhibitors that were uncovered in our case study, in line with our purpose.

An inhibitor to corporate brand orientation was found in the lack of coordinated corporate brand identity efforts. Such absence may contribute to the formation of silos, leading to varying levels of awareness and interpretation of the corporate brand within City Gross. For a retailer, this inconsistency appears to be particularly difficult to avoid, as the employees are affiliated with one single store, often detached from other stores and corporate headquarters. In the case of City Gross this becomes especially evident, as there is typically only one store per city and employees rarely interact. However, in a few cases, we found exceptions where store employees from different stores do interact, for example through the internal training program *Ung Talang*. Such cross-functional projects were mentioned by the participants to have a positive impact on creating a feeling of unity. These controlled internal branding activities therefore seem to facilitate the alignment of the internal corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image, as the respondents expressed a stronger commitment to the company, contributing to a stronger brand orientation (Huang & Tsai, 2013).

The same consistency may be created through tactical internal communication (de Chernatony, 2010; Rashid & Ghose, 2015). As previously described, City Gross had intentions of such activities which were disrupted because of the acquisition. Such willingness and active commitment suggest City Gross' top management to be rather corporate brand-oriented (Iyer,

Davari & Paswan, 2018). However, the willingness to adopt such potential communication efforts was lower among store employees and store management, as they experienced it to collide with their daily operations. Moreover, they expressed a more limited timeframe than the top management, enhanced by the changing customer-behavior. This attitude, which indicates a market orientation, is expected given their closeness to the customer (Wallece et al., 2013; Gyrd-Jones, Helm & Munk, 2013; Elg & Welinder, 2022). As a consequence, the store employees and store managers expressed a wish to obey the new customer demands, in contrast to the top management who showed evidence of being limited by the brand (Urde et al., 2011). Thus, there appears to be a misalignment within the organization regarding the optimal balance between the corporate brand identity and the shifting customer behavior (Grewal et al., 2021). This is further exemplified through the previously mentioned tug of war between the core values *customer-focused* and *responsible*, as the pursuit of affordable groceries tends to conflict with local and responsibly sourced groceries. This was further illustrated in the discussion of the price strategy, where the top management appeared hesitant to whether a general reduction in price levels aligned with City Gross' more premium corporate brand, while the store employees and managers expressed a more favorable attitude as it would enhance customer satisfaction. Thus, the strength of the corporate brand orientation varied at different organizational levels regarding the preservation of City Gross' established retail characteristics. Such presence of often contradictory interests and time frames at different organizational levels expose another inhibitor in establishing a corporate brand orientation across the entire retail organization.

The store itself acted as both a challenge and an enabler of a stronger corporate brand orientation. The value of the corporate brand identity elements only seemed to resonate with store employees when they could establish a tangible connection to their daily operations, which is in line with previous findings by Gyrd-Jones, Helm and Munk (2013). The retail characteristics and formal external communication signs in store therefore embody the corporate brand to not only the customers, but also the employees. Such evidence was found to affect the store employees more than the intended corporate brand identity by the top management. The store can therefore either act as an endorser of the intended corporate brand identity or undermine it if there is a lack of alignment. City Gross' current modifications of the assortment, store atmosphere and pricing strategy thereby affect the perceptions and practices of the corporate brand identity elements, despite not being the intended outcome by the top management. Such changes may disrupt the organizational consistency of the corporate brand

identity, for example in relation to the core value *responsible*, as well as the internal corporate brand image, for example *high quality* or *good values*. However, due to the broadness and genericness of the core values and vision, it appears as if their adaptability preserves their relevance. This realization reveals that the corporate brand identity and the internal corporate brand image shape the retail characteristics and vice versa.

To date, internal branding had less of an impact on the alignment between the corporate brand identity elements and the internal corporate brand image within City Gross than literature suggests. However, in overcoming some of the aforementioned inhibitors, internal branding, as suggested by previous literature, could serve as a facilitator to increase employees' corporate brand understanding and commitment. Brand-related HRM, internal brand communications, and brand leaders across all organizational levels could strengthen the internal brand equity and ultimately the corporate brand orientation (Barros-Arrieta & García-Cali, 2021).

The interviews revealed a tentative desire to change the retail characteristics according to the new market and customer demands. The discussion exposes the challenge of how a retailer may balance the intense external pressures while staying true to the corporate brand. Motivated by the new price-sensitivity among customers, the retailer has already started making changes in the brand assortment towards a larger emphasis on cheaper products. As most of the corporate brand's current differentiation points are characterized by a certain sense of premium, major changes to the assortment and pricing would significantly reduce the corporate brand's competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996; Urde & Greyser, 2019) and consistency (Burt & Sparks, 2002; Mårtenson, 2007). Furthermore, it would influence the external corporate brand image in terms of positioning and reputation, resulting in a new customer shopping behavior at City Gross (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees & Miller, 2013), where the fresh food assortment is likely to be less appreciated. Although that might be desirable by some stakeholders to remain relevant (Aaker, 1991), the new corporate brand would no longer sum up the values currently representing City Gross (Ind, 1997). The organization would therefore be forced to reevaluate who the company is and what it stands for (Urde & Greyser, 2019), potentially creating a new internal environment that would no longer resonate with the employees. Such revolutionary change (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) would further diminish the value of the unique competences, which have been developed in accordance with the current corporate brand identity (de Chernatony, 2010; Balmer & Podnar, 2021).

Additional need for change could be enforced by the new stakeholder Axfood, as acquisitions may lead to contradicting corporate identities (Muzellec, Doogan & Lambkin, 2003; Melewar & Akel, 2005; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). The declared reason for the acquisition was to facilitate economies of scale and further expansion of the City Gross stores (Axfood, 2021). The effect is already evident in the increasingly centralized store assortments. Such objectives could lead to conflicts with the corporate brand identity (Burt & Sparks, 2002). With City Gross expanding geographically in the future, the task of institutionalizing the corporate brand identity elements will become increasingly complex. Transmitting the same strong sense of the cultural family feeling may prove challenging moving forward. The transfer of City Gross' strong organizational culture can potentially be more difficult compared to the more generic core values and vision. With the two cultures of City Gross and Axfood increasingly merging and the number of stores growing, the strength and stability of the existing culture cannot be solely relied upon, underscoring the need to invest in expanding awareness and understanding of the other corporate brand identity elements. As the company expands into new locations, it becomes important to ensure that employees are aware of and can identify with the corporate brand identity elements, allowing for consistent behavior across all stores and in line with the desired corporate brand identity.

## **5.5 Towards a Framework for Corporate Brand Orientation in Retail**

Our findings have been summarized in the *Corporate Brand Orientation in Retail with Integrated Facilitators and Inhibitors* framework (see Figure 6). By applying the conceptual framework to the retail context, internal corporate brand elements, internal corporate brand image and internal branding have been confirmed as important factors, as suggested in our initial framework in Figure 5. The factor of retail characteristics has been added as a vital factor supporting the corporate brand orientation in a retailer. Instead of a linear relationship, we propose a circular relationship, with internal branding influencing the transfer between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image. Additionally, potential facilitators and inhibitors in the link between the factors have been added.



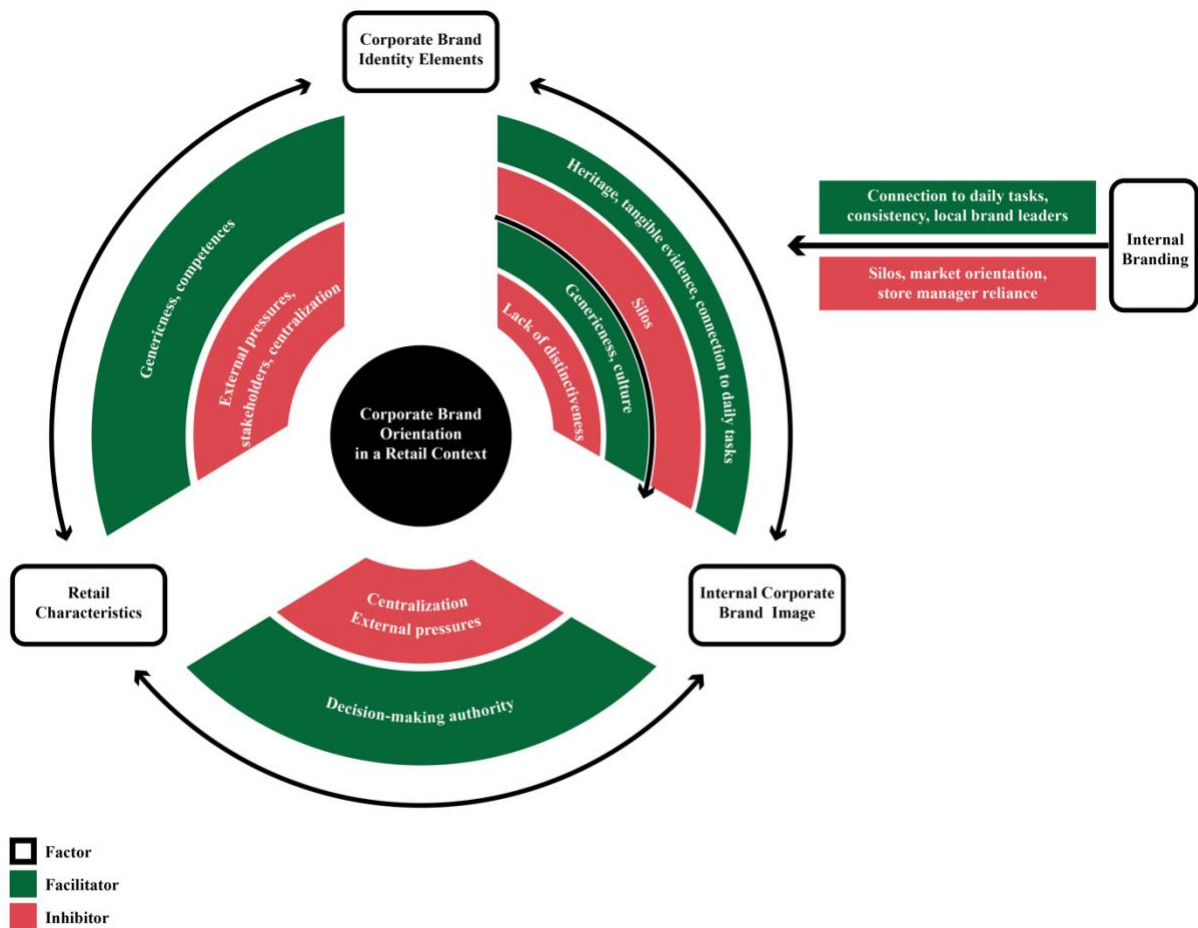


Figure 6: Corporate Brand Orientation in Retail with Integrated Facilitators and Inhibitors

To adapt the framework to retail, our study confirms that the retail characteristics must be included. During the interviews, it became evident that the stores themselves play a large part in the interpretation of the corporate brand. Within City Gross, the retail characteristics of store atmosphere (design and social), price and promotion strategy, product and category assortment, and brand assortment are suggested to have a direct impact in providing meaning to the internal corporate brand elements and forming the internal corporate brand image. Reversely, the strength of the corporate brand orientation when confronting the challenging external pressures have a fundamental impact on the retail characteristics. Thus, the retail characteristics, corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image mutually influence each other in a circular causality rather than linear as proposed by Balmer and Podnar (2021). This continuous back and forth process is what generates the collective organizational beliefs regarding the corporate brand and ultimately the strength of the corporate brand orientation. In the case of City Gross, the most significant identified corporate brand identity elements contributing to a corporate brand orientation at all organizational levels are the organizational culture and the

retail characteristics of store atmosphere and assortment. In the successful transfer of the corporate brand identity elements to the internal corporate brand image, internal branding may play a significant role in providing understanding and commitment among employees.

#### *Corporate Brand Identity Elements and Internal Corporate Brand Image*

Our study revealed a strong relationship between the corporate brand identity with the elements *culture, core values, vision, competences* and the internal corporate brand image. Regarding the transfer of the corporate brand identity elements to the internal corporate brand image, we identified the elements' lack of distinctiveness as a potential one-way inhibitor that may inhibit a potential positive influence on the internal corporate brand image. However, at the same time, we found that a certain degree of genericness of these elements seems to facilitate the formation of the internal corporate brand image, as it allows for more individual interpretations. Furthermore, we found that a strong and unifying culture seems to facilitate the transfer from the corporate brand identity elements to the internal corporate brand image. In a reciprocal manner, the formation of silos as organizational silos seems to inhibit the mutual influence and alignment between the corporate brand identity elements and the internal corporate brand image. However, tangible cues linking the corporate brand to daily retail operations were found to be facilitators in contributing to a mutual influence between the corporate brand identity elements and internal corporate brand image.

#### *Internal Branding*

As mentioned above, internal branding seems to play a crucial role in facilitating the transfer of the corporate brand identity elements to the internal corporate brand image. However, this may be inhibited by the low interest in the corporate brand identity among store employees and store managers due to their market-oriented focus. Other potential inhibitors we identified were the organizational silos prevalent in retail stores and the distance between the retail stores and corporate headquarters, which increases top managements' dependence on store managers to support internal branding. Nonetheless, several factors were found to be potential facilitators in achieving corporate brand orientation through internal branding, namely a consistent internal branding approach and brand leaders across the entire retail organization. In addition, we found that linking internal brand communications to tangible day-to-day operations of the retail organization facilitates the alignment of the corporate brand identity elements with the internal corporate brand image.

### *Internal Corporate Brand Image and Retail Characteristics*

The internal corporate brand image and the retail characteristics were further found to mutually influence each other. The collective stereotypes within the organization affect the retail characteristics, mainly in terms of store atmosphere and assortment, and the retail characteristics shape the collective perceptions of the organization. Our findings suggest that the transfer may be inhibited by centralization, as that results in less impact of the internal corporate brand image on the retail characteristics by the individual stores. External factors further inhibited the transfer, as customer behavior impacted the retail characteristics, for example in terms of assortment changes. Moreover, changes in customer behavior forced on changes to the store atmosphere and assortment, creating a misalignment with the internal corporate brand image. However, such inhibitors may be overcome by increasing the decision-making authority of the store managers and store employees, thus allowing them to let the store's internal corporate brand image become visible in the retail characteristics.

### *Retail Characteristics and Corporate Brand Identity Elements*

Similar findings were exposed in the transfer between retail characteristics and corporate brand identity elements. Because of the acquisition and new shareholders, centralized changes were made to the retail characteristics, making it less aligned with the corporate brand identity elements. However, the generic nature to the corporate brand identity elements *core values* and *vision* acted as a mitigator, as the genericness allowed for adaptations to the retail characteristics. Because of the broadness, the corporate brand identity elements could remain but with new interpretations, despite changes to the retail characteristics. Competences were further unveiled as a facilitator. The emphasis placed on competences in the corporate brand identity facilitated a strong focus on service in the store atmosphere and manual counters to the assortment. Simultaneously, such evidence in the stores justified its importance in the corporate brand identity.

## 6. Conclusion

*The final chapter of this thesis provides a summary of our study and our final conclusions. First, we revisit the objectives of this study and answer the research questions, followed by an overview of the fulfillment of our research purpose. Moreover, we present the theoretical and managerial contributions of our study before concluding this thesis with the limitations of our study and opportunities for future research.*

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As presented in the introduction chapter, the purpose of this study is to examine what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization. Therefore, we explored the internal perspective of employees of different organizational levels. As such, this thesis examines the intersection of corporate brand orientation, internal branding, and retailing, with the explicit objectives of studying the phenomena of corporate brand orientation in a retailer firsthand, applying an existing framework and building on previous theory in a retail-specific context. This led to the formulation of the following research questions to guide this study:

***RQ1: How are the elements of the corporate brand identity being perceived and practiced by employees at different organizational levels within retail?***

***RQ2: How is the internal corporate brand image being perceived by employees at different organizational levels within retail?***

***RQ3: How can internal branding support the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image within retail?***

In order to provide comprehensive insights into the research questions and fulfill the purpose of this study, we conducted a qualitative single-case study with the Swedish grocery retailer City Gross. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from different organizational levels to allow for wider perspectives. The thorough analysis of the empirical findings and the application of Balmer and Podnar's (2021) theoretical framework in the specific context of retailing has resulted in detailed and nuanced responses that comprehensively address and elaborate on each of our research questions. In addition, this has resulted in an extension of the conceptual framework specifically for retail organizations.

***RQ1: How are the elements of the corporate brand identity being perceived internally within retail?***

In examining how the corporate brand identity elements are perceived by City Gross' employees, we revealed that the awareness of the core values and vision differed depending on the organizational level, with top management showing higher awareness and commitment. The low brand awareness among store employees and store managers therefore makes it questionable whether the elements succeed in providing the foundation of the corporate brand. However, the organizational culture appears to be distinct enough to create such a central platform on its own. The generic core values and vision then act as supporting pillars, particularly emphasizing customer satisfaction, in line with the overall objective of the retail industry. Thus, the elements appear to guide the organizational activities and shape the retail characteristics, but rather because of their inherent intuitiveness and generic nature to retail than intentional institutionalization from the top management. Deliberate development could however be found in the cultivation of the distinct competences. The competences were recognized as a vital element at all organizational levels in delivering the corporate brand promise. In general, our study highlights that in the context of City Gross, culture is the most prominent corporate brand identity element contributing to a corporate brand orientation.

***RQ2: How is the internal corporate brand image being perceived by employees at different organizational levels within retail?***

The internal corporate brand image was found to be a vital contributor to a corporate brand orientation in the case of City Gross. It exhibited high levels of both uniqueness and coherence. The employees across the organizational levels expressed a more unified internal corporate brand image compared to the perceptions and practices of the corporate brand identity elements. The most prominent collective stereotypes were either connected to the retail characteristics or the culture. As such aspects are sensitive to external pressures and changes, they can potentially disrupt the alignment within the organization. Therefore, there is a need to be mindful of the potential instability of the internal corporate brand image moving forward. However, the parts of the internal corporate brand image that were based on the company's history and track record, such as the family business and previous political stances, are likely to be more resilient, also in times of external change.

***RQ3: What is the role of internal branding in supporting the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image within retail?***

Internal branding had less of an impact on the alignment between the corporate brand identity elements and the internal corporate brand image within City Gross than originally assumed. Although City Gross' top management seems to acknowledge the importance of a coherent internal branding, the efforts in brand-related HRM, internal brand communications and brand leadership to date have not been consistent. Particularly, it appears as if the unique characteristics of the retail industry, including significant physical distances between retail stores as well as to corporate headquarters, a generally strong reliance on individual store managers, and the presence of diverse store environments, present inhibitors to the effective distribution of internal branding across the retail organization. While it appears that internal branding currently plays a limited role at City Gross, it has the potential and should be used strategically to improve and strengthen the retailer's corporate brand moving forward.

The answers to the research questions enable us to answer the purpose of this study, to explore what may facilitate or inhibit a stronger corporate brand orientation in a retail organization. We found evidence indicating that the factors *corporate brand identity* and *internal corporate brand image*, as proposed in the framework by Balmer and Podnar (2021), contribute to fostering a corporate brand orientation within the retailer City Gross. However, our study also revealed that these factors alone are not sufficient to address the specific challenges for corporate brands within retail, as the unique characteristics of the retail industry require additional considerations. Thus, in addition to the previously proposed factors, we extended the framework with the main factors of internal branding and the retail characteristics. Moreover, our study identifies potential facilitators and inhibitors, contributing to a better understanding of corporate brand orientation within the context of retail.

Our study highlights the importance of the retail store as a manifestation of the retail corporate brand. Therefore, actively engaging and fostering commitment among store employees and management to make them appreciate the corporate brand and reduce their natural market orientation becomes a vital facilitator. Such commitment becomes especially important in the retail industry since customer-facing employees embody the corporate brand to external stakeholders. Widespread organizational commitment towards the corporate brand therefore facilitates the achievement of the desired consistency when delivering its promise. In the context of retail, consistency appears to be a particular challenge, given the potential formation

of silos among individual stores. Establishing an increased corporate brand-oriented organization therefore demands strategic internal branding and institutionalization of the corporate brand identity elements. Furthermore, involving employees at all levels of the retail organization in the corporate branding process is crucial. This inclusive approach facilitates the translation of internal corporate brand elements into functional behaviors applicable to the daily operations, ultimately enhancing the understanding and commitment of the corporate brand and thus the corporate brand orientation.

## **6.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This thesis contributes to the notion of corporate brand orientation in a retail context, acknowledging the importance of employees and internal branding. We outline our main theoretical contributions as follows.

As our first contribution, our study confirms the applicability of the corporate brand orientation framework developed by Balmer and Podnar (2021). We found empirical evidence of how corporate brand identity elements and a positive internal corporate brand image contribute to a stronger corporate brand orientation. However, they do so in a circular manner and not linear as proposed by the authors. We further extend previous research by adding additional factors contributing to a corporate brand orientation that should be considered in the context of retail. Our study showed that the factors mentioned by Balmer and Podnar (2021) were not sufficient in explaining the retail employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the corporate brand. We therefore propose the retail characteristics of store atmosphere, price and promotion, product and category assortment and brand assortment to be included as contributing factors when discussing corporate brand orientation in the context of retail. Additionally, we investigated the role of internal branding in achieving a corporate brand orientation. Although its presence was low in our case company, our findings suggest it to be a facilitator for the organization to become more corporate brand-oriented.

Our second contribution regards the general discussion of strategic orientations in retail. By qualitatively investigating the notion of (corporate) brand orientation at different organizational levels within a retailer, this thesis constitutes one of the few contributions of such nature to the industry to this date. It has been widely argued whether a retailer can achieve a (corporate) brand orientation throughout the entire organization. Our findings are in line with previous research, suggesting that store employees are less (corporate) brand oriented than the top

management due to their shorter time perspective tied to their working tasks. However, we propose that a wider organizational (corporate) brand orientation may be achieved through consistency with the retail characteristics and strategic internal branding efforts connected to their daily operations that target the factors in our conceptual framework. Our study therefore provides rich insights into what may facilitate or inhibit such a strategic orientation in a retail context by taking the intense external pressures and highly competitive nature into account.

The third contribution of our study relates to the role of internal branding in contributing to the alignment between the corporate brand identity and internal corporate brand image within retail. Our study shows that certain retail-specific characteristics appear to inhibit the positive impact of internal branding on employees' corporate brand understanding and commitment. In particular, this challenge seems to be rooted in the considerable physical and mental distance between different retail stores and between the stores and the corporate headquarters. The potential formation of stores as organizational silos further intensifies this challenge. Additionally, it seems as if the market-oriented approach of store managers and employees as well as top management's dependence on store managers in institutionalizing the corporate brand identity elements further inhibit such positive outcomes. Therefore, building and maintaining internal brand equity through internal branding efforts appears to be particularly challenging in retail.

## **6.2 Managerial Contributions**

In addition to our aforementioned theoretical contributions, this thesis also provides managerial implications of what may facilitate or inhibit a corporate brand orientation in the specific context of retailing. Since most previous literature on corporate brands and (corporate) brand orientation has not emerged from the retail context, its practical application may create challenges for retail managers. Therefore, our research is important for managers as it provides valuable insights specific to retail.

Our first managerial contribution highlights the importance of managers' recognition and commitment to the corporate brand for achieving a corporate brand-orientation in retail. Given the highly competitive retail landscape and the numerous external pressures retailers are constantly exposed to, the recognition of the corporate brand as a decisive competitive advantage is crucial. Only through a deep understanding of the corporate brand and its importance to the company's success can a retail organization in its entirety gain the ability to



stay true to the corporate brand and consistently deliver on the corporate brand promise. As managers are important brand leaders who inspire other employees, their commitment to the corporate brand is an essential prerequisite for successful corporate brand orientation in retail. If the retailer is unable to establish a unified corporate brand, and thus internal brand equity, there is a risk that the value of the retail corporate brand to both internal and external stakeholders will diminish, which may lead to a significant decline in competitive advantage.

Our second managerial contribution draws attention to the importance of achieving a unified understanding of the corporate brand identity throughout the entire organization. This is particularly important in the context of retailing, as the stores may act as organizational silos. Therefore, internal branding efforts, such as brand-related HRM, internal brand communications, and brand leadership, should be implemented with consistency to establish an increased awareness and unified understanding of the corporate brand. Since the role of store employees is of great importance to the retailer, as they act as the embodiment of the corporate brand towards external stakeholders, it is essential that top management ensures the internal branding efforts are distributed to all employees. Only through consistent internal branding can knowledge of the corporate brand, and therefore identification and commitment, positively affect the ability of individual employees to deliver on the corporate brand promise. Thus, by institutionalizing the corporate brand identity along with fostering a sense of belonging and co-creation among employees, a positive internal corporate brand image can be facilitated and corporate brand orientation across all organizational levels enhanced.

Our third managerial contribution concerns managers' effective communication of the corporate brand identity elements to improve the understanding and perceived relevance for employees. To achieve this, managers should enhance connections between these elements and employees' tasks to make them more contextual and adapted to functional behaviors and operational objectives. Thereby, they can become more tangible and their relevance for employees' daily tasks can be increased, which allows for a translation of the elements into actual behaviors, providing them with deeper meaning across the organization. Moreover, greater implementation of corporate brand identity elements into employees' individual performance and career development can foster a deeper understanding of their own impact on embodying the corporate brand, which is particularly important among customer-facing store employees. This can be achieved through initiatives such as incorporating these elements into employees' annual performance reviews, adding them to the measurements of success as well

as providing brand-related training opportunities. Thus, managers' consistent implementation of the corporate brand identity can strengthen the internal brand equity and enhance employees' corporate brand orientation.

### **6.3 Limitations and Future Research**

This thesis has examined corporate brand orientation within retailing from an employee perspective. As our research focuses specifically on the internal side of the corporate brand, the external stakeholders are not accounted for. However, it is important to recognize that corporate brands, in contrast to product brands, acknowledge the involvement of multiple stakeholders. This limitation highlights a need to further explore how the external corporate brand image affects the establishment of a corporate brand orientation within retail.

Our findings are limited to the specific context of grocery retailing, as this is where our case organization operates. While some characteristics are present across different sectors of retailing, we note that the discussed retail characteristics may differ in importance and expression. For instance, the wide and homogeneous assortment within grocery stores may not be present in other sectors. Thus, exploring corporate brand orientation in other sectors of retail could be of interest to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon.

The selected case organization further limits our study geographically to Sweden. It is widely recognized that there might be significant differences in employee and customer behavior across various grocery markets. Our study suggests the importance of organizational culture for corporate brand orientation, which may vary between countries as it is influenced by the national cultural characteristics. In the case of City Gross, the influence of the flat hierarchy within the organization was evident both in the corporate brand identity and the internal corporate brand image. The hierarchical structure therefore has implications for the establishment of an organizational-wide corporate brand orientation. It is likely to influence the top management's attitude towards the importance of engaging all employees, regardless of their organizational level, in the co-creation of the corporate brand identity. Therefore, we suggest future research to conduct similar studies in other cultures. This would allow for an examination of the significance of culture and an identification of other relevant cultural factors. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate this topic within other Swedish organizations, as there may be varying organizational cultures within the same national context.

It may further be of interest to study global retailers by conducting a cross-cultural study, as culture may vary within the same organization.

In this study, a qualitative approach is taken to gain a deeper understanding of the corporate brand orientation within retail and how it is perceived by the employees. This choice of method was influenced by the limited prior research in this specific context. We therefore saw a need to capture rich contextual nuances of the employees' authentic experiences with the corporate brand. The findings of this study have led to the development of a conceptual framework, which could be tested quantitatively to assess its transferability to other retail organizations and the relative importance of each factor and influence on each other. Therefore, a future study of quantitative nature could evaluate the extent to which the proposed framework is applicable in another setting.

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# Appendix A

## Interview Guide

### Opening questions

#### Introduction

- Introduction of ourselves
- Explain how the interview will go about
  - Time (1h max)
  - Open questions, please answer truthfully, no right or wrong answers, we want to hear about your experiences etc.
  - How the information will be used, consent, can we record? Contract?
  - Inform about anonymity
  - Feel free to switch to Swedish at any time if you feel uncomfortable or that you cannot express yourself as you would like to in English
- Why are we there
  - why they are important, how they can contribute
  - master's thesis

#### Who are you?

Can you describe your role as a (insert role) at CG?

- What is your job title?
- How long have you been with the company?
- What are your responsibilities?
- What is your background?
- What is your expertise?

#### Key topics

1. How would you describe City Gross?
  - a. To a new employee
  - b. With 3 words
    - i. Why?
2. What does City Gross stand for?
  - a. What does it promise to its employees and customers?
  - b. Strengths?
3. What do you think differentiates City Gross from other competitors?
4. What values does City Gross represent to you?
5. Are you aware of the City Gross core values?

6. How did you learn about them?
  - a. How are they communicated to you?
    - i. Trainings?
    - ii. What is most important to you when you receive it?
  - b. How do you communicate them to your team/staff?
    - i. Trainings?
    - ii. What is most important to you when you communicate it?
7. How do they affect your everyday work?
8. How do they affect the store experience?
9. What does [core value] mean to you?
  - a. Result-driven
  - b. Inclusive
  - c. Customer-focused
  - d. Responsibility-taking
10. How does [core value] affect your everyday work?
  - a. Result-driven
  - b. Inclusive
  - c. Customer-focused
  - d. Responsibility-taking
11. Are you aware of the City Gross vision? “Sweden’s most satisfied food customers”
12. What does it mean to you?
  - a. Does it inspire you?
13. How does it affect your everyday work?
14. How does it affect the store experience?
15. How would you describe the culture in the company?
  - a. What are some of the defining characteristics?
16. How do employees interact with each other?
17. Can you describe the process of the Axfood integration?
18. How has it affected CG so far?
19. How has it affected your everyday work?
20. How do you think City Gross (values etc.) should evolve to stay competitive in the future?

### **Closing questions**

- Brief summary of what we have talked about
- Do you have anything to add?
- Express our gratitude, how their answers are valuable and will contribute to our report
- Can we contact you again?



# Appendix B

## Consent Form

### Intervjuavtal Examensarbete

#### Uppgifter om intervjuperson

Namn:

Företag:

Arbetsroll:

Geografisk region:

#### Uppgifter om intervjun

Intervjuare:

Intervjudatum:

#### Samtycke till användning och arkivering av intervjun

Jag samtycker till att intervjun, inklusive de personuppgifter som anges i detta avtal, används i examensarbetet samt arkiveras vid Lunds universitet. Mitt deltagande kommer att anonymiseras och mina svar kommer inte att kunna spåras till mig. Intervjumaterialet får användas i enlighet med allmänna forskningsetiska principer. Vidare samtycker jag till att intervjun spelas in, under förutsättningen att inspelningen endast kommer användas till transkribering, och sedan raderas i enlighet med GDPR. Jag är medveten om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt, och kan när som helst före publiceringsdatum välja att dra tillbaka mitt deltagande.

Ort och datum

Intervjupersonens underskrift och namnförtydligande

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# Appendix C

## Pictures

### CI: Value wall



**C2: Feedback station**



### C3: In-store communication

