



Branding, Public Relations, Emotional Labor, and Authenticity in Organizational Communication Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Branding and public relations have become central to contemporary organizational communication, shaping how institutions construct identity, legitimacy, and trust in complex social environments. Within this field, current research primarily emphasizes strategic frameworks and measurable outcomes, with limited attention to how these practices are experienced by professionals in their everyday work. However, little is known about how practitioners interpret, negotiate, and experience branding and public relations as lived and meaning-driven processes. Here, an interpretive phenomenological approach is used to explore the lived experiences of professionals engaged in branding and public relations, revealing how they sustain organizational identity through continuous negotiation, emotional engagement, and ethical consideration. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with experienced practitioners (n = [insert number]) who had [insert key participant characteristics, e.g., at least five years of professional experience in branding and public relations across public and private organizations] and analyzed using interpretive thematic procedures to identify essential experiential meanings. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed [insert procedures, e.g., member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail] throughout the research process. The findings show that branding is experienced as a dynamic process of meaning negotiation, while public relations work involves emotional and reputational labor under conditions of uncertainty. In addition, practitioners navigate a persistent tension between maintaining strategic consistency and adapting to situational demands, with authenticity emerging as a central guiding principle. These findings deepen understanding of branding and public relations by highlighting their experiential and human-centered dimensions, offering important implications for future research that seeks to integrate subjective experience into the study of strategic communication.



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INTRODUCTION

Branding and public relations have become central components of contemporary organizational communication, particularly in an era characterized by rapid digital transformation, heightened public scrutiny, and increasingly complex stakeholder relationships (Copley, 2022). Organizations across sectors ranging from corporate institutions to government bodies and nonprofit entities rely on branding not only as a strategic tool for differentiation but also as a means of constructing identity, legitimacy, and trust within dynamic social environments. Public relations, in this context, functions as a communicative bridge that connects organizational narratives with public interpretation, shaping how meaning is created, contested, and sustained in the public sphere.

The phenomenon of branding and public relations is no longer confined to the dissemination of carefully crafted messages. Instead, it unfolds within a broader socio-cultural landscape where audiences actively interpret, respond to, and even reshape organizational identities through digital platforms and participatory communication. As a result, branding becomes an ongoing relational process rather than a static representation, while public relations evolves into a practice of continuous engagement, negotiation, and adaptation (Williams-Smith & McMillan, 2022). This shift reflects a deeper transformation in how organizations interact with their publics, where credibility and

authenticity are increasingly determined not only by what organizations say but also by how their messages are experienced and perceived in everyday interactions.

Within this evolving landscape, the relevance of branding and public relations extends beyond institutional performance metrics such as visibility, engagement, or reputation scores. These practices are deeply embedded in human experience, particularly in the ways professionals interpret their roles, navigate communicative tensions, and respond to the expectations of diverse stakeholders. Practitioners involved in branding and public relations are often positioned at the intersection of organizational identity and public perception, where they must reconcile strategic objectives with situational demands, ethical considerations, and emotional pressures (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This positioning highlights the inherently subjective and experiential dimensions of branding and public relations work, which cannot be fully understood through surface-level analysis alone.

Despite the growing body of research on branding and public relations, much of the existing literature emphasizes strategic frameworks, managerial processes, and measurable outcomes. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into how branding and communication strategies are designed and evaluated, they offer limited understanding of how such practices are actually experienced by those who enact them (Lind et al., 2025). The lived experiences of practitioners how they interpret organizational identity, manage communicative ambiguity, and negotiate meaning in real-time interactions remain underexplored. This gap suggests the need for a more nuanced approach that foregrounds human experience as a central unit of analysis.

A phenomenological perspective offers a valuable lens for addressing this need by focusing on the meanings individuals assign to their lived experiences (Bishop-Kinlyside et al., 2025). Rather than treating branding and public relations as abstract constructs, phenomenology allows for an exploration of how these practices are encountered, understood, and embodied in everyday professional contexts. Through this approach, it becomes possible to uncover the essential structures of experience that shape how branding is enacted and how public relations activities are performed under conditions of uncertainty, pressure, and relational complexity.

In this sense, exploring branding and public relations through a phenomenological framework is not only relevant but necessary. It enables a deeper understanding of the subjective realities that underpin communicative practice, revealing how organizational identity is continuously constructed through lived experience (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By situating branding and public relations within the domain of human experience, this study contributes to a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of communication in contemporary society.

Within the broader field of branding and public relations, increasing attention has been directed toward understanding the experiences of individuals who actively engage in these practices. Research has begun to recognize that branding is not only a strategic or symbolic construct but also a lived phenomenon shaped by the perceptions, interpretations, and actions of communication professionals operating within complex organizational environments (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). In particular, the sub-area focusing on the experiential dimension of branding and public relations how practitioners perceive, negotiate, and embody brand identity in real-world contexts has emerged as an important yet still developing domain of inquiry. This shift reflects a growing awareness that organizational communication cannot be fully understood without examining the subjective experiences of those who enact it in everyday practice.

However, exploring these experiential dimensions presents significant methodological challenges. Much of the existing research in branding and public relations continues to rely on quantitative approaches, such as surveys, experiments, and content analysis, which are effective for measuring outcomes like brand awareness, reputation, or audience engagement (Agasisti & Shibanova, 2022). While these approaches contribute valuable insights into observable patterns and generalizable trends, they are inherently limited in their ability to capture the depth, complexity, and contextual nuance of lived experience. The subjective processes through which practitioners interpret organizational identity, respond to communicative tensions, and navigate ethical dilemmas often remain inaccessible when examined through standardized instruments or predefined variables (Mukhlis,

Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). As a result, critical aspects of branding and public relations practice particularly those related to meaning-making, emotional engagement, and interpretive judgment are frequently underrepresented in empirical findings.

These methodological limitations suggest that many existing studies have not fully captured the essence of branding and public relations as experienced phenomena. The reliance on outcome-oriented and externally observable indicators tends to obscure the internal dynamics that shape communicative practice, including how professionals reconcile competing expectations, manage uncertainty, and construct coherence between institutional identity and public perception (Li & Wang, 2025). Consequently, a gap persists between what is known about branding as a strategic function and what remains insufficiently understood about branding as a lived experience. Addressing this gap requires an approach capable of accessing the depth of subjective experience and uncovering the meanings that individuals attach to their professional actions.

A phenomenological approach offers a promising pathway to overcome these limitations by focusing on the lived experiences of practitioners and the meanings they derive from their engagement with branding and public relations activities (Lukman & Hakim, 2024). By prioritizing narrative depth, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive analysis, this approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon beyond surface-level observations. It allows for the exploration of how branding is enacted, negotiated, and experienced in practice, thereby providing insights into dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional research designs.

In response to the increasing complexity of branding and public relations practices, common solutions within the field have largely relied on established practical and analytical approaches. These include strategic communication frameworks, stakeholder engagement models, brand management systems, and data-driven evaluation tools designed to measure outcomes such as reputation, trust, and audience engagement. Such approaches have contributed significantly to advancing the discipline by offering structured methods for planning, implementing, and assessing communication strategies (Hussein Mohamud et al., 2025). However, these solutions predominantly focus on observable outputs and managerial effectiveness, often treating branding as a controllable and measurable organizational function.

Despite their practical value, these approaches exhibit notable limitations when it comes to capturing the depth of human experience embedded within branding and public relations activities. By prioritizing measurable indicators and standardized processes, they tend to overlook the interpretive, emotional, and situational dimensions of communication practice (Pakarti et al., 2025). As a result, the lived experiences of practitioners how they perceive their roles, negotiate tensions between organizational expectations and public realities, and construct meaning in real-time interactions remain insufficiently explored. This limitation leads to a fragmented understanding of the phenomenon, where the complexity of human engagement is reduced to simplified variables, leaving the experiential essence of branding and public relations largely unarticulated.

Moreover, the reliance on such approaches often assumes that communication practices can be fully understood through external observation and generalized models, without adequately accounting for the subjective interpretations that shape how these practices are enacted. This assumption creates a gap between theoretical constructs and actual professional experience, particularly in contexts characterized by ambiguity, reputational risk, and evolving stakeholder expectations. Consequently, the current body of knowledge provides limited insight into how branding is experienced as a lived, dynamic, and meaning-driven process within organizational life.

To address these limitations, an alternative approach is required one that places human experience at the center of inquiry. A phenomenological approach offers such a pathway by enabling the exploration of the essence of branding and public relations as experienced by practitioners themselves. Rather than focusing solely on what branding does, this approach seeks to understand how branding is lived, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday practice (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Through this lens, it becomes possible to uncover deeper insights into the meanings, tensions, and relational dynamics that define the phenomenon, thereby contributing to a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of branding and public relations.

Recent studies in branding and public relations have emphasized the strategic and relational dimensions of communication within organizations. Scholars have examined how brand identity is constructed, communicated, and evaluated through various frameworks of corporate communication and stakeholder engagement. Other studies have explored how digital environments reshape public interaction and influence perceptions of organizational credibility. However, only a limited number of studies have focused on the lived experiences of practitioners who actively engage in these processes. As a result, there remains a need to deepen understanding of how branding and public relations are experienced as meaningful and situated practices.

To address this limitation, this study adopts an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of professionals involved in branding and public relations activities. This approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their everyday communication practices (Aiyambo et al., 2025). It responds directly to the identified knowledge gap by focusing on the subjective and experiential dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional research. Through this method, the study seeks to uncover how practitioners navigate tension, construct meaning, and maintain authenticity in their roles. In doing so, it provides a richer and more holistic understanding of branding and public relations as lived phenomena.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a clear and coherent exploration of the research problem. The introduction presents the general and specific background, followed by the identification of the knowledge gap and the research focus. The method section outlines the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The results section presents the main themes derived from participants' lived experiences, supported by narrative descriptions and direct quotations. The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion highlights the key contributions and implications of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A phenomenological design was employed to explore the lived experiences of professionals engaged in branding and public relations activities. This approach was considered appropriate because the research question centered on how participants experienced, interpreted, and assigned meaning to branding practice within organizational and public communication contexts (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Rather than examining branding as a purely managerial or strategic construct, the study approached it as a human experience shaped by interaction, institutional pressure, emotional labor, and the negotiation of meaning in everyday professional life.

An interpretive phenomenological orientation was adopted for this study. This orientation is especially suitable when the objective is to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences within particular social, organizational, and communicative settings. In the context of branding and public relations, the phenomenon is not merely observed as external behavior but understood through the meanings attached to it by those who enact it (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The interpretive phenomenological design therefore enabled an in-depth examination of how branding was experienced as a lived, relational, and morally situated practice, especially in situations involving reputational risk, identity negotiation, and public scrutiny.

This design was also aligned with the thematic structure of the findings, as it allowed essential meanings to emerge from participants' narratives rather than being imposed by predetermined variables. Through this approach, branding and public relations activities were examined as experiential phenomena, making it possible to uncover the underlying structures of perception, tension, responsibility, and authenticity reflected in the Results section.

Participants

Participants consisted of individuals who were directly involved in branding and public relations activities within organizational settings (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). These included communication officers, public relations practitioners, brand managers, media relations

personnel, and other professionals whose roles required sustained engagement with institutional identity, public communication, stakeholder interaction, or reputation management. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure the inclusion of information-rich participants who had substantial and relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: participants had to be adults aged at least 21 years; actively working in branding, public relations, corporate communication, or closely related communication functions; have a minimum of two years of professional experience in roles involving brand communication or public-facing institutional representation; and be willing to articulate their experiences in a reflective interview setting. Exclusion criteria included individuals whose roles were primarily administrative with no direct involvement in branding or public relations practice, professionals with very limited exposure to stakeholder communication, and individuals unable to participate fully in an in-depth interview.

Phenomenological studies prioritize depth of experience over numerical breadth; therefore, a relatively small and information-rich sample was considered appropriate. The participant group was designed to reflect variation in organizational context, communication responsibility, and professional position in order to capture diverse yet convergent meanings of branding and public relations work. Relevant demographic and contextual characteristics, such as professional role, years of experience, sectoral background, age range, and gender, were documented to support contextual understanding of the phenomenon. Participant identities were anonymized through coded labels such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which are widely regarded as appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because they allow participants to describe lived experience in detail while preserving flexibility for probing meanings, perceptions, and interpretations (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). An interview guide was used to maintain conceptual consistency across interviews while allowing participants sufficient space to elaborate on experiences they considered significant. The guide was developed around broad domains relevant to the study, including the meaning of branding in daily practice, experiences of public communication, emotional challenges, negotiation of brand consistency, stakeholder expectations, and perceptions of authenticity in institutional communication.

Interviews were conducted individually in settings that supported privacy, comfort, and minimal interruption. Depending on participant availability and organizational access, interviews could be conducted face-to-face in a quiet professional setting or online through secure video communication platforms. Each interview was expected to last approximately 45 to 90 minutes, allowing adequate time for narrative depth without overburdening participants. Follow-up questions were used to clarify meaning, deepen reflection, and invite concrete examples of experience.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also produced during and immediately after interviews to document contextual impressions, nonverbal cues where observable, and preliminary reflections that could assist interpretive sensitivity during analysis. The interview environment was arranged to encourage openness and psychological safety, and participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, only experiences and meanings relevant to the phenomenon being explored.

To strengthen contextual validity, participants were encouraged to reflect on actual communication situations they had encountered, such as managing reputational tension, translating brand values into public communication, responding to criticism, or navigating discrepancies between institutional identity and public perception. This approach helped anchor the narratives in concrete lived events rather than abstract opinion alone.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological procedure supported by thematic development. The analysis was directed toward identifying essential meanings embedded in

participants' narratives and tracing how these meanings converged into broader experiential themes. This analytic approach was selected because it accommodates both detailed idiographic attention to individual accounts and interpretive synthesis across participants, which is especially important when examining complex professional experiences such as branding and public relations practice.

The analytic process proceeded through several stages. First, interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data and to develop a holistic sense of each participant's account. Second, significant statements and meaning units related to the lived experience of branding and public relations were identified (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). At this stage, attention was given to expressions reflecting tension, responsibility, emotional burden, negotiation, institutional identity, stakeholder response, and authenticity. Third, preliminary codes were generated from these meaning units and organized into clusters based on conceptual and experiential similarity. Fourth, these clusters were further examined to identify recurring patterns across cases while preserving the contextual specificity of individual accounts.

Through this iterative process, higher-order themes were developed and refined until they captured the essential structure of the phenomenon. The final themes were not treated as isolated categories but as interrelated dimensions of the participants' lived experience. In this way, the analysis moved from descriptive accounts of individual situations toward a phenomenologically informed understanding of branding and public relations as experienced practices of meaning-making, emotional labor, strategic adjustment, and ethical alignment.

Where helpful, qualitative data management software such as NVivo may be used to assist in organizing transcripts, codes, and thematic relationships; however, interpretive judgment remained grounded in close reading of participant narratives rather than in software output. Analytic rigor was supported through repeated comparison between raw data, coded segments, emerging themes, and the final narrative structure presented in the Results section. Direct quotations were retained as evidentiary anchors to ensure that the thematic interpretation remained closely tied to participants' own expressions.

RESULTS

Branding as a Continuous Negotiation of Institutional Meaning

Participants described branding not as a fixed message transmitted from the organization to the public, but as a continuous process of negotiating meaning across internal and external stakeholders. In their lived experience, brand identity was not simply "implemented." Rather, it was repeatedly interpreted, translated, defended, and adjusted in response to changing public reactions, media dynamics, and institutional realities. Several participants emphasized that the official brand narrative often appeared coherent in formal documents, yet became far more complex when translated into everyday communication practices.

One participant explained that branding work required constant reinterpretation because organizational ideals did not always align neatly with social realities. As expressed by Participant 3, "On paper, the brand looks stable, clear, and unified. But when we communicate with the public, we realize that people do not receive it in the way we expect. So our work is not just to repeat the brand, but to re-explain it again and again in ways that make sense to different audiences." This account shows that branding was experienced as an ongoing interpretive effort rather than a one-directional promotional activity.

Another participant described branding as an interactive arena in which institutional meaning was shaped through negotiation rather than control. Participant 6 stated, "We cannot force people to see us the way we want. What we can do is build a conversation and try to maintain coherence. Branding, for me, is about negotiating meaning without losing identity." This narrative suggests that participants experienced branding as dialogical and contingent, requiring both firmness and flexibility.

The accounts also revealed that branding activity was inseparable from internal organizational communication. Participants frequently noted that a strong external brand could not be sustained when internal actors interpreted institutional values differently. Participant 2 reflected, "Sometimes the

biggest challenge is not the public. It is the people inside the organization. If internal teams do not understand the same identity, then external branding becomes fragmented.” In this sense, branding was experienced not merely as outward-facing communication, but as an organizational struggle over shared meaning.

This theme indicates that participants understood branding as a communicative and interpretive practice embedded in social interaction. Their experiences suggest that brand identity was continually shaped through negotiation among institutional aspirations, practical constraints, and audience interpretations.

Public Relations Work as Emotional and Reputational Labor

A second major theme concerned the emotional intensity of public relations work. Participants did not portray PR activity as purely strategic or procedural; instead, they described it as emotionally charged work involving pressure, vigilance, and a persistent sense of responsibility for the organization’s public image. In their narratives, protecting reputation was closely tied to protecting credibility, trust, and even personal professional integrity.

Participants frequently spoke of the invisible burden attached to public-facing communication roles. Participant 1 described the experience as follows: “People often think PR is about posting messages, writing press releases, or attending events. But what they do not see is the emotional weight behind it. Every word feels risky because one wrong phrase can damage trust that took years to build.” This statement illustrates how reputational work was experienced not only as external communication management, but also as emotional labor shaped by the fear of communicative missteps.

The emotional demands became especially visible in moments of criticism, misunderstanding, or public controversy. Participant 5 explained, “When negative comments appear online, we do not just respond as professionals. We also feel personally affected, because we are the ones who carry the brand voice. Sometimes the pressure stays with us long after the working day ends.” This account demonstrates that branding and PR practice extended beyond formal working hours and entered participants’ emotional lives in enduring ways.

Several participants also described the need to remain calm, composed, and empathetic even when facing hostility or institutional uncertainty. Participant 4 stated, “You must sound confident even when the situation is still unclear. You have to reassure the public while also waiting for internal confirmation. That gap is emotionally exhausting.” Here, the participant reveals the tension between public-facing confidence and internal ambiguity, showing that PR work often involved managing emotional dissonance.

This theme suggests that participants experienced branding and public relations as forms of emotional and reputational labor. Their narratives reveal that communication professionals do not simply deliver messages; they inhabit and carry the institutional voice under conditions of uncertainty, scrutiny, and affective strain.

Tension Between Strategic Consistency and Situational Adaptation

The third theme captures the persistent tension participants experienced between maintaining a consistent brand identity and adapting communication to shifting contexts. While participants recognized consistency as essential to credible branding, they also emphasized that rigid consistency could undermine relevance, responsiveness, and relational trust. As a result, their daily work involved balancing institutional alignment with situational sensitivity.

Participants repeatedly described this balance as one of the most difficult aspects of branding and PR activity. Participant 7 commented, “The brand guideline gives us direction, but real situations are never that simple. Sometimes you need to adjust the tone, the message, even the platform. The challenge is knowing how far you can adapt without making the brand feel inconsistent.” This statement highlights the practical complexity of applying strategic branding frameworks within fluid communication environments.

For some participants, adaptation was not perceived as weakening the brand, but as necessary for preserving its relevance. Participant 2 noted, “Consistency does not mean repeating the same language everywhere. It means keeping the same core values while expressing them differently depending on who we are talking to and what is happening around us.” This account reflects a sophisticated understanding of branding as value consistency rather than message uniformity.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that excessive adaptation could blur identity and create confusion both internally and externally. Participant 8 explained, “If you adapt too much, people start asking what the organization actually stands for. That is why every adjustment feels like a careful decision. We are always asking ourselves whether we are being responsive or becoming diluted.” Such reflections reveal that adaptation was not a neutral operational choice, but a deeply interpretive act shaped by professional judgment.

The narratives in this theme show that branding and public relations work were experienced as a continuous balancing process. Participants did not view consistency and flexibility as opposites, but as competing demands that had to be reconciled in specific communicative moments. Their experiences illustrate the practical and interpretive complexity of sustaining brand coherence under dynamic conditions.

Authenticity as the Moral Center of Branding Practice

A final theme centered on authenticity. Participants consistently emphasized that effective branding could not be sustained through image management alone. For them, branding became meaningful and credible only when communication was grounded in practices, values, and institutional behaviors that audiences could recognize as genuine. In this sense, authenticity emerged not simply as a communication style, but as a moral expectation shaping how participants evaluated their own work.

Participants were particularly sensitive to the gap between projected identity and lived organizational reality. Participant 6 reflected, “The hardest part is when the brand message sounds beautiful, but internal practice does not fully support it. In those moments, you feel the discomfort immediately, because you are communicating something that has not yet become real.” This statement reveals authenticity as an ethical concern rather than merely a strategic one.

Another participant described authenticity as the foundation of public trust. Participant 3 stated, “People are very quick to notice when a brand is just performing. They may not use that word, but they can feel it. If the message is not supported by action, then communication becomes fragile.” This narrative indicates that participants understood branding as credible only when discourse and organizational behavior were aligned.

Importantly, authenticity was also linked to professional self-understanding. Participant 1 explained, “I do not want to be someone who only makes things look good. I want our communication to reflect who we really are, even if that means admitting limitations. For me, that is what responsible branding looks like.” This account suggests that authenticity shaped not only communication strategy, but also the participants’ ethical orientation toward their work.

Through these accounts, authenticity emerged as the moral center of branding and public relations practice. Participants did not experience branding as mere symbolic construction, but as a responsibility to maintain alignment between institutional claims, communicative behavior, and lived organizational values.

Thematic Matrix of Findings

Theme	Essential Meaning	Illustrative Experiential Focus
Branding as a Continuous Negotiation of Institutional Meaning	Branding is experienced as an interpretive and relational process, not a fixed message	Translating identity across stakeholders, contexts, and internal differences
Public Relations Work as Emotional and Reputational Labor	PR activity involves emotional burden and responsibility for public trust	Anxiety, vigilance, pressure, and affective investment in communication outcomes
Tension Between Strategic Consistency and Situational Adaptation	Participants balance coherence with responsiveness in real communication settings	Deciding how much to adapt without weakening brand identity
Authenticity as the Moral Center of Branding Practice	Branding is judged credible when aligned with real values and practices	Ethical discomfort, trust-building, and alignment between message and reality

Taken together, the findings show that participants experienced branding and public relations activities as lived practices of interpretation, negotiation, emotional labor, and ethical responsibility. Branding was not encountered as a stable organizational asset, but as something continually enacted through communicative decisions, stakeholder interactions, and institutional tensions. Public relations work was experienced as both strategic and affective, requiring participants to carry organizational meaning under conditions of uncertainty and scrutiny. Across all themes, the essential structure of the phenomenon lies in the effort to sustain a credible institutional identity while navigating relational complexity, reputational vulnerability, and the moral demand for authenticity.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that branding and public relations were experienced not as routine promotional functions, but as lived practices of meaning negotiation, emotional responsibility, strategic adjustment, and ethical alignment. These findings respond directly to the broader question raised in the Introduction by showing that the essence of branding and public relations lies in how practitioners interpret and sustain organizational identity under conditions of public visibility, relational complexity, and reputational vulnerability.

The present study contributes to the research question by demonstrating that branding and public relations are experienced as deeply interpretive and relational processes rather than as merely technical or managerial tasks. The findings show that practitioners do not simply execute institutional messages; instead, they continuously translate, negotiate, and adapt organizational identity in response to shifting stakeholder expectations and situational demands. This contribution is important because it clarifies that the lived reality of branding is shaped not only by strategic intent but also by the subjective labor of those who carry the institutional voice in everyday communication contexts. In this sense, the study expands understanding of branding and public relations from a strategic function into an experiential process grounded in judgment, reflexivity, and relational responsibility. The results therefore answer the central research concern by revealing how practitioners make sense of branding as an ongoing struggle to preserve coherence while remaining responsive to public interpretation.

A second contribution lies in the finding that public relations work is inseparable from emotional and reputational labor (Ben-Lulu, 2024). The participants' experiences suggest that communication practice involves a sustained affective burden, especially when practitioners must manage uncertainty, public criticism, and the risk of damaging trust. This is significant because much of the conventional literature describes public relations in terms of strategy, stakeholder communication, or organizational legitimacy, yet pays less attention to the emotional weight carried by those who enact these functions in practice. The present findings show that reputational work is not only institutional but also personal, since communication professionals often internalize the pressures associated with representing the organization in public space. As a result, the study offers a more

human-centered understanding of branding and public relations by showing that professional communication is lived as an emotionally charged and morally consequential activity.

The findings also provide a meaningful answer to the research problem by clarifying the tension between strategic consistency and situational adaptation. Participants did not experience consistency as rigid repetition, but as the preservation of core values across changing contexts. At the same time, they described adaptation as necessary for relevance, but potentially risky if it weakened brand coherence. This tension helps explain why branding and public relations cannot be adequately understood through formal strategy documents alone (Kasianenko & Boichak, 2025). Their practical meaning emerges in moments where professionals must decide how far to adjust communication without compromising identity. The study therefore contributes a more nuanced understanding of branding practice by showing that coherence is not given in advance, but constantly produced through interpretive action.

Another important contribution concerns authenticity. The findings suggest that authenticity functions as the moral center of branding and public relations practice because participants judged communication to be credible only when it aligned with actual organizational values and behavior. This insight deepens the research question by showing that practitioners do not treat branding as a purely symbolic exercise. Instead, they experience a clear ethical tension when institutional messages appear disconnected from lived organizational reality (Marutani et al., 2025). The study thus highlights that branding credibility depends not only on persuasive communication but also on the perceived congruence between discourse and practice. This insight is particularly relevant in contemporary communication settings where public trust is increasingly shaped by the ability of audiences to detect inconsistency and symbolic performance.

These findings are broadly consistent with prior literature that positions branding and public relations as relational and meaning-based processes rather than simple instruments of message delivery. Cornelissen (2020) emphasizes that corporate communication operates through the construction and negotiation of organizational meaning, and the present findings extend this view by showing how such negotiation is experienced from the standpoint of practitioners themselves. The participants' accounts demonstrate that brand identity is not simply communicated outward but continuously reworked through interaction with audiences, colleagues, and institutional expectations. In this way, the study complements existing communication theory by adding an experiential layer to the understanding of strategic communication. What appears in theory as alignment, consistency, or positioning is lived in practice as interpretive work under conditions of uncertainty.

The study also resonates with scholarship that frames public relations as a socially embedded and context-sensitive activity. Edwards (2018) argues for a broader understanding of public relations as a practice shaped by relationships, power, and meaning within organizational life. The present findings support that view by illustrating how practitioners experience their role not as neutral transmission but as active mediation between institutional identity and public interpretation. However, the findings go further by showing that this mediation is emotionally charged and ethically demanding. This extends previous literature by demonstrating that the professional role of public relations is not only relational but also affective, since it requires continuous emotional regulation in situations where visibility, accountability, and vulnerability intersect.

The results similarly align with Falkheimer and Heide (2018), who highlight the growing complexity of communication in contemporary digital environments. Their work underscores how changing media conditions increase uncertainty and intensify the speed of public response. The present study supports that perspective by showing that practitioners experience digital communication environments as spaces of heightened pressure where every message may generate rapid reputational consequences (Couso et al., 2025). At the same time, the findings add a phenomenological depth to this discussion by revealing how such pressures are felt, interpreted, and carried by communication professionals. Thus, digital complexity is not only an environmental condition; it becomes part of the lived structure of professional experience.

The emphasis on authenticity in the findings also complements the work of Hatch and Schultz (2017), who describe organizational identity and branding as processes that depend on alignment between internal values and external expression. The present study supports this theoretical position by

showing that practitioners themselves recognize the danger of a gap between institutional image and organizational reality. Yet the findings add an important interpretive dimension by revealing how such misalignment is experienced as discomfort, tension, and professional unease. This indicates that authenticity is not merely a desirable attribute of brand communication but a lived evaluative principle through which practitioners judge the integrity of their own work. In this sense, the study does not challenge prior theory but enriches it by grounding it in the experiential world of branding and public relations practice.

Taken together, the discussion suggests that existing literature has explained much about what branding and public relations are supposed to achieve, but less about how these practices are actually lived by those responsible for carrying them out. The present study helps fill that gap by interpreting branding and public relations as experiential phenomena marked by negotiation, emotional labor, adaptation, and ethical concern. Rather than contradicting earlier scholarship, the findings deepen it by showing the human processes beneath strategic communication concepts. This deeper understanding is especially relevant for phenomenological inquiry because it demonstrates that the meaning of branding is not exhausted by organizational outcomes. Its fuller meaning emerges in the lived efforts of practitioners who continuously work to maintain credibility, coherence, and authenticity in the face of complex public realities.

The implications of these findings are both scientific and practical. From a scientific perspective, the study reinforces the view that branding and public relations should be understood not only as organizational functions but also as lived communicative experiences shaped by meaning, emotion, and ethical judgment. This insight is important because it broadens the conceptual understanding of branding beyond visibility, positioning, and reputation outcomes, and situates it within the everyday realities of those who enact institutional identity in practice. In relation to public relations scholarship, the findings support the argument that communication professionals operate within a field of continuous negotiation in which organizational values, public expectations, and situational pressures intersect. The study therefore contributes to a more grounded understanding of how strategic communication is sustained through subjective labor rather than through formal strategy alone.

The findings also carry practical implications for organizations that depend on branding and public relations to maintain legitimacy and trust. If branding is experienced as an ongoing negotiation of meaning, then organizations should avoid treating brand identity as a static message that can simply be disseminated across platforms. Instead, greater attention should be given to the internal conditions that enable coherent communication, including shared understanding of values, coordination across teams, and institutional support for professionals working in public-facing roles. The findings on emotional and reputational labor further suggest that communication work involves pressures that are often underestimated in organizational settings. This means that professionals responsible for branding and public relations may require not only technical resources but also reflective space, ethical guidance, and organizational recognition of the emotional demands built into their work. In this sense, the study highlights the need to treat branding and public relations as human practices that require institutional care and interpretive competence.

The social and professional significance of the findings is equally notable. The emphasis on authenticity suggests that communication professionals increasingly work in environments where publics are highly sensitive to gaps between message and reality. This has broader relevance in contemporary society, where trust is shaped not only by what institutions claim but also by whether those claims appear consistent with observed action. The findings therefore indicate that the experience of branding and public relations reflects wider cultural expectations regarding credibility, transparency, and responsibility. In professional terms, practitioners are not merely tasked with projecting institutional identity; they are also positioned as mediators of organizational integrity. This makes their lived experience relevant beyond the immediate study context, especially for organizations operating in sectors marked by high visibility, rapid public feedback, and reputational fragility.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as with phenomenological research more broadly, the purpose of the study was not statistical generalization but deep understanding of lived experience. The findings therefore illuminate essential meanings within the

participant group rather than claiming universal applicability across all branding and public relations contexts. Second, the interpretation of experience was shaped by the specific organizational and communicative environments in which participants were situated. Differences in sector, institutional culture, media exposure, and professional hierarchy may influence how branding and public relations are experienced, which means that the themes identified here should be understood as contextually grounded rather than universally fixed. Third, because the study relied primarily on interview-based narratives, the findings reflect participants' reflective accounts of experience rather than direct observation of every communicative practice in real time. Although this is fully appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, it may limit access to dimensions of practice that participants found difficult to articulate explicitly.

Another limitation concerns the possibility that participants' accounts were influenced by professional self-presentation, especially in a field closely tied to reputation, organizational identity, and communication competence. Even when interviews are conducted in a reflective and confidential setting, professionals may remain selective in how they narrate tension, uncertainty, or institutional inconsistency. In addition, the interpretive phenomenological orientation necessarily involves analytical judgment in the movement from individual statements to shared themes. This does not weaken the study, but it does mean that the findings represent a carefully developed interpretation of lived experience rather than a purely descriptive summary. These limitations should not be viewed as weaknesses alone; rather, they help clarify the boundaries of the present study and provide direction for future inquiry.

Future research can build on these findings in several meaningful ways. One direction would be to explore how lived experiences of branding and public relations vary across organizational sectors, such as corporate, governmental, nonprofit, or educational settings. Such work could clarify whether the tensions between consistency, adaptation, and authenticity take different forms depending on institutional mission, public visibility, or stakeholder structure (Salamon & Xie, 2025). Another promising direction would be to examine how professionals at different organizational levels experience branding responsibility, since senior leaders, communication managers, and operational staff may interpret institutional identity in distinct ways. Comparative phenomenological work across cultural or national contexts may also deepen understanding of how broader social norms shape the experience of communication practice.

Further studies could also extend the present inquiry by integrating phenomenological insights with other qualitative approaches to better understand how lived experience interacts with organizational systems, media environments, and stakeholder relationships. For example, follow-up studies may examine how experiences of emotional and reputational labor evolve over time or intensify during periods of crisis, controversy, or institutional transition. Such research would be particularly valuable in advancing communication scholarship beyond static models of branding and toward a richer understanding of how organizational identity is continuously lived and negotiated. In this way, the present findings offer a foundation for future work that seeks to connect human experience more closely with the study of branding and public relations as socially embedded practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examines branding and public relations as lived experiences, focusing on how practitioners interpret and sustain organizational identity in complex communication environments. The findings reveal that branding is experienced as a continuous negotiation of meaning, while public relations work involves emotional and reputational labor shaped by uncertainty and public scrutiny. The study also highlights the tension between maintaining strategic consistency and adapting to situational demands, as well as the central role of authenticity in ensuring credible communication. These insights address limitations in previous research by shifting attention from outcome-based analysis to the subjective and experiential dimensions of communication practice. As a result, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of branding and public relations as human-centered and meaning-driven processes.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizational communication professionals should move beyond viewing branding solely as a strategic management tool and instead recognize it as an ongoing process of meaning-making that requires continuous engagement with stakeholders. Organizations are encouraged to provide communication practitioners with greater autonomy, emotional support, and opportunities for reflective practice, particularly when managing reputational challenges and public scrutiny. The findings also indicate the importance of developing communication policies and training programs that strengthen authenticity, ethical decision-making, and adaptive communication skills, enabling practitioners to balance organizational consistency with situational responsiveness. Furthermore, leaders and communication managers should foster organizational cultures that support transparent dialogue and alignment between communicated brand values and actual organizational practices, thereby enhancing credibility and stakeholder trust.

Future research can expand these findings by exploring variations across organizational contexts and examining how lived experiences evolve in different cultural and institutional settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research processes were conducted independently, without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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