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Muhammad Izharuddin & Badri Munir Sukoco

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Rebranding as social negotiation: tensions across multi-level stakeholders in shopping malls

Muhammad Izharuddin ^{a,b} and Badri Munir Sukoco ^c

^aBusiness School, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; ^bDepartment of Management, University of Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia; ^cDepartment of Management, Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Rebranding is well-established for revising positioning, yet the literature treats internal and external stakeholder perspectives in isolation. This isolation seems to hide potential tensions that arise when diverse stakeholder groups project conflicting demands onto the new positioning. Drawing on a multiple-case study of two Indonesian shopping malls that pivoted from a one-stop model to a technology-focused positioning, this study explores how employees, tenants, and customers respond to rebranding, the resulting multi-stakeholder tensions, and the management strategies used to address them. We identify four phases in the rebranding process: (1) preparation, (2) brand revisioning, (3) stakeholder engagement, and (4) execution. The findings theorise rebranding as a socially negotiated process in which power dynamics shape multi-stakeholder tensions. We conceptualise stakeholder buy-in as organisational sensemaking, which is facilitated by acculturation through structured training and socialization. This research equips practitioners with context-specific strategies for mitigating resistance, including inclusive coalition-building, balanced brand continuity, demonstrable short-term wins, and culturally sensitive negotiation to align stakeholder expectations.

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Introduction

Rebranding has long been recognised as a marketing strategy for revising positioning (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Zhao et al., 2018), and changing firms' logos and names (Kashmiri & Mahajan, 2015; Stuart, 2018). As such, a substantial stream of marketing literature has investigated rebranding through the lens of repositioning, from the early work of Boyle (2002) to more recent research by Joseph et al. (2021). It appears that organisations across a wide range of sectors frequently turn to rebranding as a response to shifting environmental conditions (Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Miller et al., 2014). Rebranding, which involves realignment and communication of a new positioning (Beise-Zee, 2022), requires an understanding of the brand as a transformative portfolio of meanings that is collaboratively constructed by stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2020).

CONTACT Muhammad Izharuddin  m.izharuddin@uq.edu.au

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A review of existing research reveals that the current understanding of rebranding remains somewhat limited, particularly in terms of the roles of various stakeholders and their potential influence. This constraint appears to stem, at least in part, from a relatively narrow focus within the field, where studies tend to concentrate either on internal factors (e.g. organisational culture and employee buy-in) (Joseph et al., 2021; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) or external factors (e.g. customer perceptions and market positioning) (Collange & Bonache, 2015). This fragmented approach obscures the connections between these groups and underscores the need for a holistic perspective (Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Ramos et al., 2024; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Moreover, the predominant managerial or consumer lens through which rebranding is often viewed may overlook the dynamic role that a wider range of stakeholders can play in shaping it (Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2007; Juntunen, 2014; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

This apparent lack of a holistic view may lead to complications, as different stakeholder groups frequently present organisations with conflicting demands (Stuart, 2018), which can create tensions that seem to intensify when they intersect with the objectives of rebranding (Kraatz & Block, 2008). These tensions, in turn, might lead to a degree of misalignment between the newly proposed rebranding and stakeholder expectations (Gotsi et al., 2008; Joseph et al., 2021). However, understanding how this misalignment might be resolved remains challenging, given that empirical insight into how stakeholders engage with these tensions and buy into rebranding is still relatively limited (Gotsi et al., 2008; Joseph et al., 2021). Consequently, it seems that further investigation is needed to explore how organisations can navigate such tensions to secure stakeholder buy-in (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Lee & Bourne, 2017).

Following the previous discussion, this study aims to address three specific research questions (RQs) that appear to be underexplored in the current literature. RQ1: How do different stakeholder groups (e.g. employees, tenants, and customers) respond to rebranding? RQ2: What tensions arise from these responses? RQ3: How do organisations manage and mitigate these tensions during rebranding to ensure a successful outcome?

Shopping malls are a suitable research setting for this study, largely because they deal with multi-level internal stakeholders (i.e. management and employees) and external stakeholders (i.e. tenants and customers). The highly competitive nature of this sector tends to compel ongoing innovation, as shopping malls seek to establish a distinct market positioning (Grewal et al., 2009; Shafiee & Es-Haghi, 2017). This apparent imperative for differentiation (Miller et al., 2014), suggests that shopping malls can provide a particularly rich context for exploring stakeholder dynamics during rebranding. The research was situated in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, where a growing middle class and an expanding digital economy appear to be key drivers behind a broader shift of shopping malls towards a technology-focused positioning (Iyer et al., 2021; Meintjes & Botha, 2024).

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by theorising rebranding as a site of multi-stakeholder tensions that may be shaped through underlying power dynamics (Iglesias et al., 2020; Warren, 2025). In doing so, it attempts to move beyond the internal/external dichotomy that has characterised much of the literature (Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Ramos et al., 2024), and instead positions rebranding as a socially negotiated process across stakeholders (Stuart, 2018). Furthermore, this study reframes stakeholder buy-in as a process of organisational sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005), where acculturation may help stakeholders rationalise the transition from an old brand to

a new one (Chirkov, 2009; Lin, 2014; Meintjes & Botha, 2024). Finally, this study extends the place branding literature from macro-locations (Hakala et al., 2020; Källström & Siljeklint, 2024) to commercial micro-places (Merrilees et al., 2016; Micu, 2019), empirically showing that shopping mall rebranding is a strategic niche adaptation (Alexander, 2019; Hakala et al., 2020).

From a practitioner's standpoint, the study provides tailored guidance for engaging stakeholders. First, it recommends context-specific strategies to mitigate tensions, such as inclusive coalition-building during high-uncertainty phases and balanced brand continuity during execution (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Second, interventions must be customised to stakeholder interest, such as short-term wins to address tenants' financial concerns and training to address employee capability gaps (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018). Third, rebranding initiators must adapt to cultural contexts, for instance, personal negotiation and senior leadership visibility in relationship-based cultures.

Literature review

Rebranding

Rebranding definitions highlight several aspects, including 'change or disjunction' from the existing brand (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538), and 'disconnecting' (Meintjes & Botha, 2024, p. 11). Rebranding is a process of developing a new name, symbol, or design (Bolhuis et al., 2018; Lambkin & Muzellec, 2008). It appears to reflect an organisation's strategy, with the aim of developing a new position in its stakeholders' minds (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Rebranding may include changes in underlying values (Bolhuis et al., 2018; Merrilees & Miller, 2008), and, in some cases, signal changes in corporate strategy (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Stuart, 2018). Rebranding can be viewed as a 'process of brand revitalisation', one that may range from relatively minor to major changes (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018, p. 456).

Rebranding is often driven by a response to internal and external factors that prompt a new or revised direction for an organisation (Hakala et al., 2020; Stuart, 2018). This can be triggered by significant organisational transformations such as mergers, acquisitions, or spin-offs (Beise-Zee, 2022; Lambkin & Muzellec, 2008; Stuart, 2018). Organisations may also pursue rebranding as a means of sustaining their competitiveness (Stuart, 2018), as an outdated brand may undermine it (Zhao et al., 2018). Furthermore, rebranding can be a response to competitive pressures, enabling organisations to renew their brand identity and remain relevant in the market (Kaul & Arora, 2022).

The process of rebranding, as explored by various scholars, is as follows. Stuart (2018) draws attention to a crucial phase by referencing Wong and Merrilees (2005), who highlight a three-phase process that begins with a brand vision, which establishes the rationale for refreshing the brand's positioning. This perspective is echoed by Ramos et al. (2024), who stress the importance of foundational analysis prior to further investigation. Many scholars have emphasised specific process phases, such as analysis, planning, and implementation, while Ramos et al. (2024) and Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach (2018), break the process down into a brand audit, discovery/redevelopment, and implementation.

One commonality in the rebranding process is the vital role of internal stakeholders, particularly employees (Miller et al., 2014). Joseph et al. (2021) and Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach (2018) stress that internal buy-in is integral to the entire process. Hakala et al. (2020) outlined a process for a location's rebranding that is rooted in co-creation with stakeholders across all phases. Meintjes and Botha (2024) and Ramos et al. (2024) also highlighted the concept of stakeholder co-creation as crucial, viewing the process as collaborative work aimed at reflecting a shared vision.

This review of rebranding processes and stakeholder tensions reveals a field rich with insights (e.g. vision, implementation, acknowledging various stakeholders) but also marked by certain limitations. Studies tend to concentrate on a single stakeholder group (e.g. employees or customers) or a single level of analysis (e.g. internal or external), which may create a dichotomy that overlooks the interconnected and systemic nature of stakeholder tensions (Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Ramos et al., 2024). Furthermore, the literature appears to offer a relatively limited empirical understanding of the processual perspective, such as acculturation, through which these tensions might be navigated and potentially resolved. Given the exploratory nature of understanding these layered interactions and the lack of established frameworks, a grounded theory methodology is particularly well-suited for this area of research (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Method

Research design

This study employed a multiple-case study design to explore the process of rebranding, drawing on established methodological guidance (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018). Case selection followed a criterion-driven theoretical sampling strategy to ensure cases were information-rich and relevant to the research questions (Yin, 2018). The selection protocol targeted an industry characterised by multi-level (e.g. corporate management, unit management, frontline employees) and multi-layer stakeholders (e.g. tenants, customers). The shopping malls industry was selected as it perfectly embodies this complex stakeholder ecosystem.

The protocol then identified specific shopping malls that had undergone a successful rebranding, operationalised by three defining elements: (1) a change in the shopping mall's name, (2) a change in its visual identity (i.e. logos and colour schemes), and (3) a strategic repositioning of its market segment (Collange & Bonache, 2015). Some shopping malls were excluded because only criteria (1) and (2) were met. In most cases, criterion (3), repositioning, was not applied, as these malls remained in the one-stop shopping mall market. To further assess success beyond these structural changes, we triangulated additional indicators. These included sustained increases in occupancy rates post-rebranding, as documented in internal documents. We also sought qualitative validation through stakeholder consensus across management, tenants, and customers, as well as media coverage that consistently presented the rebranding as a successful tech-focused repositioning. Two shopping malls, Alpha and Beta, met these criteria and were selected for in-depth study.

Research context

This study was conducted in Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous country and a rapidly growing economy, a context that suggests a highly competitive landscape. The selected shopping malls, Alpha and Beta, are located in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest metropolitan area, a region characterised by a growing middle class with increasing income and a strong appetite for technology and retail experiences.

Shopping Mall Alpha is located in a dense, established urban centre of Surabaya. Its catchment area includes a mix of corporate offices and residential neighbourhoods, which means its stakeholders, particularly tenants and visitors, are likely to be diverse, including professionals. The pressure to remain relevant amidst newer developments appears to be a primary driver of its rebranding. Shopping Mall Beta is situated in a prominent suburban growth corridor of Greater Surabaya, typically characterised by newer residential developments. Rebranding to a tech-focused shopping mall here was a strategic move to become a specialised destination.

Data sources

Data were collected from three sources between 2015 and 2019. We gathered semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents. A detailed overview of all data sources is provided in [Table 2](#). A total of 17 formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews began with a key informant at each shopping mall, starting with the General Manager (GM), who provided an overview of the rebranding and helped identify other key stakeholders through a snowball sampling technique. This approach allowed us to capture perspectives from all levels and layers of the stakeholder network, including mall management (upper, middle, and lower levels), tenants (the shopping mall's first customers), and visitors (the shopping mall's final customers). Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, were conducted in person by the researchers, and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide was designed to be flexible, focusing on key topics such as (1) the rationale and goals behind the rebranding, (2) the informant's role and involvement in the process, (3) challenges and tensions among different groups, (4) communication and change management, and (5) evaluation. To assess research transparency, the anonymised interview topic guide has been uploaded to a publicly accessible repository on the Open Science Framework (OSF).¹

Data analysis

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), chosen due to the limited existing theoretical frameworks on multi-stakeholder involvement in rebranding (as summarised in [Table 1](#)). The analysis was structured using the systematic approach to inductive concept development outlined by Gioia et al. (2013), which ensures a rigorous transition from raw data to abstract themes. Data analysis was facilitated using NVivo 14.0 software. The analysis unfolded in three distinct, iterative steps. First-order coding (open coding) commenced with a line-by-line examination of the interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents to identify key concepts. This initial open coding phase involved labelling data using terms directly supplied by the

Table 1. Previous research on rebranding processes, stakeholders, and associated tensions.

No	Author (Year)	Theory/ Framework	Rebranding Process	Multi- stakeholder	Tension	Impacted Stakeholder
1	Stuart (2018)	Institutional logics	Process	N/A	N/A	N/A
2	Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach (2018)	Symbolic interactionist perspective	Process	Employee, marketing professionals, and designers	N/A	Consumer
3	Zhao et al. (2018)	Signalling theory	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
4	Hakala et al. (2020)	Brand co-creation	Process	City Administration Personnel, Marketing Agency, Residents	N/A	Tourists and exchange students
5	Joseph et al. (2021)	Social identity theory	Process	Employees, students, faculty,	Managers vs. employees	N/A
6	Keller et al. (2020)	Categorisation theory	N/A	N/A	N/A	Consumer of Private label
7	Marques et al. (2020)	Consumer-based brand equity	N/A	N/A	N/A	Consumer of Private label
8	Beise-Zee (2022)	Resource-based view (RBV)	N/A	N/A	N/A	Management and employee of the spin-off company
9	Kaul and Arora (2022)	Signalling theory and cognitive heuristic theory	N/A	N/A	N/A	Market/ investor
10	Källström and Siljeklint (2024)	Participatory place branding	N/A	N/A	Municipality vs. residents	Residents
11	Meintjes and Botha (2024)	Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), with roots in Attribution Theory	Process	N/A	Management vs. employees	N/A
12	Ramos et al. (2024)	Legitimation lens, draws from institutional theory	Process	Employee, customer, regulatory bodies	Management vs. employees in different countries	N/A

informants (in vivo codes) or descriptive phrases. This resulted in a list of over 50 initial codes, which were refined into 30 codes, such as ‘shared vision’, ‘industry analysis’, ‘caring’, ‘collaborative planning’, and ‘transparent communication’.

In second-order coding (axial coding), we searched for relationships, patterns, and contradictions between the first-order codes. We grouped them into more abstract themes that captured the underlying phenomena. For example, the first-order codes from the prior paragraph were aggregated into the second-order theme ‘Visionary Leadership and Coalition Building’. This process was refined through constant comparison and triangulation across data sources (interviews, observations, documents) until no new themes emerged.

The last step was third-order coding, where we distilled the second-order themes into four aggregate dimensions that form the foundation of our theoretical model. These dimensions represent the highest level of abstraction and structure the findings

Table 2. Data sources.

Data Sources	Shopping Mall Alpha	Shopping Mall Beta
Semi-structured interviews	Total interviews: (8) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Management (4) ● General Manager ● Senior Manager ● Marketing Supervisor ● Senior Employee ● Tenants (2) ● Biggest Tenant ● Oldest Tenant ● Visitors (2) 	Total interviews: 9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Management (4) ● General Manager ● Manager ● Supervisor ● Employee ● Tenants (3) ● Tenant A ● Tenant B ● Tenant C ● Visitors (2)
Observations completed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual shopping events (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Annual shopping event (1)
Documents obtained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publicly available documents (4) ● News related to rebranding shopping mall/annual event (10) ● Shopping malls and property industry documents (2) ● Internal documents evaluating programme outcomes (2) ● Service SOP (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Publicly available documents (2) ● News related to rebranding shopping mall/annual event (14) ● Shopping malls and property industry documents (2) ● Internal documents evaluating programme outcomes (3) ● Service SOP (1)

of the paper. For example, the ‘Preparation’ aggregate dimension encompasses themes like Visionary Leadership and Coalition Building. The resulting data structure, illustrating the movement from first-order codes to aggregate dimensions, is presented in [Figure 1](#).

Ensuring trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study implemented a rigorous validation process that drew on multiple verification strategies. First, investigator triangulation was employed: multiple researchers independently analysed and coded the data, after which collaborative discussions were held to compare interpretations and resolve any discrepancies. This iterative process of refinement helped minimise individual researcher bias and, through collective analytical scrutiny, may have improved the reliability of the emerging themes. Second, member checking was conducted in accordance with Gioia et al.’s (2013) recommendations, where key informants were invited to review and validate the researchers’ interpretations of their responses. This step seemed to contribute to the credibility of the findings by helping to confirm that the constructed themes reasonably reflected participants’ lived experiences and perspectives. When necessary, coding structures were adjusted based on participant feedback to better capture the nuances of stakeholder accounts.

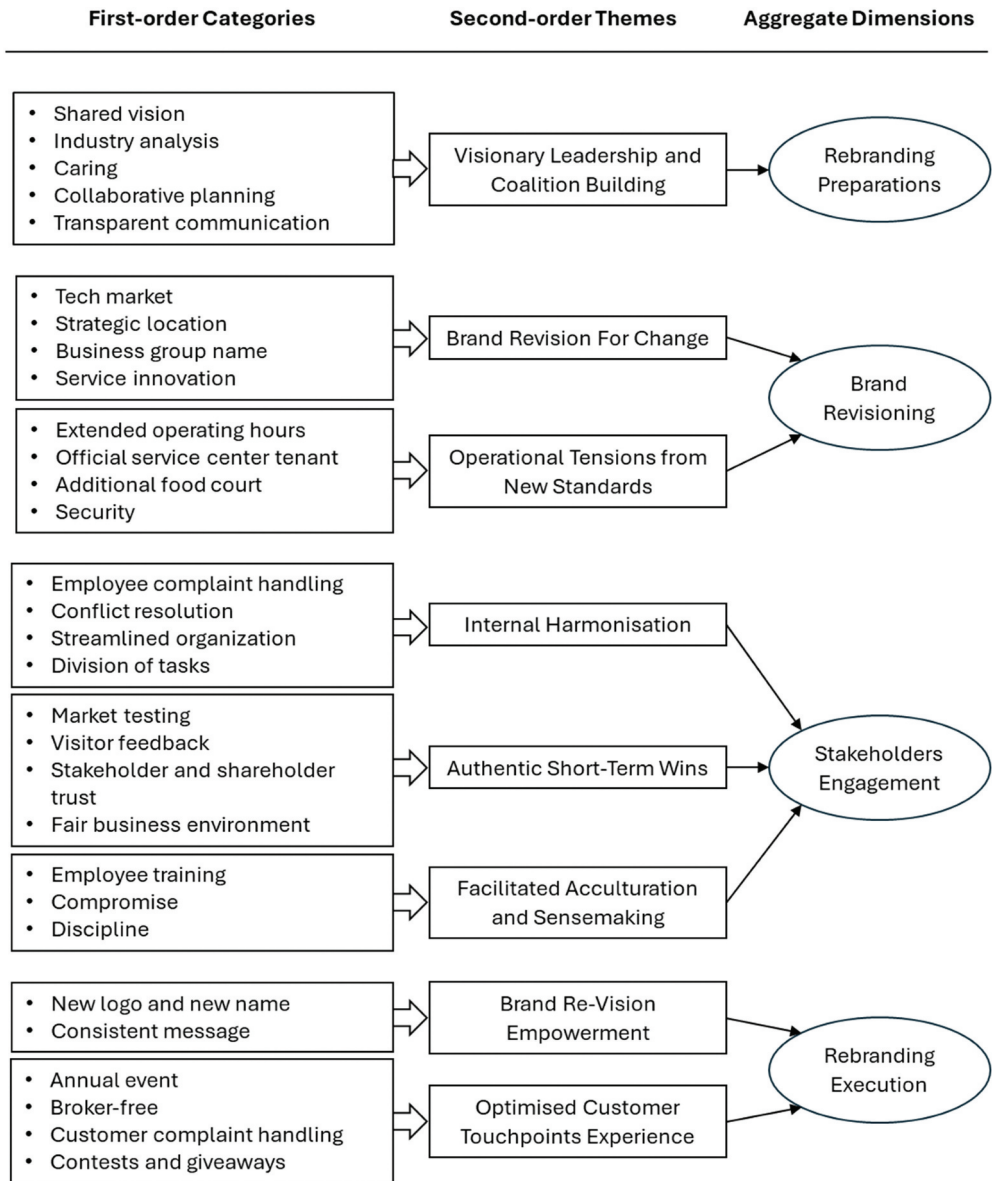


Figure 1. Data structure for rebranding process.

Findings

Categorical analysis

Theme 1. Visionary leadership and coalition building

Her vision is very good because she can see the opportunities ... we have begun to focus on smartphones. - Marketing supervisor of Shopping Mall, Alpha

The rebranding process appeared to originate when the GM of the shopping mall began articulating a strategic direction targeting a relatively untouched market segment (i.e. technology-focused). Rather than imposing this direction unilaterally, leadership seemed to recognise that securing momentum would likely depend on earning support prior to any substantive implementation. This approach, however, served to generate certain points of tension between leadership and internal stakeholders, and between formal authority to envision rebranding and operational control, thus could either facilitate or impede the proposed rebranding.

Our GM was upfront about her plans . . . we discuss issues as they arise. — Senior Employee, Shopping Mall Alpha

The underlying strain could be characterised as management and employees sitting on opposite sides, with management perceiving a certain market positioning, while employees, by contrast, exhibited anxiety about their job security. In response to these concerns, management adopted what might be described as an inclusive approach that engaged senior staff in preliminary planning discussions to secure buy-in for rebranding. This approach appeared to mitigate initial resistance by laying groundwork prior to the commencement of formal rebranding. Buy-in, in this context, refers to initial acceptance/commitment to rebranding, and seemed to manifest as stakeholders demonstrating openness to the proposed rebranding.

Theme 2. Brand revision for change

We maintained our original shopping mall name but appended 'cyber' to reflect our technological shift—preserving brand recognition while signalling evolution. — Manager, Shopping Mall Beta

During this phase, rebranding began to crystallise into tangible adjustments. The process revealed an inherent tension within rebranding: communicating repositioning while retaining sufficient familiarity. The tension here appeared to involve management that advocated repositioning to attract new customers, while employees and tenants, who sought continuity, had long operated within the existing brand framework. A comprehensive overhaul, they feared, might undermine the relationships and recognition they had developed over time.

During this period, employees and tenants appeared to engage in sensemaking regarding how the emerging 'cyber' or 'tech' identity related to the familiar 'one-stop' shopping mall concept. Sensemaking here refers to the process by which individuals interpret a novel rebranding identity in relation to existing knowledge, and this process seemed to influence whether they moved towards acceptance. Management addressed this by maintaining certain familiar brand elements, such as the original name and ongoing relationships, while carefully signalling change to offer stakeholders recognisable reference points.

Theme 3. Operational tensions from new standards

We must keep this shopping mall spotless and well-maintained at all times. — Senior Employee, Shopping Mall Alpha

As the relatively abstract vision translated into operational requirements, fresh points of tension emerged, such as the introduction of elevated service standards that extend operating hours (10 am to 10 pm to accommodate professionals), and refreshing to the physical environment. These requirements threatened to disrupt established routines and reduce employees' and tenants' autonomy.

For employees, the principal source of strain appeared to be increased workload. Extended hours and heightened expectations contributed to fatigue and stress. Perhaps more significantly, some employees struggled to see how their existing capabilities aligned with the revised service standards. This seemed to trigger resistance and impede buy-in, which eventually manifested in diminished morale and potentially declining service quality.

The future lies in technology, an ever-expanding market". — Shopping Mall Alpha's longest-standing tenant

For tenants, tension centred on autonomy and cost. Improvements to the shopping mall, including new security systems and food court renovations, also require tenants to modify their premises and absorb associated costs. Smaller independent tenants, in particular, appeared concerned that brand-managed service centres might introduce direct competition. This created a somewhat complex environment for management to navigate.

Theme 4. Internal harmonisation

If there is a price rivalry or personal conflicts arise, our GM takes proactive steps to address the issues. — Senior Manager, Shopping Mall Alpha

As operational tensions threatened to impede the rebranding process, management shifted from visionary leadership towards a mediating role. The tension here appeared to involve inter-tenant competition, which required managerial intervention (i.e. mediation). When price disputes or interpersonal tensions surfaced, management's involvement seemed necessary to prevent the rebranding from fragmenting internally and to perform a sensemaking role. By demonstrating a willingness to protect shared interests, management indicated its readiness to assist tenants in reframing the rebranding from a potential threat into a collective effort.

Another source of tension appeared to arise from mismatches between employees' capabilities and the expectations of their new roles. Employees may have been concerned that they lacked the capabilities required under the revised standards. Management responded by transforming those concerns into opportunities for self-development.

Theme 5. Authentic short-term wins

During that period, we adopted a gradual approach instead of making sudden changes. Initially, we started with 80 stand units for market trials. When the market is growing, we expanded to fill one floor with stands, and finally, everything in the shopping mall changed. — GM, Shopping Mall Alpha

Management was aware that promises alone would not adequately address tenants' financial concerns, which required tangible evidence. The tension lay between tenants' perception of financial risk and management's still-unproven direction. Tenants appeared

to require evidence that rebranding could generate returns before committing fully. Management's vision, however compelling, remained relatively abstract until market response could validate it. Short-term wins seemed to offer concrete evidence that could reshape tenants' sensemaking. When tenants observed increased foot traffic and positive sales associated with the new positioning, they found it easier to connect the rebranding to their own financial circumstances, and it boosted management's trust when introducing more significant changes.

Theme 6. Facilitated acculturation and sensemaking

The training sessions ultimately eased my discomfort with the new systems, boosting both my confidence and performance. — Shopping Mall Beta employee

The most profound aspect of rebranding may have occurred when stakeholders moved towards alignment with the new brand culture. This shift might be understood through the interaction between sensemaking and acculturation, where acculturation refers to adaptation through training and socialisation, which, in this context, seemed to facilitate sensemaking in practical terms.

The underlying tension involved the contrast between established routines and the demands of the new brand. Employees and tenants had developed routines and self-understandings aligned with the earlier 'one-stop' model. The new technology focus appeared to require different behaviours and understandings. For employees, formal training seemed to function as a vehicle for acculturation, a structured form of support that facilitated adaptation to new expectations and offered skill development and cognitive resources for sensemaking. As employees acquired updated procedures, they also began reshaping their understanding of their roles, their identity, and their connection to the shopping mall's new direction. This dual process consists of behavioural adaptation through acculturation and cognitive reframing through sensemaking.

[Regulations on operating hours] initially faced resistance, but were eventually accepted as necessary for the collective success". — Field notes, Shopping Mall Beta

For tenants, acculturation appeared to involve adjusting to a more structured business environment through observation, learning from peers, and negotiated adaptation. The tension between individual autonomy and shared standards seemed to require tenants to make sense of why consistent hours and service expectations might serve their longer-term interests, even when those standards limited short-term flexibility. This sensemaking was supported by management's consistent enforcement, combined with visible collective benefits.

Theme 7. Brand revision empowerment

A major component of this was the announcement of a new logo and new name; when our positioning was clear, many principal brands came in, and we launched our new brand of shopping mall (with a new logo), further solidifying our identity in the market. — GM, Shopping Mall Alpha

Once internal alignment had become somewhat stabilised, the rebranding progressed outward through the launch of a new visual identity and integrated marketing

campaigns. The tension at this stage appeared to lie between management and employees on one side, and tenants on the other, as the latter were responsible for implementing the brand at store level. The new positioning meant that tenants needed to refresh their storefronts to align with and remain relevant to the shopping mall's evolving image. Tenants who seemed to have internalised the rebranding through prior sensemaking and acculturation complied more willingly, viewing store updates as a natural aspect of their commitment. Tenants exhibiting weaker buy-in resisted, which required negotiation and a more gradual approach.

As the year-end approached, I initiated advertising campaigns and joined their (association) event to boost sales. In addition, I created an exhibition to help the tenants. — GM, Shopping Mall Alpha

Another source of tension arose between marketing-driven performance expectations and operational capability, which seemed to create pressure on both employees and tenants. Employees faced visitor-count targets that tested whether they could maintain performance under the rebranding vision. Tenants, meanwhile, appeared to question whether the continuous promotional cycle was sustainable, testing whether their commitment could withstand ongoing operational tensions.

Theme 8. Optimised customer touchpoints experience

... they seem to be running as many contests and giveaways as ever ... it really made me feel engaged with the shopping mall. — Visitor 1, Shopping Mall Alpha

The ultimate test of rebranding success resided in customer responses, which revealed potential gaps between all internal stakeholders (e.g. management, employees, tenants) and external customers. The tension here appeared to lie between rebranding goals and engagement, which is shaped by customers themselves. After months of internal negotiation and alignment, internal stakeholders now faced the reality that customers would determine the outcome, indicating a shift in power outside the organisation. Internal stakeholders could control visual identity and service standards to a certain extent, but they could not control how customers experienced or interpreted the new brand. A noticeable gap emerged between the intended rebranding and the actual customer experience that prompted internal stakeholders to fine-tune service environments by removing potentially aggressive brokers who may have pressured customers, improving complaint handling, and maintaining engagement activities. This suggests that brand meaning may be co-created with customers rather than imposed by internal stakeholders.

A grounded theory of rebranding process

Our findings suggest that rebranding can be understood as a dynamic, socially negotiated process that unfolds through four interconnected phases (see [Figure 2](#)), in which the resolution of tensions in one phase may create conditions for tensions to emerge in the next. Throughout this cycle, the role of shopping mall management seems to evolve, from visionary to mediator to executor, as it adapts to shifting power dynamics and stakeholder responses.

In Phase 1 (Preparation), the process is ignited by management's vision for technology-focused repositioning, which tends to generate what might be termed visionary tensions that

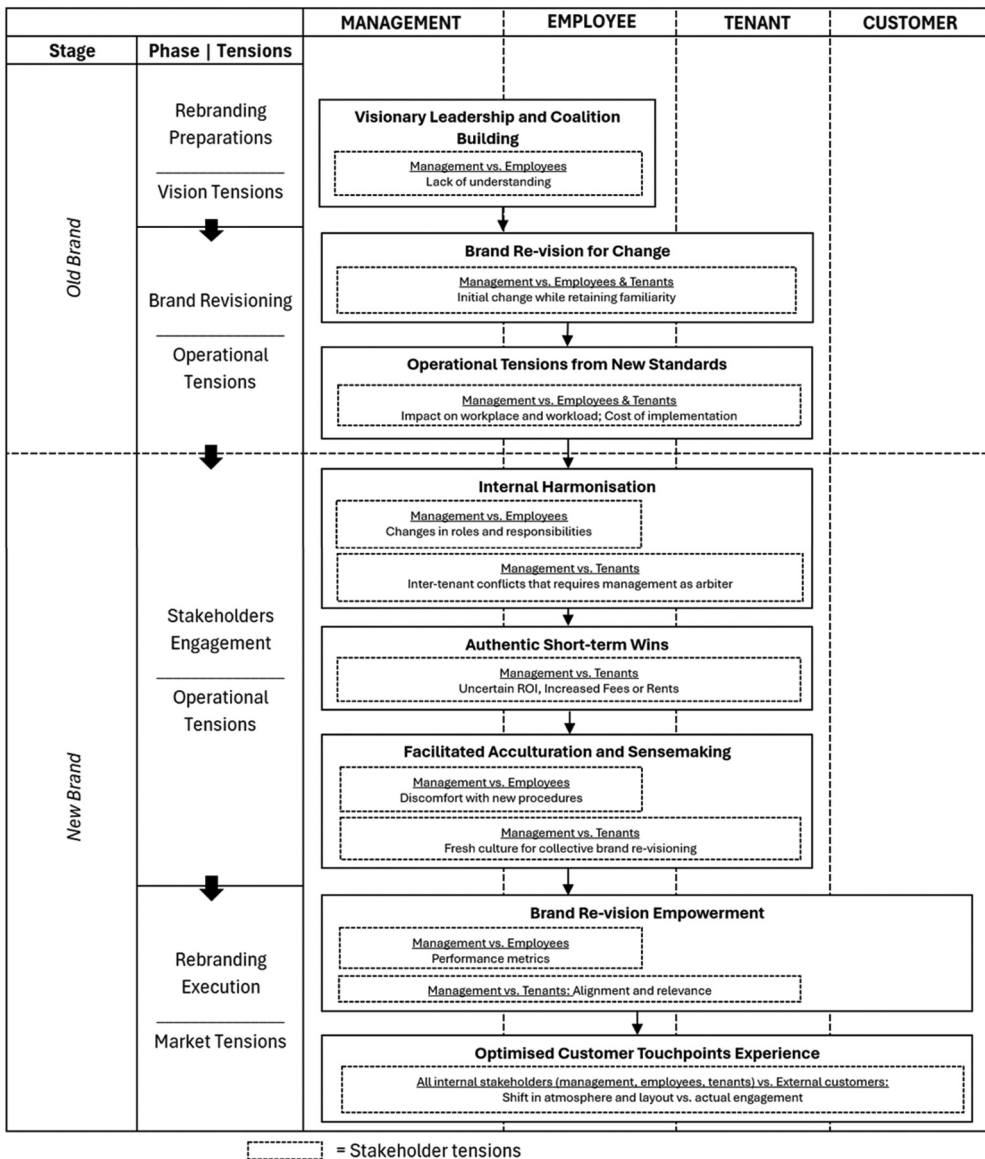


Figure 2. Rebranding process stakeholder perspectives and tensions.

lead into Phase 2 (Brand Revisioning). Here, the abstract vision is translated into tangible new rules (e.g. extended hours and improved service standards), a shift that appears to trigger operational tensions. The intensification of these conflicts generally requires Phase 3 (Stakeholder Engagement), where management adopts a mediating role by: 1) providing short-term wins as tangible proof of the new direction, 2) facilitating acculturation through training and socialisation to enable sensemaking (stakeholders rationalise the change) to address capability gaps and cultural resistance. Finally, Phase 4 (Rebranding Execution) focuses outward, with the public launch of a new visual identity and integrated marketing campaigns to manage market tensions.

Conclusion

Rebranding Preparation

Successful rebranding preparation involved a strategic vision aimed at capturing an emergent market niche (Miller et al., 2014; Stuart, 2018), reinforced by inclusive coalition-building. As we summarise, visionary tensions emerge regarding role disruption and rebranding uncertainties (Kaul & Arora, 2022; Zhao et al., 2018). In sharp contrast, successful navigation during this phase relied on inclusive coalition-building as opposed top-down mandates (Chung & Byrom, 2021; Joseph et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2014). Through transparent communication and decentralised decision-making, initial scepticism was transformed into buy-in. This established the collaborative groundwork for subsequent operational changes (Wong & Merrilees, 2005).

Brand Revisioning

This phase entailed translating rebranding vision into tangible identity revisions and operational procedures. Central to this phase was the paradox of continuity versus change (Cooper et al., 2021), as stakeholders negotiated the preservation of legacy elements against the introduction of a renewed, technology-focused shopping mall repositioning. Operational tensions arose from revised service standards, extended hours, and facility enhancements, which inadvertently increased employee workloads and sparked tenant apprehension (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Zhao et al., 2018). Balanced brand continuity, by the rebranding initiator, may retain recognisable assets and slow-down rebranding pace. This enabled rebranding to advance without eroding stakeholder familiarity (Beise-Zee, 2022).

Engaging stakeholders

During this stage, management shifted from visionary to mediator that addresses tensions through conflict resolution, co-creative planning, and the demonstration of short-term wins (Joseph et al., 2021; Stuart, 2018). These tangible outcomes seemed to validate the strategic repositioning and resolve financial uncertainties among tenants. Simultaneously, structured training and negotiated operational adjustments facilitated acculturation. We reason that stakeholders would make sense of the new brand culture and align their behaviours with revised rebranding objectives (Poulis et al., 2013; Samnani et al., 2013). This internal rebranding process was essential prior to projecting the new brand identity to the public.

Executing rebranding

With internal alignment seemingly secured, rebranding turned outward through the launch of a cohesive visual identity and integrated marketing campaigns designed to resonate with external customers (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). It could be argued that tensions at this phase transitioned to market pressures,

which may indicate performance expectations and experiential consistency across customer touchpoints (Miller et al., 2014). Through iterative, data-informed refinement of promotional activities and tenant-support initiatives, management sought to ensure the rebranded environment would deliver on its renewed promises. This approach appears consistent with bridging internal transformation and external expectations (Bolhuis et al., 2018; Meintjes & Botha, 2024).

Discussion

This section discusses the empirical findings and may also address research questions. Regarding RQ1, our findings suggest that stakeholder responses may evolve through the four phases of the model. Employees feared a loss of capability, and tenants resisted the new tech-focused procedures. We found that stakeholder buy-in to a rebranding is not based solely on communication (Joseph et al., 2021); instead, stakeholders undergo a learning process (i.e. acculturation) where they gradually adapt their behaviours and values to fit the rebranding objectives. After training, employees reported improved confidence, suggesting a sensemaking process in which they shifted to more active engagement as they made sense of their new roles in rebranding (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Lee et al., 2014).

In addressing RQ2, regarding tensions, this study found that the paradox of continuity (versus change) may drive rebranding tensions (Cooper et al., 2021; Stuart & Muzellec, 2004). The tensions that evolve across rebranding phases, from visionary to operational, and then to market tensions, are shaped by shifting power dynamics among stakeholders. Visionary tensions in the Preparation phase emerged from management's unilateral power, which ignited anxiety among employees and tenants (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Warren, 2025). In the Brand Revisioning and Stakeholder Engagement phases, operational tensions arose, where employees and tenants exercised operational power through resistance to new standards and procedures, and cost impositions that reflect a contested negotiation over implementation autonomy (Iglesias et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2021). Finally, market tensions surfaced in the Execution phase, as the externally projected rebranding encountered customer expectations, which exposed management's limited power to control those expectations (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

Answering RQ3, our four-phase model allows us to demonstrate that successful rebranding is likely to require management to shift their role from planners to negotiators (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). We reason that rather than merely pushing the rebranding vision, success appears consistent with management's capability to negotiate power dynamics and compromises that bridged rebranding goals and stakeholder expectations throughout each phase.

Theoretical implications

This study offers three specific conceptual insights that advance the literature on rebranding, stakeholder management, and place branding. First, this study theorises rebranding as a socially negotiated process. This is quite the opposite of what previous research has largely depicted as a planned sequence of enablers and barriers (Miller et al., 2014) or

a chronological progression of events (Juntunen, 2014). While these frameworks identify *what* happens, they often overlook the *how*, specifically, *how* conflicting interests lead to tensions and are navigated. Rather than a direct and top-down process (Stuart, 2018), rebranding, according to our observations, is consistently shaped through power dynamics among multiple stakeholders (Warren, 2025). While management may dictate the rebranding direction, tenants and employees possess the operational power to resist or accept it. Empirical findings demonstrate that rebranding occurs through negotiation, where management must cede control over specific operational standards to secure alignment (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Iglesias et al., 2020). Findings reflect a high-context, relationship-based culture (Hall, 1976), as seen in the location of the shopping mall rebranding. The effectiveness of personal negotiation and direct leadership accessibility reflects cultural norms in which relationship quality determines trust more than formal procedures and is very useful for navigating tensions in the socially negotiated process. Unlike in a low-context culture, stakeholders might expect trust to be established through transparent policies, and tensions can be resolved through formal procedures.

Second, this research advances the rebranding literature by repositioning the process as a form of organisational sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). While prior research identifies stakeholder buy-in as critical for rebranding (Joseph et al., 2021; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018), it is often treated as a static outcome. We argue that it is not enough for stakeholders to merely accept a new brand; they must make sense of a new vision as opposed to an old one (Meintjes & Botha, 2024). In this process, acculturation (i.e. through training and discipline) (Lin, 2014) allows stakeholders to rationalise the shift from one-stop to a tech-focused shopping mall (Chirkov, 2009; Samnani et al., 2013). In a collectivist culture, where group welfare outweighs individual interests, the rebranding can be framed as essential, allowing stakeholders to make sense of, rationalise, and accept the change.

Third, this study advances the place branding literature, which has predominantly focuses on macro-locations, such as cities or countries, targeting broad tourism audiences (Hakala et al., 2020; Källström & Siljeklint, 2024). We extend this body of knowledge to the commercial micro-place (Merrilees et al., 2016; Micu, 2019), demonstrating that shopping mall rebranding represents a strategic niche adaptation. We provide empirical evidence that, for commercial places, rebranding is not just a change in visual identity (i.e. logos/names) but a re-engineering of the experiential environment (Alexander, 2019). We show that differentiating a micro-place into a specific functional niche (e.g. technology) is physically embedded in the environment and socially reinforced by acculturated staff (Hakala et al., 2020).

Managerial implications

This study offers managerial insights to navigate the complexities of rebranding, particularly tailored guidance on engaging stakeholders. First, this study outlines various strategies that are effective under different contextual conditions. In the context of high uncertainty and resistance (i.e. the Preparation phase), top-down mandates fail. Instead, the strategy of *inclusive coalition building* is effective because it reduces tension by involving senior staff and opinion leaders before decisions are finalised. Conversely, in the context of operational implementation, where abstract vision clashes with daily

routines (i.e. the Brand Revisioning phase), a strategy of *balanced brand attributes continuity* proved successful. By retaining legacy elements while introducing new procedures, managers can mitigate the 'continuity vs. change' tension that often derails rebranding.

Second, our findings demonstrate that interventions must be customised to the specific power dynamics of each stakeholder group (e.g. tenants or employees). For independent tenants, interventions that focus on future brand promise are often ineffective; rather, effective interventions are *authentic short-term wins*. Providing tangible proof of ROI (return on investment) can reduce perceived financial risk more persuasively than mere communication can. For frontline employees, rebranding seemed to create fears regarding capability. Consequently, the most effective intervention is *facilitated acculturation* through immersive training and a supportive environment, which helps employees make sense of the new standards and bridge the gap between their established skills and the new service requirements.

Third, different cultural and market context dictate stakeholder management during rebranding. In high-context, relationship-based cultures, relying on formal contracts to enforce rebranding will result in cultural discord. This context demands a personal negotiation and senior leadership visibility style. Our study shows that direct accessibility to top management (e.g. GM) is important for securing trust and buy-in within these cultural settings. In a market context defined by aggressive external disruption, rebranding initiators should leverage the sense of urgency to unify stakeholders, framing the rebranding as a matter of collective survival to justify the difficult operational changes during the Brand Revisioning phase.

Limitations and future research

While this study provides a detailed and insightful framework for understanding shopping mall rebranding, it acknowledges several limitations that warrant further investigation. The specific characteristics of the featured shopping malls, including their size and location, may limit the generalisability of the proposed process model to other types of retail spaces. Furthermore, employing maximum variation sampling strategies that include both successful and unsuccessful cases in future studies would allow for the identification of broader patterns in the rebranding process. Additionally, future studies should explore the role of policy-making stakeholders, such as governmental bodies, as the government possesses coercive power that disproportionately impacts stakeholders and shapes the industry.

Note

1. These materials can be accessed at.
https://osf.io/b65v8/overview?view_only=bca0718cd4624301aa85db065b66e26

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ORCID

Muhammad Izharuddin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6598-8011>

Badri Munir Sukoco  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0416-1480>

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