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Responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building: Guidelines for leaders in Africa

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Purpose: This article explores the symbiosis between the fields of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building to offer a new, integrated perspective along with strategic guidelines for implementation by leaders in Africa.

Design/methodology/approach: This conceptual paper is based on a critical review of literature that follows a three-phased approach, with 87 literature sources included across 4 literature domains. Thematic content analysis of data delivers five themes revealing the symbiotic nature of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

Findings: Findings are captured in a conceptual model, which suggests that responsible leadership should be embedded in brand purpose which serves to benefit brand stakeholders and society. Responsible leaders align all decisions and actions to build and enhance cohesive brands - creating ecosystems that cogently work together toward a shared goal. Through purpose-driven brand building, responsible leaders could bolster socio-economic development in Africa, garner trust and attract investment.

Practical implications and value: The central value of this article lies in the integration of the previously separate domains of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building as well as the directions provided for further research. The new perspective is practically operationalised with strategic guidelines for responsible leadership on the African continent by serving brand purpose to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Keywords: leadership; brand management; responsible leadership; brand purpose; Africa; organisational purpose.

Introduction

Responsible leadership is an emerging field of leadership study that is socially and relationally focused, with a leadership approach which is rooted in purpose and the creation of value for stakeholders and society (Kempster et al., 2019; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Responsible leadership literature over the last decade indicates a shift from the micro-individual level to the meso-organisational level and macro-context. Further research is required into responsible leadership as a multi-faceted, multi-level construct that spans beyond individual leadership approaches and behaviour and considers the wider context in which responsible leadership occurs (Meliou et al., 2021; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

To further the body of knowledge around responsible leadership, this article explores the construct of purpose as it pertains to responsible leadership theory and practice in an organisational context. In particular, this study differentiates between purpose and brand purpose and examines the merits of approaching responsible leadership through brand purpose. The article highlights the symbiotic relationship between brand purpose and responsible leadership, synthesising the theory on purpose-driven brand building and showing ways in which it can be applied to and realised by responsible leaders.

The study embarks from understanding that brand purpose lies at the heart of the world's leading high-performance brands, encapsulating the brand's higher reason for existence and the value that it hopes to add to a wide range of brand stakeholders, both inside and outside the organisation, as well as society as a whole (Aaker, 2018; Deloitte, 2021; Havas Media Group, 2021). Strategic brands have a deep understanding of why they matter and what the unique and compelling reasons are for their existence. Brand purpose is held central to the organisational strategy and its operational model, informing the way in which the brand is positioned and providing a sound board for all decisions and actions (Havas Media Group, 2021; Kantar, 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021; Yohn, 2020).

The discipline of brand and brand building has matured significantly from its theoretical origination as the development and management of visual and verbal signifying systems designed to assist in differentiating one product, service or institution from another (Havas Media Group, 2021; Keller, 2003). Brand now holds a holistic orientation representing an ecosystem of stakeholder activity, aligned and committed to a unique and compelling purpose (Aaker, 2018; Havas, 2021; Hsu, 2016; Spence & Rushin in Hsu, 2016).

This conceptual article is based on a critical review of literature across the theoretical domains of responsible leadership, purpose and purpose-driven brand building. The review extracts insights that can advance knowledge in both responsible leadership and brand leadership and facilitate theory development across these seemingly disparate domains. By integrating various concepts across these fields, the study provides a new holistic view of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building, along with strategic guidelines for operationalisation thereof, creating not only interesting avenues for cross-functional organisational leadership practice but also new avenues for future research.

The themes yielded by a content analysis of data extracted from the 87 literature sources included in the review suggests that there are merits in integrating the fields of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building. The review reveals a lack of knowledge in the operationalisation of organisational purpose and brand purpose and responsible leadership alignment behind one central holistic purpose. Prior reviews in this domain are extended, as the focus of this study goes beyond the nature of purpose in the context of responsible leadership, but opens up a new perspective that is responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building. This perspective is advanced by showing ways in which some of the challenges and realities of leadership on the African continent could be addressed with brand purpose as the promise and navigating North Star for responsible leadership. We also bring new perspectives for strategic brand leadership in organisations through responsible leadership to address the tension point in brand literature around the responsibility for delivering on brand purpose and leadership alignment behind brand purpose. A practical perspective is offered to address the articulation of purpose and the responsible leadership thereof – that brand purpose already exists in the brand identity of the organisation, that it already considers the holistic view of adding value to organisational stakeholders and that its application to responsible leadership could be operationalised with the strategic guidelines offered.

The purpose of the study, which steered the critical literature review, was to explore the apparent symbiosis between the fields of responsible leadership from the vantage point of purpose-driven brand building, to offer an integrated perspective of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building in a conceptual model. This article posits that brand purpose lies at the core of responsible leadership, informing the organisation's reason for existence and the contribution it hopes to make to stakeholders, including society as a whole.

Literature
Responsible leadership and purpose

Responsible leadership is a leadership approach that focuses on creating value and positive change for a multitude of stakeholders, both inside and outside the organisation (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). The social and relational stakeholder orientation of responsible leadership is said to emanate from a higher purpose that provides the foundation for the building of caring, inclusive relationships with stakeholders (Kempster et al., 2019; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020; Smit, 2013).

Thought leaders and experts across reputable industry literature, reports and surveys most commonly refer to 'purpose' in the context of organisations and leadership. In recent publications and articles, the term purpose is defined as the organisation's reason for being; the way in which the organisation hopes to benefit stakeholders and contribute to the greater good (Purell, 2020; Winter & Germelmann, 2020).

Recent leadership research stresses that there is a call for a new type of leader that can affect systemic change by being socially accountable and empathetic to the needs of all stakeholders (Balchandani et al., 2019; Chima & Gutman, 2020; WEF, 2020b). Leaders must provide a larger sense of purpose and meaning and build trust in others by being transparent in and committed to their words and deeds (Balchandani et al., 2019; Clegg et al., 2021; Shaninger et al., 2020).

A stakeholder orientation based on positive societal impact is often reduced to isolated attempts at corporate social responsibility and investment projects and regularly confused with the minimum standards of compliance with regulations or laws pertaining to social development, job creation or sustainability (Hennchen & Schrempf-Stirling, 2021). Hence, leaders and organisations globally are called on to move beyond token sustainability reporting, to implement purpose-driven strategies for the betterment of society and sustained profitability. The World Economic Forum's Davos Manifesto 2020 addresses the universal purpose of a company and specifically promotes increased stakeholder centricity and purposeful shared value creation (WEF, 2020a).

A global survey of 474 executives, conducted by *Harvard Business Review* (Keller, 2015) and a US-based survey of employees, conducted by McKinsey (Gast et al., 2020b), independently confront the gap between purpose and organisational performance. The 2015 study delivers a near unanimous call for purpose-driven leadership amongst executives, one that reinforces the difference that their

organisations can make in responsibly delivering a unique and meaningful value to all stakeholders. The McKinsey study conducted in 2020 (5 years later), however, indicates that only 42% of US-based employees surveyed experience their organisations driving actual purpose-driven impact. A gap seems to exist between intent and operationalising a purpose-driven strategy timeously and successfully. The unique impact that an organisation wishes to make must effectively be concretised in a strategic statement of intent and responsible leadership must ensure alignment with the organisation's strategy, operations and governance to meet stakeholder expectations and deliver on promises made.

Further insight is required into the obligations and accountabilities related to driving the realisation of purpose in stakeholder relationships, what managers and leaders should be held accountable for and how accountability should be measured and managed (Hennchen & Schrempf-Stirling, 2021; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Literature indicates the need to address research gaps pertaining to the theoretical and conceptual foundation of responsible leadership, in the context of the wider organisational strategy, operations and culture and the setting within which the organisation and leadership operate (Castillo et al., 2020; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

The African leadership reality

Literature indicates a need for further insights about responsible leadership on the African continent (Abebe et al., 2020) and highlights a research gap pertaining to responsible leadership in emerging economies and different cultural and geographical contexts (Greeff, 2021; Hennchen & Schrempf-Stirling, 2021; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

The concept of responsible leadership has to contend with the many pressures that current African leadership is dealing with (Hennchen & Schrempf-Stirling, 2021).

There are interesting tension points in the premise that leadership, regardless of function or level of seniority in the organisation, would embrace purpose as their focus or guiding North Star, given that successful leadership performance requirements predominantly relate to commercial or financial rewards and the generation of profit for shareholders (Kazakova et al., 2020; Kempster et al., 2019). This discord is intensified by the socio-economic challenges that exist in developing countries across Africa; on a continent where poverty and financial instability are pervasive and purpose may be seen as a 'nice to have' in the light of the bread-and-butter issues that individuals, communities, businesses and governments are facing (Hevia & Neumeyer, 2020; IBM, 2021).

The uniquely African context is front of mind in the critical review of literature and the conceptual model proposed and this article's discussion pauses to provide a focal point on African leadership through the lens of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

Purpose-driven brand building

On face value, the terms 'purpose' and 'brand purpose' appear to be similar, except that brand purpose already exists as a central part of the organisational brand identity system and, thus, as an established strategic tool. It is likely to be expressed and is, therefore, optimally positioned to inform all stakeholder-connecting endeavours (Deloitte, 2021; Havas Media Group, 2021).

Organisations and their leaders may not need to grapple with the articulation, embedding and driving of purpose, but could leverage brand purpose to all organisational stakeholders.

As stated in Deloitte's 2021 Global Marketing Trends (2021):

> Brand purpose and the purpose-driven enterprise don't have to be mutually exclusive endeavours. In fact, a purpose-driven enterprise aligns its brand purpose to a bigger enterprise-wide purpose. However, in many cases, the 'why' behind an organization's products and services is siloed from other important facets, such as talent and business partnership strategy. (p. 10)

Keller (2020, p. 996) posits that 'distinctiveness is at the core of branding' and a meaningful experience of the brand's unique value establishes an authentic relationship with the brand. Brand as a social construct, whether by person, place, movement, organisation or commercial company, serves a unique reason for being.

The term brand purpose has come to define and represent the unique and compelling difference that a brand is striving to make. It serves to align a system-wide commitment of all stakeholders, their decision-making and actions (Enslin, 2019; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020; Spence & Rushin in Hsu, 2016). Purpose-driven brand building is the deliberate, mindful implementation of brand building efforts that are rooted and invested in the manifestation of brand purpose across the organisation (Curry, 2020).

The challenge is that brand purpose is often seen to be a marketing construct, something which is functionally delegated to marketing or brand management to create and use (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). With brand purpose confined to the marketing silo, cross-functional leadership may not be aware of it, invested in it or mindful of the implications thereof (Greyser & Urde, 2019; Merrilees et al., 2021).

A critical review of literature considers responsible leadership through the lens of purpose-driven brand building and reveals that brand-purpose-oriented leadership behaviours are embedded in the organisational culture and the organisation remains true to the brand purpose up to CEO level (Izzo & Vanderwielen, 2018; Schaninger et al., 2020). Literature and research indicate that brand purpose-driven organisations embed the brand purpose to the extent that every stakeholder interaction presents an embodiment of brand purpose (Deloitte, 2021; Hunt et al., 2021; Yohn, 2020). This article proposes a
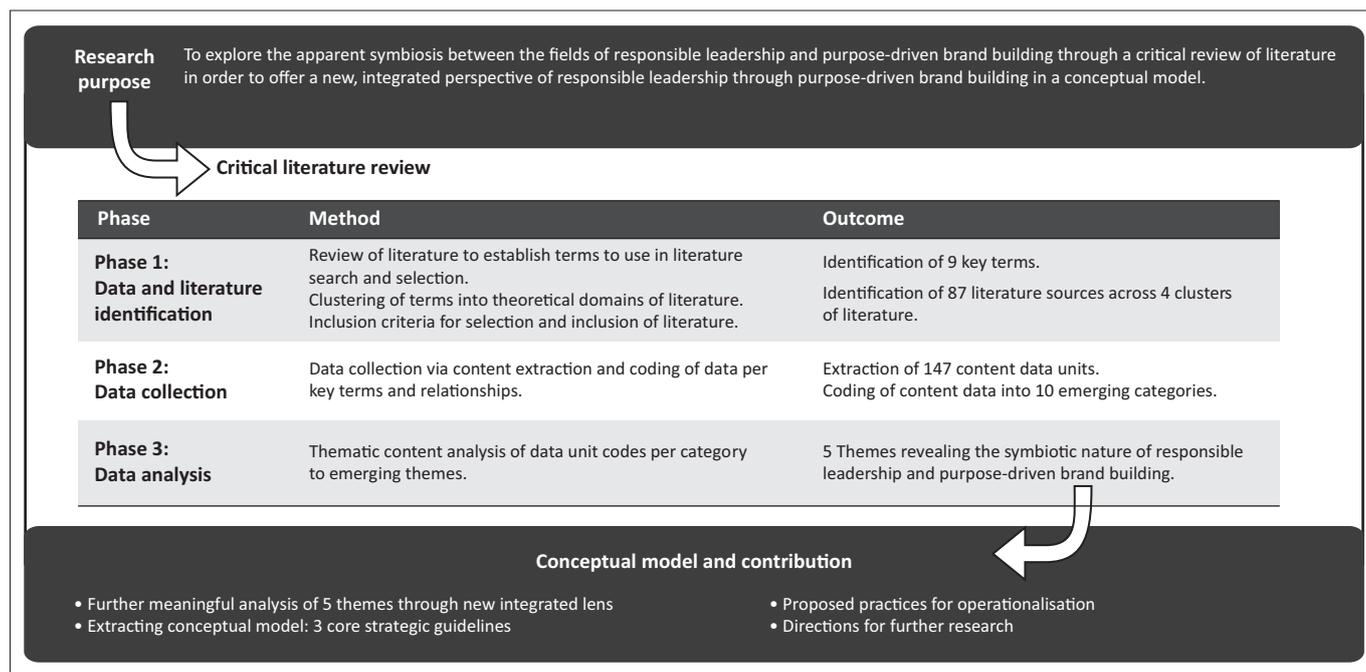
Research purpose	To explore the apparent symbiosis between the fields of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building through a critical review of literature in order to offer a new, integrated perspective of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building in a conceptual model.		

Critical literature review

Phase	Method	Outcome
Phase 1: **Data and literature identification**	Review of literature to establish terms to use in literature search and selection. Clustering of terms into theoretical domains of literature. Inclusion criteria for selection and inclusion of literature.	Identification of 9 key terms. Identification of 87 literature sources across 4 clusters of literature.
Phase 2: **Data collection**	Data collection via content extraction and coding of data per key terms and relationships.	Extraction of 147 content data units. Coding of content data into 10 emerging categories.
Phase 3: **Data analysis**	Thematic content analysis of data unit codes per category to emerging themes.	5 Themes revealing the symbiotic nature of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building.

Conceptual model and contribution

• Further meaningful analysis of 5 themes through new integrated lens
• Extracting conceptual model: 3 core strategic guidelines
• Proposed practices for operationalisation
• Directions for further research

FIGURE 1: Synopsis of the study.

symbiosis between responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building and offers a conceptual model with strategic guidelines to operationalise the adoption of purpose-driven brand building in responsible leadership practices. When the term 'brand purpose' is used, it is in reference to that which informs the entire overall brand ecosystem. It is that which gives meaning to, inspires and aligns responsible leadership.

Research methodology

The critical or integrative review of literature targeted specific literature across the fields of responsible leadership and purpose-driven brand building, integrating insights from the previously disparate domains into a new theoretical perspective (Gheondea-Eladi, 2015; Snyder, 2019). The study's critical review focused on the analysis of data in a meaningful way to develop a conceptual model, presented as three strategic guidelines for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building. The conceptual model organises research in the domain through a newly adopted lens, extending prior reviews and setting directions for research in the domains of responsible leadership and strategic brand building (Webster & Watson, 2002).

Figure 1 presents a synopsis of the study, showing how the research purpose was mobilised through a critical literature review in three phases, with a high-level overview of the method adopted for each phase and the outcome of each phase.

At the bottom of Figure 1, an arrow shows how the findings of five themes from the data analysis have been further extracted to deliver a conceptual model comprising three core strategic guidelines.

A discussion of each phase of the critical literature review ensues, with each phase addressing the structured, transparent process applied and the clear inclusion and exclusion criteria guiding the identification of literature and data, as well as the collection and analysis thereof (Snyder, 2019).

Phase 1: Data and literature identification

Phase 1 set out to identify the key terms to use in the literature search and selection and clustered the key terms into theoretical domains of literature, along with the inclusion criteria to guide literature selection.

A preliminary review of peer-reviewed literature and industry publications in the fields of purpose-driven brand building and responsible leadership through purpose delivered nine key terms. These key terms and the relationships between them provided a theoretical foundation and informed the search terms and topics to steer phase 2 of the research (Gheondea-Eladi, 2015; Snyder, 2019). The nine key terms, along with clarifying information in brackets where required, are presented in no particular order as follows:

1. brand purpose
2. purpose-driven brand building
3. intent (brand promise) and moral obligation to deliver (on promises made)
4. brand trust and brand cohesion (through purpose)
5. purpose in organisations
6. strategic leadership (of purpose)
7. stakeholder society (in relation to purpose)
8. employees and purpose (meaningful work, employee engagement, values and behaviour)
9. context and ecosystem and/or Africa (within which purpose lives).

TABLE 1: Literature sources across four clusters.

Literature source cluster	Number of sources	Key constructs
Responsible leadership	15	
Brand, brand purpose and purpose-driven brand building	35	1, 2, 3, 4
Purpose as it pertains to organisations, stakeholders and leadership	20	5, 6, 7, 8
Context of COVID-19 pandemic and/or leadership on the African continent	17	9
Total literature sources	**87**	

Phase 1 also delivered 87 literature sources for further analysis in phase 2 of the study, which is depicted in Table 1.

As shown in the left hand column of Table 1, the literature was split into four clusters, based on topic or focus.

The first cluster listed in Table 1, responsible leadership, included 15 literature sources from seminal or prominent authors in the field, as well as frequently cited articles that presented the theoretical or conceptual foundations of responsible leadership. Sources from peer-reviewed journals were favoured, although industry literature from reputable management and research publications were also included. As the focus of this article is on responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building, inclusion criteria saw the selection of literature that shed light on purpose and responsible leadership practices pertaining to the driving of purpose and stakeholder value. Whilst the 15 literature sources in the responsible leadership cluster did not expressly contribute to a deeper understanding of any of the nine key terms, the insights obtained from these sources allowed for the building of a theoretical foundation of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building, which was key to the extraction of insights from literature in the remaining three clusters.

The second cluster of literature listed in Table 1 included brand and brand building literature that could shed light on the first four of the key terms identified. Literature that allowed for a deeper understanding of brand as it pertains to brand purpose and stakeholders was targeted, with literature from across peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, reputable industry sources and research studies selected to inform a holistic and relevant view of the brand in relation to responsible leadership.

Table 1 shows the third cluster of literature as literature that sheds light on purpose as it pertains to organisations, stakeholders and leadership. This cluster of literature sources was created in response to the wide range of literature delivered by an initial search into key terms 5, 6, 7 and 8. It became apparent that there is a growing body of industry-driven literature that focuses on purpose and stakeholders as it pertains to organisations and leadership. Here, literature from thought leaders based on industry research findings and studies from the last 3 years were favoured, as these could provide the most relevant, current insights.

A fourth cluster of literature included sources that could provide a deeper understanding of the context of the current business landscape on the African continent. An initial search into literature sources across journal articles, industry reports and research studies that were concerned with leadership and the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, particularly in Africa, yielded less than 20 literature sources that met the inclusion criteria for the search. Specifically, a literature search across two different databases (Ebscohost and Google Scholar) did not yield current, peer-reviewed literature that could shed light on the particular focus area of *responsible leadership* on the African continent in the present reality impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 17 literature sources that were included in the critical review provided some data about leadership in Africa, ensuring that the African context was held central during the thematic content analysis and discussion of themes and the conceptual model. However, the authors also supplemented this initial search into African leadership literature with further literature which aimed to generate deeper insights about the African leadership reality, as presented in a separate reflection and discussion at the end of this article.

Literature that did not directly address either responsible leadership, purpose or stakeholders were excluded, as the focus of this study was primarily on these key terms.

Databases for the search into scholarly literature focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and publications on Ebscohost and Google Scholar. Industry literature searches were confined to reputable sources of current, relevant industry reports and online publications selected by the researchers. The limited search parameters were purposefully applied by the researchers, as the aim was to target a limited but insightful body of literature. However, the authors would offer that a limitation of the critical review lies in the author-directed literature inclusion criteria and search parameters and recommend further research that extends the literature selected and enriches the conceptual insights offered by this study.

Phase 2: Data collection

With 87 literature sources across four clusters selected to provide insight into the nine key terms, the collection of data commenced. As shown in Figure 1, 147 content data units were extracted and captured in an MS Excel spreadsheet, each with a data unit code that showed which key term and literature cluster the data unit belongs to.

With the coded data content units captured, thematic content analysis ensued, allowing the emergence of 10 new categories into which coded data units could be assigned meaningfully (Nowell et al., 2017). A common characteristic of each of the 10 categories presented hereafter is the nature of the category as a means of sense-making; each category drew together data that made sense of or deepened the practical

understanding of purpose from a distinct perspective, often a perspective based on the relationship between stakeholder groups or practices and purpose. The categories into which data were sorted are as follows:

1. meaning of purpose
2. purpose-driven brand building
3. rising importance of purpose
4. organisations and purpose
5. leadership and purpose
6. employees and purpose
7. stakeholders, society and purpose
8. obligations related to purpose
9. challenges with purpose
10. the value of purpose (growth, high performance, equity, trust and cohesion).

Phase 3: Data analysis

The ultimate aim of a critical or integrative review is to apply meaningful data analysis that will inform a conceptual model and new perspectives for further research (Snyder, 2019; Webster & Watson, 2002). In the previous phase of research, each content data unit was coded to show the relationship thereof with a key term and a cluster of literature. These coded data units were sorted into 10 categories in preparation for the data analysis, which focused on identifying patterns that could inform themes to underpin the conceptual model comprising strategic guidelines.

The researchers applied thematic content analysis with inductive reasoning, arriving at five themes. In this thematic content analysis, the researchers aimed to achieve a synthesis of what is known about the different concepts across domains. To achieve this higher-order synthesis, a holistic approach was taken, with the researchers applying their respective subject matter expertise and insights to extrapolating the meaning of the data through the lens of purpose-driven brand building applied to the domain of responsible leadership. Linkages between the data units were mapped as nodes, showing the inference of relationships between the data units, ultimately yielding the conceptual or theoretical insight that the data unit linkages revealed. These conceptual or theoretical insights were synthesised into five themes, which initially seemed sequential, with one theme building on the other. Upon further analysis, relationships between the themes emerged and the inter-relatedness of themes became apparent.

Whilst every effort has been made to rigorously document and transparently report on the selected literature sources, extracted data units and coding and analysis thereof, the critical review's quality and replicability could be limited by the challenging task of encapsulating the true measure of conceptual thinking and analytical ability applied by the researchers in the abstraction of themes and the formulation of the conceptual model. For this reason, this is put forth as a conceptual article based on the insights from a critical review of literature and the authors recommend further research into the direction and perspective put forth by this article.

Findings

Figure 2 shows the five themes in relation to each other. The themes are briefly presented in order from 1 to 5, followed by a deeper discussion that positions the interrelatedness of the themes, which allowed for the further extraction of three core strategic guidelines along with practices for operationalisation.

Theme 1: Brand purpose as essence/heart of the organisation

Theme 1 at the centre of Figure 2 is concerned with the nature of brand purpose as the essence of the overall company brand and its role at the heart of the organisation, as the core from which strategic brand building emanates. The theme rests on the principle or foundational rule that brand purpose should lie at the core of the overall brand and navigate the entire organisation. The brand purpose should comprise a simple, authentic and clear articulation of the brand's reason for existence and the positive impact that the brand hopes to have on the lives of internal and external brand stakeholders and society as a whole.

Theme 2: Brand purpose to engage and align stakeholders

Theme 2 is positioned in relation to theme 1, showing how brand purpose at the heart of the organisation is stakeholder orientated. Brand purpose is that around which stakeholders engage and that which each stakeholder helps to co-create. Stakeholders also align behind the brand purpose, but stakeholders should also experience the brand purpose as aligned and congruent in all their engagements with the brand.

Theme 3: Responsible leadership of brand purpose

Figure 2 shows how theme 3, responsible leadership, drives the aligned, stakeholder-orientated brand purpose outward, across the field of responsibility portrayed by theme 4 (which speaks to the intent and obligations of brand purpose), across the holistic and systemically dynamic relational ecosystem in which brand purpose lives (theme 5).

Theme 4: Brand purpose as strategic intent, with related obligations

Theme 4 is closely related to theme 2, which deals with the engagement and alignment of stakeholders. Theme 4 speaks to the strategic intent that drives the delivery of brand purpose and the responsibility of brands and their leaders to fulfil their obligations in delivering on the brand purpose and promises made.
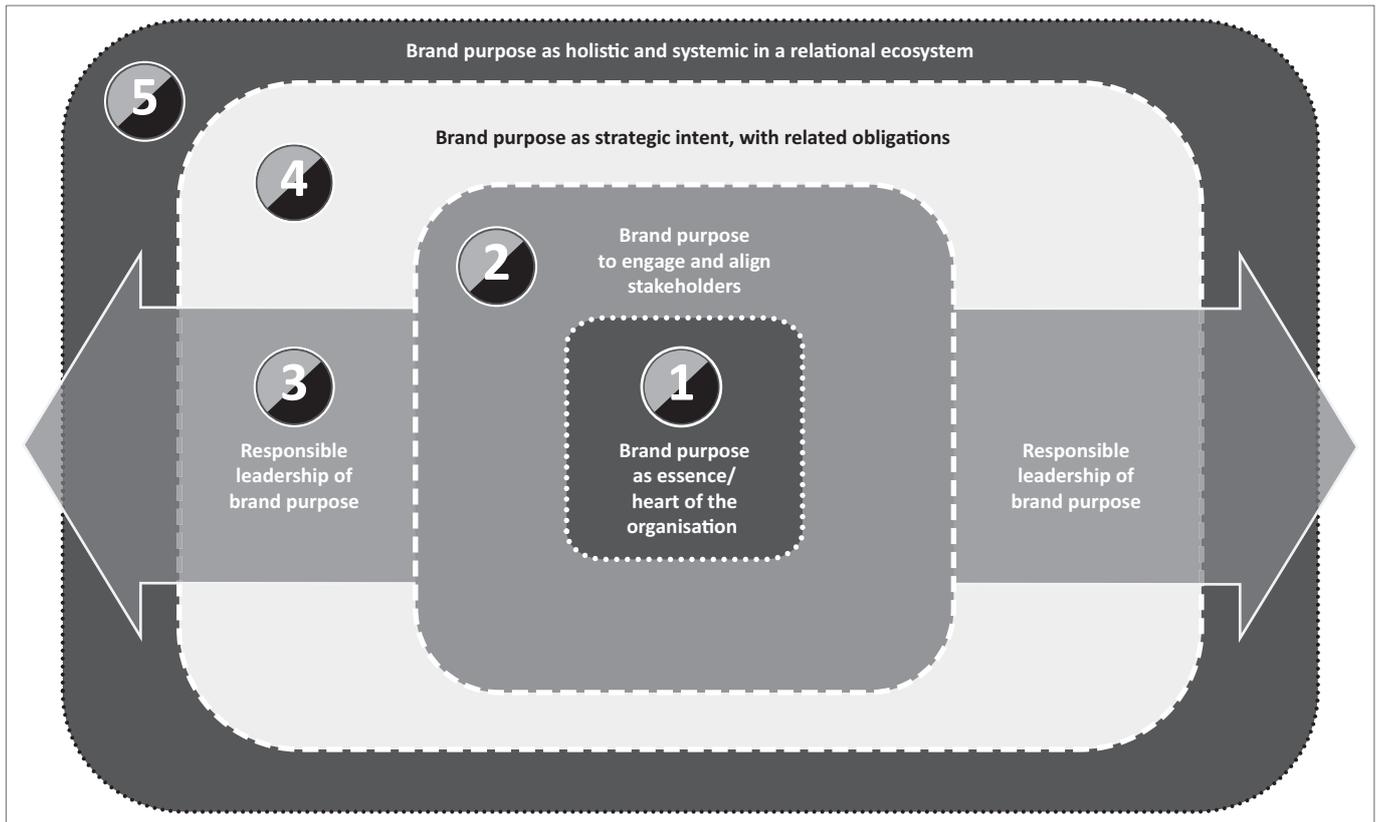
FIGURE 2: Five themes from thematic data analysis.

Theme 5: Brand purpose as holistic and systemic in a relational ecosystem

Theme 5 shows the relational ecosystem in which brand purpose functions surrounding all strategic activity. Brand purpose does not function in isolation or in a specific functional capacity (as a marketing tool, for instance), but the holistic nature of brand purpose sees it spanning the organisation and the full relational ecosystem and broader society within which the organisation functions.

Upon further analysis and synthesis, a common pattern was found across the five themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of content obtained during the critical literature review: all the themes presented insights that shed light on the positioning of brand purpose in relation to responsible leadership. As such, the themes were conceptual and theoretical, providing a new way of thinking about brand purpose in this context, thus illuminating the symbiotic nature of strategic brand purpose and responsible leadership.

Conceptual model: Strategic guidelines for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building

The highly interrelated nature of the themes and the manner in which they were positioned in relation to each other also presented opportunities for further synthesis of the themes into insights that were confined to one conceptual or theoretical

outlook of brand purpose in the context of responsible leadership.

As such, a further synthesis of the five themes was conducted to arrive at three main or core strategic guidelines for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building, which are presented and discussed in detail hereafter.

Strategic guideline 1: Approach brand purpose and responsible leadership as an interrelated ontology

This strategic guideline draws together insights from across themes 1–5 and provides a novel approach to brand purpose and responsible leadership based on an interrelated ontology.

From an ontological premise, brand as construct has evolved from a traditional and mechanistic position to a holistic and systemic ontology (Chilisa, 2019; Greeff, 2021; Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). Brand building today involves much more than simply the development and management of visual and verbal signifying systems designed to inform and attract consumers or society at large and to assist in differentiating one product, service or institution from another. In this regard and particularly in consumer terms, the American Marketing Association's (AMA) has prescribed:

> A name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers.

It is significant that the 'brand' has matured into a holistic construct representing an ecosystem of stakeholder activity, an integrated relational ontology, aligned and committed to a unique and compelling purpose. It then follows that a brand as a social construct involves a dedicated ecosystem of relations, from its internal organisation and strategic partners to consumers and investors, engaged in and committed to activities that serve a particular purpose (Aaker, 2018; Hsu, 2016). Herein lies the essence of this article. The brand as a social construct, whether by person, place, movement, organisation or commercial company, serves a unique reason for being and can, therefore, aim to be an inspirational and motivational differentiator of a higher order for the world (Keller, 2020). It is the recognition and acknowledgment of a brand's purpose that matures and propels the brand into a holistic construct or integrated and relational ontology – the essence within the entire organisation and all that it enables. Brand purpose is the heart of the brand ontology – this defines its deep-rooted universal reason for being, thus aligning a system-wide commitment of all stakeholders, their decision-making and actions towards the unique and compelling difference that the brand is striving to make in the world (Hsu, 2016).

It is our position that responsible leadership upholds the organisation as a holistic and systemic brand. Informed and motivated by the brand's unique and compelling purpose, responsible leadership engages in its totality, the relational ecosystem it comprises. The unique reason for collective and participative action and investment is the brand's purpose which is its unique reason for existing.

Figure 3 shows the ontological interrelatedness of brand purpose and responsible leadership, with brand purpose providing the unique ontological position, which finds its home in the relational brand ecosystem. Responsible leadership then allows leadership to accept their ontological responsibility to deliver on the brand promise.

Strategic guideline 2: Express brand purpose as a committed strategic statement of intent

Strategic guideline 2 is mainly related to theme 4 (Brand purpose as strategic intent, with related obligations), but also draws on the insights from theme 2 (Brand purpose to engage and align stakeholders) and the responsible leadership of brand purpose, presented in theme 4.

The contention is that the largest blind spot in conventional leadership theory today is that it remains centred around the role and persona of designated leaders and lacks the requisite focus on purpose (Clegg et al., 2021). Reportage about the construct of brand purpose and its strategic role in brand building and leadership frequently raises flags that this suffers misinterpretation, poor execution and mismanagement (Denny, 2019; Duncan, 2018; Hanson, 2018; Izzo & Vanderwielen, 2018; Scales, 2020) – the risk of purpose is that it is seen as vague, nice to have or hard to define. The opportunity is to categorically prove its
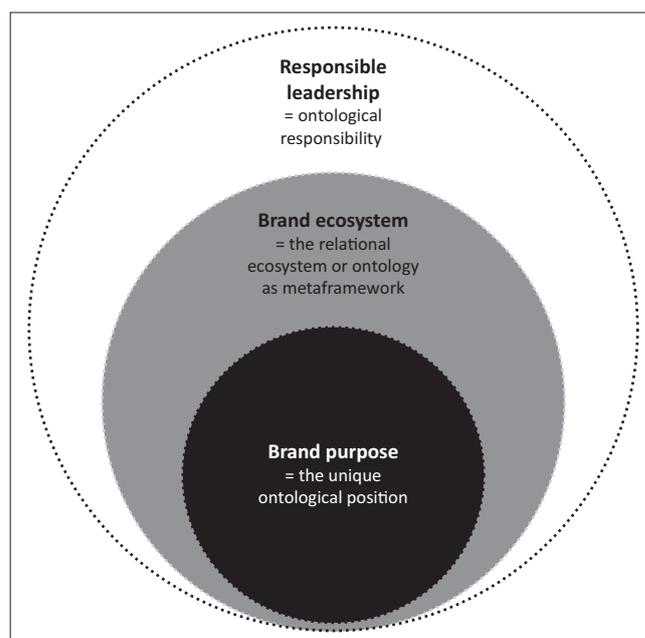

FIGURE 3: Brand purpose and responsible leadership as an interrelated ontology.

effectiveness when held rigorously to account and, in doing so, inspire stronger commitments to meaningful work' (Allende, 2019).

Drawing on leading thinkers such as Collins et al. (2005), Kempster et al. (2011), Clegg et al. (2021) reasons that leadership without purpose amounts to nothing. Stated more positively, 'leadership is the collective pursuit of delivering on purpose' (Clegg et al., 2021, p. 35). This article continues this argument by stating that the purpose of the brand, in practical and applied terms, is far beyond simply making a profit or acting as the governing party of a country that expresses its unique, compelling and genuine reason for existing (Deloitte, 2021; Havas Media Group, 2021). Furthermore, to be of value by guiding daily decisions and actions, it must exist as a strategic statement of intent (Hsu, 2016) – a statement of intent that is inherently compelling, defines the brand's unique reason for being in clear and committed terms and is accessible and instantly understandable. Responsible leadership should then be empowered to create and develop a brand ecosystem that harnesses and sustains the value of brand purpose. That is, to:

- Provide meaning, beyond profit or outward success, in an otherwise complex and ambiguous world (Havas Media Group, 2021; Kantar, 2019; Clegg et al., 2021).
- Attract and retain talent inspired by what the brand represents and is trying to achieve and, thus, an aligned internal culture (Aaker, 2018; Brown et al., 2016; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020).
- Guide and grow participative and congruent touchpoint systems and stakeholder relations (Deloitte, 2021; Duncan, 2018; Hsu, 2016; Izzo & Vanderwielen, 2018; Sinek et al., 2017; UNO, 2019).
- Motivate all stakeholders to persist rather than quit under adverse conditions (Clegg et al., 2021; Renjen, 2020b).

- Inform and guide brand reconfiguration, innovation and ideal futures (Brown et al., 2016; Izzo & Vanderwielen, 2018; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018; Volini et al., 2019).

This study proposes that responsible leadership should, in practical and applied terms, encompass the brand's strategic direction. Brand purpose is the ontologically higher-order reason for being (Aaker, 2018; Hsu, 2016). As a premise, without a unique and compelling brand purpose that is genuinely expressed in a clear and committed strategic statement of intent, responsible leadership is obstructed.

Strategic guideline 3: Take responsibility for the moral obligation to deliver on brand purpose and brand promises made

Theme 4 highlighted the need for the activation of brand purpose through strategic intent and the related obligations to deliver on brand purpose. Strategic guideline 3 builds on guideline 2, but delves further into ways in which responsible leadership of brand purpose, as outlined in theme 3, can ensure that brand purpose is consistently and mindfully carried across the brand ecosystem in a manner that benefits stakeholders and befits the relational ecosystem.

Brand as a social construct is ethically infused by its purpose. Brand purpose through its strategic statement of intent or description of what it means for the brand to exist and to create change, in principle encases the moral conscience of responsible leadership (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021; Enslin, 2019; Hsu, 2016). Brand purpose represents a 'normative endeavour' creating a binding expectation about which Bhargava and Bedi (2021, p. 3) believe few scholars, practitioners and designated leaders are serious enough. Simply put, 'brands generate obligations' (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021, p. 13).

Therefore, responsible leadership follows through on those assurances given to stakeholders, their expectations about the brand and what it may intend to achieve, its sense of purpose. There is a fidelity required for responsible leadership to uphold and comply with brand purpose, an obligation to dedicate all resources and efforts to delivering on the promise made and thus satisfy expectations (Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). Scanlon's (1990, 1998) expectation theory is widely influential and proves useful in this regard. A promissory obligation, as Scanlon (1998, p. 295) posits, is a 'special case of a wider category of duties and obligations regarding the expectations that we lead others to form about what we intend to do'. Responsible leadership, informed and motivated by the brand's purpose, is obligated to engage the relational ecosystem in its totality to deliver on the brand promise and, thus, meet stakeholder expectations. Where difficulties arise, that very same robust fidelity would act as guidance for responsible leadership to avoid pitfalls such as hypocritical whitewashing or shallow reconfigurations of the brand to either evade or otherwise misdirect accountability (Conrad & Holtbrugge, 2021; Hanson, 2018; Javed et al., 2020). Responsible leadership embedded in purpose-driven brand building will acknowledge wrongness and take substantive and firm action as a genuine reinforcement of the brand's promise, thus bolstering the ecosystems' moral conscience and stakeholders' trust and commitment (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021; Hsu, 2016).

By evaluating brand building efforts and ultimately determining the value of a brand, researchers and practitioners in traditional business, brand and marketing fields typically focus on the total constellation of shared associations surrounding the brand. For many, such valuations and the brand building action that result, are based predominantly on consumers' attitudes towards and perceptions of the brand and its activities (Agarwal & Rao, 1996; Change, 2002; Herzog, 1963; Keller, 2003; Newman, 1957; Schmitt, 2012). Proposing a contemporary purpose-driven perspective (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021, pp. 3, 14), this article contends that responsible leadership should be deeply mindful of the brand's moral obligations to deliver on the brand purpose as promised. Therefore, any assessment of brand building efforts or overall valuation of a brand should, by extension, identify all stakeholder expectations and track the extent to which the brand in fact delivers on its promise.

Three strategic guidelines for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building were discussed in the context of literature. To assist leaders to apply these strategic guidelines in the current business landscape on the African continent, practices to guide operationalisation have been highlighted and summarised and are present in relation to each other in a conceptual model in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows the ontology of brand purpose and responsible leadership, presented earlier in Figure 3 and featured in strategic guideline 1, on the left. The practices for operationalisation extracted from the strategic guidelines have been presented in relation to this ontological perspective of responsible leadership through brand purpose.

The strategic guidelines as practices on the right-hand side of Figure 4 provide a practical way to operationalise purpose-driven brand building through responsible leadership in the current business landscape on the African continent.

A focal point: The uniquely African context

There is a significant paucity of published insights into the uniquely African context. This lacuna in African studies places severe constraints and limits on this study and the operationalising of strategic guidelines as directives for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

Perspectives and publications on leadership in Africa may show a steady growth, but as Amayah and Haque (2017), Nkomo (2017) and Abebe et al. (2020) constate, leadership research in Africa is still very much in its infancy. In addition, Abebe et al.'s (2020) review of research on leadership across three disciplines, Organisational Behaviour, Human Resources and Strategy and Entrepreneurship conclude that
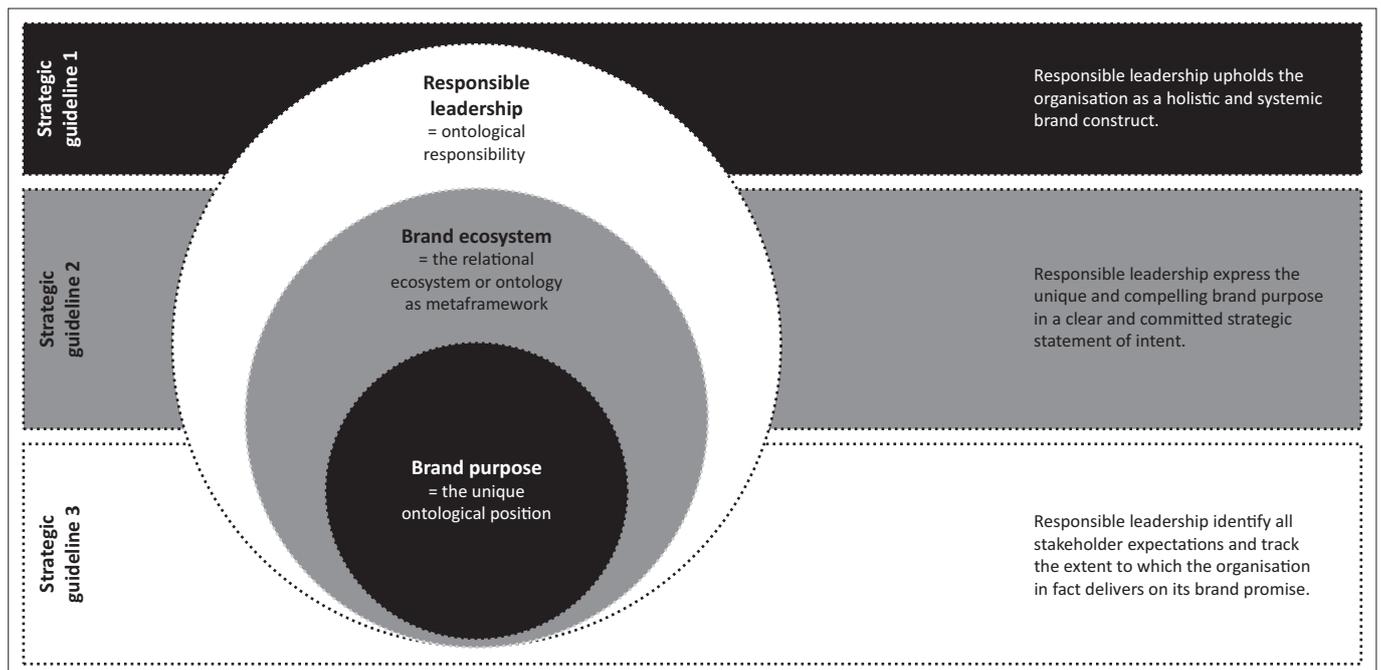
FIGURE 4: Conceptual model: strategic guidelines as practices for operationalising responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

scholarly work seems to focus in the main on practices of corporate governance and ethical issues. No peer-reviewed research on purposive brand leadership in Africa could be sourced for this study.

This has necessitated the stance adopted for this article, with respectful cognisance of authors such as Nabudere (2006) and Greeff (2021, p. 78) who propose that theories and their application be filtered critically through an 'Afrokological understanding':

Africa is a heterogeneous entity – 54 distinct nations individually and collectively present diverse socio-cultural identities and socio-economic conditions across a vast geography. Its population is young and fast-growing, with technological uptake and access presenting fertile territory for innovation (Chironga et al., 2019). These facts make it critical that leadership in Africa approaches brand purpose and responsible leadership as an interrelated ontology (guideline 1), to uncover and serve the unique and compelling differences that brands can make in and beyond this continent. This argument aligns with Osborn and Marion's (2009) seminal declaration that leadership is embedded in its context and it underscores Afrikological literature's position on multiplicity (Greeff, 2021); therefore, also the endogenous nature and potential of brand purpose and its leadership in Africa. Consider, for example, the cross-continental call towards encouraging and enabling the development of sustainable small and medium enterprises (Kumalo & Scheepers, 2021). This article suggests that entrepreneurs in all forms and sizes should lead and scale their ventures from the outset responsibly by solidifying and then instilling their own authentic purposes and brands of leadership. Kenya-based Equity Bank gave banking a human face by drawing on behavioural insights from trade in African marketplaces (Chironga et al., 2019). This

brand introduced African-styled mobile village banking (banking on wheels), integrated small retail outlets across the country as banking agents and is still applying the same unique African-originated brand purpose strategy to grow social media channel access for both banking and healthcare in East and Central Africa. Founder and CEO James Mwangi explained as 'we see the bank not just as a company but as a movement for socioeconomic transformation' (Chironga et al., 2019, p. 6).

It is the authentic expression of a meaningful and concrete brand purpose, informed by a clear, compelling and accessible strategic statement of intent (guideline 2), that motivates stakeholders to engage and persist under adverse conditions (Clegg et al., 2021; Renjen, 2020b), in conflicted environments through harsh socio-political impositions and perennial constraints on resources (Kumalo & Scheepers, 2021). This is how brand purpose strategy could encompass the moral imperative of relational leadership in pursuit of the collective 'normative endeavour' (Bhargava & Bedi, 2021, p. 3). The multi-sector African Private Sector Forum on Forced Displacement may serve as one example. Africa hosts 36 million forcibly displaced people representing 45% of the world total (Fokuo, 2022). In this context, like-minded brand purpose-oriented organisations with the skills, resources and networks to create social impact are reaching out to one another to engage in cross-sector relational conversations, operationalise their strategic intent and participate in co-creating dignified and sustainable access to economic opportunity on the continent.

This article contends that responsible brand purpose-driven leadership is capable of engaging in relational leadership from an African perspective – to enable stakeholder interdependence, communality and relational

normativity and pursue 'the betterment not only of the self, but of the world that self is bound to', as Pérezts et al. (2019, p. 737) state. This also applies to measuring brand value on the African continent. The intertwining of the business imperative and the moral obligation to determine and track the extent to which brands in fact deliver on their promises to all stakeholders, and not simply to the consumers of their products and services, can be accomplished. As such, an example could be set for best global practice.

Conclusion

A symbiotic relationship exists between strategic brand purpose and responsible leadership. Purpose-driven brand building is operationalised through responsible leadership to benefit brand stakeholders. Responsible leaders align all decisions and actions to build and enhance cohesive brands, thus creating ecosystems with clear identities, cultures, structures, policies, procedures and stakeholder alliances that cogently work together towards a shared goal.

This study proposes three strategic guidelines to enable responsible leadership in Africa through purpose-driven brand building, the first of which is to approach brand purpose and responsible leadership as an interrelated ontology. Brand purpose should be expressed as a committed strategic statement of intent, ensuring that brand promises are articulated to ensure appropriate monitoring, measurement and management. This will enable the third strategic guideline, which advises leaders to take responsibility for the moral obligation to deliver on brand purpose and brand promises made. The significance of the proposed strategic guidelines for responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building is contained in the diversity, pluralism and multiplicity of the Afrokological paradigm and the potential for leading uniquely endogenous African brand identities responsibly.

Purposeful brand building and brand leadership is not weak propaganda for competitive advantage on the African continent. Purposeful brand leadership involves an organisation of people as moral agents in pursuit of the promise made. The organisation's designated leaders set the tone and brand purpose serves as the moral compass. Through purpose-driven brand building, responsible leaders will bolster socio-economic development in Africa, garner trust and attract investment.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

This study deployed a critical literature review as research methodology to draw together the theoretical fields of responsible leadership and brand purpose. Whilst every effort has been taken to ensure a rigorous and transparent process during the research phases, the findings of the study are exploratory in nature and require further testing through primary research in an organisational context. Given that organisations vary greatly in their creation, adoption and management of brand purpose, investigating the practical relevance and application of insights (the proposed strategic guidelines) would be a recommendation for research.

It would also be remiss of the authors not to note that the thematic analysis presents an ideal picture of responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building. The field of purpose-driven brand building, much like the field of responsible leadership, is emerging, with a growing body of literature. Should this review be undertaken again, new literature is likely to have emerged. Further strategic guidelines and related practices could also be gleaned from a deeper synthesis of the research findings herein and primary research can deliver significant insight into the barriers to reimagining and operationalising responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

The pervasive gap in literature that limited this study is the specific study of responsible leadership and brand purpose in the uniquely African context. The article presents a stance in this regard with a view to further research critically exploring the systemic potential of the proposed strategic guidelines for leaders in Africa to practice responsible leadership through purpose-driven brand building.

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Authors' contributions

The conceptualisation of the article was a joint effort by all three authors. The research methodology, data collection and academic writing were driven by M.B.W., whilst C.E. contributed resources, assisted with data synthesis and was the lead writer of insights and strategic guidelines. M.T.-S. played an important role in reviewing and editing, as well as overseeing research rigour and positioning of the article in the context of the academic discipline and conference requirements.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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