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Building brand meaning in social entrepreneurship organizations: the social impact brand model

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Abstract

In the face of numerous complex challenges at the ecological, economic, and social levels, Social Entrepreneurship Organizations (SEOs) offer an approach that is both solution-oriented and future-oriented by combining profitability and purpose. However, the achievement of social goals is closely linked to the ability to operate successfully in competitive environments, in which differentiation strategies, in particular the creation of strong and authentic brands, are vital to survival. Although the new paradigm of brand management, the so-called co-creative paradigm, has been extensively researched in recent decades both in the for-profit and non-profit contexts, there is still scarce empirical research addressing the field of SEOs. To exploit the potential that the co-creation paradigm offers for SEOs, our paper introduces a social impact brand model (SIBM), which sheds new light on the design process of social entrepreneurial brand meaning. The findings identify key drivers in creating SEO brands by focusing on a dual-brand core that consists of an impact mission orientation and an entrepreneurial orientation, internal branding activities, the founder's personal brand, and relevant brand (co-)creators. By aligning their brand management activities with the SIBM, SEOs can create brands that have authentic and stable brand meanings while managing stakeholder groups' various expectations.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship organizations · Brand management · Brand co-creation · Social branding · Social entrepreneurial brand meaning

Introduction

Increasing sensitivity to social problems has set in motion transformation processes at both the societal and the organizational levels. Companies are increasingly focusing on corporate social responsibility (e.g., Milne and Gray 2013; O'Connor and Gronewold 2013; Velte 2021), and the number of organizations dedicated exclusively to solving

social problems has also risen sharply (Schofer and Longhofer 2020). However, both streams have their limitations as they either seek to maximize profits (if CSR follows the primacy of the shareholders; Freeman and Liedtka 1991), or to maximize social value. Since Social Entrepreneurship Organizations (SEOs) “bring together logics from different, and often conflicting, fields into a singular organizational form” (Huybrechts et al. 2020, p.3), they offer a route to accomplishing the social mission and gathering financial sustainability simultaneously. As a hybrid concept (Billis 2010), SEOs unify aspects of various categories of organizations (Huybrechts et al. 2020). As a result, the merging of various entrepreneurial worlds leads to an interplay of several market strategies, starting from a range of yet interwoven strategic orientations in SEOs; these range from a social orientation (Martin and Osberg 2007; Cho 2006) to an entrepreneurial orientation (Zahra et al. 2009; Yunus 2008; Kraus et al. 2014) and market orientation (Huybrechts and Nicholls 2012) to approaches for differentiation from the competition, such as brand orientation (Urde 1999; Lückenbach et al. 2019). Consequently, the achievement of social

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goals is linked to the ability to operate successfully in a competitive environment (Davis et al. 1991; Weerawardena and Mort 2006), in which approaches to achieve competitive advantage becomes relevant. One effective way to gain competitive advantage through differentiation, frequently mentioned in the marketing literature and regarded as a universal approach that is equally relevant to any organization (Napoli 2006), is the concept of branding. Aiming to generate value for different stakeholder groups, e.g., beneficiaries, customers, and investors, SEOs face a unique set of marketing challenges (Roundy 2017a) that are manifested in the diverging expectations of various stakeholders and requires both a market (Zhao and Lounsbury 2016) and a community logic (Santos 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to build and balance authentic brand meanings that reflect both the impact mission and the economic skills necessary to achieve long-term social goals.

The German social enterprise Einhorn ([www. **https://einhorn.my/**](http://www.einhorn.my/)) is an illustrative example of SEOs. It reflects very well the struggles of a social entrepreneur in the tensions between various institutional logics. Through his company Einhorn, the founder Waldemar Zeiler offers vegan and sustainable condoms as well as female sanitary products. The company invests 50% of its profits in social and sustainable projects. When the organization launched a crowdfunding campaign in the Berlin Olympic Stadium in 2019 for a good cause, it earned harsh criticism in the press and social media because that social startup is also associated with profit making (Heuberger, 2019). Prominent satirists also voiced criticism of the general conditions of this event and at the same time questioned the hybrid business model. As the example of Einhorn illustrates, SEO brands are under constant and special scrutiny from stakeholder groups. Since trust plays an overriding role in these stakeholder relationships, branding offers a helpful approach for SEOs to help build legitimacy (Liston-Heyes and Liu 2010; Napoli 2006) and to present a balanced overall picture of SEOs' opposing identities that is also flexible enough to connect with all stakeholders and to build trust. Thus, a holistic branding approach that combines the creation of a brand with monitoring strategies is the key to success.

The classical branding literature has experienced a dramatic shift in recent decades. Previously, brands were considered to have no strategic value; as Urde (1999) argues: *"For a long time, the brand has been treated in an off-hand fashion as a part of the product"* (p.119). However, based on the growing importance of service brands (Berry 2000; McDonald et al. 2001) as well as corporate brands (Balmer and Gray 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2010), the traditional view of brand management has changed. Researchers termed this *"evolution of corporate brand management from an organization-centric view based on control to one rooted in a participative co-created perspective"* (Iglesias and Ind

2020, p.710). This new paradigm of brand management, the so-called co-creative paradigm, focuses on brands as a result of social processes and claims that brands and their meaning are not solely created from within the company but co-created by multiple stakeholders. This shift of perspective has stimulated a large and growing body of literature at the intersection of branding and non-profit organizations and encouraged various research projects in this context (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009; Naidoo and Abratt 2018; Boenigk and Becker 2016; Juntunen et al. 2013; Vallaster and Wallpach 2018). Although branding has become increasingly critical in recent non-profit literature that identifies stakeholders as active agents of co-creation (Vallaster and Wallpach 2018), it is an area in which SEOs and their particular set of marketing challenges (Roundy 2017b) have received too little attention from researchers focussing on brand co-creation. Most importantly, there is a lack of research that integrates the multiple stakeholder perspectives and complex social processes in creating strong SEO brands. To best exploit the potential that the co-creation paradigm offers to SEOs, it requires a specific and holistic branding approach that addresses, amongst other factors, the following five issues: (1) How influential are fresh brand management insights (e.g., the co-creative perspective, stakeholder orientation, and role of the social entrepreneur) for brand building in SEOs? (2) How can SEOs exploit these new developments to their advantage? (3) What would a brand management model designed explicitly for SEOs look like? (4) Which components are essential? (5) How can these components be best arranged?

Addressing the lack of insights into brand co-creation in the context of SEOs, our paper is believed to be the first to introduce a social impact brand model (SIBM) that sheds new light on the design process of social entrepreneurial brand meaning. Our study's findings identify key drivers in creating an SEO's brand meaning by focusing on the organization's impact mission orientation, internal branding activities, the founder's brand, and relevant brand (co-)creators. The proposed SIBM implies that the starting point for all branding activities is a dual-brand core that consists of an impact mission orientation and an entrepreneurial orientation. It directly influences the SEO's culture, brand behavior, and communication activities. A unique role is played by the social entrepreneur, whose personal character traits, particularly his or her "personal drive," are associated with how stakeholders perceive the organization as a whole. Effective connectivity with diverse stakeholder groups (e.g., donors, beneficiaries, politicians, or brand communities) is crucial since SEOs are challenged by resource constraints and, therefore, rely on collaborations with external stakeholders that actively influence the creation of brand meaning. In this context, SEOs must credibly demonstrate that they can combine social and business objectives by synchronizing



their brand's paradoxical character traits within interaction processes with stakeholders.

Literature review

The concept of social entrepreneurship organizations

At least, since the rise of "ethical consumerism" (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Shaw and Shiu 2002), the concept of social entrepreneurship has been recognized as an object worthy of investigation in research, practice, and policy (Kraus et al. 2014; Gupta et al. 2020; Gandhi and Raina 2018). However, despite the increasing relevance of SEOs and the accompanying definitional debate that accompanies it, there seems to be some confusion about what a social entrepreneur is and does (Dacin et al. 2010). This lack of a common definition raises questions regarding which social or profit-making activities fall within the spectrum of social entrepreneurship (Abu-Saifan 2012). This is mainly due to the hybrid nature of SEOs *"that bring together logics from different, and often conflicting, fields into a singular organizational form"* (Huybrechts et al. 2020, p.3). However, some key perspectives seem to stand out in the social entrepreneurship literature.

The first perspective refers to the striving for both social and financial outcomes. In this context, Cho (2006, p.36) states that social entrepreneurship is *"a set of institutional practices combining the pursuit of financial objectives with the pursuit and promotion of substantive and terminal values"*. This understanding was further sharpened by Di Domenico et al. (2010, p. 3), who merge the concept of social mission and financial viability in SEOs. Accordingly, SEOs are *"organisations that seek to attain a particular social objective or set of objectives through the sale of products and/or services, and in doing so aim to achieve financial sustainability independent of government and other donors"*. The second perspective focusses on the existence of an innovative spirit (Yunus 2008; Zahra et al. 2009) or an entrepreneurial orientation (Kraus et al. 2017). According to Yunus (2008, p.32), *"any innovative initiative to help people may be described as social entrepreneurship. The initiative may be economic or non-economic, for-profit or not-for-profit"*. The definitional approach by Zahra et al. (2009) also emphasizes the degree of innovation as the core element and starting point of any organizational activity. In line with the third perspective, several authors also emphasize that social entrepreneurs distribute their socially innovative models via market-oriented action to reach broader and more sustainable outcomes (e.g., Huybrechts and Nicholls 2012). Following on from this, more recent literature investigates various marketing strategies in the SEO contexts. Above all, the concept of market orientation has been empirically

investigated (Glaveli and Geormas 2018; Lückenbach et al. 2019), but the more recent SEO literature also provides conceptual and empirical insights into the field of brand orientation (Schmidt and Baumgarth 2015; Lückenbach et al. 2019). The present study focuses on the first perspective and understands SEOs, following Di Domenico et al. (2010), as organizations that pursue a social mission and strive for financial independence in the pursuit of that mission. Therefore, this study excludes, for example, non-profit organizations from consideration.

In summary, the above-mentioned definitions and approaches underpin the hybridity and strategic diversity in SEOs by placing a central focus on four main strategic alignments: sociality, innovation, market relatedness, and brand focus. In unifying aspects of various institutional logics (Huybrechts et al. 2020), SEOs must address the needs of various stakeholders, which may be in conflict (e.g., beneficiaries, consumers, investors, government agencies). In doing so, SEOs face the challenge of meeting expectations from the private, social, and public sectors alike without losing credibility. Furthermore, this creates a multitude of contact points with many actors in which the co-creation of brand meaning is negotiated interactively.

Distinguishing features between for-profits and SEOs

Substantial differences exist between SEOs and for-profits, making it unsurprising that SEOs may build brand meaning differently than in for-profit organizations. Trivedi and Stokols (2011) elaborated on differences in three areas: the purposes for their existence, the role of the entrepreneur, and the essential outcomes of the venture. The following section briefly discusses each of these three differences.

SEOs aim to address long-standing unsolved social problems and bring about a positive social change (Mair and Martí 2006). Therefore, the pre-existence of a social problem is the defining feature of SEOs and the primary reason for their existence. On the other hand, businesses look for opportunities to create and satisfy unfulfilled market needs. Whether the market demand is temporally fixed is irrelevant. Crucially, there is a growing market for such needs. However, for social entrepreneurs, this is not decisive. The mere existence of social needs or market failure is sufficient for pursuing social goals (Austin et al. 2006).

The social entrepreneur can be identified as a further distinguishing feature. According to previous scientific findings, he or she exhibits characteristics such as a strong ethical orientation, a high degree of social focus, ambitiousness, and a high capacity for continuous adaptation and creativity (Alter 2006). Although some of these characteristics are also associated with the corporate entrepreneur (Sharir and Lerner 2006), a social entrepreneur uses them differently.



For example, social entrepreneurs use their entrepreneurial skills to create positive social change, whereas corporate entrepreneurs invest his or her entrepreneurial resources in addressing problems that make more “economic sense” (Trivedi and Stokols 2011). Despite that, well-known examples of corporate entrepreneurs, such as Patagonia (www.patagonia.com/), show that profit maximization and meeting social goals are compatible.

Given the outcomes, it is argued that the two kinds of organizations create different forms of social value. For for-profits, social value creation is not the primary goal, whereas for SEOs, it is the reason for their existence. Businesses may create social value indirectly, for example, by creating jobs, but these are indirect means of maximizing economic value. SEOs, on the other hand, create social value both within and beyond the organizational boundary by fostering collaboration, knowledge, and social networks as opposed to competition with other organizations (Trivedi and Stokols 2011). The field of activity of SEOs is characterized by a multitude of stakeholders’ interfaces. Reciprocal relationships exist in which SEOs depend on the intrinsic motivation of the collaborators (e.g., funding, patronage, advisory board activities). Thereby, credibility is a critical success factor for social entrepreneurs as it helps to maximize the commitment of relevant stakeholders to the collective social goal (Waddock and Post, 1991).

Supplementing Trivedi and Stokols’ remarks (Trivedi and Stokols 2011), it should be mentioned as a distinguishing feature of for-profit organizations that SEOs follow varying and sometimes competing institutional logics (the social-welfare logic, the commercial logic, and the public-sector logic) (Pache and Chodhury 2012), which implies a huge variety of stakeholder groups with widely varying expectations of the organization. However, the interaction with beneficiaries and investors, a further critical group of stakeholders—namely consumers—(Roundy 2017b) is relevant. In B-to-C for-profits, the buyer and the user of a product and/or service are often the same, whereas in many SEOs, there is a disconnect between the purchaser and the beneficiary (the user of the product and/or service). Finally, the government and government agencies, which according to scientific studies, mainly affect younger SEOs, also play an essential role in funding (Bacq et al. 2013). Consequently, SEOs face the challenge of meeting the expectations of the private, social, and public sectors without losing credibility.

The sum or combination of these differences related to the purposes for their existence, the role of the entrepreneur, the essential outcomes, and the complex and challenging stakeholder system suggest that SEOs typically build their brands differently than for-profits.

Branding in social entrepreneurship organizations

Despite the increasing awareness of branding’s relevance for social organizations (Sepulcri et al. 2020), the literature is still in its early stages. In the non-profit context, there are isolated studies that investigate the process of brand value (co-)creation (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009) and the measurement of brand equity (Naidoo and Abratt 2018). Following the dynamic stakeholder-focused brand era, most of the published studies adopt a stakeholder perspective (Boenigk and Becker 2016; Juntunen et al. 2013) and highlight the relevance of social processes in creating brand meaning. Since social organizations are located in various sectors in society, they have a broad spectrum of stakeholders and brand audiences. Therefore, high levels of trust are necessary (Kearns 2014) because they primarily rely on legitimacy and resources from stakeholders, a fact that makes a stakeholder-based perspective relevant in this context.

The main research stream in the emerging field of social branding focuses on non-profit brand equity and investigates how this construct can be measured. One approach was suggested by Faircloth (2005), highlighting the importance of brand personality, brand image, and brand awareness. These findings are consistent with a further study by Juntunen et al. (2013) who, in particular, identified brand awareness as an elementary dimension of non-profit brand equity. In line with the arguments presented by Laidler-Kylander and Simonin (2009) that there is a need to distinguish between non-profit and for-profit brand building, Boenigk and Becker (2016) included communication and relationship-oriented dimensions (brand trust and brand commitment) in their measurement model. A more recent study by Naidoo and Abratt (2018) also questions the full transferability of the (for-profit) dimensions of the non-profit sector’s brand equity construct. The authors indicate that “*there are multiple and significantly different ways of viewing the value of a social brand*” (Naidoo and Abratt 2018, p.11). In conclusion, it can be argued that it is not possible to transfer conventionally brand equity models without adaptation to the social sector.

So far, little attention has been given to the process of building social brands. Only Laidler-Kylander and Simonin (2009) have developed a model that explores brand equity drivers in the non-profit sector. This model proposes that four key variables are essential sources of brand equity in such organizations: consistency, focus, trust, and partnerships. The authors also highlight the importance of internal branding and recommend recognizing and embracing the brand’s internal role and encouraging internal brand ambassadors. Those are instrumental in promoting an understanding of the brand and ensuring that its internal and external perceptions align (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009).



Considering the idea of brand orientation (Urde 1999) as well as the identity-based approach (Burmam et al. 2009) to brand management that includes employees as an important internal source of brand equity, a more strategic “inside-out” perspective on brands can also help social organizations to create and protect brand meaning. This is primarily because branding is equally relevant to any type of organization and can lead to notable improvements in performance (Napoli 2006). Within a case study approach, Schmidt and Baumgarth (2015) related the concept of brand orientation to the context of SEOs. Their findings show that brand orientation, including a cultural and a behavioral layer, is a relevant strategic orientation for at least some successful SEOs. This was, for instance, reflected not only by the fact that their management places great value on brand management but also on the idea of “living the brand” through and by all members of the organization. According to the authors, there is, in particular, a great need for research into how brand orientation affects organizational outcomes, such as brand performance.

Recent studies further investigate the co-creation perspective in non-profit organizations and propose a model of brand strategy co-creation that synthesizes the social and contextual dynamics characterizing brand strategy development (Vallaster and Wallpach 2018). In this context, Vallaster and Wallpach (2018) draw attention to the dynamic interplay of stability and adaptation shaped by individual, organizational, and market contexts in brand strategy co-creation. A study by Waldner (2020) sets the social entrepreneur “in the center of attention” and investigates how the presentation of a social entrepreneur’s personality influences an organization’s reputation. The findings show that social enterprises enjoy better stakeholder perceptions if the social entrepreneur’s presentation focuses on society-oriented character traits rather than to business-oriented character traits.

In summary, the literature on brand meaning in social contexts remains in its infancy. Most of the existing studies focus on branding only in non-profit organizations. Besides, most of the current studies provide a framework for measuring non-profit brand equity; however, not much attention has been given to social brands’ creation process. This is especially true for SEOs. Given their hybridity, SEOs must address the needs of various stakeholders and face the challenge of meeting expectations from the private, social, and public sectors. So far, no study has been published that explores how brand meaning is created in these hybrid models. The existing brand models in the non-profit and for-profit sectors do not reflect the organizational complexity of SEOs and the specific environments in which they operate.

The co-creative brand paradigm

The branding literature has developed enormously in recent decades and new standards have been established. The traditional product and firm-centric perspective (Aaker 1996) has been seen consumers as simply passive recipients of brand meaning (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2004). However, based on the growing importance of service brands (Berry 2000; McDonald et al. 2001) as well as corporate brands (Balmer and Gray 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2010), the traditional view of brand management has changed. This development was fueled by the emergence of online communities and social media and challenged traditional corporate brand management approaches (Gyrd-Jones et al. 2013). The emerging branding perspective focuses on brand meaning as the result of social processes and argues that brand meaning, in our increasingly digital and connected world, is co-created by multiple stakeholders (Jones 2005; Merz et al. 2009; Iglesias et al. 2013; Ind and Schmidt 2019). According to Iglesias and Ind (2013), the creation of brand value occurs primarily in the “conversational space” (p.677) between the consumers and the organization through frontline employees and brand interfaces as well as in particular communities. The authors also highlight the relevance of external stakeholders such as suppliers, distributors, business partners, shareholders, journalists, and brand communities in brand meaning co-creation. In this vein, brand meaning is both created within the firm and with other “meaning makers” that are either favorably disposed to the brand or hostile to it (MacInnis and Park 2015). Therefore, in the hyper-connected digital environment, the process of brand meaning creation incorporates stakeholder’s feedback, proposals and actions (Kristal et al. 2020). That means firms have to accept a loss of control in the brand meaning creation process. A participative co-created perspective in which multiple stakeholders help build and enrich the brand (Iglesias and Ind 2020) is crucial.

In this context, considerable importance is attached to brand communities (e.g., social media) because of their impact on consumers’ perceptions (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). On the one hand, brand communities can be ideal breeding grounds in which individuals establish relations with each other and with the brand to co-create its meaning (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Cova and Pace 2006; Dessart et al. 2015). On the other hand, brand communities also have the power to co-destroy brand meanings, for instance, in so-called anti-brand communities (Cova and White 2010; Dessart et al. 2016). Therefore, such practices in brand meaning creation are associated with risk (Fournier and Alvarez 2013). Considering this loss of control (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), brand meaning is informed by a highly complex range of influences, some of which can be controlled



more than others, which can only be observed and influenced (Jevons et al. 2005).

The new co-creative brand paradigm has also influenced non-profit organizations and stimulated various research projects in this context (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009; Naidoo and Abratt 2018; Boenigk and Becker 2016; Jun-tunen et al. 2013; Vallaster and Wallpach 2018). Branding has become more and more prominent in recent non-profit literature that identifies stakeholders as active co-creation agents (Vallaster and Wallpach 2018). Although corporate branding has been extensively researched in recent decades both in the for-profit and non-profit contexts, there is still scarce empirical research in the field of SEOs. To the best of our knowledge, there remains a lack of approaches for SEOs to tap into the enormous potential of the co-creative brand paradigm. Most importantly, there is a lack of research that integrates the multiple stakeholder perspectives and complex social processes in creating high levels of brand meaning in SEOs. In this context, brand meaning reflects internal and external stakeholders' perceptions about a brand (Vallaster and Wallpach 2013). On the one hand, it integrates brand identity as the internal perspective of the brand (Balmer and Greyser 2006), on the other hand, it incorporates brand image and brand reputation, which reflect the views of the external audience of the brand (Black and Veloutsou 2017).

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of our research questions, we applied a qualitative research approach using semi-standardized expert interviews to gain a deep understanding of elements of the brand-building process and their possible interrelationships in SEOs. This method has proven to be suitable, particularly for research in experimental stages (Bogner 2009). The approach has also been beneficially applied in the branding literature when there was no or scant information available due to the innovative nature (e.g., Iglesias et al. 2013; Naidoo and Abratt 2018). To gain theoretical knowledge about the concepts in the area of study and to develop the interview guideline, we focused on the brand management literature in the for-profit and non-profit contexts that in particular discusses the sources of brand meaning (co-)creation (Brodie et al. 2006; Keller 2008; Malhotra et al. 2015; Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009; Merz et al. 2009; Iglesias et al. 2013). Based on this prior knowledge, we deductively developed the interview guideline, trying to uncover the views of the interviewees on the evolving role of social entrepreneurial brands, key actors, actions, and interactions in social entrepreneurial brand meaning (co-)creation.

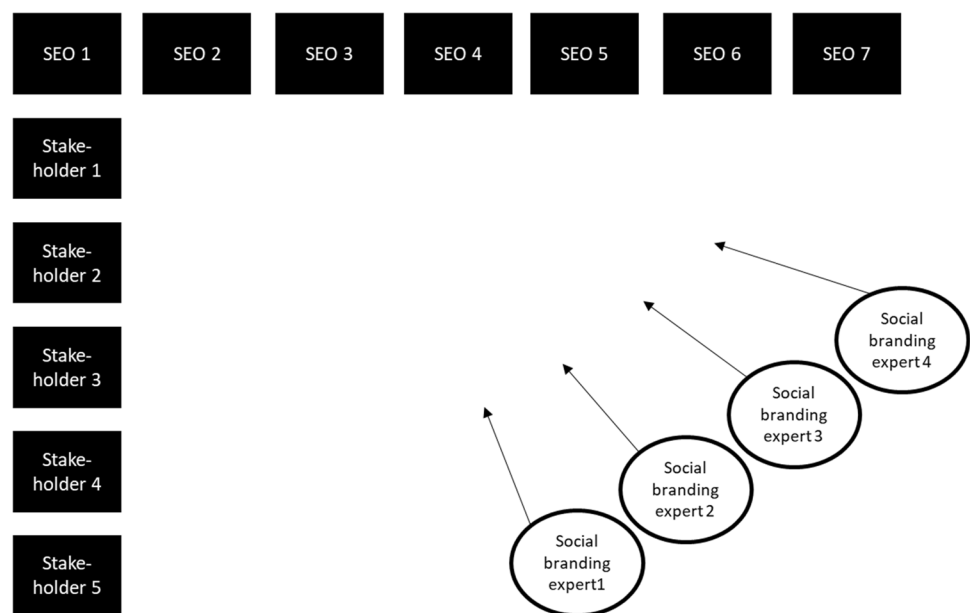
To adequately address our research questions, we selected seven SEOs from multiple sectors (B2C, B2B, and services).

We identified the SEOs through extensive online research and used academic and private networks to win persons with the necessary knowledge to our study. For this purpose, we contacted relevant German networks and impact hubs in the social entrepreneur scene. SEOs that could be counted as best practice cases with a high level of awareness and a strong brand presence were selected. The SEOs surveyed were equally distributed throughout Germany. Our participants were participants in relevant social entrepreneur networks. Two have been members of the Ashoka Fellows and thus acted as pioneers and role models to successfully initiate and drive social innovations. Ashoka Fellows are selected social entrepreneurs supported and mentored by Ashoka and its global networks to maximize their social impact. One SEO was recognized as a national award winner in the category of social engagement in 2018.

To gain a broader view of the branding of the SEOs, secondary data were analysed. For this purpose, websites, newspapers, and social media channels were analyzed and triangulated with the results from the interviews with the SEOs. To further triangulate and validate our findings with a second point of view, we conducted four interviews with social marketers with in-depth knowledge of branding in the context of SEOs. All of the branding experts interviewed had many years of extensive experience in advising SEOs in brand development. We recruited branding experts based on recommendations from the German Social Entrepreneurship Network. In addition, we used personal networks to ensure that relevant experts could be integrated into the study. In addition, we made efforts and subjected one of the organizations surveyed to a more in-depth and multi-perspective review to further triangulate the findings. To integrate a 360-degree view into the study, we additionally interviewed two employees, an advisory board member, an investor/advisory board member, and a cooperation partner in addition to the founder. The first field phase, in which we interviewed seven SEOs and two branding experts, was conducted between October 2018 and January 2019. The second field phase, in which we interviewed two branding experts and five stakeholders of a selected SEO, was conducted between October and December 2021 (see Fig. 1).

Before the interviews, the experts were provided with a background on the research and its purpose via email. The interviews (see Table 1) were held via telephone and online video conferences until saturation was achieved (Creswell 2013). The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. We analyzed and interpreted our data using qualitative content analysis (Mayring and Fenzl 2014). Based on a qualitative data management and analysis program (ATLAS.ti 8), our data were inductively analyzed and interpreted line-by-line using a coding process to identify concepts and properties. These concepts were then grouped into higher order concepts (categories and subcategories) (see Fig. 2). After



Fig. 1 Multi-perspective research approach**Table 1** Background information on the participants in the study

Expert/organisation	Position	Experience	Duration time
SEO1	Management board	< 5 years	00:26:08
SEO2	Founder/Director	> 5 years	00:35:16
SEO3	Founder/Director	> 30 years	00:33:34
SEO4	Founder/Director	> 10 years	00:30:51
SEO5	Management board	< 5 years	00:52:52
SEO6	Founder/Director	> 5 years	00:58:32
SEO7	Founder/Director	> 5 years	00:36:18
SEO4	Project-Coordinator	> 10 years	01:01:03
SEO4	Project-Coordinator	> 10 years	00:43:01
SEO4	Investor/Advisory Board Member	> 20 years	00:48:59
SEO4	Advisory Board Member	> 20 years	00:42:10
SEO4	Cooperation partner	> 10 years	00:44:02
Consultant 1	Social branding consultant	> 10 years	00:40:32
Consultant 2	Social branding consultant	> 10 years	00:55:07
Consultant 3	Social branding consultant	> 10 years	00:32:11
Consultant 4	Social branding consultant	> 30 years	00:42:54

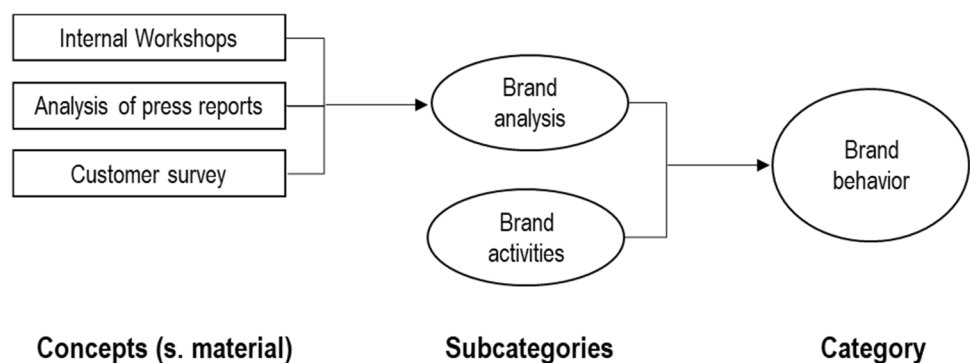
Fig. 2 Illustration of emerging subcategories and categories

Table 2 Exemplary statements concerning main categories

Exemplary statements	Main categories	#
"And because we have built up quite a right name for ourselves in recent years and are also perceived as a premium provider in other respects, the topic is also essential in this recognition." (SEO2)	Role of branding	26
"Critical, very high priority. Because we can clearly distinguish ourselves from similarly positioned competitors through the brand, we have created." (SEO4)		
"Yes, of course, the whole thing has grown completely, and I'm no longer a lone wolf. For me, it was about saying, 'There's a lot of trash in the river, it doesn't belong there—I want to solve it.' And with this idea, the whole thing has grown, and we have simply written on the flag 'we want to clean the rivers throughout Germany.'" (SEO7)	Mission orientation	34
"On the topic of branding, it's also often the case that the whole social mission should be woven into what you do commercially, like a tapestry-like that." (Consultant 2)		
"I would say that is often a weakness, that they are much too 'social' and little 'corporate' and thereby weaken their vision because they are struggling to survive, because they want to be as social as possible but do not make profits with it and cannot stay with it." (SEO1)	Entrepreneurial orientation	22
"From my perspective, a brand is something you live and fill with life, and that these values are credible to the customer and not just printed on an advertising flyer." (SEO2)	Brand behavior	49
"Internally, we have many discussions about branding and authenticity to the outside world, because many new people come in and represent the company to the outside world." (SEO1)		
"We have built up a set of values over the years. The people who work with us pursue a clearly defined mission with us, so we are very much in agreement about what we want to achieve with it, so there is harmony. The brand brings the whole thing together, a pool of the same values, which can then be shaped accordingly in exhibitions. The brand creates a high level of identity." (SEO3)	Brand culture	19
"I think it's essential that the team sees and is not just given something to do, that each individual lives the topic, what the brand is all about, and that you have to create some awareness with it." (SEO2)		
"It is important to me that we get to grips with the problem, because I can see that it is a huge problem." (SEO7)	Social entrepreneur	46
"But of course, you also build up a particular reputation. There is individual recognition. I believe that I now stand for specific values as a person, for someone who has dedicated himself to an idea for 30 years and has not been unsuccessful in advancing it." (SEO3)		
"So, when a company says, 'we would like to have you as a speaker,' it is also a critical topic. They find it exciting and want to see how the idea came about and what has grown out of it. That is part of the lecture, and everyone always finds that particularly interesting and the topic in question. Many people are moved by the fact that someone has recognized a problem and starts somewhere. Many find the growth from this very exciting and causes some to join." (SEO7)	Brand history	19
"The other side is that besides this intention, there is also this point, if I now actually take my work seriously as a social entrepreneur in communication, I have to do without a few methods that are standard in marketing, in online marketing, but are also rather manipulative." (Consultant 1) "But the more significant the whole thing gets, the more critical the brand design is, in my opinion. Because you no longer have so many contact points." (Consultant 2)	Brand design	30
"There is still a lack of awareness that you have to work strategically. And further interactions, as I said, something like events. You can work with that. How do you deal with people? Both internally and in communication with customers, in stores, etc. The contact points people, those are all interaction channels, but they're at the very edge of the circle for me. And, if you see this circle in front of you, as just emphasized, from the inside out, then it becomes something." (Consultant 2)	Marketing approach	5
"So the point is that I underestimated the importance of social networks for us for a long time. We are only active on Facebook, not overly enthusiastic, with one or two posts per week on average. The importance is becoming more apparent to me, and we will be putting a much greater emphasis on social media in the future. We intend to digitize our training, i.e., offer digital variants, and in this context, social media becomes essential for further dissemination. There will be a significant focus on it in the next three years." (SEO4)	Online communities	24
"So far, I think it's been very founder-driven for us, at least. They appear outwardly and represent the brand and tell people about it." (SEO1)	Brand ambassadors	38
"Because at some point, things come full circle, and the more often one person has heard and told about the other, the more critical it is. For us, networking is a fundamental key to success." (SEO4)	Word of mouth	16
"They are networked with each other. There are groups on Facebook, Tens of thousands." (SEO6)		



Table 2 (continued)

Exemplary statements	Main categories	#
"We have our independence in the commercial and the non-commercial environment. We are a hybrid and are perceived as such, but that doesn't create any conflicts. So far, I haven't experienced any conflicts where I've been portrayed in the commercial environment as [...] who can't get anything done. I haven't been seen as a hardcore capitalist in the social environment either. In any case, connectivity is enormously essential for all stakeholders." (SEO3)	Stakeholder orientation	50
"Often you have to zoom out a bit and think, would this be well received by the majority, or do I serve this one group of people who are thinking about our world anyway, and the rest just not. Then the "impact" is already again much smaller, if you only serve this one group—the mass can not touch, let's say." (SEO1)	Cross-sectional dimensions	49
"In general, you should be authentic; You should be original, that is, it's no use talking about compost heaps if I throw the McDonalds bag out of the window while driving. So, I have to be authentic in any case and in what I do." (SEO6)		
"Also, as high, we are convinced that this claim must also be reflected everywhere." (SEO2)		
"If you have that, then you have critics. But as long as you make it clear that growth makes sense and serves the cause and the topic, it's not a problem." (Consultant 1)	Brand monitoring	50
"All press reports are actively evaluated." (SEO4)		
"And always, if it is somehow possible, interact at eye level. Of course, don't get involved in any pointless discussions or get into justifications for negative things, but always at least say, thank you for your suggestion. We'll take it up in the round. Things like that definitely make a big difference when you show that you are and have your finger on the pulse." (Consultant 2)		
"I also believe that entrepreneurs should always clarify their values, their objectives. Again and again, they should also explain what we want and why we are doing this. Carry out such an assessment at regular intervals. This is not just meant in the sense of does it work economically? Do we have a good business model? Are we still committed to the values that we gave ourselves initially?" (Consultant 1)		

the coding process has been completed, the categories were abductively integrated into our conceptional model. Abduction is intended to help social researcher to be able to make new discoveries in logical and methodologically ways (Reichertz, 2007). Finally, the resulting model was further improved by reviewing it against the literature and discussing it at a scientific conference.

Following established procedures developed for the inductive category formation technique of qualitative content analysis (Mayring and Fenzl 2014), we integrated two independent coders in the analysis. To assess inter-rater reliability, we assigned all citations and the code list to a researcher experienced in qualitative research. After a brief introduction to our study and an explanation of the inter-coding analysis procedure, we asked him to assign the codes to the citations. This involved 72 codes and 477 citations. As a result, he could correctly allocate 53,9% of all the citations to one of the codes, which can be considered a very good result, considering the high number of codes and the fact that some citations were associated with multiple codes. Both the interviews and the intercoder process were conducted in German. After the coding process was completed, the authors translated the codes and text passages into English. To assess the translation quality and ensure that the target text has the same meaning as the source, the translated text passages were additionally checked for correctness by a native English speaker. Table 2 illustrates exemplary statements concerning the main categories.

Findings

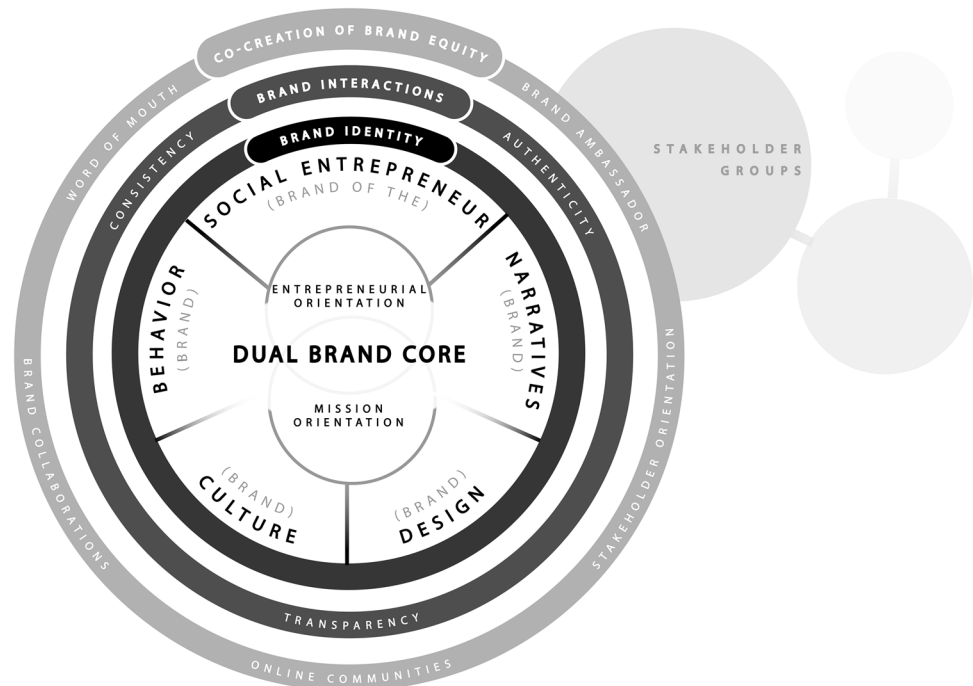
The goal of this study is threefold. First, to address the questions of what value branding has in the context of SEOs; second, to identify components and processes of how brand meaning is co-created in SEOs; and third, to determine an optimal arrangement of these components to create high levels of brand meaning in SEOs. From the analysis and interpretation of the in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs, branding experts in the field of SEOs, and various stakeholder groups, a brand model for SEOs emerges—the SIBM (see Fig. 3). Concerning our research questions, the following sections discuss the relevance of branding in the field of SEOs and further present the theoretical framework and its specific components that emerged from the fieldwork.

Relevance of branding in SEOs

Concerning our first research question, our findings show that the topic of branding is given a very high priority by all respondents, SEOs, social marketing experts and stakeholders. Due to the high intensity of competition, successful branding enables differentiation from the competition and develops unique selling propositions, including financial assets.



Fig. 3 The social impact brand model



"Critical, very high priority. Because we can clearly distinguish ourselves from similarly positioned competitors through the brand, we have created." (SEO4)
"There is an extremely high level of competition, and of course, we are required to be on safe ground from a legal point of view. And this is where trademark protection helps us. It has an incredibly high significance for our survival and differentiation from other competitors." (SEO3)

Equally, through branding, values can be signalled that combine the financial viability with the social mission's achievement, the *raison d'être* of an SEO. However, branding has a unique feature here, namely the authentic representation of a balanced overall picture of an SEO's opposing identities.

"We have our independence in the commercial and the non-commercial environment. We are a hybrid and are perceived as such, but that doesn't create any conflicts. So far, I haven't experienced any conflicts where I've been portrayed in the commercial environment as [...] who can't get anything done. I haven't been seen as a hardcore capitalist in the social environment either. In any case, connectivity is enormously essential for all stakeholders." (SEO3)

Our fieldwork has further shown that these two poles are essential to achieving acceptance among various stakeholders, especially potential investors. Here, self-confident brand management can help to send important messages in

the internal relationship with the investor so that no power imbalance arises in this cooperation.

"And at this point, it is essential in brand management that they signal in the first moment with their social vision to me, the sponsor, the investor, the financier, the donor, we can do something here, and we offer you to fulfill your mission with us. [...] So I have a clear association, and I don't go into an external determination, but there I am, and you can work with me. And that's a big difference, because sometimes there is a power imbalance between the donor and the person who is doing the social work. And that's why I think self-confident brand management is critical." (Investor/Advisory Board Member, SEO4)

Identity-driven components of brand meaning creation

From the empirical material, it appears that to build a strong brand it is essential to focus on the impact orientation of any trade. The fieldwork shows that two simultaneous strategic approaches to be pursued are relevant to representing an authentic representation to all stakeholder groups: entrepreneurial orientation and social mission orientation. To leverage branding's potential for SEOs, this interaction needs to be firmly anchored in the SEOs brand identity. As a result, the SIBM starts with a dual brand core (entrepreneurial orientation and social mission orientation). The interviews also revealed that it is crucial to create a shared value base



that all employees exemplify and, above all, by the founder, reinforced and made visible through narratives and various advertising materials. From our fieldwork, five particular identity-driven components emerged: brand culture, brand behavior, brand design, brand narratives, and the founder's personal brand.

Brand culture is a central component of a brand orientation (Urde 1999) that may also be defined as a specific type of corporate culture or a company's particular mindset (Urde et al. 2013). According to our analysis, the brand culture in SEOs covers values defined as deeply embedded but largely unconscious behaviors. As background variables they are directly associated with the impact mission, as exemplified by the founder, and collaboratively created with all team members. SEOs, which usually consist of a small team in the start-up phase and often beyond, have a unique role in forming a common identity. Therefore, all team members must generate a shared understanding of what the SEO stands for. The culture is reflected in guidelines and rules to prescribe behavior and values. These norms, expressed as the code of conduct, represent the explicit and implicit behavior rules.

"Branding in this sense is essential because it forces us internally to think about particular issues. What do we stand for? How do we want to be perceived? Who do we want to reach? What do I care about, and what are we doing here?" (Consultant 1)

Brand behavior is also a central part of brand orientation (Urde 1999) and reflects the internal anchorage of the brand identity (Urde et al. 2013). From the empirical material, it appears that SEOs can develop brand-oriented behaviors, such as regular internal meetings to analyze and discuss the brand's status and development or frequent communication to increase brand awareness and improve the SEO's image. From our data, two categories emerged: brand activities and brand analysis. Brand activities are closely related to the concept of "living the brand" (Ind 2007) which is also essential for SEOs, both internally and externally. Internally, brand values can be implicitly exemplified and passed on during team events or meetings. Identification with the organization's original values, which at their core subsume the mission statement and the entrepreneurial mindset, should also be perceptible in external relations with the stakeholder groups.

A further central part of brand behaviors is the concept of brand analysis. Our fieldwork showed that it is an essential instrument for developing one's brand and regularly checking whether the brand image is consistent with the brand identity. Through these reflection processes, both within the team and through the integration of feedback from the various stakeholders, an honest comparison of self-image and external image can occur, and a correction can be made in the event of a possible discrepancy.

"Internally, we have many discussions about branding and authenticity to the outside world, because many new people come in and represent the company to the outside world." (SEO1)

According to our analysis, the founder plays a prominent role in SEOs. In many cases, he or she has been the driver of the organization's founding to address a social problem he or she has identified. Thus, he or she serves as a role model for his or her team members and significantly transports the organization's values, both internal and external. Since the founders are often the people who primarily appear externally and represent the organization in negotiations with various stakeholder groups, they implicitly influence its identity. Over time, a social entrepreneur builds a personal brand that spills over into the organization. An essential role in this context is played by the "personal drive," which is closely intertwined with the organization's actual mission orientation.

"So, I think with the brand, of course, I also became a brand; you also build a brand as a person, which is very closely related to the product in the end. [...] But of course, you also build up a particular reputation. There is individual recognition. I believe that I now stand for specific values as a person, for someone who has dedicated himself to an idea for 30 years and has not been unsuccessful in advancing it." (SEO3)

The importance of the founder for the shaping of the brand was mentioned by all research groups in our sample, and was also strongly emphasized by the external stakeholders interviewed. Especially in the first talks about funding, the impact of the founder and the perceived credibility on the one hand and the associated economic competence on the other hand, are decisive for the economic participation. In addition, the founder's attributes are very strongly associated with organizational perception.

"In general, I would say that with the SEO, similar to others, but even a bit stronger, at least in the first years, of course, the personality of the founder is extremely important. [...] in other words, his own personal presence as a part of the brand, but also always the recommendation from the advisory board, which of course applies to develop a kind of organizational identity from it." (Investor/Advisory Board Member, SEO4)

Brand design or brand interfaces includes all the many non-human interfaces through which consumers interact with a brand (Iglesias et al. 2013). Our fieldwork shows that the creation of brand meaning in SEOs also requires consistent management across several non-human interfaces through which consumers interact with a brand. Non-human



interfaces enable SEOs to convey their organizations authentically and credibly to the outside world. Given a diverse set of stakeholders, this requires consistent management across all interfaces, including ethical principles in communication (e.g., no consideration of manipulative communication).

“The other side is that, in addition to this intention, there is also the point that if I take my work as a social entrepreneur seriously in communication, I have to do without a few methods that are standard in marketing, in online marketing, but are also rather manipulative [...] And I believe that social entrepreneurs have to set themselves limits to a certain extent because they can't use every trick in the book to turn people into customers; they can't use every trick in the book. Perhaps they have to set themselves a few ethical rules at that point. That's quite a difference, I think.” (Consultant 1)

Brand narratives target the importance of rhetoric in branding. A narrative “[...] is the reflective product of looking back and making sense of stories constructed to make sense of life” (Flory and Iglesias 2010). From the material, it can be deduced that SEOs can use narratives about their founding stories to bolster credibility and seriousness about their social mission. They contribute to an identity as they underscore through narrative why the organization was founded, what social problem is being addressed, and underpin its credibility. As part of the founding story, the founder encounters a social problem. A kind of intuition takes place that brings the problem solution into focus. This persuasive power can be conveyed via narratives and strengthens the organization's relevant stakeholders' confidence to solve the social problem over the long term.

“So, when a company says, ‘we would like to have you as a speaker’, it is also a critical topic. They find it exciting and want to see how the idea came about and what has grown out of it. That is part of the lecture, and everyone always finds that particularly interesting, in addition to the topic in question. Many people are moved by the fact that someone has recognized a problem and starts somewhere. Many find the growth from this very exciting, and causes some to join in.” (SEO7)

Brand interactions and brand meaning co-creation

The analysis of the empirical material shows that SEOs are involved in complex stakeholder networks. This results in a large number of human contact points. Our results emphasize the high importance of the design of these conversational spaces. At the level of brand interactions and brand meaning co-creation, the SIBM identifies brand ambassadors, stakeholder orientation, Word-of-Mouth and online communities as central drivers. However, according to

our analysis, three transverse components are relevant in all these brand touchpoints and should be fundamentally observed in communication: transparency, consistency, and authenticity.

Consistency should be reflected in all visual marketing materials (e.g., logo, wordmark, consistent website). Also, SEOs need to communicate both transparently and authentically. A transparent presentation of organizational activities enables the various stakeholders to gain insight into the structures and processes. An authentic communication within all conversational spaces by all organization representatives is a central pre-condition to gaining trust and legitimacy.

“People just like to talk to and about people; that's one of my common sayings. If the social component or the social impact is part of my business model and is relevant for my customers, then, of course, we also want to know if he's serious or if it's just whitewashing and PR talk. The entrepreneur's role and person are critical if it plays such a role and has such significance.” (Consultant 1)

Brand ambassadors can be classified as representatives of the organization. They act in the name of a brand (Schmidt and Baumgarth 2018). Our findings identify employees, cooperation partners, and especially the founder of SEOs as brand ambassadors who represent the brand values to the outside world. Within multiple interaction processes with diverse stakeholders, they represent their organization in negotiations about their brand's meaning. In this context, a strong stakeholder orientation is a central approach for SEOs. The fieldwork shows that particularly social entrepreneurs need strong relationship management skills. Since SEOs collaborate with diverse groups of stakeholders with diverging expectations, they must achieve connectivity with all stakeholders. It implies a precise synchronization of their brand's paradoxical character traits depending on the stakeholders' respective expectations. Our results further show that the network of existing cooperation partners is not only an essential factor for the resource mobilization of the SEO, but also a high attraction for the stakeholders themselves due to the social capital within the stakeholder networks, the level of which in turn strongly depends on the on the networkability of the founder. Accordingly, the network itself can be considered as an influencing factor on the design of the brand.

“The Advisory Board is also so attractive; it is a brand in itself because there are so many exciting people on it from politics, science, the media world, and the foundation's purpose. There is a good tone, and it has always been approachable, friendly, polite. That starts from the beginning, so to speak, there is always such



a tone in such a meeting, I'm probably anticipating some things, but that is the invisible mark, very, very essential." (Advisory Board Member, SEO4)

"This ability to integrate and to create a sense of co-ownership, which unites us all, is a great gift. It's simply a pleasure to participate." (Investor/Advisory Board Member, SEO4)

Social processes have a strong influence on creating brand meaning in SEOs. This is also reflected in the importance of Word-of-Mouth in this context. The various stakeholders pass on their accumulated positive and negative experiences with the organization in their networks. The recipients of these messages also spread the messages in their own networks. The information thus flows within and between networks of customers, beneficiaries, sponsors, and the public. Viral marketing plays a significant role, especially in social networks and online communities. The fieldwork shows that social networks have high strategic relevance for SEOs. The activities currently carried out also focus on posting articles, advertising events, or writing blog entries.

Since social processes strongly influence brand meaning in SEOs, the management of brand meaning in brand communities becomes relevant. Concerning the monitoring of branding activities, the fieldwork shows that the processes are not highly standardized; still, an awareness of this topic is discernible, and a consistent pattern of behavior can be derived. SEOs systematically observe all activities and their reactions on the internet and in online communities. It includes published articles, newspaper interviews, and posts on social networks. They, further, react to what has been observed. This refers particularly to queries and critical remarks.

"We also respond to queries and criticism that pops up from time to time when someone asks why it works like this and like that? And in the case of a donation vote, for example, the question 'Is everything working as it should?' Of course, we respond to that as well." (SEO2)

Furthermore, SEOs stimulate feedback processes with stakeholders. Our fieldwork shows that, in this context, an open attitude towards criticism and actively asking for stakeholders' perceptions is the starting point for the convergence of self-image and external image, resulting in a compliant view of the brand. If any divergence between the communicated brand values and the perceived associations is identified, this should be discussed critically within the organization, a recalibration considered and suitable measures implemented.

"If there is a spark of truth in it, you should take it up; you should bring it up for discussion internally and see how you can get back to your actual vision." (Consultant 2)

The architecture of the SIBM

Based on the empirical material and the concepts already described at the levels of brand core, brand identity, and brand interaction, the SIBM was derived abductively (see Fig. 3). The model consists of three levels. The first level refers to the brand core. According to the SIBM, brand meaning is created from an "inside-out" perspective. The interweaving of a social mission orientation with an entrepreneurial orientation creates an authentic image among the stakeholders. The prerequisite is a deep anchoring in the hybrid organization to allow the formation of brand identity. Therefore, the SIBM integrates a "dual-brand core" that act as the starting point for all branding activities.

To create the second level of the SIBM, the brand identity is then influenced by a brand orientation that consists of a cultural and a behavioral layer. Other brand identity components are brand narratives, the social entrepreneur's personal brand, and the brand design. The social entrepreneur plays a vital role in building brand identity in SEOs. As a manager, he or she has a significant influence on the organizational culture, shaping the employees' behavior in following corporate values. He or she is also often intertwined with the founding story, which leads to his or her personally being part of narratives surrounding the organization. Also, his or her personal brand is strongly associated with the corporate brand.

The third level of the SIBM considers all interaction processes with human representants of the organization. Multiple personal interactions with organization members determine the brand value co-creation to a considerable extent. Employees—and especially the founder—represent the brand values to the outside world. Acting as brand ambassadors, they represent their organization in negotiations about their brand's meaning. Since SEOs collaborate with diverse groups of stakeholders who have diverging expectations, they must generate connectivity with all stakeholders and synchronize their brand's opposing character traits depending on the stakeholders' expectations.

Furthermore, in SEOs, three conditions are relevant in all possible brand touchpoints: Transparency, consistency, and authenticity. All these criteria should be effectively observed in communication. In addition to the consistency dimension, which should be reflected in all visual marketing materials (e.g., logo, wordmark, consistent website), SEOs need to communicate, both transparently and authentically. A transparent presentation of organizational activities enables the various stakeholders to gain insight into the structures and processes. Transparency can be identified as a criterion for resolving the tensions in which SEOs operate, e.g., by communicating transparently how the financial resources are used to fulfil the social mission. As the third transverse component, authenticity should shine through all marketing



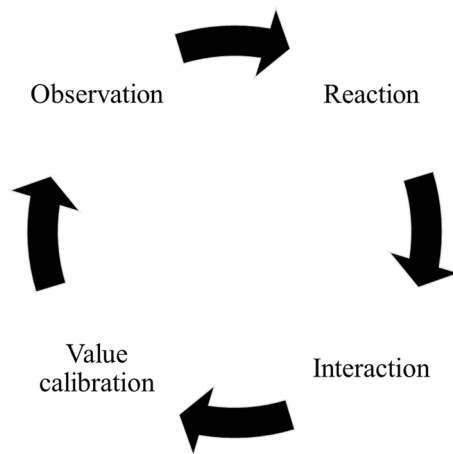


Fig. 4 Brand monitoring procedure in SEOs

activities. Given the dual-brand core, it is crucial to address the “Why” of each business decision authentically. Following Dammann et al. (2020, p.1), we understand authenticity in this context as “*the process of being in a congruous relationship with self, others, and relevant social norms.*” To promote the social mission of SEOs, communication should, on the one hand, show a genuine interest in addressing the problem; on the other hand, it should credibly demonstrate that the SEO is capable of addressing the problem sustainably through business competence. In addition to the components and processes that are relevant to creating brand meaning in SEOs, our findings present a systematic approach to monitoring the brand’s meaning in SEOs (see Fig. 4). The proposed process integrates the components of: observe, react, act, and calibrate. Concerning the importance of social processes in creating brand value, SEOs can systematically observe all activities and their reactions as a first step (e.g., published articles, newspaper interviews, or posts on social media). The next step concerns the reaction to what has been observed and refers particularly to queries and critical remarks. These must be responded to. The third step correlates very strongly with the construct of brand analysis and can be interpreted as an actively initiated feedback process stimulated by the SEOs. An open attitude towards criticism and actively asking for stakeholders’ perceptions is the starting point for the convergence of self-image and external image, resulting in a coherent view of the SEO’s brand. As a fourth step, any divergence between the communicated brand values and the perceived associations should be critically discussed within the organization and a calibration considered.

Discussion

To the extent that branding has been studied scientifically in social entrepreneurship sub-disciplines, theoretical models that address the complexity and ambiguity of social and entrepreneurial action have lacked until now. The scientific literature mainly provides comprehensive approaches and models concerning marketing and branding in for-profit businesses. An important insight in this context is the fact that not only the business is responsible for the development of brand values, but also customers and other stakeholders actively intervene in the process and help shape the brand meaning, which in turn requires a strong stakeholder orientation (Vallaster and Wallpach 2013; Wallpach et al. 2017; Iglesias et al. 2013, 2020; Ind and Schmidt 2019). The scientific discourse in the field of non-profit branding also makes a strong reference to stakeholder orientation (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009; Naidoo and Abratt 2018; Boenigk and Becker 2016; Juntunen et al. 2013; Vallaster and Wallpach 2018) but contains few studies about the co-creation of the brand (Vallaster and Wallpach 2018). The entrepreneurship literature is also concerned with drivers of branding activities (Abimbola and Vallaster 2007; Krake 2005; Yin Wong and Merrilees 2005; Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi 2010; Vallaster and Kraus 2011). The emerging research considers personal branding and places the entrepreneur at the center of all business activities, thereby influencing brand development (Spence and Hamzaoui Essoussi 2010).

Since the definition and the purpose of an SEO brand differ between non-profit and for-profit brands, the conventional antecedents of brand meaning formation needed to be reviewed. To accomplish this adequately, seven successful SEOs, five stakeholders and four branding experts in the field were interviewed. Although these two groups had specific departure points on each construct, in most cases, the statements were along the same lines. As expected, it became clear during the analysis that the simple transfer of an existing brand model cannot do justice to the complexity of SEOs and the different expectations of the stakeholders towards the organization. Following this, the results show an interplay of already known constructs from various entrepreneurial contexts, while also adding new components.

Since the goal of this study was not only to clarify the relevance of branding and to identify relevant constructs in brand meaning creation in SEOs, but also to determine an optimal arrangement of these components, we made efforts to build a brand model that was abductively derived. Our introduced SIBM represents a unique holistic brand management approach, especially for SEOs. It brings together the findings of various research streams, taking into account valid qualitative data from social entrepreneurs and marketing specialists in the field. The SIBM represents an “inside-out” approach that allows SEOs to create and maintain



meaning for their brands while considering monitoring processes. The architecture of the model consists of three levels. The core element of an authentic brand identity: a "dual-brand core" that interweaves a social mission with entrepreneurial orientation. On the next level is the brand identity, which is significantly influenced by internal branding activities and the founder's drive. Finally, at the third level the interaction with the brand takes place. Social entrepreneurs and all employees can transport a balanced image of the various identities in SEOs if they communicate and interact authentically, transparently, and consistently. An essential condition for success is creating connectivity among all stakeholders, which is crucial to appearing credible in the conversational spaces with all stakeholders.

The fieldwork shows that branding plays a highly relevant role in SEOs. However, the understanding of branding needs to be recalibrated for SEOs since impact-oriented branding is the focus of all organizational activities. The intention from which products and services are sold or financing projects are addressed differs fundamentally from for-profit contexts, in which needs are often generated among the stakeholder groups they often do not need. This has implications on several levels that apply specifically to SEOs. First, brand ambassadors of SEOs—especially to the founder—are confronted with very high expectations imposed by the diverse stakeholder groups. They must always credibly demonstrate that they are seriously interested in addressing a social or societal problem and at the same time demonstrate that they have the economic competence to implement a sustainable business model. The interviewees describe an excessive expectations, especially in regard to the integrity and credibility of SEO employees and especially the founder. They are therefore under constant and critical observation by stakeholders and the danger of a lasting loss of trust due to unethical conduct, for example, is always present. This distinguishes them from for-profits and should be considered when designing SEO brands. Second, the interviews underpinned the critical role of the social entrepreneur in building brand meaning in SEOs. All the research groups in our sample mentioned the founder's importance and that was strongly emphasized by the external stakeholders interviewed. On the one hand, his or her enthusiasm and credibility are relevant to investors and cooperation partners; on the other hand, as a networker and "conductor" of the stakeholder network, he or she has the task of bringing various stakeholders to the table, enabling multiple synergies. The quality of the social capital residing in these networks mainly depends on the founder. In our case study, the network itself was identified as a brand. Third, since SEOs are involved in a complex stakeholder network, they have to deal with much more complex stakeholder management than in for-profit organizations. In this context, informal contact points are particularly relevant, in which they have

to manage varying expectations imposed on the organization to establish connectivity with all stakeholder groups. Concerning internal branding, our results finally show that employees in SEOs are engaged out of intrinsic motivation: they act from conviction. For the design of internal branding in SEOs, this means creating sensitivity, especially for the relevance of economic goals among all employees.

Borrowing from the multidimensionality in SEOs, the SIBM provides a concrete explanatory approach to how brand meaning can be created and maintained in this specific context. It goes beyond existing commercial and social brand models by providing a particular starting point for managing brand meaning, namely the intertwining of mission orientation with entrepreneurial orientation, which are fused to form the brand core of SEOs. Based on 16 expert interviews conducted, we claim this study provides initial insights to understand the emergence of SEO brands with a strong and authentic brand meaning. It contributes to an understanding of branding at the intersection of commercial and social organizations that takes into account the organization's brand identity and the different associations of stakeholders to the organization.

Compared to existing brand models in SEOs, the presented SIBM contributes to dealing with the control of brand meaning. Provided that a strong brand is created, a systematic monitoring approach helps SEOs keep the meaning of the brand on track. The fieldwork has shown that SEOs can control their brand's meaning through a four-step procedure, although it should be stated that SEOs must accept a degree of loss of control over the brand. The proposed process integrates the components of observe, react, act, and calibrate.

Implications for research and practice

Our study offers fresh insights into the creation of brand meaning in the context of SEOs that are highly relevant for brand management research and practice. From the academic perspective, we contribute to answering the call for studies on how brand management differs between purely commercial businesses and not-for-profit organizations (Golob et al. 2020). The innovative SIBM that we propose, based on our explorative study, contributes to the social literature research by presenting a holistic brand management approach tailored to the specific challenges that SEOs face. By focusing on the antecedents of creating brand meaning, it goes beyond existing models that deal mainly with measuring non-profit brand equity (Naidoo and Abratt 2018). At the same time, our approach goes hand-in-hand with existing research (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009) that identifies consistency, focus, trust, and partnerships as key variables of brand equity. In this context, the importance of internal branding and value of internal brand ambassadors are



highlighted, ensuring that the brand's internal and external perceptions align (Laidler-Kylander and Simonin 2009). Our model also identifies these aspects as one of the main drivers in creating brand value in SEOs. Concerning the “human brand interfaces,” the social entrepreneur, whose relevance to an organization's reputation is supported by Waldner (2020), acts as a representative of the brand and influences its meaning with its personal characteristics. Therefore, personal branding has a special role here. Personal branding can be seen as a construction of a human brand “*that can then be marketed as effectively as possible*” (Shepherd 2005, p. 6) and that is highly influenced by the constructs of credibility and authenticity (Scheidt et al. 2020). This can be transferred to the social entrepreneur, who should be perceived as someone who cares about social impact but can also think and act commercially. This study also provides empirical evidence regarding brand value co-creation processes by giving first insights into how SEOs assert more control over stakeholders' dialogues in social media while simultaneously ensuring their brands align with the values derived from their mission statements. Thereby, for SEOs, the definition of a mission statement is crucial since it represents a clear idea of what an organization wants to be and positively impacts economic performance (Berbegal-Mirabent et al. 2021).

In addition to the theoretical implications, this study gives recommendations for managers of SEOs. For founders and marketing managers of SEOs, our findings help them to fundamentally understand which drivers influence the development of a strong and authentic brand. One crucial point is that they must understand that to focus on the social mission and make it credible they must have the entrepreneurial skills to achieve long-term social goals. SEOs must develop the ability to adequately address and manage the varying expectations of various stakeholders in digital and personal conversations, and ensure connectivity at all touchpoints. In these contexts, they should credibly embody the social mission but also demonstrate business skills. The union of these two paradoxical identities should be considered when developing the brand identity. In all activities, brand managers in SEOs should keep in mind that, in addition to marketing tools such as brochures or websites, it is above all personal contacts and social processes that contribute to developing a strong SEO brand. Therefore, internal branding also plays an essential role because it enables the SEO's representatives to communicate the organization's values to the outside world in exchange processes with stakeholders and enter into negotiation processes about the brand's meaning. However, SEO's management must also accept that they can only control their brand's meaning to a limited extent: in our increasingly connected world, stakeholders actively co-create the development of brand meaning. Nevertheless, our study's results provide a tool to SEO's management for moderating the co-creative brand management process.

Limitations and further research

The creation of the SIBM has been the result of research based on in-depth interviews with social entrepreneurs, managers, and social marketing experts. Therefore, qualitative research's general limitations—such as the lack of representability or possible interviewer bias—must be considered. Although our introduced brand model paves the way for understanding the creation of brand meaning in social entrepreneurship, it suffers the limitation of not having included the opinions of some important stakeholders e.g., consumers, beneficiaries, and sponsors. Due to the qualitative nature of our research, the conclusions are not generalizable. Owing to the qualitative nature of the research, the SIBM focuses on better understanding the process of brand meaning co-creation in SEOs, but without proposing testable hypotheses. Although this study provides initial insights into how brand meaning is co-created in SEOs, further research is needed that will illuminate stakeholder groups' influence in the context of brand meaning creation. Furthermore, in addition to the process of building a strong brand in SEOs, great potential still exists for work that further explores the systematics of brand monitoring process. SEO brands are a growing managerial reality, but scientific research in this field remains in its infancy. Therefore, empirical research—both qualitative and quantitative—is needed to provide other relevant explanatory approaches to the branding of SEOs. Based on our study results, we see a need for research in the following four areas. First, the presented SIBM is based on existing literature and qualitative research data. It is thus the first attempt to provide an explanatory approach to guide brand meaning management in SEOs. In the next step, the model should be tested, for example, within a case study. Second, the transferability of the model to all SEOs forms should be verified. Here, one object of research could be the role of the social entrepreneur. Does his or her influence on the brand meaning apply for all SEOs, or is this possibly dependent on certain factors such as organizational size, industry or dependence on social media? Due to the importance of a founder's personal brand, the question follows for further studies on how branding can positively influence effective succession management. Here, studies would be helpful that focus on the depersonalization of the founder's brand and derive strategies on how the DNA shaped by the founder can be perpetuated in the organization via branding, even once the founder leaves the company.

Third, further empirical research should be conducted to specify further how the stakeholder interaction process influences brand meaning in this specific context. In this context, further research could be conducted into the extent of the impact on brand meaning creation for different stakeholder groups. Finally, the process of monitoring brand meaning should be further empirically researched, specified, and verified.



In conclusion, our research provides a manageable explanatory approach for how SEOs can create brands with authentic and stable brand meanings while managing stakeholder groups' varying expectations. By aligning their brand management activities with the social impact brand model, SEOs can be much more than “do-gooders”: They can transform to strong and sustainable brands that make a real-world difference in this world.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there are no conflicts of interest.

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