Productive Incoherence

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A Case Study of Branding and Identity Struggles
in a Low-Prestige Organization

Sanne Frandsen

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The Doctoral School of Organisation and Management Studies (OMS) is an interdisciplinary research environment at Copenhagen Business School for PhD students working on theoretical and empirical themes related to the organisation and management of private, public and voluntary organizations.

This dissertation is dedicated to

Mikael and Sebastian

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List of Papers

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Journal articles

Paper 1   Sanne Frandsen, "Organizational Image, Identification, and Cynical Distance: Prestigious Professionals in a Low-Prestige Organization". The paper received a second invitation to revise and resubmit from *Management Communication Quarterly*.

Paper 2   Sanne Frandsen, "Managing Integrated Corporate Branding through Brand Hypocrisy. The paper is submitted to *Corporate Communication: An International Journal.*

Paper 3   Sanne Frandsen, "Living the Brand in an Iron Cage". The paper received an invitation from *Organization* to revise and resubmit.

Conference papers

Paper 1   Sanne Frandsen, "Employer Branding: Exploring Employees' Identification in Low-Reputation companies". Presented at the Third Conference on Rhetoric and Narratives in Management Research, ESADE, Barcelona, Spain, March 2009.

Paper 1   Sanne Frandsen, "Employer Brand Identification: A Case Study of a Low-Prestige Company". Presented at ICA, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, June 2010.

Paper 2   Sanne Frandsen, "Brand Hypocrisy". Presented at the Academy of Marketing's 7th Global Brand Conference, SAID Business School, Oxford, UK, April 2011.

Paper 3   Sanne Frandsen, "Living the Brand in an Iron Cage". Presented at the International Studying Leadership Conference, Lund University, Sweden, December 2010.

Abstract (English)

This dissertation examines the relationship between corporate branding and identity work at organizational and individual levels in the context of a low-prestige corporation. It is based on 17 months of research undertaken as an in-house ethnographer at MGP, a European based national telecommunication corporation. The study seeks to contribute to integrated corporate branding theory by adopting a critical perspective on the intra-organizational affects of brands and branding. The dissertation contains three papers, each of which contributes to discussions within corporate branding, organizational identity and identification, as well as to literature on management control and employee resistance. The findings demonstrate that the management adopts integrated corporate branding in a hypocritical manner, while employees in response develop a cynical distance to their work. While this may be interpreted as negative consequences, the dissertation argues that these are productive and have certain advantages for the management in the given context. Thus, the findings challenge the integrated corporate branding ideal of coherence between the external and internal dimensions of corporate branding as the only productive way to create a successful corporate brand.

Abstract (Danish)

Denne afhandling omhandler relationen mellem corporate branding og identitetsarbejde på såvel organisatorisk som individuel niveau i en lav status virksomhed. Forskningen er baseret på 17 måneders etnografisk arbejde hos MGP, en europæisk baseret national televirksomhed. Studiet har til formål at bidrage til teorien om integreret corporate branding med et kritisk perspektiv på de intra-organisatoriske følger af brands og branding. Afhandlingen består af tre artikler, som hver især bidrager til diskussioner inden for corporate branding, organisatorisk identitet og identifikation, ledelseskontrol og medarbejdermodstand. Samlet set viser studiet, at ledelsen optager idealet om integreret corporate branding på en hyklerisk måde, samtidig med at medarbejderne udvikler en kynisk distance til deres arbejde. Selvom dette kan læses som negative konsekvenser, argumenterer afhandlingen for, at disse er produktive og har visse fordele for ledelsen i den givne kontekst. På den baggrund udfordrer afhandlingen det herskende integrerede corporate branding perspektiv at succesfuld branding udelukkende er baseret på en sammenhæng mellem de eksterne og interne dimensioner af corporate brandet.

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Introduction

Society today seems to be dominated by brand logic (Kornberger, 2010). Cultural studies of branding have pointed out that the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) or the "dream society" (Jensen, 1999) have effectively changed our consumption and production of both signs and physical products (Schröder & Salzer-Mörling, 2006). Some, such as Klein (2000), even go so far as to claim that corporations are no longer in business to sell products but to sell an experience, a story or a certain set of values. There appears to be an ever-increasing demand for corporations to stand out and to differ from everyone else in the overcrowded marketplace, where competitors offer the same products at similar prices.

Corporate branding scholars argue that one productive way to differentiate and create a sense of belonging is to leverage the organizational identity by mobilizing the entire organization and everything it stands for in order to capture the minds and hearts of consumers and other stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; 2008). Kornberger (2010) joins Hatch and Schultz (2008) in proposing that corporate branding is also a new internal organizing principle, just as Kärreman and Rylander (2008) demonstrate branding's potential as a new way to manage meaning that is not only directed externally but also internally towards employees; "a systematic effort from top management to influence and shape frames of references, norms and values among organizational members" (p. 108). Such systematic efforts are allegedly becoming increasingly important in the development of "brand evangelists" (Ind, 2001) – employees who 'live the brand' and thus embody and personify the brand experience, and insure its alignment with brand values communicated through the brand promise (Olins, 2003).

For these reasons, I argue that employees are a vital focal point in the corporate branding logic. Employees come to operationalise the brand; to balance the diverse demands of consumers and the management's strategically formulated vision of unity. To simultaneously step forward as a subject to personify the brand, while also stepping back and machine-like following the officially scripts, procedures

and guidelines to ensure a streamlined, consistent brand experience. To protect the company image not only while at work, but also in their private sphere, in interactions with friends and families, who are potential consumers. Thus far, the literature on internal branding suggests, that employees are not only willing to take these steps but that they in fact are also *longing* to be part of the brand:

> People need an outlet for their passion and their intellect. One outlet can, and indeed should be, the world of work. Brands can come to life if organizations engage with people's deeper needs and if they help to fill the vacuum that has emerged within the lives of many. (Ind, 2001, p. 27)

There is, however, a striking absence of the voice of employees in the corporate branding literature (one exception in organizational studies is Kärreman and Rylander (2008), while an exception in internal marketing studies is Kelemen and Papasolomou (2007)). Thus, we have little knowledge about the intra-organizational effects of integrated corporate branding from the employees' point of view, despite the widespread agreement that employees play a vital role in successful corporate branding (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; 2008; Ind, 2001; Olins, 2003; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2005).

The initial motivation for this dissertation was an observation I made as an employee of a low-prestige organization. In this organization, the management was seemingly eager to mobilize employees as part of the corporate branding effort but it encountered great difficulties in making this desired vision a reality. Thus, the research question I set out to explore in this dissertation was: *How do employees respond to the corporate brand and to managerial efforts to improve it via integrated corporate branding?*

This dissertation aims to expand the integrated approach to corporate branding in the specific context of an organization with a low-prestige brand.

The current stream of integrated corporate branding literature, with Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008) as the front-runner, rests upon the fundamental and intuitively logical assumption that coherence between "what we say" and "what we do" is necessary if a brand is to be considered trustworthy (de Chernatony, 2002; Ind, 2001; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2005). These authors describe corporate branding as a strategic, ongoing communicative process that taps into important questions of organizational legitimacy and identity. However, empirical material on the integrated corporate branding approach is usually based on anecdotal material and 'best-case' examples (Bergstrom, Blumenthal & Crothers, 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Ind, 2001), and provides only limited knowledge of how branding is actually carried out in organizations. It therefore turns a blind eye to the possible "dark sides" of this integrated approach to corporate branding.

Therefore, I propose adopting a critical point of entrance to studies of integrated corporate branding that will allow for an understanding of the complicated processes of managerial identity regulation and employees' identity work in relation to an organization's corporate brand in the specific context of a low-prestige organization. The empirical material presented here has been generated through a longitudinal study of a European telecommunication corporation and is primarily concerned with micro-level processes among the organizational actors on both the management and employee levels. The findings question the common belief that the only way to create a strong brand is through coherence between the external and internal dimensions of corporate branding – that is, a coherence between outsiders' and insiders' perceptions of the organizational identity, as well as coherence between the corporate communication expressing a brand promise and the organizational practices grounding the brand experience.

Integrated corporate branding

The integrated approach to corporate branding arose from a critique of a more functionalistic approach to corporate branding, which in itself accounts for the most comprehensive body of literature on corporate branding (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimstaler, 2000; Keller, 2008; Kotler & Keller, 2009). The functionalistic approach to branding is tactical and campaign oriented, and often the term "identity" is used to conceptualize the brand identity, or the brand's innermost substance (Kapferer, 2008). The brand identity is believed to reflect the organization, yet the brand entity can – and should – be controlled by marketers (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). The brand identity is a set of associations defined by the marketers, who decide what the brand should stand for in the mind of the audience (Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimstaler, 2000).

This functionalistic view of brands as completely controlled by the management has been severely criticised by more interpretative-oriented scholars, who argue that the functionalistic approach overlooks the deeper meaning-making processes surrounding the brand and the complex ways various stakeholders relate to the brand (Gjøl-Andersen & Karmark, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 2008). Moreover, Schultz and Antorini (2005) criticise the functionalistic approach for failing to include the organization. They question how the corporate brand as a symbol can be recognized and perceived as trustworthy in relation to what the symbol represents, i.e., the organization. Their concern is that significant gaps might occur between what campaigns promise their audiences and the experiences of the external stakeholders in their interactions with the organization.

Hatch and Schulz (2003; 2008) thus advocate for an alternative, more integrated approach to corporate branding. They argue that the corporate brand gains its symbolic power by projecting the organizational identity. In Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008) framework, organizational identity is defined as "how organizational members perceive and understand 'who we are' and/or 'what we stand for' as an organization" (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 15). How the

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organizational members define "who we are" is, however, also subject to influence from "how we are perceived by others", which is referred to as the organizational image (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 23). In this perspective, coherence between "who we are" and "how we are perceived by others" stabilizes meaning, and increases the sense of differentiation and belonging among employees and external stakeholders. In this context is corporate branding defined as "a process through which an organization can continually work out its *purpose* – a purpose that is meaningful to *people* inside and outside the organization." (Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2005, p. 16) Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008) argue that coherence between the organization's brand promise and the brand experience across the various stakeholders is of fundamental importance in the building of a successful corporate brand. A lack of such coherence is, at noted earlier, believed to challenge the company's credibility and might damage the organization's trustworthy ethos. Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008) suggest that this can be avoided by simultaneously aligning the organizational culture and the organizational image with management's visions for the corporate brand, also known as the VCI model (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). They argue:

> "Whenever you encounter a successful corporate brand, standing behind that brand you will find coherence between what the company's top managers want to accomplish in the future (their strategic *vision*), what has always been known or believed by company employees (lodged in its *culture*), and what its external stakeholders expect or desire form the company (their *images* of it). The basic principle of the Vision-Culture-Image (VCI) Alignment Model [is] – that the greater the coherence of vision, culture and images, the stronger the brand" (Hatch & Schultz, 2008, p. 11)

The combination of vision, culture and image is said to represent the organization's identity – what it is, says and does – and it should, therefore, be managed continuously (i.e., not just through campaigns) in order to build a

trustworthy brand. The alignment of the vision, culture and image is necessary, according to Hatch and Schultz (2008), as such an alignment will integrate organizational behaviour behind the delivery of the brand promise to all external stakeholders. In sum, the objective of integrated corporate branding is to bring the corporation behind the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Branding's intra-organizational effects

The corporate brand literature provides a pervasive vision to contemporary management. In an increasingly complex society with an overcrowded marketplace and diverse demands from various stakeholders both inside and outside organizations, the corporate branding perspective offers an ordered way to align symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours in order to present a unified, consistent, legitimate image about "who we are". It offers a fantasy of "order, stability and predictability in an otherwise fragmented and uncertain world" (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010, p. 14). I argue, that this is a new, contemporary myth that creates the necessity, the opportunity and the impulse to organize differently.

While corporate branding may be seen as an ideal, however, we have little empirical knowledge of what kind of organization the corporate branding logic creates. Theoretically, the literature of corporate branding offers a logic in which the management is able to define and communicate an idealized organizational identity, to use one voice to accommodate the demands of all stakeholders, to close gaps between the internal and external perceptions of "who we are", and to align organizational behaviour with the brand promise. The "organization" we find in the corporate branding literature is, thus, "an organization defined, shaped, and controlled by its overall corporate message" (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010, p. 12).

Recent research in organizational communication (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010) and in critical management studies (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Kärreman

& Spicer, 2010) highlights the need to understand the potentially wide-ranging implications of the corporate branding logic for contemporary organizational life. This research also stresses the necessity of deconstructing the underlying dominant assumptions about corporate branding and providing empirical evidence that may illuminate how the branding logic guides the behaviours of organizational members, both managers and employees. This dissertation aims to accommodate these calls by examining the intra-organizational effects of integrated corporate branding through a study of corporate branding's production and performance, as well as its interpretation in low-prestige organizations. The case presented here concerns a low-prestige organization with tremendous brand challenges, which place extra pressure on the organizational members – both management and employees – to take action to minimize the identity threats posed by outsiders.

Tainted organizations

While most branding literature argues that the brand is an asset to an organization – a symbolic force that not only expresses but also positively reinforces the organization's identity– this may not always be the case. In a crisis, the brand may become a liability to the organization. (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton, Duckerich & Harquail, 1994). Kornberger (2010) argues that clashing perceptions of an organizational identity inject instability into the brand. Therefore, we are likely to suspect that the management will aim to achieve coherence between identity and image by engaging in a rebranding process.

For employees in such companies, the tainted brand not only becomes a part of work life but also a part of their private lives. As we believe that jobs and employers are, to a large extent, self-referential for many individuals (Pratt, 2000), we may suspect that being employed at a company everybody 'loves to hate' can have negative consequences. Incoherence between an individuals' positive self-image and the negative image that others have of the organization may threaten the individual's identity. Many scholars within social identity theory claim that

coherence between internal and external perceptions of "who we are" is necessary, as a positive organizational image reinforces a strong organizational identification and positive self-image, while a negative image may stress employees and leave them ashamed of their work place (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton, Duckerich & Harquail, 1994; Highhouse, Thornbury and Little, 2007; Terry, 2003).

Studies of organizational identity (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schulz, 2000; 2002; Ravasi & Schulz, 2006) thus lead us to expect that employees in low-prestige companies may be motivated to engage in organizational identity work in order to affirm their organizational identity and improve outsiders' perceptions – the organizational image. And employees' support, engagement and motivation to build a strong brand are indeed vital according to the corporate branding scholars (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; 2008; Ind, 2001; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2005; Olins, 2003).

Branded employees

Given the integrated corporate brand ambition to align vision, culture and image, and insure that the corporate brand promise is reflected in the brand experience of external stakeholders, the employees' embracement of the brand is of acute importance. This is believed to be particularly true of service organizations such as MGP (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003; Olins, 2003). Olins (2003), for example, argues that many organizations fail to realize that while more traditional, functional consumer branding always has the customer as focal point, service brands should put their own employees at the centre of their activities. As customer-brand interaction can rarely be standardized, Olins argues that the delivery of the service brand requires that employees embody and personify the brand. He states:

Marketing service brands demands an additional skill, getting your own staff to love the brand and to live it and to breathe it so that they can become the personal manifestation of the brand when they deal with customers. (Olins, 2003, p. 75)

According to Olins (2003), the employee is *the* person to represent the brand. If he or she fails to personify the brand and deliver a satisfying performance, then the relationship between the customer and the brand will be negatively affected. On this basis, Olins (2003) concludes that management of service brands has more in common with people management than with the classical marketing of product brands.

Internal branding practices

In the wake of the integrated approach to corporate branding, "living the brand" is a construct that has gained increasing interest (de Chernatony, 2002; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Ind, 2001; Karmark, 2005). The main idea behind living the brand is that employees should 'internalize brand values', that is, "the incorporation into selfhood of the values and attitudes of the group" (p. 38), and, thus enthused, be willing and able to deliver the organization's brand promise, that is, to "live the brand" (Ind, 2001).

Internal branding is described as a set of leadership practices that focus on facilitating the internalization of brand values, such as increasing employees' awareness, knowledge, understanding, involvement, commitment and identification with brand values, which are intended to result in "on- brand" behaviour (Balow & Steward, 2006). These strategies do, in other words, target the minds of the employees. Employees are not only expected to behave according to the brand, but to also *believe* in the brand values.

Strategies for producing this "on-brand" mindset and behaviour among employees are plentiful. Karmark (2005) distinguishes between

marketing/communication-based strategies and norms/values-based strategies. Marketing/communication-based strategies are suggested in the internal marketing literature, such as "managing the organisation's human resources based on a marketing perspective" (Ahmed, Rafiq & Saad, 2003). These strategies might rely on such means as persuasion (Kelemen & Papasolomou, 2007), and a high frequency of brand messages using multiple channels to target employees (Bergstrom, Blumenthal and Crothers, 2002) and HRM tools, such as attracting and retaining, training and motivating employees on the basis of brand values (Lings, 2004). Norm/value-based strategies are discussed by scholars within internal branding. They extend the internal marketing perspective by putting "culture" on the agenda (Ind, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Wilson, 2001).

Thus, internal branding is used to align the corporate culture, symbols and stories with the desired brand values. Ind (2001), for example, suggests the following internal branding activities to create "brand evangelists": commitment from top management, engagement of brand champions (change agents), internal communication, brand books and games/videos, workshops, events, and exciting HR tools, such as recruitment, training and rewards. Ind's (2001) terminology of "evangelists", and "internalization" and "incorporation" of brand values into selfhood clearly suggests that internal branding activities should form employees' subjectivity and through power regulate the employees' self-concepts. Ind (2001) takes this even further by arguing that this development is beneficial not only to the company, but also to the employees as the first quote in this chapter indicates.

This 'romantic' view of employees as brand champions is repeated throughout the branding literature as an ideal (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Ind, 2001; de Chernatony, 2002; Olins, 2003), while employees' own voices are largely overlooked. Extant research seems to ignore employees as agents that may be indifferent or perhaps even resistant to the dominant meanings carried by the brands and managerial branding efforts. Therefore, I propose that there is a need for a more critical approach to assessing the intra-organizational affects of integrated corporate branding.

Branding controls identity

Literature on corporate branding that takes a critical approach to integrated corporate branding and such constructs as "living the brand" is very limited. This is surprising given that, in recent years, literature on consumer brands has highlighted brands as entities that serve as natural sources of power (Heilbrunn, 2006). This approach defines brands as sites for struggle and domination (Kärreman & Spicer, 2010), and highlights the discursive, narrative and mythic characteristics of the brand that encompass its power in relation to consumers (Askegaard, 2006; Holt, 2004) and its dominant status in society in general (Klein, 2000). The brand, they argue, appeals to the hopes, desires, longing and aspirations of consumers by ascribing positive and seductive meaning to a product (Holt, 2004). While the cultural approach to branding is almost exclusively concerned with consumer brands, I advocate that its focus on how brands are powerful carriers of meaning – and how the management actively use branding as a way to manage meaning and control the minds of consumers and employees – can contribute new knowledge to the integrated corporate branding discussion.

   I propose the use of identity regulation and identity work to arrive at a nuanced understanding of employees' identification, apathy, ambivalence, cynicism and resistance towards corporate branding efforts and their roles as brand workers. Identity regulation and identity work are concepts coined by Alvesson and Willmott (2002). Identity regulation is used among critical management scholars and organizational communication scholars to understand how management attempts to regulate employee subjectivity through socio-ideological or technocratic forms of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004). Identity work on the other hand captures individuals' attempts to provide an answer to "who am I?". When engaging in identity work, employees may draw upon, modify or downright reject the identity structures ascribed to them by the management or others outside the organization through processes of identification, disidentification or variations

of identification between these two poles (Dukerich, Kramer & Parks, 1998; Humphrey and Brown, 2002; Pratt, 2000). The critical management perspective draws attention to the power-resistance dialectic and helps us to understand the struggles (Spicer & Fleming, 2008) inherent in the management's identity-regulating activities, such as integrated corporate branding. While managers are portrayed in significant parts of the corporate branding literature as active subjects with the power to change or regulate the organizational culture or identity, I argue that employees are not just passive followers without power. Rather, their power lies in the possibility of resistance.

The concept of cynical distance, which was first coined by Fleming and Spicer (2003), is of particular interest here. Cynical distance challenges the idea found in the branding literature that only strong positive identification with the brand values leads to brand behaviour. In fact, Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue that cynically distanced employees may perform better than those who believe in the management-defined values. Socio-ideological efforts to create consistency between an organization's values and employees' internal values – a consistency that the branding literature suggests is essential to "on-brand" behaviour – is not only condemned by Fleming and Spicer (2003) but also suggested to be irrelevant. They propose that beliefs may be externalized and employees' cynical surface act may be just as successful in relations with customers as a brand experience based on deep-acting employees. The benefit of the employee is a sense of autonomy, an illusory freedom from the managerial practices that aim to shape employee identities to fit the corporate goals.

While Fleming and Spicer's (2003) concept of cynical distance does not address internal branding efforts per se, the empirical material gathered at MGP provides rich accounts of cynical distance in identity struggles between managers and employees, and between outsiders and insiders of the organization. The evidence presented in papers one and three points towards a new understanding of cynical distance as not solely a matter of resisting managerial control but as a coping strategy based on both identification and disidentification.

Brand consistency or brand hypocrisy?

Another critical management concept that is influential in this dissertation is "organized hypocrisy", a term coined by Brunsson (1993, 2003a, 2003b). While the literature on integrated corporate branding celebrates coherence between brand and identity; among culture, image and vision; between corporate communication and organizational behaviour; and between brand promise (talk) and brand experience (action) (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; 2008; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2005; Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002), Brunsson (1993, 2003a, 2003b) claims that incoherence and misalignment are institutional norms, as management is required to be hypocritical in order to cope with conflicting demands. In the pursuit of a positive organizational image, the crafted reality represented in the talk – the brand promise – may work in a manner that is completely decoupled from organizational practices and actions. While this is often viewed as a problem, Brunsson (1993, 2003a, 2003a) argues that it is, in fact, necessary to gain legitimacy.

Scholars within institutional theory, such as Meyer and Rowan (1977), point out that organizations typically adopt zeitgeist practices (such as integrated corporate branding) ceremoniously, as these practices are believed to conflict with other efficiency criteria. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), this creates loosely coupled activities and gaps between the formal ('blueprint') organization and the informal organization. They argue that the decoupled activities are necessary for organizational survival, as the ceremonial adoption supports the organization's legitimacy, while the day-to-day operations can proceed in a normal, orderly fashion. In paper two, I examine how integrated corporate branding is enacted by the management in its front-stage talk and its backstage actions, and how the internal and external audiences respond to the branding efforts in these two areas.

Productive incoherence

This thesis is based on an in-depth study of a European telecommunication corporation, MGP (pseudonym), which was undertaken from 2007 through 2010. The company employed approximately 13,000 employees in 2007 (approximately 10,000 in 2010) and had around 2.5 million customers across various telecommunication services, including fixed line, mobile, internet and TV. The years 2007 to 2010 were particularly turbulent for the company due to shifts in ownership and top management. Employee layoffs, restructuring and frequent changes in the corporate strategy resulted in rapid shifts in the everyday lives of both employees and management. Attempts to create consistency were challenged by conflicting demands, confusing processes and a loss of colleagues, knowhow and social networks in the organization. At the same time, the organization was under heavy pressure from external stakeholders, primarily the press, who accused top management of unethical leadership. Furthermore, customers were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with MGP's inadequate customer service. Despite these negative developments, MGP produced impressive financial results year after year. In fact, MGP's EBITDA increased by 5% from 2005 to 2006, fell by 3.8% in 2007, and then increased by 5.4% in 2008, by 6.9% in 2009 and by 2.2% in 2010. Notably, this growth was achieved despite the general financial crisis in the international economy.

The external pressures and MGP's tainted organizational image occasioned identity work and brand work among managers and employees, which might not have been as salient or visible in other settings. Thus, MGP is a perfect extreme case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003) for an examination of branding and identity struggles in a low-prestige organization. Each of the three papers constituting this longitudinal study is characterized by a distinct empirical focus on a different level of the organization at a different point in time. Thus, they read as three self-contained articles, which represent three kinds of evidence for the argument that incoherence between the external and internal dimensions of corporate branding

may be productive for the management in this low-prestige organization when employees are struggling to cope with their work identity. Thus, while scholars within the fields of integrated corporate branding assume that coherence is needed for the organization to function, I argue that incoherence is common and offers other productive advantages for management.

The first article, entitled "Organizational Image, Identification, and Cynical Distance: Prestigious Professionals in a Low-Prestige Organization", concerns backstage, administrative employees in a very prestigious profession – finance. This article investigates how a negative image influences employee identification. The findings illustrate that the employees cynically distance themselves from the stigmatized organization, while identifying with their professional and work team identities in order to maintain a positive work identity. Accordingly, they succeed in diminishing the impact of the negative image on their well-being and sense of self.

The second article, entitled "Managing Integrated Corporate Branding through Brand Hypocrisy", follows a group of executives involved in marketing communication, corporate communication and human relations during a corporate rebranding process. This article examines how managers in a low-prestige organization enact integrated corporate branding in front-stage talk and backstage actions, and how internal and external audiences respond to the branding efforts in the two areas. The article shows that the management manages the integrated corporate brand through brand hypocrisy – the ceremonial adoption of the ideals of integrated corporate branding in their talk, which is decoupled from the organizational practices. Brand hypocrisy is productive, as it enables the management to gain legitimacy and to change the organizational image, which may lead to subsequent change in identity.

The third article is called "Living the Brand in an Iron Cage" and is set among a team of newly hired frontline personnel in MGP's call centre. The article investigates how the management uses internal branding as a form of socio-ideological control to produce an "on-brand" employee identity and how the

employees respond to this prescribed identity. The article shows that cynical distancing may grow out of the conflicting identities prescribed by management's socio-ideological and technocratic control mechanisms. The paper questions whether "living the brand" may be accomplished through cynical distance and surface-acting in contrast to the conventional understanding of living the brand as a result of employees' deep-acting brand values.

Contributions

Each paper makes its own contribution to ongoing discussions within the fields of integrated corporate branding, organizational identity and identification, as well as management control and employee resistance. As a collection, the papers contribute to the corporate branding literature in several ways. First, the papers highlight the intra-organizational effects of corporate brands and integrated corporate branding by giving a voice to the employees. Second, the papers offer a critical view on integrated corporate branding from an internal perspective, which leads to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which integrated corporate branding is used as socio-ideological control in attempts to regulate employee identities and identification. Third, these papers serve as an in-depth case study of a low-prestige organization, which is rare within integrated corporate branding. Finally, on the basis of these three contributions, this dissertation challenges the integrated corporate branding ideal of coherence between the external and internal dimensions of corporate brands and branding.

While these contributions are set within the framework of corporate branding, the dissertation also advances theory in related fields. This dissertation highlights the need for future critical management studies to examine internal branding as an increasing dominant logic that might drive new culture change processes. Furthermore, the MGP case highlights the possibility that the branding logic may only be performed in a hypocritical manner, which leaves a substantial gap between the socio-ideological messages and the more 'efficient', technocratic

forms of control. While critical management studies seem to rest on the idea that socio-ideological and technocratic forms of control are coherent and that they work in tandem, this study shows that this may not always be the case. This has significant implications for employee responses to management's change efforts. In this study, the dual logics of management at MGP foster both identification and disidentification, leading to cynically distanced employees. While cynical distance is usually understood as a resistance to others' attempts to regulate one's subjectivity, this dissertation suggests that cynical distance is more of a coping strategy that arises when employees are torn between the simultaneous embracement of and distance from a prescribed work identity. Thus, cynical distance arises not only from disidentification but also from identification.

Given the space limitations, I have been unable to unfold and discuss my role as in-house ethnographer at MGP in the three papers. For this reason, I have included a separate chapter on this role and the general methodological considerations that have guided my study of MGP. The chapter also seeks to contribute to the limited extant literature on in-house ethnography, which is also referred to a self-ethnography (Alvesson, 2003) by describing various dilemmas and balancing acts that in-house ethnographers are likely to encounter. That chapter is followed by the three papers.

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Balancing Acts

The Practices of the In-house Ethnographer

A confessional tale of fieldwork

It is summer of 2005 and I am applying for the job of my dreams: a two-year position as 'Graduate' - a management trainee programme in one of the largest corporations in the country, MGP. The Graduate programme has an elite status and is one of the few that allows Master of Arts graduates, like me, to apply alongside graduates with more classical business school degrees in example finance, marketing or strategy. It is a well-paid, real full-time job and, if I am accepted into the programme, it will be my first job since graduation. My hopes are high. I want this so badly. This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter this major organization, to be involved in exciting projects, and, not least, to be able to add the MGP name to my CV. It feels like the 'make it or break it' point of my life.

That year, MGP received 600 applications for its Graduate programme. They hired 15, of which I was one. Needless to say, I was thrilled. A friend congratulated me, saying: "If you can make it into MGP's graduate programme, you can make it everywhere. The world is at your feet now." And this was surely how I felt. For the next two years, I worked for three different departments at MGP, which I selected based on my own interests. Each department gave me major responsibilities, interesting projects and great opportunities to develop my skills, my career and my network. I was offered and took advantage of a number of educational opportunities, teambuilding events, seminars, etc. The company even sent me to Budapest for eight months to work for a subsidiary. I felt spoiled – and I was.

What impressed me most about MGP was the level of expertise among my colleagues. I believe that MGP, at that point, was the front-runner in many areas, especially in HR. I chose to work in the HR department during the final stage of my participation in the Graduate programme and realized that the HR department was one of a kind in the country. The department was highly profiled in terms of employee-development programmes, talent management and diversity management. In fact, the department even engaged in several research projects

with scholars, who were interested in the department's success. In this context, I was appointed Employer Brand Manager with responsibility for developing and implementing a new employer brand strategy. The management had decided that an employer brand strategy was important if the company was to attract, motivate and retain employees.

As an employee at MGP, I came to realize that the perception of MGP as a workplace was much more positive inside the organization than outside. MGP was apparently one of those companies that 'everyone loved to hate'. Everyone was or had been a customer, and most people could tell disastrous stories about MGP's customer service – or, rather, the lack of it. In 2006, MGP's CEO sold the corporation to capital funds, which was disgraced by the domestic community and, in return, the CEO accepted a large bonus. The new CEO placed by the new owners began to lay off thousands of people and the media went berserk. All brand statistics showed that MGP's reputation and corporate brand value were in freefall. Inside the organization, major efforts were launched to halt this negative development. The organization decided to introduce a new corporate brand (even though only two years had passed since the current corporate brand had last been re-launched) and a new employer brand (my project).

At the same time, however, I had other plans. An acquaintance had told me several years before about a three-year industrial PhD programme offered by the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation, a programme that intends to build bridges between the corporate world and academia, and between practice and theory. The programme funds half of the student's salary and other expenses, while host corporations pay the other half. In return, the corporation can expect the industrial PhD student to engage in research that serves some sort of useful purpose for the company. The idea of conducting an industrial PhD had been in the back of mind for some time and, as I completed my Graduate tenure at MGP, I felt this was the time to do it – and to ask MGP to be my host corporation.

I found MGP to be a fascinating case and it was a really interesting time for the company, which was engaged in extensive organizational change and what seemed

to be a search for a new organizational identity. It was facing increasing competition in the market from smaller players and had to address significant technological developments in terms of texting, data transfer, 3G networks and the electronic distribution of music. It was an opportunity that was too good to miss. I applied to the industrial PhD programme and MGP agreed to pay half of my three years of study and to provide me with access to the entire organization. In return, I was to continue to develop the employer branding strategy and, in general, facilitate collaboration among the communication, marketing and HR departments in order to recruit, engage and retain employees according to the objectives associated with the new brand. And then my PhD journey started.

What particularly caught my attention, as I began my research collaboration with MGP, was, how the management of MGP seems to think that corporate branding was *the* answer to the organization's problems. This logic was understandable given the freefall of the corporate brand's reputation. However, MGP also began to face significant problems internally as it restructured and laid off employees in what seemed to be a never-ending process. The management called for a culture change based on the motivation of a "burning platform" – or simply a sheer bloodbath. The new CEO moved from a large executive office to a printer room without windows – or so the story went. This symbolic act created groundswells in the organization. A new time had come. Soon after, employee benefits were curtailed to the extent that cleaning was kept to a minimum and there were no longer tea towels in the small employee kitchens. Eventually, the Graduate programme – despite its unique brand – was eliminated because it was simply too expensive to spoil more young graduates. While improving the company's reputation was said to be the priority of the corporate strategy, the real strategy seemed to simply be to cut costs to allow the capital funds to leverage their new investment.

Employees, which had previously been regarded a priority for investments, were now viewed as a cost. I think the first to realize this change in perception was the HR director, who left her position soon after the new CEO took up the reins

and at about the same time as I started my PhD. The HR director had been a strong force in developing HR into a national flagship, and she was well liked among her employees for her solid expertise and innovative HR approach. A new HR director, who had no prior experience within this area but who had a more strategic, financial profile, was appointed. He seemed to view HR as 'icing on the cake' – an area that could easily be cut back without any 'real' implications for MGP's everyday business. Accordingly, HR faced one round of layoffs after the other, while the remaining employees, who had been deeply involved in employee development, were now engaged in dismissals across the organization. The pressure of the situation became too much for some.

Timely, I went on maternity leave. I was offline for a few days during the first week of my leave. When I logged back on, my mailbox had several mails from my colleagues along the lines of: "I have decided to quit my job", "I have been offered a position in another company" and "I will miss you all". Most of my HR colleagues left that week. I remember that day as clearly as the day that I submitted my first job application. I felt that my anchor point in the organization had disappeared and I feared that I would be lost when I returned from my maternity leave. I was also disappointed that what all we had worked so hard for – to build the best HR practices – was suddenly framed as mere frosting on the cake. I wondered if MGP would ever be the same again and I came to realize that it probably would not.

My sense of belonging was lost for good. This was, however, not entirely a bad thing. It made it much easier for me to take on the role as a researcher. I was still engaged in the everyday work of the HR department when I returned from my maternity leave but I was not as personally attached to MGP as I had been. I tried to redesign my research to follow the shifting agenda of MGP's management but found it hard to keep up. When MGP decided to relaunch the corporate brand for the second time during my PhD studies – and I was again invited to participate – I decided to follow the process closely.

In the course of the corporate rebranding process, a new HR director took over. The new director was also the strategic director and part of the Executive Board. On paper, this was a great way for HR to show its worth to the business. However, the new director was a former McKinsey consultant and had a proven record in downsizing. As with the former HR director, she did not seem to care much about her new department. One of her first actions was to facilitate another round of cuts. This time, the entire employer branding department was dissolved with the explanation that employer branding was no longer a strategic focus area of HR. I was transferred to the recruitment department and allowed to carry on my usual duties related to observing the corporate branding process.

I sensed that there was really no more I could do in HR. There were no more colleagues with whom to collaborate and the management had lost interest in the PhD project, as branding was no longer a strategic priority for HR. In fact, HR employees were no longer allowed to be engaged in any branding-related activities. Once the corporate branding process was complete and the brand was officially launched, I agreed to move out of the HR department to become an observer in customer service. I found this to be an interesting move and a great opportunity to examine how the new corporate brand was implemented among the employees closest to the customers. I found my stay in the call centre to be truly engaging. For the first time, I felt that my research actually mattered to someone – and that I could make a real contribution to MGP's management, which clearly had some issues in terms of 'getting the people behind the brand'. Interestingly, this was also the point at which HR had no more personnel to lay off – I was next in line.

I was fired as an in-house researcher and ethnographer eleven months before the planned termination of our industrial PhD contract. This was not surprising given the changing agendas of the organization and the fact that approximately two-thirds of the HR employees had already been relieved of their duties. Still, I believe this was the absolute low point of cost cutting, as it was a clear breach of the Industrial PhD contract MGP had entered into with the government and me.

Such breaches are very rare. When they do occur, they are typically caused by bankruptcy or other conditions that dissolve the entire corporation. This was, however, not the case at MGP, which simply wanted to cut back in an already starved HR department. Two other women – both on maternity leave – were laid off at the same time.

I know this confessional tale (van Maanen, 1988) of my entry into, engagement with and exit from MGP is not the typical way of introducing a methodology section. It is important, nevertheless, to provide some information on and insight into the organizational context in which I have conducted my research in order to illustrate the development of my research collaboration with MGP. My research process serves as an extreme case of what Alvesson (1990) calls self-ethnography and it brings forth new knowledge about certain balancing acts required in the practice of being an in-house ethnographer.

In the following, I first provide an overview of the empirical material generated during my 25 months of engagement with MGP. Then I present and discuss in-house ethnography, and outline six balancing acts that I undertook in my collaboration with MGP. This methodological chapter also serves to demonstrate my overall procedure for generating and analysing empirical material as a compliment to the methodological sections in each of the papers. Therefore, in the final part of this chapter, I discuss how I used MGP as a case study, my epistemological basis, as well as my approach to generating and analysing the empirical material.

The empirical material

 The research process can be roughly divided into three phases based on the acute concerns of the corporation in 2008, 2009 and 2010. In Phase 1, MGP's organizational image is under siege and the company experiences a reputational freefall. In Phase 2, the management attempts to deal with the reputational freefall by designing a new corporate brand. In Phase 3, the new corporate brand is

'implemented' in the organization with a particular focus on the call centres. The three papers included in this dissertation reflect these three phases. They are thus concerned with different research questions and build on different sets of empirical material generated at different times and in different places in the organization. Table 1 provides an overview of the empirical material generated during my research at MGP.

Phase 1: Reputational free-fall, 2008	Phase 2: Design of a new corporate brand, 2009	Phase 3: Implementation of the corporate brand, 2010
Paper 1 "Organizational Image, Identification and Cynical Distance: Prestigious Professionals in a Low-Prestige Organization"	Paper 2 "Managing Integrated Corporate Branding through Brand Hypocrisy"	Paper 3 "Living the Brand in an Iron Cage"
Research question How does a negative image influence employees' identification?	Research question How does the management of a low-prestige organization enact corporate branding in front-stage talk and backstage actions, and how do internal and external audiences respond to the branding efforts in the two areas?	Research question How does the management use internal branding as a form of socio-ideological control to produce an "on-brand" employee identity and how do the employees respond to this prescribed identity?
Primary empirical material Interviews: 10 employees in finance	Primary empirical material Interviews: 4 executives (Marketing Communication director, Corporate Communication director, Internal Communication director, Customer Service director) Observations: HR (7 months) - Active participant observation in brand-related meetings - Informal conversations with various people from top to bottom and from the frontline to the back office - Hanging around – being an HR employee - Observation of full-day event: the launch of corporate brand to mid-level managers - Observation of company introductory day	Primary empirical material Interviews: 13 newly hired employees in customer service Observation: Customer Service (3 months) - Three weeks of introductory training - Observation of corporate introductory day - Shadowing five new employees for three weeks
Secondary empirical material Job satisfaction surveys Entry/exit surveys Tracking of the corporate brand, corporate reputation and employer brand	Secondary empirical material Tracking of the corporate brand, corporate reputation and employer brand Employer branding material (communication strategy, job ads, etc.) Confidential strategic documents (corporate brand strategy briefs and de-briefs) Employee magazine Corporate newsletters Intranet texts	Secondary empirical material Job satisfaction survey Entry survey Training material Job descriptions Call centre newsletters
Feedback sessions with MGP Finance managers		Feedback sessions with MGP Customer Care director Mobile Customer Care director (and 5 managers) Recruitment/on boarding team (3 members) Corporate Brand Director and Marketing Manager responsible for Customer Service HR recruitment manager
Through all three phases: Collection of internal communication: employees magazines, newsletters, Intranet texts. Collection of external communication: appearances in the press (TV and newspaper), commercials, annual reports, websites, rankings in national newspapers and magazines.		

Table 1: Overview of the empirical material

In-house ethnography

Ethnography originates from the academic traditions of anthropology and sociology (van Maanen, 1988). An ethnographer's objective is to explore social meaning through close contact with people "in the field", typically in order to understand their sense making, cultures and shared knowledge through their own lenses. Van Maanen (1988) describes ethnographies as "portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogeneous world. They display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order" (p. xiv). In this dissertation, I use the term "ethnography" in the widest possible sense. The papers are not ethnographies as such; rather, I view ethnography as a 'mindset' – a way to approach the field. An ethnographer attempts to get close to the group studied, driven by a curiosity to study the "Other" (Czarniawska, 2007). A variety of fieldwork techniques, such as observation, in-depth interviews and the collection of documents, are used to gain knowledge about the "ways of life" of the "Other" (Czarniawska, 2007).

As an in-house ethnographer, the researcher does not turn toward the "Other" but towards the familiar group of people to which he/she belongs. For example, I was hired to study the practices and ways of life of MGP employees, while I was simultaneously an experienced MGP employee. Alvesson (2003) calls this self-ethnography, while Czarniawska (2007) refers to the in-house ethnographer as a participant observer. I use "in-house ethnographer" to indicate that I, as a researcher, not only studied a familiar organization but also was paid (at least partially) by this organization – a context that created certain expectations about the research process and the research product. Czarniawska (2007) emphasises that ethnographies in organizational studies often tend to focus on the "field of practices", while I argue that in-house ethnographers are not only expected to observe the field of practices but also to evaluate them and to try in one way or another to improve upon them. In this sense, in-house ethnographers are often involved in what Van de Ven (2007) broadly refers to as engaged scholarship.

Van de Ven (2007) describes engaged scholarship as a way to study complex problems with and/or for practitioners and other stakeholders. While engaged scholarship is probably often viewed as related to action research, Van de Ven argues that there are at least four typical types of engaged scholarship: 1) informed basic research, 2) collaborative basic research, 3) design and evaluation research, and 4) action/intervention research. The four types are determined by the mode of inquiry – either from the outside (1 and 3) or from the inside (2 and 4) – and by research questions interested in either describing/explaining certain issues (1 and 2) or designing/controlling certain issues (3 and 4). (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 27-28)

At the beginning of my industrial PhD process, my idea was to co-produce knowledge with MGP about employer branding, which is the second type of engaged research. The two-fold research question I had started out to explore was explicitly related to MGP's challenges in positioning itself as an attractive workplace: *How can employer branding strengthen the perception of the company as an attractive workplace among potential and existing employees – and how does the company's employer brand influence the possibilities of attracting and retaining talents?* I collaborated with my HR colleagues to explore this area. As a team, we were interested in finding solutions that could assist MGP in not only overcoming the obstacles but also advancing existing knowledge within this very young, emergent field. As the employer branding area was relatively new and under-researched, I saw this process as an opportunity to use "practical knowledge" to advance extant theoretical knowledge within this area. At the same time, employer branding was also a reasonably new practice, so that MGP's management was interested in a more strategic, theoretically grounded approach to tackling their challenges.

As the confessional tale at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, the collaboration with MGP with employer branding as its focal point fell apart and I began pursuing other possible research questions. These other possible questions required a more detached type of engaged scholarship (type 1), although I still aimed to ground and situate these questions in 'real' problems at MGP. Thus, the

research question that this final dissertation aims to answer is: *How do employees respond to the corporate brand and to managerial efforts to improve it via integrated corporate branding?*

From an academic point of view, my position as an in-house ethnographer at MGP offered significant advantages. I was already an insider when I began my research and I was an accepted, natural part of the company. I could move about the organization and easily blend in without disturbing the system in an abnormal way. I was given access to all parts of the organization and spent almost all of my time there for 17 months, so that empirical material basically 'fell into my lap'. Some of the empirical material I generated in a planned, systematic way (particular the material used for papers one and three), while other parts were a result of a more emergent, spontaneous approach (paper two).

The emergent, spontaneous approach is characterised by Alvesson (2003) as a study that is carried out when something revealing happens. Basically, the researcher waits for interesting events or encounters, keeping his or her eyes and ears open – and the laptop switched on. This was particular true for me as an observing participant in the corporate rebranding process of MGP. Given my previous expertise in employer branding, I was asked to contribute. Thus, I conducted my employee work duties alongside my researcher work duties. I kept a research diary in which I recorded observations and reflections when I thought something was interesting. I made written, detailed descriptions of meetings. I collected emails and strategic documents, made notes from phone conversations or casual encounters with managers or colleagues. I had a desk in the middle of the HR department's office space – an open office occupied by approximately 45 people. Thus, I had a good view of the physical environment and was able to follow everyday life in the office. I also participated in weekly departmental meetings as well as more informal lunches and the weekly breakfast session in order to keep myself oriented about what was going on. In sum, I tried to access and document the corporate branding process and the role of the HR department as carefully as possible, realizing that my privileged access was unique.

Balancing acts

The role as an in-house ethnographer also created some challenges, as I continuously found myself in various dilemmas that I had to balance in order to keep my PhD project on track. In the following, I outline and discuss six specific balancing acts: 1) loyalty versus getting even, 2) getting close versus creating a distance, 3) being a researcher versus being an employee, 4) inquiring of employees versus inquiring of management, 5) grappling with complexity versus grappling with comprehensibility, and 6) conducting 'corporate-useful' versus 'academic-useful' research.

<u>Loyalty versus getting even</u>
Throughout my research, I have tried to use my personal involvement with MGP as a resource, while simultaneously limiting the liability. Loyalty has been one issue that has been a reoccurring challenge. Especially early in the project, I felt I had to be loyal to MGP because of my employment with the company and because MGP had agreed to pursue this research project with me. Furthermore, the exposure of behind-the-scenes and, perhaps, less-flattering conditions in the organization was a concern, as I did not wanted to cause MGP (or myself) any harm when publishing and discussing my research in public domains. As I progressed in my studies and developed a more distanced and critical attitude to MGP, I found that the 'dark' sides of branding in MGP were most interesting to me. I therefore put these at the centre of my research. I did, however, provide MGP with a pseudonym and mask its country of origin in order to protect the company as much as possible.

My firing as in-house researcher eased my sense of loyalty to the organization. However, I then encountered the opposite bias – the desire to get even. I tried to use this desire constructively to develop my own voice independent of MGP's influence, while still staying open minded and true to my empirical material. Therefore, I have continuously tried to illuminate both the positive and negative

sides of MGP's corporate branding activities and I have aimed to depict 'the MGP world' in a way that resonates with the way my colleagues – the participants – have described it. I have also attempted to give those colleagues a voice by including as many direct interview quotes and observation extracts as possible.

Getting close versus creating a distance

Conventional ethnographic studies are usually concerned with the matter of "breaking in" and getting close to the 'natives' in order to understand them from their own viewpoints (Spradley, 1980). An in-house ethnography is more concerned with "breaking out" of the taken-for-granted logics and worldviews, and making sense of "us" rather than "them" (Alvesson, 2003). Hammersley and Atkinson (1989) argue:

> The comfortable sense of being 'at home' is a danger signal. From the perspective of the 'marginal' reflexive ethnographer, there can thus be no question of total commitment, 'surrender' or 'becoming'. There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytical work of the ethnographer gets done. (p. 90).

In my case, the establishment of a certain distance to my own organizational, cultural backyard was of acute importance to obtaining a perspective on the realities in MGP. I needed to avoid getting caught up in details and idiosyncratic matters despite their entertaining nature, and to use my empirical material in a way that could contribute to our knowledge within the areas of corporate branding, organizational identity and identification. I undertook several steps to create this distance.

First, I selected unfamiliar departments as setting for empirical material generation. In papers one and three, I deal with colleagues with whom I was

unfamiliar, as they worked in the finance and customer service departments, respectively. I had no prior relations with these departments.

Second, I spent time away from MGP. For some periods, I found shelter at the Copenhagen Business School. In addition, after I finished gathering empirical material, I spent six months in Australia at the University of New South Wales, where I was physically distanced from MGP.

Third, I gathered empirical material in other organizational settings. For paper one, where I interviewed 10 MGP business professionals in finance, I decided to also interview similar business professionals working in other organizations. Thus, I arranged a total of 12 interviews with employees in four other multinational corporations. Although the empirical material gathered during these interviews was excluded from the paper (due to the journal reviewers' preferences), my original analysis was based on a comparison of the empirical material generated from the 12 interviews with the material from the 10 MGP interviews. The comparison made the MGP-specific process stand out, a process that I may otherwise have missed due to my 'blind spots' as an insider.

Fourth, I utilised different theoretical standpoints. Alvesson (2003) argues that one way of overcoming blind spots is to look at the empirical material in a more well-rounded way. I therefore read and reflected upon the literature using different epistemological views of identity: functionalistic, interpretivistic and critical (Alvesson, Ashcraft &Thomas, 2008). What seemed to work even better was to write up my empirical material in a rich, comprehensive way and then asking research colleagues with different theoretical orientations to read and respond to it. For example, paper three has been read by two traditional, functionalistic, marketing-oriented scholars; two interpretivistic, communication-oriented scholars; and two critical, management-oriented scholars. In discussions with them, I came to understand how they interpreted my empirical material and how it could contribute to the various bodies of literature. While others who do not work as in-house ethnographers may work in a similar way, I believe that it is particularly important for in-house ethnographers to view their empirical material

through different theoretical viewpoints in order to best resolve the encountered empirical mysteries.

Fifth, I was laid off. Although this was not a conscious act, it was undoubtedly the most effective way of creating distance.

Being a researcher vs. being an employee

As a result of my prior employment in MGP's Graduate programme, I had a large network in the organization and in-depth knowledge about the organization on both the employee and managerial levels. This made it easier to navigate and to find the right people to talk to, while the fact that I was familiar with MGP terminology and internal processes made it easier to code and comprehend the empirical material.

The most tangible evidence that I held a dual role in the organization was my notebook and my two business cards, one of which stated that I was an HR consultant and another that I was an industrial PhD. When interacting with colleagues, I often had to manage this dual role carefully. This was particularly true during my observation period in the MGP call centre, where I observed, interviewed and shadowed the newly hired call centre employees. My biggest challenge in this regard was to build trust with these employees. Thus, during my first day in the centre, I introduced the research project and myself. I described the project in very general terms and emphasized that I was not interested in the employees' individual performance but in their socialization as a group. I stressed that all employees would be kept anonymous in my research, and I informed them that I had undertaken interviews and made observations among MGP's top managers and that now I wished to know about the life 'on the floor'. I emphasised my role as an independent researcher, while downplaying my former role as an HR consultant.

After two weeks in this role, I undertook individual interviews with the call centre employees. At the beginning of each interview, I re-informed the interviewee about my research project. Again, it was vital to emphasise that the

employee would be kept anonymous and that I was an independent researcher rather than someone 'sent by management'. This was important, as I knew that these employees were subject to heavy management surveillance. I did not want my presence to result in further stress in relation to their performance. Some of the interviewees were sceptical about my role. However, I felt that the level of trust increased during my shadowing of the selected employees.

Czarniawska (2007) argues that shadowing creates a peculiar relationship between the person shadowed and the person shadowing. In my case, most employees treated me as a fellow colleague. One even asked me questions about what to do when he had problems with different customer cases, such as "Do you remember this from the introductory course?". Others were more formal, explaining to me what they did, how they did it and why they did it. In both cases, I found that because I had gone through the same introductory course, the shadowed employees and I had a common set of references, and I was able to understand the technical details of the work processes.

When the new hires went on a break, I was sometimes invited to join them for a smoke, a snack or small talk. In those cases, I participated. In other cases, the employees told me that they would take a break, implying that I should stay behind, which I did. While sitting next to the employees and listening to their calls, I would always have my notebook open and was constantly writing. When on breaks, I would usually leave the notebook behind (in my bag) and then later find a more private place (the washrooms) to write out my break-time conversations with the employees. Frequently, when I listened to their conversations with customers, the employees would ask me what I had written in my notebook. I would then read out a paragraph or so and give a short explanation of why I thought this was interesting. Often, this would prompt further explanations from the participants of why they had acted as they did, how they felt in the situation, etc., which were then also noted in my notebook. The three months of observation were documented in four thick notebooks totalling approximately 600 written pages.

My participation in the corporate branding process may serve to further illuminate the dilemma of being both a researcher and an employee. I was invited to participate on the basis of my previous work experience with employer branding and as a result of my role as a researcher. Although I tried, I was not fully included in the central corporate brand project team but I was still invited to participate in most of the meetings as the employee responsible for aligning the corporate brand with the employer brand. The expectations from MGP were clear: as an employee/researcher, I was expected to contribute to the corporate branding process. As an in-house ethnographer, I wanted to observe the process and interfere as little as possible. Given that I was interested in the management's sense making regarding branding, I had to be careful not to give sense to the branding based on my own personal and professional opinions. I tried to achieve this by keeping my mouth shut as much as possible, which was difficult given the course of events, and by contributing in practical ways, such as developing a media plan, coordinating with external agencies and making sure the process followed the project plan. In retrospect, I am glad that I was not fully included in the inner circles of the corporate branding team, as my combined attached/detached position allowed me to document the process without dictating it. In the areas where I felt I did not have sufficient access, I conducted individual interviews with the directors involved in the process.

Inquiring of employees versus inquiring of management
As an in-house ethnographer inquiring on multiple levels of the organizational hierarchy, I encountered dilemmas of 'levelling' with the participants. In particular, it was evident that I had difficulties levelling with my conversation partner in dialogues with the call centre employees due to my own personal background, as I was older, educated, female and local, whereas most of the employees were younger, without an education, male and some also of another ethnic background. The interviews with the participants from other ethnic backgrounds differed from interviews with those from a local background, as the

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former strongly articulated their other ethnic background and argued that it influenced their relationship with MGP. This was a non-issue for the locals. In the participant observations, however, this aspect became less of an issue as the employees paid less attention to their backgrounds in their daily routines. I tried to include myself in the call centre environment by dressing in a more youthful, casual style, by adapting the employees' language styles (slang) and by taking public transportation to work. I also downplayed my reason for being in the call centre, labelling myself as a "student" (as opposed to a researcher) writing a "report" (as opposed to a PhD dissertation). I sensed that these steps contributed to becoming an insider in the call centre environment.

The interviews with top executives and directors entailed some levelling issues as well. When talking about the branding process and employee involvement, it was clear to me that many of the interviewees' responses reflected the official, strategically formulated intentions, and served as repetitions of the company's vision and values. These interviewees were trained to argue for their cause and to present the organizations' viewpoints strategically. These sessions demanded much more of me as I wished to get behind the 'corporate (wo)man'. I wanted to get a better sense of the logic underlying the strategically formulated standard replies, and how these interviewees had dealt with or aimed to deal with the complex reality of MGP. Thus, I systematically employed two techniques. The first – 'velvet gloves' – involved showing interest in the processes and details, and focused on questions such as: What is being done? Who is responsible? Who came up with that idea? What did you do then? Who was present at this meeting? How did they react? The second – 'the iron fist' – was a fairly aggressive technique. Every time I sensed that I was encountering a rehearsed reply, I pointed out the gap between that reply and my perception of the organizational reality based on my experiences among the people "on the floor". Some took this as an opportunity to discuss the challenges of the organization (and the management team), while others became offended and began to discuss or even shout, usually starting with "You have to understand that….". Although it took some nerve to conduct these

interviews, I learned that this approach generated really valuable and insightful material. I believe that my role as an in-house ethnographer was of particular use in this respect, both because I had in-depth knowledge, which enabled me to pinpoint gaps between rhetoric and practice, but also because the interviewees had some level of trust in me, as I was an insider as well. This technique may not have worked as well if I had been an outsider.

Complexity versus comprehensibility

Given my insider's point of view on MGP, I also had a more complex, nuanced understanding of the dynamics and logics characterising the organization. I possessed the historical and contextual knowledge needed to understand the actions and reactions of managers and employees. To write it all down in words, is difficult, if not impossible. An excess of empirical material is, I presume, a basic condition of being an in-house ethnographer. As least in my case, I found myself involved in all sorts of workshops and events, in the recruitment of new employees, in campaign planning and execution, and even in the development of a new webpage advertising MGP as an attractive workplace, not to mention countless formal and informal conversations about the practices and way of life at MGP. These work-related tasks naturally contributed to my understanding and knowledge about how things functioned within the organization, although not every moment was documented or explicitly included in my papers (or in Table 1). The conducting of an inductive comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Gorbin, 1994) of my comprehensive empirical material would simply have been exhaustive and, most likely, not very fruitful. For this reason, I rely on micro anchoring (Alvesson, 2003) – focusing on specific acts, events or situations; exploring their richness; and relying on my insider's knowledge to evaluate whether they were typical events, reoccurring events, or similar to themes or processes in other situations. In so doing, I aim to be fair in the portrait I paint of MGP without missing the richness and complexity of the empirical material. I aim

to highlight and explore the specific situations I find interesting in the hope that others will also gain new insights from them.

I realize that my empirical material could probably be better presented in a monograph-style dissertation than in the paper-based dissertation that I had chosen. The choice of the paper-based format was motivated by an agreement with MGP at the beginning of the project. The company requested deliverables during the research process rather than a single document at the end of the process (a monograph). From my point of view, I selected the paper-based format, as it provided me with the possibility to use different theories and frameworks to explore MGP – and it offered some advantages in terms of a future career within academia. Thus, I hope readers will consider the three papers in their own right. Each paper is intended for a different journal, and thus addresses different theoretical and empirical issues related to branding and identity challenges.

<u>Conducting 'corporate useful' versus 'academic useful' research</u>

In-house ethnography calls for some consideration of "usefulness". Often the discourse on usefulness in a corporate setting means that the research has to pay off in terms of increasing the company's productivity or revenue. To do so requires the delivery of simple, tested, comparative and absolute results (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005). This discourse clashes with the critical, academic discourse on 'usefulness' or 'relevance', in which simple, tested, comparative and absolute results would be seen as useless in an increasingly complex and diverse corporate world. In critical management research, the germ for useful knowledge lays in the ambiguities, mysteries, struggles and micro-emancipations (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009).

In MGP, the corporate discourse was dominant. In the beginning, I was asked to produce business cases based on my research. The usefulness of my research in terms of these business cases was evaluated based on its abilities to produce an "employer-branding balanced scorecard", to develop employer-branding concepts and activities to increase the number of applicants to the Graduate programme, to

improve MGP's rankings in Reputation Institutes Work Reputation reports, and even (ironically) to grow MGP ambassadors among managers and employees. As the attention paid to employer branding decreased, it became increasingly difficult to argue for the research from a corporate-useful point of view. Then the research collaboration became a part of the company's CSR discourse. I suddenly encountered general statements like: "We are obliged to support research" or "Now that we have agreed to participate in this research, it would be unethical to fire you".

At the same time, my own perception of usefulness began to move in the direction of the academic environment to which I belonged. While I was still motivated to investigate problems that were of acute concern to the organization (and possibly of relevance to other organizations), I wanted to use my privileged access to MGP to examine the management's corporate brand logic and the ways in which the employees responded to this logic. Thus, I became increasingly interested in what was taken for granted – the 'truth' among MGP managers and employees – as I believed that the underlying assumptions about employees' roles in the corporate branding process may have prevented the organization from succeeding in its previous two branding attempts. However, this interest was difficult to express as arguments of usefulness in the logic of MGP. To-do lists and quick fixes with regards to the changes MGP was experiencing would probably have been considered valuable in the management's eyes. However, I question whether these would have been of any real use to the company. Perhaps, it was the desire for quick fixes and easy-to-follow to-do lists that caused the problems in the first place.

Therefore, I tried to be useful in other ways, such as by examining areas that were known to be problematic but where the complexity of the situation was not well understood (such as motivating call centre employees or retaining talents within finance). In this regard, my ethnographic approach could provide a more comprehensive picture of the issues and problems from different angles. Furthermore, in my feedback to the organization, I tried to be useful by

challenging the basic assumptions made about employees, management and control, which I had come across in my interviews and observations. There were some indications that this approach worked – at least in some divisions. A new Call Centre director was appointed while I was undertaking my observations in the call centres and he was very interested in my research results. After a 1.5 hour meeting, during which we discussed my findings, he asked me to conduct an action research study in the call centres. He wanted to hire a new team of call centre employees to be exclusively trained and managed, based on my recommendations, and separated from the rest of the organization. The idea was to evaluate whether this experimental team would perform better or worse than the ordinary teams I had observed. Although this was a compelling offer, it came only five days prior to my planned research stay in Australia and thus I could not accommodate his wishes. I did, however, view this offer as an indication of the usefulness of my research results for MGP's call centre.

In summary, the role as in-house ethnographer provides significant advantages in terms of privileged access to empirical material. However, in my extreme case, this role became a problematic affair that required a constant balancing act to accommodate the demands of both the corporate and academic worlds. While the idea of conducting research that both contributes to theory and practice was appealing, the shifts in strategic agendas, management, company supervisors and teams of colleagues made it hard to make long-lasting agreements and find a shared research interest that would be considered useful to the company for more than six months. The company's strategy was focused on the short term and the organization was, in my opinion, pushed to the limit in terms of cutting costs and employees. Despite this context, I was always met with a smile and even able to peak people's interest to the extent that they agreed to have meetings with me. In this respect, I felt grateful for the individuals who agreed to participate and engage themselves in my research at MGP.

Methodological process

The following sections aim to present and discuss my overall approach to generating and analysing empirical material. Each paper within this dissertation documents the methodological process in more detail. Thus, in this section, I briefly comment on MGP's characteristics as a case-study company, on my epistemological basis, the undertaking of the fieldwork and my analytical process.

Case study

MGP was pre-chosen as a single explanatory case study. Explanatory case studies are appropriate when researching questions related to "how" and "why" (Yin, 2003). A case study offers the possibility to study contemporary events, such as the launch of a new corporate brand, while they unfold without (too much) interference from the researcher (Yin, 1994). A case study's value lies in its ability to describe situations that can contain new and emergent ideas, or test and challenge existing ideas.

Accordingly, a single case study focuses on the rich, contextual life of a single setting and often relies on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994; Eisenhardt, 1989). In my case, these sources of evidence were: interviews, observations, shadowing, archives, and internal and external communication material (see Table 1). The case study design can be characterised as an embedded single case study (Yin, 2003) due to the paper-based format of this dissertation. Yin (2003) defines an embedded single case study in this way: "The same case study may involve more than one unit of analysis. This occurs when, within a single case, attention is also given to a subunit or subunits" (p. 42). In the present dissertation, therefore, each paper focuses on different units of analysis within the context of the MGP case. The unit of analysis for paper one is prestigious business professionals, all of whom were involved in the same area (finance) but worked in various positions in the company. The unit of analysis for paper two is the course of events related to

the corporate rebranding process, while the unit of analysis for paper three is the team of newly hired customer service employees. Although the analyses presented in the three papers focus on three different units of analysis based on empirical material gathered at different times, in different spaces and on different levels of the organization, I hope that their combination allows us to holistically learn more about the case as a whole.

As a case, MGP is interesting because it combines many of the rationales for case selection – it is extreme, yet typical, revelatory and longitudinal (Yin, 1994). MGP is *extreme* in the sense that the company's brand recognition is very high but its brand image is very low and it faces extreme challenges in repairing this image, as described in the confessionary tale. This situation is a result of multiple factors, including the company's position on the market, its history, its customer service practices and its ownership. On the other hand, the idea of focusing on branding as a way to move the company forward – internally as well as externally– is *typical* in many large organizations. As noted in the introduction, branding is the current zeitgeist. The way in which MGP conducts branding probably does not differ significantly from how other organizations engage in this type of activity. In MGP, the process was driven by an external agency with an impressive record and a former marketing director for Coca-Cola. The case is also *revelatory* in the sense that it is rare for a researcher to be able to observe a corporate branding process as it unfolds, and to have access to both the management's design process and the implementation of the branding strategy among employees. Finally, the case study was conducted *longitudinally* in order to gain an understanding of how the employees and managers discussed branding over time (from October 2007 until February 2010).

In sum, I argue that MGP has great potential as a theoretical sampled case: a case that is likely to replicate or challenge the emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), even though MGP was pre-selected as the case company. Its characteristics of being both extreme and typical, together with my privileged access as an in-house ethnographer, fostered both revelatory and longitudinal empirical material.

Together, these factors provide a unique opportunity to mobilize the empirical material as a critical dialog partner in theory development.

Epistemological basis

This dissertation adopts a critical, social constructivist perspective on organizational communication (Allen, 2005). A social constructivist approach implies a certain epistemological position that challenges the classic positivistic and objective researcher's essentialist claims that certain phenomena are natural, inevitable and universal (see, for example, Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

I assert that humans construct their world through language in interactions and social practices (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Language is thus not merely seen as a representational mirror of something "out there" or "in there", but as a constructional element of our world and identities. In this dissertation, the social constructivist approach helps in the identification and illumination of the ways that organizational actors, both managers and employees, produce, reproduce and change meanings about their individual and collective identities, and in critically assessing how the brand and branding as a dominant discourse aims to regulate these identities and identification processes. In this view, identities are not stable entities encompassing an essence but something that is fluent, unstable and ambiguous, and constructed in the course of interactions among people through language (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

Identification is thus not viewed as a cognitive process but as "communicative acts illustrative of one's attachment to one or more identity structures" (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002, p. 7). For example, Scott, Corman and Cheney (1998) stress that identification has a dualistic, multiplistic and situational character. They view identity as a structure, a source of individual expressions of self (e.g., "our organization identity") and an expression of such an identity (e.g., "my organizational identity"). This identity functions as an anchor of self that can be referred to, as it constitutes a specific set of resources and rules for interactions

with others (Scott et al., 1998). By drawing on a certain collective identity discourse in our interactions with others, we also produce, reproduce and alter that identity, as we communicatively display our belonging to the collective.

Therefore, I do not view the employees of MGP as carriers of subjective meaning – a certain worldview that I extract from my empirical material. I am instead interested in how the structures or discourses of MGP's brand and branding carry a certain dominant meaning and appropriate subject positions to individuals, which are then embraced or resisted through the communicative acts of identification. In paper one, for example, I investigate how employees negotiate the identities outsiders prescribe to them as members of MGP, while in paper three I analyze how the management articulates certain discourses that are used to regulate the identity of MGP's employees – and how employees identify and/or resist these discourses in certain situations.

As the power and resistance dynamics inherent in the discourses are of particular importance to this dissertation, a critical approach seems appropriate for challenging the dominant, taken-for-granted meaning the discourses carry (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2005). The term "discourse" is here used in a broad sense to include all forms of spoken interaction – formal and informal – and written texts of all kinds. I attempt to include as many different sources as possible to build a fuller idea of the way the management and employees attempt to construct their social worlds, and what their discourses achieve (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In other words, I attempt to understand management and employee discourses from a performative perspective, in their own right, and I treat discourse as "a potent, action-oriented medium, not a transparent information channel" (Potter & Wetherell, p. 160).

That said, I have aimed to move from the exclusive discursive micro-level of analysis in order to also pay attention to the ideational level, and to levels of action and social conditions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The ideational level aims for an understanding of "conceptions, values, beliefs, ideas, meanings and fantasies" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 235) constructed

in the discourses, while my focus on the levels of action and social conditions means that I wish to say something about "relations, behaviours, events, social patterns and structures 'out there' which, without necessarily being ascribed an objective or robust character, nonetheless refers to something that cannot simply be regarded as language" (Alvesson & Skölborg, 2009, p. 236). The level of talk relative to the level of action is of particular importance in paper two, where I distinguish between brand talk and organizational practices to illustrate the logic inherent in the talk in contrast to the practices. In the third paper, I further illustrate how these dual logics produce conflicting discursive constructions of 'an appropriate employee' and how employees respond to this conflict through communicative acts. In this way, I aim to understand utterances in their contexts by filling in meaning with the aid of information about when the utterance in question occurs, who the speaker is, who the speaker is talking to, the authority of the speaker relative to the authority of the listener, and how the utterance relates to other utterances occurring both before and after it as well to other types of utterances manifested in talk and actions in the organization.

Generating the empirical material

This critical, social constructivist approach has significant implications not only for my theoretical and analytical perspective but also for the generation of empirical material. In this regard, the empirical material – including the material from interviews – is interpreted with respect to its social context, as I expect individuals to produce accounts that are considered appropriate for a specific situation and thus reflect a performative interest or purpose in the situation. In other words, accounts are outcomes of a certain scene. In my research, interviews with employees were used as a valuable way to generate multiple, and perhaps contending, articulations of experiences, orientations and frames of reference (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005). From the social constructivist point of view, I suspect that individuals always attempts to present themselves as a sane, normal,

respected persons in interactions, including interview settings. The interview, in other words, becomes a setting in which certain identities are negotiated in order for the interviewee to give a positive impression to the researcher and vice versa. Critics may question the usefulness of the interview: What kind of knowledge may be produced if it is all just "face work"? (Goffman, 1959).

Although employees may wish to affirm or maintain a certain positive identity through an interview, I do not expect this identity to be much different from the positive identity they would seek to uphold in any interaction with other people. Though I view identity as situational, I expect that the patterns, processes and strategies used to produce a positive identity during an interview may not be much different than those in other situations where the person in question has been asked why they chose to work for MGP. Accordingly, the accounts used to legitimize, explain and justify their choices may have been rehearsed before and will probably be used again in future interactions with other people.

I tried to make the interviews as condensed with meaning, experiences and examples as possible, and to use them as a way to learn about certain issues – learning that would, in turn, add new reflections to my understanding of the employees' use of communicative acts. In the interviews with the finance professionals and the call centre employees, I used the means-end-chain marketing research method (Reynolds & Olson, 2001), which is designed to allow for an understanding of consumer decision making and the influence of brand perceptions. It connects product attributes with the outcome of product use and the broader goals or values that may be satisfied by its use. In an employment context, this means that three levels are linked in a simple, hierarchical chain of associations: employment attributes, the outcomes or consequences of employment, and the value of employment to individuals.

The interviewees were asked to rank eleven attributes, which were designed to cover four identification targets: organization, profession, work team and personal values (Scott et al., 1989). The eleven attributes were: 1) "The management and strategy of the company", 2) "The company's position in the market", 3) "The

company's social responsibility", 4) "Career paths and opportunities", 5) "Professional and personal development", 6) "Daily work tasks", 7) "Colleagues", 8) "The daily manager", 9) "Salary", 10) "The benefits and work/life balance", and 11) "Location and office space". Once ranked, the top three attributes were selected for further exploration. For example, a finance professional might rank the attributes "career paths and opportunities", "daily work tasks" and "colleagues" highest. In order to move the conversation to a deeper level, interview questions such as "How do you understand 'career'?", "What are the benefits of a successful career?", "Why is a career important to you?" and "What would happen if you didn't have a successful career?" were used. Subsequently, similar sets of questions were posed in which "career" was substituted with "daily work tasks" and "colleagues". These laddering techniques proved useful for encouraging the prioritizing, explaining, describing and relating of different attributes of the interviewee's employment. Thus, I did not use the interview transcript to understand how the interviewee really *felt* about the workplace but to uncover how that employee *talked* about the workplace. Furthermore, these techniques highlighted a high degree of identity negotiation and identification with the different targets within the workplace.

I found the means-end-chain method useful, as it provided a structured way of creating a space to talk about the themes that seemed most important to the participants without me controlling the conversation. I combined this approach with open-ended questions, always attempting to encourage interviewees to tell stories about certain events and recall details of whom they were with and how they reacted. I attempted to make the interview conversational, so that both the participant and I would listen and talk, and I often used my own examples and stories to obtain interviewees' reflections on various issues – and to build confidence between the participant and me.

The social constructive approach also had implications for the type of observations I conducted. I was not interested in the inner world of specific persons or their subjective feelings. Rather, I wanted to understand how

individuals interacted with each other and how the managerial discourses influenced their behaviours (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This meant observing how the employees used discursive resources or communicative acts to organize certain actions and talk, and also how they constructed, protected, repaired and changed the social reality through talk and action. Therefore I was careful to record quotes verbatim, and also to describe the context of what was said and done. I attempted to focus on reactions and record what I saw and heard in as neutral a way as possible without judging or reading "feelings" into the situation. At the same time, however, I recorded my own reactions to a situation, although these were clearly highlighted and marked as reflections rather than observations. In general, I aimed to produce ethnographic accounts that would live up to Van Maanen's (1988) definition of ethnographies (quoted earlier) by displaying the ways in which the individuals at MGP understood, accommodated and resisted the integrated corporate brand logic.

It is important to note that all of my empirical material was gathered in the native language of the country in which MGP is based. The native language was also the official language in the national part of the company, although the company communicated in English for matters relating to its international subsidiaries. This meant that all official communication was in the native language, and that managers, employees and customers communicated with each other in matters associated with their everyday social lives in this language. As I believe that expressions and negotiations of our identities are richer and more nuanced when we speak our native tongue, it was an obvious choice to gather empirical material in the native language in order to capture the complexity of the individuals accounts. I did consider conducting the interviews in English. However, I sensed that doing so would prove difficult, particularly among the call centre employees.

Working with empirical material in a language other than English has its drawbacks. The translation of the empirical material in order to present it in papers means not only taking it out of its cultural context but also changing the literal

meaning of the words, a requirement that creates a risk that the nuances and richness of the empirical material in the mother tongue may be lost. This places great responsibility on the translator and I continuously found myself in situations where I had to balance the need to be accurate in translating the quotes or extracts word for word with the need to translate meanings to clearly communicate the speakers' messages. I have tried to the best of my ability to translate in a professional manner, although I realize that this is an imperfect procedure. I, however, still believe that the alternative – to generate the empirical material in English in the first place – would have been impossible.

Analysing the empirical material

I have analysed the empirical material using interpretivistic principles of constructing empirical mysteries and breakdowns, as suggested by Alvesson and Kärreman (2005; 2007). They propose a reflexive, analytical process in which empirical material is mobilised as a critical dialogue partner that challenges, rethinks and illustrates theory. This process is a "systematic search for deviation from what would be expected, given established wisdom, in empirical contexts" (2007; p. 1265). Thus, the empirical material is used to discover or create theory rather than to justify it. In this respect, the empirical material is used as a resource for mobilizing and problematizing current theoretical assumptions.

Accordingly, the approach adopted here is not strictly inductive, as it would be in, for example, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Gorbin, 1994). My approach acknowledges that I, as a researcher, have theoretical assumptions when entering the field and that, therefore, the empirical material generation in itself is a construction based on my interests and choices. At the same time, my approach is not based on deduction, where the empirical material is used to verify or test a given theory. Instead, I have taken an abductive approach, which is an approach rooted in my own surprises, bewilderment and confusion when encountering certain instances, events, communication, actions or reactions

that did not match my expectations. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) argue that this methodology is appropriate for theory development through encounters between theoretical assumptions and empirical impressions that involve breakdowns. It is the unanticipated and the unexpected – the things that puzzle the researcher – that are of particular interest in the encounter.

I found this approach particularly useful as an in-house ethnographer because my immersion in the organization meant that I had a deeper, wider interpretive repertoire than an outsider. Therefore, what puzzled me was not simply the result of encounters with unfamiliar territory. The bewilderment I felt seemed deeply rooted in familiar organizational communication and practices. Thus, the breakdowns were both theoretically and empirically informed. In sum, Alvesson and Kärreman's (2005; 2007) idea of using breakdowns and mysteries, as an entry point to the analysis seemed to be the most appropriate, as it emphasises the interplay among theory, researchers' subjectivity and empirical options. This approach balances theory and empirical material, and acknowledges the researcher's subjective interference. In fact, it is the researchers' subjective interference, or creativity, that makes or breaks the abductive analytical process.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2005) argue that subjectivity and theoretical assumptions should not be denied or concealed, but instead cultivated and mobilized in order to reflexively and self-critically construct and answer interesting research questions. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) describe this process as consisting of three steps: "(1) the application of an established interpretive rule (theory), (2) the observation of a surprising – in light of the interpretive rule – empirical phenomenon and (3) the imaginative articulation of a new interpretive rule (theory) that resolves the surprise" (p. 1269). In the current project, this process included numerous stages, beginning with (a) observing and interviewing with an open, yet still theoretically informed, mind. I looked for empirical material related to brand/branding and employee identification, disidentification or perhaps even resistance. Thus, my theoretical assumption was formed by an integrated approach to corporate branding, and by literature on

organizational identity and identification as well as management control and resistance. This also meant (b) observing a "surprise", which often occurred in the field during interviews and observations. The surprise usually manifested itself in my own confusion or bewilderment, a sense that something did not quite add up. Weick (1989) argues that such confusion or bewilderment is a sign that the present experiences are being tested against previous experiences, which prove inadequate. It also meant (c) the formulation of a mystery, which was usually done retrospectively when working with my empirical material and trying to write up a preliminary story of "what is going on here". Solving the mystery meant (d) engaging in more reading and discussion with colleagues grounded in different fields, and trying out alternative interpretations. This became (e) an iterative process of analysing, writing up and reading more theory in order to resolve the mystery. The final stage (f) consisted of writing a paper that showed the development of a (re)solution to the mystery. I aimed to find a solution that I believed was theoretically innovative, while staying true to my empirical material and initial "bewilderment" as an in-house ethnographer.

In Alvesson and Kärreman's paper (2007), this is where the abductive process ends. However, I found that as a result of presenting and discussing my research at conferences, and receiving feedback from journal reviewers, I had return to the initial steps and question whether what I found was really a mystery and whether my solution to the mystery was, in fact, the most plausible one. New theory and streams of thought caught my attention along the way, and resulted in numerous rewritings of the papers presented in this dissertation. I realize that this approach might deviate from a more structured coding procedure, which usually grounds most inductive research. However, such a procedure views the empirical material as objective and robust, while I see my empirical material not only as one text, but also as a diversity of texts that can be written and rewritten in different ways. Therefore, this abductive approach serves as a way to take in and work with the variations, contradictions and polyphony of the empirical material.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to illuminate my role as an in-house ethnographer at MGP and the dilemmas I encountered. Six balancing acts have been discussed: 1) loyalty versus getting even, 2) getting close versus maintaining a distance, 3) being a researcher versus being an employee, 4) inquiring of employees versus inquiring of management, 5) grappling with complexity versus comprehensibility and 6) conducting 'corporate-useful' versus 'academic-useful' research. I have provided information about the research collaboration I engaged in with MGP in order to offer the reader as sense of the setting in which I have conducted my research and its context. By using my own extreme case as an in-house ethnographer, I also aim to contribute to the limited extant knowledge (Alvesson, 2003) of the practices of conducting research within a familiar organization from which the researcher also receives a paycheck.

The second half of chapter has focused on the way I use MGP as a single, embedded, explanatory case; my critical social constructivist approach; how I gathered empirical material through interviews and observations; and finally how I analysed the empirical material in an abductive way, focusing on mysteries and breakdowns. In this manner, I have aimed to describe the steps taken and the compromises made in preparing the three papers, which are presented in the following chapters.

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Organizational Image, Identification, and Cynical Distance

Prestigious Professionals in a Low-Prestige Organization

Abstract

The current theoretical discussion on the effects of a negative organizational image on employees' organizational identification has established two opposite arguments: the negative image may be internalized, resulting in distressed and embarrassed employees, or the negative image may be compensated for through affirmation of a positive collective identity, resulting in strong identification. This study highlights a new middle ground by examining the ways in which prestigious professionals working in finance within a low-prestige organization construct and maintain a positive work identity. The employees cynically distance themselves from the stigmatized organization, while embracing their professional and work-team identities in order to maintain a positive sense of self. Accordingly, they succeed in diminishing the impact of the negative image on their well-being and positive work identity. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to the ongoing discussion on the influence of organizational image on employees' identification.

Keywords**:** Identification, image, cynical distance, identity, professionals.

Introduction

The questions have been posed again and again—at Saturday evening dinner parties with friends, in taxis on the way home after work, and during phone calls with old classmates: "How can you stand it? Working for *that* company?".

Not long ago, I was employed by MGP,[1] the main telecommunications provider in the country. MGP was an employer with such an image—an employer everyone loved to hate. Like many formerly state-owned companies, MGP was considered old-fashioned, bureaucratic, and inapproachable. It was also an employer that often made the headlines, most of which were negative. Changes in ownership and top management in 2006-2007, for example, attracted a great deal of media attention, as the former CEO received a major bonus in conjunction with the sale of the company, and the new CEO started restructuring the organization, laying off thousands of people and curtailing employee benefits. The press accused both the old and the new management teams of neglecting normal business ethics. During that time my employer was everywhere in the media and very often the basic question "where do you work" at a dinner party would prompt a whole night's discussion of terrible customer service, the intentions of new management, the golden handshake to the old, and so forth. Given the situation, the company's image became a part of my everyday life. I was not only a MGP member at work, but also, most certainly, off work. Some of my colleagues left as a result of the turmoil, but many stay and new colleagues joined the firm. I wondered why people (prospective as well as current employees) chose to work for such a disreputable employer and how the negative image of the employer affected the employees' identification with their employing organization. This study—which examines how prestigious professionals construct and maintain a positive work identity when affiliated with a negative organizational image—attempts to answer these questions.

This paper reviews current perspectives on the interplay between organizational image, identity, and identification, which argue that a negative image either have a

significant negative impact on employees' organizational identification and, thus, their commitment and well-being. Or that the negative image may be compensated for through affirmation of a positive collective identity, resulting in strong identification. These two arguments is then challenged on the basis of empirical evidence derived from interviews of 10 prestigious business professionals working in a low-status organization—MGP. The findings suggest that the prestigious professionals engage in two processes of communicative acts that limit the influence of the tainted organizational image on their positive work identity. The paper concludes with an analysis of the implications of these findings for the theoretical discussion on organizational identification and the influence of a negative organizational image.

Organizational image and identification

The interplay among organizational identity, organizational image, and organizational identification has been the subject of intense discussion within the fields of corporate communication (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007), corporate branding (Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Christensen & Askegaard, 1999; de Chernatony, 1999, 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Ind, 2001), and organizational studies (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton, Duckerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schulz, 2000; 2002). The interdisciplinary approach has given rise to a diverse range of terminology, and attempts to explain how the concepts are related on the organizational and corporate levels (for an overview, see Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007).

This paper adopts the framework suggested by Hatch and Schultz (2000; 2002), which aims to bridge the corporate communication/corporate branding perspectives on corporate identity and image, and organizational studies on organizational identity and image. In this framework, organizational identity is defined as "how organizational members perceive and understand 'who we are' and/or 'what we stand for' as an organization" (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 15).

Hatch and Schultz (2000; 2002) indicate that the identity of an organization acts as a basis for organizational identification. In other words, "as the object of belonging and commitment, organizational identity provides a cognitive and emotional foundation on which organizational members build attachments and with which they create meaningful relationships with their organization" (Hatch & Schulz, 2000, p. 16). Hatch and Schultz (2002) argue, that employees' organizational identification is influenced by the organizational image, which is defined as "how we are perceived by others" (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 23). In their perspective, coherence between "who we are" and "how we are perceived by others" stabilizes meaning and increases a sense of differentiation and belonging among employees, while a discrepancy between these two perspectives may be viewed as an identity threat. This threat can, according to Gioia et al. (2000) and Hatch and Schultz (2002) lead organizational members to revisit and reconstruct their shared sense of organizational identity. Consequently, a negative organizational image may facilitate organizational change and calls for organizational actions and identity work to adjust image-related beliefs among organizational members or outsiders (Gioia et al., 2000; Elsback and Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

These studies (Gioia et al., Elsback and Kramer; Hatch & Schulz, 2000; 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) while focusing on the organizational level originate from research on organizational identification at individual level conducted within the social identity theory perspective. Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive their self-concepts through social identification based on their memberships in certain groups. Social identification is viewed as a cognitive process, "a perception of belongingness to a group and a sense of oneness with the group" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 1989). A central tenet of social identity theory is that individuals identify for self-enhancement purposes, as they have a fundamental need to preserve a positive self-concept. Accordingly, the degree of identification is significantly related to the status of the target group. Therefore, researchers focusing on organizational identification suggest that the process of organizational identification is enhanced by a positive organizational image, as a positive

organizational image leads employees to "bask in the reflected glory" (Cialdini et al., 1976, cited in Dutton et al., 1994, p. 240). That the organization's identity and image serve as significant sources of identity for the individuals employed in that organization is argued by several social identity theory scholars. Pratt (2000), for example, suggests that organizations may become self-defining or even self-referential to employees. Dutton et al. (1994) take a similar stance, arguing that "a person's well-being and behavior are affected both by the attributes they ascribe to themselves and by those they believe others infer about them from their organizational membership" (p. 240).

Studies of knowledge workers indicate that the image of the organization may be of particular concern for this group of professionals (Alvesson, 2000; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Empson, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; May, Korczynski, & Frenkel, 2002). Kärreman and Rylander's (2008) study of a multinational IT/management consultancy firm shows that the company's positive brand enhances the professionals' organizational identification, as the organizational image provides confirmation of the individuals' elite status. Similarly, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) argues that organizational members of business schools care about how their organizations are described by others because their social identities and self-esteem are connected to the identity and image of their organizations. In the context of professional service firms, Empson (2004) argues that the image of an organization signifies the quality of the service provided by the professionals within that organization. Another study, which find that professionals tend to employ a marketization strategy with regard to their career (May et al., 2002), leads us to expect that professionals may chose or avoid organizations on the basis of the latter's ability to enhance an individual's personal brand on the labor market (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005).

In light of these findings, one question naturally arises: what happens when high-status professionals are affiliated with low-status organizations?

A negative organizational image

To date, although we have some indications of how employees are influenced by their employer's image, we know little about how professionals handle a negative organizational image. Dutton and Duckerich's (1991) case study of the New York Port Authority illustrates how a negative image challenges the collective, organizational identity and creates distress among employees. Dutton and Duckerich demonstrated how outsiders' negative assessments of an organization's identity are internalized. In another article, Dutton et al. (1994) conclude that being a member of an organization with a damaged image may result in "shame, disgrace, or embarrassment" (p. 242), and, ultimately, "depression and stress" (p. 240). The consequences of affiliations with low-status organizations are generally described as "less identification, less commitment and less job satisfaction" (Terry, 2003, p. 229).

On this basis, social identity theory argues that individuals are likely to take actions to repair the organizational identity in order to affirm a positive collective self. These collective identity repair processes have been researched in a variety of contexts. In their study of how business school rankings affect organizational members, Elsback and Kramer (1996) find that organizational members engaged in communicative acts with the aim of reducing the dissonance between external and internal assessments of organizational identity. They do so by highlighting alternate identity traits and comparison groups. Research into mergers between high-status and low-status companies illustrates that social creativity and social competition strategies are commonly used by members of the low-status group to change the social belief system of the group with regard to their group's identity (Haslam, 2004; Terry, 2003).

Another growing body of literature on dirty work addresses how physically, socially, and morally tainted workers deal with the stigmatized image of their occupation. This stream of research highlights a variety of taint-management techniques (reframing, refocusing, recalibrating, and social weighting) that enables

dirty workers to maintain their self-esteem and even express pride in their work by discursively framing their collective identity in more favorable terms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Dick, 2005; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Meisenbach, 2008; Tracy & Scott, 2006). These studies conclude that a negative image has a limited negative impact on the dirty workers' well-being and identification, as they transform their stigmatized occupational identity into an ennobling collective identity with which they can identify and through which they can gain an esteem-enhancing social identity. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) even argued that dirty workers identify more with their stigmatized occupation than may be the case for those in occupations with a more prestigious image.

In sum, although these studies cover various organizational and occupational contexts, they offer interesting insight into how a negative image influences employees' identification and identity processes. They highlight two alternatives available to employees facing identity threats arising from others' negative assessments of the organizational identity. First, employees might accept and internalize the negative image, which will have a negative impact on the their self-esteem and identification (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Terry, 2003). Second, employees might challenge outsiders' negative assessments and discursively frame their collective identity in positive terms using various communicative acts (taint-management techniques, social creativity, social competition, etc.). This would, in turn, lead to high identification (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Haslam, 2004; Kreiner et al., 2006; Terry, 2003). Furthermore, Kreiner et al. (2006) suggest that there might be a range of responses between these two poles, although empirical evidence of these more nuanced responses to a tainted organizational image is lacking. Moreover, our knowledge about how a tainted image influences the interrelation between the multiple identification targets available in the workplace, especially the interrelation between occupational, organizational, and work-team identities, is limited.

A communicative perspective

This paper aims to extend extant knowledge of how a negative organizational image influence employees' organizational identification by shifting the interpretative lens away from the social identity theory perspective of organizational identification as a cognitive process. Instead, this paper moves towards Scott, Corman, and Cheney's (1998) understanding of identification as those interactions or behaviors illustrating one belongingness to a certain identity. These authors emphasize that language is an important indicator of identification, as we express our attachment to various collectives through communication with others (Scott et al., 1998).

Accordingly, in the following analysis, I conform to Kuhn and Nelsons (2002) definition of identification as "communicative acts illustrative of one's attachment to one or more identity structures" (p. 7). Kuhn and Nelson (2002) also embrace Scott et al.'s (1998) focus on the dualistic, multiplistic, and situational nature of identification. In Scott et al.'s (1998) view, identity is both a source of individual expressions of self (e.g., "our organization identity") and an expression of such an identity (e.g., "my organizational identity"). Therefore, a collective group identity (i.e., an identity that is organizational, professional, or work-team related) defines "who we are" on the basis of social memberships. This identity functions as an anchor of self that can be referred to, as it constitutes a specific set of resources and rules for interactions with others (Scott et al., 1998). By drawing on a certain collective identity discourse in our interactions with others, we also produce, reproduce, and alter that identity, as we communicatively display our belongingness to the collective. Similarly, the case studies conducted within the realms of social identity theory and dirty work show that the communicative acts are not just a passive transmitters of the collective, identity structure; employees tweak the identity by engaging in various reframing activities, such as taint-management techniques.

Scott et al. (1998) emphasize not only the dualistic nature of identification but also it multiplicity. In the social identity literature, the tainted image leads the organizational members to negotiate identities that draw upon positive identification and thus reframe the collective identity. The multiplicity of identification, however, also creates the possibility that individuals may shift from identification to disidentification with a particular target, and the possibility that a particular identity is abandoned in favor of another. Finally, Scott et al. (1998) suggest that the situation and the audience significantly influence the identity with which we choose to identify. Therefore, their framework for understanding identification may provide a more nuanced understanding of how various degrees, forms, and shifts of identification enable employees to either embrace or/and distance themselves from the organizational identity as it is represented in the organizational image.

Research design

This paper examines how a negative image influences employees' identification. More specifically, it analyzes how prestigious professionals construct and maintain a positive work identity when they are affiliated with a stigmatized organization. For this purpose, the empirical research focuses on a single organization with a negative image (MGP) and 10 highly prestigious professionals working in finance-related positions within that tainted organization.

The case

MGP is a national telecommunications provider. It had approximately 2.5 million customers and 13,000 employees at the time of the study (early 2008). On the basis of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989), the company was selected as an extreme example of a company with a negative image. At the time of the case study, all internal and external image analyses showed a drastic fall in the rankings

from somewhat negative to critical. One example of this decline was the yearly ranking of 140 national based companies' corporate reputations in a domestic magazine. In May 2006, MGP was ranked 46th, but by May 2007 it was ranked 129th. By May 2008, its rank had fallen to 136. Although such rankings may not provide a complete picture, they do indicate that MGP's external image was far from positive.

Respondents

The empirical material used in this study is derived from 10 qualitative interviews conducted with business professionals working in finance in MGP. The average age of respondents was 32.4 years (range: 30 to 36 years) and their average length of employment in the company was 3.5 years (range: 1 to 8 years). Two respondents were female and eight were male. All of the respondents took part in the corporate talent program, and were therefore viewed by the management and human resources as key company resources.

This group of respondents was selected for three reasons. First, at the time of the interviews, business professionals were in high demand in the domestic labor market. Employers and business professionals alike viewed the financial profession as highly prestigious, and finance employees were difficult to retain due to their high employability. Second, this group of business professionals handled back-end functions and their responsibilities were not directly connected to the core service provided by the company. This meant that they could, in principle, be doing a similar job in any organization, which made it even more relevant to investigate why they chose to work for a low-prestige company. Third, as these employees were handling back-end functions, they were not confronted with the organization's negative image in their daily work, although they did meet it in their private lives. Consequently, they were not explicitly trained to handle upset customers or other outsiders whose view of the company could pose a threat to their work identity as MGP employees. In other words, these employees could not

rely on a formal organizational "script" to respond to the negative image of the organization, but had to produce one on their own.

MGP provided data from three types of surveys as background information: a) MGP's annual job satisfaction survey 2008, which covered 184 of 190 finance employees; b) MGP's job-entry survey 2008, which covered 13 of 13 new employees within finance, and c) MGP's exit survey 2008, which covered 12 of 13 employees leaving finance. The entry surveys were conducted within the first six weeks of a new employee joining the company, while the exit surveys only included respondents who had voluntarily resigned. All of the data was collected within six months of the interviews through anonymous surveys carried out by the HR department. In the analysis, this background information is used to contextualize the qualitative findings. However, as the data proceedings are unknown, I do not refer to the various parameters' exact values but only indicate whether the parameters were ranked as more or less important.

Generating and analysing empirical material

The interviews conducted for this study were held one-on-one in either the participant's office or in a meeting room. The length of the interviews varied from 50 to 100 minutes, and I took notes during the interviews and taped them.

A structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used to focus the conversation but still allow respondents to address topics of their own interest. The first half of the interview guide was inspired by the "means-end-chain" marketing research method (Reynolds & Olson, 2001), which is designed to allow for an understanding of consumer decision making and the influence of brand perceptions. It connects product attributes with the outcome of product use and the broader goals or values that may be satisfied by its use. In an employment context, this means that three levels are linked in a simple, hierarchical chain of associations: employment attributes, the outcome or consequences of employment, and the value of employment to individuals.

Interviewees were asked to rank eleven attributes[2], which had been designed to cover four identification targets: organization, profession, work team, and personal values (Scott et al., 1989). The top three were then selected for further exploration. For example, a respondent might rank the attributes "career paths and opportunities", "daily work tasks," and "colleagues" highest. In order to move the conversation to a deeper level, interview questions such as "How do you understand 'career'?", "What are the benefits of a successful career?", "Why is a career important to you?", and "What would happen if you didn't have a successful career?" were used. Subsequently, similar sets of questions would be posed in which "career" would be substituted with "daily work tasks" and "colleagues". These laddering techniques proved useful for encouraging the prioritizing, explaining, describing, and relating of different attributes of the interviewee's employment. Furthermore, these techniques highlighted a high degree of identity negotiation and identification with the different targets within the respondents' workplace.

The second part of the interview focused on how the respondents believed their family and friends, professional peers, and the press viewed the company. These questions were designed to obtain an understanding of how the respondents construed the external organizational image. In this respect, my former employment at MGP proved useful, as it provided me with an "insider's" ability to capture the historical and contextual discourses that shaped the respondents' answers (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001).

As the influence of others is of particular interest in this context, it would have been desirable to conduct observations in situations where the interactional character of identity negotiations would come into play (Down and Reveley, 2001). However, as this was not possible, the second part of the interview focused on situations, events, and encounters with outsiders in which the respondent's employment had been discussed and how the respondent made sense of these exchanges.

Scott et al. (1998) and Kuhn and Nelson (2002) emphasize the communicative aspects of identification, as individuals construct their identity through language. In this respect, an interview provides a snapshot of the employees' situational identification and self-presentation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which can be analyzed by examining discursive resources as the interviewees' communicative acts of attachment. A discursive resource is "a unique way of talking about a phenomenon, a socially constructed frame drawn from a culture or subculture that enables members to assign meaning to both their own and others activities" (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002, p. 12).

The analysis was therefore conducted through a multi-step discourse analysis. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Second, based on the ranking of the different attributes and the notes taken during each interview, I identified the main themes, issues and identification targets that, on a preliminary level, demonstrated the respondents' identifications. Third, the transcripts were reread and coded according to the themes, issues, and identification targets selected in step 2. Fourth, this preliminary analysis was compared to the background surveys provided by MGP. Finally, the analysis was compared to other empirical research on the interplay between image and identification in order to develop a novel, coherent framework. This process of exploring and evaluating the empirical material and the extant literature, and developing different perspectives on the framework was iterative. In this regard, it followed Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) suggestion to use the empirical material as a critical dialogue partner in theory building.

Findings

This study's findings illustrate the communicative acts of MGP's prestigious professionals in relation to their efforts to construct and maintain a positive work identity despite their affiliation with the company, which is characterized by a negative organizational image.

Responding to the organizational image

The respondents stated that they were confronted with MGP's negative image in a variety of situations: when they were together with friends, family, or acquaintances outside work, and in the media. Respondents indicated that a main contributor to the negative organizational image was the media, which, according to the participants, had a significant influence on the attitudes of their friends and family towards the company. One respondent stated:

> I sense that they [my friends and family] are shaking their heads and wondering: what is happening with MGP? They are, of course, influenced by the press. The media writes about what is going on in MGP: customer service is horrendous, the cables have been cut, they have to lay off people again. I think they [my friends and family] are very influenced by the way media portray us—the press and all the bad stories. Everybody has a story about the atrocious service in MGP. (February 13b, 2008, MGP)

Dinner parties seemed to be a common setting in which respondents encountered negative assessments of their employing organization. One respondent, who spoke of the reactions she had come across, articulated this in the following way:

> We've all been at a birthday party where someone has come up and said that they had their cables cut and was without a phone connection for four days.... People call and cannot get through to the right person, and they are being redirected for an hour. This is the reputation we have and it is really hard to get rid of. (February 8, 2008, MGP)

Although the professionals experienced the effects of the tainted organizational image in social interactions in their non-working lives, they did not seem intimidated by that image or ashamed of their workplace. Instead, the interviews

revealed that the employees cared little about outsiders' negative assessments of the company. One participant explained:

> I know I am supposed to say it is important to me that they [family and friends] have a positive perception of the company, but it really isn't. As long as I am happy here. I think [the image] is important to MGP, but not to me. (February 8, 2008, MGP)

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment: "I shake my head. I don't really get angry. Life is too short to worry about it. It is like, 'oh well, here it comes again'" (February 19, 2008, MGP).

Interestingly, most of the interviewees indicated that they agreed with the negative image, stating that the media and their relatives were correct when portraying their employer in a negative light. In the opinion of these participants, MGP *was* facing problems and the outsiders were entitled to their negative image of the organization, as their experiences matched the reality of the organization:

> I believe some of the stories [in the media] are legitimate. Most of the customer stories are legitimate. When you send double bills to customers, they get angry. We are generating all of these stories ourselves, like when the technicians go on strike for several weeks at a time when they already have problems delivering on time (February 13, 2008, MGP).

As this quote illustrates, the respondents accepted and were consciously aware of the negative image. However, they did not initiate a reframing of the organizational identity in order to repair this negative image, as might have been expected. Some respondents did recall their attempts to repair the image by defending MGP and arguing against the negative stories, but most felt they had lost their motivation to do so. One respondent explained, "It is like a one-woman army" (February 13a, 2008, MGP), while another stated, "In my early years in

marketing, when something occurred, I tried to argue and fight against it. Now I don't really bother anymore" (February 15, 2008, MGP)

Interestingly, the professionals did not attempt to create or affirm a positive organizational identity. On the contrary, they denied having any responsibility for the negative image and held others responsible. In fact, the most common response statement on this issue was along the following lines: "In general, I say 'Listen, I work in the finance department. I have nothing to do with our customers" (January 31, 2008, MGP). Some respondents instead blamed the owners: "It is probably the reputation of capital funds that is causing the negative image in the media" (February 6, 2008, MGP). Others blamed the CEO: "I don't think it helps either, when [he] tells the press that our customer service is appalling" (February 13a, 2008, MGP). Still others accused the communications department: "Someone in communication has a huge task ahead," (February 8, 2008, MGP) or the "bloody technicians" (January 31, 2008, MGP). The organization's more general circumstances, such as being in the telecom industry, were also mentioned: "There are usually no good surprises from a telecom company" (February 13b 2008, MGP). Finally, respondents mentioned the company's history: "People joke about how hard it can be to run a business when you have a monopoly" (February 21, 2008, MGP).

The respondents' sense of autonomy from the tainted image also seemed to enable them to joke about it, and make it easy for them to reproduce or contribute to the negative image. One participant told the following story about what would happen when he met new people:

Respondent: It is fun to talk about how bad and stupid MGP is. It is a part of the game.
Interviewer: Does it affect you when you hear negative stories about MGP from people you don't know that well?
Respondent: Maybe a little—it depends on my mood. Sometimes I agree, "Yes, it is correct. It is awful." Then I tell a story that is even worse than the one they

told me, and I say, "But we are working on it." That is enough; I can close [the discussion]. If people continue, then I don't really want to hear about it anymore, but it is nothing that ruins my night. I just take it easy (February 15c, 2008, MGP).

Another respondent ironically commented that, as a professional within finance, he might even benefit from the fact that MGP was perceived as greedy: "As a consumer, you might say that [MGP] is just a giant stripping customers of money, but from a professional point of view, it can be a great plus and a great challenge that the company is big and earns so much money." (February 13, 2008, MGP)

By denying responsibility, joking and utilizing irony in response to the tainted image, the employees were able to cynically distance themselves from the organizational identity and its negative image. At the same time, employees boosted their work identities by embracing their professional and work-team identities, and they stressed that the organization provided significant opportunities in this regard.

Constructing a positive work identity

The interviewees may seem to be careless or cynical in their responses to outsiders' attitudes towards the company, but their own attitudes towards MGP reflected energy, commitment, and enthusiasm. They presented themselves as committed and engaged in their work, and they expressed high levels of job satisfaction, a finding supported by the results of HR's annual job-satisfaction survey. In contrast to outsiders' negative image of the organization, these employees constructed a different image of MGP as an employer. They did so primarily by drawing upon discursive resources connected with their identities as professionals and as work-team members. The ability to gain support for these identities within MGP seems to be the main reason for the participants' positive attitudes towards their employer.

Discursive resources related to "professional career development" were most frequent in the interviewees' accounts of why they chose to work for MGP. In the ranking exercise, respondents often placed "professional and personal development" among the top three most attractive attributes of their workplace. The opportunity to use their education and to further develop their professional expertise enhanced the company's attractiveness, and, more importantly, supported their identities as dedicated business professionals:

I have an interest in always being in motion, both personally and professionally. To think that I was at that [development] stage a year ago and I have come so far since. Right now, and over the next five years, I will focus on making progress in relation to my career and professional development. So, the opportunities offered by the company are important to me. (February 15, 2008, MGP)

The respondents emphasized their social status as dedicated professionals by stressing the freedom and the responsibility the workplace provided:

You get to participate in some very important projects and in decision making that really matters. At one point, I was the only representative from the finance department on a project involving a 5-7 million [euro] acquisition. I was solely responsible for direct contact with the investment banks, which I found very interesting. All of the cases I have worked on [in MGP] have had multi-million budgets. (February 15, 2008, MGP)

Such references to freedom and responsibility were common throughout the interviews. Respondents argued that the freedom and responsibility in their jobs encouraged them to achieve and be rewarded for personal success. One interviewee stated:

I get lots of recognition. I feel I exploit my potential really well and get recognition for it. I choose to spend very little time on things I am not good at and a lot of time on things that I am good at—and one of the things I am good at is my job. (February 13a, 2008, MGP)

In the interviews, MGP was described as a "professional playground" where employees could live out their professional dreams. Therefore, even though others might have stigmatized MGP, the participants thought highly of the organization due to the work conditions and opportunities the company provided.

The same pattern was evident in the entry reports, where "professional and personal development" was ranked as the primary reason for choosing MGP as an employer, indicating that MGP's ability to support employees' professional identities attracted finance employees to MGP. Furthermore, the exit reports indicated that when MGP failed to support those identities, employees left the company. In contrast, MGP's "image and position" fell in the bottom half of the both survey rankings, indicating that its stigmatized reputation played an insignificant role in professionals' decisions to either enter or exit the organization.

The above gives rise to yet another question. Employees appear to have evaluated MGP largely on the basis of its ability to provide a professional playground. However, are such playgrounds not available in other companies? A number of participants indeed indicated that they could easily work for another company. As one respondent replied: "I might just as well sit in an office at [a bank], [a tobacco company], or [a medical company]" (January 31, 2008, MGP). However, one element that makes MGP unique for these employees is the local work team. As one respondent explained, "It is actually not so much MGP. It is more the division. The work here is within my field of interest" (February 15, 2008, MGP). When asked, "What do you like best about your current employer?", the majority of the interviewees emphasized the strong bond with their immediate colleagues and managers:

I think it is important to be comfortable with your colleagues, that you can talk to them—not just professionally—and that you can have fun with them. If we were totally left to ourselves, without having any contact with each other, I would not be able to work. (February 6, 2008, MGP)

The respondents noted that their work team represented a space in which they could express their opinions, and that it acted as a forum where members showed each other respect and took time to listen. The participants describe the work team as an environment characterized by fun and socializing. Therefore, the work team seemed to function as an anchor in the organization. The interviewees' strong ties to the work team were also highlighted in the annual job satisfaction survey, where the highest score was given to "I collaborate well with my nearest colleagues." In contrast, the scores for "MGP has decent behavior" and "I am proud to tell others who my employer is" were the lowest, which again indicates that the business professionals in finance feel that MGP's negative image is justified due to the company's flawed record. However, this element is of little importance or relevance for these employees, particularly when compared to the advantages of the work team.

The positive evaluation of colleagues in the job satisfaction survey, along with the intense, positive use of discursive resources related to the work team, indicate that the work team supported a positive self-image. In return, employees protected the image of that team by stressing the important function it serves within the organization, and their view that the work team provided them with a purpose within the organization. Respondents often highlighted their own contribution to the team and the team's overall contribution to the organization. When asked, "When do you consider a job task to be interesting and exciting?", one participant replied:

The task has to be analytically complex. They [the tasks] are innovative, so we [the work team] develop our analytical skills and thereby also develop the

business. To undertake a great analysis is what really drives me, because it is not only me who does the analysis, but us. We, as a work team, take on the task and innovate within our field. (February 13a, 2008, MGP)

This quote also illustrates the constantly shifting and dynamic relationship between the two sets of discursive resources related to the profession and work team identification targets. Shifts between these dual targets in the interviewees' identity negotiations enabled the interviewees to construct a positive work identity despite the stigmatization of the organization. They viewed their workplace as attractive and highlighted those attributes within it that supported their preferred identities.

Discussion

This paper examines how a negative image influences employee identification. More specifically, I have analyzed how prestigious professionals construct and maintain a positive work identity when they are affiliated with a stigmatized organizational image. Previous research on knowledge workers indicates that a positive organizational image may be of particular importance to these professionals (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Empson, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; May et al., 2002). Therefore, this study used interviews of 10 high-profile business professionals working within finance in a major telecommunications company with a tainted image. The analysis was conducted using a communicative perspective on identification (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Scott et al, 1989), and the findings showed that the negative organizational image had little impact on the business professionals' well-being and sense of self. In this respect, two distinct communication processes enabled employees to sustain a positive work identity: 1) cynical distancing from the tainted image, and 2) the embracing of professional and work team identities. These findings make several theoretical contributions to the organizational identification literature.

Implications for theory and practice

First, research on organizational identification conducted from the perspective of social identity theory leads us to believe that the organizational image is important to employees: "An organization's image matters greatly to its members because it represents members' best guesses of what characteristics others are likely to ascribe to them because of their organizational affiliations" (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991, p. 548). Accordingly, an organization's positive image are said to contribute to a stronger organizational identification and commitment among employees, while a negative image will result in shame, disgrace or embarrassment, depression and stress (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al, 1994; Terry, 2003). The findings presented here, however, contribute by showing that a negative organizational image has little negative impact on the business professionals' well-being and sense of self. Rather, the business professionals adopted a cynical distance to the organizational identity and image. While the social identity theory and dirty work theories (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Kreiner et al., 2006; Terry, 2003) indicate that employees experiencing a negative image will engage in various tactics to question the legitimacy of the stigmatizing image, the employees in this case find the negative image and outsiders' critical assessments of the organizational identity to be fair and legitimate—even deserved. The employees abstain from "condemning the condemners" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 424), or challenging or completely redefining the outsider's beliefs (Haslam, 2004; Terry, 2003), thus they do not affirm a positive collective, organizational identity, as suggested by social identity theory. In stead, this means that the employees come to disidentify with the organization. While Kreiner et al. (2006) claim that disidentification has many negative consequences, including depression, stress, and possible exit, recent research within critical management studies argues that disidentification may have productive outcomes, as employees gain a sense of autonomy (Fleming & Spicers, 2003). In such research, disidentification is viewed as subtle, informal resistance among employees to managerial identity regulation, a

resistance that can take the form of humor, jokes, irony, or cynicism. This resistance serves both as a driver of and fuel for employee disidentification and through cynical distance, employees actively position themselves in opposition to the organization. Similar forms of resistance can be found in the case study presented here, where employees joke about the company's negative image and even compete with their audience in storytelling. These subtle practices of resistance create an illusion of autonomy. According to Fleming and Spicer (2003), the illusion of autonomy works as a safety valve and prevents employees from either quitting or engaging in more organized resistance. In the case of business professionals at MGP, a similar sense of autonomy can be detected—the employees view themselves as free from responsibility for the organization's negative image. Indeed, this sense of autonomy enables the employees to shift identification targets to the professional and work-team identities.

Second, theories of how employees respond to organizational images (whether those images are positive or negative) rarely take the multiplistic nature of identification—the shifting between identification targets—into account (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Hatch & Schulz, 2000; 2002). These theories argue that the employees will aim to repair and reframe the organizational identity if under pressure and take actions to change outsiders' negative assessments of the organizational identity. In contrast, this study contributes, by illuminating how respondents may refrain from reframing the organizational identity— in this study they simply shift to another, more positive work identity, which are available to them through their professional and work-team memberships. Their professional identities provide them with a highly prestigious identity, while the work team seems to anchor them in the organization and create a sense of belonging. In other words, the lack of organizational identification among these employees has limited negative impact as it is offset by identification with their professional and work-team identities. While social identity theory acknowledges that individuals tend to shift between various social identities at work, research to date does not recognize that these shifts may be influenced by the organizational image. Thus, this study

contributes with a more nuanced understanding of the influence of organizational image on the interplay among the multiple identities available to employees in the workplace. The findings indicate that if an employer is able to support other social identities from which the employees' can gain a positive work identity, then employees may not be threatened by a tainted organizational image. This, in turn, questions whether alignment between organizational image and identity is crucial for employees' well-being, as suggested by Dutton and Duckerich (1991), Dutton et al. (1994), and Hatch and Schultz (2000; 2002). This study suggests that cynical distance may induce employees to accept the discrepancy between the organizational identity and image and even preserve the negative organizational image in order to maintain their own positive work identity.

Finally, the findings also have implications for research addressing the pivotal role of organizational image in organizational identity change processes (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schulz, 2000; 2002; 2008; Ravasi & Schulz, 2006). While such research argues that threats to organizational identity arising from a tainted image lead organizational members at all levels of the organization to work to change internal or external assessments of the organizational identity, this study shows that the professionals do not do initiate such change. Instead, the adoption of a cynical distance, and the enhancement of professional and work-team identities enable these employees to secure their own positive work identities when the collective organizational identity is under siege. The cynical distance provides a sense of autonomy from the organization, while the professional identity serves as a safe, comfortable nest. Accordingly, the disidentification with the organizational image indicates some element of acquiescence to the identity ascribed to the organization by outsiders (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). This is one of the key ideas behind cynical distancing, as discussed by Fleming and Spicer (2003)—ideological consent is obtained not only though identification but also through disidentification. Thus, by resisting the tainted organizational image through cynical distancing, employees also reproduce

and contribute to the negative organizational image by accepting and even reinforcing outsiders' negative perceptions of the organization.

Given these findings, which explain the limited influence of organizational image on identification on the individual level, there is a need for further research into how cynical distancing, in tandem with professional and work-team identification, influences change processes on the collective, organizational level. While the tainted image may not have a negative impact on the business professionals, we might question whether these individually employed communicative acts have any problematic implications for the organization's ability to respond to identity threats. Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2010) showed that a positive image may lead to organizational inertia and limited efforts to engage in organizational identity work, despite the presence of a discrepancy between the organizational identity and image. The findings of this study indicate that individual responses to a negative image could lead to similar inertia on the organizational level. Indeed, two years after the interviews, seven of the ten professionals interviewed were still employed by MGP, while MGP had not managed to significantly alter its tainted organizational image.

Limitations

Some caution must be exercised when generalizing from a highly context-dependent case study, as qualitative studies of this kind offer specific, detailed, context-based information. The objective is not to provide generalizable findings but to offer new insight that might be useful in other organizational contexts. MGP represents an extreme case of a company with extensive, enduring image issues. Similar challenges may be faced in other formerly state-owned companies or industries, such as the postal service, rail transportation, natural resources, and air travel.

Furthermore, the participants selected for this study were prestigious professionals working in back-end, administrative positions. As such, they could

have been working in any other organization. Although the findings provide novel insights into how they handled the tainted image of the organization, we might anticipate other responses from employees working in front-end position or in positions with a more direct connection to the tainted image. Unfortunately, such inquiry was outside the scope of this study.

Conclusion

This paper advances our understanding of how organizational image influences organizational identification in cases where highly prestigious professionals are employed by low-prestige organizations. First, by showing that the tainted organizational image had a limited negative impact on the employees because they adopted a cynical distance to the organizational identity and image, this study highlights a previously unexplored process through which employees handled discrepancy between organizational identity and organizational image. The adoption of cynical distance falls between the extremes of either strongly identifying with the organization as a way of compensating for the negative image, or strongly disidentifying with the organization and experiencing shame, distress, and depression as a result.

Second, this study suggests that the multiplicity of identification— the shifting between different identification targets—is influenced by the organizational image. The findings suggest that employees may not be threatened by a tainted organizational image in cases where the employer is able to support other social identities from which the employees' can gain a positive work identity.

Finally, the study questions whether the prestigious professionals' communicative acts may have problematic consequences on the organizational level, as the interviews indicate that the business professionals may refrain from involvement in collective identity efforts to improve the organizational image in order to maintain a positive individual identity.

In sum, this paper adopts a communicative perspective on identification to highlight the complex, nuanced, and ambivalent responses to a stigmatized organizational image. By focusing on prestige professionals in a low-prestige organization, it challenges the current assumptions about the negative impact of a discrepancy between organizational image and organizational identity.

Notes

[1] MGP is a pseudonym. The name and location of the company have been changed for reasons of anonymity.

[2] The eleven attributes were: 1) "The management and strategy of the company," 2) "The company's position in the market," 3) "The company's social responsibility," 4) "Career paths and opportunities," 5) "Professional and personal development," 6) "The Daily work tasks," 7)"Colleagues," 8) "The daily manager," 9) "The salary," 10) "The benefits and work/life balance," and 11) "The location and office space."

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Managing Integrated Corporate Branding through Brand Hypocrisy

Abstract

Purpose - The aim of this paper is to examine how the management of a low-prestige organization enacts corporate branding in front stage talk and back stage action, and how internal and external audiences respond to branding efforts in these two regions.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on 10 months of up-close participant observations of a corporate re-branding process in which the management team designs, launches and implements a new corporate brand.
Findings - This paper shows that the management of the low-prestige company engages in branding only as a ceremonial activity in order to gain legitimacy - and it works. The management pays lip service to the ideals of integrated corporate branding. Exploring the practices back stage, however, demonstrates that they do not support the front stage performance.
Originality/value - The findings contribute to the integrated approach to corporate branding by suggesting that brand hypocrisy may be a productive way to conduct branding in the specific context of a low-prestige organization. These findings challenge the corporate branding literature's ideals of coherence (Hatch & Schulz, 2003; 2008). However, this case study illustrates that brand hypocrisy is advantageous to the management as it enables them to foster legitimacy by embracing corporate branding ceremonially, while at the same time maintaining the organizational practices that secure efficiency. The findings also suggest that brand hypocrisy may be a productive way to facilitate image changes, which in time may lead to identity changes.

Keywords: Corporate branding, legitimacy, hypocrisy, vision, culture, image.

Introduction

Corporate branding has been in vogue since the 1990s. It has developed by drawing on a rich mixture of ideas, theories, and techniques from fields of marketing, strategy, organization theory, communication and visual design. All have been drawn together under the umbrella of corporate branding to offer a so-called integrated or second wave (Schultz, 2005) approach to branding the organization. Hatch & Schulz (2003; 2008) have been front-runners of this approach arguing that the corporate brand gains its symbolic power by projecting the organizational identity. Thereby, they establish that coherence between what the organization's brand promises and the actual brand experience of various stakeholders is vital. A lack of coherence is believed to challenge the company's credibility and risk damaging the organization's trustworthy ethos. According to Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008), this can be avoided by simultaneously aligning the organizational culture and the organizational image with the management's visions for the corporate brand. This is also known as the CVI-model (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

However, in the current corporate branding literature, there is scant contextual evidence concerning the adoption of these theoretical ideas about integrated corporate branding by management, thus little is known about the talk and actions associated with integrated corporate branding in practice. This is particularly true for case studies of low-prestige organizations. By focusing on both talk and action as well as responses from external and internal audiences in the specific context of a low-prestige organization, this paper aims to critically assess the corporate branding process, which, according to the management, is designed to both facilitate changes in the organizational image *and* culture.

Integrated corporate branding

Corporate branding is different from product branding in its interdisciplinary scope and it takes into consideration multiple interactions with a variety of both internal and external stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer & Greyser, 2006). Hatch and Schultz (2003, 2008) have been front-runners of this approach and have established that coherence between corporate communication and organizational behaviour is pivotal to obtain and maintain a trustworthy brand across different audiences. Schulz and de Chernatony (2002) argue that;

> A well-conceived corporate branding strategy […] provides management with a holistic framework for conceptualizing and aligning the many different activities by which companies express who they are and what they stand for. Thus, corporate branding provides a solid foundation for developing a coherent and engaging promise to all stakeholders. (Schultz & de Chernatony, 2002, 105).

In other words, the brand is expected to reflect the organizational identity "who they are and what they stand for". It is essential that the corporate brand as a symbol is recognized and perceived as trustworthy in relation to what the symbol represents: the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; 2008).

Integrated corporate branding activities are, however, as suggested by Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008), not only concerned with crafting a brand with reference to the organizational identity, but also with transforming the organizational identity in such a way that there is a coherence between what the brand promises and the brand experience that the organization delivers. This means that integrating the external communication with internal efforts is essential to ensure that the organization is "realising the brand" (Hatch & Schultz, 2003, p. 1045). The ideal is that the "managerial and organisational processes align the company behind the brand identity" (Schultz, 2005, 27). Hatch and Schultz (2008) maintain that a close

relation between the organizational vision and culture is particularly important and that the visionary brand values should be based on the organizational culture, in order to create an authentic brand:

> Since culture is deeply embedded in organisational behaviour, brand values based on credible cultural expression will serve to create genuine coherence between the promise the brand makes and the performance the corporation delivers. This implies that organisational members are important contributors to the creation of corporate brand value. The corporate brand most likely to succeed is one that directly connects strategic vision and organizational culture. (Hatch & Schulz, 2003, p. 1049)

This quote, however, seems to assume that the organizational culture is constituted by positive values, which can be used as a productive source for strategically changing a challenged image. If this is not the case, then the integrated corporate branding literature encourages a coherent set of pan-company activities in order to change the culture and mobilize the employees to 'live the brand' (Ind, 2001). By integrating the external communication, aiming at aligning the organizational image with the management's vision, with internal activities directed at the employees, aiming at aligning the organizational culture with the management's vision, corporations are able to obtain a strong, successful, legitimate brand, according to Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008). Fully adopting such integrated corporate branding ideas in practice will possibly have a profound impact on the entire organization's conduct. In an example, Olins (2003) suggests that this requires the management to put the employees at the centre of their branding activities. This is followed suit by Ind (2001) and Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2003) who point out that this requires the management to ease their organizational control while increasingly empowering employees and relying on their organizational identification to ensure 'on brand' behaviour. To some companies such a major turnaround, however, may prove to be an enormous challenge.

In the case I present here, the national telecommunication corporation, MGP, is suffering from a negative, tainted image. This tainted image is believed by the management to be caused by the lack of a service-minded culture. There seems to be some coherence between the organizational culture and the organizational image. However, there is a significant gap between culture/image and the management's vision. The management finds itself in a dilemma in that the current organizational identity is not a desired identity to be depicted and reflected in the brand. The culture cannot be used to drive the corporate brand vision, nor can the culture easily be changed as it is rooted in the bureaucratic structure of the organization to ensure that the organization runs efficiently and creates profit. It may not secure a good customer service in a qualitative sense but the large numbers of customer relationships have forced the company to set up the work process to ensure prompt service in high quantities. Thus, while the management may acknowledge that the lack of a service-minded culture is a problem, there is also strong incentive to maintain the status quo. However, this would also significantly challenge the organization's legitimacy.

Institutional theory predicts that organizations survive to the extent that they are seen as legitimate by their stakeholders. Creating legitimacy, however, may require the organization to adapt to conflicting demands by their stakeholders. I propose that in our current Western society, institutionalized expectations are that the appropriate organization is 'the expressive organization' (Hatch, Schultz & Larsen, 2000) or the organization that brands. In order to be perceived as a legitimate player in the game of professional businesses, engaging in the corporate branding process has become a necessity. Branding has become our zeitgeist as Kornberger (2010) argues. Corporate branding is the new, contemporary myth, which creates necessity, opportunity and impulse to organize differently, regardless of its efficacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By adopting corporate branding ideas, the management show that they adhere to the collectively recognized social aims in an appropriate manner, thus protecting the organization from more critical voices that might question its conduct. But how can an organization adopt the ideals of

corporate branding when aligning the culture-vision-image seems almost impossible?

While the corporate branding literature celebrates an aligned approach and coherence between the external communication and internal implementation, institutional theory suggest that organizations may only adopt such zeitgeist practices ceremonially as they are seen to conflict with other efficiency criteria (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), this creates loosely coupled activities and gaps between the formal ('blue print') organization and the informal organization. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that these decoupled activities are necessary for organizational survival as the ceremonial adoption supports the organization's legitimacy, while the day-to-day operation can proceed in a normal, orderly fashion. While not deep-acting values of branding, we might expect that organizations engage in ceremonial activities demonstrating that they too are occupied with the zeitgeist of integrated corporate branding. Brunsson (1993) labels such discrepancies between decision/talk and action "organized hypocrisy". He argues that decoupling talk about decisions and actual actions enables the organization to respond to conflicts posed by contradictory ideologies and practices.

In the following I examine how the management at MGP enacts corporate branding in terms of talk and actions and how internal and external audiences respond to the corporate branding talk and actions. I use the term 'talk' when examining the management's accounts of decisions, whether in research interviews, press appearances or strategically produced communication material. The term 'actions' covers activities that are typically hidden from the public and are either directly or indirectly related to the corporate branding performance front stage. By focusing on talk and action as well as responses from external and internal audiences, this paper is able to critically assess the corporate branding process in order to highlight instances of both integration and decoupling between front stage talk and back stage actions.

The case: MGP

MGP[i] is a European telecommunication corporation that provides an interesting, extreme case (Eisenhardt, 1989) for exploring corporate branding. According to their own brand trackings, MGP is one of the highest recognized brands, but also one of the most disgraced brands in the country. The management of MGP have tried to change this by repositioning MGP with two corporate rebranding processes since 2004. The third one, which is the object of this study, was initiated in 2009. The extensive focus on building a strong competitive brand in an overcrowded telecommunication market means that the company has the second largest marketing budget in the country. However, allegedly this has not changed the brand image significantly. In a strategic corporate brand document outlining the brand vision for the new corporate brand to be launched October 2009, the current brand challenges are described as: a) "MGP's current communication is failing", b) "the MGP brand is losing confidence" and c) "MGP is concurrently loosing customers". However, seemingly the tainted brand has not had any impact on the financial results of the organization. In fact, MGP's EBITDA increased by 5% in 2006, a decrease by 3,8% in 2007, then an increase by 5,4% in 2008, 6,9% in 2009 and 2,2% in 2010. Still, the management of the organization has put 'improving our reputation' at the top of their strategies during these years and it is generally assumed that the negative brand image is caused by poor customer experiences – and by an angry press who portrays MGP as a slow, bureaucratic, inapproachable company. Thus, according to top management, improving the brand image is not only a marketing or communication task. It also requires the organization to become more 'customer oriented'. Thus, their approach to the brand task ahead is – at least rhetorically – based on an integrated approach to corporate branding focusing on both the external and internal perceptions of the organizational identity.

Generating and analysing empirical material

I followed the process of designing and launching a new corporate brand for MGP from April to November 2009 and subsequently its implementation among employees in MGP's call centres from November 2009 to February 2010.

The empirical material was generated by using three types of sources to capture the planning process of the new corporate brand. First, interviews (Kvale & Brinckmann, 2001) were conducted with key figures in the branding process. The respondents were the director of the Marketing Communication (MarCom) department, the director of Corporate Communication (CorpCom) department and the director of Internal Communication (IntCom). The director of MGP Call Centres was also interviewed both before the launch and after the 'implementation' of the new corporate brand. Second, active participant observation (Spradley, 1980) was done in the HR department. In particular in three meetings where the HR department, the MarCom department and the External Agency (ExtAg) met in order to 'translate' the new corporate brand into brand actions for the employees. Third, documents in form of strategic power point presentation were collected from the MarCom department, the CorpCom department, the HR department and from the ExtAg.

The implementation of the corporate brand was examined by following a team of newly hired customer service employees through their introduction, training and work during their first three months of employment. I observed 13 full time call centre employees between 19 and 26 years of age, three of whom were women. I began with moderate participant observations (Spradley, 1980) in weeks 1-3 during the training sessions. Then, interviews (Kvale & Brinckmann, 2001) were conducted in weeks 2-3. Finally, I individually shadowed (Czarniawska, 2003) 5 of the new staff members in order to explore how employees 'performed' the corporate brand. I also collected training material, newsletters from upper-management and emails sent via the team's distribution list.

I analysed the empirical material using interpretivistic principles of constructing empirical mysteries and breakdown as suggested by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007). They propose a reflexive, analytical process in which empirical material is mobilised as a critical dialogue partner that challenges, rethinks and illustrates theory. It is a "systematic search for deviation from what would be expected, given established wisdom, in empirical contexts" (p. 1265). Thus, the empirical material is used to discover or create theory rather than justifying it. In this case, the empirical findings question the 'integratedness' of an integrated corporate branding process.

Setting the scene

In the spring of 2009 MGP establishes a new Marketing Communication department [MarCom], a unit with the stated mission to insure that all communication across MGP's products is aligned with the corporate brand and the strategic focus of MGP. The director of MarCom is recruited from a leading position at Coca Cola and after a competitive tender procedure they decide to hire an external agency (ExtAg), which is well known and recognized in the industry. They even hold numerous awards for their creative approach to TV commercials. The MarCom director along with the new ExtAg are at the forefront of designing the new brand. Simultaneously, the top management team designs a new corporate strategy. Here the corporate communication (CorpCom) director is highly involved and so is his subordinate, the internal communication (IntCom) director. Their roles are to handle all PR and internal communication in relation to the launch of the new corporate strategy and the new corporate brand. In HR, employer branding is on the strategic agenda and a unit of project managers are working to position the company as an attractive workplace in order to attract and retain talent. Moreover the director of HR is also the director of Strategy, consequently, she has a position on the executive team and is outwardly involved in both the corporate strategy and the corporate branding process. Also, a new culture change project

group, TRC, is launched independently of HR but with direct reference to the executive management team. TRC is an abbreviation for 'Take Responsibility for the Customer' and its primary focus is to change the organizational culture and processes – particularly in the front line - to improve MGP's customer service, as it is believed that poor customer experiences are the main reason for the tainted image. MGP's Call Centres are a large part of the front line and they went through a transformation in 2008/2009. Several smaller units are closed and the new larger call centre units are said to become "world class call centres". The director of the call centres describes their transformation as a "culture-journey". In sum, various initiatives are on the face of it taken to improve the organization's brand in an integrated manner attempting to improve both the image and the culture of MGP. Even a researcher is invited along to study the process and document its success.

Brand talk

The following analysis illustrates how the key people in the branding process talks about the corporate brand and how subsequent actions are taken in relation to the corporate brand.

The need for a new image

In the interviews conducted with the key people in MGP's corporate re-branding process, the MarCom director, the CorpCom director and the IntCom director, all directors argue for an urgent need to change MGP's current brand and gain a new image. The IntCom director in example explains;

We want to get away from this identity called 'MGP is the telecommunications giant'. [...] We have become the big ugly corporation with a slightly monopolistic attitude [...]. Meanwhile there is still a heritage and we do have some heavier obligations compared to our small fast-moving competitors. We

must get away from the image which is mainly about bad customer service, and which is also about the fact that we do not dare to stand up for our own business and be proud of it. And we must also move away from the image that we are so complicated that customers can't stand to change anything in their relationship with us. And then also we must get away from being perceived as very heavy, very large, the image we have of being a big, opaque, unreachable business.

(Interview, IntCom director)

In this quote, the IntCom director points out a range of reasons, why the current brand is failing. MGP's contextual features, such as their history and legal obligations as the main domestic telecommunication provider, are all seen as negative attributes. At the same time more internal features such as complexity, flawed customer service and a lack of pride among employees are articulated as essential contributors to the failing brand.

The key idea behind MGP's desired brand position is that MGP should not be considered a telecommunication giant but instead as a large, domestic community where employees and customers alike feel a shared sense of belonging. In the debriefing document, this future direction for MGP is described in the following way:

MGP is no longer "big" but "wide". MGP is no longer "mighty" but "national". MGP is no longer an "absolute monarchy" but a "democracy". MGP is no longer "[the nation's] largest telecommunication company" but "[the nation's] largest community", thus the new slogan is "… us with MGP".
(Strategic Corporate Brand Debrief Power Point Presentation).

This vision of an embracing community is repeated in the interviews with the directors. However, it is also emphasised that they may not succeed in their vision unless the community feeling is expressed from the inside:

It is of no use if we just make an advertising campaign; these things need to come through from the inside. You know, MGP employees should be proud to sit around the dinner table and say to their neighbour dinner partner: I work for MGP and I am damn happy about it. It is really about inside out, so the employees are really first priority in order to build up some faith, that we are actually going to make a difference.

(Interview, MarCom director)

In this sense, the new desired brand also becomes a new desired identity. A desired identity to which the directors all ascribe certain "dreams" and "hopes" in relation to an improved customer service. The MarCom director states:

I have a dream, that we can use this new communication platform, in the future when our customer service numbers increase, to actually begin and communicate about our customer service. We can not do that today. It is still too dangerous. But the wishful dream could be that we should reach that goal one day.

(Interview, MarCom director)

Also the IntCom director states that an improved customer service is essential if the customers are to get a positive experience and gain trust in their new 'community'.

I hope, that one day it will be like this: the customers call MGP and they get exactly the help they need […]. But first it is about building trust. Trust that this is really … well to begin with a task that MGP wants to do and a little later that this is also a task that MGP can do.

(Interview, IntCom director)

In both of these quotes it is clear, that the directors talk about the new brand vision as – a vision. They argue that the caring community feel that is to be communicated through the new corporate brand can only be gained through improved customer service, but MGP is not there yet. Accordingly, the directors explain that the brand vision prescribes a desired image for MGP, which needs to be actualized inside the organization before the brand promise can be converted into the aspired brand experience. Therefore, the dominant argument in the interviews with the directors and also in the strategic corporate branding documents seems to be that MGP's declining brand image also needs to be dealt with from the inside. As the CorpCom director states, "There are some fundamental things in MGP, we simply need to be better at". The old brand is allegedly not just "fixable" by externally launching; it also needs to be based on internal cultural changes.

The quest for integrated efforts

The quest for integrated efforts is described in another strategic corporate brand document labelled "Recruitment Communication" and produced by the ExtAg. Here the corporate branding process is depicted as two tracks, which run parallel towards "a new DNA". One track is concerned with external initiatives such as "a new communication structure" (more brand, less product), "a new communication focus" (more focus on retaining existing customers, and less on attracting new customers), and "a new story" ("… us with MGP). The other track is concerned with internal activities: "the TRC project", "new strategy (rules to live by)" and "new KPI's." Concluding remarks are: "The story needs to merge both internal and external perspectives … and it needs to be continuously rewritten to match the journey towards a new DNA." This document echoes the previous interview statements arguing that MGP needs to move towards not only a new image – but also a new identity and a new DNA. The road to get there should be paved with both internal and external activities. This integrated approach is also reflected in

the directors' responses: In one example, the CorpCom director explains that they have taken a holistic approach to the entire corporate branding exercise:

> Our point of departure is that this communication really should be, with a very popular word, holistic. In the sense that […] the great vision, all the way from employer branding and the HR area through the Communication area to the Marketing area, is that these things need to work together and we need to talk with one voice. […] It is actually really hard to see the dividing line between HR, Communication and Marketing.
> *(Interview, CorpCom director)*

Throughout the interviews the directors address this need for integrated efforts across the different departments in order to ensure long-term success with their new corporate brand. One of the main initiatives taken to ensure employees' commitment and that external and internal activities are "glued together", as the CorpCom director expresses, is the 'rules to live by'.

'The rules to live by' are described as strategic themes or corporate values. They are: "customer first," "simplicity" and "collaboration" and they are included in the new corporate strategy. These are seen to unite the corporate strategy and the organizational performance - to bond the external and the internal tracks. The need for such rules to live by is expressed by the HR director who states that the new brand strategy "requires that we take out employees' DNA and operate a new one into their spine" (referenced by a ExtAg representative at a meeting with HR and MarCom). Accordingly, the "rules to live by" should guide the employees' behaviour as well as their beliefs. The CorpCom director states that "To get a company with 10.000 employees to march in step with one another. That is damn hard. I think, especially our rules to live by will have a really great effect. Nice and easy." He continues later on in the interview "They have to understand, if we [the employees] do this and if our mindset is customers first, collaboration and simplicity, then we contribute to our common goal". The IntCom director also

argues that the rules to live by is "the complete, reduced essence of the strategy" and should provide employees with an "anchor in their daily lives" and a motivation to "walk in the right direction towards what we want in 2012." The underlying metaphors used here suggest, that there is a need for the employees to channel their work effort into one direction, which is aligned with the strategy and external positioning. Changing the culture to meet the desired organizational identity may however not happen overnight:

> I think we are dealing with an evolutionary process and not really a revolution from one day to the next. The evolutionary process means that we will present this to the outside world and that also includes all MGP employees, and both the external environment and our selves will have to get use to approaching a new identity.
> (*Interview, IntCom director).*

This is also echoed by the CorpCom director who emphasises that it takes time for the employees to believe it or even feel it:

> It is not like we will completely push this and indoctrinate people, because they have to live this. We think that they [the rules to live by] should be internalized nice and easy, because we believe that they should last five or ten years.
> *(Interview, CorpCom director)*

In sum, many of the essential ideals of an integrated corporate branding process are adopted by the directors in regards to a holistic approach across the organization, aligning both external and internal activities, engaging employees through identification with the organization and beliefs in the new rules to live by, while also taking a long term perspective on the brand implementation. In the following we should investigate if this front stage talk reflects the back stage actions.

Brand actions

The following section of the analysis provides a tour behind the scenes of the corporate branding performance in various 'wings' of the company, which are said to work on the integrated corporate branding project. The empirical material is both extracted from interviews and observations and illustrates that the front stage performance put forward by the directors is a far cry from the realities behind the scenes.

The MarCom department

The MarCom department and the CorpCom department (including IntCom) seem to be aligned with each other's activities, although there is a clear division of work. MarCom is occupied with visual identity, developing a new layout for print and online advertisement as well as a new creative universe for commercials on television and radio. The ExtAg conducts most of the hands-on-work and thus, MarCom's role is primarily to facilitate, coordinate and review the suggestions from the ExtAg. The MarCom director describes it (at length) as a 'clean-up' task:

> "I have a girl who only focuses 100% on the corporate visual identity. It is really… can you imagine? Power points, flags in our flagpoles, attitudes about our business cards, have they become too boring? […] There is a lot of cleaning up to do, and this is where we contribute. And then there is something about how we write letters to our customers, […] we need to look at all these letters. So there are a lot of different activities which is launched in parallel."
> *(Interview MarCom Director)*

Though the MarCom director seems to worry about the internal mobilisation, there is also strong belief, that external marketing of the new corporate brand will have an internal, motivating factor:

What will happen is, of course, is that we invest what is needed to get the right impact in the market. This is all about push in the media. It is about how often you will see this on television, how often you will meet us in the streets. And we have some pretty heady goals here, which means that you should have seen us at least three times. And this means, that of course it will have the same effect for employees at MGP. If not a greater effect, because you live it, as a part of your every day life. You notice it more. So I don't think that many days will pass, before the employees will be confronted with positive comments from family and friends.

(Interview MarCom director)

The MarCom director here displays a great deal of faith in the auto-communicative affects of the marketing communication and perhaps therefore, she is only peripherally involved in the internal mobilisation. Instead, the MarCom department focuses their activities on the external launch of the brand.

<u>The corporate communication department</u>
The corporate communication department on the other hand, is given the sole responsibility for aligning the employees with the new corporate brand - and the task ahead seems simple. The CorpCom director explains:

It starts with the creative part. The day before [the launch], a secret gimmick will reach most MGP employees to signal "this is it," and then on the day everyone will get a copy of [name of employee magazine] in the morning, where a lot is written about the new strategy and the rules to live by, but also a lot about why we have a creative platform, with explanations and interviews and so on with the key figures, plus everyone gets to see the commercial before the launch and there is a film about the film, which explains why we have chosen this obscure universe. But really the story is so easy to tell because it fits in, the keyword is simplicity, so it will fit completely and it is in eyelevel and

so on. And the customer is first. Really it fits well in relation to all the stuff we do, so communication wise there is a really good red thread in all of this, so I will say [in an ironic tone], that you are really good if you manage to mess this up.

(Interview, CorpCom director)

And so it happens; the day before the launch of the corporate brand, all employees receive a text message on their mobile phone telling them to look forward to the following days, as something new and exciting is about to happen. On the morning of launch day, the employees can read the national version of the *Financial Times*, "When MGP's CEO today gathers his employees, it is to tell them that MGP in 2012 is Europe's strongest telecommunication provider". On the same day in front of all entrance doors, CorpCom staff hand out a special issue of the employee magazine about the new brand and strategy. With the employee magazine they are given a pastry known as "a snail" (metaphorically, quite ironic since the main idea of the corporate brand was to get rid of the tainted image of MGP as being slow). On the intranet there is a movie about the production of the new advertising universe and also an interview with the CEO about the new strategy. That is it. Then there is silence.

This perhaps reflects the CorpCom director's argument:

"We need to be hard-headed in a world where things move as fast as they do, and with a financial crises and so on. We don't have time to sit down and do an amazing employees programme where you treat your employees in two years and then we will know if it will create better results for our customers.
(Interview, CorpCom director)

The CorpCom director also emphasises that as long as the customer satisfaction increases, then the employee satisfaction will automatically follow and create a

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positive cycle of change; "when you begin to create a happy customer, then you will also create happy employees, and then they will have a positive influence on each other". Thus, similarly to the MarCom director, the CorpCom director seems convinced that the external communication efforts will have a profound impact on the internal mobilization of the employees.

<u>The HR department</u>

Another reason for the sparse activities for employees is perhaps that HR has been excluded from the corporate brand planning process. In the early spring of 2009, MarCom is assigned the task of designing a new corporate brand. They are also given the required resources to do so. In May, when HR turned to MarCom and the ExtAg in order to offer their help with the internal mobilisation, the response from the ExtAg is "The contract we have signed with MGP is only related to MarCom's activities. In case either HR or Communication needs to get something done they must back it financially themselves" (telephone conversation with the ExtAg, 4 May 2009). The lack of financial resources to carry out internal branding processes means that HR is left out of the strategic planning meetings concerning the launch of the corporate brand. In a subsequent meeting between the ExtAg and HR representatives, the ExtAg explains:

> It is important that you guys work together. About 10 days ago, we sat around a table with Marketing [MarCom] and Communication [CorpCom] and we discussed the internal effects of this external communication. Then they said: 'wait, someone is missing around this table: HR!' But that is the way it is, if you are on a small budget, then you are not invited. Only those with a large budget, they are always there.
> *(Meeting with the ExtAg and HR, ExtAg representative)*

Accordingly, budgets seem to determine who is included and excluded in the process. And in this case, HR is left out. Another incident which seems quite

contradictory to the front stage articulation of the importance of mobilising employees, is when in late May the HR, director decides to restructure the HR organisation. Thus, the former employer branding department, which has engaged in some collaboration with the MarCom and the CorpCom departments, is closed down. Some employees are fired; only one employee (temporarily assigned with two months left) is moved to a new department "On-boarding," and told to carry on with her usual activities. The Head of Recruitment and On-boarding comments on the structural changes:

> "MGP should only be branded from one place in the organisation: MarCom. Closing the [employer branding] department is a symbolic way of showing that this is not a priority at HR, though you still have lots of employer branding tasks to perform. In particular, a new template for job ads".
> *(Department meeting, manager of HR Recruitment and Onboarding)*

The temporary worker, who is now in charge of the employer brand, is told to rename all employer brand documents, which she does. The former "Employer Brand Communication Strategy" is now the "Development of a New Job Ad Template". The restructuring also influences the frail collaboration between HR and MarCom. One month after the employer brand department is shut down, a project manager at MarCom contacts the employer brand manager with a problem: "We have produced a brand equity model and presented it to an external agency. They pointed out that we missed a key stakeholder group – the employees. Can you help us?" The employer brand manager reluctantly replies "I am sorry, but we cannot help you, we are only supposed to do the job ads now." The MarCom project manager responds "But we don't know what to tell the employees?" Still, he finds no help at the HR department.

In sum, while MarCom and CorpCom are engaged in activities related to the grand launch of the new corporate brand, HR is completely out of play due to limited budgets and restructuring. While subsequent attempts are made to engage

HR in further branding activities and to include the new corporate brand in other HR operations besides the new job ads, these initiatives fall to the ground due to a lack of commitment from the HR management. They continuously excuse their absence by repeating that the corporation should only be branded from one part of the organization, MarCom, in order to obtain consistency. The so-called holistic, integrated approach has collapses. The HR management has even decline participation in an interview for this study.

<u>The Call Centres</u>

As the interviews with the directors indicate, MGP's call centres are severely criticised not only externally, but also internally as they are considered the primary reason for MGP's negative image. For this reason the MarCom director assures me that the management of Customer Service has been deeply involved in the corporate branding process in order to insure that the brand promise follows suit with an aligned brand experience. She suggests that I schedule an interview with the director of the call centres in order to get their input for my research. And so I do. The interview was held a couple of days prior to the massive external launch and is quite surprising. The call centre director quickly clarifies to me that they have not been involved in the corporate branding process:

> "No. Not at all. Not at all. We… you could say, really we… (long break while she thinks), I think that they should have done that and one could also have done it at an earlier stage. […] At least we need to be aligned because we are a large organisation and we are really a lot of people and we are the image to the outside world. Plus, we know, that we will be exposed to this from day one from our customers. So yes… but we haven't been part of the process."
> *(Interview, Call Centre director)*

The call centre director explains that they await information from the head office and once they receive it, they pass it on to their employees at their daily 15-minute

briefing that "this is what is happening" and "this is the story we tell" and "this is why we are doing this". This is a standard procedure when launching new marketing campaigns. The Call Centre director continues:

> We will not do something extraordinary unless they [head office] tell us, maybe they want a brand game or brand balloons or … whatever it is they will come up with. If not then in principle it will just run like an ordinary marketing campaign. And then we will of course work with it, but it is nothing like we are changing the values or anything because of that, it will just be part of our ordinary training sessions.
> *Interview, Call Centre Director*

The Director of the Call Centres clearly states that she and the rest of the call centre management has not been involved in the process of designing the brand and to her knowledge the launch of the corporate brand is merely an external marketing campaign. Little does she know that the main idea about the corporate brand – at least front stage – is that the call centre personnel should provide brand experiences consistent with the brand by behaving according to certain values, the rules to live by.

TRC, the corporate culture change group

Two months after the launch, the corporate 'culture change group' (with direct reference to the executive management team) try to make some more fundamental changes to the ways the customers service employees handle their calls. In the name of taking responsibility for the customers (or following the new rule to live by: customers first), the culture change group introduces 'the good sale' as a part of implementing brand behaviour. 'The good sale' is conceptualized as an ideal concept of a sales encounter; one during which the customer is well informed with regards to both the product and the process of receiving the product. This is important to the management, as they have learned that many customer problems

arise from misinformation in the sales situation. While we might expect an initiative, which will enhance the employees' own ability to judge what type of information the customer needs, 'The good sale' concept is instead launched in form of a mini checklist. The team leaders are told to sit next to the employees at least 30 minutes once a week to listen to their conversations with customers. During these 30 minutes the team leader is to tick-off on the checklist whether the employees remember to say everything in the right order and manner. While 'the good sale' may improve the brand experience while the team leader is listening, it seems to have very limited affect on the call centre culture. The standardised checklist and the obvious, direct surveillance become object of ridicule among both employees and their team leaders. According to one team leader, taking responsibility for the customer (and thus the new rules to live by) requires a much more flexible approach to the sales encounter. Thus, the standardised format of 'the good sale' is considered almost absurd. However, none of the employees resist directly, but seem to instead adapt situationally with a quite cynical distance.

Responses from the external audience

On 2 October 2009, a new television commercial appears on the advertising block on most national TV channels. It features two well know actors dressed up – in fact undressed – as the opposite sex. The actors are wearing very nature-like nude costumes acting the role of the nudist couple "Clara and Brian". This creative universe is rooted in the comedy genre and while Brian is the nerdy engineer excited about the technological features of MGP's product, Clara is the naive psychomotoric therapist who is eager to learn more about the products from her 'wise' husband. Each quarter, new episodes of Clara and Brian's lives are displayed. Every time a product, a feature or a new offer is communicated through this advertising universe. The creative universe symbolically aims to accomplish at least two things: a) "We want to call on the smile and lower the parades among [our customer]" (CEO, Employee Magazine". b) We want to embrace [our

customers] in a tele-community, where [Clara and Brian] lead the way. It is about the life of the common people, simplicity, sympathy and a sense of community and togetherness" (Creative Director, Employee Magazine). The characters are humorous and playful. They live a simple, careless life as customers at MGP, because – it is implied – MGP takes care of their telecommunication problems and MGP embraces all types of customers (you, me, even nudists) and their problems. Both the technological issues (as Brian represents) and the more user-oriented issues (as Clara represents) are welcome.

Millions of Euros are spent pushing this new communication platform and the presence of the television advertisement is massive. The external launch of the corporate brand and the controversial figures of Clara and Brian also receive extensive focus from the press, which adds to the massive advertising efforts. Clara and Brian receive thousands of friends on Facebook and on the Image Ranking of 2010, MGP has moved from being ranked number 139 to number 120. All in all, the new corporate brand is seen as a success. In the press however, MGP is still frequently accused of mis-treating their customers, being old fashioned and bureaucratic etc. Unlike in the past, the management is now armed with brand talk, a new vocabulary suitable for addressing the accusations. MGP's management can and do always say, "we are working on it". One year after the launch, the national version of BBC's Watchdog spends 30 minutes on primetime television interviewing angry MGP customers who have had disastrous experiences with MGP. The response from MGP in this programme is that "we are working on it". This phrase is repeated again and again. Another example is an article in a national new paper in January 2011, where MGP again is accused of unfair customer treatment. The director of Call Centres states: "We have changed a lot through the last decade, but this is a journey we are on, and of course we can be better".

Responses from the internal audiences

The rules to live by 'customer first', 'simplicity', 'collaboration' and the culture change project; 'Take Responsibility for the Customer' are mentioned in the employee magazines and on the intranet, a monthly 'TRC employee of the month' is celebrated. At the company introductory day, TRC is explained in the following way: "TRC is about creating the right latitude and preconditions for the employees, who deliver customer experiences everyday. We do this by providing the right support and goals for these [employees]". The responsible behaviour required from the employees, in order to deliver the right brand experience, is then prescribed:

> Page 1: (The slide shows five pictures of what is assumed to be MGP
> employees) Heading: What do all these have in common?
> Page 2: Heading: TRC DNA - real simple
> they stop problems, do not let go before the customer is satisfied
> they do not accept poor customer experiences, but take a personal responsibility
> they are competent and meticulous
> they know where to find help in MGP
> they keep their promises
> they go the extra mile to ensure customer satisfaction and they spend the
> necessary time on the customer
> they have empathy.
> *(Power point presentation, company introduction day)*

A couple of attending call centre employees, who have been employed at MGP for approximately 2 months, do not seem too impressed by the performance put forward by the management this day: "To be honest, I think it is boring." Another one agrees "Perhaps if you are higher in the hierarchy, then it makes sense but not really to me. I don't think it made much sense that talk about putting the customer first. I sit in customer service, I know that it [put customer first] is, what I am

supposed to do". The responses here indicate that the talk of 'rules to live by' and culture change is considered uninteresting and perhaps even self-evident by the very employees who are expected to incorporate and 'live by' these new brand values. An apathetic, cynical distanced response seems to be reoccurring among the employees.

Reasons for decoupling

In an interview with a new director of the Call Centres four months after the launch of the corporate brand, I address how the management's talk of rules to live by, customer first, and the TCR programme – take responsibility for the client – seemed in conflict with a strict time-focused performance measurement system designed to ensure prompt handling of customers. The brand values seem to require that the employees spend more time on the phone to ensure quality in service encounters, yet the strict performance measurement at the call centre seems to reward those who are able to finish calls quickly. He explains this contraction in the following quote:

> You have to deliver an economic result. […] We always have to be more efficient. […] You can not just let go of it [efficiency] because the quality you would get in terms of customer satisfaction can never compensate for [a high] average handling time. […] That is a fact. Either it will cost us hundreds of thousands [Euros] or a bad customer experience.

This means that if his employees were truly to behave according to the brand values, then the organisation would possibly become more inefficient and management would lose its profits. While some of the performance measurements of the call centres are related to the quality of the calls, most of them are related to quantity and efficiency. Thus, the corporate branding ideals become almost

impossible for the employees to actualize. This however, seems to be the ideal solution as it secures the existing efficient production mode of the call centre.

Discussion

The above analysis aims to illuminate how the management in MGP, a low-prestige corporation, enacts corporate branding in front stage talk and back stage action, and how internal and external audiences respond to the branding efforts in the two regions. The findings show that the management at MGP adopts the ideals of corporate branding in a ceremonial manner. Their talk parrots the rhetoric of an integrated corporate branding approach, thus dazzling their audiences – the researcher as well as the external stakeholders – to believe that the corporate branding process will have a profound impact on the internal culture. They mobilise a new corporate brand, a new corporate strategy, new rules to live by and even a corporate culture task force to ensure that everything is presented in a consistent manner. Moreover, they hire a prestigious external agency to shine up the process and gain legitimacy. The wide range of activities becomes a ceremonial externalization of their stated beliefs of an integrated effort to motivate and mobilize employees; but the decoupled actions backstage tell a different story.

HR and the Call Centres are excluded from the corporate branding process and limited efforts are made to in fact ensure that the employees 'live the brand.' While we might expect that employees would rebel, the internal audiences seem apathetic. They seem to have seen it all before, and they consider it (largely accurately) to be brand talk directed to please external audiences. Managements' performance is well received by the external audience, as management has become well equipped with a new brand vocabulary telling external audiences that "we are working on it." Thus, though the brand talk may not be followed up with aligned brand actions from the corporation, the brand talk still has a symbolic value in handling the outside world while maintaining the status quo inside the organization. Though the directors state that they wish that the employees'

behaviour were guided by their beliefs and commitment to the brand, the cultural change seems to be facilitated through checklists, scripts and direct surveillance, which decrease the empowerment of the employees to actually 'live by the brand'. As the call centre director states: "one extra second on the phone, would cost the company hundreds of thousands [Euros]". These findings may rightly be labelled brand hypocrisy.

The concept of organized hypocrisy is defined by Brunsson as "signifying a difference between words and deeds, the eventuality that organizations may talk in one way, decide in another and act in a third (Brunsson, 2003a, xiii). In a branding context, brand hypocrisy captures the fact that corporate branding may only be pursued as a ceremonial, front stage performance decoupled from the everyday organizational practices back stage. The brand hypocrisy enables the management to externally adopt the corporate branding zeitgeist and thus gain legitimacy while preserving the status quo internally (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By launching a desired identity decoupled from the organizational identity, the management gives the impression that the organization is actually doing something to change the pitiful customer service. And the brand talk alone may be adequate to convince any external audience. Brunsson (2003) argues that the main reason hypocrisy works is that talk has value in itself. The brand talk ensures the external audience that their interests will be taken care of and in the case of MGP, the external communication expresses that the organization is responsive to their customers needs and thus invites them to join the all embracing MGP community. Often, as it also seems to be the case with MGP, the external audience has too little insight into the organization to evaluate whether the front stage talk reflects the back stage action. Thus, the management is simply evaluated based on the ceremonial activities front stage.

The findings contribute to literature on corporate branding in three ways by demonstrating that brand hypocrisy 1) enables the management to embrace the integrated corporate brand ideology, while maintaining a more Tayloristic-founded culture inside the organization to ensure efficiency, 2) enables the management to

change the external image, hoping that this will provoke an internal identity change and 3) is a productive solution for low-prestige organizations who may experience great difficulties in genuinely adopting of the integrated brand logic, yet are still expected to do so.

First, the findings illustrating that brand hypocrisy is productive as it enables the management to foster legitimacy to the outside world around a new desired identity, while still being efficient and producing services according to their usual performance standards. This goes against what we might currently believe will create at trustworthy brand, at least according to Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008), who argue that a brand should reflect the organizational identity. In the case of MGP however, a decoupling between brand talk and organizational actions seems to work. Hulberg (2006) criticizes the corporate branding literature for its general assumption of "being universal and applicable to all organizations" (p. 61). In the case of MGP, we witness an organization where a genuine adoption of the integrated corporate branding ideology in organizational action would be far too dangerous for the daily operations. To solve this dilemma, the management instead designs a desired identity, which they communicate externally – and with success – to improve their image, while decoupling the actions inside the organization. The brand talk serves to legitimize MGP and since the current negative image is believed to be rooted in poor customer service, the only way around this problem is to adopt the zeitgeist ideals of integrated corporate branding. However, there are also clear indicators that this organization cannot possibly live up to these ideals. The front line – and particular the call centres – are run under strict Tayloristic management regimes and 'the good employee' is discursively constructed using military (march in step) or bodily (operate a new DNA into their spine) metaphors. This seem to be very different from the corporate brand talk repeating ideas of managing employees through beliefs, values and identification, i.e. the MarCom director statement that "things need to come through from the inside". The ceremonial performance, however, ensures external audiences that the management is actually doing something, to change the organizational identity.

The management parrots the vocabulary of corporate branding which enable them to fight off critical attacks from the press and angry customers.

Second, while Hatch and Schultz (2003; 2008) argue that successful corporate branding rests on the management's ability to close gaps between culture, vision and image *simultaneously*, this study of a low-prestige organization suggests that a discrepancy between vision-culture-image is needed, at least temporarily for organizations that face challenges both internally (culture) and externally (image). While other case studies have shown that the internal integration of corporate branding fails (Papasolomous-Daukais and Kitchen, 2004) and argue that this is a problem, the idea of brand hypocrisy put forward here suggests that the decoupled talk and actions may have some utility to the management. Gotsi and Andriopoulos (2007) argue that in a corporate re-branding process, the management often disregards the quest for alignment, as their aim is to redefine the corporate brand vision and realign corporate associations to a new, desired position. Such an ideal self-image can be, as suggested by Christensen, Morsing and colleagues, used internally to mobilise 'what can be made true'. (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008; Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2011). In the case of MGP, the directors state that creating a new image is of great urgency and while this is ideally supported by an internal organizational culture change, the management note that the internal corporate branding process should be seen as 'an evolutionary process' (IntCom director). The 'rules to live by' need time to "be lived nice and easy" (CorpCom director). While the directors stress that their main worry is that the organization fails to deliver brand experiences aligned with the new brand promise, they are also very direct in suggesting that the new corporate brand is more a vision of the future than rooted in the organization's current capabilities. Thus, their take on the branding process seem to be to communicate an ideal identity externally, which they may not be able to deliver, but which may change outsiders negative perception of 'who they are' and thus break the vicious circle. In example, the CorpComm director states that he believes that an increase in customer satisfaction will also automatically result in an increase in the

employees' job satisfaction. The directors' strategy thus seems to be to 'seduce other to seduce our selves', to push the ideal identity externally in order to change the organizational image and thus hope that a change in attitude among others may also create a change in attitude among insiders. Brand hypocrisy may in this sense be productive for moving the organizational image in a positive direction and one can speculate that this may indeed have a positive influence on the culture in the near future, once employees begin to notice that MGP is moving up the image rankings. This approach seems to differ from previously documented organizational identity change processes. For example in Elsback and Kramer (1996) and Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000), where the management aims to change 'from the inside'. Other studies such as Kjærgaard, Morsing and Ravasi (2011) however, suggest that the change of an organizational image have a positive influence on the organizational identity over time. Only time will tell if MGP's illusory approach will have a long-term sustainable effect as we might suspect that there is a time limit to how long the management can maintain the projected identity if it is not followed up with cultural changes, or perhaps by a new articulation of a new brand position (as it has been the case historically in MGP). Future research may advance our understanding of brand hypocrisy by taking these time-related issues into consideration and conducting longitudinal studies in order to detect managerial brand talk and brand actions as well interrelations between external and internal responses over time.

Finally, this paper contributes to integrated corporate branding literature by examining a low-prestige organization, and illustrating how integrated corporate branding is enacted in this specific context. While corporate branding literature propose best case examples of corporations' successful integrated corporate branding processes, in example Lego (Hatch & Schultz, 2008), Bang and Olufsen (Schultz & Ravasi, 2006), INK (Kornberger, 2010), Volvo (Urde, 2003) we have limited understandings of the particular conditions of a low-prestige organization in relation to integrated corporate branding. These best case examples nevertheless maintain the institutionalised expectations in our current Western society, that

integrated corporate branding is 'the way' to conduct corporate branding, as noted by Christensen and Cornelissen (2010). Thus, in corporations like MGP management are forced to be hypocritical to foster legitimacy. In MGP's case, it seems that a more traditional, marketing approach to corporate branding (so-called first wave (Schultz, 2005)) works for MGP. However, they label it an 'integrated corporate branding approach' despite the limited integration as this is what is expected of them. Consequently, the case also indicates that while a genuine adaption of integrated corporate branding may be suitable for companies, which have positive brand associations (as the above listed), it may be extremely difficult for organizations with a low-prestige, tainted image. Instead, brand hypocrisy seems to be more productive in such cases.

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Living the Brand

in an Iron Cage

Abstract

This paper describes how the management uses internal branding as socio-ideological control to produce an 'on brand' employee identity and how the employees respond to this prescribed identity. Using interviews, participant observation, and shadowing this study reveals the process of coping through cynical distancing among members of a group of newly hired call centre employees. The findings show how cynical distancing grows out of conflicting identities prescribed by management's socio-ideological and technocratic control mechanisms, which fosters simultaneous identification and dis-identification among employees. The study extends the concept of cynical distance as well as advances our understanding of how the tandem of socio-ideological and technocratic control may work through cynical distance. Finally the paper raises the question of whether living the brand in an iron cage is accomplished through internalization of brand values and deep-acting or if a good surface-act through external belief practices may be preferred by both management and employees.

Keywords: Branding, identity, identification, cynical distance, management control, resistance

Introduction

Living the brand is a construct that has gained increasing interest within the branding literature the recent years (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Ind, 2001; Karmark, 2005) as it emphasises the relationship between the organization's brand and its employees' performance towards external stakeholders. The main idea behind living the brand is that employees should "internalize brand values" (Ind, 2001), that is, "the incorporation into selfhood of the values and attitudes of the group" (p. 38), and, thus enthused, be willing and able to deliver the organization's brand promise, that is, to "live the brand" (Ind, 2001). Internal branding is described as a set of leadership practices that focus on facilitating the process of internalization of brand values, such as increasing employees' awareness, knowledge, understanding, involvement, commitment and identification with brand values, which are intended to result in "on brand" behaviour (Balow & Steward, 2006). The strategies for producing this 'on brand' behaviour among employees are plentiful. Karmark (2005) distinguishes between the marketing/communication based strategies and norms/values based strategies. The marketing/communication based strategies are suggested by the literature within internal marketing, such as "managing the organisation's human resources based on a marketing perspective" (Ahmed, Rafiq & Saad, 2003), that is through means of persuasion (Kelemen & Papasolomou, 2007) and high frequency of brand messages using multiple channels (Bergstrom, Blumenthal and Crothers, 2002) and HRM tools such as attracting and retaining, training and motivating employees based on brand values (Lings, 2004). The norm/value based strategies are represented by scholars within internal branding, which extends the internal marketing perspective by putting 'culture' on the agenda (Ind, 2001, Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Wilson, 2001), thus internal branding is used to align the corporate culture, symbols and stories with the desired brand values in order to produce employees who lives the brand, the so-called "brand evangelist" (Ind, 2001).

Critical management scholars see the idea of producing appropriate employees as identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity regulation refers to management's use of socio-ideological control to influence the employees' organizational identification in such a way that the prescribed organisational (brand) values become self-referential or even self-defining. Socio-ideological control thus targets the mind and self-image, in contrast to technocratic forms of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004), which is more directed toward the output or behaviour of employees. The internally-focused branding practices as outlined above offer a systematic and conscious way to direct shared interpretations and meanings, so employees ideally adhere to values and ideals that support the best interest of the brand (and the management) in any given situation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). The terminology of 'evangelists', 'internalization' and 'incorporation of brand values into selfhood' clearly suggests that the aim of the branding activities is to form the employee's subjectivity and through socio-ideological power regulate the employee's self-concept. This more critical perspective on branding is supported by a case study by Kelemen & Papasolomou (2007), which shows that internal marketing signals to employees a certain path of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours valued by the organisation and that this path is usually systematically reinforced as the branding activities reward the employees with the appropriate attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, while punishing or marginalizing those who tend to deviate from the path that has been laid out for them. Also Kärreman & Rylander (2008) agree that branding should be researched not only from marketing's functionalistic point of view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), but also as management of meaning, which "potentially instructs and directs organizational members" (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008, p. 103).

Previous research has illustrated how iron cages of technocratic and socio-ideological control work in tandem, particularly in knowledge-intensive companies, where technocratic means of control are supplemented or even substituted by socio-ideological means of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). However, limited

research has looked at what happens when conflicting identities grow out of management control mechanisms. Sturdy (1998) does emphasize, albeit from a theoretical point of view, that there seem to be contradictory demands in the service sector; unlike in knowledge intensive work, management here on one hand uses surveillance and other technocratic forms of control to regulate the labour process, while on the other hand demanding that the employees are customer oriented and act according to the customer's needs. In such cases, management prescribes conflicting identities to the appropriate employees.

The idea of conflicting identities has implications for the way we think about identification. The existing literature suggests that there is a nuanced range between the poles of positive and negative identification. Pratt (2000) points out that employees may identify, disidentify, deidentify or experience ambivalent identification with their organization. Dis-identification occurs when one actively identifies oneself in opposition to the organization, while deidentification means that there is no connection with the organization. Ambivalent identification is also called schizo-identification by Elsbach (1999) and Humphreys and Brown (2002), because it arises when employees are torn between contradictory thoughts, feelings and behaviour as they simultaneously identify and dis-identify with the collective identity of the organisation. The prime goal of identity regulation is to facilitate stronger organizational identification, but in cases where the management prescribes conflicting identities, the notion of identification becomes much more complex. Identification with one prescribed identity may require dis-identification with another identity, thus resulting in an ambivalent identification with the organization.

Ambivalent identification, however, is a somewhat overlooked theoretical concept. Critical management scholars tend to argue that employees resist managers' control through dis-identification. This resistance may be formal, such as protests or strikes, or it may be more informal, routine resistance (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) such as humour, joking, irony or cynicism (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2002, Fleming, 2005; Mumby, 2005). These forms of resistance

are all outwardly and upwardly oriented against the management. They are both driven by and fuel for the employees' dis-identification, through which the employees actively position themselves in opposition to the organisation. Ambivalent identification on the contrary is rarely mentioned in these studies of resistance, though Sturdy (1998) suggests that employees may actually "smile and sometimes mean it".

With reference to Kunda (1992) Sturdy (1998) argues that "there is simultaneous or alternate attachment and detachment in relation to the required orientation – role embracement and distancing" (Sturdy, 1998, p. 33). On this ground he advises us not to fix employees' identification at one point of the continuum, as identifying or not identifying with the prescribed identity (or role), but focus on the temporal and situational nature of distancing (or embracement) as driven by and fuel for ambivalent identification. Pratt also gives examples of ambivalent identification, where the Amway distributors of the study are moving towards and moving away from the organisation at the same time. In one of the quotes, the respondent describes this process as a struggle, which causes him to occasionally "just flow with things" (Pratt, 2000, p. 480). Sturdy argues that ambivalent identification may lead to surface acting, which is behavioural compliance, in contrast to deep acting, which is ideological compliance. Surface acting is argued to be a form of protection from full identification, as deep acting may lead to stress or burn out. The idea of surface acting is similar to Fleming and Spicer's concept of cynical distance (2003).

Fleming and Spicer's ideas on cynical distance (2003) are particularly interesting when studying 'on brand' behaviour because they argue that employees may perform a prescribed work identity without believing in it – and even perform it better than those who do believe. According to Fleming and Spicer (2003), cynical distance stems from dis-identification and creates for the employees an illusion of autonomy through various informal and often subtle resistance practices. The illusion of autonomy works as a safety valve, thus employees refrain from more organized or strategic forms of opposition and managerial domination

is preserved. On this basis, Fleming and Spicer describe cynical distance as an "ideological consent" (2003, p. 116) and an "inadvertent success of corporate power relations" (2003, p. 160). They take this argument further and explain that employees may not believe in the values, however they still perform them *as if* they believe. This is because external belief practices believe *for us*. These external belief practices are practical, effective procedures, series of objects and actions as well as institutionalised rituals, which enable employees to behave in the right (on brand) manner, while their mind is free to think about something else (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

In this article I want to extend Fleming and Spicer's ideas on cynical distance and present empirical evidence that suggests that cynical distance grows out of identification with competing identities that are implied by managements' technocratic and socio-ideological control. Along these lines I propose that cynical distancing should be understood as a process of coping with competing identities demanding that the employees struggle between simultaneous identification and dis-identification, more than an active resistance against management based on dis-identification alone, as suggested by Fleming and Spicer (2003). The argument is based on the empirical study of management's 'implementation of brand behaviour' in a call centre managed where labour processes are highly regulated by electronic surveillance and quantitative performance targets. The analysis demonstrates how internal branding practices are used as socio-ideological control and how the employees respond to the ideal 'on brand' identity by cynically distancing themselves from their job. Understanding what it is like to live the brand, when working in an iron cage, not only advance the Fleming and Spicer's ideas on cynical distance (2003; 2008), but also provides new insights on how the tandem of socio-ideological and technocratic forms of control may work through cynical distance. This raises the question of whether brand behaviour may indeed be produced through cynical distance and surface acting rather than solely through positive identification and deep acting as assumed by the branding literature.

Generating the empirical material

The aim of the empirical study was to produce an ethnographic account of the way of life (Czarniawska, 2007) of a group of newcomers in a call centre unit at an European based national telecommunication company; MGP. Thus a research design was developed to follow the newly hired employees through their introduction, training and work during their first three months of employment from November 2009 to January 2010. Three ethnographic methods were used for empirical material generation; participant observation (Spradley, 1980), interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007). Shadowing is described by Czarniawska (2007) as "following selected people in their everyday occupations for a time" (p. 17) and it proved to be a useful method for generating empirical for this study. The most obvious advantage of shadowing, in contrast to conventional observations, was that I was able to experience first hand how the new workers interacted not only within the company but also with the external audience, the customers, as I had a separate headset that tapped into their phone line. Thereby it became possible to explore how they, in the actual service encounter, were engaging (or distancing) themselves in (or to) the desired identities prescribed by the management.

The participants in this study consisted of 13 full time call centre employees between 19 and 26 years of age of which three were women. Identifying information such as names, gender and ethnic background have been changed in the following sections to protect confidentiality. The group of newcomers was selected for two reasons. First, MGP had launched a new corporate brand in October 2009 and I wanted to learn how these new socio-ideological ideas were presented to the newcomers and how they reacted to them. Second, as previous research had focused on resistance among existing employees, I wanted to investigate how newcomers would react to such management initiatives.

The call centre's HR department usually hired new employees in bulks of 10-15 employees in order to optimize the introduction and training, which gave me great opportunity to observe a group of newcomers following the same process. The introduction was done in classrooms separate from the newcomers' future work environment. Once the three weeks of training ended, the newcomers would be distributed to different managers and begin their job in separate teams with more experienced colleagues.

The procedure for generating empirical material was as follows. First, moderate participant observation was carried out for week 1-3 during the training sessions in order to observe how the corporate brand was communicated to the newcomers and also how this information was perceived and (perhaps) internalized by the participants. Second, interviews were conducted in week 2-3 in order to explore the participants' motivation to and expectations of their new job. Third, I individually shadowed five of the new staff members for three days. I shadowed participant number 1 on Monday on week 5, 10, 13, of his employment, participant number 2 on Tuesday on week 5, 10, 13 and so on. As there was a minimum of two weeks in between each shadowing session, I was able to reflect on the prior session and allow these reflections to inform my subsequent observations. During the three months I also collected training material, newsletters from the upper-management, and emails sent via the teams' distribution list.

It is worth mentioning that prior to my observations in the call centre I had done observations and interviews in the company's headquarter following a corporate rebranding process involving members of the Corporate Marketing, Corporate Communication and Corporate HR departments. This gave me an insider's knowledge of the organisation and the ability to capture contextual themes present in the management's articulation of brand values and the appropriate employee behaviour. Still, I had no prior experience in the call centre unit. What was new and surprising to the new employees was therefore also new and surprising to me. In sum, I had a comprehensive and rich database to examine how the MGP management (both corporate and specifically in the call centre)

articulated appropriate 'on brand' identities and how the new employees responded to these organizational identities prescribed by the management.

Analysing the empirical material

The analysis had a dual focus. I first needed to investigate how the management prescribed organizational identities for regulating the new employees' work identity. This was done by examining the notes taken during my observations; I had written down pieces of dialogue between the management and employees during the orientation, subsequent meetings, daily briefings and ordinary conversations during the day. I also took into consideration written information, in the form of emails and newsletters, as well as visuals such as posters or other interior decoration. The extensive use of performance measurement was also included in my analysis. I used a thematic approach (Riessman, 2008), carefully examining the articulation of different themes and how these themes were related. I also to some extent incorporated a structural approach (Riessman, 2008), not only paying attention to what is told, but also attending to the telling, in particular how the 'I',' we', 'us', 'you' and 'them' were used as well as the use of figurative and metaphorical language.

Second, I turned to how the employees responded to the ideal organisational identities. Again I used my notes from the participant observations and shadowing – as well as the transcriptions of the interviews. I focused on thematic and structural narratives, which were either told to me during the interviews or 'performed' in real time during my observations. On this basis I constructed a timeline, which helped me understand the process of identification during the three months and also to pinpoint key situations, which were central for understanding the struggles of ambivalent identification and cynical distancing among the newcomers. The results of this analytical process will be reported in the following section.

The case

MGP (pseudonym) is a European based telecommunication provider with app. 2,5 mill customers spread over a variety of telecom services such as land line, mobile, internet, VoIP, cable TV etc. In contrast to many other telecommunication corporations, who have outsourced their call centres, MGP has kept their call centre unit in-house, employing approximately 2500 employees of a total of 10.000 MGP employees. The empirical material is generated in the call centre unit, with the original name "Mobile Customer Service", which was then changed to "Mobile Sales and Service". Here the employees take inbound calls and handle questions, feedback and complaints from mobile customers, who experience problems with their mobile subscription. This means handling a variety of issues related to technical problems, billing, subscriptions or handsets. The problems' range and nature requires some technical knowledge and a fairly good understanding of IT, as employees usually navigate between 8-20 different IT systems in order to solve the customers' problems. The technical competences of the employees, however, received little attention in the new culture change program, which followed the re-launch of MGP's corporate brand.

In October 2009, a new corporate brand was launched after MGP had experienced years of battling a stigmatized brand. According to the Marketing Director, MGP as a former state-owned telecommunication corporation was perceived by customers to be bureaucratic, old-fashioned, clunky and arrogant. A new brand was to change that. The new slogan was "us with MGP". The idea was to break down the negative associations of MGP and instead build up new associations of MGP as a cooperative community embracing all customers with MGP subscriptions, hence the new slogan. In order to deliver on this brand promise an internal culture change process was initiated called TRC.

TRC was am abbreviation for "Take Responsibility for the Customer". Translated to the mother tongue of the organization TRC also means 'thank you'. The management emphasized that customers perceived MGP as arrogant because

the customers did not experience problem solving and responsible behaviour from MGP's employees when they approached MGP. They had to call several times and often had to talk to numerous employees in different departments during each call in order to have their problems solved. The desired culture of MGP was one where the customer experienced that he/she had to call once and only talk to the one employee, who answered the phone. The employee would be able to understand the customer's problem, to deal with it and give the customer a great service experience. This may not seem like an unreasonable requirement from the customer point of view, however, as we shall see, it had extreme implications for the call centre employees. Furthermore, another fundamental change caused by the new corporate brand was a change in customer segmentation. While the current brand aimed to attract new customers, the new branding efforts aimed to retain the existing customer. This also meant that the call centre unit gained renewed focus within the organisation, as they were not only responsible for smooth customer service, they were also more than any other unit expected to deliver on the new brand strategy by selling more products to already existing customers, when they called in with problems.

Producing 'on brand' identities

The CEO himself continuously emphasized the importance of TRC via internal communication. Every month, a TRC employee who had done something extraordinary to accommodate the customers' needs was celebrated. Pictures of the monthly TRC employee were framed and put in the lobby for every employee and visitor to see. Furthermore, new values called "rules to live by" were incorporated into the new corporate strategy, which was launched simultaneously with the corporate brand. These values stressed the importance of a smooth customer relationship; they were "customer first", "cooperation" and "simplicity". The new employees were naturally unaware of this, when they first began their jobs at MGP's call centre; however, in the call centre job ad the socio-ideological

messages sketched the path of appropriate employees to potential employees already before entering the organisation.

The MGP call centre job advertisement contains two dominant themes; 'serving customers' and 'selling'. Even in the heading, the two are included: "Customer adviser/salesman for MGP Mobile Sales and Service". The first few lines of the advertisement underscore the importance of the two themes constituting the right behaviour of MGP call centre employees:

> You will service MGP Mobile's residential and SOHO [small office/home office] customers through the phone. Based on the customers individual needs, you counsel and advise them, when they call with regards to questions about our products and service. With the intention to sell, you tell the customer about the advantages of our subscriptions, terminals [handsets] and data-solutions. The goal is to give the customer a superior experience with focus on individual counselling and identification of needs. This requires ambitious employees, who are eager to reach their goals – and show happiness when you succeed.

'Serving customers' is here elaborated with an emphasis on taking responsibility for the customers' individual needs and guiding them to the best solution. This solution may be a sale (sales are explained in the immediately following sentence). The two themes of 'serving customers' and 'selling' are presented as in harmony, inclusive of each other. The appropriate employee is furthermore described as ambitious, eager, happy and successful. More of these adjectives follow in the ad, positioning the employee as "positive", "full of initiative", "self-driven" and with "a desire to reach individual and team goals".

In the daily routines at MGP's call centre the primary socio-ideological identity regulation also hinges on the themes of 'serving customers' and 'selling'. In the middle of the rooms are white boards where each employee's sales results and performance are listed and updated everyday. The first-level management often facilitate sales competitions, in which the employees compete against each other in

teams in order to improve the sales. During such competitions the atmosphere is intense and the room filled with human noise. A small reception bell is located next to the boards, and every time a team-member manages to sell, he/she rings the bell and the rest of the team will loudly applaud and cheer for him/her – while still being on the phone with customers. Being a good salesman is however not enough at MGP's call centre.

Producing efficient identities

The 'efficient' employee is according to the management an employee who focuses on time and the quantity of service encounters. The 'efficient' employee is articulated by the management in a socio-ideological fashion; however, more traditional technocratic means of control are in use in order to 'encourage' employees' adoption of this efficiency path. The employees are measured and rewarded according to no less than 9 different parameters, which are the following:

A) The employee should log on the phone on time;

B) The employee should have his/her break on time;

C) The employee should be logged on to the phone at all times when not on break;

D) The employee should limit the use of 'freeze'[1] on the phone, the maximum was described as 15%;

E) The employee should handle as many customers as possible;

F) The employee should keep the average handling time short, the max was described as under 300 seconds;

G) The employee should limit the number of calls he/she redirected;

H) The employee should increase customer satisfaction;

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[1] freeze means that the employee is logged on the systems, but the calls are redirected to other colleagues. This was often used if the employee had to follow up on a customer, read information etc.

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I) The employee should increase first call resolution, usually set between 81-85,4%.

All these criteria and the individuals' performances are listed in a "coach report", which are the basis of the "performance dialogue", which the team leader and the employee engage in every fortnight. A-C are also directly observed by the managers and the coaches, while D is incorporated into a tone, which appears every few seconds if a customer is waiting. In terms of E, a screen in the middle of the room displays the number of employees on the phone, the number of customers waiting and the average waiting time. The numbers update in real time every second or so. F-I numbers are sent to the team leader daily and she or her coaches[2] put them on the white boards for every one to see. F, H and I are part of the team provision so everybody seemingly has an interest in high numbers on these targets. The exact targets to be met are sent out every month by email from the team manager. The email usually contains targets on C, D, F, H, I as well as sales targets. If employees fail to meet the performance targets on A-D, this could result in a subtraction of their salary. Meeting the rest of the performance targets usually means an additional bonus. Further bonus can also be achieved by selling products to their customers, the more premium the product the bigger the cash bonus.

The 'efficient' employee is not articulated in the job ad or during the introduction or training sessions. Not until 5 weeks of employment is the extensive use of measurement and surveillance presented to the employees. The following extract is from a meeting held by a coach in order to introduce the performance measurement system to the new comers.

Extract: Getting whipped
The coach in Marion's teams starts the meeting: "Now it starts to count. You have to log on to the phone when you are supposed to. You have to have your

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[2] Coaches are experienced employees who have privileged responsibilities and act as the teamleader's deputy.

break when you are supposed to. The time one has to be at work must be obeyed. In the end it can cost you on your paycheck if you don't. [...] Marion and I don't want to be the bitches, but we get [whipped] with a wet newspaper. I have experienced to be called in my car, and they ask us why this person is not logged on. So they are watching us". Later at the meeting they start talking about the coach report. "Here is the number of calls. Paul has done 3 calls [in half an hour]. We need to do 50-70. Then you are doing a good job. Practice makes perfect."

There are interesting differences in the management's production of the 'serving customers'/'selling' and the 'efficient' identities, which the above extract also indicates. While 'selling' behaviour is rewarded, a lack of efficiency is punished. While 'serving customers' and 'selling' are articulated as taking personal responsibility for accommodating the customer's needs, the strict control system producing the 'efficient' employee tend to undermine this personal responsibility as there is limited latitude to actually serve the customers let alone sell to them. In the set of performance measurements some criteria, namely, G and H, do support the 'serving customers' and 'selling' as appropriate behaviour by measuring the quality of the calls; however, other criteria, such as E and F, are indeed contradictory as they focus on the quantity of calls. It is almost impossible to deliver good results on all criteria and comparing the team members' performance rates also show that they tend to score high on some criteria at the expense of others. Indeed, the conflicting character of the appropriate organisational identities seems to create vast challenges for the employees.

Identifying with the organisation

During the first three weeks of employment I asked the newly hired employees why they chose to apply for a job in the MGP call centre and in their responses they described the employment attributes of the organisation in a very positive

manner. Most of the employees had previous experience from other service jobs and was attracted to the job in Mobile Sales and Service because: "I like to talk to different people", "A good chemistry with the customer, can make my day", "Every call reveals a new task for me" and "This job is just right for me". Some of the employees argued in the interviews that they saw themselves as over-qualified for the job, but they had applied for the position in order to begin a career in MGP. They articulated pride in being part of the MGP organization: "MGP has great products, they sell everything within the world of technology", "I think the technical features are cool, and I am learning something new all the time" and "The best part about this industry, is that it is developing continuously", "MGP has an extraordinary position on the market. They are number 1". This organisational success was according to the interviewees caused by happy customers. "Deep down, the customers are truly happy about MGP." In sum, all the answers revealed high level of engagement at this very early stage of their employment at MGP. The identification was also apparent when the new employees finished their training sessions and were assigned to their new teams. The following extract is from the day where four of the newcomers are introduced to the more experienced colleagues in their new team:

Extract: Introduction of the new comers to their team
The team leader Tania has gathered her team for their daily 15-minutes briefing session. It is a young team and there is a good atmosphere. Jokes are exchanged across the meeting room. Tania goes through various themes on the agenda, she then asks the newcomers to introduce themselves: Mark: "My name is Mark. I am 23 years. I just moved to [name of city] and I am your new super-salesman." The next follows: "My name is Ehsan. I am 21 years. I come from Telemarketing and I am also your new super-salesman". Then the final one: "My name is Lars. I come from Directory Service and hopefully I will also be your new super-salesmen" (he shows crossed fingers). Everyone applauds them and yells, "welcome".

This example shows that the employees in particular seem to embrace and adopt management's strong articulation of salesmanship as the preferred identity. In their everyday work life, the sales are registered in central IT systems, but most employees also list their own sales on post-its during the day and update their own excel sheet in order to keep an overview of their earnings. During the shadowing I was frequently exposed to their sales results and often they asked colleagues if they wanted to compare excel sheets. It is indeed considered very prestigious to be a good salesman.

Identification and dis-identification

In week five, shortly after the management revealed the performance measurement system, one of the newcomers remarks that there seem to be conflicting messages in the management articulation of the appropriate employee.

> Extract: We are like slaves
>
> Ehsan needs to send an email to a customer from an IT system, which is working slowly. To me he explains; "We are being measured on 'freeze time', but look it is really not my fault. The system is working so slowly. (...) We are being measured on 5-6 different things, we are like slaves. But if we sell, then it is okay. Then she (team leader Tania) will say, oh well I can see you have spent extra time on sales. (He opens the system, where he has registered his sales). Look how much I have done. She said it was quite good for a newbie."

In this short conversation it is interesting how Ehsan first distances himself from the 'efficient' identity, but then starts to defend the team leader and himself by stressing that the efficiency requirement may not be met from his side (due to the slow systems), but he is still an appropriate employee as he is a good salesman, thus embracing the 'selling' identity. While Ehsan directly addresses the

conflicting themes of 'service customer', 'selling' and 'efficient', the mismatch is usually not articulated in a strong, unified voice among the employees. Instead, the struggle to fulfil the competing identities becomes salient in the actual service encounter.

In the continuous articulation of the desired brand behaviour "Take Responsibility for the Customer', the management emphasises that by keeping the customer happy, the employee will automatically also keep the employer happy; however, in the actual service encounter this seems to be two very different sets of needs. The following extract shows an example where Marianne, who is one of the most customer-service-oriented newcomers, struggles to keep both the customer and the employer happy. During my shadowing of her I experienced how she continuously made even very angry customers happy. The ongoing monitoring of her performance showed that a high customer service index reflected her customer-oriented behaviour, however, after 10 weeks of employment and her first month on the phone, she started complaining that her handling time was too high and that she did not sell as much as the others.

<u>Extract: Marianne, is everything under control?</u>

The customer is an elderly lady interested in a mobile broadband subscription, but she is unsure if there are enough signals in her summer cabin. Marianne locates and opens coverage maps on her computer, but she is unable to understand them. She puts the customer on hold and asks a colleague, who is unable to help. The colleague suggests she call another call centre unit 'technical support'. Marianne explains the situation to the customer and the customer asks if Marianne could call her back, when she had found out about the coverage. They agree to do so, and Marianne calls the 'technical support' who tells her that she can use a mobile broadband because there is 3G coverage, while she may experience problems with her mobile phone if it only runs on 2G. Marianne calls the customer back and repeats the message she got from 'technical support'. The elderly lady asks if, Marian can send her an offer

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on a mobile broadband and also for a new mobile phone that has 3G. Marian asks for the lady's email, but she does not have an email account. Marianne: "Maybe you can ask in one of our shops then? We usually only send out offers by email." Customer: "Can't you just send it to me by post?" Marianne: "I don't think so but I will ask." Marianne again puts the customer on hold, and ask her coach if it is possible, she returns to her desk and explains to me: "Oh no, I have to find the [standard] emails and print it out my self, it is not good for my freeze time". Marianne explains to the customer, that she will receive the offers by post within a few days and she ends the call. Directed to me she says while taking off her headset "We can put them down now, we will not need them for a while. This is shit! And I have a break in 5 minutes. Maybe I can just finish beforehand". Marianne locates the standard emails and starts reading them. She corrects them, by removing links (because they do not make sense in a paper format) and adds "Visit us in our store". She then looks up prices on a mobile handset and finds a cheap one. She adds its details to the letter. I ask if it uses 3G (otherwise it would not work in the customer's summer cabin), Marianne responds: "No, but the 3G ones are just so fucking expensive. Oh well I will write it down any way". In brackets she adds to the letter "not 3G". Marianne finds more details on the mobile broadband connection, adjusts the information to suit the elderly lady's needs, and then finally she starts printing. At this point in time Marianne is red in her face, she is working fast and almost running to the printer. Time is ticking. The printer is located in another room, when she arrives she discovers it is not working. She returns to her desk, and tries again. This time with more success. Now she tries to find an envelope, so she is walking about in the office room. While putting the papers into the envelope she is interrupted by the coach: "Marianne, is everything under control?" Marianne: "I had to send something to a customer". The coach in an upset voice: "Next time you should log out. You have been on "freeze" for 20 minutes. It is bad for our average handling time". Marianne posts the letter and

rushes to the desk and immediately starts answering call. She did not have her break that day.

While Marianne in this example provides good customer service and takes responsibility for the customer's problem, she is aware from the very beginning that this is not good for her quantitative performance measurement. She gets stressed and in the end, she decides to suggest a handset, which not exactly matches the customer's needs as well as suggests that the customer should visit one of the company stores. By doing so she avoids negative impact on her First Call Resolution statistic even though she will also not be able to log the call as a sale. Perhaps Marianne in this case expects that a new encounter with this customer will cost her more on the performance targets than on her sales account. The fact that she follows through on the customer's request to print (and thereby overlook the standard procedures) shows that Marianne is committed to the brand values of 'serving customers' and wants to take responsibility for the customer. She uses her own judgement to adjust the letter, so the information is relevant to the customer and she agrees to post it, as the customer has no email account. In the end, however, she is not rewarded for her embrace of 'serving customers' as a value. Instead, she is punished by the management.

During my shadowing I observed similar service encounters were the employees struggled to unite the competing identities of 'serving customers', 'selling' and being 'efficient'. Often these encounters were stressful to the employees and though they aimed to take responsibility for the customers, they were continuously punished for not being efficient enough and thereby ruining the performance statistics, as in the example of Marianne. In one case an employee quit her job, as she felt she was trapped between conflicting messages and she therefore could not live up to her own expectations of 'serving customers'. Others kept going and cynical distancing seem to be the preferred coping strategy when they were not rewarded for their embrace of one prescribed identity because it inherently involved disengagement in other prescribed identities.

Cynical distancing

During the three months of observing the newcomers I experience how their initial identification turns into ambivalent identification and that the struggles of ambivalent identification call for cynical distancing as a coping strategy. Christine, describes this development from identification to disidentification in her own words:

Extract: They can't get their shit together

Christine: I went from "waoo!" to… well just say the word MGP and I can't take it.

Me: Did something happen?

Christine: They can't get their shit together.

Me: Who?

Christine: The team leaders. They just expect more and more and they are never satisfied. All that control, I just can't take it.

Me: But I thought your team was all right?

Christine: No. They have all given up. They just sit there in their small groups and are really disengaged. They have given up. They can't be bothered anymore.

While Christine is fairly direct in her assessment of the management and her colleagues, other rarely take an active stance against the management and often find support among their fellow colleagues. Cracks, however, begin to appear in their usual strong engagement. The cynical distance is evident in an emerging apathetic attitude, an increase in the use of humour and ironic comments about management's statements and also by exaggerating the 'service' role prescribed to them. The below extract from my observation notes present Terry, who now seems indifferent to the customers:

Extract: I can't do anything about it

It seems like a hard day for Terry. He solves the customers' problems, but only just that. "I can't do anything about it" seems to be his most often used excuse to the customers. In the calls he tells the customers to either visit the MGP retail store or go online. He makes no real effort to sell, it seems like he just needs to get through the day. He lights up during his break when he plays table soccer with the colleagues.

Terry was usually good at selling, which was clear during the early observations; he seemed self-driven and eager to take responsibility for the customer. A few weeks later, he seems mostly defeated, while his team leader 'surprisingly' begins to praise him for his ability to balance the different demands.

Cynical distancing seems to be a compromise, an escape from the struggle between on one hand wanting to deliver good customer service, and on the other hand being punished for not being efficient. The employees begin to develop other strategies that help them get through the day; humour tends to a reoccurring way to let off some steam.

Extract: You know what you will get from MGP

Marianne and Agneta are on a break. They read an article on the company intranet, where it is claimed that MGP has gained new customers despite the financial crisis. Natalie comments: It must be because you know MGP will remain. We have existed so many years. Agneta: Yes, and you know what you get here. Natalie: Yeah, you always know what to get from MGP. Hans joins the conversation: Do you? Then Lars ironically suggests: You often get a weird tone in your handset. Lars: And a huge bill! Marianne: And you can never get through to customer service!! Everybody laughs at the remarks.

In this conversation the employees joke about the seemingly positive promise 'you always know what you get at MGP' and cynically elaborate on the negative experiences one may 'always' encounter as a customer at MGP, thus ridiculing management's official statements.

Another good example of this is Lars, who at the end of my observation is quite skilled in manipulating the system. He is able to read emails, check news pages online, order plane tickets online and chat to his colleagues on an instant messaging system, while at the same time sweet talking customers and on the surface handling their problems on the phone.

Extract: We are MGP's face to the outside world

Lars dryly states to me: "They [the management] say we are MGP's face to the outside world, but really we still get low base salary and I have to go through sales pitches and three systems before I can get [0,4 Euro] for the sales of a simple subscription. I might as well not do it".

Lars is critical of the management's articulation of the importance of the call centre's employees as MGP's face to the outside world; however he still performs the 'serving identity' – sometimes even in an exaggerated manner. This could be by recommending subscriptions of other providers, if he believes they match the customers' needs better: "[Teleone] has some really good prices. Here you pay [x] cent." Or by offering money back, if a customer complains that their bill is too high. While the customers are sometimes entitled to money back due to errors in the system, most often he does not bother to research the issue, but instead just offer a fifty/fifty split with the customers if "he seemed nice" or "she seemed genuine". As a result Lars earns very good scores on his Customer Satisfaction Index and also a fine average handling time, which are both praised by his team leader. He appears to do a good job as the 'serving' human face of the organisation.

Externalizing beliefs

At the end of my observation period at MGP's call centre, a new management initiative was launched; 'the good sale'. While the employees had learned the tricks and shortcuts to manipulate the performance system, the management was well aware of cynical distanced employees. Thus MGP's corporate culture change group developed the concept 'the good sale' as a part of implementing brand behaviour. 'The good sale' (encounter) was one during which the customer was well informed with regards to both the product and the process of receiving the product. This was important to the management, as they have learned that many customer problems arose from mis-information in the sales situation. 'The good sale' concept was launched in form of a mini checklist. The team leaders were told to sit next to the employees at least 30 minutes once a week to listen to their conversations with customers, while the team leader was to tick of on the checklist whether the employees remembered to say everything in the right order and manner.

'The good sale' effectively transformed the socio-ideological brand messages into yet another technocratic bar in the iron cage. The externalization of belief and the obvious, direct surveillance of their team leaders was not welcomed by the employees, as they found it intrusive that they were told to behave as if they where serving customers, while they felt that they were indeed genuinely trying to take responsibility for the customers. This responsibility, however, required a much more flexible approach to the sales encounter, thus the standardized format of 'the good sale' was considered almost absurd by the employees and therefore reinforced their cynical distance to their work.

Discussion

This study of new hired employees in MGP's call centre has shown how the management uses internal branding practices as socio-ideological control to

produce 'on brand' organizational identities of 'serving customers' and 'selling'. While the employees at first embrace these identities, they are caught in a struggle of fulfilling conflicting demands between the 'serving customers'/'selling' and being an 'efficient' employee as prescribed by the technocratic forms of control. In order to cope with this struggle of ambivalent identification with the organizational identities the employees develop a cynical distanced approach to their work.

The findings of this study suggest a number of contributions to the literature on employees' cynical distance, on management control and on internal branding. First, this study contributes to Fleming and Spicer's ideas on cynical distance (2003; 2008). While they argue that cynical distance is driven by dis-identification and resistance, this study shows that cynical distancing as a process is driven by employees' identification and embracement of the prescribed work identities. The conflicting nature of the demands of the MGP call centre's management, however, means that while embracing the identities of 'serving customers' and 'selling', the employees are punished for distancing themselves from the 'efficient' identity, thus putting them in an impossible situation, torn between different identities. Cynical distancing becomes the only way out. While Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue that cynical distance enables the employees to resist and consent to management control at the same time, because it creates a sense of freedom for the employees, this study illustrates that cynical distance enables employees to identify and cope with management control because cynical distance makes it possible to balance the competing demands through surface acting. Another point made by Fleming and Spicer (2003) is that the employees' performance is not affected by their cynical disbelief, because external belief practices will believe for them. These external belief practices are explained as a relief for the employees, because it allows them to think about something else while doing their job; however, based on the empirical findings I argue that the external belief practices are not a power-neutral phenomenon nor the route to escape, indeed in the case of MGP's call centre the external belief practice of 'the good sale' feeds into the cycle of struggle as it becomes just another element of the technocratic regime of control. Saying the

lines of 'the good sale' script is not by the employees' in MGP's call centre experienced as a help or an easy way to surface-act the identity of 'serving customers', instead, it is perceived as sign of mistrust and an absurd controlling practice as the employees believe they are already serving the customers the best they possibly can. This means that the external belief practices indeed reinforce the cynical distance and becomes an integrated part of the cynical distancing process.

Second, the findings of this study highlight that technocratic and socio-ideological control in tandem may not build on each other or feed each other in a way that strengthens the employees' identification with one organizational identity as argued by Kärreman and Alvesson (2004); instead, it may produce different opposing identities for the appropriate employee. In the case presented here, the management is successful in strengthening the employees' identification of both the 'serving customers'/'selling' employee and the 'efficient' employee, even though these prescribed identities are conflicting. As a result the employees exhaust themselves in an attempt to fulfil the competing demands and eventually develop the coping strategy of cynical distancing themselves to their job. Thus, these findings advance our understanding of how socio-ideological and technocratic control works in tandem. They do not necessarily strengthen the employees' identification with one appropriate identity consequently producing employees who deep-act the values of the organization. Instead, the case shows that the tandem of management control mechanisms works through cynical distance to produce ambivalent identification resulting in (skilful) surface acting employees.

A third point raised by the study concerns the idea of living the brand. The call centre at MGP is inevitably a crucial contact point to the external audience, indeed, a place where management would want 'brand evangelists'. However, this study raises the question whether it is at all possible for employees to deep-act the brand values under the strict regime of technocratic control of the call centre. Karmark (2005) argues that many companies find that their brand is too valuable an asset to leave up to employees to interpret and define. This study points in the same

direction, as the findings suggest that the management may not want employees do deep-act brand values. In MGP's case it seems like the management is almost setting up the employees to become cynically distanced. They recruit highly motivated employees, some even seemed overqualified, and the management then strengthen the newly hired employees' identity as 'serving customers' and 'selling', while at the same time punishing them for not simultaneous being 'efficient' time wise. Managing the balancing act of the competing identities seems to be crucial, indeed the appropriate employee is not someone who deep-act the brand values, but someone who in fact masters the surface act in a way that makes the customers believe that they are in good hands. A good surface act seems easier for the management to control via external belief practices and it is a way to provide good service without the employees going 'deep', but simply getting the job done.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the management of MGP's call centre has used internal branding practices as socio-ideological control to produce employees living the new corporate brand and how the newly hired employees responded to these activities by cynically distancing themselves from their work. The empirical material was generated through an ethnographic study of a group of newly hired employees during their first three months of employment. The empirical material provided evidence that employees' cynical distancing grew out of identification with competing identities, as the 'on brand' identity prescribed by the socio-ideological control was contradictory to the 'efficient' identity prescribed by the technocratic management control. Based on these findings I propose that cynical distancing should be understood as a process of coping with competing identities demanding that the employees struggle between simultaneous identification and dis-identification, more than an active resistance against management based on dis-identification alone as suggested by Fleming and Spicer (2003). The study also

contributes to our understanding of how the tandem of socio-ideological and technocratic forms of control (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) may work through cynical distance and finally it questions whether living the brand is at all possible in the iron cage of a call centre – perhaps 'on brand' behaviour is accomplished through surface-acting rather than deep-acting, as assumed by the branding literature (Ind, 2001). These contributions call for future research to engage in a more empirical investigations of cynical distancing as a process of employees' not only resisting management and distancing themselves from the organization, but also embracing and identifying with their prescribed work identities. This would also require a more nuanced understanding of how different forms of management control work to produce various appropriate employee identities. Though it is often claimed that there might be many organizational identities at play for employees to identify with, it is rarely explored empirically how these multiple identities may support or, as in this case, compete against each other. Often, the question is whether the employees identify or disidentify with their organizational identity; however, this study suggests that identification and dis-identification may occur at the same time and be directed towards different prescribed organizational identities. In this respect, the paper encourages future research to consider the situational, processual, multilevel and perhaps conflicting character of organisational identification. Finally, this study argues for a more critical perspective on branding, which today primarily is theorized from the functionalist perspective of Marketing. As the corporate brand is one of the most powerful organizational symbols for management, employees and external stakeholders, it is an important subject for further organizational studies.

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[i] MGP is a pseudonym. The name and location of the company have been changed for reasons of anonymity.

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