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Placing Branding within Organization Theory

Brannan, M.J., Parsons, E. and Priola, V.

The aim of this volume has been to contribute to the emerging discussion surrounding employee branding with a series of studies focusing upon the realities of ‘living the brand’ for workers at the point of production. The chapters in this volume provide a rich insight into the experience of employee branding in various organizational contexts and in keeping with our aim, the approach taken by our contributors has focused on the lived experience of branding and its wider resonance for sociological debates on work. In this final chapter we seek to explore some of the key emergent themes and issues and call for more empirical work to critically explore the scope and limitations of employee branding from a socio-economic perspective. We also seek to place employee branding into a wider theoretical debate informed by a sociological understanding of the role of branding in contemporary organizations and society. Whilst we think this contribution does much to explore the experience of branding, there is a notable absence, both here and elsewhere, of systematic survey level work that might be used to explore the extent and scope of branding and its impact as an employment strategy for the macro economy. In considering the impact of branding at a micro level, we have provided an initial attempt to establish the wider importance of brand value in contemporary capitalism and the first and final chapters consciously ‘bookend’ the case study material, accounting for the significance of branding for financialisation (the first chapter) and to diversity management in organizations (the final chapter).

The chapters present a range of illuminating themes and ideas providing a significant contemporary commentary on the brand experience. A central theme that cuts across the contributions is the complexity of the branding experience for employees and for employers. The degree of flux, dynamism and contestation that lies at the heart of the employee brand performance stands in stark contrast to the very notion of brand, which at its core, attempts to bundle a range of themes and emotions into one simple universally communicative concept. We take this insight to be significant and, from a practitioner perspective, this alone should give, at least, some pause for thought to those who would seek to harness employee branding in the service of organizational objectives. Those that have grown accustomed to the elegant simplicity of notions of brand image in contemporary capitalism should be aware that the overwhelming experience of branded employment, on the evidence presented here, does not correspond to a series of slickly replicated identical performances demonstrating neat alignment between employee and organization; rather the experience of branding demonstrates fracture, paradox and staccato subversions which have the capacity to thwart rather than to secure organizational objectives and desires.

Albeit primarily empirically based, it is notable that a number of chapters in this volume have, in various ways, attempted to theorise the experience of employee branding and this is something that we wish to continue in this final section. Offering a theoretical insight is of value as an attempt to explore, not only the ways in which employee branding processes actually work, but also how they fit in relation to wider mechanisms and dynamics of organizational and social life. In this way we might better understand the scope and limitations of the branding idea and how it relates to macro-level economic and political issues. In this task we feel that the use of a variety of theoretical resources may help to shed light on the branding process, thus we recognise that we

offer these insights as initial engagements with the concept from a more critical perspective. We are therefore pragmatic, rather than partisan, with our choice of theory and are guided by explanatory capacity rather than ideological commitment to existing theoretical alignments. Rather than offering the ‘final word’ on employee branding we seek here to make tentative steps towards a theorisation of the complexity that has been amply demonstrated in the empirical accounts and see our conclusion as ‘opening up’ rather than closing down much needed discussion in this area. This final chapter, therefore, represents an initial attempt to present some theoretical remarks and make sense of the brand complexity.

Much of the initial literature on employee branding (e.g. Miles and Mangold, 2004) argues that branding can and should go beyond internal marketing tactics (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000) to involve organisational-wide strategies (as noted in the case of HRM processes discussed in a number of chapters). Such strategies are designed to motivate employees to internalise and perform the desired brand image in order to enhance customer satisfaction and organizational productivity. Although the rhetoric of employee branding might originate from within specific forms of functionalist management literature, a key concern in all the contributions to this volume is the critical engagement with the branding concept. Limiting the analysis of employee branding to internal marketing and functional HR issues omits crucial wider political and ethical debates that we see as significant.

Further, the development of internal marketing into forms of employee branding represents symbolically, materially and bodily a move on the part of capital to shift the terrain of control from the interiority of organizational space to the outside life-space of employees *and* potential employees. The impact of this, not only on one’s work identity, but also on other identities outside of work, clearly needs far more

consideration and connects vividly to what some authors (e.g. Willmott, 2010) call the ‘unseen’ side of the production process, where user-customers and user-employees actively participate equally in the building and erosion of brand equity.

On the surface employee branding might be seen as a largely benevolent practice, which, in attempting to improve organizational performance, works to humanise employment relations. The unitarist logic behind this thinking; that happy workers will ultimately engender happy customers, finds little support in the work presented here, either in the voice of the authors, or in the voices of the participants represented in the case studies. Thus, we feel that it might be more instructive to consider alternative conceptions and to move away from functional or practitioner orientated literatures to explore some of the organizational-theoretic constructs intertwined with employee branding processes in order to better understand its dynamics and political implications. It is to this that we now turn in the following subsections.

Employee Branding and Organizational Culture

Our theoretical starting point is to recognise that employee branding, as a relatively new concept, has a deep resonance with wider organizational constructs such as that of organizational culture, itself subject to intense practitioner adoption and academic critique and evaluation. Theoretically then, branding might be seen as yet another attempt to ‘engineer’ organizational culture in pursuit of a rather narrow set of corporate goals, thus fitting into a neo-liberal inspired attempt at the colonisation of worker identity in pursuit of accumulation. The ‘culture debate’ has had a significant impact on organizational practice, and has been both reflective and directive and employee branding may simply be the latest iteration of this practice. The trajectory of employee

branding, for example, shares similarities with the organizational culture literature, initial enthusiasm and adoption by leading people-focused organizations collapsing into growing scepticism, cynicism, and critical inquiry by management and organizational studies scholars and researchers. Culture, like branding, suggests the notion that organizations can and do design the interiority of the employment relationship through careful recruitment and selection, employee development, communication and ownership of corporate values (Ray, 1986; Priola and Hurrell, 2011) with given outcomes in mind. From within the so-called ‘culture-as-control’ perspective, employee branding can be seen as yet another way to manipulate the workforce in order to achieve organizational goals. As the chapters here demonstrate, branding, like organisational culture, certainly exerts influence on organisational members in that the beliefs and values they project work to shape employees’ behaviour in specific ways; it is evident that some ways of being are ‘legitimised’ through the brand, whilst those that are not compatible with organizational brands are de-legitimised. This can be seen for example in the ‘brand fit’ recruitment practices discussed by Hurrell and Scholarios in this volume. It is also clear that, to various degrees, notions of brand are internalised and often misrecognised as something other than overt management strategies (see Ray, 1986). However, the assumption that such conceptions can be uniformly applied and relied upon remains contested and has its limits evidenced by examples in the work presented here. This is also supported by the wider, vigorous debate surrounding the possibility of cultural engineering, with many authors suggesting that organizational culture ‘by design’ is, in fact, an impossibility in any meaningful sense (see Sinclair, 1991; Muzio et al., 2007). Employees can and will deploy their own ‘readings’ of organizational attempts at branding. In the case studies presented here this is reflected

in the wide ranging use of the term (re)appropriation to understand and unpack the employee branding process (see especially the chapter by Tarnovskaya).

Despite this, we think that the debate that surrounds employee branding – rather than being abandoned in the face of the post organizational culture debate – has instead, much to learn from this discussion. In this sense it might be instructive to think about employee branding as a process of *becoming*, itself a performative act of production and consumption carried out in organizational and social flux. Thus, although the employee branding concept might be flawed intellectually and practically, its continued and growing use warrants further attention. Seen from this perspective, the notion that idealized conceptions of brands could ever be transferred unproblematically to employee performances is rendered fictive, yet its practice, and wide interest among practitioners, demands further explanation. Moving the debate away from the assumption that branding can ever be an unproblematic and unidirectional practice is, on the basis of the work presented here, both necessary and desirable. The central issue therefore becomes the need to apprehend the function, however incomplete, that employee branding plays and what impact its attempted implementation has on the experience and management of working life.

Employee branding clearly goes beyond processes of internalisation of organizational values and behaviours (the aim of processes and interventions intended to create a strong corporate culture) in that it emphasises identification but also the representation of the brand outside the workplace as part of the employee's lifestyle and identity. Yet as we have noted, this cannot and should not be read as an uncomplicated process. Whilst we recognise that employee identities, both within and without work, will be influenced by employee branding activities, we also see its implementation as problematic in that it cannot result in a unified and unidirectional practice enacted by

all organizational members in a similar manner. See for example the ‘polysemic brand readings’ in Bennett and Buchanan-Oliver’s chapter and the two almost diametrically opposed readings of the brand by IKEA employees in Tarnovskaya’s chapter. As with many organizational interventions, processes of employee branding are developed within a specific organizational milieu, which will necessarily influence both design and implementation. Equally, processes of branding are always conditional, contingent and open to interpretation and negotiation (whether deliberate or unwitting) between various organizational actors. Employee interpretations of branding processes may lead to ambiguity but also to ruptures and resistance, as evidenced by some of the work included in this text.

It is perhaps employees’ capacity for resistance, which many of the chapters here draw specific attention to, where employee branding may most easily be turned against its architects (see in particular chapter by Russell). Workplace resistance, as a form of misbehaviour at its most basic level, has been defined as ‘*counter-productive activity*’ (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995 and 1999) and it is clear that the brand offers employers (and customers) an important and effective resource to leverage their interests against those of the organization. Employee resistance is also intimately connected with employee identity and the ‘*appropriation of identity*’ (ibid) remains a key dimension in which the conflict between Capital and Labour is played out. In an era where notions of ‘identity performance’ are so clearly articulated by organizations as central to their success, it is little wonder that savvy customers and employees can and do work to subvert this process in innovative and highly effective ways for a variety of ends.

At the heart of the control/resistance dialectic lies the concept of agency and this emerges in the empirical work presented in a number of chapters which highlight how branding (power) and resistance operate at multiple levels resulting in dispersed and

varied modalities of accommodation and struggle (as clearly illustrated in Cushen's chapter). The benefit of a collection of ethnographic work such as this, resides in the fact that, whilst aiming at making sense of the complex social processes that structure employee branding in organisations, it also provides space for variety of voices and experiences that question the orthodox control-resistance duality. Whilst the contributions in this volume do not attempt to reconcile debates on structure and agency in labour relations, on a theoretical level¹, they do provide evidence of multiplicity and inconsistency in the practices of labour relations challenging not only functionalist and bourgeois analysis of workplace relations but also more traditional (orthodox) labour process theorizations. Therefore whilst we can be confident that branding is important and does have an impact on people at work, this must be tempered to acknowledge that the influence played by branding activities on employees' positioning in relation to their work is only ever in process and never unproblematic. Moreover, while rejecting the individualism and voluntarism of functionalist perspectives, the work presented here supports the view that as 'agents' (albeit in an asymmetrical relation), employees have the potential to embrace their organization's expressed brand values but also to resist them and re-articulate them for their own ends. This re-articulation might reside in the habitual, everyday individual responses to employee branding but equally it might be the result of deliberate organised attempts to re-articulate the brand for purposive ends. This is reflected in the chapter by Simms in this volume where trade union organisers deploy brand narratives in the service of union recruitment and organising.

Employees as Cultural Carriers

¹ For a theoretical discussion of subjectivity and the labour process theory see O'Doherty and Willmott's 2001 article in *Sociology*, 35(2), 457-476.

An alternative perspective that could be taken in theorising the concept of employee branding might see employees as ‘cultural carries’ of the brand image (see Cultural Intermediaries in the literature cf. Negus, 2002, Nixon, 2002); required to deploy a wide arsenal of actions, meanings and symbols to demonstrate the consumption of organizational products. So for example, the retail worker who wears the clothes that she sells embodies the image of an idealised customer giving customers a ‘lived example’ of the product in use (Pettinger, 2004). The emphasis on employees as cultural carries is often represented in the practitioner literature (e.g. Hemp, 2002; Walker, 2002) as key to achieving excellence, not only in customer service, but also in customer-employee relations. In assessing and theorising this practitioner-oriented perspective, the work of Bourdieu (1984), and specifically the notion of ‘cultural intermediates’, is significant. Bourdieu applies the term to those groups of workers involved in the provision of symbolic services or products (see also Nixon and du Gay, 2002) and the concept is further explored by Negus (2002) and McRobbie (2002) who, in investigating the position and status of cultural intermediaries, focus on questions of cultural and social change within the service economy. Negus (2002) advocates the importance of understanding cultural intermediaries in today’s economy, emphasising the significance of these workers and their structural location ‘*in-between*’ production and consumption. Intermediaries are engaged in developing a point of connection between production and consumption, shaping use values and exchange values and managing how these values are connected to people’s lives by forging a sense of identification and desire between the product or service and the consumer. Ultimately however they are, of course, unable to bridge the distance between production and consumption and merely succeed in reproducing it, ‘*offering the illusion of the link rather than its material representation*’ (ibid p.509). Bourdieu uses the terminology for

restricted categories of workers with a specific class connotation: ‘the new petite bourgeoisie’, made up of workers involved in sales, marketing, fashion, public relations, advertising and other areas of work concerned with presentation and representation. Negus, however, extends its use moving away from the specific class position implied by Bourdieu and in this wider sense, the term and its conceptual apparatus, is clearly of value in the discussion of the dynamics of employee branding. Seen from this perspective, and returning to our opening remarks, employees are invited to bring more of *themselves* into the workplace not out of humane benevolence but because organizations consider those ‘selves’ to have specific value in the accumulation process, thus contributing to the generation of surplus for the organization. These selves are closely scrutinized for their ‘brand fit’ and in such cases the brand operates to govern subjective norms. Hurrell and Scolarios’ chapter provides a fine-grained analysis of this governance in action. In their hotel case studies those that are invited in are described as having ‘polish’. We should be left in no doubt that not everyone is welcome to bring their selves into the workplace; the act of invitation invokes the knowing discrimination of the host who compiles the ‘guest list’ and the unknowing embarrassment and shame of those refused entry. Indeed, in this vein, Edwards and Kelan complete the volume by demonstrating concern at the likely incompatibility of employer branding and its anti-inclusive foundations and diversity management.

The application of the concept of (cultural) intermediaries to employee branding turns upon an understanding of the process(es) of branding as a transmission mechanism, wherein intermediaries effectively communicate ideas about the organization and its product to a wide audience including potential employees and customers through emotions, aspirations and bodily dispositions. A number of chapters in this text provide good examples of this in practice and this is further illustrated by the number of

employees who are required to ‘Tweet’ or ‘Blog’ at work to reproduce the brand norms and values in a public arena (see for example Taylor and Land’s Ethico employees in this volume). Employees as intermediaries, thus, contribute to value creation (in terms of both brand value and equity) of the product or service with their unwaged labour in the same way as user-consumers participate brand value co-creation through their public and communal use of the brand (Willmott, 2010). Employee branding, thus, augments the traditional circuit of capital accumulation; employees are summoned to buy into symbolic representations of organizational values, as a precursor to the *production* of organizational capital, through performance for a commercial audience. ‘Living the brand’ consequently becomes a prerequisite for the *consumption* of capital reconfigured as *meaning*. Placing the employee, rather than the product, at the fulcrum of the production and consumption relation may, as Land and Taylor illustrate, have precarious organizational consequences.

Employee Brand as Organizational Putty

Existing studies of the experience of work, especially service work, from both an employer and customer perspective have drawn attention to the contradictions and tensions that are characteristic of the forms. Most typically and prosaically these tend to be played out in the tension between fulfilling quality based objectives, often expressed in terms of customer service, whilst at the same time fulfilling the quantitative goals of organizations usually formulated as numerical targets (Taylor and Bain, 1999). Symptomatic of a much deeper structural antagonism, the unattainable goal of balancing irreconcilable objectives is something with which many practitioners and employees will doubtless identify. From an organizational perspective, although

attainment of both objectives is specified as a service or product offering, too strict adherence to these ideals, and the corresponding insistence on simultaneous achievement of both quality and quantity for example, can lead to moribund and catastrophic organizational outcomes. It is in this sense that some authors have argued that contemporary organizations, which appear to promise ‘everything to all’, require spaces of negotiation where meanings are malleable and ambiguous. Such spaces allow slippage between objectives without fear that failure will puncture the foundational logic, or the continued survival, of their space within the organization (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008). Seen from this perspective, the complexity and ambiguity of branding in practice may provide space for service and product promises to be pursued, but not met. In short, the employee brand in essence provides a narrative ‘cover’ for non-compliance and failure. A version of the style versus substance debate, employee branding seen from this perspective acts as a narrative that works to cushion the blow of non-performance. For example, organizational targets and pledges that are not met are made good by the conduct and style of employee performances in pursuit of those goals. The material reality that the promised goals are structurally unobtainable, a functional feature of the dominant logics of capital, may be lost on customers as they gaze anaesthetised by the spectacle of aesthetic display performed, more often than not, by those at the bottom of organizational hierarchies. Indeed, as Klein (2000: 22) observes there is a sinister element of ‘collective hallucination’ engendered by such performances. The material reality of the situation, is of course, seldom lost on employees who are never far from brutal reminders that performance alone is no longer quite good enough. Moreover, in an environment that desires youth and novelty, the cultural capital that secures their employment location is likely to be ebbing away by the day. As a number of chapters in this volume point out, perhaps the most malevolent

aspect of employee branding lies in its promised solution to alienation whilst simultaneously leaving the underlying property relations untouched.

Looking Forward

In highlighting the key issues to emerge from the work presented in this volume, we have attempted to provide some theoretical directions that can be pursued to explore employee branding from a critical perspective. These ideas need further theoretical development and empirical investigation at a time when the idea of the brand has extended beyond the disarmingly simple notion of ‘stamp of quality and authenticity’ to represent a differentiation strategy for the corporation itself (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). As the values, vision and culture of organisations become the core of their unique selling proposition (Balmer, 2001), the role played by employees shifts dramatically from providers/sellers of labour to carries or intermediaries of such corporate values and visions. It is this crucial shift from product-brand to corporate-brand that has deeply enhanced the representation capital of the brand and the holders of that capital in wider social and economical spheres. The work presented here is a testimony of this shift as it is experienced and ‘lived’ within the workplace in a variety of organizations. Yet as evidenced by some of the work in this volume, employee branding, as a top down process of influence and change, often generates resistance, particularly when the values represented by the brand do not ‘resonate with the tacit meanings and values that organization members hold and use’ (Hatch and Schultz, 2003: 1049). Moreover, we argue that even when there is alignment between brand culture, corporate image and employee identity, as publicly enacted by ‘branded

employees', processes and experiences of employee branding are far from straightforward and still remain contested within and between workers, and managers. In closing we would like to re-connect our consideration of employee branding to contemporary experiences of work. What are the implications of these processes for the experience of work in the twenty first century? Are experiences of branded working conditions more likely to produce anxiety or reassurance? Are they likely to promote numbness and despair or inspiration and fulfilment amongst workers? In answering these questions we return to our opening themes of control and consent.

One might argue that the brand embodies a *new form* of domination and control, one levied at the individual capacity for self governance, one which calls forth the enterprising subject so central to Neo-liberal forms of capitalist reproduction (Rose, 1992). Here the brand appeals to individual freedom to act while simultaneously capturing that action in the pursuit of capital accumulation. The brand has been posited as a new form of informational capital (Arvidsson 2006) within capital accumulation. The circulation of this capital is facilitated by the advent of the knowledge economy where the ability to perform and reproduce certain modes of communication are essential, be these emotional, aesthetic or symbolic in form and content. Indeed it is the very weightlessness, virtuality and immateriality of the brand which allows it to travel so far, so fast and so often unseen. In many cases its effects most often pass silently and unrecognised through the workplace. Its ability to direct attention away from the material dimensions of hard and dirty work, whilst at the same time putting the individual to work in its service, might be seen as pernicious indeed. In addition, such lack of substance reflected in the immaterial and ephemeral dimensions of the brand may well not be enough to offer workers reassurance, inspiration and a sense of fulfilment but rather work to promote anxiety over never quite perfectly produced

performances and communicative displays. If we lift the lid on the slick and shiny branded world, the same old social relations of production are revealed, where control over labour remains a stark divider between the haves and have nots. This element in the circuit of capital not only reveals the labour processes, previously hidden behind factory doors, but reminds us that the very act of such display has become central to the process of value creation itself. Correspondingly, such performances are often both tightly controlled and celebrative of a narrow set of class, race and gender norms in their promotion of specific communicative, bodily and aesthetic dispositions. Thus, while the brand offers a promise of the freedom to ‘be yourself’ in the workplace, this promise is never quite delivered, not least because at its heart, the brand requires the suppression of individuality to function fully.

Taking a less dystopic perspective, and turning to the theme of consent, the brand cannot travel and grow without the complicity and consent of employees, consumers and managers. Because the brand only exists in the minds of these constituencies and because it is predicated on a shared terrain of meaning we might argue that individuals are, to some degree, responsible for their own enchantment and thus entrapment hold a key stake in the brand and offer potential for its transformation. The ways in which this shared terrain of meaning encompasses the context of work, as much as it does the context of consumption, inscribes the production of value in its dual functions, as symbolic value for employees and customers, and as value that can be translated into accumulation (as brand value) for the organization. In a time when the corporate brand is often what distinguishes one organization from another, it is not a surprise that what is being attempted through the various employment practices documented here is the accomplishment of a ‘corporate identity’ to uniformly represent the brand to the outside

world and, in essence, to further build the brand's equity and to pursue accumulation by other means.

This volume offers an analysis of how organisations can and do mobilise employees to further build their brand equity whilst acknowledging how this is experienced by employees. The chapters provide a detailed and nuanced account which shows that the branding process is always complex, conflictual and contradictory to further remind us that the mutability of employee subjectivity is always, at heart, the shifting sands upon which branded empires are built.

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