

Employee Branding: Enterprising selves in the service of the brand

Abstract

Employee branding is a new twist on employee socialization and identity regulation. Employee branding shapes employees' behavior so that they project the brand identity of their organization's products through their everyday work behavior. Employee branding is intended to induce employee-brand identification, a psychological connection between the employee and the brand, to provide an unobtrusive, seemingly unproblematic engine for "on brand" behavior. To introduce organizational scholars to issues involved in employee branding, this essay outlines some of the assumptions, tactics and practices of employee branding. I draw on theories from marketing and organizational studies to define employee-brand identification and to develop a preliminary model of how employee branding programs could induce employee-brand identification. In addition, I raise questions about the relationships between the organization, the employee, and the brand that employee branding reinforces, and propose directions for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

A new and improved model for the competitive organization is being promoted by marketing consultants and executives. This new model, known as "living the brand" (Ind, 2001; Pringle and Gordon, 2001; Mitchell, 2002) is advertised as strengthening an organization's position in the competitive marketplace while enhancing internal organizational effectiveness, all by emphasizing organization-wide employee involvement in branding processes. Like other enterprising organizations that expect their employees to demonstrate initiative, self-reliance, and responsibility for their own actions as they pursue the organization's interests (Rose, 1991), employees at organizations that are living the brand are expected to motivate and regulate themselves so that they express in their everyday behavior the attributes that define the brand's identity. To induce employees to project the brand's identity, organizations engage in the training and socialization practices of employee branding (Edwards, 2005; Harquail, 2005, Miles and Mangold, 2004). Through employee branding, employees are expected to internalize the desired brand identity and to be motivated to project the brand's identity to customers and other organizational constituents (Miles and Mangold, 2004). The ultimate goal of employee branding is to have employees incorporate the brand's identity attributes into their own self-concepts, so that self-concept related motives provide an unobtrusive, unproblematic engine for brand-expressive behavior.

Employee branding is a specific kind of identity regulation by an organization, through which employees are directed to develop self-images and work orientations that

are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives (Willmott, 1993; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Organizations attempt to influence how employees define themselves so that when employees express themselves at work they automatically advance the organization's goals. One common influence on employees' self-definitions, and a well-known form of identity management in organizations, is organizational identification. Organizational identification is the ongoing process of linking one's self-definition to the identity of the organization. It occurs through defining oneself as having the same attributes as those that define the organization and by experiencing a sense of personal connection with the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994; Pratt, 2000). As employees identify with the organization, their interests become aligned with the organization's interests because employees internalize the organization's attributes, values and expectations as their own.

Employee branding has a logic analogous to the logic of organizational identification. The goal is to induce employees to create a behavioral and psychological connection between **their own identity** and the brand's identity. This connection should lead employees to prioritize the brand's interests automatically and uncritically, **because branded employees treat the brand's priorities as their own**. In organizations that are living the brand, the ideal employee is one who engages in behavior that expresses her own identity and the brand's identity, simultaneously, without experiencing any conflict **or distinction** between the two.

In many ways, employee branding is just like any other strategy through which organizations attempt to increase control by shaping employee identities (e.g., Clegg,

1994; McDonald, 2006) and so it is problematic simply on those grounds. In addition, however, employee branding is a way that “marketing asserts itself as a dominant principle of organizing” (Cheney and Christensen, 2001), dominating not only employee identity but also the identity of the organization itself (Harquail, 2009; Kornberger, 2010) . Employee branding is an internally-directed employee management program that takes its cues about how to define and create the ideal employee from the commercial practices of marketing. In order to assess whether employee branding is simply identity control in a new package or whether the assumptions it brings in from marketing create a different challenge for employees, organizational scholars need to look more closely at the practice and ethos of employee branding.

Although the potential benefits of employee branding have been advertised in a variety of managerially-oriented outlets (Ind, 2001; Miles and Mangold, 2004; Mitchell, 2002), there has been little scholarly work to map out what employee branding really is, what it does, and what it assumes (Miles and Mangold, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Harquail, 2005). To introduce organizational scholars to the issues involved in employee branding, I begin this essay by outlining some of the assumptions that undergird the enthusiasm of employee branding’s proponents. I describe the tactics and practices of employee branding to show how they differ in subtle ways from traditional employee socialization tactics. I draw on theories from marketing and organizational studies to define employee-brand identification, the psychological connection between the brand and the employee, and to develop a preliminary model of how employee branding programs could induce employee-brand identification. In addition, I raise questions

about the relationships between the organization, the employee, and the brand that employee branding reinforces, and propose directions for future research.

Introducing Employee Branding

Proponents of living the brand claim that “every employee should be involved in the care and nurturing of the brand” (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991, p. 129). They plainly state that employees must internalize the brand’s identity before they can project it to others (Joseph, 1996; Ind, 2001, 2003; Miles and Mangold, 2004). A brand is more than the name given to a product, service, or organization; it embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). Nurturing a brand requires attending to the brand’s identity, the tangible and intangible, functional and symbolic attributes that define the brand (Rubenstein, 1996; Kotler, 1997; Aaker, 1997, 1999). Only recently have employees throughout the organization been expected to be involved in translating the abstract ideas of the brand into their everyday behaviors, decisions, attitudes and so on (Adam and Henriksson, 2006; Ind, 2001; Mitchell, 2002). For example, at Volvo, employees use the brand identity to guide decisions that might even seem minor, such as creating the right “click sound” for the seatbelts (Adam and Henriksson, 2006). When every employee is involved in branding, the organization ought to be more effective at creating, sustaining and delivering upon the “brand promise”.

The idea that branding should be used *on* an organization’s employees is quite new. Employee branding programs are intended to impress brand attributes onto the work behavior of employees, who are then expected to infuse brand attributes throughout their work (Ind, 2001; Mitchell, 2002; Miles and Mangold, 2004). Branded

employees are expected to project the brand's identity through all of their behavior, including their demeanor, appearance, and manner of interacting with customers. From a marketing perspective, behaviorally projecting the brand's identity is known as "on-brand behavior" (Mitchell, 2002). From an organizational theory perspective, projecting the brand's identity can be understood as brand identity work. Brand identity work is the range of individual activities intended to create, present, and sustain the appearance of being like the brand and projecting the brand's identity. It is based on the construct of individual-level "identity work" (Snow and Anderson, 1997; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), defined as the "range of activities that individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). Brand identity work includes behaviors, gestures, verbal statements, points of view, and emotions that reflect and project the brand's identity attributes.

Although it is not uncommon for a subset of employees to engage in brand identity work when their formal organizational roles explicitly require them to represent the brand to customers (roles such as salesperson, spokesperson, celebrity endorser, etc.), employee branding programs require every employee—those with customer contact and those without—to represent the brand through their personal behavior. Employee branding proponents argue that employees throughout the product creation chain need to engage in brand identity work because the behavior of each one is important for delivering an overall branded product (Frost and Kumar, 2000; Pringle and Gordon, 2001). "Linkage research" that focuses on the relationship between internal organizations processes and customer satisfaction has shown that what employees

experience in their work environment is correlated with the experiences they provide for customers (Johnson, 1996; Schneider, et al., 2000; Dunn and Davis, 2004). When employees with internal responsibilities and no direct contact with external stakeholders offer other employees “on brand behavior”, they provide important support to those who project the brand to external customers (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). “A company achieves its greatest advantage when employee actions and brand identity reinforce each other” (Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop, 2005, 164).

Tactics of employee branding programs. Before the brand identity can be projected from one employee to others, the organization must create and instill the brand message in employees’ minds (Miles and Mangold, 2004). So, the first step in employee branding is teaching each employee about the brand. Conventionally, programs designed to help employees understand the brand identity have taught employees about the brand’s identity and how to communicate it through marketing decisions about design, advertising, promotions, and packaging (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). These training programs maintain a separation between the employee and the brand, and treat the brand as the object of the employee’s efforts. In contrast, employee branding programs train employees to see themselves as connected with the brand and to treat themselves as the object of their own and their organization’s branding efforts.

Employee branding programs use four basic tactics: (1) teaching employees about the brand, (2) teaching them how to represent the brand in their behavior, (3) giving them opportunities to practice representing the brand, and (4) continually associating the attributes of the brand identity with the employees themselves. The first two tactics develop the employee’s behavioral connection with the brand, and the only

difference between employee branding and previous forms of brand training is that every employee receives this training. The last two tactics develop the employee's psychological connection with the brand, using the marketing logic of meaning transfer (Mc Cracken, 1988). Marketers build brand identities by teaching consumers to associate the brand with a set of brand attributes by consistently pairing these attributes with the brand name, product, packaging, imagery and so on through advertising and marketing communications. Because these attributes are shown as being attached to the product and brand, the consumer comes to see them as being part of the brand and as defining its identity. Once the meanings are associated with the brand, customers can acquire the brand's meaning by consuming the product (Mc Cracken, 1989; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). In this way, consumers can use their connections with brands to construct their self-definitions (e.g. Belk, 1988; Richens, 1994; Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Similarly, employee branding programs continually associate the employees and the attributes of the brand so that these attributes can be transferred from the brand identity to the employees themselves. This attribute transfer can range from a superficial behavioral accommodation where employees project the brands' attributes in their decisions and behaviors without accepting these behaviors as being 'part of them', to something deeper- a psychological internalization of brand attributes into the employees' self-concept. As employees behave like the brand, as they represent the brand to others, and as they are continually reminded that they are paired with the brand, they may come to see themselves as having acquired the brand's attributes as

their own. The employees may come to define their self-concepts through their connection with the brand.

By encouraging the behavioral presentation and psychological internalization of brand identity attributes, employee branding programs align employee behavior and bring the entire organization into the circle of enthusiasm and creativity that enables brand stewardship (Ind, 2001; Davis and Dunn, 2002). However, the way that employee branding engages employees is by appropriating more of their personal selves. Through the incursion of the brand into individuals' personal behaviors and then into their self-definitions, employee branding can encourage employees to regard themselves and behave as servants of the brand. In this way, employee branding subverts conventional organization-employee and product-employee relationships, ultimately putting employees at the mercy of customers' preferences and desires.

Employee Branding Practices. Employee branding programs are finely targeted socialization programs (Van Maanen and Schien, 1979) to get employees to conform with and accept an organizationally controlled set of attitudes and behaviors. Employee branding processes include brand education and brand interface training, formal human resource practices of recruitment, selection, appraisal, and rewards (Edwards, 2005), internal communications, organizational décor and artifacts (Harquail, 2005), and informal socialization processes.

Brand training programs form the core of employee branding processes.

- | Conventional brand education programs are augmented by [training in “brand](#)
- | [interfacing”](#), the ways that that the brand and customers ought to interact so that the customer’s relationship with the brand is enhanced. The content and reach of retail

sales training are also expanded. Every employee is taught how to be the brand interface for customers and is given a chance to practice or role-play representing the brand to the customer. Employee branding programs take the additional step of taking employees outside of the classroom, putting them into direct contact with actual customers. For example, organizations may have every employee spend a few days working as a salesperson or customer service representative. In these strong situations, with clear behavioral expectations and an audience with high expectations, employees are able to project the brand identity and to get real feedback on their performance from consumers.

Employee branding programs also include opportunities for all employees “reconnect with the market” (Gephardt, Carpenter, and Sherry, 2006). Cross-functional teams of marketing and non-marketing employees might meet with customers, distributors, and retail sales people (Gephardt, et al., 2006). Employees might also get involved in market research, helping to collect and interpret customer data and feedback. For example, Procter and Gamble soap making technicians rotate through short stints answering the consumer 800-number feedback lines. Often, employees are encouraged to take the role of a consumer to experience how the brand identity is delivered. For example, Harley-Davidson employees must purchase their bikes from dealers, using the same procedures as non-employees, so that they know what it is like to be a customer and to interact with sales, shipping and customer service. These programs are intended to teach employees how customers experience the brand, so that employees can understand what customers expect of the brand and of the employees who represent the brand.

In addition to training, other elements of the human resource system can be used for employee branding (Edwards, 2005), especially for dispensing formal feedback and discipline. Brand identity work is treated as a competency that all employees ought to have (Edwards, 2005), and expectations about on-brand behavior are incorporated into performance appraisal and reward systems. Organizations also use “brand champions”, employees who are willing to “proselytize on behalf of the brand” (Ind, 2001, p. 124) and demonstrate how one ought to enact the brand. Informal interactions with other employees, observations of colleagues, and other socialization processes in the larger organizational culture (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) also contribute to branding.

Employees can be branded by organizational communication practices. Internal corporate press, new product launches, and participation in meetings in which the brand is discussed communicate brand attributes and suggest ways to promote them. Communication practices directed at outside constituencies such as brand advertising and public relations campaigns may also indirectly brand employees by encouraging employees to see themselves as representatives of the brand (Elsbach and Glynn, 1996). Inside the organization employees are branded through “everyday brand exposure” (Casteel, 2006) to remind employees to exhibit on-brand behavior. For example, organizational decor and displays of brand-related artifacts that symbolize and communicate desired brand associations, such as art collections, furniture, color schemes, copies of print advertising, product prototypes, and promotional materials, can provide visual reminders or “identity cues” to prime employees to keep the brand in mind. Some organizations go as far as having a sample retail store set up inside their corporate headquarters. Employees receive and then personally display brand-related

artifacts like key chains, mugs, and decorative accessories (Elsbach, 2005) and clothing emblazoned with the brand's logo (Harquail, 2006). Brand-related artifacts and décor help to create and sustain "situation congruity" (Aacker, 1997; Solomon, 1983) so that employees conform their behavior to situational cues. These tactics reinforce the desired associations between the product and its attributes and between the brand and the employee and also help to discourage the salience of employees' other identities.

Accommodating the brand identity in behavior. Once employees have been taught how to project the brand's attributes they are theoretically able to accommodate these attributes in their everyday work behavior, and they can accommodate the brand identity without accepting brand attributes personally or adopting them as self-defining (Kelman, 1958). Making it easier for employees to accommodate brand identity in their behaviors is the presence of other employees who are also performing brand identity work. Other employees' brand identity work demonstrates different ways to translate brand attributes into behavior. An employee can observe other employees, can mimic their brand identity behaviors, and adopt what works for them (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), expanding their own repertoire of brand behavior. In addition, being in a social context where other employees are engaged in brand identity work can help to keep brand attributes salient and remind each employee to engage in her or his own brand identity work.

Accommodating brand identity attributes in behavior is also positively influenced by the degree to which the employee's organizational role requires brand identity work. Employees with significant contact with organizational outsiders are under more and more consistent pressure to represent the brand. For example, a retail salesperson will

be likely to perform more brand identity work more often, because her role requires her to act as the brand's representative to those outside the organization. Moreover, customers, stakeholders and others outside the organization expect her to project the brand's identity. Thus, in an environment of employee branding, the visibility of the employee as an organizational spokesperson and the degree of customer contact in his role will be positively related to how much brand identity work he performs. Overall, employees who have been taught how to express the brand in their behaviors, who work in a context where other individuals are also performing brand identity work, and who have some experience acting as a brand representative will all be more likely to engage in brand identity work.

Internalizing the brand identity through employee-brand identification.

Although employees can accommodate brand identity attributes in their behavior without adopting them as self-defining, behaving in ways that project the brand's identity attributes can lead an employee to internalize the brand identity. When employees internalize the brand identity, they use the brand's attributes to define their own identities, establishing employee-brand identification. Drawing on definitions of organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Dutton, et al., 1994) employee-brand identification is defined as the perception of a connection with the brand, where the employees define themselves with the attributes that they believe define the brand. In marketing, a similar construct addresses consumers' attachment to brands: the self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). (The term "brand identification" is generally used to describe how consumers recognize a brand through its logo, packaging, imagery, etc.) A self-brand connection exists when consumers use the

identity of the brand to construct their sense of self or to communicate their self-concept to others. Employee-branding is a self-brand connection made by employees to their organization's brand.

A Preliminary Model of Employee-Brand Identification

For this initial, heuristic model of employee-brand identification, I draw predominantly from two research streams: theories about self-brand connections among consumers and theories about organizational identification. All three constructs represent psychological connections from individuals to objects or entities where the connection is anchored in the individual's self-concept. Theories of organizational identification (e.g., Dutton, et al., 1994) and self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003) suggest that several mechanisms help to create employee-brand identification by encouraging employees to transfer brand identity attributes into their self-concepts. These include employees' role performance, identity claiming and identity negotiation, as well as employees' motives for self-consistency and self-verification. Theories of organizational identification and self-brand connection also suggest that employees will vary in the degree to which they will identify with a given brand. This variation will be due, in part, to differences in the features of the brand's identity, in the self-concepts of individual employees, and in the preconceived "fit" between the brand's identity and the individual's identity.

Features of brand and self-identity attributes

The attractiveness of a brand attributes. Brands are designed intentionally to be attractive to certain individuals or groups of individuals. When consumers find a brand to be attractive, they are more likely to purchase that brand than others, and they

are more likely to create a self-brand connection (Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

Similarly, when individuals discern that an organization's identity is attractive, they are more likely to identify with that organization (Dutton, et al., 1994).

Attractiveness of the brand's identity is a subjective quality that can be assessed on many dimensions by an employee. For example, a brand (or organization) may be attractive because it has a generally positive or prestigious reputation (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell, 2002), or because it is seen as have certain specific attributes (e.g., ruggedness, conscientiousness) that an individual finds desirable (Aaker, 1999). Beliefs about a brand's typical user, the target consumer, the occasion of use, the groups that favor the brand, and so on, can all contribute to the brand's identity (Keller, 1993). It is important to note that brand identities have abstract, interpretive characteristics and physical, objective, characteristics. Often these characteristics are human attributes, such as personality traits (Aaker, 1999), because personification is such a common branding tool (Zinkhan, 1993).

Dutton, et al., (1994) argue that three principles of self-definition—self continuity, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement -- account for the attractiveness of an organizational image, and by extension a brand identity. Individuals also find attractive brand or organizational attributes that are like how they see themselves now and/or how they would like to be seen (e.g., their ideal self, Markus and Nurius, 1986). A brand identity will be more attractive to the employee if it provides him or her with the opportunity for satisfying any of these self-related motives by associating themselves with it. Brand identity work provides a way for employees to appropriate the symbolic meaning of the brand as though they were customers, so that their connection with the

brand is available to create and define their self-concepts (Levy, 1959; Mc Cracken, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2003).

Identity congruence. Identity congruence will influence the degree to which an employee incorporates the brand identity into his or her self-concept. Identity congruence refers to the relationship between the attributes in the brand identity and the attributes that are already part of the employee's self-concept. Attributes can be understood to be congruent when they are similar to each other and when defining the self with one set of attributes does not preclude defining the self in terms of the other identity (Gallois, Tluchowska and Callan, 2001). Congruence eases the way to identification, because employees only need to recognize the similarity between themselves and the brand's identity attributes to establish a connection.

When self-concept attributes and brand identity attributes are congruent, no change in the content of the employee's self-definition is required. What does change is that the employee now explains the presence of these attributes in her self-concept as due to her connection with the brand. Because individuals want to maintain the continuity of their self concepts across time and situation (Steele, 1988), identifying with a congruent brand can help the employee maintain and even reinforce his self-definition.

In addition to self-continuity, self-expression is an important driver of consumer preference (Belk, 1988). Consumers prefer brands whose attributes are congruent with their own (Kassarjian, 1971; Sirgy, 1982) because they provide an easy opportunity for self-expression (Kleine, Kleine, and Kernan, 1993; Shamir, 1991). Being connected to a brand with a congruent identity allows employees to exhibit more of who they are.

Congruence between the brand identity and the objective, physical attributes that are part of an employee's identity is as important as congruence between brand identity and the employee's self-defining subjective attributes, because brand identities often imply a certain physical or objective kind of person. Said another way, a brand's identity attributes may imply a consumer with a specific human age, sex, gender orientation, physical ability, race and class. For example, the Nike brand conjures up a physically fit and active individual, and this typical consumer may be congruent or incongruent with physical features that are part of the Mike employee's self-definition. Just as consumers are likely to seek a connection with brands that are associated with their in-group (whether the group is based on subjective, abstract attributes or objective, physical attributes) while rejecting connections with brand associated with their out-group, (Brearden and Etzel, 1982; Escalas and Bettman, 2003), employees are likely to do the same.

Malleability of attributes. Some brand identity attributes allow a little room for individual interpretation; what it means to possess that attribute is a bit malleable. For example, a British man who enjoys gardening might interpret a brand's artistic identity to be congruent with his self-concept, even though he neither paints nor sculpts. In contrast, this same man may not be able to find a way to re-interpret the brand identity of Quiksilver surfboards so that he feels any congruence or connection between himself and that brand. If any attributes of the brand or the self are malleable, there is the possibility that the employee can re-interpret the attributes to establish congruence.

On the other hand, what it means to possess some attributes may be quite fixed. If an attribute's meaning is fixed, and the brand identity and employee identity conflict

with each other, the employee is less likely to identify with the brand. Being physically and demographically different from the brand's identity or ideal consumer may have negative effects on employees' brand identification (Wooten, 1995). Employees may perceive that the brand is "not for me" (Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier, 2000). For example, the young, slender and white faces of a cosmetics brand may conjure up set of demographic, physical, gender, and racial identity attributes that are simply unachievable for the employees who manufacture the actual cosmetics. In these situations, employees who are being branded may need to suppress their own selves while they project the brand identity attributes, creating a "façade of conformity" (Hewlin, 2003), a false representation of embracing brand values. They may express their own non-brand attributes at the risk of approbation or marginalization, or they may actively resist branding and engage in "service sabotage" (Harris and Ogbonna, 2006). And, employees who feel that they are being pressured by the organization to present themselves in a way that is at odds with their self-definition may react negatively (Covaleski, et al., 1988; Hewlin, 2003). A thorough discussion of what might occur when there is a significant misalignment between brand identity attributes and employees' self attributes is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is important to acknowledge here that employees can pretend, resist, and become estranged in employee branding situations where there is misalignment between the brand identity and their own self-definition.

Behavioral Mechanisms of Employee-Brand Identification

There is a reciprocal relationship between identity and behaviors, where identity influences behaviors and behaviors influence identity (Stryker and Serper, 1982; Steele,

1988; Schlenker and Trudeau, 1990). Through the influence of role taking, the motivation for consistency between one's behaviors and one's self-concept, and the social nature of identity claiming and negotiation, an employee's brand-promoting behaviors may lead her to identify with the brand.

Role taking. Employees may be influenced to identify with the brand through the general influence of behavior on role taking and the influence of role taking on the self-concept. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes and patterns of interaction they may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definition (Ibarra, 1999, Ashforth, 2001, Pratt, et al., 2005). The role that employees assume is "being" the brand. Employees can be the brand by seeing the world from the brand's frame of reference and by projecting the brand's identity, as though they were playing the role of the brand. In playing the role of the brand, employees make salient their beliefs about the brand's identity and how it should be expressed. These brand beliefs may then influence the employee's frame of reference so that he or she interprets situations and establishes priorities and goals consonant with the attributes and interests of the brand (Stryker and Serper, 1982). In addition, the salience of the brand's attributes may overshadow the other attributes in the employee's self-concept. Because employees perform identity work all day long, their brand promoting behaviors are a constant presence and influence on them. Although employees may initially be playing the role of the brand and pretending to have the brand's attributes, over time this role playing may lead employees to believe that these attributes are not just performances but are, instead, their own authentic attributes (Ibarra, 1999).

Self-consistency. Despite the fact that individuals' self-concepts are an amalgam of identities specific to certain situations (Markus and Wurf, 1987), individuals strive to maintain consistency between their behaviors, the way that others' define them, and how they define themselves (Gecas, 1982; Steele, 1988). Individuals' motives for self-consistency can motivate employee-brand identification when the brand identity and the employee's self-concept are somewhat congruent. For those employees who already experience identity congruence, displaying brand attributes in their behavior demonstrates self-consistency. They may, over time, connect their possession of these attribute to their relationship with the brand. For employees who initially do not define themselves as having the same attributes as the brand, projecting brand attributes in their behavior may lead them over time to internalize these attributes as their own. To maintain consistency between their behaviors and their self-beliefs (Gecas, 1982; Steele, 1988), employees may explain to themselves that their brand-projecting behaviors are actually a function of who they are, and revise their identities to incorporate these brand identity attributes. While we often think of self beliefs as leading to behaviors, behaviors also lead to self-beliefs.

An individual's desire for self-consistency and the social pressure that they may experience to look consistent is not only behavioral. Individuals also seek consistency between their self-concepts and what they believe is appropriate for people with their physical characteristics and demographics. So, a lack of congruence between immutable physical attributes and the brand's attributes may make it difficult for an employee to experience self-consistency, and thus they might resist employee-brand identification.

Identity negotiation and identity claiming. Individuals' self-definitions and self-conceptions are constructed and negotiated in social interaction; they are the result of interacting with others about they are to be seen, a process known as identity negotiation (Swann, 1987). When employees engage in brand identity work they can engender a cycle of social interaction that may lead them to internalize the brand's attributes as their own, and to identify with the brand.

Individuals assert how they would like to be seen through behaviors known as identity claiming. Identity claiming is an impression management process in which individuals present themselves as having the identities and attributes that they desire to possess (Snow and Anderson, 1980; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Harquail, 2006). People make identity claims through behaviors that signal how they view themselves or how they hope to be seen by others. When an employee displays the brand's attributes by engaging in brand identity work, these behaviors may be interpreted by others as the employee's personal identity claims, because the audience has no way of knowing whether the displayed attributes apply to the brand or to the employee. The public association of attributes and the individual through brand identity work sets into motion the identity negotiation process, when others in the social environment will read the employee's behaviors as identity claims and respond accordingly.

Individuals respond to how others react to their self-presentations and identity claims by maintaining or modifying their private self-concepts in response to these reactions (Schlenker and Trudeau, 1990; Swann, 1987). When feedback from other employees or external stakeholders is interpreted as feedback about the employee him or her self, the employee is likely to revise his or her self-concept to incorporate these

attributes. If the employee is treated by others as though she or he has the brand's attributes, the employee may conclude that she or he does indeed have these attributes. In addition, because individuals replicate the behaviors that seem to win them approval, employees who receive positive feedback that they are projecting the brand's attributes well may make gradual changes in how they define themselves (Ibarra, 1998; Schlenker and Trudeau, 1990; Swann, 1987).

Individual-Level Differences

There are several individual-level psychological differences that may affect how employees identify with a brand. These include and are not limited to differences in individuals' dispositions and personalities, their self-other orientations, and the structure of their self-concept (Marcus and Wurf, 1987; Ashforth, 2001). Here, I offer three representative examples of variables that ought to influence employees' brand identification: self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990), brand-extended self-construal (Sprott, Czeller and Spangenberg, 2006) and sentiment towards marketing (Gaski and Etzel, 1986).

Individual self-concept clarity. Individuals vary in the degree to which their self-concepts are open to redefinition and revision. One cause of this variation is individuals' degree of self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990), a structural aspect of the self-concept. Self-concept clarity reflects the extent to which an individual's self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable. Individuals whose self-beliefs are vaguely and unconfidently defined, inconsistent and unstable are more open to influence (Campbell, 1990). Individuals high in self-concept clarity will have

lower self-concept malleability, and will be less receptive to the influence of employee branding programs. Therefore, they will be less likely to identify with the brand.

Brand-Extended Self-Construal. Marketing scholars who study consumers' relationships with brands have identified that individuals vary in their brand-extended self-construal, their general propensity to include important brands as part of their self-concepts (Sprott, Czeller and Spangenberg, 2006). Some individuals are quite likely to define themselves using brands in general, while others are less likely. These scholars consider brand-extended self-construal to be a type of personality variable, related to an individual's independent versus interpersonal orientation, and his or her level of materialism. However, this construct may also be a reasonable proxy for assessing the degree to which an individual has learned to be a post-modern consumer of brands and brand images. Whether a personality trait, a learned ability, or both, employees' propensity for brand-extended self-construal should influence their general willingness to identify with the brand.

Sentiment towards marketing. Individuals differ in their attitudes towards marketing as a practice. Scholars looking at aggregate consumer sentiment over time (i.e., national-level attitudes) have demonstrated that individuals vary in their sentiment towards marketing (Gaski and Etzel, 1986), the degree to which they are critical or accepting of marketing as a practice. Employees who are critical towards marketing as a practice may be more wary, more suspicious, and more resistant to employee branding than will employees with a more positive sentiment towards marketing as a practice.

Summary of preliminary model. Employees will be more likely to identify with the brand when they perceive the brand to be attractive, when there is congruence between the attributes in their self-concept and the brand's identity, when the employees' self-concept clarity is low, and when the employees has a strong propensity for brand-extended self construal. A generally positive sentiment towards marketing will also increase the likelihood that an employee will identify with the brand. Moreover, when employees assume the role of the brand, receive positive feedback about their projection of brand attributes, and experience feedback about their brand identity work as feedback about their selves, employees will be more likely to identify with the brand.

The Challenges of Employee Branding and Employee-Brand Identification

The putative benefits of employee branding may be numerous and significant, but these practices carry long-range and potentially damaging implications for employees, organizations and brands. Employee branding makes simplistic assumptions about brands and about employees and considers only the rosiest of potential outcomes.

Assumptions About Brands

Marketing practitioners and scholars recognize that the idea of brand identity as a single belief set that everyone identifies with is an overly simplistic myth (Gapp and Merrilees, 2006). Yet, employee branding assumes that the brand will translate in a consistent way to all of its audiences. First, there may be a variety of interpretations of the brand message, not all of them consistent with the attributes the organization intends to communicate. Gapp and Merrilees (2006) describe a hospital whose brand, "exceptional care, exceptional people", meant one thing to the organization's customers

(patients) and another to the organization's employees (doctors and nurses). For the employees, the word "exceptional" invoked overwork, stress, burn-out and impossibly high work standards. Second, a given attribute is not necessarily appealing to everyone. In the hospital, some employees found the attribute of "exceptional" to be quite unappealing, and a few even rejected it outright. As a result, some hospital employees projected the identity attribute of "exceptional care" in their work while others did not.

The assumption in employee branding that all employees will be attracted to a brand is inconsistent with a fundamental marketing practice. Marketers construct brands to appeal to the desires of a specific target audience. That target audience can be narrowly or broadly defined, but it rarely if ever includes everyone. Even so, employee branding proponents assume that a brand identity designed to appeal to a targeted subset of consumers will be just as appealing to employees, even though these employees may be quite unlike the consumers for whom the brand is originally designed. For example, brands are often targeted towards groups of consumers that are defined by their age, race, sex, class, orientation, and other categories. The marketplace is finely segmented by these categories. But employee branding proponents are silent about how these features of a brand's identity or an employee's age, race, sex, class, orientation, and so on might need to be addressed in employee branding.

In addition, employee branding assumes that all brands are equally useful as vehicles for shaping behavior and for defining employees' selves. However, some brands are better able than others to communicate something about an individual's identity. Brands that are high in symbolic meaning, brands that are publicly consumed,

and luxury brands can convey more about people who use or possess them (Bearden and Etzel, 1982), and so these sorts of brands are more likely to be appropriated by individuals to construct their selves.

Brands are often partial or outright fictions (Kotler, 1997). The symbolic attributes associated with the brand may be completely unrelated to the product's objective features. When employees are asked to project brand identity attributes that they know to be untrue or inauthentic, they may feel uncomfortable being asked to sell this fiction to customers or to each other. While some employees may be nonplussed by fictitious attributes, others might respond more cynically.

Employee branding assumes that brand identity remains fairly stable over time. However, brands change, as do the consumer needs and desires that brands are intended to fulfill. Changes in the brand identity will require identified employees to project new and different identity attributes in their behavior. Some employees may have to change their self-definitions to keep connected with the brand, and as the brand becomes more or less congruent with the employees' self-concept, the strength of the employee-brand identification may change. Moreover, employees who are strongly identified with the brand may resist changes in the brand's identity because these changes would require them to change their self-definitions (Ashforth, 1998).

Assumptions About Employees

Marketing as a discipline asserts itself as participatory, responsive and democratic (Kotler, 1997; Cheney and Christensen, 2001). When marketing practices are applied to employees, employees are expected, like consumers, to be willing, ready and able to 'buy' the brand. Employee branding programs ignore two important

differences between employees and consumers: consumers' brand identification is selective and volitional while employee-brand identification is behaviorally imposed and psychologically induced. Employees cannot be selective about the brands they are asked to connect with, and rather than being optional connecting with the brand is part of their job. Further, employee branding proponents have not addressed directly how employees themselves might respond to being branded, being told to project the brand's identity, and being expected to connect themselves psychologically with the brand. Instead, it is taken for granted that employees will be willing to assume the brand identity and that every employee will be excited about being given responsibility for the brand.

Despite the fact that some employees might be enthusiastic about employee branding, employee branding is first and foremost a strategy for "identity regulation" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Employee branding regulates employees' identities by encouraging them to present their selves in a way that is valuable to the organization, and that is subject to its authority. In the process of brand identity work and brand identification, employees must subordinate their own individuality and their own subjectivity. Employees are induced to internalize the brand's ideological and normative stance, to bind their self-conceptions to the brand's identity and even to become emotionally attached to the brand. Employee branding regulates employees' identity because it attempts to control what behaviors the individual can display, it subordinates the individual's autonomously-defined self, and it reduces the employee's opportunities for self-expression.

Employees' ability to execute brand identity work and to achieve employee-brand identification is also taken for granted. Brand identity work is treated as being important, but also as being rather easy. However, brand-identity work is work —physical, cognitive work and emotional. It takes effort to learn brand-appropriate behavior, make it routine, elaborate upon it, and so on. Moreover, this work is in addition to employees' functional work responsibilities.

Employee branding places a burden on employees that may not be borne equally. Employees whose physical appearance, demographic group, psychographic profile, social identities and personalities are incongruent with the brand identity will be more constricted in their self-presentation, pressured to change more of themselves, and required to work harder than others to project the brand identity. For these employees, their efforts to project the brand might not even be recognized as such by their audiences. If their attempts to project the brand identity falter and receive negative feedback about their brand (self-) presentation, they may come to feel negatively about themselves (Markus and Nurius, 1986). They may also experience psychological and emotional distress from suppressing their personal attributes and pretending to be something they are not (Hewlin, 2003).

There is another dimension of brand-related work that employee branding proponents do not mention, and that is the work related to un-branding and re-branding. The idea that an employee can become the brand fails to consider what happens when the employee needs to relinquish that brand or become an entirely new brand, such as when she or he changes jobs. Individuals will have to identify, de-identify and re-identify as they move from one brand to another. And, individuals' job opportunities may be

significantly limited if it appears that they are not enough “like the brand” to be hired, when employers look to hire people that already fit the brand identity (Casteel, 2006).

Finally, consider the assumption that launched the idea of employee branding. Does the employee really need to “be the brand”, to internalize the brand’s identity or to become identified with the brand, in order to be effective at “delivering on the brand promise?” Truly skillful marketers, and even merely adequate ones, can understand a brand deeply and find ways to project the brand’s attributes without having to “be the brand” or even be like the brand. Yet, proponents of employee branding do not seem to trust that employees outside of the marketing function could develop adequate brand insight and ability without giving their selves over to the brand.

Future research

This essay has taken a simplified approach to describing processes of branding, employee identity construction, and identity regulation in an effort to establish a space for critically investigating employee branding as a practice and as an ethos. Future research on employee branding should take multi-pronged, multi-disciplinary, and more finely-grained approaches.

First, it is important to explore how employees themselves experience being branded, since their perspective is not addressed by employee branding proponents. Research should consider employees’ identity options within an organization that is pursuing employee branding, to see how they might respond to and resist identity regulation (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1998; Collinson, 2003), and how they might sustain and shape their own identities in the process (e.g., Tracy, 2000; Pratt, et al., 2006). For example, employees might respond with disidentification, ambivalent identification, and

neutral identification (see Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004). Similarly, employees might develop conformist, dramaturgical and resistant selves (Collinson, 2003; Helwin, 2003). There may be important nuances in employees' identity construction that shield them from (or make them more vulnerable to) the self-commodification implied by being branded. Moreover, employee branding is not the only strategy that organizations are engaging in to influence how employees define themselves at work. Simultaneously, employees themselves are engaged in identity construction at work (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, et al., 2005) and it is important to consider how employee branding programs interact with the other identity concerns and goals of organizations and employees.

A comprehensive and critical analysis of the employee branding paradigm could also consider employees' collective options for resisting, co-opting or transforming employee branding. Group-level resistance strategies as well as a serious discussion of organization-level alternatives for employee branding could take the pressure off the individual resistant subject and challenge the managerial rhetoric that would otherwise adopt wholesale the incursion of the marketing paradigm into employee-organization dynamics. The rhetoric and rhetorical tactics of branding programs should be examined in greater detail, so that the full set of their assumptions and implications can be understood (e.g., see Bengtsson, 2003; Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney, 2005). Specifically, research should consider the ethics of branding and further commodifying employees by branding them, as well as the ethics of putting the brand above the employees and organization itself (e.g., Rose, 2001; Gustavsson, 2005).

In my effort to provide a preliminary, heuristic model of employee-identification, I have likely missed some nuances that will be important in later, more detailed

treatments. Additional research could flesh out the individual and brand related features that facilitate or impede employee-brand identification. More importantly, research from paradigms in addition to mainstream social psychology, such as discursive and narrative theories (e.g., Tracy, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) and psychodynamics (e.g., Carr, 1998) could ask different genres of evaluative and critical questions to add complementary, powerful insight into employee branding.

Research should directly address the fundamental assumption of employee branding, that employees must “be the brand” in order to deliver on the brand promise. It could compare the individual and organizational outcomes of employee branding with those of well-delivered, more conventional brand training programs, to evaluate whether employee branding is the only process for engaging employees in branding. Research on employee branding should also incorporate larger questions about systemic issues, such as the question of whose interests should dominate organizational goals. Although it may be rare to find an organization that puts employees’ interests over those of the brand, these organizations present another strategic option. For example, a recent paper celebrating the success of employee branding at Southwest Airlines (Miles and Mangold, 2005) mentions that, at Southwest, neither customers nor the brand come first. Employees do. Perhaps this seemingly modest difference in Southwest’s employee branding practice is what really leads to employees’ effective participation and organizational success.

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