**Employees as Animate Artifacts:**

**Employee Branding by "Wearing the Brand"**


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Fueled by and fueling a larger cultural trend toward consumerist notions of social relationships is a hot management fad: celebrating the power of brands and recommending marketing concepts and branding practices as tools for general organizational management. An initial wave of advice on expanding branding as a marketing tool (e.g. Pine and Gilmore, 1999), is now giving way to arguments for organizations themselves to become brands. Under the rubric of "Living the Brand" (Ind, 2001; Pringle & Gordon, 2001), these arguments go beyond advising organizations on how to create brands to recommend that organizations apply branding practices to themselves (Davis & Dunn, 2002).

By presenting branding practices as tools for general management, marketing rhetoric is largely appropriating long standing knowledge about organizational socialization and culture, repositioning it, and renaming it organizational branding.  What's new here is the way that marketing rhetoric is being used to reposition the desirable relationships between an organization, its products, and its members (Hackley, 2003). Marketing rhetoric tells managers to "treat employees as customers" by "selling" the organization to its employees and treating employees' evaluation of their organization as a kind of "customer satisfaction" (Cardy, 2001). Living the brand advocates go even further, recommending that employees themselves become part and parcel of the organization's product and the customers' experience of the brand. Employees throughout the organization should be involved in branding, so as to "enhance the sale" and "make the brand come alive" (Mitchell, 2002: 99) for the consumer.  Arguments for treating employees as part of the branded product are implemented through employee branding, and find their most visible expression in the practice of "wearing the brand."

Employee branding attempts to link employees' everyday work behavior to a larger *raison d'etre* of the organization: the organization's brands. Through the extension of the branding practices into the organization, particularly having employees wear clothing associated with the brand, and through the subsequent incursion of the brand into individuals' personal behaviors, these employee branding initiatives promise to engage individuals more fully, while appropriating more of their personal selves. Thus, at the same time that these programs align employee behavior and bring the entire organization into the circle of enthusiasm and creativity that enables brand stewardship (Davis & Dunn, 2002; Ind, 2001) they also encourage organizations to treat their employees as artifacts of their organization's products, an approach

which has far-reaching effects on employees as well as the organization. In this chapter I discuss employee branding and the specific practice of wearing the brand to consider how these programs might subvert conventional organization-employee and product-employee relationships, turning employees into artifacts of the brand.

### Branding and the Employee

Branding is the practice of taking something more or less generic (be it a product, service, or experience) and making it distinctive, by associating the product with real and imagined qualities that marketers hope will help a customer prefer that brand over others. The brand itself is the social construction that links a material product with a set of beliefs about the product's tangible and intangible attributes. Brands help differentiate a product from similar or competitive others on three dimensions: performance, imagery, and consumer insight (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Brand performance associations distinguish the product in terms of its functional benefits (e.g., it cleans thoroughly). Brand imagery associations create a sense of the kind of person who uses the product and the circumstances that the product creates for the user, evoking the 'romance' of a brand. Finally, consumer insight associations show how the brand can resolve the consumers' own problems better than similar brands. Together, these associations create the functional, symbolic, and emotional aspects of the brand.

Brands themselves are organizational artifacts (see Schultz & Hatch and Cappetta & Gioia, this volume), and they are important sensemaking tools within the organization as well as for the consumer. For the consumer, a brand is an artifact that helps answer the question of why a product, service, or experience is preferable to others. For members of the organization, the brand helps to answer the question, what do we want to communicate about this product that describes it to consumers, differentiates it from similar products, and leads consumers to prefer this product over competitive others? What managers understand about and desire for the brand's meaning also helps them make decisions about the physical product itself. In these ways, brands are sensemaking tools that help organization members create, evaluate, and deliver the tangible and intangible promises represented by their organization's products.

Directed at organizations themselves, "internal branding" advocates a system of socialization and communication practices intended to inspire employees to deliver on a brand's promise, by leading employees to internalize brand values and by instilling brand values in key internal organizational processes (The Conference Board, 2001). Employee branding focuses on the employees' role in creating and maintaining the brand attributes associated with the organization's products. The action implied by the label employee branding is meant literally, because these 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, 2003; Mitchell, 2002) through "on brand behaviors".  On brand behaviors are those that enact, demonstrate and maintain the brand's attributes. Employee branding practices encourage employees to think about the brand more consciously and actively consider the brand's interests as they make decisions. To encourage employees to associate the brand and its attributes as closely as possible to their selves, employee branding advocates recommend orienting the organization's culture toward the brand so that every expression of the organization, from common organizational artifacts such as décor, equipment, publications, and uniforms to underlying organizational values, manifests the brand's values and attributes. The goal of employee branding is to create employees and a work environment where every decision and every behavior enacts and displays the specific attributes of the brand. Since branding advocates want employees to internalize the brand's values, however, they seem to hope that employees will come to believe that they share the attributes of the brand and to define themselves as one with the brand. Thus, "(b)y weaving the brand messages into employee's everyday experiences, managers can ensure that on brand behavior becomes instinctive" (Mitchell, 2002: 1010). The intent of employee branding programs is, ultimately, to change the ways that employees think and behave so that their thoughts and behaviors always prioritize the brand's interests.

Conventional brand education programs designed to help employees keep the brand in mind have focused on teaching employees about the brand. These programs assume that the more employees know about a brand, the more effective the employees can be at translating the brand's desired attributes into marketing and product development decisions. These programs work through cognitive mechanisms that maintain a separation between the employee and the brand: the brand is the object of the employees' efforts. In contrast, employee branding advocates describe employee branding as a process for tightening the relationship between the brand and the employees by associating the brand and its attributes with the employees themselves. Employee branding programs assume that the more the employees can act like the brand, the more they can execute on-brand behavior. Employee branding asks employees to assume the role of the brand's representative at all times, regardless of their role or function within the organization. Advocates promise that employee branding will increase the frequency and intensity with which employees evoke the brand's values in everyday work practices. They argue further that stronger employee branding will lead to increased positive feelings toward the organization, interest in organizational successes, and uniformity in both employees' understanding of the brand and in their approaches to delivering on the brand promise (Mitchell,

2002). Perhaps the greatest promise is that branded employees will prioritize the brand automatically and uncritically and to always put the brand's interest first.

**Practices and Forms of Employee Branding**

Employee branding programs recommend that managers redeploy practices that reinforce the norms and values of the organization itself -- practices such as socialization (e.g., training and communication), organizational decor, the distribution of organizational artifacts, and controlling employee appearance – and use these practices instead to educate and reinforce beliefs about the brand. Perhaps the most common form of employee branding is training programs where all employees are taught the basics of branding and marketing principles and instructed on the attributes to be associated with their specific brand. For example, as part of Bath & Body Works' new employee orientation, new employees receive training on the concept of branding, on the retail brands that compete with the Bath & Body Works brand, and on the specific attributes of the brand that the organization promotes. Every organization member, from hourly workers who pack and ship stock to the firm's accounting professionals who manage the firm's capital, participates in this brand orientation. Employees are expected to know all about their company's brand and to display the brand's attributes and promote the brand's interests through on brand behaviors in their everyday work, even when their jobs have little or nothing to do with marketing.

In addition to training programs, employees are branded through a variety of organizational communication practices. For example, internal corporate press and new product launches are designed not simply to inform or educate employees but also to persuade them and influence their behavior (Ind, 2001; Mitchell, 2002; Pringle & Gordon, 2001). In addition, communication practices which were previously directed only at outside constituencies-- such as brand advertising and public relations campaigns— explicitly are being redesigned to target employees as well as outsiders. Not content to depend on whatever indirect effects these communication practices may have on employees (Elsbach & Glynn, 1996), organizations see their advertising and PR efforts as tools to influence employees and encourage on brand behavior (Mitchell, 2002). As a result, Wal-Mart's television advertising, featuring the greeter welcoming customers as they come into the store, is as much about demonstrating what attributes the employees are expected to display in their own behavior as it is about promoting Wal-Mart's brand to the general public.

Indirectly but still explicitly, employees are branded by organizational décor that reflects the brand, such as brand-consonant aesthetic schemes (e.g., color palettes, furniture styles), corporate art, and three-dimensional product displays designed for retail environments.

Organizations also distribute to employees brand-related artifacts such as copies of print advertising, product prototypes, promotional materials like key chains, mugs, and decorative accessories (see Elsbach's chapter in this volume), and clothing emblazoned with the brand's logo that symbolize and communicate desired brand associations. These artifacts are intended for use outside and inside the work environment, to surround the employee with reminders that reinforce the desired associations between the product and its attributes, and the brand and the employee.

**Employee Branding by Controlling Employees' Appearance**

Somewhat less common and becoming more popular are employee branding techniques that work by controlling employees' appearance, through programs that advocate "wearing the brand". Wearing the brand requires employees to dress themselves for work in ways that symbolize the brand and the brand's attributes. By mixing their own personal work wardrobe with organizationally specified brand-expressive clothing -- clothing that by its style, type, and functionality, as well as its emotional and "romantic" associations, symbolizes the brand to the wearer – employees use their own physical appearance to communicate the brand's attributes to the internal organizational audience.

At first glance, employee branding practices that control employees' appearance looks like a simple extension of a common practice of clothing retailers. Clothing retailers often require that their salespeople wear items that the company sells (Merrick, 2003), so that salespeople model and demonstrate for customers the fashions for sale (Cappetta & Gioia, this volume). For example, The Gap requires retail store employees to wear Gap-brand clothing or clothing similar to it. Salespeople's appearance may also be controlled so that they project or even personify to the consumer the image of the brand's ideal customer.  The dress code of clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch refers to employees as "Brand Representatives," whose defined duties include "looking great in A&F-style clothes" and "projecting the A&F brand with enthusiasm and energy" (Greenhouse, 2003; Merrick, 2003). Potentially more nefarious is the practice of controlling salespeople's appearance by selecting them on criteria such as their physical attractiveness, ethnicity, age and perceived social class.  Abercrombie & Fitch is currently being sued by former employees who contend that they were denied retail sales jobs because their appearance did not reflect the white, Anglo-Saxon, frat-boy image of A & F's brand.

More recently, policies for controlling employees' physical appearance have been adopted for employee branding.  Instead of focusing on influencing the consumer, wearing the brand is intended to influence the thoughts and behaviors of employees themselves. Rather

than being a superficial requirement intended to influence only the employees' surface appearance, wearing the brand is directed more deeply at the individuals' beliefs about the brand, their relationship with the brand, and the link between the brand and their own behaviors. Controlling appearance through dress is potentially an effective way to influence individual's behavior, because of the ways that dress reflects, influences, and helps to construct individuals' social selves (Davis, 1991; Entwistle, 2000). By formally and informally expecting employees to express the brand through their physical appearance, especially by asking employees to dress in ways that symbolize the brand's attributes, organizations strive to link brand attributes to their employees' sense of self.

Wearing the brand is supposed to make the brand's values and message consistently salient for employees. As employees put on brand-expressive dress, they become conscious of whether and how they individually are representing what the brand stands for. When employees wearing the brand interact with others inside the organization, their own and their colleagues' brand-expressive dress triggers them to keep the brand and its attributes in mind. Thinking "as the brand," these employees may be more creative when considering how the brand ought to be represented in different situations (Pringle & Gordon, 2001). Because every organization member can or should be able to find ways to wear the brand, members throughout the organization can express the brand through their appearance, reinforcing and maintaining the salience of brand attributes. Employees wear the brand for themselves, for each other, and for the brand itself.

**Living the Brand at Land Rover NA**

To some, wearing the brand may seem silly, while to others it may seem banal. But employees of one corporation, Land Rover NA, found the practice to be very effective at keeping their minds and their behaviors on brand. Land Rover NA, the marketing, sales, and retailing management division of the larger Land Rover Corporation, actively practiced wearing the brand from its formation in 1985 with 10 employees until about 1998, when it employed 170. As the former chief executive officer Charlie Hughes tells it, managers at Land Rover NA were focused on the overall goal of living the brand, of finding ways to make the brand come alive and feel alive to the employees, so that their everyday work could be focused on and infused with a deep understanding of the brand's attributes and of its meaning to customers (Moore & Harquail, 2003). Their living-the-brand program included training on the mechanical aspects of the vehicle, training in off-road driving techniques to understand the performance of the vehicles, and workshops to discuss the Land Rover brand heritage and how it could be communicated to North American consumers. During their first week working together, the 10

Land Rover NA executives decided to dress like the brand as an exercise to get in touch with their brand and to generate an esprit de corps.

Land Rover was positioned as a lifestyle brand, in which the product's basic functional proposition is augmented with a set of values that connects with and adds meaning to the lifestyles of particular consumer groups. Lifestyle-branded products come with idealized social situations attached to them (Solomon, 1994) and are heavy on brand imagery. As Hughes explained, "Land Rover customers are buying a piece of hardware-- but they are really buying a dream" (Moore & Harquail, 2003: p 4). To dramatize, the Land Rover brand lifestyle and imagery suggests that Land Rovers are driven by quasi-British, upper-crust, men with adventurous spirits who enjoy bird hunting, going to the country lodge or on a big game hunt in Africa, and the thrill of driving through rough, wild countryside that no European man has explored before.

Living the brand at Land Rover was boosted by an unplanned outcome of promotional events directed at Land Rover customers. Early in the reintroduction of the brand to North America, Land Rover held customer driving workshops and off-roading events to generate excitement around the brand's performance and imagery associations. For each of these promotional events, Land Rover NA created some unique clothing and accessory items, which it called Land Rover "gear." At first, Land Rover gave customers T-shirts, key chains, baseball caps, and other logo wear. Shortly thereafter, managers decided to make the merchandise more unique and brand specific. They began distributing Wellington boots, Barbour jackets, hunting vests, shooting caps, and other Anglophilic outdoorsy items. The gear was so popular that customers asked to purchase it outright. The company began to produce the gear to sell at retail, hired a designer to create it and issued spring and fall gear catalogues. All this time, employees at the Land Rover NA headquarters were wearing gear that they collected while working at the promotional events themselves, mixing it in along with more conventional workday clothing intended to express the brand's attributes. The consumer-gear program and the wearing-the-brand initiative ultimately converged, when Land Rover NA employees were instructed to purchase gear from the catalogue (at a significant discount) and to mix this gear into their work wardrobes so that they could wear the brand at work. On any given workday, employees' appearance would reflect the Land Rover brand through a mixture of Land Rover gear, accessories and brand-expressive clothing items from their personal wardrobes. Land Rover NA executives believed that employees enjoyed wearing the brand. As Hughes said, "I think we created magic… We created a team that everyone wanted to belong to" (Moore & Harquail, 2003). But behind the magic, being part of the brand team also required a lot of work.

**The Work of Wearing the Brand**

One could argue that wearing the brand is merely an entertaining example of organizational dress, the patterns of clothing and artifacts that employees wear at work that are achieved through implicit dress norms or explicit dress codes (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Organizational dress is intended to facilitate employees' work within and for the organization (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail & Mackie-Lewis, 1997) because dress can help employees engage and execute their roles and establish role-appropriate emotional states and relationships with others (Rafaeli et al., 1997). Organizations themselves, through organizational dress, influence what information employees can communicate about themselves, their organizations, and their role at work by controlling each employee's visual self-presentation.

While all forms of organizational dress require physical and cognitive work (Rafaeli, et al., 1997), the work of wearing the brand is comparatively complex. Wearing the brand demands that employees think regularly about the brand, about how to translate the brand and its attributes into clothing-borne symbols, and about how to present themselves as artifacts of the brand. Wearing the brand is a unique twist on organizational dress because this psychologically complex work facilitates a subtle yet profound shift in the status of employees-from being creators of the brand to being the brand's subjects.

On the surface, the process of wearing the brand appears relatively straightforward: employees dress for work in combinations of their own clothing and items judged to symbolize various attributes of the brand, so that the employees' finished appearance represents the brand. Examined more closely, wearing the brand involves a lot of work by employees. It requires employees to invest themselves in learning about the brand, pushes them to take the role of the brand, to consistently communicate brand attributes to others in social interactions, and to attach brand attributes to the individual's self.

Wearing the brand is the outcome of several effortful activities, including acquiring branded clothing that fits, acquiring branded accessories, paying for and maintaining a wardrobe, and choosing clothing each day. Each morning, the process of getting dressed for work activates the individual's brand schema and the individual's symbolic judgment, as he or she tries to assemble an outfit that expresses the brand. With the choice of each brand-relevant or personal clothing item, as with the assembly of the overall outfits, employees must assess whether any brand attributes are reflected, which brand attributes are reflected, whether they have achieved a coordinated look, and whether they are branded "enough."

While some employees might be able to reduce wearing the brand to an automatic, mechanical process (e.g., select trousers from pile A, shirt from pile B, vest or sweater from pile

C); for others, wearing the brand each day requires more concentration. People may make routine clothing combinations on some days and unique combinations on other days as they respond to seasonal changes or one-time situations. In addition, individuals need to incorporate all these elements into outfits in which they feel reasonably comfortable, both physically and psychologically. Thus, wearing the brand challenges employees to express the brand's attributes while reflecting some of their physical need, preferences, and personal style.

Dressing each day to wear the brand asks employees to transfer meaning from the brand to themselves by creating a symbolic value chain. The value chain begins at work, where a set of brand imagery and consumer insight associations are symbolically attached to a functional product to create the brand. Next, employees must transfer meaning from the brand idea into individual clothing items, into the daily outfits they assemble for themselves, and onto their bodies. Then, employees take the symbolic product—their own branded appearance— back into the workplace, where they are expected to reflect, consider, and enact in their behavior the attributes that their branded outfits and selves symbolize. Each morning, getting dressed to wear the brand requires employees to put their more abstract, intangible understanding of the brand into some kind of tangible symbolic expression and then to be that symbolic expression themselves, all day long.

Each time employees dress to wear the brand and when they add branded and individual items to their wardrobes, they reinforce and elaborate on their ability to translate the brand's essence into the symbolism of clothing. Wearing the brand requires employees to learn or even create the associations between clothing attributes (color, cut, functionality) and brand attributes. Day in and day out, they have to consider what the brand attributes are, how they might be reflected, and how they could be aggregated, through a set of dress symbols. As they observe other employees also wearing the brand, they may imitate the tactics of employees who wear the brand with a certain panache, thus expanding their repertoire of wearing the brand. Employees also receive feedback from other employees that confirms, disconfirms, and or otherwise educates them on how well they have symbolized the brand through their dress. At Land Rover NA, employees commented on each other's brand dress, especially when a person found an item of apparel that expressed the brand well (e.g., a rugged corduroy shirt from Land's End Outfitters) but was not from the gear catalogue, or when an individual showed up with an antique or otherwise rare artifact (e.g., a belt from the first "off road rodeo"). They complemented each other not only on particular items that reflected the brand but also on outfits that seemed to convey the brand effectively. Through their own experimentation, through observing others, and through responding to feedback on their efforts to wear the brand,

individual employees develop insight into the brand and how it can be expressed symbolically. Wearing the brand gives an employee personal daily practice at "operationalizing the brand" (Davis, 1991, p 227), by expressing the brand's conceptual attributes through combinations of material symbols.

### The Intended Effects of Wearing the Brand on Employees' Sense of Self

Learning how to associate dress attributes with brand attributes and performing this work daily influences not only how employees conceptualize the brand but also how employees conceptualize themselves. The same general process that marketers use to brand products - constantly associating symbolic attributes with the physical product so that consumers psychologically transfer the attributes to the product -- is applied to employees through wearing the brand. Just as consumers use rituals of possession and personal grooming to transfer the social meanings of advertised goods to themselves (Mc Cracken, 1988) employees transfer their knowledge of the brand into their clothing as a means for transferring brand knowledge into their behaviors and cognitions, and then transfer brand attributes into their self-concepts. Transferring brand attributes into self-attributes through dress employs several mechanisms, including identity claiming and identity negotiation, role performance, basic processes of attitude change, and self-consistency pressures. All of these mechanisms share a basic process: that of continually associating the individual with the brand's attributes, so that the individual comes to think of him or herself as actually possessing those attributes.

Individuals intentionally associate themselves with a variety of attributes and groups to indicate who they are, through behaviors known as identity claiming. Identity claiming is an impression-management process in which individuals present themselves privately and socially as having the identities and attributes that they desire to possess (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Harquail, 2003; Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Clothing is a common tool for claiming identity attributes for the simple reason that the proximity of a symbol to an individual's body is used by the self and others to approximate the importance to the individual of the meaning attached to the symbol (Thatcher, Doucet, & Tuncel, 2001; Entwhistle, 2000). Because dress is highly visible and is closely attached to our bodily selves, it quickly assumes "the quality of a metaphor" for an individual's identity (Davis, 1991; Belk, 1988).  Because individuals' self-conceptions are constructed and negotiated in social interaction (e.g, Cooley, 1902) as they respond to the reactions of others to their self-presentations and maintain and modify their private self-concepts in response to these reactions (Swann, 1987), wearing the brand may engender a cycle of social interaction that may lead employees to internalize the brand's attributes.

When a person wears the brand, others may perceive the person's clothing as making an effort to communicate who that person is, and so employees wearing the brand may be interpreted by others as claiming the brand's attributes as their own. Whether the association between displayed attributes and the individual is intended for self-definition or for some other motive such as "operationalizing the brand," the public association of attributes and individual through the symbolism of clothing sets in motion the social negotiation of identity. Whether the employees intend it, others in their social environment will read their branded behaviors and symbols as identity claims and respond accordingly. If employees are treated by others as though they have the brand's attributes, they may conclude that they do indeed have these attributes.

Wearing the brand may also influence employees' self-concepts through the general influence of dress on role taking and the influence of role-taking on the self-concept. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions, they may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definitions (Ibarra, 1999). Dress helps employees execute their organizational roles by helping them enter one role and shed others, by helping to establish emotional states that facilitate role performance, and by helping them relate effectively to others by influencing their relationships within the organization (Rafaeli et al., 1997). More than regular organizational dress, wearing the brand cues a very specific role: that of "being" the brand. Employees can "be" the brand by seeing the world from the brand's frame of reference and by acting "as" and "for" the brand, as though they were playing the role of the brand. Playing the role of the brand involves making salient an employee's cognitive schemas about what the brand is and how it should be expressed. These brand schemas may then influence an 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. In addition, branded dress may maintain the salience of the brand's attributes, perhaps even making them as or more salient than other attributes in the individual's self concept. Although employees may 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).

Employees wearing the brand may also be influenced by basic processes of attribute change as a result of being part of a branded group. Kelman (1958) outlined three ways that individuals accept group influence and come to display the values and attributes of a group: (1) compliance or exchange, (2) identification or affiliation, and (3) internalization or value congruence. Compliance occurs when individuals display group values and attributes simply to

avoid punishment or gain rewards. Identification occurs when individuals adopt group values and attributes that they respect (or don't disagree with), without accepting them as their own. Internalization occurs when an individual already holds values and attributes that are the same as or congruent with those of the group.

For individuals who do not possess the same attributes as the brand, displaying brand attributes for compliance and identification may lead individuals over time to internalize these attributes as their own. Because individuals strive to maintain consistency between their behaviors and their self-beliefs (Gecas, 1982; Steele, 1988), employees who wear the brand may seek to think of themselves as being the way that they present themselves at work. While we often think of self-beliefs as leading to behaviors, behaviors also lead to self-beliefs. Consistently dressing oneself in the brand's attributes and demonstrating these attributes through one's behavior may lead an employee to internalize these attributes and adopt them as self-defining. Thus even after they take off their work clothes employees may discover that they are still-- behaviorally and cognitively-- branded.

Wearing the brand is a prosaic yet comparatively extreme example of a workplace practice that derives its power from constraining, directing, and disciplining the individual's sense of self while at work (Collinson, 2003; Clegg, 1994; Trethaway, 1999; Willmott, 1993). Because wearing the brand controls an employee's self-presentation at work, it is a form of "identity regulation" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) that encourages individuals to present themselves as valuable objects in the eyes of their authority while subordinating their own subjectivity in the process (Ashforth & Mael, 1998). Wearing the brand regulates identity by controlling the amount of an individual's appearance that is left to his or her discretion and by controlling the content of what the individual can display. If clothing and other personal artifacts serve to extend the self metaphorically (Belk, 1988; Cohen, 1989), wearing the brand may lead to the subordination of the individual's authentic and autonomous self by shrinking the psychic space in which they can experience their individuality.

Individuals whose physical appearance, demographic group, psychographic profile, social identities and personalities overlap with a particular brand and its attributes will be less constricted in their self-presentation than will individuals whose appearance, social roles, and personalities clash with their role as a brand artifact. For example, a tall, northern European white man wearing the brand at Land Rover will experience less identity regulation than a short Korean man because his physical appearance is more consonant with the brand's identity.

The match between the attributes the brand represents and the attributes the employees actually have will also affect the identity regulation they experience. Whether or not the

employees personally hold the brand's values they must appear as though they do. Displaying the attributes of a specific brand may be more of a burden for some types or classes of employees than for others. For example, female mangers at Land Rover needed to reconcile gender expectations, professional role expectations, and brand expectations while figuring out how to display the masculine attributes of the brand. Managing any conflict between the attributes of a brand and ones personal attributes or social roles might also be emotionally difficult (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989; Ashforth & Mael, 1993). Self-presentations that can be justified as self-representative are more likely to feel comfortable and to be internalized more easily than self-presentations that contradict self-beliefs and social expectations (Schlenker & Trudeau, 1990). Employees who feel pressured by the organization to present themselves in a way that is at odds with their self-definition may react negatively (Covaleski, et al., 1998), perhaps alienating themselves from the brand's attributes. In addition, individuals who are generally apathetic about dress may be less affected than those who regularly use dress to express their individuality (Shim & Bickle, 1994). Given the infinite number of combinatorial options in creating an outfit and the symbolic ambiguity inherent in clothing (Davis, 1991), wearing the brand may still leave room for individuals to resist conforming their self-expression completely. But employees who resist or who remain unskilled at wearing the brand may appear to be "not branded enough", calling into question their more global ability to express the brand's values as well as their commitment to the brand.

### Complications for Employees' Sense of Self Specific to Wearing B*rands*

All of the complications and concerns mentioned above could be raised, to one degree or another, with any form of organizational dress. Yet controlling employee appearance to serve the brand is uniquely problematic because of three qualities inherent in commercial brands. First, brands are not real. Both the consumers who buy them and the employees who craft them understand that brands are fictions that combine truth and fantasy.  Second, brands and their attributes are created by marketers to elicit consumers' desire. The attributes of a brand are chosen and manipulated to fit what marketers believe that consumers should want; the needs or particular talents of employees and organizations have little or no bearing on the attributes that are attached to the brand.  Third, the attributes of a brand are tethered to the product very tenuously. Beyond the material, functional attributes of a product, every other attribute comprising a brand is ephemeral, and so what the brand means- its social signification—is inherently unstable. What a brand means or stands for is always at the mercy of the marketplace. Brands mutate in response to shifts in the socially constructed meanings of comparison brands, to changes in fashion, and to changes in consumers' tastes.   The unique

problems of wearing the brand boil down to these: (1) employees are asked to present themselves as something they know is at least partially fictitious; (2) employees are asked to present themselves as part of the product, designed to please customers, and (3) employees are asked to transform themselves to fit an image that is itself unstable.

Consider first what it means for branded employees that brands are fictions. Marketers strive to create a symbolic, partly fictional meaning for their brand that will entice consumers into a relationship where the branded product helps consumers construct their identities socially and fulfill themselves emotionally (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Herman, 2002). Using "compensatory symbolism" (Solomon, 1983) and "symbolic consumption" (Elliott & Wassanusuwan, 1998) consumers use branded products to fill the gap between an idealized set of behaviors and attributes that they desire and their own ability to enact these behaviors or have these attributes in real life (Helman & de Chernatony, 1999). When consumers' construct their sense of self by associating themselves with brands they usually find for themselves a comfortable balance between authenticity and fiction. However, compensatory symbolism can go too far when, instead of being fulfilled consumers pour themselves into brands and let brands become their identity. They become all about surface appearance, lose their core self of self (Quart, 2003), and lose their sense of personal authenticity.

Moreover, when ones association of self with brand is enforced rather than voluntary, compensatory symbolism and symbolic consumption have different effects. Employees wearing the brand have little or no authority over the brand or attributes with which they must associate themselves, and they are unable to control the balance between authenticity and fiction because they do not control how branded they need to appear. Yet regardless of whether the relationship between the brand's attributes and the employees' attributes is improbable or inauthentic, the employees' individual identities are still shaped and perhaps even distorted when they must present themselves socially as the brand. Employees who are not and cannot plausibly "be" the brand are still required to associate their selves with the brand in ways that create for them, however briefly and intrapersonally, the experience that they are what they cannot be. This kind of "emptied out relationship (Quart, 2003)" can threaten the authenticity of their relationships with other employees and with the organization itself (Tracy, 2000). Even worse, this relationship with the brand may threaten employees' sense of personal authenticity.

Second, consider that employees wearing the brand are being directed to present themselves as part of the product. When a Land Rover executive explained that "wearing the brand gives people working in that company permission to be just like the products" (Moore & Harquail, 2003: 7), he implied that being like the product is something employees should desire.

But if employees are treated like products, as interchangeable commodities distinguished primarily by their degree of branded-ness, employees are no longer unique individuals with valuable skills and experience. In addition, the more employees are like products, the more they risk "becoming characters for commerce" (Tracy, 2000) who are required to present whatever public face will please the customer. When employees have to anticipate the needs of customers, even when they never interact with these customers, the customers become yet another boss.

Finally, consider that if the meaning or social significance of a brand is unstable, so then is the standard against which the branded employees must perform. Branded employees must be willing and able to change their self-presentations whenever marketing experts want to adjust or evolve the brand, and branded employees must buttress their self-presentations against the vagaries of market trends and consumer preferences. For example, if employees get any pleasure out of presenting themselves and their brand as hip, then they stand to lose something when and not if consumers' changing tastes make their brand and the employees themselves "uncool". If employees are effectively branded, so that brand attributes and their meanings are deeply embedded in employees' self-presentation and work behavior, employees might find it hard to exchange old attributes for new ones or protect their self-esteem when attributes that were once desirable fall out of public favor.

### Complications of Employee Branding for the Organization-Employee Relationship

In addition to the unintended effects of wearing the brand on the employees' sense of self and on the relationship between the employee and the brand, employee branding practices may also complicate the relationship between the employee and the organization. Potential complications stem from (1) the breakdown of internal-external organizational boundaries, (2) any lack of overlap between the between the meaning of the brand and the core values of the organization, and (3) the distortion of the power dynamics between the organization, the brand and the employees.

*The breakdown of internal/external boundaries.* One organizational complication of employee branding stems from the breakdown of the organization's internal and external boundaries. Previously, organizations were encouraged to keep their internal functioning separate from their external relations (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), so employees were rarely cultivated as consumers. The emerging practice of employee branding treats employees (organizational insiders) as consumers (organizational outsiders), even though employees and consumers may have different interests and different perceptions. Insiders and outsiders have access to different information about organizations and apply different values and goals in

interpreting this information (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Employees who experience the organization from the inside while being targeted as consumers by communications that construct the fiction of the brand may be more sensitive to the degree of consistency between the practices of the organization projecting the brand and the image of the brand that is promoted. For example, can a facial cleanser produced by an organization that exploits child labor be environmentally friendly? Branded employees may also be more sensitive to the consistency between the brand's advertised attributes and the processes through which the actual product is created or manufactured. Can an automobile built in Detroit by AFL-CIO workers actually "be" the hand-crafted, finely tuned machine transport of the British upper class? When employees see a disjunction between the attributes of the brand that they are supposed to represent, the attributes of the processes creating the branded product, and the attributes of the organization they are part of, they may question the authenticity of the brand, the authenticity of the organization and their own personal integrity.

*The overlap between brand attributes and organizational values.*  The relationship between the values of an organization itself and the attributes of the brand it constructs may pose an important obstacle to operationalizing recommendations of employee branding. A fundamental assumption of employee branding programs is that the set of attributes that compose the brand are consonant with, if not the same as, the values and attributes that compose the organization's identity. Under this assumption, programs that reinforce the brand serve to reinforce the organization. But embedded in the relationship between the brand attributes and the organization's attributes is the question of brand structure, or how the organization's name is related to the major brand(s), sub-brands, various business units, geographic areas, and channel descriptors.  Functionally, there may not be an effective correspondence between the brand structures (how brands are related) and organizational structures (how units are organized). Thus, the alignment of brands with employees and brand groups with work groups may lead to situations where employees in the same work group dress as different brands, or vise versa.    Moreover, some functional groups may find the brand consonant with their strategy, while other functional groups find the brand associations to be a hindrance.

When the corporation is the brand, and when the corporation's name represents all the products and services that the organization provides, this problem is supposedly simplified.  Yet even in its simplest case, where a single brand "name" represents both the company and the consumer brand, "coherence is not guaranteed (Cappetta & Gioia, this volume)". If there are important differences between the attributes of the organization and the attributes of the

consumer brand, especially if these sets of attributes conflict, employees may find it difficult to adopt the consumer-oriented brand beliefs and transfer them into the workplace. At the purely visual level, would having employees dress like the brand make the workplace look less like a workplace and more like a theme park? At a deeper level, what might happen if employees of companies like Playboy, Inc. were directed to reflect the consumer brand's attributes and values in their everyday workplace behavior?  Employee branding asks employees to attach themselves to the brand, and when the brand is unlike the organizations' values, this may set up tensions that are difficult for employees and organizations to negotiate.

*The distortion of power relationships between the organization, the brand, and employees.*  Another possible complication stems from the repositioning of the target of the organization's branding efforts and the change in power relationships that this suggests. In conventional product branding practices, the brand is the creation of the organization and its employees; it is their intentional social construction. In employee branding practices, the employees and the organization become the creations of the brand. Like a science project gone awry, employee branding initiatives subvert the power relationship between the creator and what is created.  When the brand becomes more important than the organization itself, managers may make decisions that benefit the brand yet damage the organization. For example, the thirty million dollars a year that Nike pays to a celebrity athlete to endorse a sneaker might be better spent as performance incentives for low level employees within the organization itself. Employee branding makes the employees and the organization instruments of the brand and subject to the brand's power and interests.

The practice of wearing the brand may also affect the organization's identity in ways that marketers have failed to consider. When organizations institute the practice of wearing the brand, they may trigger the replacement of organizational identity with brand identity. The dominant dress attributes across an organization are believed to convey the central, distinctive, and enduring values of the organization (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993) and to express the organization's identity (Cappetta & Gioia, this volume). By instantiating, reminding, and reinforcing brand values by making them ubiquitous, visible and constant through dress, wearing the brand makes brand attributes available to be construed by employees as the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of organizational identity (Harquail & King, 2003). Because advocates of living the brand assume that organizational and brand values are consonant, this is precisely the outcome they seek. But while both brand identities and organizational identities are sets of beliefs about central, distinctive, and continuous attributes, brand and organizational identities differ in a subtle yet profound way. Brands are beliefs

invented about a product to make a product more desirable, to sell it, and to make a profit. In contrast, organizational identities emerge from members' collective values and help to provide the organization and its members with a deeper, broader reason for being. Certainly, many organizations exist to sell products, but for most organizations, this is not their sole source of meaning or purpose. To supplant the collective, organic meaning of organizational identity with a commercial fiction such as a brand is to diminish what is possible for employees and organizations to achieve and places commercialism and even cynicism at the organization's heart.

### *Implications*

So what are we to make of employee branding practices, especially programs like wearing the brand that work by manipulating employees' self-presentation and self-expression? Are these branding programs as harmless and simple to execute as their advocates would make them seem? As with so many programs intended to transform employees' relationships to work, employee branding in general and wearing the brand specifically are compelling ideas that, if managed thoughtfully, may indeed bring about behaviors that managers desire. It is hard to argue with the basic premise of these programs: employees who understand the brand and keep the brand in mind will be better at delivering on the brand promise throughout the organization and to the consumer. Certainly, the positive experience with wearing the brand that Land Rover executives report suggests that wearing the brand can focus an organization and might even be fun. Given the purported benefits of these programs and recognizing the ways that employee branding may constrain individuals' authentic self-expression at work, perhaps the more important issues are not whether to brand employees but, instead, how much branding is necessary, what branding processes are most appropriate, and at what point the benefits of employee branding become outweighed by the costs to employees and organizations.

Employee branding programs offer organizational scholars some intriguing avenues for exploring the specifics of complex relationships among the organization, the organization's products, and the organization's employees, and for evaluating the effects of these relationships at the individual, collective and organizational levels. For example, can asking employees to develop a relationship with a brand by presenting themselves as expressions, symbols, or artifacts of the brand lead them to become overly attached to the brand and to its current attributes? Would this reinforce internal complacency and overconfidence and prevent employees and organizations from attending to external risks and opportunities? Organization scholars could consider how using beliefs about a product originally intended to influence

external consumers can and should influence internal organizational processes, especially when these beliefs are known to be fictions.

As a unique twist on organizational dress, the dynamics of wearing the brand demonstrate how basic processes of organizational dress can be complicated when dress expectations prioritize interests outside instead of within the organization. Exploring wearing the brand and similar programs may give us new appreciation for the ways that employees access, personalize, and employ personally manipulable symbols to serve their needs and the needs of the organization. More broadly, observing how individual employees' selves are used to sell product beliefs to themselves and each other should raise our awareness about the power dynamics involved in making employees instruments of the organization's brand. Finally, with regard to the broader incursion of marketing rhetoric into organizational analyses, we should look closely and critically at the applicability of marketing rhetoric to larger questions of organizational leadership. Organizational scholars and managers alike need to judge whether newly-hyped  perspectives are really new or merely repackaged, and whether the management advice they generate facilitates or subtly manipulates the relationships between employees and organizations.  As they say in marketing, *caveat emptor*.

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