

**The silver bullet of branding: Fantasies and practices of organizational identity work in  
organizational identity change processes**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper studies the role and function of corporate branding in organizational identity change, contributing to the increased scholarly interest in the organizing effects of branding, particularly corporate branding. Based on an ethnographic case study of corporate brand planning and implementation at a European telecommunications corporation, MGP, this paper demonstrates how corporate branding logic functions as a management fantasy that settles the tensions of planned organizational identity change. The findings illuminate the important implications of corporate branding logic for the professionalized practices of organizational identity work, with branding fantasized as a “silver bullet” by the organizational branders while in practice emerging as a self-defeating prophesy.

## INTRODUCTION

*“The term ‘silver bullet’ (...) refer to an action which cuts through complexity and provides an immediate solution to a problem. The allusion is to a miraculous fix, otherwise portrayed as ‘waving a magic wand’. This figurate use derives from the use of actual silver bullets and the widespread folk belief that they were the only way of killing werewolves and other supernatural beings.”<sup>1</sup>.*

Recent research has highlighted how the world is dominated by brand logic, with corporate brands becoming loci of meaning management directed not only at external audiences, such as consumers, but also at organizational members (Kornberger, 2010; Mumby, 2016). Consequently, a more organizational approach to the study of branding has supplemented traditional marketing research, focusing on the organizing effects of the brand for the internal functioning of the organization (Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, & Laine, 2011; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Mumby, 2016; Müller, 2016; Vasquez, Sergi, & Cordelier, 2013). This body of work has demonstrated that corporate branding has become a vital part of corporate strategy for most organizations, both public and private, matching the belief that the corporate brand is invaluable in positioning an organization as unique in a global, competitive environment (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011).

The research objective of this paper is to understand the role and function of branding for planned organizational identity change. Previous literature has pointed out that organizational identity is vitally important to successful corporate branding, as the symbolic power of the corporate brand is seen as linked to its ability to reflect the unique organizational identity of the organization behind its products (Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010). Thus, the organization and its members become the point of differentiation in “being branded” towards

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/silver-bullet.html>.

external stakeholders (Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Müller, 2016; Vasquez, Sergi, & Cordelier, 2013). Following this branding logic, organizational identity has turned into an asset to be branded, and organizational identity work has become increasingly “professionalized,” involving marketing experts, communication specialists, public-relations bureaus, advertising agencies, and graphic designers, as well as a range of organizational managers and employees within marketing, communication, human resources, strategy, and customer service (Kornberger, 2010). This development, however, appears to be relatively understudied within research on organizations in general and on organizational identity specifically. Thus, we know relatively little about how corporate branding influences the organizational identity work ongoing in organizations today. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question: How is branding discursively constructed and practiced by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work?

The “silver bullet” serves as an explanatory metaphor for the way branding is discursively constructed in the context of a planned organizational identity change, as branding is believed to “cut through” organizational complexities, providing a straightforward solution to organizational identity tensions. An ethnographic case study of corporate brand planning and implementation at a European telecommunications corporation, MGP, illuminates the branding practices of identity definition, projection, promotion, and enactment, all important parts of organizational identity work. The discourse and practices that comprise the branding process in the case study are guided by fantasies ascribed to the future identity of the organization and to the grand possibilities for managing the process of changing organizational identity. On this basis, I make the overall argument that corporate branding must be theorized and analyzed empirically as a logic with wide-ranging implications for the way work is organized around planned organizational identity change.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Organizational identity change

The malleability of organizational identity and the notion of endurance, stemming from Albert and Whetten's classical definition of organizational identity as "distinct, central and enduring" characteristics of the organization (1985), has been highly debated in recent years (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Golant, Sillience, Harvey, & Maclean, 2015; Schultz & Hernes, 2013).

Organizational identity, by management, is often seen as a strategic asset that needs to be changed and 'worked on' in order to fit the strategic objectives of the organization (Oliver, 2015; Corley, 2004). The debate has, according to Schultz (2016), approached organizational identity change from three different perspectives. The first social-actor perspective is based on Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition, and considers organizational identity as an enduring glue that stabilizes an organization in times of change (Whetten & McKay, 2002). The second social constructivist/interpretivist perspective challenges the endurance argument and proposes that organizational identity can change and will be prompted to do so by a change in the external environment or perceived identity threats, or for strategic purposes (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The third perspective, a more processual/narrative, sees organizational identity as continually constructed and thus change as ongoing (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Chreim, 2005; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). In this paper, I focus on the second perspective of *planned organizational identity change*.

From this perspective, organizational identity is conceptualized as comprising both *identity claims* or labels, which symbolically express "who we are as an organization," and *shared understandings* about what those identity claims mean (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Planned organizational identity change may not only include changes to identity claims but also members' belief systems. Extant literature typically

characterizes this process as a movement from clarity about the organizational identity, to an emerging ambiguity around ‘who we are’ and ‘who we want to become,’ to a renewed clarity about the organizational identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This is described as evolving sense-making and sense-giving processes, which engage the management in envisioning and signaling a new identity and the entire organization in subsequent re-visioning and energizing (enacting) the new (changed) organizational identity (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) remark that “any substantive change leads to the alteration of existing value and meaning systems” (p. 434). Both the organizational identity claims and the collective identity understandings are in other words seen as changeable, though not necessarily easily accomplished.

Organizational identity change processes are described by Corley and Gioia (2004) as “precarious” and fraught with ambiguity, as existing claims and understandings of “who we are” require redefinition. Similarly, research has previously highlighted that identity tensions in change processes are *triggered* by discrepancies between “who we are” and “who we would like to be” (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Hatch, Schultz, & Skov, 2015) or between “who we are” and “who others think we are” (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Corley and Gioia (2002) explain that “Identity ambiguity implies multiple possible interpretations about which core features should define the changed organization, so tensions can accompany the process of deciding which interpretations will prevail in shaping the company’s future image” (p. 173). The role of top-management in planned organizational identity change is thus to bring clarity and settle tensions of identity struggle through sensegiving activities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Van Riel et al., 2016).

Indeed, some studies have questioned if changes in *organizational identity claims* strategically fostered by management may necessarily bring changes in the *shared organizational identity understandings*. For example, Humphreys and Brown’s (2002) study of organizational

identity change in a higher education institution demonstrates the fragmented and conflicting nature of the organizational identity narratives authored by management, employees, and external stakeholders. Corley (2004) similarly demonstrates that organizational identity beliefs are different within an organization along the hierarchical division of organizational members, producing a gap between “perceived changes to the organizational identity and the actual implementation of identity change” (p. 1164). Furthermore, Scott and Lane (2000) argue that organizational identity understandings emerge in the interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders; thus, imagining organizational identity as a coherent, aligned, collective, and shared frame of sense-making misses the important processes of contestation and negotiation between the organization and its various stakeholders.

Based on these empirical studies, it is evident that organizational identity change is dominated by ambiguity, tensions and struggles in various ways, both related to the *organizational identity claims* and related to managing the *shared understanding* of the organizational identity. In this paper, I argue that branding ideas and practices are used as ways for management to handle the ambiguities, tensions, and complexities of organizational identity change. The recent professionalization of organizational identity work has occurred under the label of branding involving marketing experts, communication specialists, PR bureaus, advertising agencies, and graphic designers, as well as a range of organizational managers and employees within marketing, communication, HR, strategy, and customer service. While Corley and Gioia (2004) mention branding efforts as a response to ambiguity in organizational identity change, they make little attempt to explain fully the role and function of branding in the process of organizational identity change. Christensen and Cornelissen (2010, p. 12) argue that the “organization” we find in the corporate branding literature is “an organization defined, shaped, and controlled by its overall corporate message.” Still, corporate branding ideas and practices have received relatively little

attention by scholars within management and organizational studies in terms of their influence on organizational identity change for strategic purposes.

This paper particularly highlights the *work* of organizational identity change to understand the role and function of branding in organizational identity change. Work is understood as the practices in which key members engage when they *work on* the organizational identity, both in defining or revising organizational identity claims and managing shared understandings. Kreiner and Murphy (2016) define organizational identity work as “comprising discursive, cognitive, and behavioral processes that help individuals and collectives create, sustain, share, and/or change organizational identity” (p. 279). Empirical studies have looked at planned and strategically initiated organizational identity changes (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Hatch, Schultz, & Skov, 2015), yet rarely has attention been paid to the micro-level discourses and practices that comprise this type of organizational identity *work*. Watson (2016) proposes that “to study organizational identity work is to study organizational interactions, ‘micropolitics,’ and negotiations between the various constituencies that make up the organization” (p. 136). Studying these practices shows how organizational identity change is populated with local meanings and performances in order to produce strategic and organized outcomes for the organization. Oliver (2015) has recently pointed to the need to study organizational identity work as a strategic practice. The ethnography presented in this paper illustrates that organizational identity work undertaken as organizational identity change is framed and understood as corporate *branding*.

### **Corporate branding**

While early literature on branding focused on marketing products to consumers, beginning from its first concept as a physical mark signaling a certification of standard and quality (Willmott,



2010), branding today has also become the “management weapon of choice to structure the internal functioning of the organization” (Kornberger, 2010, p. 10). The meanings of brand and branding have thus evolved significantly, and a second wave of corporate branding has emerged, a conceptual logic in which the corporate brand gains its symbolic power from the organizational identity it represents (Schultz, 2005). This shift has occurred since consumers increasingly buy the “organization” behind the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2000) and develop consumer-company relationships based on identification with the organizational identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). The demand for corporations to brand themselves and their distinct identities has increased. Branding research has thus evolved within the marketing discipline to include no less than seven different perspectives on branding, one of which is the identity perspective explicitly linking the corporate brand to the identity of the organization (Hedig, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009).

From this perspective, the corporate brand is underpinned by the organizational identity (Kapferer, 2002). Organizational identity is seen as *the point* of differentiation, one that is difficult for competitors to replicate (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). The idea of corporate branding is thus to build upon and create a shared, collective identity that can be expressed in all the organization’s products, services, communication, and behavior to create a unified image of the organization among its stakeholders. On this basis, Schultz (2005) describes corporate branding as a holistic concept that unites strategy, organization, and marketing. She defines corporate branding as “a process through which an organization can continually work out its purpose—a purpose that is meaningful to people inside and outside the organization” (p. 16). The second wave of corporate branding, led by Hatch and Schultz, should be seen as an interpretive counter-approach to the traditional functionalistic marketing perspective on branding.

The traditional marketing perspective on branding conceptualizes identity as defined by brand strategists, as enduring/stable, and as essential to the organization expressed in terms like “the

DNA” (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006) or the inner most substance (Kapferer, 2004). The branding objectives of marketers are thus to infuse the brand with humanlike personalities and attributes (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Typically, the identity construct is labeled “brand identity” in the marketing literature, which has developed various models and systems for managing brand identity. The brand strategist’s task is to ascribe unique sets of associations to the brand (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2004). Olins (1989) suggests that brands acquire identity through visual representations of the organization, using vehicles such as names, logos, symbols, slogans, and spokespeople. Balmer (2012) develops his elaborate AC4ID model of corporate management to suggest that the brand comprises not one identity, but rather a constellation of seven identity types that must be managed. Kapferer (2002) argues that

For corporate brands, in particular, the organizations that they represent provide elements of truth, of inner authenticity, of inner relevance; the brand’s meaning is not invented, or derived from market analysis; it is revealed. The truth of the corporate brands lies within themselves. This is why the process of defining corporate brand’s identity so stresses the necessity of understanding the organization itself, its identity. (p. 176)

Other streams of marketing literature have critiqued the idea that marketers could infuse the brand with meaning based on the organizational identity, as research on brand communities has highlighted that brand meanings typically arise in interactions between the brand, consumer, and consumers (Cova & Cova, 2001; Cova, Pace, & Skålén, 2015; Morandin, Bagozzi, & Bergami, 2013; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2000). Further, research within cultural marketing on brands suggests that they are seen as myths depending largely on their social and cultural context for the formation of meanings (Holt, 2004; Kay, 2006).

Returning, to the second wave of branding, countering this above-mentioned traditional marketing perspective on corporate brands, Hatch and Schultz draw on insights from service

marketing to argue that the brand identity should not only be expressed in the formalized brand messages but also conveyed in interactions between the company and stakeholders. A discrepancy between the “brand promise” (expressed in the *brand identity*) and the “brand experience” will lead the brand to lose its symbolic power and trustworthiness. Similarly, Kapferer (2002) distinguishes between the projected identity and the manifested identity. Thus, in order for the corporate brand to be perceived as trustworthy, they argue, the symbolic brand message projects an identity (*organizational identity claims*) that must be aligned with the organization’s behaviors and beliefs about “who we are” (*organizational identity understandings*) as they are manifested in the “moments of truth” between the organization and its environment. As such, the “enactment” of the brand becomes important at the corporate level in order to create an attractive, distinct, and legitimate brand that competitors would have difficulty copying (de Chernatony, 2002; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Ind, 2001). The ambition of brand enactment among organizational members means that the corporate branding process is described as a more inclusive and democratic process involving the ‘entire’ organization. Indeed, Hatch and Schultz (2003) argue, “Corporate Branding requires organization-wide support. The whole organization from bottom and across functional units is involved in realizing the corporate brand” (p. 1045). The “living the brand” concept emerged (Ind, 2001) to propose that the brand is enacted by organizational members, who identify with the organization and thus internalize and “live” its brand values. Ind (2001; 2003) proposes, “it is the collective power of individuals in an organization that provides and sustains competitive advance” (p. 43).

Empirical studies of the relationship between corporate branding and organizational identity suggest that organizational culture and identity can be used as a way to infuse brands with *positive* meaning (Ravasi & Schultz, 2008). In reverse, the brand may also infuse organizational members’ understanding of “who we are” as an organization in a positive way (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008),

and even provide an overall purpose or meaning to otherwise mundane work (Brannan et al., 2015). There is a reciprocal positive exchange of meaning between the “brand” and the “organizational identity,” yet other studies have critiqued the assumed positive, strategic importance of the brand reflecting the organizational identity. For example, Borgerson, Magnusson, and Magnusson (2006) argue, based on an analysis of Benetton’s unorthodox advertising campaigns, that the identity expressed may work in an entirely decoupled manner from the everyday work of the organization and the everyday consumption of the products. There is no identity behind the brand. Cayla and Peñazola (2012), on the other hand, argue that there may be “too much” organizational identity behind the brand, preventing the companies from adapting to foreign markets and consumers, which may not readily conform to the company’s understanding of ‘who they are’ as an organization. Such dysfunctional identity-brand dynamics have been labelled ‘self-absorption’ and ‘self-seduction’ by Christensen and Cheney (2000).

In light of these diverse studies of the relationship between brand and organizational identity, several scholars have called for more critical interrogations into the role and function of brands in relation to organizational identity. More broadly, a few studies have been conducted on ‘marketing work,’ which have illuminated the practices of marketers and the marketing ideology that shapes their sense-making, decisions, discourses, and actions (Cova, Pace, & Skáléns, 2015; Svensson, 2007). Skálén and Fougère (2007) have, from an Foucaultian stance, highlighted the importance of understanding the production of subjectivity and normalization as an effect of marketing technologies. However, turning to the literature on corporate branding, little is revealed about the micro-level discourses and work associated with *corporate branding* as *something that people do* (Vasques et al., 2011; Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011). Spicer (2010) points towards brands as a complex of control over identity, and argues that in future studies of brands and branding, “the most obvious gap [will be] the detailed study of brand work. This involves asking

what are all the various people engaged in when they are building and maintaining brands” (p. 1739). Also, Svensson (2007) highlights that more work-oriented research should be done on branding as a phenomenon, which positions the marketers as ‘chief cultural architects’ contributing to the production and reproduction of identity for both themselves, the organization members, and the consumers. In this paper, I contribute to this line of research by illuminating the role and function of branding in the specific context of organizational identity change. I do so by asking *how branding is discursively constructed and practiced by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work?*

## **METHODS**

### **Case presentation**

Ethnographic studies documenting how practitioners discursively construct and practice organizational-identity-work-as-branding are rare (Spicer, 2010). In order to address this gap, the paper is based on an ethnographic study of a corporate branding process at MGP, a European telecommunications corporation. MGP’s history goes back to the very beginning of telecommunications in 1879, and it has for years operated as a public organization with a monopoly in the market. In 1997, however, it became privatized and in the new millennium, an international capital fund bought MGP. In recent years, MGP faced fierce competition. The company’s main service, the fixed line, was surpassed by the technological development and the MGP name was tainted by its heritage as a public, bureaucratic organization, by a series of bad customer experiences shared by the media, and by many large-scale scandals associated with the selling and buying of the corporation by capital funds. MGP became an organization everyone loved to hate. In response to these multiple and diverse forms of organizational identity threats, the CEO initiated a new strategy for the organization with the ambition of launching a new corporate brand.

The corporate branding process begins with the establishment of the MarCom (Marketing Communication) department and the MarCom director, along with the newly hired ExtAg (external agency), are officially responsible for designing, launching and implementing a new brand. The corporate branding process is closely tied to top management's work on a new corporate strategy. Here, the CorpCom (corporate communication) director is highly involved, along with his subordinate, the IntCom (internal communication) director. Their roles are to handle all public relations and internal communication in relation to the launch of the new corporate strategy and corporate brand. In HR, employer branding is on the strategic agenda, and a unit of project managers are working to position the company as an attractive employer. The HR director is also the director of strategy. Furthermore, a new culture change project group, TRC, is launched independently of HR and with direct reference to the executive management team. TRC is an abbreviation for "Take Responsibility for the Customer," and its primary focus is to change the organizational culture and processes to ensure that the newly defined brand values - "rules to live by"—are "implemented." In sum, various initiatives are taken to improve the organization's brand, resulting in different forms of organizational identity work.

### **Generating empirical material**

To gain insight into how branding is discursively constructed and practiced by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work, I used ethnographic methods to capture the micro-level activities and stories involved in the processes of strategic work (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011). Nicolini (2009) argued for the use of ethnographic methods to zoom in on both the sayings (discourse) and the doings in order to zoom out on the broader implications of specific practices. Clegg, Carter and Kornberger (2004) argued for the importance of providing an analysis of the things actors themselves actually do in situ when they say they undertake strategic practices,

such as organizational identity work. As such, I followed the process of designing and launching a new corporate brand at MGP for seven months, and I subsequently followed its implementation among employees at MGP's call centers for three months.

I documented this process by using and combining multiple research methods. First, interviews were conducted with key figures in the branding process. Second, active participant observation was carried out in the human resources (HR) department. In particular, three meetings took place between the HR department, the Marketing Communications (MarCom) department, and an External Agency (ExtAg) to 'translate' the new identity into brand actions for employees. Third, documents in the form of strategic PowerPoint presentations were collected from the MarCom department, the Corporate Communications (CorpCom) department, the HR department, and the ExtAg. The implementation of the corporate brand was examined by following 13 customer-service employees through their induction, training, and work during their first three months of employment. I also collected training materials, newsletters from senior management, and emails sent via the team's distribution list. Shifts in location enabled me to pay attention to the doings and dealings of *multiple* organizational actors engaged in the corporate branding process, recognizing that branding is often *done* by multiple organizational members, not only the marketing department (Vasquez et al., 2013). An overview of the empirical material is provided in Table 1.

	<b>Planning</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	Four interviews with the directors of (1) MarCom, (2) CorpCom, (3) Internal Communication (IntCom) and (4) Customer Service (Call Center)	Thirteen interviews with call center employees; one interview with the (new) director of customer services
<b>Observations</b>	Three meetings between HR, MarCom, and ExtAg. “Hanging out” at the HR department, doing consultancy work.	Observations on the launch of the brand. Informal conversations with employees and mid-level managers. Observations at a “strategy day” where the brand was introduced to managers of the residential division. Three weeks of full-time observation during the introduction and training of newcomers. Shadowing five employees for three days each over a period of three months.
<b>Documents</b>	PowerPoint presentations, strategic documents, employee magazines, intra-net text.	Newsletters, email communication, TV commercials, radio spots, newspaper coverage of the launch of the brand.

Table 1: Overview of empirical material

### Analyzing empirical material

By drawing attention to discourses and practices, organizational ethnography typically brings forward often overlooked or concealed dimensions of work and organization. As an ethnographer, I was puzzled by the constantly conflicting positions taken in the discursive construction of the branding process. In that sense, I found that organizational ethnography was particularly suited to depicting “the tensions and discrepancies between official pronouncements and unofficial practices, formal design and informal wheeling and dealing,” and “front regions and back regions,” as well as



“what people do and what people say they do” (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009, p. 8). Thus, inspired by Van de Ven and Poole (1995), the analytical modus focused on the dialectical tensions and ambiguities in the discourses and practices of organizational identity work.

Inspired by the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), I first coded the interview texts to identify the initial concepts of the discourses around the corporate branding process. I then grouped them into eight categories (open coding): real organizational identity, ideal organizational identity, substantive changes, symbolic changes, organizational approach, marketing approach, inside-out implementation, and outside-in implementation. These tensions were categorized as first-order categories. Next, I searched for relationships between the categories, in order to connect them with higher order themes. I noted how the participants’ discourses were inconsistent and rooted in binaries, illuminating sense-making struggles around four main themes of organizational identity work: (a) *identity definition*; (b) *identity projection*; (c) *identity promotion*; and (d) *identity enactment*. For instance, (a) identity definition involved struggles between tensions of real organizational identity vs. ideal organizational identity, (b) identity projection involved struggles between substantive changes vs. symbolic changes; (c) identity promotion involved struggles between the organizational approach vs. the marketing approach; and (d) identity enactment involved struggles between inside-out vs. outside-in implementation. Instead of treating the discursive inconsistencies as a methodological problem, I sought to further develop the tensions engaging in “oppositional thinking” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) to allow for a nuanced understanding of the discursive struggle around branding. In other words, this inductive and analytical process moved from the participants’ construction of “branding” (first-order) to my interpretation of this process as organizational identity work (second-order), illuminating how meaning was ascribed to the organizational identity work in the participants’ discourses during the process.

Second, I focused on the actual practice linked to the branding process in order to understand how these discursive struggles rooted in tensions of organizational identity work were settled or overcome. Zooming in on the work practices and the unfolding of events as the brand was planned, launched, and implemented, it became evident that the corporate branding logic served a particular role and function in the organizational identity work: as a fantasy of the “silver bullet.” Based on this “mystery,” I engaged in more abductive processes of a “fantasy reading” of the data, inspired by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), moving back and forth iteratively between the data and the literature on fantasy. On this basis, I identified four aggregate dimensions of branding as a “silver bullet” fantasy in organizational identity work: (a) Postalgic fantasy of “who we can become,” (b) Fantasy of control over audiences’ sense-making process, (c) Fantasy of unity and wholeness, and (d) Fantasy of control over organizational members’ subjectivity. Table 2 provides an overview of the analytical process and the emergent categories, themes, and dimensions of my findings.

In order to ensure trustworthiness in generating and analyzing the empirical material, I took several steps, inspired by Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. First, I sought credibility through ‘oppositional thinking’ and sensitivity to inconsistencies. I triangulated the data, particularly interview discourses versus documents, and observations of events and practices in everyday work of the participants, as described above. After the initial period of observation, I returned to the organization and presented the preliminary data-analysis to participants (member checks) and I engaged in peer debriefing, discussing my analytical findings with experienced qualitative researchers. Second, to tackle issues of transferability, I have included a detailed (thick) description of the organizational context and aimed at ‘showing’ (in contrast to telling) the complexity of the data (Tracy, 2010). Third, to address issues of dependability, I attempted to be transparent in my description of the analytical

process and include multiple and varied voices in my analysis from across the organizational divisions and hierarchies. Fourth and finally, confirmability was attended through meticulous data management and recording, verbatim transcription, careful notes of observations, and extended collection of documents.

<b>1<sup>st</sup> order categories</b> <b>Branding tensions</b>		<b>2<sup>nd</sup> order themes</b> <b>Organizational identity work</b>		<b>Aggregate dimensions</b> <b>Fantasy resolution to tensions</b>
Real organizational identity	}	Identity definition	}	Postalgic fantasy of “who we can become”
Ideal organizational identity				
Substantive changes	}	Identity projection	}	Fantasy of control over audiences’ sense-making process
Symbolic changes				
Organizational approach	}	Identity promotion	}	Fantasy of unity and wholeness
Marketing approach				
Inside-out implementation	}	Identity enactment	}	Fantasy of control over organizational members’ subjectivity
Outside-in implementation				

Table 2: Overview over emergent categories, themes and dimensions.

## FINDINGS

### Defining the organizational identity

The local discourse around the branding process suggests that branding is understood as the practice of *defining* the organizational identity, which the new corporate brand should reflect. Yet, tensions arise between defining the *ideal* and *real* organizational identities. On the one hand, the branding process is driven by an ambition to change the organizational identity and the conceptions of the organization among both organizational members and external stakeholders, primarily customers.

Thus, the discourse of *ideal* organizational identity is marked by a clear distancing and breaking with the past and present conceptions of the organization, as evident in the following quote.

We want to get away from this identity of MGP as ‘the telecommunication giant’.  
[...]. We have become the big, ugly corporation with a slightly monopolistic attitude  
[...]. We must get away from the image, which is mainly about bad customer service,  
and which is also about the fact that we do not dare to stand up for our own business  
and be proud of it. And we must move away from the image that we are so  
complicated [bureaucratic] that customers can’t stand to change anything in their  
relationship with us. And then we must also get away from being perceived as very  
heavy, very large, the image we have of being a big, opaque, unreachable business.  
(IntCom director, interview).

The current organization is constructed negatively in this discourse as a “telecommunication giant” with a “monopolistic attitude.” Because of its size, it is “complicated,” “heavy,” “opaque,” and “unreachable.” This is a concern, it is argued, because its bureaucratic structure is associated with poor customer service and demoralized employees, who are no longer proud to be members. By contrast, the directors involved in the corporate branding process articulate an *ideal* organizational identity centered on the new values of “customer first,” “simplicity,” and “collaboration”; these values are defined as the new “rules to live by.” The directors all ascribe certain “dreams” and “hopes” to the new brand and to the possibilities of re-interpreting the organizational identity.

I have a dream that we can use this new communication platform, in the future when our customer service numbers increase, to actually begin to communicate about our

customer service. We cannot do that today. It is still too dangerous. But the wishful dream would be that we should reach that goal one day. (MarCom director, interview).

Here, the *ideal* organizational identity is discursively constructed as a vision, something to *become*, rather than a reflection of the current organizational identity and reality. By contrast, another local discourse, more nostalgically oriented, constructs the organizational identity as reflected in the brand as the *authentic* and *natural* identity. The “rules to live by” are constructed as emerging from the organization’s *true* and *real* organizational identity.

We knew what the words [values] were, but not really how to use them. But really they came from the masses of MGP, you could say, by looking at MGP’s [development] over the past couple of years. (CorpCom director, interview).

This discourse of MGP’s *real* identity is marked by a nostalgic return to what MGP “is really about” and a mobilization of an enchanted past, not as something ‘infected’ with bad customer experiences and a heavy heritage, but marked by honorable values and a history of care. This is further reflected in the following quote:

We need to get back to who we used to be. To go back and find all the good things that are in MGP, some of the good things about our culture that people still remember (IntCom director, interview).

The ‘official’ organizational identity claim becomes largely defined by the ExtAg. Based on a brief developed by the MarCom department, a workshop with senior management, customer surveys and employee interviews, the ExtAg provided a debrief describing the *new identity of MGP* to senior

Box 1: Excerpts from PowerPoint presentation. ExtAg’s debrief of new identity. (I)

Confusion is common at MGP. The employees are bewildered. They long to be told who MGP is and be provided with a shared direction to guide their work.

There is frustration over untapped potential. Many hold ideas for improvement. Several people feel that MGP is underrated and they are ready for change.

Many employees are ashamed of bad customer service. The negative image affects everyone.

Box 2: Excerpts from powerpoint presentation. ExtAg’s debrief of new identity. (II)

The new MGP is not big.

**It is wide.**

Big = Almighty

**Wide = Folksy**

Big = Solitude

**Wide = Democracy**

management. The debrief (box 1 and box 2) stated that MGP should no longer be considered “large” but rather “wide,” because being wide means being more “folksy” and “democratic.” The

organization should no longer be seen as an “opaque,” “monopolistic” corporation, but rather as a “community of members.” As such, customers are labeled “members,” and the period of subscription is now labeled the “period of membership.” The community feeling should be evoked by the new slogan, “us with MGP.”

*Identity definition and the fantasy of branding*

We see in this local discourse of the new brand an oscillation among representing the organization “as we were,” “as we are,” and “as we want to be.” The tensions among past, present, and future conceptions of “who we are” marks different fantastical scenarios motivated by the wish to break with the current identity others ascribe to the organization. Nostalgia and postalgia have been previously explored in the literature as an “escape” from present-time status quo based on dreaming about what was once accomplished and what can be accomplished (Ybema, 2004; Gabriel, 2016). In this case, MGP ended up with identity claims that primarily reflects a postalgic fantasy about who they want to become as described by the external agency. Ybema (2004) described such a postalgic fantasy as follows: “it takes a burning desire, not to return, but to go forward, to go and find out what lies behind the bend, over the mountain, behind the horizon. It may be expressed in utopian ideals and formalized plans, all picturing the future as being fundamentally different from and brighter than today” (p. 826). The fantasy of the brand logic functions as a form of escapism from the complexities and ambiguities of organizational life, allowing organizational members to re-articulate or define a new organizational identity that is safe from identity threats in the form of external criticism and perceptions of failure (Brown & Starkey, 2000). The external agency plays a significant role in formulating the organizational identity claimed to be conveyed in the brand and spark the imagination of what the organization can become. They may be seen as ‘identity midwives’ (Cayla and Peñazola, 2012).

### **Projecting the organizational identity**

The local discourses and practices of the corporate branding process suggest that branding is constructed as practices of *projecting* a *new* organizational identity, which symbolically can change perceptions of the organization both internally and externally. The practice of *projection* means that the corporate branding process is constructed as being a continuous oscillation between making *substantive* changes to the shared understanding of organizational identity “to create a new organizational DNA” - and creating and managing the more *symbolic* organizational identity claims to build an external image that is appealing, creative, and competitive.

The ExtAg translates the new identity claim “us with MGP” into a branding campaign driven by a “creative universe” on TV and radio. This universe is centered on two well-known actors, who wear nude costumes and act as the nudist, opposite-sex couple “Clara and Brian.” The creative universe is rooted in the comedy genre: while Brian is a nerdy engineer, excited about the technological features of MGP’s products, Clara is a naïve psychomotoric therapist, eager to learn more about the products from her ‘wise’ husband. Each quarter, new episodes of Clara and Brian’s lives are released as a serial, fictional comedy show. The controversy surrounding the nudist couple gives MGP the desired media attention on the launch day of the new corporate brand. Thus the ‘branders’ achieve their goal of *projecting* a new identity.



Internally, the externally projected identity receives all the attention. In the HR department discussions around the new identity is reduced to concerns about color schemes and online design (box 3).

Box 3: Excerpt from observation notes from a meeting between ExtAg, HR, and MarCom

The HR director opens the meeting: “Has the Corporate Visual Identity been approved?” ExtAg confirms that it has been approved and starts presenting their PowerPoint slides. The slides are mainly focused on visual aspects and are very technical. “We need a circle here and a circle there.” They move on to state their new definition of MGP’s identity as an employer. There are no comments from either HR or the MarCom representatives. The HR director finally breaks the silence: “Can we use other colors? And how would this look online?” ExtAg answers with a few examples.

Observation reflections: I am surprised that there are no questions about the ideas around “who do we want to be as an organization.” There seems to be a content atmosphere in the room in the sense of ‘this looks good, we will take it.’

Mid-level managers are all invited to a “strategy day,” and corporate branding is last on the agenda. Here, the managers, without further introduction, are shown the new TV commercials, while candy in the shape of “jelly boobs” is handed out as a gimmick (box 4). The employees are introduced to the new strategy and corporate brand via the Internet, where the CEO is interviewed about the new strategy. However, the most space is given to the new advertising universe. In the employee magazine, the CEO states that the creative universe symbolically aims to “call on the smile and lower the parades among [our customers].” The Creative Directors of ExtAg argue, “We want to embrace [our customers] in a telecommunity, where [Clara and Brian] lead the way. It is about the life of the common people, simplicity, sympathy, and a sense of community and togetherness.”

Box 4: Excerpt from notes on “strategy day” for midlevel managers

The marketing director: “We want to strengthen MGP’s brand. I want to explain to you the purpose of this madness. There is a strong rationale for doing what we do. We need to package our message so that people will be bothered listening to it. The purpose is to strengthen the sympathy towards MGP’s brand.”

He then progresses to talking about typography and ‘tone of voice.’ The people in the audience seem rather distracted and are engaging in small talk. The room is filled with cracked noise from the candy bags of ‘jelly boobs’ that have been handed out.

One person asks a question: “How long is this [creative] ‘universe’ going to survive?”

Marketing director: “Several years. That is super efficient.”

He then shows a ‘pre-premiere’ of the commercials on the large screen in the auditorium. People start laughing and applaud it at the end.

Marketing director: “We want to be more folksy. We want to talk with a big smile on our faces to evoke some sympathy.”

Vice president of the private division: [Addressing the audience] “Is this going to work? Does this make sense?”

The audience shouts back (with jelly boobs in their mouths): “YES”

*Identity projection and the fantasy of branding*

The preoccupation with identity projection through symbolically charged images and a creative universe suggest a fantasy in which the symbolic representation of “who we are” enables management to control the meanings associated with the organization among customers, as well as among organizational members. While the branding process is discursively constructed to substantially shift internal understandings of organizational identity (as illustrated in the previous section), resources, effort, and money are expended to develop a creative universe which appears decoupled from the internal understanding of organizational identity. Thus, while the directors engage in the discourse of including the organizational culture, history, and employees’ values in

the branding process, they appear rather self-seduced by the power of the creative universe and concerned primarily with colors, designs, artifacts (see box 3), and by a blind belief that because it can ‘call on a smile’ then customers and organizational member would de facto ‘buy into’ the new brand and its projection of the new, desired organizational identity.

The branding logic, according to Svensson (2017), is marked by grandiose delusions characterized by “fantasies of unlimited powers, great importance and almost limitless influence on the world” (p. 2). It is interesting to note in the case of MGP how the organization chose to focus on the external projections of the new organizational identity, using the marketing ‘gimmick’ of handing out jelly boobs and providing ‘pre-premier’ showings of the commercials on the strategy day as ways to build an emotional link to the new organizational identity. Svensson (2007) argue that marketing logics, such as branding, are rooted in postmodern grand narratives, which celebrates the importance of images, symbols, fictions, rather than content or essence. At MGP, the communication tricks are seen as a natural way to influence the meaning-making process of the mid-level managers. This represents a fantasy of being able to control, through campaigns, how the empty signifier of the brand is charged with certain identity characteristics. This becomes even more apparent when the local branding process shifts from brand design to brand implementation.

### **Promoting the organizational identity**

The practices of *promoting* the organizational identity are constructed as a natural part of the corporate branding process. The discourses focus on the concept of unity. The organization is envisioned as united around the new brand and recognized as consistent in its words, the brand promise, and actions (the brand experience). Thus, the role of various organizational players in promoting the identity becomes contested, ranging from an *organizational* perspective, which

includes multiple organizational actors in the process, to a *marketing* perspective, where the process is centrally driven by the MarCom and CorpCom departments.

The *organizational* perspective is constructed in a local discourse on collaboration among departments, engagement across different professions, and a broad consideration of the alignment between both internal and external activities in promoting the new organizational identity to ensure “one voice” in interactions with external stakeholders.

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

Similarly, in the strategic document “Recruitment Communication,” the branding process is depicted as two tracks running in parallel towards “a new DNA.” One track is concerned with external initiatives, such as “a new communication structure,” “a new communication focus,” and “a new story,” while the other track is concerned with internal activities, such as “the TRC project” (culture change project), “the new strategy,” and “the new KPIs.” Concluding remarks state that “the story needs to merge both internal and external perspectives ... and it needs to be continuously rewritten to match the journey towards the new DNA.” In sum, this *organizational* discourse highlights the need to mobilize the entire organization to promote the organizational identity, to ‘speak with one voice’; in other words, to collaborate across marketing, communication, and HR

departments to unite the external and internal activities so as to be recognized as “one” organization.

Against this is the *marketing* discourse, which describes the promotion of the organizational identity as a matter of developing “one look” and promoting a certain *visual* identity. As such, the activities of the corporate branding process is concerned with visual identity, developing new layouts for print or online advertisements, and establishing a new creative universe for TV and radio. The MarCom director describes this practice as a clean-up task to ensure the consistent visual representation of the organization.

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

The resources provided to the corporate branding process are earmarked for developing the unified, “one look” of the organization. This has consequences for the division of labor. During the early process, the HR department turns to the MarCom department and the ExtAg to offer its help with the internal implementation of the brand. However, the ExtAg, which is coordinating the branding process, responds that in relation to the branding process MGP had only bought services related to marketing activities. The lack of financial resources to carry out the internal activities related to changes to the shared organizational identity understandings means that the HR department is left out of the strategic planning; it is not invited to the meetings concerning the launch of the corporate

brand. It is excluded from this process, because “that is the way it is; if you are on a small budget, then you are not invited. Only those with a large budget, they are always there” (A representative from ExtAg, meeting with ExtAg and HR). The HR department themselves also appear to withdraw themselves from the branding process. As an HR manager explains, “MGP should only be branded from one place in the organization: MarCom.” In meetings among the HR department, the MarCom department, and the ExtAg, most questions from the management of HR concern the visual and creative design of the brand: “Is the Corporate Visual Identity approved?” or “How will it look online?” (HR director, meeting with the MarCom and ExtAg, box 3). Issues related to collaborations among departments and alignment between internal and external activities in promoting the new organizational identity with “one voice” appear to be overtaken by a “one look” promotional logic as the process develops. Quite late in the process does marketing seem to realize that the marketing logic has implication for the internal launch of the brand, as evident in box 5.

Box 5: Observation of brand network meeting. Tony works in MarCom and Monica works in HR.

Tony says that he has been working on a Brand Equity model and presented it to another external agency for quality assurance.

Tony refers to the meeting, stating: “One of the consultants at the external agency had said: ‘you are missing an important stakeholder group. Employees.’” “We have to work together and discuss the internal launch of the brand.”

Monica: “I would love to. But we have just been cut in our resources at HR, so we are not allowed to engage ourselves in employee branding anymore. Now we work on onboarding, recruitment, and job adds.”

Tony: “But how am I to know what I am to say to the employees? I think we need to make a gap-analysis and send out a questionnaire before and after our launch. Then we will be able to measure if this has been a success.”

Monica appears to agree and offers a few nods, but says nothing.

Labelling the organizational identity work *branding* has great implications for how it is managed, who is involved, and who gets a say in the process. The *marketing* perspective considers HR to be illegitimate ‘branders’, and thus HR is excluded from the branding process. Meanwhile, the HR department also seems to exclude itself, as its management seems to perceive the organizational identity work as out of their hands. HR management even refused to participate in an interview for this study “on branding.” Instead, all decisions and activities become centered in the MarCom department, with the promotion of “one look” for the organization.

### *Identity projection and the fantasy of branding*

The branding logic promotes a fantasy of coherence, of establishing and maintaining a favorable image among different stakeholders. Christensen, Morsing, and Cheney (2008) pointed out that the word “corporate” invokes a bodily metaphor of unity and totality; the *raison d’être* for corporate branding is an ideal image of unity, with a consistent voice across markets and audiences to emerge in the environment as “one.” Interestingly, at MGP, this fantasy translates to “one look” rather than “one voice,” and the organizational “body” was largely ignored in fantasies of managing the interpretive processes of external stakeholders through symbolic images and visual designs. As such, the ambiguity, messiness, and complexity of its organizational identity is reduced to more manageable and tangible aspects of logos, colors, PowerPoints, business cards, and websites, rather than more cultural or socio-ideological aspects of changes to shared organizational identity understandings. Gabriel (2000) pointed out that in situations of uncertainty, fantasies enable people to turn passivity into (pro)activity and helplessness into control. The branding fantasies do just this at MGP, with certain key organizational members (particularly marketing and communication directors) emerging as “natural,” active, and responsible identity workers because of their externally oriented roles, while others, such as those in HR, are largely excluded from the process.

### **Enacting the organizational identity**

The *projection* and *promotion* practices associated with organizational identity work as a corporate branding process may suggest that management appears less interested in the *enactment* of the new organizational identity. Yet, the directors engaged in the corporate branding process still discursively construct enactment as a vital part of projecting the brand “from the inside.”

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

In this *inside-out* discourse, employees are positioned as vital for delivering on the brand promise and moving the organization towards its ideal identity. Therefore, the IntCom director characterizes the new values, “the rules to live by,” as “the complete, reduced essence of the strategy” that should provide employees with an “anchor in their daily lives” (interview). Moreover, the CorpCom director argues for the vital impact of “the rules to live by” in mobilizing the organization, since they are “the glue that attaches our strategy up here to our daily execution of the strategy,” adding that “to get a company with 10,000 employees marching in step with one another ... is damn hard. I think, especially our rules to live by, will have a great effect” (CorpCom director, Interview). This discourse is even taken to an extreme in a frequent reference to the words of the HR director, who



had stated that “the new brand strategy requires that we take the employees’ DNA and craft a new one into their spine” (ExtAg representative at meeting with HR and MarCom).

Against this *inside-out* discourse is another discourse suggesting that the enactment will appear naturally, because employees will be “hit” by the external projection of the brand to the degree that enacting it follows naturally. From this *outside-in* the directors highlight a positive cycle of change through which employee satisfaction automatically follows an increase in customer satisfaction. The CorpCom director argues, “When you begin to create happy customers, then you will also create happy employees and then they will have a positive influence on each other” (CorpCom director, interview). The rationale behind this perspective is thus first to project the organizational identity externally, which will then also have a positive effect internally.

It is about how often you find this on television, how often you meet us in the streets. And we have some pretty heady goals here, which mean you shall see us at least three times [during the campaign]. And this means that, of course, it will have the same effect for employees at MGP, if not a greater effect, because you live it as part of your everyday life. You notice it more. So, I don’t think that many days will pass before employees will be confronted with positive comments from family and friends.

(MarCom director, Interview)

This faith in the outside-in dynamics of the projection and promotion of organizational identity seems to be the reason why the front-line call centers were not involved in the branding process. At the launch of the new corporate brand, call center management introduces the brand during the employees’ usual 15-minute daily briefing. The call center director explains in an interview (a few

days before the launch) that “this is standard procedure when launching a new marketing campaign.”

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

Meanwhile, everyone inside and outside the organization is bombarded with the new advertisement of the brand on television, on the radio, in newspapers, and online.

Box 6: Excerpt from observation on the launch of the new brand/identity.

The day before the launch of the corporate brand, employees get a text message on their cell phone stating that they should look forward to the following days as something new and exciting would happen.

On the morning of the launch, employees read in the newspaper [the national version of the *Financial Times*], “When MGP’s CEO today gathers his employees, it is to tell them that MGP in 2012 is Europe’s strongest telecommunication provider.” In front of all entrance doors, CorpCom staff on the day hand out a special issue of the employee magazine about the new brand and strategy. Along with the magazine, employees are given a pastry known as a “snail” (quite interesting, since the main idea of the corporate brand was to get rid of the tainted image of MGP as being slow). On the intranet, there is a movie about the production of the new advertising universe and also an interview with the CEO about the new strategy. That is it. Then there is silence.

Three employees discuss the launch:

Tina: “I think they are kind of cute” [Referring to the naturists Brian and Clara].

Susanna: “I am a little disappointed. I thought we would receive some information on the intranet?”

Markus: “I suppose we will be gathered later [for a meeting]?” [No meeting was initiated]

They appear to recognize the new corporate brand as an external activity and do not pay much attention to it. They just carry on their daily business.

Despite recognizing that improved customer service is one of the major issues that must be addressed for the corporate brand to succeed, observations in the call center reveal little explicit communication or training regarding the new brand or its values. The “rules to live by” are enforced through a mini-checklist, where the team leaders sit next to their employees for 30 minutes once a week to listen to their conversations with customers. The team leaders used the check list to verify and record whether each employee remembers to say everything in the right order and manner. The standard checklist and obvious direct surveillance quickly become an object of ridicule among the employees and their team leaders, thus appearing to have limited influence on the call center employees’ enactment of the “rules to live by.” Instead, the employees seem to experience the externally projected and heavily promoted claims of organizational identity as decoupled from their everyday work and their own conceptions of “who we are.”

#### *Identity enactment and the fantasy of branding*

To the management, the brand emerges in a fantasy of limitless power, not only over the sense-making processes of external audiences but also over the subjectivities and “DNA” of organizational members, particularly those on the front lines. Management articulates the new organizational identity as processes of *instillation* in the minds of organizational members, rather than being enacted or co-constructed. Furthermore, this instillation is performed through fairly technocratic means (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), while the socio-ideological forms of managing meaning are left to the extensive external marketing of the new organizational identity. Such fantasies of power may be rooted in what Fougère and Skålen (2013) label as the ideology of marketing which turns every organizational members into marketers. People are constructed as manageable objects to be examined, evaluated and controlled in order to please the sovereign customer through “service orientation” or “service spirit” (Skålen & Fougère, 2007). In the case of

MGP, hopes and dreams are placed on the effects of the external promotion; it appears self-evident to the directors that employees will be seduced by the defined, projected, and promoted identity they meet in the media. However, the mere label of the organizational identity work as “branding” leads the call-center management to consider it simply another “marketing exercise” (one of many). Thus, limited effort is put into ‘social engineering’ or towards any alignment of the call center employees’ beliefs about and understanding of the organizational identity.

Interestingly, the branding logic appears to function as a fantasy of the “silver bullet” that can magically fix complex organizational problems, cutting through the tensions and struggles of organizational identity work. In practice, however, it paradoxically emerges as a self-defeating prophecy. The branding process is a fantasy of being able to strategically change the organizational identity (both identity claims and shared understandings) in response to the organizational identity threats MGP is facing. The fantasies of the branding process involve holistic initiative, inclusion, and mobilization of the entire organization, from top to bottom and across previous silos of marketing, communication, and human resource departments. Yet, because branding’s modus operandi is seen as driven by external image building, promotion, and advertising, the practices around branding at MGP reduce the organizational identity work to be focused on the definition of an ideal identity, projected and promoted based on marketing logics and enacted internally via checklists, balloons, and jelly boobs. This yields rather decoupled, yet extensively promoted identity claims, while the collective understanding and identities of organizational members remains rather unchanged.

## **DISCUSSION**

Branding has been described as *the* organizing principle of contemporary capitalism (Kornberger, 2010; Mumby, 2016), and a managerialistic ideology which directs management decisions,

organizational behavior, organizational forms and the products/services on offer (Fougère & Skålen, 2013; Skålen, Fellesson, & Fougère, 2006). This paper contributes to the emerging interest in the effects of this dominating branding logic for organizations (Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 2000, Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Vasquez, Sergi, & Cordelier, 2013). The research objective of this paper was to understand the role and function of branding for planned organizational identity change. This was pursued through the research question: How is branding discursively constructed and practiced by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work. The findings suggest that branding structures organizational identity work in a certain way that opens (and closes) particular sets of meanings, discourses, and practices associated with this work. The branding logic functions as a mythical form of ‘silver bullet’ for navigating the complexities of organizational identity change, building on megalomaniacal fantasies of design, projection, promotion, and enactment of a new organizational identity. The brand emerges in fantasies of nostalgia, control over sense-making processes, unity, and wholeness, as well as control over organizational members’ subjects. This study advances existing literature on both organizational identity change and branding by: (a) illuminating the fantastical nature of branding; (b) analyzing the opportunities and limitations of branding in planned organizational identity change; and (c) demonstrating the influence of branding on the organization of identity work processes. I discuss these contributions in more detail below.

### **Branding as a fantastical logic**

Hulberg (2006) argued that corporate branding is proposed as a universal approach suitable for any organization. The “why” of corporate branding was indeed never questioned at MGP. None of the participants in this research ever questioned *whether* branding was the right solution to MGP’s problems. At the time of the study, MGP was in a state of crisis, faced organizational identity

threats in terms of a tainted image and decreased income follow the death of its service, the fixed line. Yet, in this complex context, senior management relied on and reproduced branding logic, which holds a fantasy of a holistic and manageable - a brandable - solution to organizational problems. Management appeared to take for granted that a new brand would assist the corporation to achieve a better image among its external audience, despite its own argument that the negative image was caused by organizational size, heritage, bureaucratic structure, ineffective customer service, and so on. Still, MGP turned - as do many other modern organizations - towards corporate branding as the *natural* frame for organizational identity change. The logic of branding provides management with a seductive fantasy of order and control over messages, with the new organizational identity defined by leaders and marketing or communication specialists, which thus reduces the complexity of including and engaging in dialogue with both employees and external stakeholders (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010).

While Svenson (2017) pointed to megalomania in the branding literature, this paper illustrates how these megalomaniacal fantasies of the branding logic manifest themselves in the local discourses and practices of branding. Branding is constructed as a 'silver bullet' that cuts through organizational complexities and conquers all imaginable organizational challenges. The branding logic, however, also emerges as self-defeating in practice, with the mere label of "branding" preventing significant change to the collective *understandings* of the organizational identity. This is because the practices center around projection and promotion of an ideal identity through visual identity, a creative universe, and advertising, rather than through any in-depth organizational development. For future studies of brand logic and its implications for organizing, it is important to recognize these fantastical features of the branding discourse; yet it is also necessary to understand that while the logic of branding is based on imaginary, postalgic dreams, control over

meaning, and unity and control over subjectivities, it nevertheless has great and very ‘real’ implications for organizational identity change in particular and for organizing in general.

### **Branding as enabling and constraining organizational identity change**

Previous research has highlighted the complex and ambiguous nature of planned organizational identity change (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996, Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). This paper contributes to this line of work by illuminating both the opportunities and the constraints of branding as way of *understanding* and *doing* organizational identity change. It illustrates that organizational identity change is a complex process marked by tensions, ambiguities, and struggles over meaning in the process of *defining*, *projecting*, *promoting*, and *enacting* the new ideal identity. The findings also show that a brand reduces these ambiguities by making organizational identity change manageable through discussions about logos, colors, and design, thus avoiding difficult issues of culture change, behavioral patterns, and structural challenges. While Kärreman and Rylander (2008) pointed out that an organization’s brand may be used by employees to cope with organizational ambiguity in establishing “who we are,” this study points out a similar benefit for organizational management. The brand logic grants management a fantasy of agency and control over the process, one which enables it to mobilize resources for the organizational identity work. Organizational identity change becomes discursively positioned as important and vital to organizational success. Therefore, large sums of money, time, and human energy are used to ‘produce’ an organizational identity that is ideally able to transcend organizational boundaries and speak to stakeholders both inside and outside the organization. In other words, the brand logic moves organizational identity change beyond (traditionally conceived) boundaries, with the external surroundings explicitly brought *into* the organizational identity work. By professionalizing organizational identity work under the label

of branding, the constant flux of meaning ascribed to the organizational identity becomes fixated (at least for a while) and explicated through the brand, and thus it is also made available as a point of reference for both members and external stakeholders.

The findings of this study, however, also suggest that with these opportunities come constraints for organizational identity change. In the case study, the organizational identity change was not only largely influenced but was nearly taken over by the perceived interest of external audiences and the ambition to design an identity that is “brand-able”. Customers take - discursively - a sovereign position; the importance of changing the image among customers through new identity *claims* seems to become more important than changing employees’ *understandings* of organizational identity. As a result, the aesthetic part of organizational identity work takes center stage, as preoccupations with graphic design, logos, colors, websites, and TV commercials with (fake) nude actors take up much of the time and effort directed to the practices of branding. Because the organizational identity work is labelled “branding,” visible aesthetic changes to the identity claims are ascribed greater importance than changes to the organizational members’ shared identity understandings. Though changes in understandings are articulated as important in the directors’ discourses, they are easily dropped in practice due to micro-politics. The professionalization of organizational identity work under the label of branding means that organizational identity is discursively positioned as an entity to be manipulated and marketed, with the so-called ‘authentic’ or “real” aspects of “who we are” evoked as brand assets, while the multiplicity of voices from organizational members’ are largely silenced in order to fit the best, managerially defined symbolic representation of the (ideal) organizational identity. In other words, the reality of organizational life is transformed through the narrow route of branding into a metaphor that fits the visual cliché of ideal identity. Similar insights have been offered in critical studies of place branding, with Pedersen (2004), for example, arguing that “branding is, in other words, pragmatic; it sees no potential of



social development that is not marketable” (p. 78). Similarly, the branding logic guiding organizational identity work sees no potential in organizational development that goes deeper than what can be managed by scripts for service workers and marketed by slogans and logos.

### **Branding and the organization of organizational identity work**

The discourse on corporate branding we find in the “second wave” of corporate branding literature has made the case that branding process should be inclusive and involve organizational members at all levels (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Ind, 2001; Schultz, 2005). Yet, the case study highlights that participation in the organizational identity work of a branding process is contested. The practices in the case study seem to be directed by corporate branding’s marketing roots; thus, more traditional approaches to marketing are legitimized and naturalized to a certain degree, making it difficult to include a wider range of organizational members. Instead, branding becomes an elite process dominated by the directors of MarCom and CorpCom, who exclude the voices of employees, HR, and customer service. In example, the meetings between MarCom and HR became centred around pseudo-decisions of online design and color schemes rather than equally participation in defining, projecting, promoting and enacting the new identity. Such findings, extends the current critical literature on extra-organizational collaboration in marketing work between *marketing and customers* (Cova et al, 2015) illustrating, that intra-organizational collaboration under the label of corporate branding is also dominated by traditional conceptions of marketing work, rather than any plans of giving other organizational constituencies any real influence.

By drawing on a corporate branding logic, the directors can draw upon favorable meanings of themselves and what they do, putting themselves at the center of organizational identity work. By using corporate branding vocabulary, they manage to establish the intention for the remaining organization to participate; however, the branding label also allows the HR department and call

centers to refuse to participate in the branding process because “it is not their responsibility.” To HR, the organizational identity work becomes a matter of the graphic design of job notices; to the call center, it is a matter of minute-long briefings of front-line employees and perhaps a brand balloon, which is the usual local practice of branding in the organization. As such, the organizational members *outside* the Marketing and Communication departments seem happy to leave the organizational identity work and corporate brand planning to traditional marketers, who by the branding logic are positioned as the the ‘legitimate’ and ‘natural’ ‘branders’. The case study illustrates that a close examination of local discourses and practices is important to fully understand the tensions that hinder and stimulate participation in planned organizational identity change.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I examined how branding is discursively constructed and practices by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work. The research objective being; to understand the role and function of branding form planned organizational identity change. The case study has provided unique insights into the micro-level discourses and practices that comprise organizational identity work at the strategic level, with ongoing negotiations of central tensions around *identity definition, projection, promotion, and enactment*. Once the branding logic ‘hits’ organizational complexities, its fantastical nature stands out, as branding is constructed by management as a “silver bullet” for navigating the conflicting and contradictory processes of organizational identity change. The brand offers the organization an ideal identity to which it may aspire and a route ‘to become’ that cuts through complexities to make organizational identity change manageable, a quick solution to a difficult problem. Branding is a conceptual logic, a particular means of executing strategic changes to organizational identity that should no longer be ignored, a vital part of organizational identity work in contemporary organizations.

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