1. Introduction

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The growth of emotional, aesthetic and identity work within organizational contexts has led to epochal changes in the way that people are managed at work and, as a consequence, the way that work is experienced by employees. This volume explores the experience of employee branding, a very concrete and specific employment practice, that has become increasingly popular in recent times. This focused approach provides an aperture through which we can gain insight and provide analysis into a much wider and more complex picture of dynamic social relations mediated through the changing contours of the employment relationship. With, for example, many employees being increasingly encouraged to bring ‘more of themselves’ into the workplace (Fleming, 2009), the question of what constitutes appropriate selves, and how this is formulated, remains open to question and a vital topic for critical debate and engagement.

Working in the tradition of industrial sociology, this volume presents a range of theoretically informed empirical accounts that document the pleasures and pains of living the brand as a mode of both production and being in the world. The chapters also chart the ways in which employees may potentially become constituted as ‘portraits’ of organizational brands, and the prospects for securing competitive advantage that this may confer on organizations goes some way to explain the extraordinary lengths that some have gone to in order to embed these processes within institutional architectures. As the following quote proselytizes:

If genuine commitment is to be achieved amongst front-line people, the brand ideology must touch the core of why people work in the organisation… If they are to ensure continued success in a competitive market, organisations must engage in team training that encourages individuals to connect and become the Living Brand® for both their internal people and external customers. The Living Brand® experience looks inside the mind and behaviour patterns of front-line people and answers the questions of how to turn even the most cynical of team members into a true Living Brand® Champion. (Smith, Bridge Training and Events, 2009)

Taken from commercial consultancy promotional material, the quote above might be read with a degree of cynicism but nonetheless highlights the two
key mechanisms through which employee branding operates in the contemporary organization: control and consent. The promise to ‘turn even the most cynical into true… brand champions’ is redolent of an impetus toward compulsion, colonizing employees’ hearts and minds in the strict service of accumulation. In terms of consent, the brand simultaneously works to mollify, touching ‘the core of why people work in the organisation’, offering employees a set of ideals to buy into, an ideology to strive for and ultimately a sense of meaning in a meaningless world. In becoming a ‘brand champion’, employees are invoked to embody, and thus animate, the brand, both for fellow employees and for customers in a complex series of relations that serve to produce and reproduce brand equity. As our point of departure, this example illustrates the central theme of the volume; an attempt to understand the power of brand rhetoric in contemporary organizations through an exploration of the production and consumption of meaning at work and the attendant politics of this process.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In studies of work and employment it is commonplace to draw attention to the changing face of organizations as they adapt to increased competition, rapidly changing product markets and global forces that work to restructure the way in which organizations must compete. While in recent decades the content of work and employment has undoubtedly changed significantly, there have also been profound changes in the form that work takes, meaning that it is not just what we do at work that has changed, but also how the work is done that has undergone radical transformation. Very broadly speaking, the growth of employment in the tertiary industries in most advanced industrial economies has meant that employment in services has become dominant. Working in the service industry is often characterized by workers engaged in emotional, aesthetic and identity work and, some argue, this has necessitated profound changes in the ways that people are managed at work.

Key to understanding the distinctiveness of work and employment in the global service economy is the spatial and temporal collapse of production and consumption; meaning the act or work can no longer be separated or abstracted from the consumption of its product. While on the one hand services are seen as playing a fundamental role in most economies, their evolution is also having a significant effect on society and the ways in which work is organized in all other sectors (including manufacturing). Sectors are becoming inter-related with the bundling between services and products, and the outsourcing of service-based functions to specialized firms, becoming key factors in this development. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are also fundamental in contributing to the interconnections between sectors and in
narrowing the differences between various economic activities as well as the business development opportunities offered to large enterprises and to small organizations (OECD, 2000). The consequences that flow from this are both complex and contested and are still yet to be fully understood. However, we do know that working people are increasingly being encouraged to embrace the ‘corporate lifestyle’ and model themselves to organizational images while, paradoxically bringing more of themselves into their work and workplace.

One possible response aimed at achieving the fuller involvement of employees has been the development of employee branding strategies where workers are encouraged to buy into symbolic representations of organizational values by, for example, consuming the companies’ products or ‘living the brand’ away from the workplace (Miles and Mangold, 2004). In this way employees, through both display and performance, are increasingly being induced to reinforce and represent the brand image both within the workplace and without. The image presented to an organization’s customers and stakeholders through its employees becomes more crucial in the current era where ICT allows employees to share their work experiences and views of their organizations and products with the rest of the world via blogs, websites and social network sites. Therefore the employee brand, it seems, has never been more important for organizations and employees have the potential to create positive and negative brand images by influencing stakeholders and customers alike (Mangold and Miles, 2007).

In this volume we seek to explore the idea of ‘employee branding’ from a number of different perspectives. Our interest in the area is mirrored by a general increase in the awareness of employee branding from a corporate and practitioner point of view and this is, in part, due to a number of large organizations enthusiastically adopting the cause of employee branding as a key aspect of their human resource management (HRM) strategy (see Barrow and Mosley, 2005). The notion has also come to prominence in the functional and prescriptive management literature and there have been a number of studies that have sought to explore and promote the idea more widely (e.g. Gotsi and Wilson, 2001; Martin and Hetrick, 2006). Yet despite the enthusiasm with which the idea has been met with in some quarters, the practice has also encountered a degree of suspicion and hostility. Some authors have, for instance, suggested that the concept is hollow, or merely a reinvention of an older style ‘employee engagement’ strategy, or part of an attempt for HR managers to align their own role more closely with the strategic initiatives of the organization (Collins, 2003; Martin et al., 2005). Given that the contours of successive strategies to manage the employment relationship are littered with attempts to gain the control and consent of employees, we think it important to engage critically with the notion of employee branding and seek to offer an evaluation that is both historically and theoretically informed.
Our contribution to the employee branding debate seeks to explore the practice of employer and employee branding by focusing upon the lived experience of working under what might be termed branded conditions. More specifically, we seek to present a series of organizational case studies of employee branding ‘in action’ in an attempt to delineate the practice from both an employer and employee point of view. In this respect the chapters cover a diverse range of sectors and organizational contexts to include: clothing and furniture manufacture; retail; heavy industrial manufacture; hotels and the leisure industry (casinos); financial services providers, high technology providers and charitable service providers (Scope and Typetalk).

From the outset we wish to make clear that for us strategies and practices of employee branding are necessarily contested activities; always partial and always in process. Their effects are neither inviolate nor intransitive, and are always open to negotiation and contestation. Yet it is precisely this malleability that offers employers potential in terms of shaping notions of idealized workers and this makes the concept very appealing and worthy of serious empirical engagement and interrogation. Moreover, our case study approach is based on the knowledge that, to use Karen Legge’s (1995) phrase, the rhetorics and realities of the employee relationship frequently and powerfully diverge and our commitment is to explore processes of branding from an in-depth, ‘as it happens’, perspective. While such an approach will be unable to comment on the wider significance of branding, it may open up an initial empirically informed theoretical understanding of the dynamics of branding in action and its impact for employers, managers, subordinates, consumers and society more widely. We include case studies from a number of employment sectors that are geographically dispersed, albeit heavily euro-centric. This, we believe, follows the pattern of adoption of employee branding practices but we are keen to note that further studies of employee branding in the regions that we do not cover will clearly enhance our understanding. As too will survey level work, which will add breadth to, and thus complement, the work presented here.

The volume approaches the topic of employee branding from a number of different disciplinary backgrounds, which we consider germane to the topic at hand. Branding is largely seen as a marketing phenomenon and this is therefore our starting point. However, the task of engaging with employees speaks directly to our shared interests in organization studies, and its prescriptive cousin, HRM. Our multi-disciplinary approach draws attention to the economic, social and often political context, which fashion and continue to shape practices of employee branding. Yet despite this, what unites us with each other as editors, but also with the other contributors to this volume, is a deeply held view of the importance of fine-grained qualitative research and for the attendant possibility of sociological analysis that this presents. Scepticism surrounding the idea of employee branding is, we think, well placed; as noted
previously, we can point to many attempts to gain the control and consent of workers. A useful starting place is, therefore, to ask ourselves what exactly is employee branding and how is the term being used?

WHAT IS EMPLOYEE BRANDING?

We perceive employee branding to be an exercise in organizational communication that extends beyond the strict confines of the employment relationship. The specifics of the brand, often partially formed and lacking in full codification, work to promote ideas of idealized types of workers (Pettinger, 2004), that is to say: ‘the sort of workers who work here’. Stakeholders, much wider and broader than simply management and employees, receive and process this communication as part of everyday life. Indeed, it is this wider audience and the wider perception of the employee brand that, in our view, makes the concept so worthy of study. Just as potential employees are part of the audience for the performance of the employee brand, so too is the potential customer (Merz et al., 2009). This is significant from an organizational perspective because it means that much of the work that once was restricted to the materiality of the product, such as the embodiment of capital, quality, ethos etc., can now be communicated by other means.

Some argue that this shift results from moves towards a knowledge economy. Arvidsson (2006, preface), for example, views the brand as symptomatic of a shift from industrial to informational capital, seeing it as ‘an institutional embodiment of the logic of a new form of informational capital – much like the factory embodied the logic of industrial capital’. As such the brand is not only entirely implicated in the management and motivation of workers but also, as Arvidsson observes, puts to work the capacity of consumers and other actors to ‘produce a common social world through autonomous processes of communication and interaction’ (2006, preface). Thus while the brand is often made visible through its effects on employee recruitment practices (Brannan and Hawkins, 2007) (i.e. employees must embody the look and feel of the brand), these same employees are also ‘put to work’ in developing and maintaining a shared terrain for its subsequent communication. Here an individual’s attitude or personality often take precedence over specific, more traditionally defined, skill sets. Arguably workers’ ability to engage in, and reproduce, specific forms of communication has become central to both their continued employment in an organization and their ability to ‘get on’ in increasingly dynamic employment markets. Moreover, from an HR perspective, the task of communicating ‘what it means to work here’ can have already begun long before an employee clocks on for work for the first time. Put succinctly, employee branding extends the frontier of control, albeit tentatively, beyond the physical boundaries of the
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organization. This is illustrated by the so-called ‘war for talent’\(^1\), which saw the development of competitive recruitment strategies used by large corporations from the early 2000s to attract and retain key talented workers. Martin Kornberger (2010, 124) gives a good example of how such a recruitment strategy has been put into practice in his discussion of IAG’s ‘recruitment revolution’. In fitting with this perspective another appropriate example can be seen in the burgeoning range of self-help books where the practice of ‘branding yourself’ is advocated as central to career success (Peters, 1999; Andrusia and Haskins, 2000; McNally and Speak, 2003), demonstrating the extent to which the working lives of professionals are currently exposed to the discourse of employee branding. The mantra ‘you are your own brand’ has become particularly relevant to professionals’ occupations, including academic careers. Noble et al. (2010), for example, relate one’s academic career to a ‘personal brand-building project’ aimed at achieving eminence or career success mainly by publishing in ‘A’-rated journals. As such the brand acts to structure modes of self-governance in the institution or organization: as employees are entreated to reproduce the brand they also simultaneously reproduce themselves as organizational members.

WHY EMPLOYEE BRANDING? WHY NOW?

While it is almost certainly true that attempts to ‘brand employees’ have a long history, systematic attempts to design the look and feel of idealized workers in such a robust and explicit way is a relatively new phenomenon. This sea change is partially evidenced in the plethora of books now available as practical guides to leveraging the brand in the service of human resource management (Ind, 2001; Barrow and Mosley, 2005; Sartain and Schumann, 2006; Buckingham, 2008). While tempting to see this as just another management fad, we think that the confluence of the following factors is significant in understanding this trend.

The restructuring of advanced capitalist economies has entailed massive shifts in the type and nature of employment for the vast majority of employees. In the context of this volume this is important for a number of reasons; the decline in the concept and reality of a ‘job for life’, for example, is crucial in framing employment issues. Under conditions of relative employment and sectorial stability, individual narratives of employment and service were sedimented by decades of employment with a single firm, currently employees are simply unlikely to spend sufficient time to learn ‘what it means’ to be a specific type of organizational employee by osmosis and immersion. The collapse of this kind of employment pattern, along side with the specific attack on the internal labour market structures by neo-liberal forms such as outsourc-
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ing (Rubery et al., 2002), means that the processes of identification within organizations have become far more problematic and disrupted than has been hitherto the case.

Furthermore, the growth of service work, which for the most part is brand driven, focuses attention on the employee in a much broader way than ever before. Crucially, in the case of most service work, the brand resides in the employee; employees simply are the brand. Here researchers have underlined the centrality of forms of emotional labour performed by service employees in both successfully delivering the service and perpetuating the branded experience for the customer (Hochschild, 1985). Under these conditions business success or failure is inextricably linked, not just to the productivity and material output of the workforce, but also to the way in which this work is conducted. Given what we have said previously about the collapse of sedimented forms of learning at work, we might posit employee branding as a mechanism to speed up the learning process at work in order to influence employees as they learn and internalize the behavioural rules to enable appropriate behaviour as part of a broader sense of how to conduct themselves at work in a way which is carefully aligned with the strategic objectives of the organization. The rise of the creative industries and the move towards an ‘aesthetic economy’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Entwhistle, 2002; Böheme, 2003; Postrell, 2003) can be set alongside such developments, wherein creativity and design are significant vehicles for competitive advantage, and jobs claiming to have a creative component are highly valued. The turn to aesthetics has significant consequences for employees in that they are encouraged to adopt specific stylized forms of embodied disposition, which are then harnessed to create value for the organization (Warhurst et al., 2000; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). Building on previous conceptions of emotional labour, Witz et al., following Bourdieu, describe aesthetic labour as:

the mobilization, development and commodification of embodied ‘dispositions’. Such dispositions, in the form of embodied capacities and attributes, are to some extent possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. However employers then mobilize, develop, and commodify these embodied dispositions through processes of recruitment, selection and training transforming them into ‘skills’ which are geared towards producing a ‘style’ of service encounter that appeals to the senses of the customer. (Witz et al., 2003: 36)

Against a backdrop of declining narratives surrounding work and the potential that this has for meaning making in our everyday lives, Gabriel (2005) draws attention to organizational attempts to enchant both workers and customers. In a photo essay depicting the ‘Pleasures and Sorrows of Work’ under contemporary capitalism de Botton (2009: 103) reflects on the tendency towards a ‘crisis of meaning’ in some societies where some industries have ‘little connection to

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our sincere and significant needs’ and where the banality of labour is intertwined with, and driven by, the honouring of the resulting material gains. One of de Botton’s examples is United Biscuits, where (as in most organizations operating under conditions of contemporary capitalism) the work is subdivided into increasingly specialized and compartmentalized tasks. For example, workers might be involved in minutiae of designing the font for the biscuit packaging, monitoring sales in a specific region, driving delivery lorries between hubs or spotting malformed biscuits on the production line. This division of work does not only result in tedium, but further elevates the vexed question of motivation: ‘whether the company could succeed in providing its staff with a sufficiently elevated set of ideals in whose name they were to exhaust themselves and surrender the greatest share of their lives’ (de Botton, 2009: 82). It is in the context of the failure of work to provide sustaining and life-enhancing meaning and narrative that we think processes of employee branding are making attempts to resuscitate and rejuvenate tarnished images and ideals. In industries where both means and ends may indeed be said to be trivial, we observe, with some scepticism, that the brand could offer a medium through which sets of universally valued ideals might be made visible, thus potentially rendering work more meaningful.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BRAND

Dating the emergence of the brand concept is not without complexity, particularly when we consider the host of attendant activities caught up in its rise to prominence. Designers, accountants, marketers and retailers might all point to different significant events to account for its advent. Tracing the word ‘brand’ back to its etymological roots suggests that it is derived from brandr, an old Norse word meaning ‘to burn’. In turn, this word refers to the burning of a maker’s or owner’s mark onto products, and this practice still endures in the branding of cattle. The meaning: ‘identifying mark made by a hot iron’ can be traced back to the 1550s; this was broadened in 1827 to ‘a particular make of goods’ but the term ‘brand name’ does not appear until 1922 (Online Etymology Dictionary). Very primitive examples of brands can be found as early as the Bronze Age: excavation of the Indus Valley, for example, has unearthed square seals depicting a range of animals. These seals are thought to have been used by stone and bronze craftsmen to identify the origin of their wares and therefore to signal quality. The seals have been found attached to vessels such as jars and baskets as well as documentation that would have been involved in trade (Moore and Reid, 2008).

As with most histories of consumerism, we might associate the birth of mass marketed brands with the rise of industrialism. The movement of production...
from artisanal, community-based industries into the factories of towns and cities put an increasing distance between the producers and eventual consumers of products. Consumers who were used to obtaining knowledge about products either from their actual producers or from their local chapman or shopkeeper, were now reliant on packaging and advertising for information about these products. Here the symbolic attributes of products, particularly their ability to compete with products of a similar type, became increasingly important. In addition, the makers of these new mass-produced products had to persuade the consumer that their products were as reliable and trustworthy, and of a comparable (if not higher) quality to the locally produced goods that consumers had long been familiar with. As Lury observes, ‘the early stages of the development of the brand were intended to allow the producer to speak “directly” to the consumer through presentation, packaging and other media’ (2004: 19).

However, the rise of the brand is not associated solely with consumption, but more broadly with the organization of production during the industrializing period. The geographical growth of markets and increased circulation of goods produced competition on an international scale and brands were vital in competing in this new arena.

Many brands claim to be the branded ‘first’ in the UK, for example Bass and Company, whose red triangle was the first trademark to be registered under the UK’s Trade Mark Registration Act 1875. Lyle’s Golden Syrup makes similar claims to being one of the earliest brands, with their distinctive green and gold tin dating from 1885. Other examples from the late 1800s include Campbell’s soup, Coca-Cola, Quaker Oats and Kellogg’s cereals. These examples illustrate the inextricable relationship between the brand and wider forms of visual culture. The rise of the brand goes hand in hand with the advent and increasing sophistication of marketing activity (see Tadajewski, 2009). In terms of professional marketing, by the 1950s, a consumer-centred philosophy began to emerge among manufacturers, one that replaced the previous focus on sales. Marketing increasingly became articulated as a principal organizing function (along with innovation) whose main purpose is the creation of a satisfied customer, who consequently would reward the organization with sales (Webster, 1992).

In placing the consumer central to organizational activities, greater effort was put into marketing research in order to better understand the consumer and their needs. At this point organizations began to draw upon developing social and psychological knowledge about the consumer to input into both the design and sales processes. Indeed the use, and potential misuse, of this knowledge was not without controversy, as attested by the publication of Vance Packard’s 1957 book The Hidden Persuaders, which offers a popularist critique of advertising manipulation.

From the 1960s onwards marketers began seriously building on the idea that consumers might have a relationship with brands (Fournier, 1998). Significant
money and effort has been put into building brand images and personalities that consumers would want to, or perhaps more significantly be persuaded to, identify with. As part of this programme we have seen the rise of ‘experience marketing’, where the functional attributes of products are marginalized in favour of a celebration of the experience that the brand offers and this becomes the central focus of marketing activity (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 2000). In the same vein ‘lifestyle marketing’ has become the accepted modus operandi (Michman and Mazze, 2003). This lifestyle approach attempts to reach into all areas of an individual’s sense of self to include attitude, values and personality in a range of market segmentation techniques. Arguably this approach to marketing is more pervasive than ever before and attempts to address the consumer as an individual. It appeals to the individual’s sense of taste and style by providing assemblages of products and attendant promotional meanings in order to resonate with, and reinforce, consumer individuality. Featherstone, in discussing the meaning of lifestyle as it relates to consumer culture, observes that:

lifestyle… within contemporary consumer culture [it] connotes individuality, self-expression and a stylistic self-consciousness. One’s body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner consumer. (Featherstone, 1987: 55)

Thus, lifestyle marketing moves away from previous mass-marketing approaches of the 1940s and 1950s focusing on an explicit attempt to appeal to the individual and to individuality (Holt, 1997), even though such an appeal to individuality at the mass-market level is entirely paradoxical. The brand plays a central role in directing and channelling consumption meanings: the American fashion retailer Abercrombie & Fitch is a good example of a ‘lifestyle brand’ appealing to a very specific way of living. The company’s brand promotion techniques (i.e. its store environments, advertising and clothing design) are underpinned by a very exclusionary and socially divisive set of meanings. Their stores, for example, are staffed by young ‘brand representatives’ who quite literally embody the Abercrombie & Fitch lifestyle: attractive, athletic, popular and enthusiastic. These employees are recruited largely on the basis of aesthetic appeal and a visual ‘fit’ with the brand (see also Warhurst and Nickson, 2001; Pettinger, 2004; Hancock and Tyler, 2007; Warhurst et al., 2009). Once employed, staff are instructed on how to present themselves in minute detail, as formulated in their ‘Look Policy’, which describes the expected ‘appropriate look’, including, for example, the maximum allowed length of nails.

From the 1960s onwards the visual symbolism of brands developed and strengthened to form the contemporary brand landscape where Nike’s swoosh,
Mercedes-Benz’ three-pointed star or McDonald’s golden arches come to form their own language, condensing a complex of cultural meanings into a single symbol. Familiarity and instant recognition are prized attributes in the increasingly crowded ‘brandscape’ that constitutes the television adverts, supermarket shelves and streetscapes (Klein, 2000; Klingmann, 2007) of the contemporary Western world. Indeed brands have become part of the cultural fabric of contemporary commercial, but also private, life (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006). While brands feed on popular culture for their central motifs, we also see a reverse flow of meaning with brands themselves providing the fabric for social communication, offering us a shared terrain through which to communicate meaning (Arvidsson, 2006) and around which communities might be formed (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlester et al., 2002; Maclaran, 2009). In this sense brands provide the context or frame for the production of meaning. As Arvidsson (2006: 8) observes, ‘brands do not so much stand for products, as much as they provide a part of the context in which products are used’. While this is significant in cultural terms, in economic terms the value of this context cannot be underestimated. Focusing on the economic dimension of brands reveals the most recent turn of the wheel in a branded world. The meteoric rise of brand equity on company balance sheets reflects, in part, the objectification of brands made tangible to allow them to be leveraged and monetized (Wilmott, 2010 and in this volume). Sophisticated metrics measuring the value that a brand adds to an organization (brand equity) demonstrate in many cases brands to be the organization’s most valuable asset. Brand value, and consequently the adjusted value of a company, supports and reaffirms an economic rationale, not only for brand decisions and organizational investments in branding, but also for guiding financial analysts’ and investors’ decisions and as such the brand is typically leveraged as a source of governance and discipline both financially and organizationally.

CASE STUDIES OF EMPLOYEE BRANDING

This collection explores both organizational and employee perspectives in investigating the ‘lived experiences’ of understanding, implementing and negotiating processes of employee branding. The chapters embrace both empirical and theoretical foci. The empirical case study contribution is at the core of the work (Chapters 3 to 9) and these chapters provide the ‘lived’ contribution to our understanding of the contemporary experience of work, and outline in detail how organizations attempt to build brands through employee relations and HRM initiatives, but also, more informally, through the nurturing of specific organizational and shop floor cultures. Chapters 2 and 10 are conceptual and theoretical reflections that seek to provide a broader contextual
consideration of key aspects of employee branding and include considerations of the interstices between branding and financialization and diversity respectively. In Chapter 11 we close with a consideration of a series of themes running through this collection and offer some brief emerging theoretical perspectives in an attempt to open up ongoing debate.

The volume opens with a discussion that considers the impact of branding in the context of financialization and market capitalization. Hugh Willmott’s chapter takes an ethico-political perspective to provide an analysis of branding in the wider context of capitalist reproduction where brand equity is co-produced by user-consumers. The chapter charts how, through conversion, brand value is appropriated by organizations; in doing so the chapter provides an apt contextual account of the financial importance of branding to organizations and provides a useful foundation for the subsequent chapters.

Chris Land and Scott Taylor’s empirical work explores branding themes in the practices of what they call ‘New Age’ capitalism. Their case-study organization is a retailer of fashion goods promoting an ‘alternative lifestyle’ which, they argue, is in tension with the capitalist values embedded within the organization. The company celebrates specific leisure activities, adopts a strong and overt ethical and environmental stance and promotes alternative lifestyles through its brand and its employees. Crucially, however, these are not necessarily reflected in the design and management of the organization’s work processes in relation to, for example, the use of alternative sources of energy, employee work/life balance and the structure of organizational ownership. It is also not reflected in the views of all employees, particularly at the lower levels of the organization, and is certainly completely disconnected from the workers who manufacture their garments in the Far East (which are not directly audited by the company). These tensions are fully explored in the chapter in relation to both theory and practice and related to the notion of authenticity.

Sandra Smith and Margo Buchanan-Oliver’s main concern is to unpack the processes of representation of the self, the organization and the brand from the perspective of employees. In their chapter they offer a social narrative analysis of identity construction in relation to the brand, focusing on verbal and graphical representations of the relationships between the individuals, the organization and the brand. By revealing the polysemic rather than dichotomic relation between accommodation and resistance to brand values, they argue that the experience of the brand, and the construction of branded identities, are always fragmented, complex and paradoxical, thus confirming the contested nature of employee and employer branding.

With a more specific focus on HRM practices, Jean Cushen explores the attempts of a large multinational organization, a provider of portable, high technology products and services, to engender the ideal employee through an organization-wide programme of employer branding. The chapter challenges
mainstream views that soft HRM principles of unitarism, commitment and mutual fulfilment can be successful in achieving full employee commitment. In the case study presented the employer branding initiative served to direct employees’ attention towards management activities that were perceived as contrary to their interests (such as cost-cutting exercises), thus creating a rhetoric–reality gap that generated anger and frustration among employees and resulted in a dramatic subvert of the initial goals of the employee branding project.

Experiences, interpretations and subversions of branding initiatives are also at the centre of Stephanie Russell’s work. By focusing on training, development, aesthetic representations and organizational artefacts, this chapter explores how employees are encouraged to internalize the brand through a number of potentially invasive strategies. Stephanie explores how discourses of customer sovereignty underpin organizational attempts at employee–brand alignment within the specific case-study organization. Stephanie’s contribution provides an interesting input to the labour process debate, highlighting how attempts at disciplining employee behaviour in their everyday lives, both within and outside of work, are often met by a variety of resistance tactics and behaviours through which employees’ selves can be expressed.

Scott Hurrell and Dora Scholarios document the recruitment strategies of two different hotel establishments in relation to issues of person–brand fit. The two hotels studied demonstrate a different emphasis on selection procedures, leading the authors to suggest a link between HR practices, brand identification and organizational experience of skills deficit. The chapter advocates that person–brand fit-recruitment practices may be superior to standardized, competency-based procedures. Such practices would also allow applicants agency in selecting the organization, facilitating self-selection, within the decision-making processes. While a strategy based on person–brand fit could be considered successful from an HR perspective, it can also have serious implications in perpetuating specific norms surrounding appearance, background, class and gender, and operating to exclude those who do not ‘fit’ with these norms.

Focusing on the concept of human agency, Veronika Tarnovskaya’s chapter explores ways in which employees at IKEA (the Swedish furniture store) interpret brand messages and appropriate them as part of their own identity work. Through the analysis of her empirical work, Veronika merges processes of employer with employee branding positioning the ‘employee as agent’ at the centre of processes of narrative construction. Framing the employer brand as a structure, and employee branding as a form of appropriation work within and upon this structure, Veronika explores the various ways in which employees both accommodate and resist the brand.

Melanie Simms takes a different perspective in her chapter: rather than exploring employee branding from an internal organizational perspective, she
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looks at the ways in which an outside organization (in this case a trade union) might harness the employee branding process to meet their own aims. She analyses the dynamics affecting the service brand of two charitable and two commercial organizations at the point in which trade unions are attempting to organize the workforce. In doing so she examines how the process of managing front-line service work through branding presents opportunities but also challenges for trade unions when organizing workers. The chapter explores how trade unions mobilize existing narratives of service brand values as a way to gain collective influence and frame the desired improvements to working conditions in their campaigns. The financial value attached to the positive perpetuation of the brand means that organizations may be more responsive to union requests leveraged around their brand values.

In a final conceptual contribution Martin Edwards and Elisabeth Kelan discuss processes of employer branding in relation to aspects of diversity management and question whether employer branding and diversity strategies are opposed or whether they might serve a common objective. The existing conflict between branding (as a process of value homogenization) and diversity management (as intent to acknowledge and value differences between employees) is dissected in Martin and Elisabeth’s discussion. While acknowledging the challenges and contradictions between employer branding and diversity, the chapter offers some insights into ways in which these tensions can be reconciled, albeit to a point.

In the concluding chapter we seek to pull together emergent themes from the preceding chapters in an attempt to open up future discussion and commence a theoretical debate which we hope will be explored by further theoretical and empirical work on the employee branding complex practice.

NOTE

1. The term was initially used in 1997 by Steven Hankin from the consultancy firm McKinsey & Co.

REFERENCES

Introduction


