



# Branding in the sacrificial mode – A study of the consumptive side of brand value production

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## KEYWORDS

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Production;  
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Value;  
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**Summary** Scholarship on branding has made important contributions in terms of the function of branding and how it produces value for organizations. However, there has been an overemphasis on the *production* of value, at the expense of an understanding of the value that is *consumed* in branding processes. This paper explores the consumptive side of branding by drawing on the anthropological concept of “sacrifice,” arguing that branding may take place in a “sacrificial mode,” which facilitates a theorization of branding as a double-edged process of complexity reduction, in which value is simultaneously produced and consumed. The article draws on an empirical study of branding in a Swedish police organization that fell in disgrace, and suggests that organizational identification as well as the potential for an organization to reflect on the effects of its own activity may be consumed in the branding processes.

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Branding has relatively recently made its way into organization studies and has arguably made three major contributions. First, it has highlighted how organizations increasingly understand themselves from the outside in, i.e., through the understanding of external stakeholders (e.g., Kornberger, 2010). Second, it has developed the understanding of branding processes as not only the management of external organizational relationships, but also as a tool for managing the internal functioning of the organization by communicating the organization’s preferred values and identities to its members (Hatch & Schulz, 2003; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Moor, 2007). Third, it has introduced branding as a lens through which *qualitative* value production can be understood. Brand value arises through relationships between various stakeholders, and measuring the value of these relationships is not so much a quantitative exercise as it is a matter of negotiating quality (Kornberger, 2010; Lury,

2004; Lury & Moor, 2010). Even though this has extended the understanding of branding and valuation, there has been an overemphasis on branding as *production* of value, at the expense of insight into that which is *consumed*—in the sense of “used up” or “destroyed”—as a result of branding practices. This article sets out to contribute to the understanding of the consumptive side of branding.

Attending to branding’s consumptive side enables a broadened interpretive repertoire as well as a more critical theory of branding. Consumption is an inevitable aspect of production. Just as the production of commodities involves the consumption of, for example, labor and capital, the production of qualitative brand value ought to be associated with consumption of resources—not only financial resources, but discursive and human resources too. Studies of branding—marketing management (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Keller & Lehmann, 2006) as well as interpretivist scholarship (e.g., Kärreman & Rylander, 2008)—tend to emphasize how branding leads to an association of organizations or products with positive values, whereas inquiry into negative valuation or destruction of value as a result of branding is scarcer. A

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consideration of the consumptive side of branding may, thus, serve both interpretive interests of understanding what branding means, and critical inquiry into potentially problematic consequences of branding practice.

The present paper explores the consumptive side of branding by analyzing an attempt of branding in the Swedish Police after an incident that was perceived as jeopardizing the organizations' reputation.<sup>1</sup> The situation is thus of a special kind—a branding logic was followed to prevent the organization from falling in disgrace. In the analysis, in order to empower the branding literature, I make use of the concept of "sacrifice" (Girard, 1972, 1982; Hubert & Mauss, 1964) to theorize branding as a double-edged process characterized by *complexity reduction*, in which value is simultaneously produced through the "tangibilization" of qualitative resources, and consumed through the destruction of other resources. I bring out the simultaneously productive and consumptive side of branding by showing how an attempt to re-establish a brand value was based on assumptions of an outsider's view, how complexity was reduced, and how organizational resources were consequently "sacrificed," thus pointing at the cost at which brand value was created. The study shows that the potential for organizational identification as well as organizational reflexivity—i.e., the ability of the organization to take into account and reflect on the effects of its own activity—may be consumed for the sake of producing brand value. Thus, the paper enables critical insight into branding processes and suggests that the analytical power of branding will increase if it is understood as a social practice of simultaneous production and consumption of value.

## Branding—from quality marking to internal communication

In the sense of attempts to attach meaning to products and organizations, branding is not a novel phenomenon. Nevertheless, the meaning of branding has changed over time, its importance is increasing, and as a management concept it is relatively new (Moor, 2007). Once a marker of quality and origin, "brand" has become a symbol of identity and status as well as a financial asset (Moor, 2007; Willmott, 2010).

Most work on branding has taken place in the marketing field, with a focus on building and measuring brand equity as a central corporate asset (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2008; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). These studies offer good insight into established assumptions about what brands *are*—they may be markers of quality, trust, and financial value—what brands *do*—they may simplify choice by promising quality and trust, and they may "reflect the complete experience that

customers have with products"—and how brands *are produced*—they are based on the product, accompanied by "marketing activity, and the use (or nonuse) by customers as well as others" (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740).

*Complexity reduction* runs as a common thread through these definitions of what a brand is and does. Brands are understood as distillates of larger wholes, expected to *mark* quality rather than making people delve into the substantial aspects of a product, and they are supposed to *simplify* choice rather than encourage an investigation of alternatives. Largely, they are meant to produce a reflex rather than reflexive action (Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam & Sullivan, 2012).

The attention of the marketing scholarship is mainly directed toward (marketing) managers and aims to assist them in their attempts to measure brand performance (e.g., should the measurement be based on customers' views, the company's views of how the brand provides a competitive advantage, or the brands' financial value?), and guiding marketing initiatives (e.g., should the brand extend into higher/lower price ranges and what would be the consequences of this?). Although useful for those who manage through branding, what this literature does not do so well is offer insights into the organizational, social, and political consequences of branding efforts.

Lately, more sociologically and organizationally oriented scholarship on branding has been added to the marketing management texts. In addition to outlining how branding and brands are affecting an increasing number of aspects of social life and are being applied to everything from celebrities to cities (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010), this literature probes the meaning and consequences of a branding logic. First, branding is understood as a practice that operates "*from the outside in.*" That is, a branding logic converts the old premise that organizations understand their environments through themselves into a new assumption that organizations understand themselves through their environment (Kornberger, 2010, p. xiii). As an attempt to conceptualize this, "the brand" has been defined as "the interface for [the] rapidly expanding conversation between consumers and producers" (Kornberger, 2010, p. xii; Lury, 2004).

Second, the branding scholarship combines the outside-in-dynamic, which is not new but has also been indicated by the image-identity literature (e.g., Alvesson, 1990), with a theory of *qualitative value*. As Lury (2004, p. 6) states, branding introduces "qualitative intensity into the [...] conventional market economy of price." Measuring brand value largely becomes a matter of measuring quality, the modus of value production becomes increasingly relational, and its locus moves from the workplace into society in general (Ashcraft et al., 2012; Land & Taylor, 2010; Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007). Therefore, brand value arises not from pricing tangible assets, but from the quality of the relationship with various stakeholders such as customers, the public, or the media. Branding is primarily a matter of managing these relationships, and thereby engaging in the practice of valuing them. Accordingly, production of value is less about production of products than production of meaning associated with the products (Land & Taylor, 2010), and the value of work is constructed less at the site of production and more through the relationships in which meaning is ascribed to the work. In terms of product branding, this means that the value of a t-shirt is produced less in the clothing factory and more in the

<sup>1</sup> Reputation is, thus, relevant here in terms of something that needs to be "good," and branding is, partly, work to prevent the reputation from declining. However, reputation—typically referring to the "general opinion or estimate of a person's [or organization's] character" (Oxford English Dictionary)—does not capture very well the interactions between the inside and outside of an organization. Rather than the content of the general opinion, this study highlights these inside-outside movements, and, as the literature review further down will highlight, this is precisely the phenomenon that the notion of branding represents and interrogates.

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