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The Blurred Line Through Technology

A Study on the Influence of Technology in Relation to Brand-Centred Control

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Abstract

Modern technology plays a significant role in transforming workplaces and creating an improved business performance. The technological advancements have enabled organizations to utilize technology platforms for increased brand performance since brand and branding have become highly important in today's organizations. Our interest in the topic of technology in the background of brand-centred control arises from the fact that modern day technology has the power to influence employees in many ways leading to a blurred line between work and private life. And by technology, we specifically discuss the mobile technology in the form of an application that serves as a round the clock feedback system. We, therefore, aim to study how the employees make sense of technological influences in relation to brand-centred control. The study is conducted in a well-known Swedish retail chain known for the brand and its message and our target group is the front-line service workers holding the designation of sales advisors. Since we believe in the socially constructed nature of reality, we see the study in the light of interpretive tradition by delving into the different meanings attached by employees in relation to technological influences in the background of brand-centred control. We also incorporate elements of hermeneutics by comprising an analytical circle of text. Additionally, the study takes on an abductive approach to data collection. For the purpose of the research, we conduct semi-structured interviews and informed workplace observations with front-line employees in the retail chain along with an analysis of textual content related to the organization and the technology platform. The research portrays how employees make sense of the technological influences in relation to brand-centred control. This sensemaking further leads to the formulation of the technology in the form of an app as a mode of control. Additionally, the employee sensemaking suggests that the app acts as a motivator or 'boost' for employees to align and regulate themselves to organizational culture and brand.

Keywords: *Technology, Sensemaking, Service Organizations, Organizational Culture, Brand, Brand-centred control, Control, Internal Branding, Normative Control, Neo-Normative Control*

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1. Introduction

Brand-centred control as ''the representation of the brand outside the workplace as a part of the employee's lifestyle and identity'' (Brannan, Parsons & Priola 2011, p. 272)

"I talk about it in private and stand for the values and the culture, not just at work but in private as well. /---/ If the person can live the organizational culture." (Elijah)

1.1. Background

In the current world, technology, particularly in the form of information and communication technology, is transforming workplace functioning, how we interact and communicate and the way in which businesses generate and gain value (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Additionally, in today's society, it is no longer just about a high human interaction and low elements of technology. The interaction between service providers and customers has been revolutionized by the introduction of modern technology. The need and want from customers are still unchanged. Customers demand flexibility, reliable outcomes, responsive systems, easy access and compensation with an apology if something goes wrong. Customers want the best service (Bitner, 2001).

Moreover, services are more complex than products due to the reason that employees are a part of the delivering process, from start to the end through customer interaction (Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002; Yu and Tseng, 2016). Employees are the driving force in service organizations and central in the process of brand building (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001) as brand and branding have become highly important in organizations (Müller, 2017). Further on, Machtiger (2004) states that service companies have started realizing how crucial employees are to build a powerful service brand. This is because a key goal of employees in service organizations is to fulfill customers' expectations and deliver brand promise (Punjaisri, Willson & Evanschitzky, 2009). Gummensson (1990) therefore states that the face of the brand is the employees, which is developed from the customer interaction and client service. Punjaisri et al. (2009) additionally state that the attitudes and behaviors of the employees' influence the perception of the customers and stakeholders.

Since the employees need to fulfill customers' expectations and deliver the set promise of the brand, they more or less turn into roles as brand representatives which can relate to the quote above by Brannan, Parson and Briola (2011). This creates a blurred line between work and private life enabled by the brand awareness of the external audience (including employees) which further develops into the concept of brand-centred control (Müller, 2017). This mechanism is an expansion of the sub-concepts of internal branding which extends to normative control and neo-normative control that in one way or another controls employees within and outside an organization (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Müller, 2017). Further on, we choose to pursue the research in service organizations involving front-line service workers and how the employees make sense of the brand-centred control which is derived from the sub-concepts, and in what ways the employees are influenced by technology in the form of a mobile application. The service organization chosen for the study is a well-known Swedish retail chain known for the brand, customer focus and service. This provides a set up for studying brand-centred-control due to the general brand awareness of the organization among external audience.

1.2. Problematization

A dominant concept in organizational theory, since the time of Weber that remains a crucial issue that molds our experiences of organizational life, is 'control' (Barker, 1993). Barnard (1968, pp. 17) stressed on the significance of control when he wrote that "a key defining element of any organization was the necessity of individuals to subordinate, to an extent, their own desires to the collective will of the organization". Further on, Barker (1993) states that in order for individuals to achieve organizational goals, they might actually have to renunciate some authority in organizational participation. According to Oxford University Press (2017, pp.1), control is the power to influence or direct people's behavior. Hence, control is generally seen as problematic in organizations because of these basic tensions.

Kärremann and Rennstam (2007) takes the study on management control further and differentiates it into behavior control, output control and normative control. According to Ouchi (1979), behavior control involves direct orders to subordinates with close supervision and controls target behavior. One of the key methods of behavioral control as suggested by Edwards (1981 cited in Barker, 1993) is technological control, which is the type of control that emerges from the physical technology of an organization, such as in the assembly line found

in traditional manufacturing setup. From our understanding, through technological control, Barker (1993) predominantly refers to technology introduced in manufacturing industries which is evident when he means that technological control may lead to "worker protests, slow-downs, and assembly-line sabotage" (p.409), which may result in worker alienation. The second form of management control, which is output control, is a method of controlling organizational members through set objectives that form their key deliverable. This is further indicated by clearly set and defined goals, which may be gauged after task completion (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). In the third form of control, which is normative control, the control is based on guiding values, norms and beliefs that are ingrained in the members of the organization through socialization (Kärreman & Rennstam, 2007). The last half of the 20th century has seen a significant increase in the use of science and technology for purposes of social control (Marx, 2001). Now, referring back to Edward's take on technological control, which was formulated around 1981 as a form of behavior control, we feel that this sort of a take on technological control is still accepted but outdated considering the current technological advancements. Most of the studies on technical advancements and its effects on workplace dynamics, in our understanding, concern to the emerging trends in automation and robotics. However, in our view, there is a huge impact played by other technical influences such as cloud and mobile technology strongly influencing workplace dynamics that may lead to a blurred line between work and private life. The problem in our view lies in the fact that such emergent forms of technology, especially in the platform of mobile technology, in the form of an app, may act as a new form of control influencing individuals in many ways which need to be further explored. Hence, it is in our interest, to explore the technical influences of emergent app trend on workforce through sensemaking in relation to brand-centred control. Since the mechanism of brand-centred control primarily involves normative control and internal branding (Müller, 2017), our fundamental focus will be to frame technological control in relation to internal branding, normative control and neo-normative control.

We see that the above-mentioned scenario in relation to technological advances is directly in line with the increasing 'work uberization' concept which is developed from the business model of Uber (Nicolas, 2017). This is the neo-euphemism used to indicate a highly tele-networked business model used to provide better work efficiency and business performance. Even though work uberization in the current world is used to indicate an array of business strategies to deliver better performance, we will be seeing the concept in the sense that the technological advances have made way to a feedback system that functions round the clock.

And this concept of a constant feedback system, when applied on service work, might lead to better output or in other cases, perceived problem by employees. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the lack of research on newer forms of mobile technology and its impact on the workplace is a strong factor that motivated us to delve into this study.

Furthermore, there is already an availability of a huge amount of studies on how to align a company's brand with the identities of the employees in different ways and the importance of employees living the brand of a company and delivering the message (Müller, 2017). However, there are no studies on how technology as a mobile application may influence or lead to brand-centred control. Our study will therefore be derived from the article 'Brand-centred control': a study of internal branding and normative control'' by Monika Müller (2017) who studied the phenomena which is the blurred line between work and private life that is accentuated by the external audience (stakeholders of the organization such as customers, employees etc.) acting as a normative form of control. The author further suggests there has to be future research on how the phenomenon affects the employees' selves. Hence, it is in our interest to incorporate technology and brand-centred control to explore the sense-making of employees with relation to this connection.

1.3. Research Questions

The key goal of our research is to contribute to the existing literature on brand-centred control and technological control with a focus on how employees make sense of the technological influences in their daily lives. This further enables us to expand the literature on control, as we believe the changes in workplace dynamics have led to newer forms of control. Deriving from the problematization presented above, we, therefore, pose the following research question:

- How do employees make sense of the technological influences in relation to brand-centred control?

Our research question will be answered in terms of the understanding of the concepts of internal branding, normative control and neo-normative control that leads to the phenomenon of brand-centred control. We also seek to explore additional insights that might be derived from the sub concepts and their interrelation in the mechanism of brand-centred control.

1.4. Outline of the thesis

The paper consists of 6 chapters including this introductory chapter. In chapter 2, we take the readers through our theoretical concepts on which we build our research on employee sensemaking of the technological influence in relation to brand-centred control. The theoretical base will stand as a reference for our elaboration of the revised mechanism of brand-centred control backed by technology which will further be presented in chapter 5. Chapter 3 will cover the detailed methodological choices framing the study and includes subchapters covering the research approach, research design, data collection method and process and credibility aspects of the study. Further on, in chapter 4 we intertwine analysis and discussion and name it 'Analysis'. This chapter will include the empirical material along with our reflections and theoretical underpinnings, leading to the final and overall discussions of the study in chapter 5, 'Discussion'. The conclusions will be presented in chapter 6 covering research contribution, limitations, practical implications and recommendations for future studies.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the following chapter, we present the theoretical framework that will later be used as a toolbox to analyze our empirical data. We will start by laying out the technological context and the theoretical background to sensemaking that drives our study. Further on, we will elaborate on the organizational culture that sets a base for the brand and brand-centred control. And additionally, we develop an understanding of the brand-centred control mechanism through the sub-concepts of internal branding, normative control and neo-normative control.

2.1. Technology and workplace

In the present global scenario, technology, particularly in the form of information and communication technology, is transforming workplaces. Accordingly, there can be five key technologies that can be considered to be transforming the foundations of global business and the agencies that drive it: cloud and mobile technology, machine learning and big data, sensors and intelligent manufacturing, advanced robotics and drones and clean-energy technologies (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). Out of these technological advancements, our specific interest lies in mobile technology in the form of mobile applications and how it affects workplace dynamics in relation to brand-centred control and sub-concepts. And specifically, an upcoming phenomenon that we are witnessing in workplaces is the 'uberization of work' enabled by advancements in mobile technology. The uberization phenomenon is derived from the worldwide success gained by Uber since 2009 and is derived from the business model of Uber (Nicolas, 2017). A majority of the articles on workplace uberization focus on the 'gig-economy' or the free market system in which organizations adopt short-term contracts or temporary assignments and freelance work. However, according to the blog post by Nicolas (2017), the workplace uberization trend emerged at the meeting point of three background trends which are: the understanding of the digital universe, the search for best customer experience and the urge to seek independence by individuals in expressing his/her skills on a daily basis. And we see the conglomeration of these trends facilitating workplace functioning through mobile technology in the form of the mobile application enabling a constant feedback system that leads to better customer experience. Hence in our study, we will be presenting workplace uberization from the viewpoint of mobile technology facilitating a round the clock

feedback and how employees make sense of its influence over the blurred line between work and private life.

2.2. Sensemaking

The primary goal of our study revolves around understanding the employee sensemaking of the technological influences and hence, it is vital to touch upon the theoretical underpinnings. According to Weick (1995, p. 4), sensemaking means simply "the making of sense". It is the activity that enables us to understand the complexity of the world as a situation that is "comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). It is regarded as a social process that occurs between individuals as meanings are shared and socially constructed. One of the key properties of sensemaking is its social context. Weick et al. (2005, p.409) elaborates that sensemaking unfolds in the "social context of other actors" and Maitlis (2005, p.21) views sensemaking in organizations as a social process in which the individuals unfold and interpret the organizational environment through continuous interaction with each other by constructing meaning that allows them to understand the world better and act collectively. Sensemaking generally stresses on the social context because even the individuals who make sense of the world on their own constitute a sociomaterial context where their thoughts, behaviors, emotions and feelings are influenced by the "actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Allport, 1985, p. 3, cited in Weick, 1995, p. 39). Understanding employee sensemaking becomes a key element in our study as we delve into the thoughts, interpretations and emotions of employees in the service sector which are strongly influenced by the customers whom they face in their day to day life. In order to analyze the employees' sensemaking in relation to brand-centred control, it is crucial to begin with the organizational cultural background which frames a base for the further concepts and mechanisms.

2.3. Organizational culture

Organizational culture is a complex phenomenon that can be influenced by the external environment (Mungiu-Pupazan, 2016). The phenomenon is characterized as a pattern of norms, values, symbols and actions which have an effect on the organization's performance (Mungiu-Pupazan, 2016; Alvesson, 2001). Furthermore, it is described as ''the pattern of shared values and beliefs that help individuals understand organizational functioning and thus provide them

norms for behavior in the organization'' (Deshpandé & Webster, 1989:4). Mungiu-Pupazan (2016) and Meyerson and Martin (1987) argue that the phenomenon is socially constructed. It also affects the wellbeing of the employees including their minds and actions inside as outside the organization. Additionally, Kallas and Reino (2014) and Smircich (1983) stress that the organizational culture acts as a tool to guide the behavior and actions of the employees.

2.3.1 Patterns of the organizational culture

As mentioned above, organizational culture consists of a pattern of symbols, values and norms. Cohen (1974) means that objects can be seen as symbols that stand for different purposes, just as Alvesson (1993) means that symbols are supposed to express a certain meaning. According to Hatch (2002), the meaning can be both unconscious and conscious and the symbols are thus an extension of the concrete form of an object. The values, however, are what is considered important, right and wrong, goals, social principles and standards within an organization and therefore has a connection with emotions (Hatch, 2002). The expectations of the member's behaviors in certain situations are characterized as norms and since it has an effect on the behavior and attitudes it can be a factor to the success of an organization (Hatch 2002; Alvesson 2013).

2.4. Brand

Values and beliefs of a culture can also be seen in the brand of a company (Malik, Neam & Munawarn, 2012). The brand can be for example a symbol, design, a name or a combination of them in order to differentiate them from its competitors (Kotler, 2008). Aaker (1996) stresses that a set of brand associations constitutes the brand identity, which is what the brand stands for and delivers a promise to customers. Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) argue that core values, authenticity and uniqueness are what constitutes a brand identity whereas De Chernatony (2006) means that it is the central idea of a brand and how it communicates this to stakeholders. The brand identity, therefore, includes perceptions and status that the stakeholders of the organization hold towards the brand (Kirmani, Sood & Bridges, 1999). One can further associate human characteristics with brand personality (Dikcius, Seimiene & Casas, 2018; Aaker 1997) whereas Allen and Olson (1995) argue that specific meanings describe the brand personality. The brand personality is generated and communicated through experiences that consumers have with the brand and marketing communications (Sung & Kim, 2010).

Additionally, Kay (2006) argues that brand personality should be in relation to the main values of the organization.

2.4.1. The correlation between organizational culture and brand

Balmer and Greyser (2002) stress the importance of aligning the values of organizational culture with the brand values which ensures to deliver a coherent and unified customer experience. However, misalignment can lead to conflicting employee actions, and inappropriate brand inconsistency and behavior (Griseri, 1998; De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008).

As mentioned above, organizational culture thus affects the behavior of the employees. De Chernatony and Cottam (2008) mean that this influences the customer interaction and is moreover vital since the brand is delivered by the behavior of the employees. If the organizational culture, therefore, is not appropriate and supportive, the chance for employees to ‘’live the brand’’ is small (Schultz, 2003). Furthermore, brand success is contributed by the organizational culture (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008). The values of the brand and values of the employees should be aligned in order for the organizational culture to have a positive impact on brand performance (Rubino, 1998), for which is related to satisfaction and commitment (O’Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Ostroff, Shin & Kinicki, 2005). Further, Siegall and McDonald (2004) also stress that the personal values of the employees and organizational values should interact. However, if this is not achieved consequences can arise. Employees can experience tension between their natural actions that would arise if their personal and brand values are misaligned. They may also find distrust and be unwilling to support and deliver the brand (Griseri, 1998; Yaniv & Farkas, 2005), which can lead to inappropriate behavior and employee inconsistency in delivering the brand (De Chernatony & Cottam, 2008).

2.5. Employer Branding

To continue, employer branding is viewed as sub concept of corporate branding by Foster, Punjaisri and Cheng (2010) and is one of the most important assets of a company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is the employer branding and the attempt to, as an employer, promote its desirableness within and outside the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is used as a

way of marketing itself to future employees and stakeholders but also attracting and retaining current ones (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Ambler & Barrow 1996). Furthermore, employer branding is creating a perception of the brand (Pavitra, 2018).

Employer branding can be seen as a three-step process according to Backhaus & Tikoo (2004). The establishment of a value proposition that presents offerings and associations, for example, organizational culture, is the first step (Sullivan, 2002, 2004). It is further used to attract the population of target and is characterized as external marketing, the second step of employer branding (Sullivan 1999). The last step of the process is internal marketing, also known as internal branding, which is a part of the organizational culture. It is the set promise that needs to be delivered to the employees. Additionally, the intention of employer branding is to commit and engage the employees with the set values and goals of the organization. It creates value and can affect the competitive advantage and organizational performance (Frook 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Barney 1991)

2.5.1. Internal Branding

Internal branding, also known as employee branding, can be considered as an extension of culture management, which is the management of organizational culture (Edwards, 2005; Kornberger, 2010). They stress that it has the potential to influence the identities of employees and lead to new forms of normative control. The two key objectives of internal branding can be: first, to enable employees to become ambassadors of the brand by forming symbolic ties with the brand (Santos-Vijande, den Rio-Lanza, Suárez-Álvarez & Díaz-Martín, 2013; Vallaster & De Chernatony, 2006), and secondly, to enhance the communication within the firm to boost activities related to brand development (Webster & Keller, 2004). Müller (2017) stresses that when the behaviors, languages, outward appearances and attitudes of the employees' become the brand through aligning their identities with the brand, the employees, therefore, acts as the brand message. The employees furthermore live the brand (Edwards, 2005). The practices of internal branding include for example briefings, group meetings and orientation (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). According to Bergstorm, Bluementhal and Crothers (2002), internal branding is a way of communicating the brand adequately to the employees by conveying its relevance, successively linking the jobs in the organization to deliver the essence of the brand.

Internal branding additionally, becomes crucial as it helps organizations in providing a steady value output to stakeholders, generates symbolic value in employees in line with the brand and creates higher value for organizations (De Chernatony & Riley, 1999; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). The significance of internal branding accentuates the fact that brand value is co-created by stakeholders and impressions may be created every time there is an interaction between the stakeholders and employees (Ind, 2014; Merz et al. 2009). Internal branding hence differs from other branding concepts in the sense that it not only involves employees as a supplementary audience for brand messages but urges employees to be the message (Edwards, 2005).

2.5.2. Normative Control

Müller (2017) states that internal branding has the potential to regulate the identities of employees and lead to further development of normative control. The aspect of normative control, according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), deals with the development of self-images and work orientations which conform to the managerial objectives. Normative control urges employees to identify themselves strongly with the goals of the organization rather than monetary rewards or physical coercion (Gabriel, 1999; Kunda, 1992). Additionally, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) mean that it is a way of controlling and regulating the identities inside the organization. Further on, according to Willmott (1993), normative control requires employees to assess their own worth in terms of the cultural values which are to be internalized by them. According to Alvesson (2007), the shared values and meanings are closely linked to organizational culture and Kärreman and Rennstam (2007) claim that these are the key elements used within normative control as well. They continue by suggesting that normative control is about influencing the values of people and their core understanding of reality which is easily associated with culture. Hence, one can say that organizational culture forms a vital element of normative control. Additionally, this view is supported by Alvesson (2007), who maintains that organizational culture is a key aspect of normative control.

2.5.3. Neo-normative control

Neo-normative control, according to Fleming and Sturdy (2009), is evidently linked to normative control and "emerges out of normative control" (p. 570). They outlined in their study two key dimensions of neo-normative control - the celebration of difference and fun as the expression of self. These aspects according to them encourage employees to showcase the

nominally private and authentic aspects of their self. A key implication of neo-normative control is that the workers carry their true identities to work rather than the identities being manipulated through corporate culture programs (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2017). However, one of the prevailing consequences is that the workers do not enjoy freedom over labor processes even though they might have the power to be themselves. (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011). Adding on, Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge (2010, p.117) state that under neo-normative control, the manager pays a 'channeling role' to facilitate the liberation of the values that are already embodied in the employees. In the case study conducted by Fleming and Sturdy (2011), the freedom to be oneself did not free workers from the control exerted by the call center, however, it introduced freedom around the control system. However, even though their study also attempts to throw paradoxes of work culture that promotes 'being yourself' or 'fun at work' that can also arise through resistance developed by employees, they stress that this sort of a hint is just a "scratch on the surface" of gaining understanding of the regime (pp. 580). However, in comparison to normative control, Kunda (1992) states that there is a difference in the normative base for neo-normative control, in the sense that the real lives of employees are not ignored or left out in favor of the collective normative frame of the organization.

In line with what has been mentioned above regarding the dimensions of neo-normative control, in our study, we will be presenting neo-normative control as a tool that is used to deliver authentic and genuine customer service steered by personal service and relationship building. This enables the workers to bring their private life experiences in the context of customer service that helps them relate to customers in a more authentic manner.

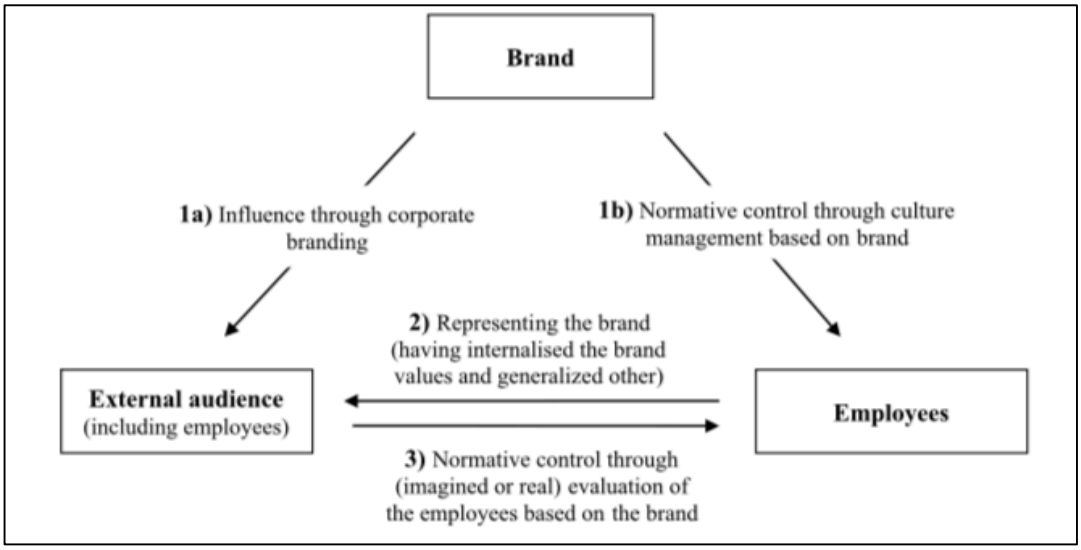
2.6. Brand-centred control

Müller (2017) in her study suggested that the external audience such as customers, friends, strangers, fan-communities and the public turns in to an additional source of normative control for employees. This phenomenon, according to Müller (2017), is a key aspect of brand-centred control which is derived and goes beyond the conventional forms of normative control. She further states that the close alignment between external and internal brand communication forms a key element of brand-centred control as the brand communication shared with employees and external audience suggests how employees could or should enact the central themes of the brand. Hence, her study highlights three key findings. The first finding suggests that brand messages that are communicated to the external audience, become a part of the

employee mindset at the same time through internal branding. The second finding suggests that internal branding thus aligns employees to the brand values which results in employees representing the brand which means that the actions of employees reflect the culture and brand. The third key finding offers that the external audience thus turns in to an additional source of normative control as they are aware of the central themes of the brand. This is because the employees are aware of the brand image of the external audience and hence, are evaluated as brand representatives. Hence, brand-centred control is when employees become and act as brand representatives inside and outside the organization leading to a blurred line between work and private life (Müller, 2017).

2.6.1. Mechanism of brand-centred control

The detailed mechanism of brand-centred control as suggested by Müller (2017) can further be explained as below:



(Fig.1. Mechanism of brand-centred control (Monika Müller,2017)

(1a) suggests that through corporate branding, the company uses the central brand messages to address the external audience. This makes the external audience aware of the brand and frames the basis of their evaluation of employees. In (1b), the brand is used by the organization as a key element of cultural management to enable employees to communicate the brand to external viewers by aligning their attitude and behaviors to the brand and be a visible representation of the brand. The mechanism suggests that the processes (1a and b) can generate a 'faceless mass' as Kunda (1992) mentions, but also in the form of external viewers who are aware of the brand

and its messages and tends to evaluate the brand representation of employees. (2) suggests that the employees internalize the messages of the brand and the brand images of the external audience at the same time. This leads to the employees acting like brand representatives even outside the organization. (3) As the employees know about the brand image carried by the external audience, they begin to evaluate their actions and self in line with the brand values even where there is no face to face interaction involved with the external audience. This leads to the employees being evaluated as brand representatives and receive feedback as the ideal brand perception of customers are ubiquitous. Even though brand-centred control is generally based on conventional normative control, Müller (2017) suggests that it can co-exist with the neo-normative control.

2.6.2. Implications of brand-centred control

One of the key implications of brand-centred control is its impact on the private life of employees (Müller, 2017). She suggests that the employees in this form of control tend to take the brand and internalized general others into their private lives which leaves them with a feeling that they can be evaluated anytime by the external audience. The blurring of boundaries between work and private lives as suggested by Fleming and Sturdy (2009, 2011) and Land and Taylor (2010) is further aggravated by this supplementary external source of normative control. In this regard, it is worthwhile to draw the reference to the 'generalized other' as conceptualized by Mead (1974) which is the representation of the attitude of the whole community. This 'generalized other' according to him influences an individual's thinking. He continues that "It is in this form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals ... i.e. that the community exercises control" (p. 155). The generalized other, therefore, becomes part of the 'self- disciplining power' (Willmott, 1993, p. 538) of normative control. Müller (2017) also notes that employees could participate or resist brand-centred control depending on how they relate it to themselves. She further suggests that while enthusiastic employees accept the blurred lines between work and private life, there could be other employees who pursue to reject this internalization. The variations of this resistance could be in the form of 'cynical distancing' as suggested by Fleming and Spicer (2003) or 'pragmatic distancing' as suggested by Müller (2017).

2.7. Emotional Labor

Another reaction or consequence of brand-centred control besides cynicism and resistance can be emotional labor. This could also be a form of reaction developed in relation to the employees' attempt to be oneself at work which points to a neo-normative form of control. The term emotional labor was coined by the sociologist Hochschild (1983, p.7) to describe "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value". Another aspect of emotional labor according to Hochschild (1983, p.7) is that it "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others". For her, it is not just the display of the emotion but includes the difference in what is being actually felt versus what is being displayed externally. Accordingly, she suggests the strategies of surface acting and deep acting adopted by employees that engage in emotional labor. Surface acting according to Hochschild is when the service providers perform their duties without having alignment between their inner emotions and the emotions displayed to the customer. And alternatively, if the service provider aligns the inner emotions to that of the one displayed, it is described as deep acting. Hochschild (1983) elaborates on how the strategies could generate detrimental effects on the employees who do emotional labor as the effort has to be dealt with something personal and internal for the employee. However, Ashforth and Humphrey (1991), took a different position than Hochschild (1983) in terms of the impact of customer, organization, and employee on emotional labor. According to Moreo, Woods, Sammons and Bergman (2017), Hochschild explained emotional labor in terms of emotional regulation whereas Ashforth and Humphrey defined emotional labor as the display the customer sees. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) viewed emotional labor as the management of impression the customer had of the organization. Grandey (2000, p.97), however, views emotional labor as the "process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals". When it comes to emotional labor and the involvement of customers, much of the study related to this topic has been focused on the act of smiling and other related displays. (Ford, 1995; Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006)

3. Methodology

In the following chapter, we take the readers through the methodological approach that frames our study. We begin by elaborating the philosophical underpinnings of the study in the research approach followed by our research design, data collection process and methods. Further on, we share the insights of our data analysis process and credibility of our study before we end the chapter with an outline of the study.

3.1. Research Approach

Further to the research questions presented in the previous section, it is vital to elaborate on the influence of our metatheoretical point of view on the research project. Quantitative research typically attempts to project an objective truth in the form of facts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). However, in our study, we adopt the idea that the existing objective truth or social reality is constructed through the meanings attached by individuals to the related objects, events and interactions (Prasad, 2005). Qualitative researchers on the other hand study things and situations in their natural setting, trying to interpret and make sense of the phenomena in relation to the socially constructed reality and the attached meanings people bring to them (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). And hence, in the process of our study, we will be involved in a qualitative approach, seeking to bring in to light the interpretations and sensemaking effort of individuals behind such realities (Prasad, 2005).

In line with our aim to explore the socially constructed nature of reality, we base our study on an interpretative research tradition as we see human interpretation as the base for developing knowledge about the realities of the social world. According to Holstein and Gubrium (1993), interpretive traditions find a strong base in the subjective nature of interpretive notions. In the tradition, understanding meanings and the intention gain a focus that stands above causal explanations and as a result, the emphasis is on subject matters that touch upon everyday life world in which individuals try to make sense of the encountered situations or phenomena (Prasad, 2005). Accordingly, we would explore further into the employees' sensemaking of technological influences in relation to brand-centred control by diving deep into the subjective reality of employees' associated with the retail brand. In line with the tradition which stresses

the belief that the world is socially constructed, we believe that there are differences in how individuals construct and share the realities associated. This also points to the differences in the process of sensemaking. Moreover, through elements of the hermeneutic approach, we present the employee sensemaking in a wider context by comprising an analytical circle of text and its contexts such as organizational background, pre-understanding of the researchers and linguistic elements of the text (Prasad, 2005).

For the study, we adopt an abductive method that has qualities of both inductive and deductive approaches (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). According to Meyer and Lunnay (2013 cited in Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), the abductive approach has also been generally recommended as an innovative take on empirical research driven by theory. The motive behind adopting this method is that while our approach draws from theory, we are also open to the new insights generated in the process of study. Empirical base backed by theoretical preconceptions can guide the process of data interpretation (Alvesson, 2003), and our study will be taken forward in this direction. And accordingly, as Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) suggest, we will further strengthen our interpretations with new observations. During our conversations and interaction with the interviewees, our insights and knowledge evolved about our study (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2006). Our knowledge and insights are, however, shaped by our own interpretations that we make subsequently and as qualitative research entails reflection, this empirical research can be defined as the interpretation of interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018)

3.2. Research Design

For the purpose of our study, we have chosen front-line service workers in a well-known Swedish retail chain. The reason for such a choice will be explained further. We will then introduce our data collection method and process. The names of the organizational representatives from the retail chain and the app are anonymized and renamed throughout the study and further information of the organization will also not be revealed to due to ethical considerations that will be presented in the data collection method.

3.2.1. The Case Company

For the study, we have chosen a well-known Swedish retail chain with around 120 stores in Sweden. The selection of this organization comes down to the reason that firstly, it has a well-

known brand profile as we wanted to ensure that the organization presents a good brand profile which will help us explore the phenomenon of brand-centred control further. And secondly, due to the availability of personal contact of the store manager and thus easier access. Our target for the study is front-line service workers who hold the designation of sales advisors in the retail chain. And this is because we bring in the concept of mobile technology in the form of an app forming a customer feedback system as a new form of control throughout the study. And also because the front-line service workers face customers on an everyday basis which enables the researchers to assess the influence of the feedback system. Moreover, we believe that service workers have to visibly align themselves to the organizational culture and brand more than an employee in a non-service sector because of the element of customer interaction. This makes it an ideal set up for elaborating on brand-centred control which frames the brand awareness of the external audience as an important aspect. In the study, customer feedback is also considered as a reflection of the brand awareness of the external audience, mainly customers.

3.3. Data collection method

3.3.1. Interviews

The interviews were deep interviews, where Bryman (2008) defines them as a mix of unstructured and semi-structured interviews and would give us acumen into ‘’the life world’’ (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). A set of questions that act as a questionnaire of commonly formulated questions is defined as semi-structured interviews and unstructured consists of different themes or general informal questions (Bryman, 2008) and our interview guide was therefore based on themes that are central for the study. Deep interviews were chosen due to the fact that studies on organizational culture, brand and different forms of control are based on people’s interpretations and sensemaking. Additionally, Bryman (2008) means that the interview questions should be in an order which makes the answers come naturally for the interviewees.

The primary resource of information for our study is the empirical material from the interviews with 10 front-line sales advisors from the Swedish retail store. However, we additionally had a conversation with two store managers in order to gain more insight into the organizational culture and the functioning of the app. Their insights are not presented in the study, as the conversations were done for the researchers to get introduced to the organization. We have

included front-line employees with different years of experience within the retail chain and due to the reason that they most likely will have different interpretations of the store and would, therefore, be representative of the organization. The employees were interviewed from two stores in the south of Sweden due to availability reasons. However, we do not intend to do a comparison of the stores, but rather present the narrative sources to give a general idea of the employee perceptions in the stores.

3.3.2. Observations

The aim of observations is according to Alvehus (2013:93) to observe ‘’naturally occurring’’ situations. According to Gill and Johnson (2002:144) participant observation is when ‘the researcher attempts to participate fully in the lives and activities of subjects and thus becomes a member of their group, organization or community. This enables the researchers to share their experiences by not merely observing what is happening but also feeling it’. The purpose is therefore to experience the special nuances of meaning (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). However, Alvehus (2013) stresses that one problem that can occur during observations is the effect of the researcher on the ones observed. The participation by the researches can affect in the way that the observations become less representative, this thus depends on what role the researcher takes on in the observation.

And accordingly, the second resource of data for our study is the empirical data from observations. Since we were engaged in informed observations, we took on the roles of participants as observers. This means that the candidates in the study are aware of our roles as researchers, the purpose of our study and we can focus on our role as researchers in the observation. The relationship between the observers and researchers turn into a fieldwork relationship (Ackroyd & Hughes 1992; Sanders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009).

3.3.3. Online Data and Reports

The company website of the organization was the third resource of data and was accessed at the beginning of our study in order to gain an understanding of the organization, its culture and brand messages. Additionally, the company website and client testimonial section of the app provider was analyzed as well to gain insight into the service provided. Furthermore, we conducted an analysis of documents such as brand brochures and annual reports from 2015 to

2019 from the organization's online portals which fall in line with the hermeneutic tradition aiding us in the interpretation of interviews and observations (Bowen, 2009; Prasad, 2005).

3.4. Data collection process

All of our interviews were done face-to-face. However, the interviews were done in Swedish to generate a natural flow of conversation and therefore only one of us researchers actively participated in the interviews since one of the researchers is from Sweden and the other is a non-Swedish speaker. Our aim was to create a more natural setting so that the interviewees would not feel like they were being in close observation and hence their openness in conversation is encouraged (Bryman 2012). This factor was enhanced by having interviews in Swedish. We wanted to create a close and improved relationship with the sales advisors by being genuinely interested in their perspectives and experiences (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006).

Bryman (2008) suggests that the participants should be informed of the purpose of the study and be given the right to decide on their involvement. Additionally, he stressed that the researchers should conduct an informed collection of information and maintain confidentiality throughout. In line with this, in the interviews as well as observations, it was crucial for us as researchers to consider ethical requirements of the study with regard to the confidentiality of the information collected and participant details, collection of information on participant consent and the informed use of data. The participants were informed of the purpose and context of the study along with the contribution offered to the organization. The interviewees were briefed about the ethical considerations which were followed throughout the whole study and were given assurance that the name of the company and interviewees would be handled with full anonymity. The interviewees were also informed that the interviews would be recorded for transcriptions, however, they were assured that the same would not be shared with anyone but used only for the purpose of the study and deleted after completion of transcription. The recording of interviews helped the researchers to focus on the content and context during the interviews and no separate interview notes were taken.

Our interview questionnaire consisted of questions linked to organizational culture, brand, technology, perceptions on control related to normative and neo-normative forms of regulation, internal branding and a blurred line between work life and private life. The interviews started with questions regarding the organizational culture and brand further leading to technology and

how they make sense of the influences. Supplementary questions were asked after the interviewee responses to ensure clarity of explanations. Some of the questions asked were for example: How would you describe the organizational culture? How would you describe the brand? In what way do you feel you are being influenced or controlled by the organization? How do you think the organization influence you in your private life?

The interviews were done at the company office to enable observations and dialogues in the natural setup of the organization and lasted for around 30-45 minutes each. The empirical material constitutes the interview excerpts presented from Carl, Emma, Niclas, Daria, Sofia, Therese, Kira, Annie, Victoria and Anna and are not representative for their genders and have been in the organization ranging from 6 months to 15 years.

The observations were done before and after the interviews. The reason and goal of this are that we as researchers wanted to observe the organization with new and 'fresh eyes'. We, therefore, did not consciously look for connections or conclusions that correspond to what had been said by the interviewees during the interview process. Nor did we exclude other factors that could affect our interpretations of the observations. Additionally, this gave us the chance to compare our interpretations and perceptions from the observations as our observations remained unaffected by what was said in the interviews. The observations were done by both of us and took on the role of researchers doing passive observations. A total of 4 observations lasting for a total of 10 hours were done. Mental notes were also taken after the interviews because it was inappropriate to take notes during the observations (Lofland & Lofland 1995; Sanjek 1990) and we did not want to affect the behaviors of the employees'.

3.5. Data Analysis

Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that concepts and hypotheses should be directed by and based on systematic involvement with empirical material as this would help in maintaining an open mind to the insights derived from empirical material and not just a search of theoretical evidence. In line with this, we have gathered and analyzed data continuously and simultaneously. As and when sets of interviews were finished, we started out by coding various themes from the transcribed interviews.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 101), coding is "the analytical processes through which data are fractured, conceptualized, and integrated to form theory" and according to their model, the coding procedure includes three models. First is the open coding which is the "analytical process through which the concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data." (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp.101). And accordingly, in this first stage, we identified the key concepts, terms and images used by the interviewees pointing to organizational culture, brand images, internal branding and perceived forms of control. These key themes and images were further attached meanings based on the research topics. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest the second stage of coding as axial coding, which includes the creation of sub-categories where the concepts identified in the initial stage of open coding are grouped to. Correspondingly, we developed sub-themes of normative control, neo-normative control and perceived technological forms of control. The third and final stage of coding is selective coding as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998, pp. 143) which is the "process of integrating and refining theory". In this stage, we referred back to theory to draw linkages to the findings and thus expand theory.

Styhre (2014) suggests that the empirical section of the paper should avoid intervention from the researchers in terms of suggestions and comments on how certain events could be interpreted in a specific setting. He also says that in such a presentation of the empirical section, the reader "needs to be given the right to play a modest witness (p.80)." However, in our paper, we will be combining the sections of analysis and discussions including theoretical intervention as well as interpretation of researchers. This is because we believe that the readers should be taken through our interpretation and thoughts when the illustrations are fresh in their minds. Having illustrations and discussions presented separately might mean that the readers might have to refer back and forth on the empirical material to find connections and insights. Our own interpretations and theoretical connections presented together will help the readers relate the empirical material to the context in hand more effectively. This chapter combing our analysis and discussions will be called 'Analysis' and the following chapter 'Discussion' will present the findings and final and overall discussions from the analysis.

3.6. Credibility

Bryman and Bell (2005) and Svenning (2003) suggest that it is complicated for the researcher to not influence or affect the respondents in some way or the other which in turn might affect

the responses and hence the analysis. The factors such as insecurity or lack of confidence might affect the responses. Since we have approached the respondents through our personal contact who is employed as a store manager in the organization, we are aware that the responses might be affected by this factor, even though the respondents were assured of confidentiality. This possibly may lead to a situation where respondents provide researchers with that might please the store manager or omit less positive parts of the situation (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Additionally, we understand that the respondents may face difficulties in clearly expressing their thoughts on the influence of technology, blurred lines and the perceived control (Alvesson, 2003). However, the researchers have to rely on the verbal responses through words shared by interviewees without having an opportunity to analyze the thoughts going on in their minds. And this could be a general limitation of qualitative research.

At present, we have done the study in two stores of the retail chain. However, as a store with around 120 stores, we believe that conducting the study in multiple stores across Sweden in a wider time frame would have given broader insights or given an opportunity for comparison of responses.

Moreover, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) stress that it is challenging to study organizational culture in a short period of time. The authors do not further explain what they mean by this. However, we believe it is because organizational culture is a complex phenomenon and our thesis work in the organization lasted for a comparatively shorter time. More time might have given us an opportunity to do more observations and interviews helping us understand the culture, brand-centred control and forms of control in depth. Additionally, we feel, more time would have helped us to dig deep into the discrepancies or 'not so rosy' picture of organizational reality. Having said this, more time for study would mean broader insights and does not undermine researches done in a shorter time frame.

4. Analysis

In this chapter, we present the empirical data, along with our theoretical framework as a toolbox and with our own reflections. This can set a base for our study which will guide us in answering the research questions in the discussion. The analysis will start with an outline of the case context followed by the organizational culture and brand. This, in order to understand employee's sensemaking of technological influences in relation to brand-centred control, is vital to create an understanding of the employee's perceptions of organizational culture and the brand since these set the base for the concepts of brand-centred control. Further on, an analysis of the key elements making up the mechanism of brand-centred control such as internal branding, normative control and neo-normative control will be presented. This chapter will combine analysis and discussion, as explained in the methods chapter.

4.1. Case context

The chosen retail chain makes use of mobile technology in the form of an app to gain insight into the best practices that lead to the achievement of KPIs by effectively capturing customer feedback enabling a reduced variation in performance in the business. The app will be presented as RACE (renamed for organizational anonymity) throughout the study and the purpose of the app is to facilitate sustainable change and improvement in organizational and employee performance over time.

The customers link their mail to their membership to this feedback system on checkout during the first purchase in the store. From then on, after each purchase, they are open to sharing their feedback and suggestions. For example, the customers are asked if the staff greeted them with a 'hello' and how the experience at clearance at checkout was. In the form of scorecards, the results are presented for individual stores, which makes it easy for the store to easily identify weak areas and take up improvement measures. Helene Warner, sales manager at the retail chain says that the managers and employees use RACE to review and understand what the customers want from the organization, and what the teams should focus on in order to make the customers more satisfied when they leave the store (partner testimonial section in App website). Tom Eden, head of analysis at RACE organizational team, says that customer

feedback must be focused on behavior and must be immediate, i.e. as close in time as possible to the customer experience. He further states that for the organization (chosen retail chain), questionnaires are sent to the customer the day after the customer's visit to the store. According to Helene, the store managers in the retail chain prefer to work with the RACE system in order to be better at customer care because all employees are curious about the comments from customers including them. Hence, they follow the results in RACE on a daily or weekly basis. The app helps the stores in their communication with the customers and makes it easier to target improvement activities based on customer testimonials. The reports from RACE set a base for the development plan for the coming period and the goals are set for store managers which are continuously measured and followed up in the app. Helene further stresses that the managers print reports and customer comments from RACE and put it on the wall to motivate employees. She says it is a tool in everyday life with feedback from customers. She further adds that it is a part of understanding the sales development of a store and the report with the summary of the results of customer feedback with comments reach the management level every month. The employees are strongly advised to download the app in their private mobile phones in order to update themselves on the feedback from customers round the clock.

4.2. Technology in the form of a mobile application

In order to elaborate the employee perceptions on technology, it is vital to understand the purpose of the RACE phone application through the interpretations of employees. The following illustrations show how employees make sense of the purpose of the app that they regularly engage in. Carl says that "*RACE is a measuring tool to make sure if we do our job and such since we actually earn money on people that are satisfied. And the happy customers build their satisfaction with some kind of feeling that is given in the store*.". In addition to Carl, the app is described by Elijah and Sofia in the two following illustrations.

> *"/.../ but RACE is a good thing where the customers comment on how they experience us as a store and sales advisors so that is a good platform to see and understand how we work. And to always be observant with the new employees. /.../ RACE is a customer follow up to our members to where they after can fill in a survey on how they experienced the customer service and where they put ratings on us, in for example how they experienced the service in the fitting room. And it*

> *is very good to see what we can do better and improve through RACE, we can see what day and time they were in the store but that can be a good thing." (Elijah)*

In line with the response from Elijah, Sofia describes how the app stands as a standard of how the sales advisors should work in the store:

> *''RACE is a kind of customer response and personal shopper at the same time where customers can answer how the sales advisors perform on the floor with a lot of different questions which gives us a standard of how we should work in the store. RACE is very important for the company because that is the place where we can show that we do a good performance at work and if we do something not very positive the customers will tell us in RACE and let us know in what kind of way we need to improve our behavior and perform better.'' (Sofia)*

Correspondingly, it was experienced in the executed observations that the employees were checking the comments in the app on a daily basis. The employees also showed us the app and its user interface in the mobile device in the stocking room. The illustrations by Carl, Elijah, Sofia and the observation suggest the utility of the mobile phone application, how it is made use of to track customer experience and how it helps sales advisors track their performance. The app, therefore, acts as a feedback system. The employees present RACE as a tool that guides their behavior, as the customer feedback in the app suggests areas of improvement for better performance. Hence, the mobile technology in the form of an app is presented in the study as the key technological influence that is being made sense of by the employees in the retail chain. As presented in the citations, the app acts as a communication channel tracking in the customer responses and customer satisfaction that has the potential to drive improved business. The mobile platform facilitating this feedback system directs to the conglomeration of the background trends as suggested by Nicolas (2017). The author points to these trends as the understanding of the digital universe, the search for best customer experience and the urge to seek independence by individuals in expressing his/her skills on a daily basis. And hence in our study, the app is presented throughout as a key factor that leads to the 'uberization' of the workforce that generates a round the clock feedback system.

4.3. Customer focus as culture and its elements

In order to understand the organizational culture within the Swedish retail store, it is important to understand how the sales advisors understand and perceive the culture. The empirical data present that the employees' interpretations of the organizational culture are aligned with the corporate culture presented in the annual report. Additionally, organizational culture is a pattern of values, symbols and norms (Mungiu-Pupazan 2016; Alvesson 2001). However, norms and symbols will not be touched upon in detail in the study since our study relates to the connection between organizational cultural values and brand values. This can be in line with what Balmer and Greyson (2002) suggest when they mean that there should be an alignment in organizational culture values and brand values. This can be seen in the annual report of 2016/2017 of the company where they state that *"The customer is always the prime focus. /--/ Customer focus is at the core and sales personnel are expected to show a genuine interest in helping customers to find their style."*. Further on, Niclas points to this focus in culture when he says *"Ambitious and high customer service, that's like the feeling that you get, that you need to give high customer service, be ambitious and be in alignment with your colleagues."*. Also, Kira implies on this aspect of the organizational culture in her illustration: *"The customer especially /.../ like customer focus. /---/ When the customers get here they have to be able to get the help they want and we always follow the trend and give customer service."*. The illustrations from the annual report, as well as the illustrations from Niclas and Kira, display that the employees interpret organizational culture as one based on the foundation of strong customer focus. Niclas and Kira also imply that the culture is a way of behavior and actions within the store for example through expressions of 'giving customer service' and therefore acting accordingly. Additionally, Kallas and Reino (2014) and Smircich (1983) stress that the aim of organizational culture is to act as a tool to guide the behavior of the members.

The organizational culture and how it guides the behavior of the employees was also seen in our observation. When entering the store, the sales advisors welcomed us and shortly offered help. The sales advisors were constantly around for help needed. While entering the fitting room later for an eventual purchase and receiving help from the sales advisors, they shared their own experiences of finding clothes for certain occasions. The observation presents that the sales advisors throughout the visit to the store deliver a high focus on the customer with increasing the probabilities of customers leaving the store satisfied. Additionally, our observations reveal that the culture has been enforced throughout the organization through

posters in stocking rooms and restrooms. Further on, the customer focus is reinforced through the values of the organizational culture. The below illustrations display two of the employee responses on what the values stand for.

> *"Personal with the customer, for example, when they are in the checkout, is to really create a relationship with the customer and show that you care about them and the things that they buy so the feel like they have done a great shopping." (Niclas)*

Correspondingly, Sofia implies in the quote below that a personal relationship with the customer and service mindedness are the organizational values and refers to this as "connection with the customer".

> *"I as a person, of course, need to feel comfortable at the store and in the company, and everything is about service and that you have to be service minded and that stands for it as well, and to create a connection with the customer." (Sofia)*

Hence, from the two above responses from Niclas and Sofia, who also represent the other interviewees, one can imply that the employees' sensemaking in relation to the cultural value of the organization centers around personal relationships and service mindedness. The employees stress that through creating a close and personal relationship with the customer the culture, which is customer focus, is better delivered. This is further stressed by Hatch (2002) by stating that values are what is most important, or right and wrong within an organization. Thus, one can suggest that the organizational culture and its values have strongly and clearly been communicated throughout the whole organization, starting from the top management, since the interviewed sales advisors and observations present a constant organizational culture.

4.4. Personal service as a brand message

In the theory chapter, it was presented that the values of organizational culture can be seen in the brand of a company, which can be presented in the citations below.

> *"/.../ personal service because that is what people expect here, to get personal service and create a personal relationship with the customer. /---/ I think that most*

people connect it with quality because we've always worked and focused on quality." (Carl)

In line with the illustration from Carl, Niclas means that the brand message is personal service by making sure that the customer is satisfied.

"I definitely think that the sustainability goes hand in hand with the organizational culture... You know, if they come back with an item of clothing that has not delivered in the quality we don't have any problems with returning it and to give back the money to the customer. It is always about making sure that the customer is happy and for that is to always have a customer focus and service. /---/ If someone shops at our store it is important for them to know that the quality is good and that it lasts for a long time." (Niclas)

Additionally, the brand message can be seen through what Elijah stresses about at all times by showing the best for the customers.

"We are the face out, the sales advisors in the store, so they have to show the feeling that the company wants to deliver. There has to be a willingness to show the best for the customers and to treat them well. You want to work in a team and always strive forwards. /---/ what we stand for which is quality and customer service. /---/ The most important thing is the personal service, quality and the ability to choose between different brands, that we have a wide offer of clothes.'' (Elijah)

All of the three employees above stress that personal service is one of the brand associations through assuring that the customers consistently leave the store satisfied. Furthermore, they also imply that an additional brand association is 'quality'. Carl mentions that the set promise to the customers is personal service and relationships which both Niclas and Elijah established to be true by delivering the set promise to the customers. This can be further elaborated through what Aaker (1996) means when he stresses that a brand consists of associations that are supposed to deliver a promise to customers which in turn creates the brand identity. Moreover, the organizational culture can be seen in the brand through personal relationships in the retail chain. Thus, one can regard that the personal relationship is created while delivering personal

service to the customer since this may enhance the chances of closer relationships and higher service mindedness. The correlation between organizational culture and brand can, therefore, be displayed through the alignment between customer focus, personal relationships and mainly personal service. Considering that the organizational culture affects the behavior of the employees, the alignment assures the brand is delivered precisely through the behavior since it affects customer interaction. Deriving from what Schultz (2003) suggests, the more the alignment between organizational culture and brand, the more are the possibilities of 'living the brand'.

To summarize, and establish our interpretations regarding organizational culture, its values and brand, it is presented from our observation that the culture of the retail chain is centred around customer focus, personal service and relationships, service mindedness and quality. This is further presented to the external audience through magazines, social media, and tv-advertisements. The retail chain is widely regarded by the external audience as one of the strongest brands offering personal service to customers which were additionally conveyed from a daily magazine which will be anonymized due to ethical reasons.

4.5. Sensemaking on technological influence

In the following sections, we will be presenting employee sensemaking through the elements of brand-centred control.

4.5.1. Aligning identities to RACE - Internal branding

The brand value is co-created by stakeholders and impressions may be created every time there is an interaction between the stakeholders and employees (Ind, 2014; Merz et al. 2009). The interviewees stress on the importance of aligning their attitudes, behavior, and language to that of the identity of the organization so that they create positive impressions in the stakeholders. This is further stressed by Carl suggesting his views on 'doing the job properly': *"/.../ because if we can see that the comments and rates get higher (in RACE), then that is a confirmation that we do our job properly.*". Additionally, Therese stresses that the app assures that the employees 'do their jobs properly': *"If you don't follow the routines, rules and directions you will probably get negative comments in RACE or feedback from your manager".*

Along with Carl and Therese, Annie also makes sense of the app as an important aspect in the daily work at the company.

> *"Well, at every meeting they always lift the most important stuff and sometimes it is shown in the physical environment as well, like the store manager can put up post-its about where we are in RACE, which is customer focus, and how far away we are from our goals, what we have to think about and push each other." (Annie)*

Furthermore, the following illustration from one of our observations, sheds some light in understanding how the identity of the organization is aligned to the employees in the organization as they seem to think about the feedback even in casual encounters and making sure that they live up to the culture, brand and the set promises to the customers. In the observation, one of the sales advisors was packing up the delivery, when the vice manager casually went up to her and reminded her to always smile to the customers and always cater to their needs. She said that it might help them to get more positive feedback in RACE because since they take it seriously and they want to be the best store in their region, but also Sweden.

The above quotes, from specifically Carl and Annie, suggest that they make sense of the feedback in RACE as an assurance of their actions and behaviors being aligned to the organizational culture which they imply from the statement of 'doing the job properly'. We reflect upon the connotations of behavior as the act of smiling, saying 'hello' or 'hi' to customers, greeting the customers, having a welcoming body posture and the like. And additionally, it gives them an indication of whether their work goals are achieved or not. 'Doing the job properly' can moreover be a way of assuring that the employees act and communicate the brand message of the organization properly, which is in line with internal branding and its way of aligning the employees' identities with the brand. They employees moreover become the brand message of the organization (Edwards, 2005). Additionally, if the identities are aligned, one can suggest that it can provide a steady value output to stakeholders (De Chernatony & Riley, 1999; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009). One can also imply that internal branding can be seen as a form of control in the sense that it reassures them that identities are aligned and continues to be. Furthermore, we argue that this is a form of control in the sense that if employee identities are not aligned, then they might receive negative feedback in RACE. One of the key objectives of internal branding is to enchance communication within the firm that leads to brand development (Webster & Keller, 2004). From the illustrations, it can also

be suggested that brand development can be facilitated based on the feedback from RACE as suggested by Therese, Annie and the observation notes above, wherein, the manager or the vice-manager communicates the RACE feedback. The practices of internal branding include orientation (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) and it can be argued that the employees make sense of the app as a way of orienting them to the culture and thus acting as a strong influence for internal branding.

4.5.2. Technology as normative control

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, internal branding measures exert influences on normative control by tying employees' identities and selves to the brand. And the influence of internal branding can thus further be explained through the normative form of control.

As suggested by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), normative control is a way of controlling and regulating the identities inside the organization. Further on, Willmott (1993) states that normative control requires employees to assess their own worth in terms of the cultural values which are to be internalized by them. In line with this, the below illustrations suggest that employees see RACE as a form of normative control in guiding and controlling their behavior and actions. The feedback system enabled by the app acts as a guiding tool for their behavior at work. Hence, through the following section, we present mobile technology in the form of an app as a new form of normative control that guides their actions and behavior and acts as an additional control mechanism regulating employees to the organizational culture. Carl explains this in the following quote.

> *"/.../ because there (in RACE) you can see if we follow our guidelines and values since (which is customer focus, personal relationship, service mindedness, personal service) that is where the customers give us comments of how the visit has been in the store, like did you get a 'hi' and was the follow up in the fitting room good and such" (Carl)*

The sales advisors further on, see the feedback in RACE as a confirmation or validation of their performance on the floor as sales advisors which help them identify the action areas for improvement, which can be shown in the illustrations below.

"RACE is an example, she (the store manager) wants that all customers are happy so I make sure that with all the customers I am meeting, I have a smile on my face. But you can't make everyone happy but as long as I have done everything I can, and I am doing it for the manager, you know…to push that little extra. /…/ So it is like a guide tool to show us what we can do better and how and in what ways we have to change our behavior and performance in order for the customer to be happy." (Niclas)

Similarly, Victoria means that the feedback in the app acts as validation or confirmation of their work.

"The other day I was in the store and it was just me and Annie on the floor and we had a lot of customers to attend to. However, since it was just both of us, we were unable to attend to all the customers, and there was a customer who came for a product return. He had to wait for a longer time and unfortunately, he was not happy with the service and left negative feedback (in the app). My manager checked upon me the next day to check on the issue because of the negative feedback.'' (Victoria)

Further on, employees related to this form of management steered by technology as a control, implied by both Therese and Daria in the quotes below.

"I mean, sometimes I feel controlled due to RACE, but it can be whomever I mean, a person from a higher position from the headquarter that can be in the store, but that does not have to be a negative thing but you always need to be on your toes and always be on your best side. RACE is a tool which measures how we are against the customers all over the store and how we are with routines. (Therese)

Correspondingly, Daria expresses that RACE affects her actions in the store.

"/…/ I mean I have to act a certain way of course for example, when answering the phone or when you have to smile and look in the eyes of the customer and you get feedback if you don't follow this. You can't have your hands in your pockets or stand in a certain position. I mean you know yourself how an open person looks

> *like in the store, and I want to look like an open sales advisor so they feel like they can come up and talk to me... And otherwise, they tell us through RACE. And RACE is an app with customer responses where they give comments of how satisfied they are with the experience in the store and if they were treated the way the wanted…" (Daria)*

Hence, deriving from the employees' sensemaking from Carl, Niclas, Victoria, Therese and Daria of the app, firstly, it is established that the app acts as guiding tool through the customer feedback mechanism that directly and indirectly points to the organizational culture which is based on customer focus. Secondly, that the app aids to the validation or confirmation of the performance of sales advisors on the floor through manager reviews, as well as self- review by employees, and assuring the job is being done properly. And thirdly, specifically from the illustrations by Niclas and Daria, it can be seen that they modify their behavior in the form a smile or the body postures in order to create a good impression with the customers and increasing the possibilities of receiving positive feedback from customer satisfaction. And this can be a further hint to behavioral control through technology. And hence, derived from the employees' sensemaking, it is presented as a form of control as one can propose that the app is a means of regulating the employees to identify themselves with the goals of the organization. However, if the employees fail to identify themselves with the organizational goals, it is implied from the responses by Victoria and Daria that they might get negative reviews and thus negative feedback from the manager which places this context into a form of control. This is affirmed by Gabriel (1999) and Kunda (1992) who state that normative control urges employees to relate themselves to organizational goals. We further on elaborate on how this can be viewed as control by bringing in how and what ways the negative feedback in the system affects them in the paragraph below.

4.5.2.1. Negative feedback as a negative experience for the sales advisors

As stressed above, the feedback from the app motivates employees to control their actions according to the organizational values as the failure to do so might trigger negative feedback from customers and managers. In line with this, the employees' sensemaking suggests that RACE can have negative consequences as well to sales advisors which can be displayed through the quotes below. Normative control according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), deals with the development of self-images and work orientations which conform to the managerial

objectives. The influence of the app in developing work orientations can further be illustrated through the following excerpts. And here, the feedback from customers in the app acts as an indicator of how regulated the employees are to the culture. It indicates how employees view negative feedback in the app, which is presented by Annie and Therese in the following two illustrations.

> *"And regarding RACE, I'm always updated and affects me when I read the comments, and outside work when I read them and a negative one you try to remember if you worked that day and what you could have done better and so on." (Annie)*

> *"If you don't follow the routines, rules and directions you will probably get negative comments in RACE or feedback from your manager. And the fitting room is especially important since that is the place where you can really create a personal relationship with the customer. And I would want to ensure that our store gets positive feedback always and reduce negative comments" (Therese)*

The above quotes display that the employees strive to create a better experience by creating a positive customer experience that aids to reduce negative feedback in the app. The comment by Annie 'a negative one you try to remember' shows how the employees might think of the negative feedback constantly even off schedule. This may be implied as an implication of RACE as a control system. One can imply that Annie and Therese make sense of the negative comments in RACE that leads to a negative interpretation of things which in turn acts as a parameter for evaluating work situations. They reflect on the negative comments in RACE and therefore make sense out of that situation or experience in a negative way. Additionally, the response from Therese to 'reduce negative comments' indicate through her sensemaking that negative feedbacks are undesirable, standing as an indicator of a performance issue calling for managerial intervention.

4.5.3. 'Being Yourself' and Technology - Neo-normative control

Fleming and Sturdy (2009) outlined in their study that the aspect of 'being yourself' at workplace encourages employees to showcase the nominally private and authentic aspects of their self in an organizational setting. The brand message of personal service and relationships

motivate employees to 'be themselves' in the organization by being genuine and authentic in customer interactions. The illustrations indicate that the employees strongly believe in 'being themselves' at work which may help them in building a personal relationship with the customers. The interviewees also hint to the kind of feedback they would receive from creating positive relationships with the customers. Furthermore, Niclas stresses that by being personal, he can generate positive feedback in the app which can be interpreted in the sense that the feedback system motivates employees to be themselves.

> *"/.../ When you're being personal you get a better performance automatically I feel because then you feel like you can be more personal and get a better relationship with the customer which can always give positive feedback (in RACE) and it's the key 'factor', like five steps to succeed in this company and one that says 'dare to be yourself'. And I really think that this is one of the reasons to why this company succeeds you know, but this one really stood out because then I felt I could do more than just say 'hi' to the customer and ask if they need help. And the company itself pushes on it, but obviously, my store manager is my contact so I feel like she pushes on it a bit more, to be personal and myself." (Niclas)*

In addition, Anna means that 'being yourself' and bringing in the aspects of personal life to customer interactions increases the chances of creating a personal relationship with the customer.

> *"Well, the organizational culture encourages personal service and relationships and I feel that is better achieved when I am myself. Because if it is not, there is a facade that is limiting the chemistry or connection between me and the customer. And creating such relationships help me do my job better and you know… That is what I look for when I come to a store, which I would and if I could give some kind of feedback somewhere." (Anna)*

As mentioned in the literature review, one of the two key dimensions of neo-normative control is the celebration of difference through a work culture that promotes employees to 'be themselves' (Fleming & Sturdy 2009). This can be presented through the two quotes above by Niclas and Anna, where employees stress that they have better opportunities and feel more

comfortable of delivering the culture and brand while 'being themselves' as being personal and sharing their diverse experiences.

Furthermore, our observation may help in suggesting how employees view 'being themselves' at the workplace. In the observation thus, Anna and a customer began to have a more personal conversation in the checkout. The customer invited Anna to a conversation about purchasing outfits for specific romantic dates and even Anna got engaged and personal in the conversation with the customer and shared thoughts about what kind of outfits she preferred during those occasions. The interaction with Anna displays how she makes sense of the implications of 'being yourself' as it is in this case through being private and talking about romantic dates where she elaborates regarding this in the interview by the following illustration. Moreover, this illustration is in the context of bringing private life experiences and sharing it with the customers to help them relate to their shopping needs.

> *"Yes. We are allowed to be personal and talk about our own experiences and life with the customers and colleagues as long as it does not by any chance offend anyone, especially the customer /.../ It gives a closer and personal relationship with the customer which can be seen as good service through the eyes of the customer. /---/ We get weekly emails and every day briefing sessions from the manager who urges to have a clear focus on the customers by delivering the best service… and this will hopefully encourage customers to come back." (Anna).*

Further on, 'being yourself' can additionally be promoted if the personal values are aligned with the organizational culture, its values and the brand, since it may increase the possibilities of having a more relaxed and authentic communication with colleagues and customers. The employees, Anna and Niclas imply that one should 'be yourself' rather than having a facade that is supposed to represent something else than what the employees stand for. This is in line with what has been mentioned in the literature review, where it is stated the more the personal values are aligned with the brand and organizational culture and its values, the more coherent and unified customer experience would be (Rubino, 1998; Siegall & McDonald, 2004). The two sales advisors further on imply that by being oneself, one can create a more authentic relationship with the customers. One can argue that the employees perceive or make sense of the RACE app as a ''boost'' or a motivator to incorporate their private life aspects for better service and the possibilities for the positive feedback. Since the app is a part of the organization,

the organization encourages people to 'be themselves' which is in line with what Fleming and Sturdy (2009) and Jenkins and Delbridge (2017) stress when they mean that employees are encouraged to 'be themselves' and bring in their real identities to the workplace. The interrelation between neo-normative control and the mobile technology trickles down to the fact that employees belong to the uberized workforce that is constantly seeking validation of their performance through the feedback from the app. Since employees believe that by being able to relate oneself to the customers by bringing in personal experiences in the interactions, they believe that they would receive positive feedback in the app.

4.6. Technology and its influence on the blurred line between work and private life

As stressed in the literature review, one of the key implications of the phenomenon of brand-centred control is its influence on blurring the line between private and work life. In the previous sections, we have presented how technology in the form of an app acts as a tool guiding actions and regulate employee behavior through internal branding, normative as well as neo-normative control. In the following section, we present how employees make sense of this technological influence and how it plays an integral role in blurring the line between work and private life through their sensemaking. Additionally, to set the base for brand-centred control, it is important to note that the employees share a clear awareness of the expectations of the external audience (customers and the general public) as the brand messages are conveyed to the external viewers as conveyed in two following quotes by Sofia and Carl.

> *"/.../ and it affects me in the way that I think about the negative comments and what I could have done better as it kind of gives like a wake-up call /.../ And it is kind of like a stress factor to always live up to the expectations of the customers because they know what the organization stands for. But I guess that's just how it is. And since you as a sales advisor need to have this app in your phone means that you do really take work into your private life but even though you don't always go inside it, the app is always there and you always see it which brings you some kind of underlying stress." (Sofia)*

Additionally, Carl points to the brand awareness of external audience by saying "*/.../ personal service because that is what people expect here, to get personal service and create a personal relationship with the customer.''*

The following illustration by Daria focuses on how employees perceive the influence of technology in blurring the line combining normative control through internal branding. She also shares a clear awareness, like Sofia and Carl, regarding awareness of external audiences as the brand messages are conveyed to the external viewers.

> *"Well, if I see a colleague sell better than me I get a bit of performance anxiety which makes me push for more of course and when it comes to feedback I get it from my boss where they tell me what I can think of and can do better and such and you need that in order to develop as a person and as a sales advisor… and when it comes to RACE it really affects me because you can look at the app and see the comments and always try to have as good comments as you can because you want to be good and perform well you know… and if you don't they may describe you in the comments and really put you out there you know… and of course, I check the app in private life as well just in order to keep up and see how we can improve." (Daria)*

In the above illustrations by Sofia and Daria, normative control and internal branding are intertwined and reflects upon brand-centred control. The intertwining occurs when the sales advisors, for example, Sofia and Daria, are constantly changing their actions and behaviors accordingly to the expectations of the organization and the customers. It can be seen as normative control since it is a way of controlling and regulating the identities inside the organization based on the organizational goals (Gabriel, 1999; Kunda, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) based. Further on, Daria stresses that she continuously updates herself with the feedback from the store manager and customer's comments in RACE. Daria is making sense that her actions and behaviors are therefore controlled by the comments in RACE, which can be seen as normative control through the app. She is also aligning them accordingly to the feedback in the app in order to possibly maintain positive ratings. In other words, she is aligning her identity with the brand and moreover becomes the brand message even to external audiences (Müller 2017; Edwards 2005). When becoming the brand message through internal branding and normative control, there is a higher chance of taking the work into private life. In

this case, the work follows Daria into private life when updating on the feedback in the app off schedule. In relation to brand-centred control, this can be elaborated through Müller's (2017) perspective that employees become the message through internal branding and normative control. In this study, the feedback in the app from the external audience influence the sales advisors round the clock adding on to the phenomenon of uberization.

Moreover, there can be consequences of becoming and living the brand message, a blurred line between work and private life that is facilitated by the brand and simultaneously through the app. Checking up on the app in private life may lead to underlying stress, according to both Sofia and Daria in the citations above. One can, therefore, argue that the employees make sense of the app RACE as the reason for the blurred line between work and private life. When the employees become and live the brand, by also bringing in work to private life through checking upon the app off schedule, one can argue that these aspects function as a part of their life and lifestyle, as 'a way of life'. However, there are employees who make sense of brand-centred control facilitated by technology differently than the employees who bring private life to work.

4.6.1. The blurred line as 'A way of life'

Some employees illustrate how they view brand-centred control as a natural influence bringing flow to their actions at work. This perception enables them to behave at work without drastic behavioral modifications as they see it as something embedded in their way of life which Elijah describes in the following illustration.

> *"Automatically, I think if you stand for something I think it is easier to be in the company if you as a person have the same values as the company itself. I've been here for many years and I live the company. I talk about it in private and stand for the values and the culture not just at work but outside work as well. It is not the same for new employees because they don't live for it as much because they do not really understand or stand for the values or cultures of the company. So that is an important thing, that the person has traits that can be seen in the company as well because I think that is the best way to deliver the message if the person can live the organizational culture." (Elijah)*

Similarly, Carl describes that the work has become a big part of his life: *"I talk about the store in my personal life because it is like my personal identity because I've worked here for such a long time."*. Additionally, the influence of technology on brand-centred control can further be elaborated through one of the interviews by Therese.

> *"There have been times when I could relate to the customers so well. Last week, there was this customer and I was helping her in the fitting room and I felt I could share a lot with her. She initially seemed shy to show her arms (personal reasons). However, we eventually got into a conversation where I started telling her about my own insecurities and we connected well. However, I came to know later that she had a negative experience in the checkout because of a long queue and not enough sales advisors for checkout for which she wrote negative feedback in the app. Later when I checked the feedback at night (after work hours), I was disappointed" (Therese).*

As mentioned in the theory and in the analysis section of neo-normative control, personal values should preferably be aligned with the organizational culture and brand for coherent customer experience (Rubino, 1998; Siegall & McDonald, 2004). And as the above illustrations from Elijah and Carl present, the employees mean that they live for the company and it is like their identity which can be grounded in that their personal values are aligned with values of the company. Further on, neo-normative control encourages people to be themselves in the organization (Fleming & Sturdy 2009; Jenkins & Delbridge 2017), where this study argues for as sharing personal experiences with customers. If the personal values, therefore, are aligned with the culture and brand, and the organization encourages people to be themselves, wherein the living of the brand and blurring of work and private life becomes more apparent. This is in the way that they take their personal life and personal values to work and vice versa. With the promotion of internal branding and normative control through technology by controlling and aligning the identities with the culture and brand, one becomes the message with a combination of personal values that are connected to what the company stands for. And hence the blurring of the line then becomes more apparent.

Additionally, the last quote from Therese reinforces our argument on how the sales advisors make sense of technology's influence on the three concepts of brand-centred control. It presents a correlation between the three concepts namely, normative control, internal branding and neo-

normative control through regulating and aligning their actions and behavior according to the expectations of the organization and the customers, that is customer focus, personal service and relationships, and the comments in RACE. The app may also act as a ‘’boost’’ or motivator for Therese in the sense of constantly having a customer focus and delivering personal relationships by ‘being herself’. The brand-centred control is more apparent when Therese is updating herself off schedule which is facilitated by the feedback system from the external audience available round the clock on the mobile platform, and in that way may affect her negatively due to making sense of the whole experience negatively. This can, in turn, be the reflection of the negative comments in RACE affecting the experience in a negative way.

4.6.2. Brand-centred control through a facade

Throughout the study, we have presented how the sales advisors modify their actions in order to align themselves to the organizational culture through normative and neo-normative forms of control. However, we are aware that there could be discrepancies in employees' sensemaking of the technological influence in relation to the influence of internal branding, normative and neo-normative forms of regulation. And hence, there could be ‘not so rosy,’ realities in the organization. Even though the above-mentioned empirical data draws an ideal picture in line with the theoretical framework, we could also take a critical view of the implications of brand-centred control. Even though we presented that employees feel they are being encouraged to and can ‘be themselves’ at the workplace, a critical look at the mechanism may lead us to interpretations that hint undercurrents of emotional labor identified from employee sensemaking which is illustrated in the quotes below.

> *“You're kind of like a different person in the store since you're kind of putting on a facade. I mean you can't really be the person you are in private in the store because that would just be too much. You need to be like ‘’Instagram’’ life, like a certain facade, like a shell…” (Daria)*

Furthermore, in line with this, Annie says that she has limitations of showing her ‘’real self’’.

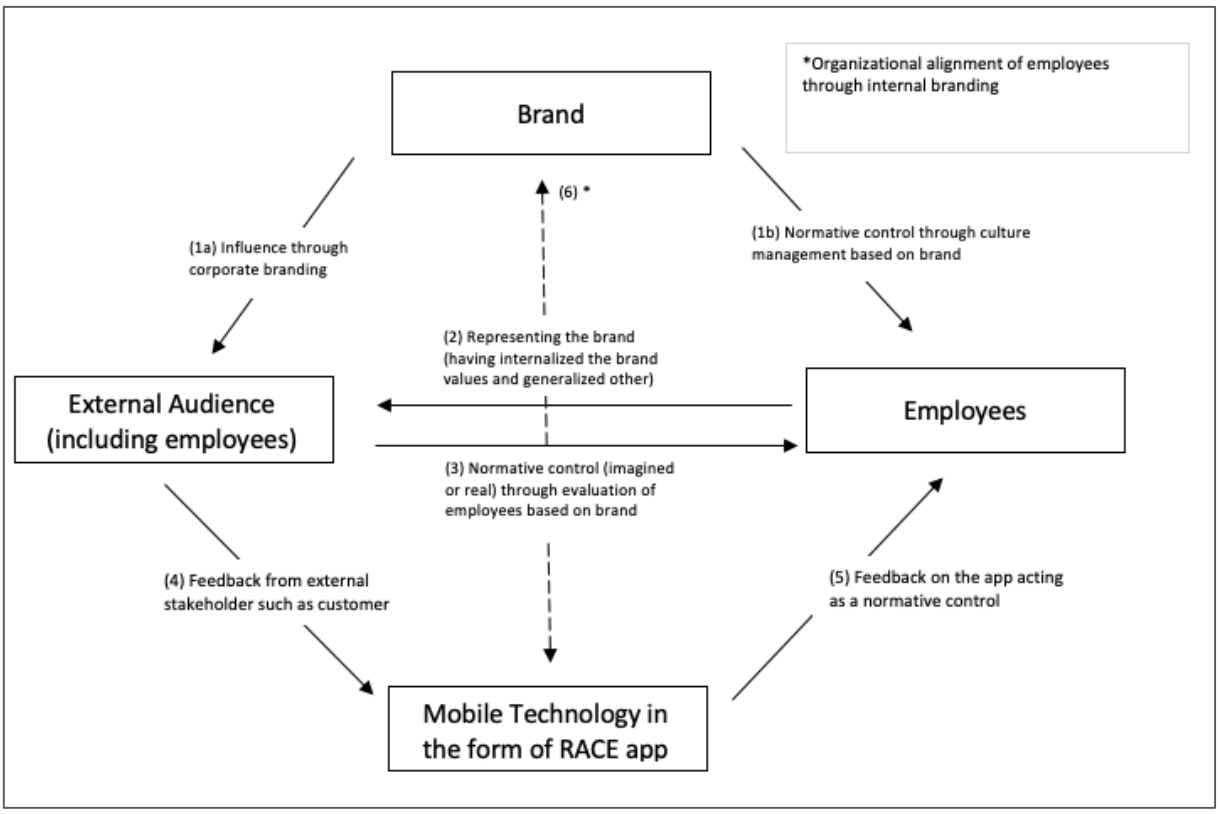
> *“In my private I allow myself to have bad days and feel bad but when you get to work you just need to leave it behind you because I have to be the best me and perform the best in front of the customers.’’ (Annie)*

Daria and Annie mean that they put on a facade when working and does not feel like they can be fully themselves. One can argue that the sales advisors are changing their real emotions accordingly to the situation in the sense that they display a feeling that is different from what is felt inside their bodies and minds. This is in line with Hochschild's (1983, pp. 7) theory regarding emotional labor which is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" or also described as it ''requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 1983, pp. 7). Hence, deriving from the employees' sensemaking which suggests the need to put on a facade or leave the emotions in private, one can further argue that brand-centred control in relation to neo-normative control might indicate emotional labor as an implication. Moreover, the expression of Annie to 'leave the bad feelings behind' and be the best for customers may suggest an indication of surface acting as suggested by Hochschild (1998).

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we will be presenting our analysis and the conceptual framework developed in the previous section directly in relation to our research question. Since the brand-centred control mechanism is created through the influence of internal branding, normative and neo-normative control, we will be presenting the discussions particularly in relation to these concepts.

As presented in the analysis section, the employees perceive the organizational culture and brand of the retail chain as that which strongly finds its base in customer focus, having values centered around personal service and service mindedness. Keeping this in mind, we will present our revised mechanism of brand-centred control which will lead us to addressing our conclusions to our research question in chapter 6, 'Conclusion'.



(Figure 2) Our expansion of the mechanism of brand-centred control by Müller (2017)

As presented in the mechanism of brand-centred control in the theoretical underpinnings, in (1a) the brand messages are conveyed to the external audience which includes the customers as well as the employees (Müller, 2017). In the case of the retail chain, the brand messages of customer focus, personal service, service mindedness and quality are conveyed to the external audience through magazines, social media, and tv-advertisements. In (1b), the same brand messages conveyed to the external audience are communicated to the employees of the organization through briefings and group meetings through internal branding. And accordingly, the employees are encouraged to communicate and live the brand (Müller, 2017). In (2), the employees internalize and communicate the brand to the external audience through their actions and behavior. In (3) by having a clear understanding of the brand awareness of the external audience, the employees start to judge their actions in terms of the normative brand values and feel evaluated in various situations "as the idealized images of customers' perceptions are generalized through the brand and rendered omnipresent" (Müller, 2017, pp. 909).

We will further elaborate on the technological influences through an expansion of the framework suggested by Müller (2017). With the base framework in place, we introduce the additional mechanisms of (4), (5) and (6) to point to the influence of technology in relation to brand-centred control. In the light of the mechanism of brand-centred control and the sensemaking of employees in relation to the technological influences, we would further argue that technology in the form of a mobile application, RACE, can be seen as a key factor that promotes the mechanism of brand-centred control leading to a form of control. We further propose this control as a new form of technological control. (4) Shows that external audience, mainly customers, share the feedback in the app which affects the employees throughout their work cycle forming a round the clock feedback mechanism leading to the work uberization. Further on, (5) the feedback from the app, which aligns employees to the organizational culture and brand, becomes a crucial aspect here regulating employees to the organizational culture through normative control as well as neo-normative control. In this process, the employees internalize the comments in the feedback system and modify their actions in their everyday work that might enable them to achieve better feedback and thus better performance. The interplay of neo-normative control comes into effect when employees deliver customer focus by incorporating their private life experiences into their customer interactions which the sales advisors believe might lead to positive feedback in the app. Moreover, the sensemaking of the employees leads us to frame this technological influence as a form of control. This is because

they believe that the failure to live up to the expectations of customers might lead to negative reviews in the app and thus negative feedback from their own manager. This might, in turn, influence their evaluation of self-worth in relation to the organizational goals. The dotted line (6) between the brand and the app suggests that the employees are aligned to the brand and culture through RACE which in turn acts as a tool for internal branding. It is in the process of (5) that the control mechanism is generated by technological influence.

The internal branding, facilitated by technology in the form of an app, works in the way that there is a brand value that is co-created every time there is an interaction between the stakeholders and employees (Ind, 2014; Merz et al. 2009). It can be seen that the employees perceive that the feedback system acts as a means of aligning them to the brand and facilitates an improved brand representation by employees. In line with the idea of 'generalized other' as suggested by Mead (1974), one can further imply that internal branding, facilitated by technology, further acts as a control that aligns employee behavior in accordance with the feedback received in the app as the employees are aware of the general expectations from them as a part of the retail chain. We further argue that the function of orientation as a mode of internal branding (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011) served by the app in turn acts as a control as employee sensemaking suggests that the failure to align to the brand and organizational culture can lead to negative feedback and thus negative remarks from the store manager. Furthermore, internal branding extends on to normative control which regulates the employees and their actions and behavior through the technological platform of RACE which leads us to the proposal of the mobile technology platform in the form of an app as a new form of normative control. Neo-normative control contributes to the mechanism when the employees incorporate their private life aspects in conversations with customers while having an awareness of the brand expectations of the customer, which they believe might gain positive feedback in RACE.

Additionally, the employees make sense of the app as a system that generates feedback whether positive or negative. Particularly in situations where employees feel that they have to greet customers with a 'hi' or 'hello', 'smile' or modify their body posture as a behavioral modification, and the awareness that a failure to do so might generate negative feedback in the app and might additionally give an indication of behavioral control through technology as suggested by Edwards (1981 cited in Barker, 1993). Hence, it can be implied that this technological control acts as a form of behavioral control as well.

We further on argue that an implication of the technological influence in relation to brand-centred control as revealed from the sensemaking of employees is emotional labor. This can be considered as a variation of resistance such in the form of 'cynical distancing' as suggested by Fleming and Spicer (2003) or 'pragmatic distancing' as suggested by Müller (2017). Emotional labor comes in to play in the sense that the employees might put on a facade and engage in surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) with customers by trying to hide their real emotions as they believe that such a facade is required to gain positive feedback in RACE. Hence, one can further imply that RACE acts as a tool that guides their emotions in order to gain positive feedback in the app and thus support the organization to achieve the goals.

6. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, we present our research contribution and elaborate further on the limitations and practical implications of the study. We end the section by suggesting recommendations for future research.

6.1. Research Contribution

The primary aim of our thesis is to explore how employees make sense of technological influences in relation to brand-centred control. And by technological influence, we specifically target mobile technology in the form of a mobile application. Hence, our research question is framed as:

- How do employees make sense of the technological influences in relation to brand-centred control?

To conclude, firstly, the employees, as well as us as researchers, make sense of the app RACE as a tool that guides or controls and aligns employees' actions and behavior according to the expectations of the customers (external audience), organization and feedback in the app. We further develop this in the lines of technological control pertaining to mobile applications. The study additionally illustrated that this technology as an app acts as a new form of control derived from internal branding (as control), and extending to normative and neo-normative control.

Secondly, the employees make sense of the app as a factor that controls their work behavior in the sense of a smile, gestures and body postures. We further develop this employee sensemaking and argue that RACE acts as a behavioral control that influences the three sub-concepts of brand-centred control. The employees' sensemaking further suggests that the app serves throughout as validation or confirmation of the actions, behavior and performance of the sales advisors at work.

Thirdly, the sales advisors make sense of the app as a 'boost' or a motivator to modify their work behavior in order to increase the possibilities of receiving positive comments. This is facilitated by 'being oneself' and sharing personal life experiences while creating a personal relationship with the customer and having customer service.

Finally, the blurred line between work and private life occurs through the brand awareness of external audience and the way RACE aligns and control the actions of the employees. And also through sharing personal experiences by 'being themselves' and updating themselves on the feedback in work and private life in order to 'do their job properly' (see figure X.) The employees further make sense that the blurred line between the work and private life is enhanced by the feedback system. We further on argue that technology facilitates the phenomenon of brand-centred control and the blurred line may eventually lead to work uberization. And this is established as the employees make sense of the technological influences serving a continuous round the clock feedback system, RACE, affecting in the way of for example behavioral modifications, experience evaluation, and self-validation or confirmation of performance.

The findings of our study in this direction help in firstly, developing the literature on management control by extending the concept of 'control' as elaborated by Bernard (1968) and Kärremann and Rennstam (2007). Secondly, it further expands the technological control literature developed by Edwards (1981 cited in Barker, 1993). The study takes a different direction from the modern day articles on workplace technology that focuses on artificial intelligence and robotics by presenting insights on the influence of mobile technology in the workplace. Hence, we believe that our study contributes to the void of a research field pertaining to workplace technology.

Furthermore, our study contributes to the field of brand and brand-centred control by developing on the concepts of internal branding, normative control and neo-normative control in a mobile technology-driven service organization. Our study adds to the understanding of how employees make sense of brand, technological influences and a blurred line between work and private life with regards to the specific retail chain as well as the general service sector. As workplace technology evolves, we believe that workplace dynamics evolve as well. And through the expanded framework of brand-centred control presented, this study contributes to defining internal branding and normative control in the new light of technology.

6.2. Research Limitations

In addition to some of the limitations of the study presented in the methodology chapter, we address additional limitations which we feel our study might be subjected to. Qualitative research may be prone to ambiguities which are deep-rooted in the human language and can be identified in the analysis (Atieno, 2009). An example of this in our research context would be the concept of control which might, for example, mean to have the power to influence someone to do something or to possess the power to give orders. However, we believe that certain ambiguities remain even after attempts to clarify the research context to the participants which will eventually find its way into the responses. Moreover, since employee sensemaking becomes a key tool of analysis, the case of ambiguities become more relevant.

Furthermore, the findings of qualitative research generally cannot be extended to broader populations with the same level of certainty the qualitative studies can (Atieno, 2009). And this is because the findings of the study are not validated for statistical significance or due to chance. Even though the study provides strong insights into the influence of mobile technology and how employees view such influences, the findings cannot be generalized as sensemaking can vary from employee to employee. Moreover, the study is set in the context of a service organization that utilizes a mobile platform for the feedback system and the findings from a similar study might vary in other sectors or industries.

Additionally, we have focused on one particular type of mobile technology which is the app that acts as a feedback system. However, there could be other similar mobile or computer platforms capable of blurring the lines between work and private lives which are not touched upon in this study.

6.3. Practical Implications

On the practical front, our study has pointed to how the communication of organizational culture, brand and goals within the retail chain is facilitated and inculcated by the platform of the mobile app RACE. This may point to how mobile technology can lead to improved overall performance within the organization that facilitates to align and regulate employees to the culture and brand. This is made possible as the employees with the help of feedback system modify their actions to deliver better results. Organizations can thus consider the insights of

the study to utilize upcoming mobile technology to modify their workplace dynamics in order to deliver positive employee alignment to organizational culture and brand.

Along with adopting such newer forms of customer feedback systems, an understanding of how technology plays a role in blurring the line between work and private life is crucial for the management teams in organizations as this may help them ensure that employees are not weighed down by the aspects of work in their private life. A lack of understanding of these aspects might lead to employee burnouts and resistance. Moreover, an understanding of the consequence of brand-centred control steered by mobile technology, in the form of emotional labor throws light into the technique adopted by employees to adjust their emotions and thus behavior in order to ensure positive feedback throughout. An understanding in this regard might additionally support in reducing employee burnouts.

6.4. Recommendations for future research

Considering the technological advancements in recent years, we suggest that the influence of technology in the workplace should be studied in detail in organizations, considering the power of technology to influence workplace dynamics. As mentioned in the section of limitations, our study focused only on one particular mobile technology in the form of an app. However, we feel that the study if done in a different industry having similar technological platform may offer different results. Moreover, conducting the study in a wider population may lead to newer insights.

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8. Appendix

Anonymised list of interviewees: Sales Advisors

Name	***Designation***
Carl	Sales Advisor
Emma	Sales Advisor
Niclas	Sales Advisor
Daria	Sales Advisor
Sofia	Sales Advisor
Therese	Sales Advisor
Kira	Sales Advisor
Annie	Sales Advisor
Victoria	Sales Advisor
Anna	Sales Advisor

(Table 1: Anonymised list of interviewees

The interviews conducted with the 10 Sales advisors listed above constitute the key empirical material for the study. In addition, we engaged in a conversation with two store managers to to get introduced to the store, gain insight in to the organizational culture and the functioning of the app. However, these additional conversations do not constitute the empirical material.