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Total Adoption, Strategic Adoption and Cynicism

How do Employees Relate to and Experience the
Corporate Brand?

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Abstract

Title	Total Adoption, Strategic Adoption and Cynicism: How do Employees Relate to and Experience the Corporate Brand?
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Keywords	Brand, Discourse, Language, Subjectivity and Understanding.
Purpose	The main purpose of this study is to examine how employees relate to and experience the organizational brand. This is done by examining the brand discourse, to discover how participants in the study relate to this discourse.
Methodology	The study is conducted from interpretive philosophy, poststructuralist theory and a qualitative mode of inquiry.
Theoretical Framework	Poststructuralist understandings of discourses, subjectivities, power, and resistance.
Empirical Foundation	A study of an energy company. Data was collected from marketing documents and twelve semi-structured interviews.
Conclusion	The relationship between the employee and the brand is complex as people make sense of and relate to the brand in different ways. The findings suggest that participants related to the brand by total adoption, to strategic adoption and cynicism. Overall, we found the company does not control how the employee relates to the brand as the relationship is quite fluid. We also conclude that context, in junction with tenure and position, had an impact on the relationship the participants formed to the brand.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This project is about how employees relate to and experience the corporate brand. We claim a social constructionist stance as we look at the context of branding and the relationship between branding as an organizational aim, and as employee identification. Our empirical study explores how employees relate to the brand. We view this relationship as one with consequences, as an organizational brand has the potential to shape the culture, policies, and subjectivities of those it touches. There is a great deal of research available on management and customer perception of brands, however, studies with focus on employee experiences are limited. In light of this, we want to explore the employee's point of view. In addition, we examine what subjectivities are engendered in the discourse around the brand.

The branding concept has gone beyond the external environment with a main focus on consumers, to being directed towards the organizational members (Arvidsson, 2005). Therefore, we have seen a rise in what some refer to as *employee branding*. Companies tie qualities to brands that are believed to make the brand distinct (Harquail, 2004; Miles & Mangold, 2004) in order to attract, retain, and motivate both prospective and current employees.

Little research has been done on how employees experience and relate to corporate brands. Existing studies of the relationship between brands and employees commonly take the management perspective, the customer's perspective, or the perspective of brand specialists. Their focus is on 'how to' best work with brands in order to affect employee perception and, above all, behaviour (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Punjaisri, Wilson & Evanschitzky, 2009). The few studies that do focus on employee relationships to brands tend to maintain a 'how to', or business case stance, as they focus on how the employee's relationship with the brand affects their working relations with customers and the external brand (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009). As a result, the main focus of existing studies is on the impact on external brands. The simple fact is that few studies have been conducted on employee perception (Helms & Stern, 2001) and the importance of the employee's role in the organization (Balmer, 2001). This is the reason we engage in studying how employees relate to the brand.

1.1 Research Problem

As will be outlined in the review of literature, we have found two themes in the existing literature on brands. The predominant story is that brands are effective, viewing brands as business cases, which suggests that brands are something beneficial that organizations need in order to attract employees. Furthermore, the predominant story suggests that employees can successfully, and willingly, embrace the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Harquail, 2004). An alternative story is more critical and questions the purpose of branding; suggesting that brands may be a form of control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel, Willmott & Worthington, 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

While our perspective on employee branding is slightly more sympathetic to arguments put forth in the second perspective, we believe that knowledge around this issue is lacking in empirical material and therefore remains in need of further empirical, and in particular qualitative, research. We believe that people make sense of and interpret conditions differently depending on previous experience (Marshak & Grant, 2008) and therefore the relationship between a person and a brand is fluid and complex, resulting in multiple meanings. We all carry our preconceived ideas and subjective understandings when entering a social situation, which potentially alters the way we see the world (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). As we are socialized by society, the experiences that help us make sense of our existence have a slightly different impact upon us. The aim of this study is to bring empirical knowledge to the forefront, when dealing with how employees relate to their company's brand.

1.2 Research Design

We examine the case of ELEN¹, a global energy company, as our empirical basis for analysis. We will explore our theoretical and methodological designs in further chapters. Briefly, our empirical inquiry takes two forms. First, stemming from a poststructuralist perspective, we believe that meaning is constructed within language (Weedon, 1997) and presupposes that structured discursive fields are already at work within the organization. To that end, we first analyse and explore ELEN's brand as part of a discursive field meant to engage employees.

Also from a poststructuralist standpoint, we see that employees are subject to these structures upon entering the organization and must therefore navigate the existing

¹ Fictive name

discourse (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In our second analytical section we unpack interview data to examine how employees relate to ELEN's brand discourse, paying particular attention to the subjectivities this discourse produces and how employees navigate them in various ways.

The purpose of this project is to add to scholarly and practical knowledge of brands and employee relations. To that end, we hope to add to scholarly understanding on how employees experience 'being branded'. Although it is not our focus, we also envision how this knowledge can benefit practitioners who design brands and the employees who are subject to them. These matters will be discussed further in our conclusion.

Based on the above discussion our research questions, guiding the research are:

- *What is the brand discourse?*
- *What subjectivities does the brand engender?*
- *How do employees relate to the brand?*

1.3 Outline of Thesis

This project is organized in the following manner: In *chapter 2* we delve into the literature on branding and identity, as no discussion of corporate branding would be complete without a nod to how it invokes identity. We explore the different views on branding by dividing them into two camps. One views branding from a functionalist perspective, the 'business case', and the other from a more critical stance, by viewing brands as a form of control.

In *chapter 3* we explain the meta-theoretical starting points we used to engage in the study. We are guided by the view that the world is socially constructed. We use a qualitative mode of inquiry, and an interpretive approach to look into how participants relate to the organizational brand. Our research design will be outlined as well as methods used to interpret our data.

In *chapter 4* we outline our analysis by delving into our research questions and attempting to define the brand discourse and how employees relate to the brand. Our main findings suggest that this is a complex relationship and that employees relate to in different ways, partly depending on context, in other words, tenure and position. The ways in which the participants related to the brand are the following: as celebrators, as

cynics, by identifying with the brand, and by downplaying the brand, as well as using it as a Band-Aid when navigating tricky situations.

In *chapter 5* we engage in a discussion of the different implications that the results of the analysis might have and how these extend the present theories. These implications are concerned with matters of homogenisation of employees, lack of diversity, as well as a discussion around if brands are important or not.

In *chapter 6* we present our final conclusions, reflections and put forth our suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on corporate branding. We will also look into identity since no discussion of branding would be complete without a nod to how it evokes identity. From what we have gathered, there are two camps of branding dominating the literature. The first camp is the functionalist view of the ‘business case’ of branding, where the predominant story is that brands are good and productive. The second is the more critical stance, which questions the functionalist approach by looking at branding with a bit more concern, where the main criticism addresses how brands might be a form of control. These concerns will be unpacked in this chapter. Finally we introduce our empirical research questions, as well as information about the research site.

It is not a surprising supposition that brands and branding are of value while doing business today as they are most certainly an organizational resource. Typically when thinking of brands, we think of external sources such as products, corporations, objects or consumption. The main focus in literature and research has complemented this idea by highlighting external environment and consumer branding. However there is a new trend emerging in which organizations attempt to differentiate by trying to attract and retain the best people, with the intention of them playing a big role in their brand development. The origin of this particular trend has its roots in human resources and has been aptly termed *employee branding* (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Employee branding is defined as “a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm.” (Sullivan, 2004, p. 1). It has been conceptualized from being a process, influencing the employee’s behaviour and how they make decisions, to a recruitment strategy combining human resources management and marketing (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Employee branding is a big part of an organizations larger corporate brand and adopts the shape, the tone, or the visuals so that the organization is telling one cohesive story. However, we are going to unpack employee branding as a separate phenomenon because we are interested in how employees relate to the brand.

Organizations engage in employee branding for the following reasons: first, to attract recruits and to retain and motivate current employees to engage in the strategy

and culture of the organization, thus making them brand assets (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cardy, 2001; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Xia & Yang, 2010). Second, to build the image of a great company to work at (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Xia & Yang, 2010). And third, to create a good customer experience of the external brand (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright & Khan, 1999). Thus the strategic rationale for organizations to engage in employee branding is to provide discernable business advantages in lowered HR costs, re-education, and salaries (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Sullivan, 2004). The persistent undertone echoing through all company branding policies is to gain a strategic advantage in the marketplace, resulting in more profits for the organization. A solid plan of action to that end would also include the staff's participation by creating cohesiveness, shared understanding, common goals, and directions (Mitchell, 2002).

Employee branding is undertaken in the following way: through initiatives, such as organizational values, brand workshops, training programs and branded clothing and items, which come with a promise to involve employees by occupying 'more of their personal selves' (Harquail, 2004). Throughout the discourse, the brand socializes and invites identification by the use of symbolic and material signifiers that help shape organizational life. The discourse is also designed to engage the identity construction of its employees through brand values and narratives. Symbolic signifiers that remind employees of the brand can be: furnishing, a specific colour that is connected to the brand, items and the interior of the organization that are labelled with brand values (Harquail, 2004; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Identifying with the brand becomes a key driving force for employees to engage in tasks that in turn actively stimulate a sense of loyalty (Punjaisri et al., 2009). The brand then goes on to create subjectivities through the organizational discourses.

Although the effects of employee branding are certainly diverse, the desired organizational impact and vested interest is to have employees live the brand. According to the social identification theory, if employees identify with a certain social group within the organization, they are more likely to act in the organizations interest and maintain consistency with its goals. Furthermore, they will make a bigger effort on part of the organization if they believe in its values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Thus, the brand has its part in the employee identity. An emotional attachment is needed to gain commitment from employees and for instilling pride in

their position (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), which can be done by branding the work employees perform (Sartain, 2005). “The goal of employee branding is to create employees and a work environment where every decision and behaviour enacts and displays the specific attributes of the brand” (Harquail, 2004, p. 4). Thus the employees perform according to brand values in obtaining organizational goals, hierarchizing organizational values, and confirming the employee branding’s intended effects (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This will result in branded employees putting the brand’s interest first by habitually and uncritically prioritizing in its favour (Harquail, 2004). Employees that are exposed to these branding initiatives will also voluntarily act as brand ambassadors when outside their workplace in promoting the brand to others, displaying the business case’s traits of employee branding, as in their minds it will create ‘free’ marketing for the company (Sullivan, 2004).

Employee branding is beneficial for the organization in the following way, employees put the brand’s interest before their own, thus affecting how they relate to and identify with the brand (Harquail, 2004). Here socialization and brand discourse play an important role as the brand discourse is delivered to employees through the socialization process and employees learn through the socialization how to navigate the brand discourse (Giddens, 2003). This process helps the employee to relate to the brand and thus navigate the organizational discourse. The brand has an important role in the socialization process as part of the organizational culture, acting as a regulating force. It communicates the values, norms and appropriate behaviour. It also clarifies what passes as common expectations and understandings of how to work and reach organizational goals (Harquail, 2004; Miles & Mangold, 2004). Furthermore, social relations are always thought to be tied to power relations which define the forms of subjectivity (Weedon, 1997). This leads to how branding can have an effect on the employees identities, thus the employee brand can have a part in influencing the identity construction. A brand is believed to create emotions, experiences, and even fantasies for employees. The process of integrating with the brand evokes pride in their job with the result of employees representing the brand on a professional, as well as personal level. The upswing could encourage further identification with the brand and socialize the employees into a certain mould, as the brand message requires employees to be of one mind.

From the above discussion we have realized what employee branding consists of, and how and why companies invest in employee branding. It is evident that organizations have a vested interest in employee branding. Now we will shift our focus to a more elaborate discussion of the two camps that dominate the literature on branding. The first camp is the ‘business case’ of branding that views employee branding as positive, the other is the more critical stance that puts the ‘business case’ into question.

2.1 The Business Case of Employee Branding

The ‘business case’ of employee branding stems from a functionalist paradigm and is the focus of the first camp. In this camp the predominant discourse around employee branding is positive, claiming employee branding is both good for the company and for the employee. The statement is partially supported by existing research and documentation associated with branding. The reasoning behind this trend of branding is that it is strategically beneficial for the company as it creates a competitive advantage and increases employee productivity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), which in turn will result in economic gain for the company.

The employee brand is viewed as a tool, which the organization employs to reach organizational goals. The starting point is finding the right employee for the company and thus creating more commitment towards the organization (Balmer & Gray, 2003). The brand is regarded as powerful in its positive influence on people’s performance (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005). If the individual experiences positive aspects of the brand they are more likely to identify with it and consequently strive for the organizational goals. The power lies in the brand’s symbolic meaning, as it evokes positive feelings the employees can relate to. It follows that with this emotional connection, the individual is more likely to choose a particular organization or stay with it from a sense of heightened self-image that inclusion in the organization promises (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

The brand’s main purpose is to communicate values to employees. These values become a part of the process in which the receiver of the brand message knows and appreciates them (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998). Scholars partial to this view take a ‘how to’-approach to branding when affirming the brand’s intended influence on people according to management’s plans. The outcome is viewed as stable and measurable. If the brand is not received as it was supposed to, then

something is wrong and corrective measures can be taken by management resulting in the desirable outcome (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998).

In regard to the individual's identity, the functionalistic view upholds identity as a social fact. As a result it is stable and can be observed, measured, influenced and managed. The key point is to look for essential traits and stable characteristics in the identity of individuals (Alvesson, 2004; Balmer, 2001) so that the employee brand can have an effect on the individual the way management intended. This is achieved by the fact that the brand controls the relationship between the brand and the individual and calls for employees to be of a single mind, always putting the brand's interest before their own (Harquail, 2004). The main goal of the 'business case' is to create the right employee and a functioning working environment where decisions are in line with the brands stated goals and employees display brand values every step of the way.

Despite their polar viewpoints, both camps agree that employee branding is part of how employees are socialized into the organization and that the discourse around the brand is a powerful part of the socialization process. In part, it also performs as a form of regulation and control. However those leaning towards the more 'business case' oriented camp would claim this is a good thing, both for the organization and the employee as it creates cohesiveness, a shared understanding, and direction. The next section will explore the alternative view of employee branding.

2.2 The Critical Stand

The second camp stems from critical management studies. Here we evoke critical scholars as a reminder that although the discourse around employee branding is positive perhaps we should look into what really occurs when organizations use employee branding. Therefore we look into the critical camp with more detail as we examine how employees navigate the brand discourse and the effects of socialization, language, discourse and the subjectivities they engender, as well as how employee branding can be a regulating force and a form of organizational control.

2.2.1 Branding Through the Mediums of Language and Discourse

Brands are mediated to employees through the use of language and the dominating organizational discourse. Through language we learn what is socially accepted as normal (Weedon, 1997). Thus the brand has an important role in facilitating the required behaviour, when acting a certain way becomes common sense. To that end,

language is used to influence and shape individuals through values derived from the brand (Tietze, Cohen & Musson, 2003). Poststructuralist scholars believe that meaning is created within language (Weedon, 1997), which means that language also regulates the understanding of individuals (Czarniawska, 2000) as well as having the power to shape organizational life (Johansson & Heide, 2008). From this we see that language creates subjectivities that employees must navigate.

Discourses are shared meaning systems, which frame our understanding and the way we make sense of our social world (Tietze et al., 2003). In the context of organizations, discourses “define the way we think, talk and act in and around work context” (Tietze et al., 2003, p. 78-79) supplying tacit knowledge on how to act and relate to subject matters (Tietze et al., 2003). Since discourses are regarded as regulating and believed to affect behaviour, they also impact the identity of individuals (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Thus the brand is a powerful tool as it provides discursive fields that shape the subjectivities employees must navigate. The concept of discursive fields is attributed to the French theorist, Michel Foucault. The philosophy was created to understand the relationships between language, subjectivities, power and social relationships (Weedon, 1997).

The brand discourse is used to communicate the nature of the organization and the type of people who work there, portraying an image of the ideal employee. When a brand is reproduced through the ideal employee, created through brand discourse, the power relations are also reproduced (Weedon, 1997). Furthermore, the way discourses create subjectivities has an effect on power relations in the company (Weedon, 1997). This means that when you enter an organization, you also enter a discourse, which will affect your thinking and understanding, as well as your behaviour in that context (Marshak & Grant, 2008; Tietze et al., 2003).

Discourses exist both in written and spoken forms in social settings within organizations (Weedon, 1997) and pointedly engender subjectivities of the brand that employees are meant to embrace and live. Throughout the discourse, the brand socializes and invites identification by the use of symbolic and material signifiers that help shape organizational life. The discourse is also designed to engage the identity construction of its employees through brand values and narratives. The goal is mediating a message and to infer meaning, making it a part of the employee’s sense-making. This is partly in order to create a common understanding of the organization (Harquail, 2004).

As a result, the discourse around brands can be viewed as a tool for control and an attempt in identity regulation where it highlights management objectives. This is partly because the power exercised within discourse is how it creates subjectivities (Weedon, 1997). Next we will transit to how employee branding can be employed as identity regulation, where the brand creates subjectivities that the employee must navigate.

2.2.2 Identity Regulation and Control Through Brand Discourse

In exploring how brands affect employees it is important to dig into how branding tends identity, as it is believed to be a form of control. Identity researchers from the critical stance often classify identity as constructed, fragmented, changing, multiple, filled with ambiguity and at times messy (Alvesson, 2004). It is found on multiple levels from personal identity to organizational identity. In the organizational setting identity is embedded in a social and discursive context (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). It is how a person or a group of people understand themselves as they identify with, for example, a profession, a company, or gender (Alvesson, 2004).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) claim that social identity theory can be applied when studying organizations. As organizations are social groups people identify with, the brand can have a part in and influence the identity construction. Employees claim identity and belonging to social groups by living the brand, thus making the brand characteristics their own (Harquail, 2004). A symbolic signifier, like a brand, is believed to create emotions, experiences, and fantasies for employees (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Therefore, from an organizational perspective, identity is believed of importance since it can be regulated as a means of organizational control (Alvesson, 2004). Here the value of the organizational brand is of significance, whereas the brand essence has been defined as part of identity that glues the elements together (Urde, 2003).

According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), from a management perspective, managing staff is attempting to control identities. The use of identity regulation as a means of organizational control is intended to influence employees in order to shape and create the identity the organization deems preferable (Alvesson, 2004), in a sense the ideal employee. One of the intentions with employee branding is to change mind-sets, so that employees put the brands interest before their own, thus affecting how they behave, relate, and identify with the brand (Harquail, 2004). The organization tries to

create control over employees self-image by creating subjectivities that will affect and direct them towards preferred actions (Alvesson, 2004).

Subjectivity is a form of individual regulation that occurs when identifying with positions within a discourse (Weedon, 1997). By that occurrence, the individual makes itself a subject (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2004), creating a depiction of who he or she is (Alvesson, 2004). For example, in the beginning, the employee is socialized into the organization and becomes subject to organizational practices in order to navigate the present discourse (Alvesson, 2004). Thus subjectivity can be viewed as a control mechanism since individuals are subject to brand discourse, which asserts a degree of power over their perceptions. These subjectivities engender how organizational members act within the organization.

In reference to socialization, a distinction is made between informal and formal socialization (Giddens, 2003). An informal socialization process is the influence and interactions with co-workers in which employees learn from others, while adjusting to and learning how to perform the work. Giddens (2003) refers to this part of socialization as a teaching function. These influences are often more effective than formal influences, communicated through proper internal channels (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Therefore it is important for employee branding. Management plays a big part in the formal socialization process by acting as sense-givers through signalling appropriate behaviour, using the brand and its values to 'help' employees make sense of the organization (Miles & Mangold, 2004). The use of external influences such as marketing material, usually directed towards potential employees, could also influence existing employees in how they are supposed to act. This is done by communicating what is acceptable and, more importantly, what is not acceptable (Miles & Mangold, 2004). This is part of the social process, communicating to employees how to act, in the form of values and norms (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Here we can see that socialization, discourses, and language are all part of identity regulation, thus an important part of employee branding.

The critical stand further states that managers use employees' uncertainties and expectations as a way of reaching out to them. Instead of using external control, identification with the organization becomes a more subtle way to manage employees (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). As part of the discourse, brands exert power over employees. The discourse directs behaviour and helps the employees make sense of their role in the organization (Alvesson, 2004), making it easier to relate to the brand.

2.2.2.1 How is Identity Regulation Performed?

Critical scholars state that employee branding has the potential to act as a managerial tool. In this part we go further into specific ways that management uses employee branding to exert control, in cases like: recruitment, socializing new recruits, and during actual employment (Xia & Yang, 2010).

First, the recruitment process can be used as a form of control through employee branding. By using brand concepts when hiring, the company can find people who share the same values and by that create homogenization within the organization. When employees are part of an organization consisting of a homogeneous group of people, who share similar backgrounds and personal qualities, they are more likely to find comfort in identifying with the organization (Alvesson, 2004). How employees experience regulation is also affected by if they feel they match the brand, since employees internalize brands and their values more easily if they experience this match (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Harquail, 2004). The starting point of creating the match could be the screening of applicants for future employment in an attempt to produce the right type of employee (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). The downside of homogenization is that it could stand in the way of critical thinking and innovation by the production of a stereotypical employee (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Basset-Jones, 2005).

Second, formal socializing efforts can also be used as a way of influencing employees (Giddens, 2003; Miles & Mangold, 2004). Socialization plays an important role for employees that are new to the organization. These individuals are unsure of their role and how the organization works, which induces a need for them to learn how to successfully navigate the organizational discourse. The discourse is constituted of values, behavioural norms, and the power structures of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The employees use symbolic interactions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) in deference to brands to make sense of the organization and the immediate working environment. Training programs are a good example of new recruits being socialized into the organization and exposed to the brand discourse. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), these programs are developed to have an impact on the individual's identity and how they relate to the company. In effect, selecting individuals that already fit the brand for easier integration and branding individuals for the purpose of encouraging responses in accordance with company goals (Harquail, 2004).

Lastly, through every day work, management can use the brand, in the form of symbolic signifiers, as a tool of constant reminder. The symbolic signifiers are part of the culture and make the brand visual in the organization, for example in the form of marketing materials. This is all part of the socializing process and the establishment of the brand in the hearts and minds of employees to promote living the brand (Harquail, 2004), thus representing the brand on a professional as well as personal level (Mitchell, 2002). By using the brand message in their everyday work, employees are more likely to act according to the brand. It will also make them more positive towards the brand, as it confirms a uniform understanding of the brand among employees (Mitchell, 2002).

2.2.2.2 External Effects on Identity Regulation

External factors also influence the employee's relation to the company and brand. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) individuals defend the company they work for in order to keep up appearances. They connect their identity to the company. This is part of them making sense of their work duties. Individuals are affected by how other people view the brand, since the company reflects who they are, which makes them more likely to defend the company (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). We can see that employees are sensitive to outside opinions, which in itself could force them to defensively identify with the brand. The control is not only exacted by the organization, but outside factors also contribute.

2.2.3 Resistance towards Control of Identity

Up until now we have described how the critical camp views the control over employees by brand discourses. In the following section, we look at how employees can handle the subjectivities discourse engenders without necessarily accepting and identifying with them.

Responding to control and identifying with culture and brands does not always happen naturally for employees. Management is unlikely able to control the subjectivities of employees in every instance. Some dis-identify with the objectives of the organization and become cynical towards it. This cynicism results in employees distancing themselves and distrusting the corporate culture and thus the brand. The cynicism is rooted in the employee's recognition of culture or brands as managerial tools, which is why they fail to relate to it (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). This portrays the employees as slightly more empowered, in that he or she resists the controlling forces of

the organization. However, literature states that individuals may distance themselves from recognizing being branded, but does not go further in addressing their belief in the brands actual message (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

The implications of cynicism could be that even though the cynical person realizes the power that is exerted over him or her and indeed feels that he or she is free from it, this person still ‘surface acts’ the values and preferred behaviours in order to navigate the discourse as part of the corporate culture, even though he or she does not internalize the values behind it (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Sturdy, 1998; Willmott, 1993). This depicts cynicism as ideology, declaring you cannot escape the control of a discourse, but demonstrating that being subject to power does not mean that you have to internalize the meanings behind it (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Taking a humanist view on cynicism, it can be recognized as a defence mechanism from the “corporate colonization of identity” (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p. 160), again informing us that cynicism is merely an idea. Cynicism can then be seen as a way of dealing with control, as the individual refuses to recognize its power (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

From a managerial perspective cynicism can be viewed as something that must be dealt with and ‘fixed’ (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), as demonstrated in the previous section on regulation. However, the literature reveals that cynicism is not an organizational problem since it does not have implications on behaviour (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Sturdy, 1998; Willmott, 1993).

The above discussion infers that employees can be reluctant towards the brand, by displaying cynicism about its role and its message. Cynicism is portrayed in two ways, either the individual does not internalize the brand message, but still acts accordingly in order to navigate the discourse, or the cynicism is directed towards the control, but the message is still internalized and accepted.

From the review of the literature we outlined what employee branding is and explored why and how organizations employ it. The conclusion is that organizations have a vested interest in employee branding. We have discovered two dominating camps in the existing literature on employee branding. Both camps agree that socializing is part of how employees are socialized into the organization and that discourses are powerful, and also that it is a form of control. However, the ‘business case’ of employee branding views this as good, where the predominant discourse is positive towards this notion while the other demonstrates, a more critical stand that

questions the ‘business case’. The critical stand views employee branding as a form of control where language and discourse are the core of how the brand is communicated to employees who are subject to brand discourse, engendering subjectivities. Thus the brand is used as a tool to regulate employee identities and have an impact on their sense-making to reach companies goals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). The critical stand views brands as socially constructed and that the brand promise ties certain beliefs to it which people experience and understand in different ways (Harquail, 2004). The creators of brands seek to influence the minds of recipients in ways that trigger emotional factors. However people make sense and interpret conditions differently, depending on previous experience and therefore the brand can affect people in different ways (Marshak & Grant, 2008). Despite this fact, the belief is that brands are a powerful tool of control that has a part in regulating employees’ identities.

2.3 Research Question

The literature indicates that organizations are increasingly doing employee branding and the predominant story among scholars is that it is a good thing and in favour of the trend. Yet the critical stand questions this and states it can act as a controlling force. Then our empirical question asks what this means for employees. To that end, we pose the following questions:

- *What is the brand discourse?*
- *What subjectivities does the brand engender?*
- *How do employees relate to the brand?*

In addressing these questions, we will use the case of ELEN that practices employee branding through external and internal marketing material in order to attract, retain, and motivate its prospective and future employees.

2.3.1 The Case of ELEN

Our research was conducted at a global energy company, ELEN². ELEN produces power and is also an energy supplier. It is one of the world’s largest privately owned energy companies with over 30 million customers, and 85.000 employees

² Fictive name, as the company is anonymous.

worldwide. In Sweden, the company consists of a parent company and several subsidiaries, and is one of the leading energy companies in the country. The company is managed through top-down control from a European country.

ELEN takes pride in their long-term employment retention, which is around 15 years on average, and claims they have an extremely competent and motivated workforce. ELEN has also received several awards as one of the best employers in Sweden. The employees working at ELEN typically have an educational background as engineers and, or, in business. The career opportunities in the organization are said to be good. A change in position is not unusual, as the company does a lot of internal recruitment.

ELEN strives to give back to the environment. In order to contribute, they put a lot of effort in developing sustainability in societies. For example, in Sweden, their goal is to invest 580 million SEK in different environmental projects up until 2013, which adds to their profile as a socially responsible company. They seek to produce cleaner and better energy, which will transform the company into a global provider of energy, offering specialized solutions. ELEN proclaims that this policy will benefit the employees, the investors, and the costumers of future generations. The goal is to be a leading company in CSR, within their market.

Besides social responsibility, the company also portrays itself as having a work environment that is open and social. ELEN has a trainee program that is actively marketed towards students both in student magazines and at job fairs. They also provide general placements for the newly graduated as well as for those with work experience. In recruitment advertisements they, in addition to their social responsibility, also emphasize the career opportunities that they can offer.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The primary focus of this research was to discover how employees relate to the corporate brand. As indicated by the literature review, employees are unwittingly drawn into brands and live them, both at and outside of the workplace. Scholars also suggest that employees might be controlled and regulated by the brand discourse. Furthermore, brands are thought to be a powerful socializing force that can guide organizational behaviour in instances such as recruitment. In essence, corporate brands have consequences. This is why we wanted to conduct a qualitative research to explore how employees interact within the discursive framework of the brand and how they make sense of, navigate and resist it.

This study has been influenced by our commitments to an interpretive philosophy and poststructuralist theory. We draw on a poststructuralist theoretical framework that language constructs meaning and our social realities and also how we as individuals explore, create and resist subjectivities (Weedon, 2007). Within this framework we are going to unpack our ontological and epistemological understanding. We do not seek to find one truth; instead we emphasize the multiplicity of meanings and of knowledge by gathering rich data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002; Hall & Hall, 2004; Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Part of an interpretive approach means studying participants in their natural environment, and our main goal as researchers is to explore how individuals experience, understand, and make sense of the social world. Thus our assignment is to interpret and make sense of these understandings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

The first section in this chapter explains in more detail how we view reality, from what paradigm the research is conducted, the nature of truth, and how knowledge is conceptualized (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2002). Specifically, we outline our ontological and epistemological starting points. The second section explains our research process, including how we collected and analysed our data through a constant comparative method. Finally, it deals with how we engaged trustworthiness, limitations and our own reflections of the process.

3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Before we outline how we engaged our research, it is necessary to explain our meta-theoretical starting points. We entered this research process with certain ideas relating to the ontology and epistemology of the social world. Ontology is the worldview of the researcher and the nature of things as we know them. It concerns the nature of truth and of being (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Letherby, 2003). Epistemology is how to best investigate this reality and is considered to be the nature of knowing (Barker, 2006; Easterby-Smith, et al., 2002; Letherby, 2003). Our ontological understanding is developed by an interpretive framework with a keen eye towards poststructural theoretical understandings in that we view reality as being socially constructed and given meaning by people (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Furthermore, we take the position that the notion of objective facts is not possible; hence data is always influenced by people's preconceived ideas and understandings. Ontologically, we acknowledge that individuals enter organizations that are already rife with discourses and structures meant to guide subjectivities and behaviours (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). For instance, we argue that brands are discursive fields that produce subjectivities that employees must navigate.

Epistemologically, we believe that we learn through language. Language is central to shaping, influencing, generating insight, and seeking understanding (Tietze et al., 2003), as well as shaping subjectivity (Weedon, 1997). Thus, we are not looking for one truth but the multiplicities of experiences as individuals react and respond to discourses in a variety of ways. The need people have to make sense of how their situation, not only as individuals but also as social individuals, is influenced by their environment and the dominating discourse (Johansson & Heide, 2008; Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009; Weick, 1995). Our interpretive philosophical starting point allowed us to approach the topic from a qualitative mode of inquiry. Furthermore, our poststructural understanding dictated what we did as researchers as it shaped our process and how we conducted our research. In order to understand people's experiences, understandings, and perceptions we need to question brand discourses and understand individual's relations and perceptions to it.

3.2 The Process of Data Collection

In this section we briefly go through what we did to collect data as we explain how our process began.

Before we started collecting data for this project, we conducted seven pilot interviews with employees at an organization that one of the researchers was familiar with³. The goal was to see if the themes in our interview guide focused on how people relate to and experience the brand. It was important for our study to go through the interview guide beforehand to enhance our understanding in how to conduct and act in an interview.

Our research was conducted at two sites of the same organization, ELEN: the parent company and a subsidiary that is responsible for the distribution of energy, where we, in total, conducted twelve interviews. We limited the study to one company in order to gain a deeper and richer insight into the work of the organization and the personal experiences of its employees. We began one month of qualitative data collection at 17 March that ended 21 April 2011. In the process of data collection, we were known to the interviewees and other members of the organization as students doing research on the company, studying management at Lund University.

We conducted the study from an interpretive perspective hence our approach is marked by qualitative research methods in the collection of data, which are: document analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996). By using these methods we are enhancing our understanding of the participant's perceptions, experiences, subjective understandings, and feelings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). The two primary sources of data are corporate documents on employee branding and interviews with employees. The corporate documents consist of branded marketing material from the company home page, interviews with employees in student magazines, job announcements, recruitment ads, job fairs, and the stated values of the company. These documents give us an insight into the brand discourse. We chose to look into these documents to explore what subjectivities might be produced through these texts. Furthermore, the interviews allowed us to see the participants perception and experience of the discourse and, perhaps more importantly, how they navigate them.

³ Pilot interviews were conducted in February 2011.

3.2.1 Sources of Data

Our formal sources of data were document analysis and interview transcripts, however, observations played a crucial role as well. For instance, we did observations before we conducted our interviews to get a sense of the organization. This helped introduce us to people, which made our access easier. We consider the observations one of our informal sources of data, yet it was they were a crucial step in our process. The remaining section explains how we got access to the corporate documents that we used as a source of data and how we conducted interviews.

3.2.2 Documents

We analysed documents and text in the form of branded marketing material, such as published interviews with employees in student recruitment magazines, ads for ELEN, job announcements in student journals, and material on ELEN's web site. In addition to this, ELEN gave us a power point presentation used as internal material for employees where their values and the ELEN brand are set in text form. Document analysis was of high importance for our research in exploring how the brand was presented in text and to get the feeling of the dominating brand discourse. It was also useful for exploring how the employees navigated the discursive field. Furthermore, the analysis gave us insight into the language, the metaphors and, the narratives used to describe the intentions of the brand, which was used to answer the questions; what is this company and who works here? The information derived from the analysis further enhances the study in exploring underlying meanings and how branded materials seek to create subjectivities.

3.2.3 Interviews

We conducted twelve in-depth interviews in two different settings. The interviews were conversational in a social situation, conducive to understanding meaning from the participants perspective (Kvale, 1996; Payne, 2000). Seven women and five men were interviewed, five of which were trainees at the parent company who had worked there for a year. In addition, we interviewed seven employees at the distribution department were job tenures ranged from three to ten years, working with human resources (HR), financial matters and change projects. The reason why we included trainees was to explore the difference in experiences of the brand between new employees and the more seasoned employees. We believe that the access we gained to

the employees at the HR department is of significant importance. These employees work with employee branding, which is a key point of our research.

Initially, we established the connection with the organization through a personal network. We sent a formal letter to contacts asking for participation in our study. During the process, interviewees got interested in our project and offered to contact their own network and asked them if they wanted to participate in the research. Everyone we contacted personally, and those who were contacted through interviewees, were willing to participate and showed great interest in the study.

We used a semi-structured interview guide. The meaning we put into a semi-structured interview guide is that it is built on themes (in our research: brand, culture, values, communication, personal life, and the connection between self and organization) rather than precise questions. The reason we chose semi-structured interviews was to be able to allow a more open communication throughout the process where questions emerged and evolved during interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Kvale, 1996). We believe this gives more richness to the data. Before every interview we communicated with each participant through email to negotiate meeting time. We conducted interviews in person at the interviewees' chosen site at the companies' facilities. In order to make the best use of the time and to be in a relaxing setting, which the interviewees were familiar with. The interview started out with small talk and a cup of coffee creating a conversational atmosphere. Before we started, we emphasized that the identity of the interviewer would be anonymous, as well as that of the company name. Although the interviews were open and semi-structured, we always asked two questions in the beginning to start the interviews: *Tell me about yourself?* Followed by the question: *What got you here?* During the process, questions changed and emerged on site due to what we had learned in previous interviews. For example the questions: *How do you feel when you say that you work for ELEN?* emerged as well as the question: *How would you describe a 'typical' ELEN employee?* Interviews were recorded, they ranged from 50 to 80 minutes, and were conducted with three interviewers and one participant present. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish.

To summarize, we used both internal and external marketing material from ELEN. We conducted twelve in-depth interviews with both trainees and those employed on a permanent basis. The collected data yielded 130 single spaced pages of interview transcripts. We also took field notes on site to supplement the interviews.

3.3 Data Analysis

In the following section we will explain how we analysed data from branded corporate documents, interviews, observations, as well as our experiences on site. In analysing the data, our work was based on poststructuralist theories with particular attention to how language structures social realities and how participants explore, construct, and resist subjectivities. The data went through a constant comparative process through in depth reading and development of themes.

In qualitative research, analysis takes place during, as well as after, interviews in a constant comparative method. This is part of gaining a deeper understanding and helps generate new ideas. As a result the collection, the analysis and the interpretation of the data is integrated (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). We followed these guidelines in our research, collecting field notes simultaneously so we could reproduce them later on in the process. During the process we made sense of what we observed, learned from the interviews and from our experience of the organization. Field notes gave a richer understanding throughout the process and added to the knowledge we gained. From this a recurring theme emerged in how the employees navigated the brand and added to our understanding while we conducted the final interviews.

3.3.1 Documents

When analysing the branded documents we paid attention to and looked for trends and themes. We looked for words that were used repeatedly and coded for how often they appeared in the text. We looked at the documents from a poststructuralist perspective and asked what discourses and subjectivities were engendered. We found a theme in the language, surfacing in the interviews among the participants, which could be connected to the marketing material from ELEN. We sensed a connection between the text, and the interviews in our analysis and were able to navigate between different parts to get a better understanding of the whole context. In using the documents as data we highlighted the different themes with colours and made notes.

3.3.2 Interviews

As interviews were our main source of data we explored them in much detail when looking for patterns and underlying meaning. The information gathered during the interviews made the basis of the sense-making process and in interpreting the data, connecting part of the interviews with the whole of the study. To illustrate, after we had

transcribed our interviews, written down our field notes and collected the secondary material, we read through the data thoroughly and looked for themes, patterns, narratives, metaphors and contradictions. These themes and patterns were colour-coded in interview transcriptions', field notes and in the marketing materials. The recognition of recurring statements and themes was the first step in making sense of the whole data. Parts of interviews were explored in more detail to get a deeper understanding. Then we connected the interviews to our field notes to explore the underlying meaning in the data (Patel & Davidson, 2003). Secondly, we printed every interview and reread the material several times. We used a whiteboard to document patterns and themes, and marked the hardcopies with notes and comments. We then processed recurrence of themes in Excel to define the coding groups. We also used visuals to better understand the whole, which we linked to parts of the interviews. At the end of this process we organized the interviews in different colours by themes, patterns, and quotes in an attempt to see the emerging storyline. We also documented the process by photographing it.

During the whole process we added notes in the form of keywords in the word documents we used. These were, for example: brand, values, identity, and culture. We started out with a broad analysis to make sense of the collected data. The amount of data was overwhelming and we felt that this was a good way to get an overview. Then we made a separate document organizing the data for each theme and connected different parts of the interviews to themes, linking it to what we had observed and the recurring subjects in the branded marketing material. As mentioned above we also used a whiteboard to draft up what we felt was most important while analysing. In the process we kept our research question in mind as a reminder of the study focus. It also guided us while organizing the data. From this a clearer structure emerged and we were able to link our empirical material to theory and to organize quotes for our chapter on analysis.

To summarize we analysed our data by highlighting recurring themes, patterns and contradictions and connected them to our research questions.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Limitations

In this section we will outline the trustworthiness of the project regarding validity and reliability. We also refer to ethical concerns in how we practice respect towards our participants.

According to Eisenhardt (1989), collecting information from different sources and perspectives strengthens the research. This is in line with our method when collecting data through documents, interviews, and observations. We have also been able to interpret the material in association with different disciplines such as, management, marketing, and psychology. Our aim is not to generalize employee relations to brands but to create an understanding and generate insight of the presented study as we believe that experiences and perceptions can differ in alternating contexts. The chief objective is to provide new insight into this field and not to replicate past theories.

By conducting pilot interviews we got a better understanding of how to focus our interviews by asking preliminary questions as well as testing our initial interview guide. This is in line with Bryman (2001), who states that pilot interviews help the researcher to realize which angle and focus to pursue. We believe that using an open-ended interview style by avoiding leading questions that could affect the informant's answers, biases, and preconceptions (Bryman, 2001) has contributed to the validity of our research. Open-ended interviews give the informants an opportunity to answer the questions openly without us narrowing their options by a direct setup.

To keep the validity of the process we felt it necessary to conduct in-depth interviews. During these we observed our participant's voices, transcribing them religiously so we would be able to represent the participant in a true manner. We were also watchful of surroundings and people in our role as observers and wrote separate descriptions after every visit, enabling us to create our own understanding before engaging in discussion. After each discussion we compared notes. We ensured confidentiality and the participants of the study were anonymous. This was verbally confirmed in the beginning of each interview as well as with a written confirmation by letter, sent to participants beforehand. We documented every step of the process of the analysis by photographing our work for easy access to workflow and material.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, which allows our informants to express themselves in a more natural way since it is their native language, and we believe this has provided our research with a deeper understanding of their thoughts. We are aware that language barriers can occur when translating the empirical material from Swedish to English; however we have translated the quotes together, using dictionary, to preserve the original meaning.

In order to guarantee reliability and to get a broad perspective in our interviews, all three of us participated. All participants were asked beforehand if they were comfortable with all three of us participating during the interviews. We also divided up the transcribed texts to get a more comprehensive view of the material, by reviewing them from different perspectives, in order to minimize construction errors (Eisenhardt, 1989). Several close readings were made so as to not miss any details.

3.5 Reflections on the Process

This entire study has centred on understanding our participant's relationship to the brand. While on the subject of relationships, it is important for us to review our own relationship to our meta-theoretical starting points and our method in general. This section is about our own experiences, the dilemma we faced, and how we worked through it.

Part of our process during this project has been our own learning curve. We have been inducted in a critical tradition that has both enabled and limited us. An example of this is when we found ourselves unable to shake a vision of a man controlled by the brand. We were compliant to the idea of brands being a managerial tool used to shape employees and direct them towards organizational goals. The idea stems from our educative electives where we have learned that control is everywhere, instead of learning to separate it from our preconceived notions and looking exclusively into the interpretive framework of what the person was really telling us and its meaning. Being self-reflexive of our own understanding and the preconceived ideas we bring during the course of the study has helped us during this process (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Interpretive research is about gaining insight and understanding of participants' experiences (Hall & Hall, 2004). This means that researchers need to take into account that people have preconceived ideas, understandings, and feelings. We are all social creatures with a wealth of experience, which have already shaped our worldview. During our lifetime we have been socialized by education, by our primary caretakers, and by society. All of which have a slightly different impact upon us in relation to understanding our current situations (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Therefore, no two individuals will see things in exactly the same way. This means that all research is coloured by our preconceived ideas. Thus, bias has to be acknowledged as well as the personal influence and understanding of the researcher in the process (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). With this in mind it was important to keep our biases from overly

influencing the data and analysis and be mindful of the fact that they not colour our analysis without thoroughly inspecting the possibility. The goal, as researchers, was not to find one truth but multiple truths as we believe that people experience multiple realities.

During the process we were aware that the quality of our research depended on our analytical skills. The task was extremely challenging and the need for self-reflection of feelings and assumptions meant distancing us from our investment in the original method. As the example clearly shows, we realized we were guided by our own acceptance of control when analysing our data. This forced us to look carefully at the data again with an interpretive lens. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) term this as good research, in contrast to being objective towards it. Being reflexive is more likely to lead us to different points of view. In hindsight, the decision to have all three of us attending the interviews and simultaneously observing the context and interpreting the data has added to the value of our study, producing comparative points of view adding to the reflexive analysis of the data.

We also addressed the issue of representation. That is the selective elements attributed to our own interests as we do not have the same experiences as our interviewees and we, perhaps, select what we deem the most interesting parts of the interviews when analysing the data. This could misrepresent what the informant is trying to put across (Hall & Hall, 2004). To avoid this trap, we used quotes and made use of field notes to create descriptions. Our experience is that the method added to a more conscious and reflexive research.

Part of our process was doing observations and although they did not play into our formal analysis we believe that they shaped and guided our process and that they were crucial in gaining access and getting to know the people in the company.

We adopted Alvesson's (2003) reflexive approach to interviewing. As we inserted ourselves into the social world we were studying, we needed to be alert during the process. We were constantly challenging our own thoughts to avoid traps of selective memory and preferred topics and, in turn, be better able to collect rich data. We believe that heightened awareness helped keep bias out of the interplay, and using the learning curve derived from this gave us a better and more honest overview during the process. In addition to the reflexive approach, conducting the research with three

researchers made us able to question assumptions that arose during interviews, which greatly improved the interpretive value of the research.

On a final note, we hope that in upcoming sections, our methods have been transparent in showing how we gained access, how we chose participants, how the data was gathered, and how it was analysed into results. It is our intent that the transparency shall add further credibility to our research.

Chapter 4: Analysis

This project looks into how employees relate to the brand. We noted earlier that mainstream literature suggests a relationship where, if the brand is fulfilling its purpose, the brand and the employee identities are aligned (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Harquail, 2004). Against this rather static view, we also noted that more critical management studies often claim that branding discourses are a means of control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel, et al., 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). In this project we seek to engage in this conversation. We argue that understanding how employees experience and relate to an organization's brand is an empirical question, and not a given. We explore this in two sections below.

First, we argue that examining an organizational brand is an exercise in answering the questions: according to the brand discourses, what is this organization and who works here? Answering these questions provides us with insights into how branded materials seek to create subjectivities that the employees must navigate.

Second, understanding how employees relate to the brand requires qualitative research, specifically, asking employees to account for their relationships to the organizational brand. To that end, in this chapter we will analyse ELEN's corporate brand to explore which discourses about the organization and the ideal organizational members are presented to employees. This viewpoint is a necessary first step in understanding how employees relate to the brand. This section brings empirical knowledge, taken from the employee's point of view, to the forefront as we unpack our empirical questions: *What is the brand discourse? What subjectivities does the brand engender?* and, *How do employees relate to the brand?* The analysis highlights two themes: the anatomy of the brand and the employee's experience of the brand.

4.1 The Anatomy of the Brand

Scholars who wish to understand an organization's brand can go about this in several ways. Our focus is on learning how employees relate to the brand. Therefore, we analyse brand materials that are meant to speak to employees, such as recruitment materials. These messages are employed by the company as marketing tools to attract, motivate and also retain employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cardy, 2001; Xia & Yang, 2010). We analyse the messages about the brand that are communicated to the

employees – our focus is on the literal messages the organization puts forth. We also look at the mediums through which these messages are communicated – our focus here is wider and takes into account ‘how’ the organization communicates through visuals and other mediums. Finally, we will put the two together to make claims about the holistic, ideal identity that the organization seeks to communicate to employees in particular.

4.1.1 Brand Messages Constructing an Image of the Company

Organizational brands communicate multiple messages to stakeholders. However, there are often key messages that pervade branded materials and, through repetition, show us how the organization wishes to be perceived and who the organization wishes to hire. We have found three key messages in ELEN’s branding materials. The organization stands for: social responsibility by giving back to the environment, opportunities for employees, and openness. These messages are found repeatedly in the various internal and external marketing materials that are directed towards both potential and present employees: the home page, interviews with employees in student magazines, job announcements, recruitment ads, job fairs, and the stated values of the company. The company uses language where these three words are represented in the text. We will explore each of these messages below before turning to how these messages become part of the organization’s construction of an ideal employee.

4.1.1.1 Social Responsibility: Your Energy Shapes the Future

ELEN’s homepage reveals several organizational values. These values are used internally to guide employees and their work. One value that stands out is “social responsibility.” Social responsibility, defined as the organization making a change for the future, is portrayed as a guiding tool as well as something employees at ELEN are responsible for. Social responsibility is apparent in advertisements directed towards potential employees. The slogan that the company uses in all of their recruitment advertisements, both in texts and in videos, is: “Your energy shapes the future.” The above examples point to the organization’s belief that it is the employees who project the image of the company as being socially responsible. This emphasizes the responsibility and importance of the individual for displaying a socially responsible image.

These messages are also meant to communicate something about the type of person who works at ELEN. One advertising message to employees asks: “The problem

with global warming needs to be resolved. Do you want to help?⁴” The advertisement is written in big letters and visualised with a map of Sweden listing where ELEN has made investments for the environment and the techniques they have developed in renewing existing power sources instead of harnessing new natural resources. If we look at the language the company uses, it appears clear that they are attempting more than simply telling potential employees about the good work being done by the organization. They use invitational rhetoric meant to invite the potential employee to take part in the good work. Therefore, instead of “we do good work”, the message is “we need you to make a difference.” The message of social responsibility becomes one of these “good works.”

Beyond slogans, the organization also puts forth materials that showcase employees who fit the brand. For instance, in an interview with a trainee in a student magazine, social responsibility is portrayed in the heading: “A future business where I can make a difference.” The interview starts with an introduction explaining why she applied: “ELEN is a company that matches her values, especially around questions about solutions for the future of the environment.” In the interview she states: “Here you can really make a difference and contribute to the wealth of society as it is a future business that stands before many different challenges.” Social responsibility is also a recurring theme in video clips that are found under career opportunities on the company’s home page where employees, visually represented riding horses in nature, state why they have chosen ELEN: “Harnessing the power of the natural world allows us to preserve a place like this for future generations. I’m proud to work for a company that is not afraid to do something different.” What we learn from these messages is that the company is portraying itself as a responsible employer and a good place to work. Further they use their branding material to prove that the employees are fulfilling the social responsibility by acting accordingly.

4.1.1.2 Opportunities to Fit the Brand

The organization’s brand messages to employees also revolve around opportunities. Not surprisingly, the theme opportunities, was found most often in recruitment advertisements in student magazines to attract potential future participants to ELENs trainee programme. In one recruitment advertisement we found the headline, “Number crunchers and technology geeks!”, and they continue by saying:

⁴ All quotes are translated from Swedish to English, except the slogan: “Your energy shapes the future.”

Starting as a trainee with us gives you a dream start to your career. You have a unique opportunity to develop as a person in your future professional role. We provide you with professional support throughout and permanent employment directly.

We found that although ELEN's materials make use of the term opportunities, they rarely go further than using the term. Instead of unpacking the opportunities, they use the term as a way to communicate the type of employee they are looking for. Therefore, it is important to look at how the organisation presents opportunities and how these discourses become part of the picture of who makes an ideal employee.

In another recruitment advertisement for the trainee program, the offer is presented as the following: "An individually designed program means that you yourself, to a greater extent than in many other trainee programs, can affect your future within the company." Here we can see that the opportunities are there but that it is the individual's responsibility to take advantage of them. This connects to how contributing to society is also the individual's responsibility.

We delve deeper into the discourse around opportunities, by looking at interviews in a career magazine where one interview starts out with the vast title "Ambition." One quote from the interview is drawn out, enlarged and put in red; "I'm flexible. In my world nothing is impossible. I can if I want to. That's my motto." Additionally the word ambition was used together with opportunities in the following quote: "ELEN has a lot to offer for someone that is ambitious, curious and creative." Here we can see that these opportunities is for a special kind of person, one that is responsible and autonomous, as the message quickly shifts to what kind of person you need to be to get the opportunity. The word opportunity is used but we never learn what they are.

The theme of opportunity is also inherent in the recruitment slogan used in all recruitment ads and job announcements, and also presented under social responsibility, "Your energy shapes the future." Thus you have an opportunity in taking part in the future work of ELEN. The recurring theme of an ideal employee emerges, where it is his or her responsibility and opportunity to shape the future. We argue that the message is twofold: the organization offers opportunities that are inviting for future employees (even if they are not spelled out) but on the flip side you need to be a certain kind of

person that takes personal responsibility and is autonomous to be able to get these opportunities.

4.1.1.3 Openness - the Right Way to Behave

Openness is the third theme that stands out and it is the part of the brand that relates to employees behaviour. Openness is one of ELEN's values and is promoted several times on the company's home page when the company lists how employees should interact internally and externally. It is also one of the core values that are stated as the responsibility of the employees in how customers experience the brand. The emphasis on employees being open is further encouraged when the company states the appropriate behaviour for the employee, again pointing to the ideal person. Openness is visualized in magazine interviews with established staff, directed towards potential employees, by making openness the driving force of change. In analysing the discourse around openness, we look into how it is portrayed and why it is used to portray the organizational brand.

On the homepage, openness is stated in the following way: "We are open to new ideas and change. We are open and candid with one another and promote knowledge sharing freely across all barriers and boundaries." Openness is portrayed in an inviting way, creating a picture of a good company to work at. The theme emerges again in video clips that are found under career opportunities on the company home page where employees state why they have chosen ELEN: "Communication and trust are important. I'm proud to be a part of a company where teamwork and openness matter." Evoking the feeling that the individual does not stand alone by using the word openness, which encourages communication within the company. This is another reference to ELEN being a good place to work. In an article a manager for ELEN states the importance of openness: "Openness gives energy while control constrains it." He continues by saying: "We are capable of doing so much more when we are not forced into a controlling management style." Again this quote shows us that being open is all about taking responsibility and being autonomous. It could be interpreted that management wants employees to be independent, or that they think they are self-directed. It is a part of openness to take responsibility for your actions, communicate your ideas and behave in an open manner. You have a freedom to develop but with freedom come responsibility. Being open engenders the subjectivity facilitating the forming of the right employee.

This in turn makes the employee more open to the brand message depicting ELEN as a good company.

Looking through the core of the different messages in the above texts, we can see what holistic picture that the company wishes to present of both the company itself, and of the organizational actors. The company stands for a good place to work where the core of the brand is social responsibility. Further the company offers opportunities for a responsible and autonomous person. This also signals what kind of people work for the company, someone who is open, responsible and autonomous. The brand attempts to create an image that taps into the three characteristics that make the brand distinct: social responsibility, opportunities and openness. By this the company is constructing the image of what it stands for, who works there, as well as constructing the ideal employee in seeking someone that fits the profile. Thus the company constructs the ideal employee through its branding material and creates subjectivities around the brand that employees must navigate.

It is apparent from the above discussion that regardless of the different reasons one could bring to this organisational brand, it seems clear that the organization is attempting to create a static and controlled image of the right employee in seeking uniformity. The implication of this could be a homogenization of images and the lack of diversity among employees, as the company hires these 'little brands' that fit the company profile. What we have found when we talked to employees is that regardless of how the organization structures the brand they do not control how the employees relate to the brand. This brings us to the question and the next section of how employees relate to the brand.

4.2 How Employees Experience and Relate to the Brand

Organizations want employees to ingest the brand. Nevertheless, if and how the employees actually do that is an empirical question. From what we have seen in the section on the anatomy of the brand, we know a branded discourse exists and how it is used by the organization to portray itself and its members, as well as for constructing the ideal employee. However, we do not know how this affects the employees and how they relate to the brand. While we do know that brand discourses matter (Marshak & Grant, 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Tietze et al., 2003; Weedon, 1997), we do not know, as yet, how they matter. For this reason we need to explore how employees navigate the discourse of the brand by looking at how they relate to it.

We have found that employees experience and relate to the brand in multiple ways but of special interest was one uniform story in how they relate to it depending on tenure and position. That is compared to how long they have been with the organization and whether or not they take part in producing the brand. We view the relationships with the brand on a scale from total adoption (trainees), to strategic adoption (human resources), to cynicism (other employees or those with long tenure). These are the following ways in which they relate to the brand discourse: as celebrators, as cynics, or by identifying or downplaying it, and by using it as a Band-Aid. The analysis highlights three themes: “the newbies”, “the producers and consumers”, and “the tricky navigation in the face of stigma”. We explore this in the three sections below.

4.2.1 Newbies

From our data we have found that tenure matters. We especially noted how trainees, or newbies, religiously adopt the brand; we believe this is because they are subjective to the brand discourse that is already at work in the organization, especially through the socialization around the trainee programme. This results in early brand adoption, with the newbies acting as celebrators and therefore relating uncritically to the brand. This shows us how different workplace subjectivities lend themselves to different relationships in regard to this branding process and to the degree of exposure of the brand. From what our data tells us, brand exposure happens through the branded material, which has been outlined in the section above, both before employees enter the organization and when they are inside it. Outside the organization this happens, according to our trainee participants, mainly through career events and job fairs, where ELEN presents itself towards prospective applicants for the trainee programme. Inside the organization the brand discourse is delivered to the employees via socialization, as that is the process in which the employees learn how to navigate the discourse (Giddens, 2003). In this section we look at several accounts from newbies, first, how they relate to the brand before entering the organization. This is because we noted a difference in our participants’ accounts regarding how trainees related to the brand before entering the organization. Second, how they relate to it while they are being socialized into the organization during the trainee programme.

4.2.1.1 The Newbies First Encounter with the Discourse

Our interest lies in how participants relate to the brand. In the first part of our analysis of relationships with the brand, we take our starting point in how the trainees

were exposed to the brand before they entered the organization, and more specifically, their first encounter with the brand discourse. We do this to be able to better understand how their relationship to the brand began.

The trainees were the only group of participants who expressed a relationship to the brand before entering the organization, as others claimed it was a coincidence that they applied to work for ELEN and that they did not know much about the organization and brand before they started working there. The following quotes reveal their point of view: “It was an electricity supplier, my electricity supplier, so in that sense I knew about them, but I didn’t know what happened behind that”, explains a HR specialist. Another female participant, working at the financial department, explained: “It wasn’t like I searched for [information about the company], it was a coincidence that I applied. I like it now afterwards, but it wasn’t like I had looked into it.” We imagine that the participants must have had some preconceived ideas and expectations (Sandberg & Targama, 2007) about the work before being hired, but these, as has been illustrated, are not related to the brand discourse. This implies that the brand has a greater effect on newly graduated students interested in the trainee programme.

Therefore we will focus on the newbies relationship to the brand before applying to the trainee program. This is in order to see how they are affected by their first encounter with the brand discourse, especially through the medium of career events. In the following quote a young female trainee explains enthusiastically about when she encountered the company at a job fair:

It was at the job fair days, where I just knew, god what a refreshing stand [the surroundings where the company is representing themselves and meet students], I was totally blown away, and anyway it was an exciting stand. I went and talked to the people and many had done the trainee program and were really content with it and talked about it in a very honest and committed way. Then I just got the feeling how exciting [this company is]. Then I also met other employees from ELEN that talked about what a great company it was. It’s so great to be able to represent that kind of company and I just felt a click.

The trainee got exposed to the discourse around the brand at a job fair, forming her first impression, and relation to it. She expresses a connection with the representatives she met, and that she liked the appearance of the stand, and that she felt a ‘click’ indicating that at that moment she formed a relation to the brand and that she

would like to represent the company, again showing how she immediately relates. This is part of her sense-making in how she understands and is forming an idea of who works at ELEN, expressing that she felt that she could fit in and thereby showing her positive reaction towards the brand. We interpret that the people she met shaped her perception of the ideal employee, perhaps the same ideal employee that ELEN is communicating through its brand discourse. Later in the interview she speaks about the job fairs from the company's point of view: "When we are out at job fairs, they send representatives that they feel represent the company in a good way." This gives us an insight in how these job fair representatives are meant to represent the brand discourse and possibly relate to the ideal employee through employee branding.

Another trainee explains his first encounter like this:

Why ELEN, a few reasons...on a career event the company showed their trainee scheme and what they want to do and ELEN was amazing from my perspective. There is an international approach and a chance to completely decide by yourself what you want to do, no real limits you can do whatever you want if you get the context...energy business at the moment is the most dynamic you can find and for a young person it's great to be a part of that...and I like red [the company colour], much better than green or blue [laughs].

This male trainee relates to the opportunity theme in the brand discourse, outlined in the anatomy of the brand section above. He showed an enthusiasm, in the same way as the female trainee in the above quote, when speaking about the company, showing that he relates to the brand by celebrating it. It is interesting though, that he uses humour to demonstrate his belief of how absurd it is to decide on a workplace on account of the company brand as he jokes that he likes the brand colour. This implies that he does not believe that the brand is that important, even though he likes the company. Yet another male trainee talks about his perception of ELEN before he started at the trainee programme:

I had heard a lot of good things about the company and what tempted me the most was that they work with exiting questions and new thinking in the energy business...so I think there are good opportunities since we are present in over 30 countries around the world...and then I tried to see, well there was the trainee program that appealed to me the most and I had heard a lot of good things about it from school and at job fairs.

This trainee's relationship to the brand seems to have started through word-of-mouth experiences and job fairs. He makes sense of the brand in a positive way by referring to opportunities that the organization can offer. The fact that the newbies already had a positive view of the brand before they got hired could be connected to what Harquail (2004) states, that trainee programmes selects individuals that already fit the organizational brand so that it is easier to integrate them in the organization. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) draw this further by saying that training programmes are developed to have an impact on the individual's identity.

In this section we have found that the trainees begin their relationship with the brand before they are recruited. We have also seen that this preconception of the company is a positive one. In the next part we will look at what happened when these individuals were recruited, and how socialization into the organization has formed their perception of, and how they relate to the brand even more.

4.2.1.2 Socializing – How do Newbies Relate to the Brand?

What we found when looking into how participants relate to the brand is that exposure to the brand has an effect on their relationship. In this section we continue to examine the newbies relation to the brand, after they have entered the discursive field of the organization. What we see in the newbies relationship with the brand is that they are highly exposed to it in their first year of recruitment, thus taking a more positive stand towards it, acting as celebrators. This will be discussed further below.

The trainee programme is a one year educational work programme where the participants work in four different parts of the organization in order to learn about the organization and to find out where it is most suitable for them to work in their future position at the company. The programme also includes trips, meetings, and social gatherings. As explained passionately by one of the female trainees, who is in her final part of the programme:

Within the trainee programme it's kind of extreme, we spend a lot of time together privately, and the woman who is our coordinator always makes sure that we have a good time, it's a lot of trips and then it's a lot of going out and dinners and like that, it's a little extra...It's a lot of networking when you're in the trainee program.

Here we can see that the trainees spend a great deal of time together, both privately and at work-related gatherings, where they socialize, informally and formally, around the work. We can thus see that they are exposed to the brand discourse through socialization in several different settings, which has an effect on how they relate to it. By this the company is attempting to affect the relationship that they employees have to the brand, as training programmes are believed to have an impact on individual identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The quote “always make sure that we have a good time” shows how the trainee recognizes the coordinators efforts in conveying a positive experience of the company and the brand. We can deduce by her enthusiastic narration, that her positive view of the brand, as a “good time” and “a little extra”, is part of how she relates to it. One female trainee also described how she was socialized and navigated the organizational brand discourse as a new recruit by adopting the behaviour of a colleague:

But there I was in the beginning and then you are a bit perplexed yourself, you do not really know where you stand and you're new in this role and that makes it so easy to, then I had a colleague whom I worked very much with, and then I started, She is a bit different compared to me, she is very strategic and think in many steps before she says anything. So I noticed that I began to act like her. It went so well for her and there I came in new. She was amazingly kind, and...she gave me lot of tips all the time. I took it in straight away and bought her concept completely. And then around Christmas, but Damn [says her own name], It was something that she did and [I thought] she can't do that. No, why should I also do that and then I started to realize when I became more confident in my role. Then there is no need or, well, then I started acting in a way that I think is good.

What we can see is that when she started feeling more comfortable with her role in the organization, she also felt that she was able to navigate the discourse by herself. This shows that she has been through a process in which she formed her relation to, and experience of, the brand discourse and when she knew how she related to it she was able to navigate it. What we have also seen in the above quote is that the colleague helped her by teaching her, which can be related to how Giddens (2003) defines socialization as a teaching function. This educational view of colleagues was also mentioned by other trainees as something that helped them when they were new to the organization: “Something that I like in the program [is that] you learn a lot on the subject base, the area, but on the other hand you learn much more on how people

interact, what kind of leaders you can have.” Another trainee says: “Yes, but, when you ask someone, people are willing to tell you more...people are very ‘oh, how nice, can I help you?’ and likes to tell you more.” Yet another trainee uses the word open, when talking about her co-workers, relating to one of the core values of the brand: “I think that people were very open when I came in new here, very open and keen on sharing what they do.” From these quotes we can see that exposure of the brand discourse towards the newbies also appears by interaction with colleagues as a form of socialization, in this case in a more informal manner, which is believed to have a more profound effect on the identity construction of employees (Miles & Mangold, 2004).

From the above accounts we see that the newbies are highly exposed to the brand discourse, which also have a positive impact on how they relate. To further our analysis, and delve deeper into the question we asked in the beginning of this section, how employees relate to the brand, we now show examples of how they talk about their relationship to it. One of the female trainees describes in a keen way, how she identifies with the brand:

I perceive ELEN as a very value driven company. We have courage, mutual respect integrity, and social responsibility and those things, and I think that my values are kind of the same. ELEN feels like a very down to earth company and I can really identify with that.

She continuous to talk about it in another instance in the interview:

Yes, the values are of course these, C, it is, I do not really remember it so that we can wait with, I is integrity, I believe, S is the social responsibility, M is the mutual respect and C is courage. It’s something like that anyway.

Here we can see that she is stating the company values by heart, showing us that because she has been socialized through the brand discourse, she can easily state its contents. We can also see that she has a positive view of the brand as she express, in the first of the two quotes, literally that she “identifies” with it. She also uses “we” when she talks about the company relating to herself as well. The use of “we” shows us how she identifies and has internalized the values as she looks at herself and the company as one, in portraying the characteristics of the right employee. In the following quote, by a lively and enthusiastic male trainee, we can clearly see the celebration of the brand:

We are 200 trainees and from my experience and the experience of the trainee programme. I feel like I know them all. We had a workshop last week and everyone is open, only met these people three times but I feel like I have known them for five years. I don't understand how the HR department is able to do this, but they do it. It's amazing how they do it...This culture...is really established among the trainees. Amazing standing together, helping each other, living this company spirit. Amazing, that's what I experience.

The quote shows how he relates to the brand in its unification of people within the organization as he truly celebrates it by using the word "amazing". This is a good example in how he generalizes for how other trainees relate to the brand: "This culture...is really established among the trainees. Amazing standing together, helping each other, living this company spirit." Showing how he experiences that others also relate and live the brand. He also refers to the people as being open, which is one of the core values of the brand and thus also the employee's responsibility. Showing the positive relationship he experiences as a trainee.

In several accounts when the newbies spoke about their relationship with the brand they drew upon one of the themes of the brand:

And then I think that it is interesting with social responsibility and I really wanted to work for a company where I could stand for the product, where I can feel that, really cliché, that I could feel that I am doing something for society...rather than, I don't know, find a new kind of potato chips and push them out to the people so that they will get even fatter and contribute to consumption society.

In this quote she recognizes that it is a "cliché", but insist that it is a part of her values to do something for the company. She uses social responsibility, which is part of the brand discourse, and how she feels that she can relate to it as being good for society, contrasting it to the consumption in society. A male trainee instead puts the emphasis on opportunities: "Dynamic, international, a lot of opportunities, a lot of intelligent people. I only know focused people that have a goal...this is what I experience." These two trainees thus relate to the brand by one of its features: social responsibility or opportunities, acting as celebrators. They do this in claiming identity and a feeling of belonging to the social group by living the brand and making the brand characteristics part of their own (Harquil, 2004). According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002) having

values that ‘fit’ the company and being exposed to the discourse that surrounds the brand, the values can become a controlling force as the company decides to choose an employee because he or she fits.

If we apply this theme to the ‘right’ person or ‘ideal’ employee and look at what this tells us, we see that it relates to what people state are their personal characteristics: “I fit the profile they were looking for...I know that they are looking for certain personal traits...I am social and open.” Another participant said: “It felt like they were recruiting the same kind of person, so when I came along I fitted as well.” Yet another stated: “I think they recruited me for who I am, I’m really open and social.” This shows the organizations intention of constructing an ideal employee and how the employees have adopted the notion that they are the right person in how they relate to the brand, showing that the discourse has created subjectivities.

Another male trainee talks about the brand and organization in a dedicated way as he states: “There is a program called ELEN a great place to work...and I always agree with that, actually, I can identify myself with the company.” He continues by saying: “It’s not like you are branded and stamped with an ELEN stamp.” Even though he can relate to the brand and organization, and does that in a positive way, he honestly does not feel like he is branded, he just enjoys the work. Looking into the above accounts the trainees seem to adopt the brand discourse this mirrors all the interviews we had with the trainees. This implies that the ideal employee is reproduced as a ‘little brand’, which could have implications for diversity and homogenisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Basset-Jones, 2005).

We have found that the newbies relate to the brand by total adoption and celebration of it. They become subject to the brand as they are highly exposed to it, but we also see that, as in the last example, they do not necessarily, themselves, connect their positive feelings about the brand to being branded, we interpret this as an indication that the newbies are internalizing the brand and making the discourses their own. We note that short tenure seems to have an effect on the degree of exposure. This implies that exposure of the brand discourse, in a formal way from management, thus is not an on-going process, but something that happens mainly whilst the participants are new to the organization. Implying that the brand matters most in the first phase when attracting employees. Another finding was that position has an effect on how employees relate to the brand. This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

4.2.2 *Branded Positions: Producers and Consumers*

As noted earlier our interest and main focus in this project is on how employees experience the brand. We have found that context matters. From our data, an employee's position, meaning whether they produce branded messages or consume them determines, to some extent, their relationship to the brand. The closer the employee is to the production of branded messages, the more they relate. Five examples augment our argument: the first two come from an HR business partner, who is a producer of the brand, and her co-worker, and then we have three examples that relate to the consumers of the brand, one is a specialist in product innovation, one works as a controller and the third is a project leader. They, like most employees, are meant to be consumers of the brand.

The HR business partner is in her late thirties and has worked for the company for six years. Her main responsibilities is human resources matters and working with employee branding. "When we sit at the head office working with employee branding we use the word *ELENite* when we are discussing who we want for ELEN." She continues by saying:

We do employee branding...The campaigns that has been in for example magazines, newspapers and also in our ads when we are seeking recruits, and when we are looking for trainees. We push for what we can offer and the social responsibility.

This quote makes clear that the HR business partner views herself as the producer of the brand. This relationship comes through as she says: "I mean if I would say *ELENite* and employee branding at the fifth floor they would probably look at me like I was some kind of alien." A closer look at this statement reveals that the producers of the brand have their own discourse around the brand as they are aware of this and avoid using this language when talking to the consumers of the brand. Another point is that the branders or the producers design the branded message in order to attract the right employee by constructing an image of the ideal employee. She continues: "It's about selling to the managers using their language, that if we recruit the wrong person it will cost them." Again implying that there is an ideal employee constructed through the branded materials that is then communicated to the managers that recruit. The quote can be interpreted in the sense that it is the HR department that is calling the shots when it comes to who gets hired, as there is one ideal type of person emerging through the

brand. This is further strengthened as she continues: “We want managers that are open for new ideas...that we can coach...then they get a ‘drivers licence’ for managers.”

As a producer of the brand, with a certain degree of control over it, we believe that the HR business partner is supposed to like the brand and celebrate it as it is a big part of her every day work. From the above we can see that the HR department not only controls the brand message, it also supports the messages, which could lead to the brand being reproduced. This leads us to how the producers relate to the brand. The HR business partner relates positively to the brand as can be seen on the following quote:

I believe ELEN has an important assignment to fulfil and a big responsibility, I feel that what we do is extremely important...I’m proud of ELEN as an employer...Yes, we are a great employer. You can be proud of ELEN from many perspectives. A good employer, both regarding opportunities and taking care of its personnel.

From this quote she speaks as an aspiring HR business partner as she repeatedly talks about ELEN as a good employer and her position becomes evident as she refers to “we” being the employer, thus saying that she herself has a part in being this “great employer”. Further she relates to the brand when she states that she is proud of ELEN as an employer and discusses the important responsibilities that the company faces. We interpret that she strongly relates to the brand as she is a producer of it. For that reasons we believe that she has to like it more than if she was a consumer as she takes part in constructing it, thus making her a celebrator. An ambitious mother working closely with the HR business partner also identifies with the brand and relates to it as a celebrator when she starts out by saying: “Life is more than only the work, even though the work is extremely important to me. It is a big part of my identity.” Then she continues: “I’m very loyal to ELEN.” From this we see that as a producer she identifies with the brand and although she is also honest about the fact that there is more to life than work, she wants to emphasize that she is loyal. She continues later on in the account to describe in more detail how she relates:

ELEN is a good employer...there are opportunities for those that want...we have a lot of ambition...we work a lot with our social responsibility, actually we do that all over. I want to take responsibility and we do that. It is really important for me.

In this quote she also refers to the company and its employees as “we” using the brand discourse when talking about the opportunities for those that seek them and the social responsibility that she, herself, relates to as a person.

The above accounts show that the producers celebrate the brand. They take part in constructing the branded discourse, which leads to them strategically adopting the brand that potentially makes their work easier.

We now shift to another example where we explore how three consumers of the brand relate to it. This is done to show how other participants can relate to the brand in a different way. Note how this example is quite different when the people are not producers of the brand. These examples mirror what we found across the interviews.

The first is a specialist of product innovation at ELEN. He has worked for the company the last three years in various departments and at different locations. As a consumer of the brand he expresses cynicism towards it.

I work. It's not a blessing that I'm working at ELEN. It's not like I'm knighted or you know, blessed by God in a way working at ELEN. It is interesting topics and I like to work on interesting topics. So there's a match.

In the above quote he describes that he identifies with and likes the work. He feels a match as the work he is performing is in line with his interests but does not seem to identify with the brand rhetoric. In a sense, he is celebrating the work but downplaying the brand. He continues when asked about the brand:

We are trying to get one ELEN culture...I don't know how to describe it. I just don't see any real inner values represented by this umbrella...I think it is too much to call it a culture.

He continues and expresses how he feels about the values:

Well I think they are definitely great values that everyone should encourage themselves to use towards that goal...it's a good guideline to stretch out to. How you would like your employees to be like.

We interpret this as although the brand is not a part of his every day work the values are. He does not seem to like the idea of it being part of a marketing frame that

employees are supposed to ingest. When asked about it he reacts in a more negative way than positive, although he recognises that the values are a good guiding tool for people and for the company to decide what kind of person they want representing the company. This takes us to the example of our next consumer of the brand.

Our second example is a female controller in her thirties that has worked for the company nearly three years. She also expresses cynicism towards the brand as a consumer.

If you ask me what values we have. I am not able to say, and that actually says a lot. [Pause] Yes it really says a lot I think. If I don't know them, then the other employees won't know them either, perhaps those working with HR. And that says a lot about how they actually have managed to internalise them.

The quote refers to the HR department as the producer of the brand and she recognises the obvious fact that of course the human resource department knows the values as they made them. On the other hand the consumers do not and she makes the assumption that this mirrors how other employees relate as well. From the quote we also interpret that she feels it is their responsibility as producer to convey and internalise the values to others, thus she is not taking responsibility for it herself.

She continues talking about the company in the interview stating that: "It is a good place to work". Several times she mentions the importance of social responsibility:

The social responsibility is so important, energy is so important for the society. We are truly doing something that is good, without heat we would not... [Pause]... We sometimes forget that.

Here she relates to the core of the brand although she does not know the values by heart. She also talks about the people: "The people are open and social like me. We are the same." She continues and talks more about openness: "It is important to be open. I often get things I need to do, last minute from co-workers. Then the only thing that counts is to be open [Laughs]." Here she also relates to one of the values of the brand discourse, the importance of openness. It seems like it is internalised since a lot of her work revolves around getting information and working closely with people. Being subjected to socialization around the values makes her act according to them without reflecting over it. She relates cynically to the brand even though she conforms to it

(Fleming & Spicer, 2003). As the specialist in the first example, she downplays the brand when asked about it but seems to overall enjoy her work and the people she works with.

Our third example is a young project leader in his early thirties that has worked his way up the organisation the last four years. As he is simply subject to the brand and can perhaps not see an immediate strategic advantage to his work he portrays the brand in a cynical way: “For all of the employees at ELEN, there are a bunch of stated values that one should follow and it's pretty much common sense, and that, most people have.”

The above analysis of the consumers of the brand is in relation to Fleming and Spicer (2003) that not all employees respond positively to corporate culture, which in our case is the brand, and employees can be cynical about it. This leads to them dis-identifying, however these employees act according to the values to be able to navigate the brand and are thus subject to the power relations engendered in the everyday discourse around the brand.

From the above discussion we can draw the conclusion that position matters. Employees that have more control over the production of the brand relate more to the brand and act as celebrators. What we have found was that the producer of the brand both controls the brand message and supports it. That could lead to the brand being reproduced. On the other hand the consumer does not relate directly to the brand and even downplays it. However, they act according to the values and are subject to the discourse surrounding the brand. Another finding is that employees lean on the brand when they find themselves in a tricky situations. This is explored in the next section.

4.2.3 Tricky Navigation in the Face of Stigma

In our analysis we have found that employees relate to the brand in different ways from total adoption, to strategic adoption, and cynicism. Additionally we found that they evoke the brand and use it as a cover to navigate tensions. Since ELEN's price is comparatively high and uses disputable methods to extract energy, people have a strong opinion when it comes to the company. Employee discourses reveal several tensions that they must navigate such as how they feel when they tell people where they work. We provide three examples. The first comes from a specialist in the finance department, the second from a male trainee and the third from a female trainee.

A finance specialist at ELEN in her late twenties describes how she has to defend the brand when she socializes outside the company. Her story is played out as follows:

I do everything possible to be a good ambassador. Once it becomes debates and every time you're at a party and say you're working at ELEN people say "oh why are electricity prices so high?" And then I can directly take up the discussion and try to explain in an easy way that there is a reason, then of course it's not always that it might not help but at least in the long run you hope that it might change someone's opinion. When I go to the gym, I have a keychain that says ELEN and a water bottle. I always say that I'm probably ELEN's best ambassador.

From the above quote we can see that the finance specialist repeatedly finds herself in situations where she has to defend her workplace in the face of stigma. When this happens she leans on brand slogans in order to navigate the tension, as she herself puts it: "And then I can directly take up the discussion and try to explain in an easy way that there is a reason." This reason is the brand slogan, which comes up later on in the interview and refers to the social responsibility of the company and giving back to the future of society by investing in the environment. In this example the brand acts as a shield and helps her to navigate the situation by evoking the brand. She seems to be proud of the company as she states in her account that she is an ambassador for ELEN and uses company branded items frequently. Several of our participants used the word ambassador and the wordings "we always defend it" implying that they always defend the company if a conflicting situation comes up.

A lively trainee in his twenties told us a story about how he tries to avoid situations where the company comes up, and how he relates to the brand if he cannot avoid it:

[There are] not many people taking up the ELEN badge. It is not because we are not proud, trust me it is not nice if you are in a garden party, you don't want to say [that you are working for the company]. It is because everyone can talk about energy and has an opinion on it. If I was working at Bosh, for example, that is very technical, everyone, people can't talk about it because they don't know anything about, but here it is like, YES you are a bad boy. Everyone can contribute to the story. But if there is a discussion, then we always defend ELEN.

From the above account, a contradiction is evident as he states that he is proud of working for the company but that he avoids telling people where he works since he knows it can end up in a debate. He also emphasizes that the reason why people join the

discussion on ELEN is because it represents matters in which anyone can have an opinion, not because the company is bad. Interestingly, he states that in a debate “we”, meaning everyone at ELEN, always defend the company, which groups him with the company’s other employees. He relates to the brand navigating the debate, asserting his point of view.

A female trainee uses a narrative to explain the tension and the debates she encounters:

And then you meet a lot of scepticism from relatives and such that where “oh, how unfortunate this is [that you got the job]” [everyone is laughing] and then, well they think it’s capitalistic. Well of course, that’s got to do with political opinions, that they think “oh, no, this is not good and it’s technical”. Very many of my relatives on my mother’s side are humanists and leftist, so they believe this is selling your soul. [everyone is laughing] Then during the weekend we were helping a couple of friends to move, and a woman was there whom I never met before. And afterwards we were all having a chat, and she asked me where I was working so I told her, in a short version, what it is I do. She seemed really sceptic so I said, well, I think ELEN is a really good employer, “you really think that?” Yes I think it’s a really nice atmosphere, it’s very good employee politics, people like it there “oh, you mean it in that sense” then I said yes, but I also think it is a good company, if it’s the business model you refer to, I think it is a good company “oh” she thought. Later it showed that she was pretty left-radical and she thought “oh, you really think so, oh my” really, she was very negative.

As with the other interviewees, the trainee uses the narrative to make sense of her situation. The tension in the discourse is evident as she tells us how people react when she reveals she is working for the company: “oh, how unfortunate this is [that you got the job].” She, too, leans on the brand to navigate these types of situations, using brand slogans, defending herself and the company.

The above examples also reflect how different participants responded to this question. Furthermore, it shows how the employees relate to the brand when unpacking the dilemma of outsider opinion on their working environment as well as processing their personal view of the company for themselves. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) employees defend their company in order to keep up their own appearance, linking it to their identity and to make sense of their work situation; even if they are aware that they are defending it. This we see in all the accounts. The examples also show how influenced people are by other people’s perceptions of the brand which

makes it important to defend it since the brand has a possible implication for their own identity (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The reaction is partly making sense of their experiences (Sandberg & Targama, 2007) as they actually are defending themselves drawing on the brand discourse to navigate potential embarrassment in a social setting. The other option is discussing how they feel about it.

This project had its starting point in exploring how employees relate to the brand, we began by answering the questions: according to the brand discourse what is the organization and who works there? Exploring brand materials to see how they seek to create subjectivities that employees must navigate, we found that the organization strives to create the image of an ideal employee through the brand discourse. The three key messages that the brand communicates to its stakeholders are: social responsibility, opportunities, and openness. As we have shown in our analysis, all these messages signal how the company wants to be perceived and how the ideal employee should behave. Then we unpacked our main empirical question: How do employees relate to the brand? We seek the answer by looking into employee's experiences and the branded discourse that they are subject to.

Given our social constructionist paradigm, we have noted in our analysis that people make sense of and relate to the brand in different ways, either as celebrators or cynics, by identifying or by downplaying its significance and by using it as a shield in tricky situations. The company does not control how people relate, as we have shown it is complex. We have found that context matters and that the relations refer back to the brand discourse in an interesting way. This manifests in how tenure makes people relate differently in comparison to the more recent hires, since most commonly the newbies relate as celebrators. We have also shown how position has an effect on how people relate. A producer of the brand celebrates it while a consumer is more cynical towards it. Furthermore, a producer is in a position to both control the brand message and support it. Although cynics downplay the brand, they still act according to values and are subjected to the discourse surrounding the brand. This manifests in their daily discourse and values that stem from the brand producing subjectivities that are favourable to the prevailing power relations (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Another finding is that people draw from the branded discourse when they are in tricky situations, leaning on it as a shield to defend their own identity. We believe that these findings have several implications, which we will explore in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this project we have explored how employees relate to their corporate brand. Our overall findings suggest that instead of viewing the relationship between employees and brands as static, scholars must take context into account. Given our social constructionists guiding framework, we found that overall the company does not control how employees relate to the brand. In this study, we identified how employees relate differently to the brand depending on their tenure and position. The relationship is on a scale from total adoption, to strategic adoption, and cynicism. Furthermore, the relationship is complex and fluid, as people carry with them preconceived ideas, experiences, and understandings (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). These elements impact each person somewhat differently when making sense of, and understanding current situations. Therefore, no two individuals, in similar social contexts, are likely to interpret situations in exactly the same way. This allows us to approach the relationship in a different way as the findings go against the most common view on brands, stating that they are intended to have the same effect on all individuals (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Harquail, 2004).

The first finding, that the company does not control how the employees relate to the brand, implies that the employees are not identifying with the brand discourse. They relate to the work but not to the company or the brand rhetoric. They seem to downplay the brand and relate to it in a cynical manner. The relationships indicate that not all employees were accepting to the notion of being branded.

The second finding, of how context matters for how employees relate to the brand, reveals itself in two different ways. The first is that producers of the brand, those in control of the brand message, have a stronger relationship to the brand, viewing it positively, and acting as celebrators. Whereas consumers, those subject to the brand, downplay it. This contradicts the core of employee branding, which preaches that regardless of employee position, role or function in a company, employees should represent the brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998; Harquail, 2004). The second is that tenure makes people relate in a different way to the more recent hires who most commonly seem to celebrate the brand.

In the following section we will take a closer look at the critical questions, the implications and the interesting themes that emerged during our analysis and from our

findings. All sections are structured around each critical question, discussing its implications.

5.1 Implication 1: Homogenization and Lack of Diversity in Creating 'Little brands'

Brands are meant to have an effect, although more often than not the connection to *how* that occurs is unclear. As we have confirmed by exploring the anatomy of the brand, the brand discourse seems to be constructing an image of the ideal employee. The brand discourse thus creates subjectivities in which the employees have to navigate.

The implications of promoting this ideal employee can lead to homogenization of images and a lack of diversity. A clear indication of homogenization suggests that existing and potential employees share common views and characteristics of the brand discourse. This can be advantageous for the company since it is a form of cohesiveness that makes it easier to integrate and socialize the employees into the organization (Alvesson, 2004) and to gain their acceptance to 'live the brand'. However, we also believe that it can restrain the company in multiple ways, for example in the lack of diversity. If diversity does not exist within the company, innovation, critical thinking, and change initiatives can be limited (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Basset-Jones, 2005). These attributes are important for the company in developing and reaching their accomplishments, particularly in a company like ELEN whose aim is to create new energy solutions for the future.

Creating this ideal employee through the brand discourse can also serve as a means of control. The company hires these 'little brands' that fit the company profile of the ideal employee. The theory is that the employee will be a better fit (Harquail, 2004) in the organization and the profiling can potentially make it easier not only to integrate the newly hired into the organization but also to form and control them.

5.2 Implication 2: Reproducing the Brand Message

The point of conflict that our analysis uncovered was that employees relate to the brand in different ways: as celebrators or cynics; by identifying with the brand, by downplaying it, or by using the brand as a Band-Aid to navigate tricky situations. From the literature we deduct that employee branding is supposed to affect the employee in a similar manner, regardless of the employee's position or role in the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo, 1998; Harquail, 2004). What

we found is that this is not the case. Our findings suggest that those that produce the brand, having more control over it, relate to the brand by celebrating it.

This implies that the producers strategically adopt the brand as it makes their job easier. Because of their position and the role they play in the HR department, it could imply that they are instrumental in reproducing the brand and the brand message, potentially leading to less critical thinking. Another inference could be personal resistance to change. This could, again, impact the lack of diversity and critical thinking by active preference to these ‘little brands’. It is highly probable since the HR department have a say in who gets recruited, as we saw in one of the accounts given by the HR business partner. Another implication could be resistance to changing the brand since you do not feel a need for changing something that you already feel comfortable with. This can result in halting the evolution of the brand, up to the point where it is only reproduced.

On the other hand, it could also promote cohesiveness in the company and contribute to the ‘we’ feeling several of our participants referred to when speaking for the company. Furthermore, the positive feelings that arouse from all of our correspondents in the trainee programme could partly be attributed to messages the HR department continuously sends, as commented on by one of our participants who was “amazed” by their ability to recruit these ‘ideal’ employees.

5.3 Implication 3: Is Branding that Important?

A theme among our participants showed that they identified with the work, stating that they were tailor-made for the tasks they performed, but also that they did not pick up on the brand discourse. As one participant cynically notes, he does not feel “blessed” working for ELEN, but he really enjoys the work as it “matched” his personal interests. Participants further stated that the whole industry around energy was believed to be interesting and that having good co-workers was a great factor. From our data on the consumers of the brand we can make the assumption that the participants did not experience that they were branded. One of the participants joked about that he chose the company because he liked the brand colour, implying that it is out of the question to choose a company because of its brand. Potentially the brand does not control as much as the organization thinks, and if that is the case, why is branding still implemented as the main tool of the company culture to create identification? The employees can potentially perform their work without the brand. On the other hand, the organization

may need it to be able to perform within the market environment since it is a prerequisite for existing on a free market level.

The data also suggests that being subject to socialization of company values makes employees adapt to the values in spite of their cynicism towards it, even though they are not fully connecting with it. We believe this response helps the employee to better navigate the discourse. The findings are in line with Fleming and Spicer (2003) who argue that employees do not have to feel that they relate to the brand in a positive way to adopt its values.

We also saw that trainees celebrate the brand and have a positive relationship to it, whereas other consumers of the brand do not feel the same attachment. These newbies were, before getting their position on the trainee programme, individuals that were eagerly seeking a job and seem to notice and relate to the brand differently to other employees. As newcomers they needed to make sense of the organization through the organizational discourse as they were unsure of their role in the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Does this mean that employee branding in particular only has an effect in attracting employees but not in retaining and motivating them? As our participant said, they got motivated by challenging work as well as by their co-workers, which is not connected to the brand per se. It also implies that the brand needs to be viewed as an on-going process as its initial influence seems to wear off for the long-term employees.

5.4 Implication 4: Preventing Change

We noted in our analysis that employee discourses reveal tension, when employees are in a position where they feel they need to defend the brand. When in conflict, they resort to using the brand to navigate these situations and in the process defending their own choices by keeping up appearances through publicly identifying with the brand (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). They lean on the brand in tricky situations by using brand slogans. Tensions and ambiguities surround the implications that this could produce. Our interpretation is that it could very well have an effect on change by defensively repeating the company line. The employees have at least two options to choose from when engaging in brand discourse; by highlighting the positive side of the proposed problem and in doing so potentially avoid addressing it, or be honest which could press the company to deal with conflicting issues.

As demonstrated, the main findings are, first of all, that the company does not control how the employees relate to the brand and, secondly, that context matters in how employees relate to the brand, especially in relation to tenure and position. Further findings also suggest that the relationship is fluid and complex. From these findings we have discussed the different implication they can lead to. We propose that if the brand is to facilitate the intended effect the company strives for, it has to be regarded as an on-going process and continuously developed so that brand themes can be effectively woven into the company culture (Alvesson & Svingsson, 2008). Ultimately the characteristics of the brand discourse present a challenge, as our findings dictate, we look at the relationship from an interpretive paradigm, taking into consideration that individuals have preconceived ideas and subjective understanding that affects how they make sense of this relationship in different ways.

By having dedicated brand producers, the brand message can be strengthened, but it can also get continuously reproduced and thus create constraints if these producers are reluctant towards change. There is a risk of homogenization of images when using a brand that promotes an ideal employee, which can have implications for change, diversity and innovation. We also conclude that perhaps the brand does not have to be the means for motivation and retention of employees; instead our findings suggest that the current form should rather be utilized as a good tool for attracting new recruits. We also ask if branding is all that important, since it does not seem to create the intended identification with its employees, even if they agree with its message.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

We started this project with three questions: *What is the brand discourse? What subjectivities does the brand engender?* and, *How do employees relate to the brand?* We took an interpretative approach, constructing a qualitative study containing interviews and branded marketing documents, when examining the case of ELEN, as our empirical basis for analysis. When conducting our analysis we started out by mapping out the anatomy of the brand. From that we deduced, that the brand consisted of three themes: social responsibility, opportunities, and openness. These formed an idea of the ‘ideal’ employee, which the company relies on to portray both themselves and those who work for the organization, and which also creates subjectivities that the employees must navigate. Having established the criteria of the brand, we delved into the perceptions of the employees through interviews and learned that they relate to it in many different ways: as celebrators, as cynics, by identifying with the brand, or by downplaying it, but also by leaning on the brand as a Band-Aid. This implies that the company does not control how the employees relate to the brand. The documented reactions showed relations to the brand as complex, fluid and multiple.

We also found that context matters in how employees relate to the brand. Newbies with relatively short employment, and producers of the brand, in a position to wield control over it, related to the brand in a positive way, even celebrating it. Further we found that the participants also related to the brand by using it as a Band-Aid, when navigating tricky discussions about the company in interactions with people outside the company.

We saw in our review of existing literature around brands and employees, that there are two camps. One promotes a functionalist perspective, the ‘business case’, since it views brands almost exclusively as positive, intended to have the same effect on all employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998; Harquail, 2004). We have shown that this is not the case as the study repeatedly uncovered different perceptions and reactions towards the brand. The other camp takes a more critical stand towards brands and states that they can be a controlling and regulating force used to obtain organizational goals (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Fleming & Spicer, 2003). We have further shown that the company does not seem to control how the employees relate to the brand. Our results

have confirmed that this is an empirical question since there is no single answer to how employees relate to the brand discourse.

Our contribution to the field of studies on brands is our interpretative perspective, taking into account the different perceptions and understandings of employees, as our findings suggest that the relationship is complex. What drew us to conduct this type of study was a gap in existing research as it hardly encompassed any literature exploring the employee relationship to company brands (Balmer 2001; Helms & Stern, 2001). The existing studies are mostly centred on perspectives of managers, customers, and brand specialists (Punjasri & Wilson, 2007; Punjasri et al., 2009), which is why we decided to explore the perspective of employees toward the brand. We have found a need to step out of the functionalist way of viewing brands and look at what happens beyond that. After all, the employees are one of the most important assets of a company.

From our study and from discussing the implications of our findings, matters that could be of interest for future research have emerged. First we like to address the fact that this is a limited study, both in time and scope. It would be of interest to do more long-term research on employees' perceptions of brands. Our study was conducted in a Swedish energy company, but future studies could take place in another culture or another type of company of different size and industry. This would broaden the research and perhaps make other understandings and implications more visible as well as comparing other types of brand discourses and their specific effect.

Second, we would like to point out the notable connection between context and perception. Participants working in HR departments, as producers, with a controlling responsibility of the brand and of new hires, took a positive stand towards the brand discourse, acting as celebrators, whereas consumers downplayed it. Therefore it could be of interest to do supplementary research focused on HR managers and their perception of the brand they control. The study implies that brand discourse is most receptive to new employees in the organization. We also found that employment period mattered, as the newbies of the organization were most recently exposed and also related in a positive way towards the brand discourse, thus the employee brand only seemed to attract, not to motivate and retain. This could be studied further for directions and suggestions of how management can work with branding matters in regard to, both newly hired and long-term staff. We also believe that it would broaden the scope of

future research to look at the relationship between brand and culture, in a more profound way than our study has done, because of our limited time and scope.

Finally, one consistent finding was that employees readily employ the brand as a tool for navigating tension in debates and discussions around the more disputable characteristics of the company. A further examination of how employees use brands as tools in other uncertain situations could lead to a deeper understanding of the ways a brand can become both a shield and a comfort for employees when encountering difficult situations outside the organization.

The study has inevitably left us with more questions than answers. However it most certainly gives a clear indication on how to direct future studies and all in all, a good start for further investigations.

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