



# The silver bullet of branding: Fantasies and practices of organizational identity work in organizational identity change process



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## 1. Introduction

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

Recent research has highlighted how the world is dominated by a brand logic, with corporate brands becoming loci of meaning management directed not only at external audiences, such as consumers, but also at organizational members (Kornberger, 2010; Mumby, 2016). Consequently, a more organizational approach to the study of branding has supplemented traditional marketing research, focusing on the organizing effects of the brand for the internal functioning of the organization (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2017; Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011; Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2015; Frandsen, 2015, 2016; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Järventie-Thesleff, Moisander, & Laine, 2011; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Müller, 2016; Mumby, 2016; Vásquez, Sergi, & Cordelier, 2013). This body of work has demonstrated that corporate branding has become a vital part of corporate strategy for most organizations, both public and private, matching the belief that the corporate brand is invaluable in positioning an organization as unique in a global, competitive environment (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011).

The research objective of this paper is to understand the role and function of branding for planned organizational identity change. Previous literature has pointed out that organizational identity is vitally important to successful corporate branding, as the symbolic power of the corporate brand is seen as linked to its ability to reflect the unique

organizational identity of the organization behind its products (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Thus, the organization and its members become the point of differentiation in “being branded” towards external stakeholders (Brannan et al., 2011; Frandsen, 2015, 2016; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Müller, 2016; Vásquez et al., 2013). Following this branding logic, organizational identity has turned into an asset to be branded, and organizational identity work has become increasingly “professionalized,” involving marketing experts, communication specialists, public-relations bureaus, advertising agencies, and graphic designers, as well as a range of organizational managers and employees within marketing, communication, human resources, strategy, and customer service (Kornberger, 2010). This development, however, appears to be relatively understudied within research on organizations in general and on organizational identity specifically. Thus, we know relatively little about how corporate branding influences the organizational identity work ongoing in organizations today. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question: How is branding discursively constructed and practiced by organizational members engaged in organizational identity work?

The “silver bullet” serves as an explanatory metaphor for the way branding is discursively constructed in the context of a planned organizational identity change, as branding is believed to “cut through” organizational complexities, providing a straightforward solution to organizational identity tensions. An ethnographic case study of corporate brand planning and implementation at a European telecommunications corporation, MGP, illuminates the branding practices of identity definition, projection, promotion, and enactment, all important parts of organizational identity work. The discourse and

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

practices that comprise the branding process in the case study are guided by fantasies ascribed to the future identity of the organization and to the grand possibilities for managing the process of changing organizational identity. On this basis, I make the overall argument that corporate branding must be theorized and analyzed empirically as a logic with wide-ranging implications for the way work is organized around planned organizational identity change.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Organizational identity change

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

From this perspective, organizational identity is conceptualized as comprising both *identity claims* or labels, which symbolically express "who we are as an organization," and *shared understandings* about what those identity claims mean (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Planned organizational identity change may not only include changes to identity claims but also members' belief systems. Extant literature typically characterizes this process as a movement from clarity about the organizational identity, to an emerging ambiguity around 'who we are' and 'who we want to become,' to a renewed clarity about the organizational identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). This is described as evolving sense-making and sense-giving processes, which engage the management in envisioning and signaling a new identity and the entire organization in subsequent re-visions and energizing (enacting) the new (changed) organizational identity (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) remark that "any substantive change leads to the alteration of existing value and meaning systems" (p. 434). Both the organizational identity claims and the collective identity understandings are in other words seen as changeable, though not necessarily easily accomplished.

Organizational identity change processes are described by Corley and Gioia (2004) as "precarious" and fraught with ambiguity, as existing claims and understandings of "who we are" require redefinition. Similarly, research has previously highlighted that identity tensions in change processes are *triggered* by discrepancies between "who we are" and "who we would like to be" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Hatch, Schultz, & Skov, 2015) or between "who we are" and "who others think we are" (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Corley and Gioia (2004) explain that "Identity ambiguity implies multiple possible interpretations about which core features should define the changed organization, so tensions can accompany the process of deciding which interpretations

will prevail in shaping the company's future image" (p. 173). The role of top-management in planned organizational identity change is thus to bring clarity and settle tensions of identity struggle through sensegiving activities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Van Riel, Bhatt, & Baumann, 2016).

Indeed, some studies have questioned if changes in *organizational identity claims* strategically fostered by management may necessarily bring changes in the *shared organizational identity understandings*. For example, Humphreys and Brown's (2002) study of organizational identity change in a higher education institution demonstrates the fragmented and conflicting nature of the organizational identity narratives authored by management, employees, and external stakeholders. Corley (2004) similarly demonstrates that organizational identity beliefs are different within an organization along the hierarchical division of organizational members, producing a gap between "perceived changes to the organizational identity and the actual implementation of identity change" (p. 1164). Furthermore, Scott and Lane (2000) argue that organizational identity understandings emerge in the interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders; thus, imagining organizational identity as a coherent, aligned, collective, and shared frame of sense-making misses the important processes of contestation and negotiation between the organization and its various stakeholders.

Based on these empirical studies, it is evident that organizational identity change is dominated by ambiguity, tensions and struggles in various ways, both related to the *organizational identity claims* and related to managing the *shared understanding* of the organizational identity. In this paper, I argue that branding ideas and practices are used as ways for management to handle the ambiguities, tensions, and complexities of organizational identity change. While Corley and Gioia (2004) mention branding efforts as a response to ambiguity in organizational identity change, they make little attempt to explain fully the role and function of branding in the process of organizational identity change. Christensen and Cornelissen (2010) argue that the "organization" we find in the corporate branding literature is "an organization defined, shaped, and controlled by its overall corporate message (p. 12)." Still, corporate branding ideas and practices have received relatively little attention by scholars within management and organizational studies in terms of their influence on organizational identity change for strategic purposes.

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

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