**Incorporating the creative subject:   
Branding outside–in through identity incentives**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the intersection of branding, identity, and control. It develops the notion of identity-incentive branding that links research on the collective-associative construction of occupational identities (Ashcraft, 2013) with work on identity incentives as engaging form of control (Anteby, 2008). Empirically, we draw on a case study of a North American grocery chain that is known for employing art-school graduates and other creative talents in creative (store artist) and non-creative shop-floor positions. The study shows that the brand is partly built outside-in through association with employees who incorporate the brand in their identities and lifestyles. In return, those employees receive identity opportunities to validate their desired sense of self as ‘creative subject’. We discuss the dual nature of identity-incentive branding as neo-normative control and outline its implications for the organization and employees.

**Keywords**

Brand, branding, creative self, identity-incentive, neo-normative control, retail sector

**Introduction**

Brands have become a ubiquitous element of our culture. Their logic and language define many aspects of social life, including political and religious practices, our lifestyles and sense of self (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004; Klein, 2000). While much attention has been paid to brands as means of marketing, playing on consumers’ needs and desires with commercial intent, organizational scholars have pointed out that branding can also be seen as means of organizing by communicating or, indeed, imposing certain meanings upon employees (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). Research on *being branded* has therefore started to explore the consequences of being a member of a particular brand (Sullivan et al., 2013, p. 121). It considers the organizational efforts taken to regulate employees’ perceptions, interpretations, and identities (e.g. Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Kornberger, 2010; Pettinger, 2004), which is epitomized in such notions as ‘living the brand’ (Ind, 2001), brand ambassadors, or brand citizens (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Burmann and Zeplin, 2005). Recently, scholars have pointed out that the relationship between *branding* and *being branded* might be more complex. Rather than trying to convince employees to adapt to identities that are provided from the top down, organizations draw on employees’ identities and lifestyle preferences (Land and Taylor, 2010), and their moral values (Jeanes, 2013) to build the brand from the outside-in. Critical scholars hold that this kind of branding is based on immaterial labor, which adds substantially to the brand’s value without being compensated (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006). On the other hand, organizational members seem willing to engage in the production of an emerging brand because it defines in part who they - as members of this brand – are or will become, reflecting a dialectic relationship between *doing branding* and *being branded* (Vasquez et al., 2013).

Adding to this debate, scholars have pointed out that issues of identity are closely related to questions of control (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Anteby, 2008; White, 1992), referring to branding as a new form of organizational control (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Brannen et al. 2015; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Land and Taylor, 2010; Jeanes, 2013). Taken together, the examples suggest that branding, identity, and control are intertwined in ways that beg for further exploration. More specifically, understanding branding from an outside-in perspective poses the question of why employees willingly bring their authentic, brand-relevant selves to work and produce the brand by producing themselves (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Fleming, 2009, 2014; Land and Taylor, 2010). To address this research question conceptually, we develop the notion of identity-incentive branding, linking research on the collective-associative construction of occupational identities (Ashcraft, 2013) with work on identity incentives as engaging form of control (Anteby, 2008).

Empirically, the paper draws on a case study of a North American grocery chain. The case study is interesting for at least two reasons: First, despite the retail’s sector negative image among potential job-seekers (e.g. Broadbridge et al. 2009; Lindsay and McQuaid, 2004), this grocery chain has been successful in building an attractive employer brand, making it repeatedly onto the list of the 100 best companies to work for in the U.S. Second, this grocery chain recruits art school graduates and creative workers into positions of store artist and sign maker and (non-creative) shop-floor positions such as cashier. Knowing that the retail sector tends to recruit low-qualified, cheap labor (e.g. Bozkurt and Grugulis, 2011; Carré et al., 2010), the practice of hiring art-school graduates spurred our interest. Equally, or maybe even more so, we were puzzled by the fact that art school graduates would consider a career at a grocery chain, motivating us to explore the case in greater depth to understand the dynamics of branding work with a particular focus on the role of creative subjects (e.g. Bain, 2005; Beech et al., 2016; Rowlands and Handy, 2012; Taylor and Littleton, 2008, 2012).

The contribution made by our study is twofold: First, introducing the concept of *identity-incentive* as branding practice contributes to our understanding of how brands can be built outside-in in a collective-associative process of linking the brand to employees who embody brand-relevant subcultures that lie outside the main business of the organization. Employing Ashcraft’s (2013) collective-associative view to questions of branding demonstrates its usefulness beyond the work-practitioner domain. Accordingly, the relationship between the brand and employees’ identities is mutually constitutive. To account for its bilateral nature, the notion of identity-incentive branding combines literature that focuses on how the brand derives its meaning from the people associated with it (e.g. Land and Taylor, 2010; Jeanes, 2013), with research that has looked at how brands provide identity opportunities for employees’ desired sense of self (e.g. Brannen et al., 2015). Second, the study adds to the literature on organizational control by showing that employees associate themselves to the brand and willingly bring their identities and lifestyles to work when they are provided with identity incentives (Anteby, 2008). We discuss identity-incentive branding as a facet of neo-normative control (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009) and extend its current focus on existing identities, such as gender and ethnicity, to *desired* identities that are unstable and in need of social validation (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). According to our analysis, brands are neither completely controlling and exploiting employees, nor providing ‘neutral ground’ on which to build one’s identity. Instead, the brand is being produced and consumed by the employees, while employees’ identities are produced and consumed by the brand: employees derive identity from the brand they are working for, and the brand derives its meaning from the employees it incorporates (see Ashcraft, 2013: 12-13 for the bilateral nature of the work-practitioner relationship).

**The brand as the boss: Internalizing the brand and organizational control**

Following the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences (e.g. Alvesson, 1991; Barley, 1983; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Smircich, 1983; Smircich and Calas, 1987; Swidler, 1986), brands are symbolic cultural artifacts and branding a way of expressing preferred values and meanings (e.g. Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Lury, 2004). Brands suggest images of what is typical and expected of a product, a service, an organization, or an employee (Brannan et al, 2015; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Pettinger, 2004). In retail and service organizations, the brand’s meaning is experienced through the store atmosphere, the products, and, perhaps most importantly, in customer service interactions with the sales staff who are expected to embody the soul of the brand (Pettinger, 2004). As a consequence, organizations are interested in employees who identify with, *become,* or *live* the brand and who act in accordance with organizational brand values (e.g. Ind, 2001; Kornberger, 2010). This is branding inside-out: it attempts to regulate employees’ identities by encouraging them to internalize the brand values and align their sense of self with the one that the organization tries to promote (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Jeanes, 2013; Land and Taylor, 2010). According to this first perspective, brands organize by deciding who gets employed and by providing clear directions as to how employees should act and look (their clothing, style, aesthetics) (Pettinger, 2004), hinting at the brand as potential control mechanism (e.g. Brannan et al., 2011, 2015, Kärreman and Rylander 2008).

The literature on organizational control suggests a wide array of forms of control (e.g. Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979; Mintzberg, 1983; Alvesson and Kärreman 2004). While technocratic and ‘objective’ control (that relies on standardized work procedures) can be viewed as intrinsic to modernity and industrialization (Thompson et al 2001), the focus of both practice and research has shifted towards output control and attempts to target workers’ behavior indirectly. This accounts for the increasing destabilization of the corporate form due to heightened competition, outsourcing, offshoring, down-sizing, deregulation, customer orientation, and increased environmental complexity (e.g. Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Kunda and Ailon-Souda, 2005).

Because of the difficulties with quantifying and storing ‘services’ or assuring service quality, output control plays a relatively minor role in service work (Normann 1991; Grönroos 1994). Instead, control in service organizations is largely designed to influence employees’ behavior indirectly by targeting service workers’ hearts and minds and regulating their norms, emotions, beliefs, and values. Here, social relations, identity formation, and ideology are the basic ingredients for exercising what is termed in the literature as *normative control*. Identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) has become one of the most common ways of exercising normative control. Studies have revealed how elite claims (Alvesson and Robertson 2006, Thornborrow and Brown 2009), HRM practices (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007b), and CSR initiatives (Costas and Kärreman 2013) can be mobilized for purposes of identity regulation.

Looking at control from a branding perspective, studies have shown how branding can be used to regulate identity work by stabilizing and maintaining a particular organizational identity that has become unsettled in the wake of corporate growth and expansion (Kärreman and Rylander 2008), by extracting brand storylines that outline the appropriate lifestyle for employees (Land and Taylor 2010), and by operating as a promise for ‘the future career self’ (Brannan et al, 2015). However, brands, like culture, might have unintentional detrimental consequences in their attempts at regulating and controlling employees’ identities, leading to cynical and opportunistic behavior that undermines their meaning. For example, Kunda (1992) underscores the difficulties with high-intensity identity regulation through enforced ideology, where the negative dynamics turn out to outweigh the positive coordinating effects.

**Incorporating the individual: Identity, branding, and neo-normative control**

Recently, scholars have begun to notice that organizations have turned to practices that mobilize, confirm, and strengthen identities and lifestyles *already preferred and expressed* by employees. Rather than forcing people to adapt to brand-specific identities as suggested by normative control, corporations build their brand outside-in by incorporating identities that are already in play. Organizations including McDonalds or Abercrombie and Fitch build their brand by associating it to particular categories of race, gender and sexuality (Mumby, 2016). The practice of building a brand outside-in might be best explained with the help of Ashcraft’s (2013) framework of occupational identity construction. Her argument includes that first, “occupations, like organizations, assume collective identities” and second, “social identities implicate and influence one another” (p. 13). In other words, rather than inventing occupational identities wholesale or independent of other social identities (the traditional unilateral or individual-independent view of identity construction), Ashcraft (2013) demonstrates that collective identities of occupational groups such as nursing, accounting, investment banking, engineering, or aircraft piloting are built by drawing on gendered, education-based, and class-based identity material that lie outside the organization. Accordingly, occupational identities are collective identities that are built through association with other social identities (e.g. male, white, upper-class). Accordingly, “we know the character of an occupation by the company it keeps” (p.6).

In the context of branding work, Land and Taylor (2010) provide a vivid example of how brands can be built through such collective-associative processes. In their empirical study of a boutique brand for clothing that is linked to popular outdoor sports, they show how employee’ lifestyles (e.g. their social identity of being a surfer) are mobilized to articulate and specify the brand. Narratives and anecdotes from employees’ own activities, for example, using the ‘too nice to work’ voucher provided by the company to take a day off and go surfing, are used extensively in promotion materials. Although the company presents itself as alternative and accommodating its employees' needs and desires, Land and Taylor (2010) show that this is a two-way street, as the employees’ lifestyles are extracted for brand meaning and value.

Viewed from a critical perspective, the empirical insight provided by Land and Taylor (2010) can be read as a form of control that is engaging, rather than constraining (Anteby, 2008). Instead of regulating employees’ identities to adapt to and internalize organizational brand values, employees are encouraged to express themselves at work. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) refer to this mechanism as *neo-normative* control. It “involves the selective enlistment of the private dimensions of employee selves through a process of ‘existential empowerment’… what was once protected from the organization via cynicism and psychological distancing is appropriated as a corporate resource to enhance output” (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009: 571). Jeanes (2013) reveals the tensions around this new form of control in the context of her case study of a moral brand that specializes in handmade cosmetics. At first sight, the organization seems to represents employees’ personal values; it can be used as a ‘a platform for their views’ and they willingly do the branding for the brand and live its values and ideals in sales interactions through the expression of their personal engagement and sense of moral purpose. On the other hand, they feel pressure to conform. Only brand-‘fitting’ and conforming employees such as the ‘eco nazi’ (or the ‘tattooed surfer’ in Land and Taylor’s (2010) study) are granted the opportunity for self-expression and authenticity (see also Fleming, 2009). Brands thus exercise neo-normative control through the “freedom of the employee”, empowering them in particular directions and aligning the interests of the organization with the employees’ quest for self-realization (Arvidsson, 2006: 42).

**Incentivizing the individual: Employees’ identity work through brands**

Adding to the abovementioned perspectives on branding, identity, and control, research on organizational identification has shown that employees often enthusiastically embrace the identities that the organization is trying to regulate (e.g. Gotsi et al., 2010; Pratt, 2000), including desired occupational identities such as consultants, investment bankers, or engineers (Ibarra, 1999; Kunda, 1992). In addition, research into work practices that confirm preferred identities (Elsbach, 2009) and the notion of ‘identity workspace’ that outlines how organizations can help members understand who they are and who they want to become (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) show that organizations, alongside financial compensation, have the potential to provide employees with symbolic compensation in the form of identity opportunities or identity rewards (e.g. Akerlof and Kranton, 2005: 11; Anteby, 2008; Brower and Abolafia, 1997) that enables them to validate preferred, but often unstable, identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

In his study on the meaning of leniency as a way of engaging workers in a French aeronautic plant, Anteby (2008) develops the concept of *identity incentives* to account for the fact that opportunities for identity confirmation at work can arouse “identity feelings that induce action or motivate effort” (p. 203) that lie in the organization’s interest. Anteby shows that employees may be willing to provide the identities and lifestyles that the organization is attempting to promote, and feel rewarded in the process. In his example, skilled craftsmen are allowed, even sometimes encouraged, to build so called ’homers’- unauthorized objects, such as ashtrays, window frames, and barbecues (p. 206) for individual consumption. While the craftsmen appreciate the opportunity to deepen and express their craft skills, management tolerates the practice not only because it allows for shady exchanges (managers get their own homers), but because it increases job satisfaction and subtly extends managerial control. Managers gain control over the employees because they are handed the possibility to grant and withdraw opportunities for the enactment of occupational identities. In this sense, Anteby (2008) highlights how management can appropriate elements of collective identities that, as Ashcraft (2013) has pointed out, mostly reside outside the organization, for control purposes.

Alongside this research, recent work has started to explore how brands might provide identity opportunities not only for consumers but also for employees, emphasizing the importance of affective resources, including the feeling of belonging and access to emotional support (Arvidsson, 2006; Brannen et al. 2015; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). Similar to the concept of cultural resources (Weber and Dacin, 2011), symbolic resources (Swidler, 1986), discursive resources (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), or cultural raw material (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), the symbolic meaning of brands can be used by employees to validate their desired sense of self. Interestingly, this symbolic meaning is in part produced by the organizational members themselves. In their study of a re-branding initiative of a university department, Vasquez and colleagues (2013) were able to show how an emerging brand that was produced by the faculty members, in turn provides resources for the faculty members’ own identity work. Focusing on the everyday representation practices that led to a new website for the department, the authors put forward an understanding of branding as “an array of communicative practices, a form of ongoing and collective work where questions of organizational and individual identity are interwoven with concerns of organizational representations” (p. 137), advocating a dialectic understanding of being branded and doing branding as well as linking micro and macro approaches of corporate branding.

Taken together, this third line of research suggests that, instead of being manipulated and forced to take on specific organizational identities, workers actively engage in producing the brand (Vasquez et al. 2013) and might actually look forward to enacting the identities promoted by the organization (Anteby, 2008: 202). This seems particularly true for identities that are highly desirable, but difficult to achieve, such as the creative self (Bain, 2005; Beech et al., 2016; Rowlands and Handy, 2012; Taylor and Littleton, 2008, 2012). Brands that provide relevant identity material might therefore be particularly attractive for employees desiring to confirm their sense of self as creative subjects.

To summarize, our understanding of branding, identity, and control is less concerned with the traditional, top-down view of how employees internalize brands and regulate their identities. Instead, our theoretical framework focuses on the building of a brand by incorporating employees’ identities outside-in, and the working of the brand as identity opportunity. We use Ashcraft’s (2013) concept to outline how the brand is built on the *organizational level* in a collective-associative process and Anteby’s (2008) notion of identity incentive to help explain why employees on the *individual level* might be willing to engage in the association process. In the next section, we provide the empirical basis for the study and outline our methodology and research design.

**Empirical Case**

*Research setting*

The retail chain Genuine Groceries (GG, a pseudonym, as are all respondents’ names) is in the market of offering products and services that focus on natural, local, and organic food. The organization can be described as a lifestyle brand (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2012; Helman and De Chernatony, 1999; Pettinger, 2004) that tries to enter the lives of its customers on a moral level by promoting alternative values, such as green ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility (including the promotion of recycling, supporting the local community, etc.) (e.g. Brunk, 2010; Jeanes, 2013). It ranks among the ten largest public food and drug retailers in the U.S. and is a Fortune 500 company. The grocery store is known for its liberal values and team-based structures. It employs art school graduates and other creative talents who work in creative and non-creative staff functions, i.e. in the positions of store artists or sign makers (about 1 to 1.5 positions per store) or as cashier or team member in the various food departments, such as bakery or cosmetics.

The single case study approach allows researchers to explore organizational processes and phenomena from an interpretive perspective that has the potential to lead to a refined understanding of organizational phenomena (Siggelkow, 2007). Our initial entrance into the research field was motivated by the observation that a grocery store recruits art school graduates – an empirical observation that seemed unusual and ripe with opportunity to explore changes in the workplace settings in post-industrial cultural economies (DuGay and Pryke, 2002). Therefore, we started by looking at the organization and its brand image to better understand why art school graduates would consider a career in the retail sector, later turning directly to art school graduates and other creative subjects in the organization to understand how these employees (their identities and lifestyles) contribute to the meaning of the brand and how aspects of the brand can work as identity incentive for employees aspiring to be ‘a creative’.

*Data collection*

Our fieldwork includes visits to 41 Genuine Groceries stores in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. About half of our visits took place on the West Coast (Los Angeles metropolitan area, here referred to as Area 1), and the East Coast (the New York Tristate area, including Washington, Boston, and Toronto, here referred to as Area 2), respectively. In addition, we also visited three stores in London, UK. Our data come from different data sources including non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and publicly available data (including job adds, internet blogs, newsletters). Our field notes were complemented with photographs taken from the stores’ inside and outside (Warren, 2009). To gain a better understanding of the retail context and the specific characteristics of the GG brand, we also visited numerous conventional grocery stores as well as two competitors who are also engaged in retail in the local and organic food segment. However, the photographs and store visits to other grocery chains were not analyzed formally, but were rather used to further our understanding of GG’s specific brand meaning.

Data collection was carried out alongside data analysis, allowing the data collection process to be refined as our research question developed (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). What started as a study of why art school graduates would opt for a career with a grocery chain gradually shifted as certain findings emerged. To this end, data collection was conducted over four rounds between June 2010 and July 2014. In data collection rounds 1 and 2, we concentrated on talking to store artists and sign makers on both the West Coast (data collection round 1) and East Coast (data collection round 2). However, opportunities to converse with other team members, management team members, and customers were seized whenever possible. We added more questions to our semi-structured interviews in round three and four, addressing issues of branding and identity work more directly (see Appendix for interview guideline). In the latter data collection rounds, we also expanded the focus to more systematically include team members that were working in non-creative staff functions and management team members, arranging interviews with them in advance. Some of these team members turned out to be working as artists in their free time (although this was not a criterion for our choice of interviewing them). In total, 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 24 store artists, 13 team members, and 10 management team members. The interviews were designed to last approximately 25 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 10 minutes and the longest 80 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. When recording was not possible, we summarized the interviews in our notes (see Table in Appendix for overview of respondents).

*Data analysis*

We approached our data from a constructive-critical perspective (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), analyzing our data in an in-depth, iterative, and reflexive process, looking for repetitive patterns to construct meaning. For reasons of clarity, we detailed this iterative process as involving three successive steps, even though these were overlapping and sometimes carried out simultaneously as our data analysis was continuously refined, incorporating new data from data collection rounds three and four (see above).

The first step involved scrupulous readings of our raw data, particularly our field notes, photographs, and the publicly available material we had gathered in order to identify emerging themes and issues that would help us understand the meaning of the GG brand. Each brand theme that emerged was then further explored by looking for ambivalences, ruptures, and relations that would help us understand *how* this specific meaning was created and maintained. It was at this point that we started to engage with literature on branding work and the role of employees in the branding process as a way to help make sense of what our empirical case was about (e.g. Charmaz, 2006).

The second step can be described as following the logic of abduction (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007a). It involved a constant shifting between our empirical data and the concepts that we found in the literature. Taking the interview transcripts as primary data sources in step two, we coded them for a) instances in which employees actively contribute to the brand (meaning) i.e. examples of how employees’ identities and lifestyles were involved in doing the branding. This included practices such as showing customers their tattoos or talking about their art. After having sensed that the brand might provide identity opportunities, ‘symbolic compensation’ or what Anteby (2008) has described as identity incentive, we also systematically coded for b) illustrations of how the brand meaning was used by employees to express who they were and how they justified why they were working for this brand. This included hinting at meanings that could serve as symbolic compensation, as they provided desirable identity opportunities. For example, these could include ‘*In this job, I find companionship’* or ‘*I can be an artist and make the store look beautiful’*.

In the third step, we reviewed the data from the second step and compared it with our initial list of brand meaning themes to see how they fitted together, leading to a consolidated list of four brand themes. For each brand theme, we gathered empirical illustrations of how this meaning is co-created by employees’ and how the brand theme can serve as identity incentive for the employees by providing them with identity opportunities to produce themselves as creative subjects. Figure 1 juxtaposes the four brand themes, the branding work, and the identity incentives.

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Figure 1 about here

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**Findings**

***GG as a place for cultural activity and art: Being an artist***

Art and culture are present in the life of this organization in numerous ways. The grocery chain recruits art school graduates and ‘creative talent’ to work as ‘store artist’ – a position that is available in virtually all of the 800 stores. The title indicates that the position goes beyond the functionality and efficiency dominating the logic of a conventional grocery store. It breaks with traditional outlooks by introducing the notion of art into a commodity business. The job of the store artist is to create a special atmosphere in the store by means of handmade artworks. In addition, the store artists are responsible for communication design, including chalkboards that inform consumers about prices or product quality. The design builds on manual and cultural practices, rather than purely efficient communication designs, thereby creating an arts and crafts atmosphere. The artistic signature that the store art carries signals a cultural organization that resonates with site-specific themes and issues. For example, in one of the New York stores located in close proximity to the Museum of Modern Art, one can find pop art takes on old and modern masters on the cafeteria tables. All stores show hand-drawn signs and creative illustrations of specific product qualities and tastes, sometimes even using poetic language or other creative text elements. These artworks turn the grocery store into a gallery: a place where artwork is on display for a broad audience. This is emphasized in some stores by dedicated exhibition corners where local artists can showcase their work and offer it for sale (see Figure 2). The grocery store is also a studio: Consumers and employees alike can witness how the artwork is produced on site by taking a look into the store artists’ studio (see Figure 2). Overall, the mere presence of store artists creates a special atmosphere that signals that this grocery chain is different from other retailers. To speak with Ashcraft (2013), we know the character of the brand “by the company it keeps” (p.6). By hiring creative talents the brand associates itself with a social identity that is unusual for the retail sector, marking a clear distinction to other grocery chains.

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Figure 2 about here

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Employees (store artist and team members alike) are sometimes encouraged by the store’s management to show their musical talent and to perform live during official store hours. Other managers set up bands for special promotions inside or outside the store. From a branding perspective, GG is able to express its commitment to creative talents and cultural activities. It also distances itself from the (negative) image of standardized mass production and commodities that is characteristic of other retail chains such as Wal-Mart (e.g. Ann and Carr, 2010).

From the employee’s perspective, the GG brands serves as identity opportunity by providing a stage and organizing an audience. The store artists can show their work and be sure that somebody will see it. The store artists are often asked about their artworks and even receive requests to come and do work for customers in their free time. Yao, who is employed as a store DJ, talks about the appreciation and good feeling he gets from customers’ reactions.

*I have people come up to me all day and saying, thank you for playing this music, this is really nice, I come out of my way to come to this store, I hear these comments all day long. … But my point is, I’m seeing this happiness, they’re coming to me and saying, ‘you make me happy’, they literally say that, so this is very nice, a very good feeling. (Yao, Store DJ, Area 1)*

It is a good illustration of the affective resources that brands can provide and that employees can use for their identity work. The notion of identity opportunity is also clear when the respondents talk about how the position of store artist is considered a ‘privileged position’ that many aspire to. Being able to call oneself store artist or sign maker is compensation in itself for someone who dreams of a career in a creative field.

*… There was only one other position and that was in fact sign maker. I said I wanted to be a sign maker, just given the title ... I have really, I mean, I’m lucky enough to have a nine to five that pays me to do art, not many people can do that. A lot of struggling artists would kill for that, you know, I actually... that’s my job, if you ask me what I do, I’m an artist for [GG] and that got me to realize, wow, I’m doing what I love. (Ali, store artist, Area 1)*

For many, working at GG as a store artist is seen as an entry ticket to the world of design and other creative jobs. Thus, they see it as an opportunity to develop and improve their skills as artist - an identity incentive similar to the craftsmen skills in Anteby’s (2008) study. Our respondents talk about how the job at GG provides them with the opportunity to ‘rebrand’ and ‘reinvent’ themselves as artists or to ‘*pursue design in a more serious capacity*’ (Timothy, store artist, Area 2). In other words, while some see working for this brand as a way to enact a desired identity, others see it as an opportunity for establishing a desired future identity (Brannen et al. 2015). Table 1 provides a summary of the findings.

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Table 1 about here

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***GG as a hotspot for creative people: Belonging to the creative ‘in-crowd’***

The GG retail setting gives considerable visibility to employees who represent the ‘alternative’, ‘artistic’ type. Not all of them are, however, able to work in the position of store artist. Indeed, many work as regular team members in specialty departments, such as cheese, bakery, or cosmetics. Many of them share a passion for art and creativity and often pursue activities in a creative domain in their free-time.

*No, a lot of people around here have their day jobs here, you know, and I’ve met a lot of musicians. I’ve met a lot of other artists who don’t hold the position [of store artist] that I have, that might work in the cheese department or work at the coffee bar, who, you know, are trying to pursue other things besides working here.* (Nils, store artist, Area 2)

Even though we could not find any information in HR brochures that would require a particular look in order to be eligible for working at GG, we did find evidence in job advertisements that GG is actively looking for people who would like to express themselves and be creative. On the other hand, even though the ‘right look’ is not officially a requirement, it seems that existing employees attract new employees who fit in ‘look-wise’.

*[GG] is seen as a lot of things, but I think its team members are seen as kind of, being kind of alternative, you know, and, having that sort of vibe with, you know, the tattoos … GG’s team members have had that kind attached… like this team member was telling me: oh, you look like you fit in here, kind of thing, you know*…(Timothy, store artist, Area 2)

Creative talents are often actively involved in networks that turn out to act as positive feedback loops. They naturally follow what might appear as an insider tip. In turn, GG has become a hotspot for creative talents who are looking for work to finance their creative endeavors. A musician might know an actor who needs a job to pay for living expenses, who then tells a friend who is also a musician about another job at GG. In this case, the brand works like an HR strategy for recruitment and is built in a collective-associative process by incorporating the right kind of people and identities (Ashcraft, 2013). Work relationships and friendships are closely intertwined and create the impression that ‘*we’re all friends here*’ (Mark store manager, Area 1). The job at GG provides employees with the opportunity to meet and engage with likeminded people.

*They have a store artist who’s really good there and, ah, yes, we’ve become really good friends because he likes art and music and we talk and we kind of like similar things and... You just meet people, you know. Like in the same community, people like the same thing, you know, struggling being an artist....* (Paul, store artist, Area 1)

With so many artistic people working at GG, it becomes *the place to be* if one wants to be an active member of the creative ‘in-crowd’. Working for GG after graduating from a fine art school is not taboo, but indeed considered a serious option, which is reflected in graduates’ common practice of looking for GG job openings on a regular basis while finishing their school.

From a branding perspective, the presence of store artists and creative people who are likeminded types creates a particular sense of community with an almost intimate atmosphere that works like an identity incentive (Anteby, 2008). It is a fascinating place with many ‘cool’ things going on that turns the grocery store into ‘the place to be’ – not only for employees who aspire to being considered creative, but also for customers who are willing to pay extra for the ‘enchantment’ that they receive and for those that appreciate the ‘coolness’ of a place.

*Customers come in and, first they hear the music and then, when they see the DJ, … it makes them feel, well, I think, that it makes them feel more, like, wow, this is the place to be. We have people that come here just to hang out. We have people come in here, just to people-watch. … it's not just a place that you come to buy your groceries. You meet with friends, I've seen people come on dates over here. People that, a guy brought a girl on a date over here. … they only come in for one thing and when they see so many other things going on, they just absorb everything* (Mark, store manager, Area 1*)*

The relationship between doing the branding for the organization and receiving identity opportunities in return seems to be a ‘give and take’ as one store artist notes. However, when asked whether it is due to the store artists that customers come in here, he is more cautious:

*It’s give and take, it’s a give and take relationship, but I think yes, if you’re asking if those type of people will shop here and is it because we’re [GG] that they come here or is it because we [the store artists] are bringing them in, I can’t answer (*Ali, store artist, Area 1)

***GG as socio-political organization: Working for a ‘Good Cause’***

*The values of the company itself are actually pretty good, because, it gives back to the community… like a percentage of the sales, in total, of the store, and they would give it to a charity… a local charity or high school that is in need, and then, they give that profit to them, which is amazing. …. I feel like I'm working for a good cause.* (Aiden, team member/musician, Area 1)

In addition to its appearance as a cultural ‘hotspot’, GG can also be portrayed as a social and political organization. There is a strong commitment to social issuesdirected towards the community (in the form of supporting local initiatives, such as animal protection, local vendors, or artists), but also with a global thrust, in the sense of promoting fair trade, sustainable living (recycling), and healthy eating. The everyday business of selling goods to consumers is closely intertwined with charity and other fundraising activities, such as the collection of money to promote healthy eating options. Other examples include the encouragement of consumers to *Donate your small change for big change!* (see Figure 3, first photograph)and to purchase goods to improve lives: *Improving lives with every purchase* (printed on paper bags). The grocery chain presents itself as a passionate social and political actor in the fight against poverty and inequality.

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Figure 3 about here

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From a branding perspective, the traditional categories of ‘bad corporation’ and ‘good citizen’ are remixed, and the organization is able to position itself as an employer with a bigger picture and a social vision. This impression is further strengthened through numerous political and industry initiatives (e.g. quality standards). For employees, GG’s involvement as a social and political institution expands the common notion of corporate social responsibility and demonstrates how a business organization attempts to have a positive impact on the world. This makes the corporation attractive for people who are looking for sense and meaning in their work. The critical view that many creative workers might hold towards working for a large retail corporation is refuted. ‘Working in a grocery store’ becomes an (identity) opportunity for someone who aspires to be ‘working for a good cause’.

*I think that the whole concept of the company, … towards thinking about a good healthy eating, is just more attractive for us, as artist, than a regular corporation. I mean, even though GG is a corporation... Compared with the rest of the other big corporations that work in retail, … it’s completely different. (*Carlos, store artist, Area 1)

Working for GG allows employees to contribute to social change, such as educating customers about the need to recycle. GG’s values allow them to identify with and be proud of what the organization stands for – as one employee put it: “*our organic standards are the ones…we set the organic standards for the country*” (Paul, store artist, Area 1). In other words, GG provides values that are central for the employees’ sense of self as creatives, including social responsibility and political interest, a strong awareness of global issues (climate change, poverty), and a desire to ’volunteer with one or more good causes’ (Ray and Anderson, 2000).

*The atmosphere, and again I think GG kind of pops up in places that have a lot of creative people in it as well. I think the mindset of a creative person such as a musician; … They want to eat healthier and they want these sort of things.  It’s in the lifestyle perhaps (*John, store artist, Area 2)

On the other hand, because artists and creative workers are known for these values and their critical attitudes towards conventional corporations, they authentically embody the brand meaning to customers. The branding depends on credible ‘ambassadors’ who make sure that the brand’s slogan is not lip service, but filled with actual ‘life’. By associating with the right kind of people (Ashcraft, 2013), brand value is generated. Our findings suggest that the opportunity to work ‘for a good cause’ is a powerful identity incentive (Anteby, 2008) for workers who identify as artist, which is why they are willing to get associated with the brand.

***GG as an alternative organization that fosters individuality and authenticity: Being able to ‘bring myself to work’***

Unlike other commodity settings, individuals and their differences are actively shown and expressed at GG. On the level of the employees, we find that individual talents and strengths are promoted. For most of the time, original, hand-drawn chalkboards feature individual team members by presenting them to the customer with their individual talents and personal suggestions, advice, or ideas. The message is not one of representing a standardized employee, but of accentuating and valuing individual differences. For example, on one of the boards we were invited to meet ‘*Lauren! Favorite Actor: Arnold Schwarzenegger. Favorite Fruit: Pineapple. Favorite Veggie: Carrots*.’ (see Figure 3, third photograph). On another, we learned that Ilona is a cake decorator who ‘*loves working with her hands and embracing her creative side*’.

In this retail context, no-one is a ‘number’. Instead, individuality is accentuated. This is also reflected on the store level: according to our interviewees and own observations, each store is different in that it has ‘its own vibe’ and atmosphere, as a result of the artist who is responsible for the store as well as the community in which the store is embedded and which it is supposed to reflect.

*It just happens to be whatever community that store is in and what people are going to look like* (Mason, team member/musician, Area 1)

Individuality is also expressed by particular looks that are encouraged by a liberal body policy that includes, among others, not requiring employees to generally wear a uniform. Judging from the number of times that this was mentioned during the interviews, this freedom seems to represent a central incentive for creative talents, because it allows them to ‘be themselves’ and ‘bring themselves to work’ (Florida, 2012: 72). According to a store artist, the great advantage of working for GG is that they do not require you ‘to put on a tie and pretend that I am somebody else’. This is very attractive for artists because

*We want to be ourselves for as much as possible. … As an artist … you’re trying to find a... place that holds you better, that gives you more options or makes you feel more freedom* (Carlos, store artist, Area 1)

In a similar way, a team member notes:

*I don’t feel very independent wearing what somebody else tells me to wear. ... which is actually one of the reasons why I started working at the store I work at now is they let you wear whatever you want* (Mason, team member/musician, Area 1)

Unfitting standard uniforms that immediately identify employees as members of a service class (Gorz, 1989), are absent. Instead, employees demonstrate their membership of trendy sub-cultures and remain true to their lifestyle during working hours. At GG, employees are encouraged to show ‘who they really are’ and have their tattoos, piercings, or dyed hair – as long as it does not offend anyone[[1]](#footnote-2) (see Figure 3).

*There’s a lot of eccentric, different types of people, you know, because [this community here] is very artsy and, so, in our store, like the frontend, a lot of people have tattoos and like crazy hairdos and stuff. What’s cool about GG is they don’t care what you look like. There’s people that have tattoos all over their bodies and then work with customers and stuff.* (Noah, team member, Area 1)

The tolerance for sub-cultural practices contrasts sharply with other work settings in the retail service sector. GG’s brand meaning is that of an alternative organization, a ‘holding ground’ (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) for artists and other alternative people. The presence of sub-cultural practices suggests the absence of disciplinary force. Instead, GG presents itself as a place for deviance that is marginalized in mainstream businesses. In fact, being yourself and not somebody else appeals to employees who might hardly function in other settings – as suggested by Aiden, who had not been able to keep steady employment until he started working for GG.

*It's a good company, it's really hard to find a good company. … Me being like a weird kid anyway…*(Aiden, team member /musician, Area 1)

From a branding perspective, GG has found a way to productively integrate the individual idiosyncrasies of creative people into a corporate context. Through *association* with different subcultures, the brand as alternative organization is built. At the same time, this brand meaning serves as identity *incentive* for someone who does not function in standardized settings. In a way, one might even say that the individual idiosyncrasies that are banned or eradicated in other business contexts stand at the very core of the GG business model: Consequently, a tattoo is not only tolerated, but encouraged or even required. What used to be a marginalized subculture in the corporate world shapes the corporate culture at GG, highlighting the centrality of aesthetic labor in contemporary organizations (e.g. Warhurst et al. 2000).

**Discussion**

Branding has become a “central, constitutive feature of organizing in contemporary capitalism”, which requires us to take a closer look at the intersection of branding, control, and identity (Mumby, 2016: 1). Responding to this recent call, the paper has explored the brand meaning of a North American grocery chain and its link to employees’ identities and organizational control. We propose that branding is a dynamic, mutually constitutive process (see also Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 2002) in which the brand meaning is produced by incorporating employees’ brand-relevant identities. At the same time, the brand provides relevant identity incentives that are consumed by the employees to produce their desired sense of self as creative subjects. We refer to this form of branding as *identity-incentive branding*. It relies on the simultaneous affirmation and exploitation of employees’ desired identities in exchange for their co-creation of the brand. While we acknowledge that both the employee and the brand can draw on the resources of the respective other, the term identity- incentive was chosen deliberately, because it hints at the potential controlling effect of incentives (Anteby, 2008). In the following, we explore in greater depth the implications of identity-incentive branding for the organization and the employees.

***Branding by association and identity-incentives***

GG’s preference to incorporate the artistic alternative ‘type’ employee is in line with its overall brand promise and meaning. The association with employees’ identities and lifestyles is thus a viable approach for the creation of its brand (Land and Taylor, 2010). The practice of building a brand by associating with artists, including actors and musicians, is well documented in the marketing literature (e.g. Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995; Erdogan, 1999). For example, Byrne, Whitehead, and Breen (2003) studied the association with Jamie Oliver (the television celebrity known as The Naked Chef) in branding the products of leading grocery stores in Britain and New Zealand as high-class choices. However, differing from this type of celebrity endorsement, the art school graduates and creative talents at GG are no celebrities, but often ‘just out of school’ young people with an interest in art and aesthetics, representing members of a ‘creative’ community or class.

In other words, it is less the individual person or individual celebrity identity that is hired, but rather the employees’ membership in a particular subculture, a collective identity including looks (e.g. Pettinger, 2004; Warhurst et al. 2000) and values (e.g. Jeanes, 2013). The celebrities in the marketing cases remain extraneous to the organization and receive substantial financial remuneration for their engagement with the brand, which can easily run into millions of dollars (e.g. Agrawal and Kamakura, 1995). By comparison, the association with creative subjects in the case of GG does not cost the organization anything extra. The value that employees add to the brand is compensated for symbolically via identity opportunities that enable them to enact their desired identities (Anteby, 2008). Our case illustrates that cooptation does not necessarily mean that employees are exploited or assimilated against their will. Instead, employees eagerly embrace the brand and use the organization as identity workspace (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) to build and validate the identities they aspire to (Brannen et al., 2015). As such, brands can be seen as repositories for identity work. Like culture, brands provide symbolic meaning that is necessary to validate one’s sense of self. Mumby (2016: 10) notes that in contemporary capitalism, the brand has become “the key point of reference and meaning for employees whose traditional identity markers were disappearing” (p. 10).

The fact that identity-incentive branding builds on already revealed identity preferences means that GG does not need to engage in resource-consuming attempts to define suitable identity projects for its employees, nor in managing meaning to persuade employees to pick up the offered identity projects, as traditional approaches of normative control would suggest. Rather, GG draws on and promotes the preferred identities already firmly in place among potential employees. In this sense, GG follows the common practice of professional service firms, such as accountancies and law firms, where the firms attach themselves to the profession and the professional identity (Grey, 1994). GG’s innovation is having identified a workable occupational identity that lies outside the core practices of the organization. After all, GG sells groceries, which has, at best, tenuous relationship to artistry. This latter aspect distinguishes our findings from the work of scholars such as Land and Taylor (2010) or Jeanes (2013). While the employees in those studies bring to their organizations identities and lifestyles that reflect the organizations’ products, GG draws on identity material that is decoupled from its services and products, adding value to the brand by bringing in an aesthetic, creative element to a non-creative sector.

Moreover, the observation that GG builds on already revealed identity preferences seems to be going against the established view of how identity formation usually happens in organizations. Rather than ‘handing down’ expected identities in a top-down process, the concept of identity-incentive branding supports Ashcraft’s (2013) collective-associate view, whereby collectivities, such as occupational groups and organizations, gain their identities by aligning with other social identities. The brand meaning is thus constructed in relation to the embodied social identities that are associated with it (in our case that of creative subjects).

The key word is *associated* – social identities can be associated and combined in diverse ways, where each combination of associations creates a distinct collective identity. For example, the same type of work can be linked with different symbolic layers, aligning the work with different social strata. As Ashcraft (2013) shows, the work of cutting hair can be understood very differently when it is performed in high street saloons catering to wealthy women versus urban barbershops catering to working class men. The same is true for the work of selling groceries, which has very different connotations if carried out at an artisanal farm, a farmer’s market, a high street boutique vendor, or a Wal-Mart store.

Thus, brands receive their meaning in large part by virtue of their association with social identities that lie outside the organization. This dynamic can be observed in our case. GG clearly engages in practices that mobilize, confirm, and strengthen identities and lifestyles *already expressed* or *desired* by employees. Instead of forcing them to buy into the brand, the brand buys into its employees and their identities and lifestyles. Employees are encouraged to associate their authentic selves with the brand, thereby producing that brand and themselves (Arvidsson, 2006; Land and Taylor, 2010). Seen as a whole, our findings point to the fact that brands have the potential to tap into the collective-associative aspect of identities to help explain how brands are built on the collective or *organizational level* (Ashcraft, 2013). Like Ashcraft (2013), our theoretical framework advocates a *bilateral view* of brand building by addressing also the *individual level*. Accordingly, employees get associated to the brand because the brand provides identity incentives that are relevant for their sense of self (Anteby, 2008). We conclude that at GG, *employees derive identity from the brand they are working for*, and the *brand derives its meaning from the employees it incorporates* (see Ashcraft, 2013: 12-13 for work-practitioner relationship). Figure 4 illustrates the bilateral relationship in which the organization and the employees engage in a mutual constitutive relationship of brand building through association on the *organizational level* and the process of employees’ identity work through identity opportunities and incentives, i.e. their association with the brand on the *individual level*, connecting macro and micro level approaches of corporate branding (Vasquez et al., 2013).

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Figure 4 about here

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***Identity-incentive branding as neo-normative control***

Maintaining that issues of identity are bound up with issues of control, we end our discussion on a critical note, highlighting that identity-incentive branding can work as an engaging form of neo-normative control (Anteby, 2008; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009).

One advantage of building the brand outside-in and associating with identity preferences that already exist lies in the fact that GG does not need to commit much effort to promote the preferred identity: employees already embrace it enthusiastically (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). In this sense, GG has been successful in *sourcing out* both the contents and the socialization of the preferred identity to the employees. At the same time, the fact that a particular identity is *preferred* (i.e. hired) and *sanctioned* (e.g. fired) *by the brand* becomes hidden and makes identity regulation difficult to discern from other forms of social control, that is, control that is exercised between people and not through hierarchy or authority.

Put differently, social control (O’Reilly, 1989; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) becomes the major means of enforcing identity regulation at GG. This kind of identity regulation from *below* or from *the side,* rather than from *above,* is perhaps best understood as a form of *identity capture*, where the coopting of already formed subjectivities takes precedence over trying to persuade individuals to adapt to identity templates sanctioned by the corporation. As a result, the identity incentives are not perceived as controlling by the employees. Rather, they are enchanted by the opportunity to enact a desirable identity that has few other identity spaces available to it where it can be realized and affirmed. The fact that GG has the power to affirm these desired identities makes the employees vulnerable and increases their self-discipline and commitment (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). The more central the identity is to their sense of self, the more the employees will align with the organization in order not to lose the opportunity to affirm their sense of self. Being a ‘creative’ is a highly desirable, but also precarious identity project in contemporary, aesthetic capitalism (e.g. Beech et al. 2016; DuGay and Pryke, 2002; McRobbie, 2001; Taylor and Littleton, 2008, 2012). Opportunities for affirming this identity are sought-after, which puts GG in a privileged position.

The perhaps most critical aspect of identity-incentive branding as neo-normative control might be that employees have no place to hide (Fleming, 2014). Informal culture, long seen as a central source for employees’ authentic self-expression and means to resist management, becomes impossible to keep apart from official culture, as sanctioned by management. At GG, this is further underscored by the fact that employees’ presentations of self are part of the branding process of the organization. Resistance and true individuality become problematic, perhaps even futile, because all available expressions of resistance and individuality have been bought into as part of the brand, very aptly illustrating a central element of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011). Thus, incentivizing employees to allow co-optation of their genuine selves for the good of the organization involves certain drawbacks for the employees that are not easily discernable.

At the same time, as Ashcraft (2013) shows, embodied social identities have always been crucial for the formation of collective identities. Recognizing the importance of *with whom* one is doing things in the formation of collective identities is not the same thing as to say that a particular entity – such as the brand – has the monopoly over deciding which identity incentives currently hold sway. These will differ over time and between industries, and will reflect broader socio-economic and political changes. Their definition is therefore likely to resemble the ongoing struggle over brand meaning among stakeholders, outlining the potential ‘control’ that customers and employees can exercise over brands (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Kornberger, 2010; Mumby, 2016).

**Conclusion**

This paper contributes to our understanding of branding as organizing practice by highlighting how branding, identity, and control come together. It does so by developing the notion of identity-incentive branding that links research on the collective-associative construction of occupational identities (Ashcraft, 2013) with work on identity incentives as engaging form of control (Anteby, 2008). Our framework advocates a bilateral view of mutual constitutive relationships between the building of the brand and employees’ identities. Accordingly, brands neither completely control and exploit employees, nor do they provide ‘neutral ground’ on which to build one’s identity. By arguing that employees associate themselves to the brand and willingly bring their identities and lifestyles to work when they are provided with identity opportunities that are relevant for their desired sense of self (Anteby, 2008), the concept of identity-incentive branding adds to our understanding of how brands can exert control (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Brannen et al. 2015; Jeanes, 2013; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Land and Taylor, 2010; Mumby, 2016) and how identity-incentive branding works as a facet of neo-normative control not yet discussed in current literature (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). It extends its focus from existing identities, such as gender and ethnicity, to *desired* identities that are unstable and in need of social recognition and validation.

In contemporary, aesthetic capitalism, branding and identity projects are not only of importance for professional service firms and their complex occupational identities (e.g. Ashcraft, 2013; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Kärreman and Rylander 2008) but also for the (formerly) low-skilled retail service sector that is hiring workers with backgrounds in creative fields. The advent of job titles such as ‘store artist’, ‘sandwich artist’ or ‘barista’ can bee seen as a trend towards building brands by associating with creative subjects that are on the look-out for opportunities to validate their desired sense of self. Capitalizing on desired identities might thus represent a promising business model for retail service organizations that are able to incentivize positively charged identity projects with appropriate symbolic means.

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1. For example, tattoos that show women with naked breasts would need to be covered so as not to offend anyone. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)