# Portraits of Call Centre Employees: Understanding control and identity work

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## Abstract

This paper examines how employees respond to managements' conflicting use of technocratic forms of control to ensure efficiency and socio-ideological control to produce an 'on brand' employee identity. The paper proposes a portrait-based form of ethnography as a way to illustrate both commonalities and differences in employees' identity work and responses to managerial control within the call centre setting. The findings show that cynical distancing – and subtle enactment of the service brand – grows out of simultaneous embracing of and distancing from the contested work role. The study extends the concept of cynical distance as well as advances our understanding of how the tandem of socio-ideological and technocratic control may work through employees' cynical distancing. Finally, the paper argues for more nuanced insights into the identity work of call centre employees to fully understand negative but also positive consequences of managerial control in this specific setting.

## Introduction

Living the brand is a construct that has gained increasing interest within the branding literature in recent years (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Ind, 2001; Karmark, 2005) as it emphasizes the relationship between the organization's brand and its employees' performance towards external stakeholders. The main idea behind living the brand is that employees should "internalize brand values" (Ind, 2001), that is, "the incorporation into selfhood of the values and attitudes of the group" (p. 38), and, thus enthused, be willing and able to deliver the organization's brand promise, to "live the brand" (Ind, 2001). Internal branding is described as a set of leadership practices that focus on facilitating the process of internalization of brand values, such as increasing employees' awareness, knowledge, understanding, involvement, commitment, and identification with brand values, which are intended to result in "on brand" behaviour (Balow & Steward, 2006). Call centres are often regarded as the spearhead of an organization in relation to its customers, and as such the call centre employees become important 'brand ambassadors' or 'brand evangelist' (Ind, 2001).

Call centres have been described as modern-day "electronic sweatshops" that create an "assembly line in the head" (Taylor & Bain, 1999). Notwithstanding, alongside the technocratic forms of control, which rely on standardization and

Tayloristic principles aimed at streamlining and limiting the personal element of work, call centres have been subject to concomitant pressures to increase the service mind-set by celebrating empowerment, internalization and personification of the corporate espoused values example in brand values. This leaves the employees in an interesting dilemma of balancing the competing demands of both providing service or, as in this case, 'performing on brand' and being quick and productive. An empirical illustration may demonstrate the struggles faced by employees. Let me introduce Marianne.

Marianne was 20 years old and the performance monitoring data showed a high customer service index for Marianne, which presumably reflected her customer-oriented behaviour. Marianne appeared to be a perfect 'brand ambassador.' However, the nature of the work she did, in particular the way in which it was organized, controlled, and managed, left Marianne with some challenges in fulfilling the company's 'brand promise.' The following field-notes were recorded during a work-shadowing observation:

> The customer (an elderly lady) is interested in a mobile broadband subscription, but she is unsure if the signal is strong enough in her summer cabin. Marianne is unable to answer, so she calls 'technical support' who tells her that the customer can use a mobile broadband because there is 3G coverage, although she may experience problems with her mobile phone if it only runs on 2G. Marianne calls the customer back and repeats the message she got from 'technical support.' The elderly lady asks if Marianne can send her an offer on a mobile broadband and also for a new mobile phone that has 3G. Marianne asks for the lady's email, but she does not have an email account.
>
> Marianne: *"Maybe you can ask in one of our shops then? We usually only send out offers by email."*
> Customer: *"Can't you just send it to me by post?"*
> Marianne: *"I don't think so but I will ask."*
>
> Marianne again puts the customer on hold, and asks her coach if it is possible. She returns to her desk and explains to the researcher:
>
> Marianne: *"Oh no, I have to find the [standard] email and print it out myself, it is not good for my freeze[1] time."*
>
> Marianne explains to the customer that she will receive the offers by post within a few days and she ends the call. While taking off her headset, she exclaims:
>
> Marianne: *"We can put them [the headsets] down now, we will not need them for a while. This is shit! And I have a break in five minutes. Maybe I can just finish beforehand."*

Marianne locates the standard emails and starts reading them. She corrects them and adds "Visit us in our store." She then looks up prices on a mobile handset and finds a cheap one. She adds its details to the letter. Marianne finds more details on the mobile broadband connection, adjusts the information to suit the elderly lady's needs, and then finally she starts printing. At this point in time Marianne is red in the face, working fast and almost running to the printer. Time is ticking. The printer is located in another room, and when she arrives she discovers it is not working. She returns to her desk, and tries again. This time with more success. Now she tries to find an envelope, so she is walking about in the office room. While putting the papers into the envelope she is interrupted by the coach:

> Coach: *"Marianne, is everything under control?"*
> Marianne: *"I had to send something to a customer."*
> Coach: *[upset, irritated voice] "Next time you should log out. You have been on "freeze" for 20 minutes. It is bad for our average handling time."*

Marianne posts the letter and rushes to the desk and immediately starts answering calls. She does not have her break that day.

This paper examines how call centre employees respond to the management's conflicting use of technocratic forms of control to ensure efficiency and socio-ideological control to produce an 'on brand' employee identity. The paper proposes a portrait-based form of ethnography as a way to illustrate both commonalities and differences in employees' identity work

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[1] Freeze" means that an employee is logged onto the system but his/her calls are directed to other colleagues.

and responses to managerial control within the call centre setting. Cynical distancing becomes a central concept to understand the responses, but also a concept of development to fully encompass the processes detected through the ethnographic study. What follows is a literature review focusing on managerial control as a way of regulating identity and cynical distance as a response to this regulation of employee' individual identity work. Then portrait-based ethnography is presented as a method, before moving to a presentation of the case company MGP and four portraits of MGP's call centre employees. The discussion outlines the findings and contributes to the literature on organizational control and resistance – as well as the methodological implications of using portrait-based ethnography.

## Identity regulation and management control

Critical management scholars use the term identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) to explain management's use of socio-ideological control to influence the employees' organizational identification in such a way that the prescribed organizational (brand) values become self-referential or even self-defining. Socio-ideological control thus targets the mind and self-image, in contrast to technocratic forms of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004), which are more directed toward the output or behaviour of employees. The internally-focused branding practices, as outlined in the introduction, offer a systematic and conscious way to direct shared interpretations and meanings, so employees ideally adhere to values and ideals that support the best interest of the brand (and the management) in any given situation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). The terminology of 'evangelists,' 'internalization,' and 'incorporation of brand values into selfhood' (Ind, 2001) clearly suggests that the aim of branding activities is to form the employee's subjectivity and through socio-ideological power regulate the employee's self-concept. The objective is not only behavioural compliance with the brand values, but also that these values guide the employees' way of thinking and feeling 'behind' the brand enactment. Previous studies show how such brand enactments are controlled by the internal branding practices. As an example, Kärreman and Rylander (2008) argue that internally focused branding practices offer a systematic and conscious way of directing shared interpretations and meanings, and help to ensure that employees adhere to values and ideals that support the best interest of the brand (and management) in any given situation. This more critical perspective on branding is supported by a case study by Kelemen and Papasolomou (2007), which shows that internal marketing signals a certain set of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours valued by the organization to employees and that this set is usually systematically reinforced. As such, branding activities reward those employees with the appropriate attitudes and punish or marginalize those who deviate.

Previous research has illustrated how technocratic and socio-ideological control work in tandem, particularly in knowledge-intensive companies, where technocratic means of control are supplemented or even substituted by socio-ideological means of control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). However, limited research has looked at what happens when conflicting identities grow out of management control mechanisms. Sturdy (1998) emphasizes that there seem to be contradictory demands in the service sector; unlike in knowledge-intensive work, management here on the one hand uses surveillance and other technocratic forms of control to regulate the labour process, while on the other hand demands that the employees are customer oriented and act according to the customer's needs. Korczynski (2001) thus labels call centres as "customer-oriented bureaucracies," which are infused with two contradictory logics: the logic of personal and emotional commitment and flexibility in the service encounter, and the logic of routinization and impersonal rationality. In such cases, management prescribes conflicting identities to the appropriate employees.

## Identity work and cynical distance

While the term identity regulation adds emphasis to the organizational identity structures guiding the employee's subjectification process, the concept of identity work stresses the individual's agency in constructing a self that is coherent, distinctive, and positively valued (Kuhn, 2006). When engaging in identity work, employees may draw upon, modify, or downright reject identity structures ascribed to them by the management. Much of the literature on identity work has risen to account for the ways in which individuals construct a sense of self in organizations or occupations faced with uncertainty or anxiety (Collison, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Meisenbach, 2008). The concept of identity work may help us understand the individual differences in ways of responding to managements' identity regulation, as the identity work can be regarded as both socially shaped and personally motivated (Gnaur, 2010). In other words, it offers a counter-perspective on call centre employees that values individual choice, sense-making, strategies, and storytelling, rather than merely positioning them as passive dupes of managerial control. Employees are not just passive followers, their power lies in the possibility to resist.

Employee resistance against socio-ideological control has been studied in the context of culture change and emotional labour literature. These studies illustrate that employees resist managerial efforts to influence their subjectivity by developing a cynical work attitude (Kunda, 1992; Hochschild, 1983). This cynicism is often evident as informal, routine resistance (Prasad & Prasad, 2000) taking the form of apathy, humour, jokes, or irony (Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Mumby, 2005). These studies argue that cynicism arises as employees actively position themselves in opposition to the organization and thus escape the commodification of their identities, cultures, or emotions to protect their authentic sense of self. Employees re-describe themselves as "wise" cynics who see through the hollow promise of managerial rhetoric and, thus enlightened, can maintain a sense of autonomy (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

This illusion of autonomy, however, also means that employees refrain from more organized or strategic forms of opposition, and managerial domination is thus preserved. On this basis, Fleming and Spicer describe cynical distance as "ideological consent" (2003: 116). In fact, employees' behavioural consent becomes even more explicit because they continue to *act as if* they believe. Kunda's (1992) and Hochchild's (1983) iconic studies illustrate that employees perform their roles flawlessly "on stage" even in the presence of a cynical attitude "backstage." Holmer-Nadesan (1996) argues that employees' cynical counter-identification enables the service employees to interpret the managerial rules in a way that expands their space of action. The employees play the system and in so doing they are able to replace the rather limited expectation of their work with a wider range of choices for actions and expressions. Fleming and Spicer (2003) therefore argue that employees who "perform" a prescribed work role without believing in it may perform it better than those who do believe, as they become skilful surface actors.

In what follows, I examine how employees respond to management's conflicting use of technocratic forms of control to ensure efficiency and socio-ideological control to produce an 'on brand' employee identity with the specific aim to understand how cynical distance arises and influences employees' enactment of the brand in the call centre context. To answer these questions, this paper presents four portraits of call centre employees working for a major telecommunications provider, MGP (pseudonym).

## Research setting

MGP is a European-based telecommunication provider with approximately 2.5 million customers who utilize a variety of services, such as land lines, mobiles, internet and cable TV, etc. In contrast to many other telecommunication corporations who have outsourced their call centres, MGP has kept their call centre unit in-house, with call centre employees constituting approximately 2,500 out of a total of 10,000 MGP personnel. The empirical material is generated in the call centre unit with the name "Mobile Sales and Service." In this unit, employees take inbound calls and handle questions, feedback, and complaints from mobile customers experiencing problems with their mobile subscription. They therefore handle a variety of issues related to technical problems, billing, subscriptions, or handsets. The range and nature of the problems requires some technical knowledge and a fairly good understanding of how the subscriptions match different types of usage.

## Producing 'on brand' identities

At the time of the study, MGP was going through a rebranding process to change its reputation as being "bureaucratic," "old-fashioned," "clunky," and "arrogant" (Interview, Marketing Communication Director). A new brand positioning MGP as embracing all customers was to change this reputation. To ensure internal commitment to the brand a culture change process called TRC was initiated. TRC was an abbreviation for "Take Responsibility for the Customer," which, in the mother tongue of the organization, also meant 'thank you.' The management emphasized that customers perceived MGP as arrogant because the customers had not experienced problem-solving and responsible behaviour from MGP's employees. Customers with problems related to their subscription often had to call several times and had to talk to numerous employees in different departments in order to have their problems solved. In contrast, the desired culture of MGP was one in which customers only had to call once and only had to talk to the employee who answered the phone. That employee should be able to understand the customer's problem, to deal with it, and to give the customer a great service experience. Furthermore, another fundamental change caused by the new corporate brand was a change in customer segmentation. While the current brand aimed to attract new customers, the new branding efforts aimed to retain the existing customers. This also meant that the call centre unit gained renewed focus within the organization, as they were not only responsible for smooth customer service but were also more than any other unit expected to deliver on the new brand strategy by selling more products to existing customers when they called in with problems.

The CEO himself continuously emphasized the importance of TRC via internal communication. Every month, a TRC employee who had done something extraordinary to accommodate the customers' needs was celebrated. Pictures of the monthly TRC employee were framed and put in the lobby for every employee and visitor to see. Furthermore, new values called "rules to live by" were incorporated into the new corporate strategy, which was launched simultaneously with the corporate brand. These values stressed the importance of a smooth customer relationship, focusing on putting the "customer first," "cooperation," and "simplicity." These values further guided the rhetoric of job advertisements, newsletters, and other written forms of communication.

In the daily routines at MGP's call centre, the primary socio-ideological identity regulation also hinges on the themes of 'serving customers' and 'selling.' In the middle of the rooms, white boards are positioned where each employee's sales results and performance are listed and updated daily. The first-level management often facilitates sales competitions, in which the employees compete against each other in teams in order to improve the sales. During such competitions the atmosphere is intense and the room filled with human noise. A small reception bell is located next to the boards, and every time a team-member manages to sell, he/she rings the bell and the rest of the team will loudly applaud and cheer for him/her – while still being on the phone with customers.

## Producing efficient identities

The 'efficient' employee is, according to the management, an employee who focuses on time and the quantity of service encounters. Traditional technocratic means of control such as electronic surveillance and performance management systems are used to ensure time-efficient behaviours and practices. The performance targets, which primarily focus on maximising the number of customer interactions, included the number of calls taken, average handling time (AHT, maximum 300 seconds), total time logged on the phone (100% excluding breaks and briefings), the use of "freeze"[2] on the phone (maximum 15%), and the number of calls redirected. Measures were also introduced to encourage customer-oriented behaviour, including measures for customer satisfaction and first-call resolution (targets usually set at 81%-85.4%). All of these criteria and data on employees' performance were included in a "coach report," which served as the basis for fortnightly "performance dialogues" between team leaders and each of their employees. If employees failed to meet the performance targets related to time efficiency, they would be penalized with a salary deduction. On the other hand, bonuses could be achieved by selling products to customers – the greater the premium, the bigger the cash bonus.

The surveillance system was sophisticated, as the criteria used to measure the employees' performance also reflected the co-existence of dual logics behind the call centre's work practices. The internal branding discourse of "taking responsibility for the customer" and the more qualitative performance measurements seemed to stress that employees should take personal responsibility for the customer's needs and provide individualized counselling, whereas the standardization of the work processes and quantitative performance measurements aimed to routinize employees' behaviours and limit their latitude to actually serve the customer. The conflicting character of the appropriate identities seems to create vast challenges for the employees, which will be illustrated in the following portraits.

## Ethnography as a portrait of a people

This study proposes a portrait-based approach as a new way of understanding the regime of control and their impact on subjectification processes. Ethnography, Harris and Johnson (2000) argue, "literally means 'a portrait of a people.' […] a written description of a particular culture – customs, beliefs, and behaviours – based on information collected through fieldwork" (p. 5). The idea of using portraits as an ethnographic method is typically seen within political science, using portraits to understand politicians or Heads of the Secretaries of State (Ribbins & Sherratt, 2012), as well as among studies of leadership within education (English, 2006). In organization studies, portrait-based ethnographies are yet to be explored.

Portraits can be seen as combining ethnography and biography. English (2006) defines biography as "a written narrative of one person by another, most often historical/chronological in form, which attempts to offer a verbal picture of some depth of an individual of importance or notoriety" (p. 146). Taking an ethnographic approach that uses not only interviews but also observational accounts, I advocate for the use of "prosopography" as a form of "group biography

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[2] See previous footnote.

usually identified within a specific time period or event" (p. 147). While such portraits often focus on individuals of importance, we may find the method equally revealing, focusing on 'ordinary' call centre employees in order to understand their life, skills, and motivations to take a job in call centres. The ambition of this paper is to breath some "life" into the portraits of call centre employees and use prosopography to demonstrate not only similarities in identity work under the call centres' regimes of control but also the differences in coping and contesting this control.

Three ethnographic methods were used for empirical material generation: participant observation, interviews, and shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007). Newly hired employees were followed for three months, starting with their first day of employment and continuing through their orientation training, and initial weeks of work. The observation period ran from November 2009 to January 2010. The most obvious advantage of this ethnographic approach is that it enabled the researcher to not only document life-stories told through interviews but also to experience first-hand how the new workers interacted within the company and in interactions with the customers, as the researcher had a separate headset that tapped into their phone line. Therefore, it was possible to explore how these employees engaged (or distanced) themselves in (from) the contested work role through identity work.

The participants were 13 full-time call centre employees[3] between 19 and 26 years of age, of which three were women and ten were men. Empirical material was generated as follows. First, the researcher engaged in moderate participant observation for the first three weeks of the training sessions. During this stage, the researcher observed how the brand was communicated to the newcomers, and how this information was perceived and (perhaps) internalized by the participants. Second, the researcher conducted interviews with each of the participants in weeks two or three in order to explore their motivations and their job-related expectations. Third, the researcher shadowed five of the new staff members for three days each as they interacted with MGP's customers. Participant 1 was shadowed on Monday in weeks 5, 10 and 13 of his/her employment, Participant 2 on Tuesday in weeks 5, 10 and 13 of his/her employment, and so on. The researcher selected the five employees for shadowing after the interviews based on the diversity in their level of engagement in their new job and ability to reflect upon their own work roles at MGP. The researcher also collected training material, newsletters, and emails sent via the teams' distribution lists during the three months with the company.

In what follows, a prosopography of four individual call centre employees will be presented. The analytical procedure focused on the entire empirical material, however, the presentational form focuses on the ethnography of these four selected participants, as they are illustrative of both the commonalities and differences in responses to the managerial control, while they also narrate themselves as having very different motives of engaging in the call centre work.

## Prosopography

### Mark

Mark was in his early twenties and had recently moved to the city in order to get a new job. After his military draft, he worked as a carer at an elderly home and applied to become an ambulance worker but failed. At the time of the study he was pursuing a career within management, though he had not decided whether he should be studying at university or trying to work his way up within MGP. He positioned himself as very interested in IT: "I love computers and IT. […] It is awesome. There are so many challenges and so many possibilities. There is nothing you can't do with IT nowadays. With his love for IT, Mark argued that MGP was the perfect place to work:

> "MGP is a massive corporation. And it has this amazing positive and great market position. It is number one in [name of country]. Of course you hear a lot of crap about MGP from friends and family, but that doesn't change that MGP is really the preferred media company."

Though Mark demonstrated a positive attitude towards his new employer, he himself was reluctant to change his own mobile subscription from a competing company, because he believed that he received better value as a customer outside MGP. Throughout the introductory course he asked many 'critical' questions in comparing MGPs services with the services provided by his "own" teleprovider. He could be found surfing competing companies' websites and loudly

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[3] To ensure confidentiality, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym

discussing prices with his colleagues. He asked the trainer: "Can I ask why MGP is so much more expensive than, for example, [name of competing teleprovider]?" When it came to processes of failed payment Mark also questioned the appropriateness of MGP's conduct:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mark: | The colleagues here are really tough on you, if you receive a reminder. I have misplaced a bill a couple of times and called in. And they could not do anything. |
| Trainer: | Is it MGP's problem that you have misplaced a bill? Or that you have been on vacation? Here you have to understand the business point of view. Some people say, but what can I do? Can't we make a deal. NO. This is YOUR problem, not ours. |
| Mark: | But what if it is MGPs fault? |
| Trainer: | IF it is a clear mistake, then they should not pay. |
| Mark: | So we are not 100% scumbags? |
| Colleague: | Only 95%. This is MGP. (Everybody laughs). |

Similar irony is found in remarks when off the phone, as an example one day where the directory is down, and calls can not be forwarded. Mark stated that "It has not worked as long as I have been here. Welcome to MGP apparently."

Although Mark frequently challenged the rules and procedures of MGP's Customer Service, he appeared very loyal on the phone with customers where he often offered services outside his immediate domain. One day a customer called in with a computer issue. Mark guided her through her issue although this had nothing to do with her mobile subscription. He experimented with different solutions and ended up finding the problem. However, he did not have access to the company systems to solve the problem, so after several minutes talking he ended up forwarding her to the IT hotline. When he hung up he said "This is not really our department, but I know a little about this so…"

Mark appeared to relate to the customers on a personal level as in the following example, where he is taking the customers' address to make a subscription:

| | |
|---|---|
| Mark: | So you live on [name of Island]? |
| Customer: | Yes. |
| Mark: | Didn't you have a storm the other day? |
| Customer: | No not really. |
| Mark: | My family lives in [name of town close to the island] and they had a storm. |
| Customer: | Perhaps it was the end of last week. We had issues with the ferry then. |
| Mark: | Okay? |
| Customer: | It did not sail. Then it is fantastic to live on an island. |
| Mark: | Okay 3-5 days then you should receive it [ends the call]. |

Mark typically tried to solve customers' problems, however, he was concerned that his service conflicted with his average handling time (AHT):

"Yesterday I had an old lady, who should have had her email setup manually on the phone. It took an hour and nine minutes. After an hour I told her that the phone was defective, so she would have to bring it to the store. By then we had wasted a whole hour. My AHT was not good. I spent seven minutes on average yesterday, but I am only allowed to spend three minutes."

Keeping time whilst simultaneously pursuing sales can be rather difficult. Mark, however, appeared to prioritize sales and was often found checking his excel sheets where he had noted all his sales for his personal record – and found discussing sales numbers with his colleagues.

Colleague:      Are you on top of the world with sales today?

Mark:            People are not in the mood for sales today. At least not the ones directed to me. But of course I have done some upgrades, they also give provision.

Mark was one of the newcomers who had the highest performance in terms of sales and he appeared to bask in the standing ovations he received when ringing the department's reception bell to signify that he had made a sale. Mark argued that his success was based on his positive attitude:

"I just love to talk to people. […] I don't know. It just comes natural to me. […] No matter whether the customer is upset or happy, I will still behave in the same way. It is not like I would press "mute" and then trash someone and then get back to them and be like (in a happy tone) "la la la." I have a natural good attitude towards people."

His positive attitude appeared to be recognized by his management as well. During the final week of observation management informed him, that he had been chosen along with a handful of others to test a new system.

## Paul

Paul was 27 years old and had moved back and forth between jobs and university for the past few years. Paul stressed that the main reasons behind his decision to apply for his MGP job were because he deemed it preferable to working in a shop. In comparison, he perceived his job at MGP to have better working hours (only daytime), better salary, and a more convenient work place, since its close proximity to his address prevented him from having to commute. He elaborates further:

"It is not that I am the dedicated tele-geek. It is not because I can relate to MGP either or that I thought I *must* have a job at MGP. […] I am at crossroads now. Should I return to studying or should I just work? And I am really in doubt because I cannot imagine doing this for much longer. Not that I feel superior to this, I just feel I am made for doing something other than sitting and talking on the phone. I just don't find it that exciting."

Paul had worked as a shop assistant at one of MGP's main competitors before, and thus was familiar with the teleindustry. Working on the phone was, however, new to him and a role he allegedly struggled with.

"It is the first time I am trying it [selling] over the phone, so I haven't really yet … because when people call in with a problem, I haven't managed to turn it into "Shouldn't you buy one of these subscriptions yet." […] Mostly because I do not know all the subscription types. I think, I just have to turn my head around it right? I just have to remember to ask. […] I just think it must be something with my head. To sell over the phone. It is because I hate telephone salesmen. […] That someone is calling me and I am being disturbed at 6 pm. At home I go crazy. NO! Well so that is what it is."

While Paul articulated a struggle between on the one hand hating telephone salesmen and on the other hand being a telephone salesman himself, he argued that he was just playing the role prescribed to him by his workplace.

"Something like service charges. I hate it. I hate service charges. I don't understand from the customer's point of view why they have service charges. From the company's perspective it makes good sense, because they have to earn money. They ask me if it is fair, that they claim service charge right? As a private person, I hate it – it is not fair that I have to pay 5 Euros just to pay my bill. But when I am at MGP and a customer service consultant, I am a face to the outside world. Then of course I charge the fees. This is what I mean, this is the uniform you are wearing so I just adapt to MGP's politics and follow the rules here."

While Paul at first glance appeared to be indifferent to his job at MGP, he was also rather reflective about his role and how he might react as a customer if the roles of customer service consultants and customer were reversed. During observations he often took the point of view of the customers and made extensive efforts to care for the customer's needs – sometimes also at the cost of his employer. As a result, he found himself struggling to unite the competing demands of providing service and be time efficient on the phone. In one instance, Paul handled a very complicated case of four subscriptions, which had been badly messed up. After finishing the call, which had taken him 46 minutes (MGP set the AHT at three minutes), he commented on the case:

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|---|---|
| Paul: | Apparently, this issue has taken the customer a few months to get resolved. I personally think it really sucks that customers are not notified when their subscriptions are rejected. And there was no information on him really… [Shrugs shoulders] |
| Researcher: | Are these tasks annoying or fun? |
| Paul: | Well, both. If I didn't have to wait to get help, then it would have been fun. It would be fun if I had complicated cases like this all the time, but the fact that I should be available on the phone is always in the back of my mind." |

Throughout the day, Paul kept a record of his minutes used on various activities in a notepad. At the end of the day, he sends an email to his coach about his time usage. Soon Paul received an email from the coach, questioning whether he made an error in the original mail:

| | |
|---|---|
| Coach: | Have you really been 'off' for 1.09 hours? |
| Paul: | Mega-long case. Two number portings[4]. It is true – I spent 1.09 hours 'off.' [Turning to the researcher] When will you be back? |
| Researcher: | In three weeks. |
| Paul: | Do you think I will still be here then? |

Paul here took responsibility for his customers, but was still reprimanded and punished by the performance measurements. He feared that he may be punished by a deduction in his salary, or ultimately lose his job. As a result, he became creative in balancing the competing demands by accommodating the customers' wishes in a way that could not be detected by the team leaders or the performance management system. One way was to offer customers credit on their bills, even when the customers were not entitled to it. As management had no way of monitoring the degree to which employees offered credits, this became a preferred tactic the call centre employees to enact the brand values and ensure high figures

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[4] 'Number porting' means transfering a mobile number from one company to another.

on customer service measures. The following example illustrates how Paul wished to please a customer who had just agreed to take on four subscriptions in a conversation with another sales department at MGP:

| | |
|---|---|
| Paul: | (To the customer) I can see that you have to pay fees for all four subscriptions but I suggest that we split the fees fifty/fifty – we will pay two of them. Normally, we never credit fees for new subscriptions, but I will make an exception in this case. [Ends the call] |
| Researcher: | How do you decide who should receive credit and who should not? |
| Paul: | The customer should sound sincere. In this case, she admitted her fault. I often give in on smaller fees. I mean, fees do not mean anything and the customer is happy now." |

These instances of rule-breaking behaviour differed from the service encounters where he worked diligently to solve customers' complex and idiosyncratic problems. In the later situation he came to work against the key organizational goal of efficiency. In contrast, the rule bending allowed him to enact the brand in more subtle ways, which came to support the management's brand promise of 'putting the customer first' in a way that was much more time efficient.

### Lars

Lars was 22 years old and had been working at MGP for two years in directory services. During the two years, he had advanced from being a front line support consultant to a coach assisting colleagues, and eventually to a trainer educating new employees. He was provided with education in order to help him progress as a trainer, but once the financial crisis hit MGP he was fired along with more than 100 other colleagues. This was a year before the research. Since then he had been traveling, doing a part time diploma in education, and trying to find another job. He was therefore relieved when he was again offered a job at MGP. Lars argued that it was not a job that he found attractive in itself, but he appreciated the knowledge and insight he gained, which he planned to use in the future when living his dream of becoming an entrepreneur.

"[It is] something you can use in another job in the future. Something that can open doors. Oh, it really gives me something positive to be in this job, so it is not just a waste of time spent on job tasks. Then you think the company actually gives you more, than you came for, right? […] This is really important to me anyway, because it gives me a positive kick in the future somewhere. Not just in my career, but also in general, if you want to become an entrepreneur in the long run. […] I have always dreamt about being an entrepreneur, right. I don't like to have someone above me watching. It is not really me. I haven't had problems with it. It is just not the way I am."

So while Lars argued that this was not the job of his dreams, he still appreciated it because he learnt something of use for the future.

"We talk to customers on a daily basis, this has a positive affect – psychologically you become strong in communication and managing customers. If you then one day have your own business, and need to know "how should you handle the customer," then you know that you have talked to thousands of customers here, and you know how they are, and you compare them and get some good insight. How do I manage them? […] Things like that I can use and take with me."

Lars appeared to be quite engaged in his job and his role as a customer service employee, however, only a couple of weeks later he appeared to have lost his initial commitment and instead was struggling to make sense of the competing demands of providing service, selling, and being time efficient.

"It has surprised me that we are being measured on all sorts of things, like AHT and leave. We have performance discussions every second week and now also sick leave discussions every second week. I knew there would be a lot of goals to reach, but not this many."

A sense of apathy appeared to emerge as Lars started to manipulate the system like reading emails, checking online news, and chatting with his colleagues through an instant messaging system during phone calls. Meanwhile, he still managed to sweet-talk his customers and attempted to quickly handle their problems. He began to position himself as one able to see through management's hollow promise: "We are being measured on five or six different things. We are like slaves." However, he still maintained a happy face towards the customers, and never spoke negatively about MGP on the phone or displayed any form of distress in the customer interactions.  Instead, like Paul, Lars developed creative strategies for balancing the competing demands of providing customer service and being time efficient. In one instance he opened up a closed phone line even though he had no documentation that the bill had been paid. Lars explained: "We do not normally open a closed line before we have the receipt, but sometime you have to listen to the customer. She sounded sincere." He often emphasized that if the customers sounded sincere and if he experienced a genuine "relationship" with them, then he would bend the rules to accommodate their needs. In another instance he even suggested a price plan from a competitor, which he thought would better suit the customer's need. In more complicated cases he would ask the customers to go online or visit MGP's retail stores. In such ways he managed to balance the diverse demands, but also to subtly rebel against the system without getting reprimands or being punished in terms of deductions in his pay.

### Christine

Christine was 22 years old and has been employed at MGP's telemarketing department before changing jobs to MGP's Mobile Sales and Service. It was Christine's hope to build a career within MGP, though this was not something that was initially approved of in her family. In the interview she explained the struggle it had been for her to take on the position as customer service employee:

> "My dad has always been very engaged in my studies and wanted me to go to university. But I am not born to go to school. I am not! My dad is a doctor and my mom a dentist, right? […] First I became part-time employed at MGP. I worked there during the evenings, right? And I really did well in this job. I got these diplomas and I went home and bragged about it.  I never got anything from my school. […] Then one day I realized, I think it was just one morning when I woke up; this is my future and I am getting older. I was 19, 18-19 years old at this point. Now it has to stop."

Later that day Christine decided to drop out of school and returned home to her family earlier than usual. She was concerned how to break the news to her father:

> "I could see it in his eyes. He stared at me. He thought "has she been expelled?" or something. He looked at me and said "why are you home already? Are you on a break? Are you going back or … ?" […] It was a huge shock to him. Then he said, "What are your plans?" And I told him. "I want to work full-time at MGP. I work there part-time – I want to work fulltime." "But why?" he says. "Dad can't you see how well I am doing. I get bonuses all the time, and diplomas and this and that" – and he could see that. […] "If this is what you what, then you should do that." And I was crazy, crazy happy about it. I still am."

Christine's resentment of education was evident during her three weeks of training. She had difficulties concentrating in the classroom, she moved impatiently about on her stool, she told the teacher she felt sick, and she once in a while took a nap. The enthusiasm about her new job was, however, reflected in her behaviour once on the phone or outside the class room. She was eagerly asking questions, participating in group work, and contributing her opinion as to how employees could take responsibility for the customer. In the interview she explained that the buzz of selling is something that motivates her:

> "It is really important to me that I am at work and together with people I like. My team is very important, because I am use to an energetic and lively workplace. In telemarketing (former employment), every time someone made a sale we clapped and stood up and danced a lot. There was a lot like that which I really liked. […] Also the atmosphere is great, and the people are full of energy and all that, which makes me become sharper on the telephone when talking to customers."

Christine expressed hope that some day she might advance within the customer service to become either a management assistant or a sales coach.

> "But it is not because it is something I strive for, as long I am here at MGP and as long I make people smile, then I am happy. […] My future is here. And I will also get a pension from here. I am not going anywhere. […] I will probably even recruit my children and family to work here as well."

Christine's engagement and commitment to MGP appeared to be very strong and primarily guided towards the sales and services part of the job: "Making people smile."

In week five, however, I found her wandering in the hallways. She had decided to quit her job:

Christine:     I went from "woohoo!" to … well, just say the name MGP and I can't take it.

Researcher:     Did something happen?

Christine:     They can't get their act together.

Researcher:     Who?

Christine:      The team leaders. They just expect more and more, and they are never satisfied.  All that control ... I just can't take it.

Researcher:     But I thought your team was all right?

Christine:      No. They have all given up. They just sit there in their small groups and are really disengaged. They have given up. They can't be bothered anymore.

Christine was fired a couple of days after.

## Discussion

This ethnographic study of newly hired employees in MGP's call centre has shown how employees respond to management's conflicting use of technocratic forms of control to ensure efficiency and socio-ideological control to produce an 'on brand' employee identity. The portraits demonstrate that although employees initially first embrace the customer service role and genuinely enact the brand values, they soon find themselves struggling to fulfil the conflicting demands, as the brand logic co-exists with, but contradicts, the call centre's bureaucratic logic of efficiency. One strategy presented by Mark is to embrace one part of the work role of "the salesmen," while distancing and downplaying the efficiency demands. The underlying argument appears to be "as long as I am selling, I will be okay." This argument appears to be supported by management, who have installed rituals for celebrating sales achievements.  For some employees (represented by Lars and Paul), cynical distancing becomes a coping strategy that enables them to balance the conflicting demands. They position themselves as cynical employees able to see through management's hollow brand promises and as committed employees who, by bending the rules, are able to care for the customer. For management, cynical distancing and the rule bending serve as a productive response that covers up the cracks in the management control systems, because employees manage to be efficient while they continue to enact the brand. Christine, who in the beginning appeared to be the most engaged and the one with most at stake in her job as customer service consultant, ended up exiting the organization after finding that others' cynical distancing and the managerial hypocrisy became too overwhelming. The findings of this study make a number of contributions to theoretical discussions of branding as socio-ideological control and to the debate over employees' acceptance of cynical distancing from such normative control.

### Branding as socio-ideological control

Recent research on branding within critical organization studies (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Kärreman & Spicer, 2010) argues for the need to investigate the intra-organizational effects of corporate branding. The 'living the brand' construct is conceived within the branding literature (de Chernatony, 2002; Ind, 2001; Olins, 2003) as empowering the

employees and liberating them from technocratic forms of control and instead relying on their organizational identification and internalization of brand values to ensure aligned brand behaviour. The present study demonstrates, alongside Kärreman and Rylander (2008), that the brand *is* to a large extent a powerful discourse, which informs and directs the employees' organizational identification. The newcomers already embrace the brand values when joining MGP. In the case of knowledge workers, the brand – as a form of socio-ideological control – has seemingly supplemented and even substituted more technocratic forms of control, thus deeply embedding the brand logic in the organization. The MGP case, however, adds to the discussion of the intra-organizational effects of branding by presenting a situation in which the brand logic in management rhetoric is decoupled from the more bureaucratic logic of standardization and efficiency permeating the call centre. In this particular context of brand implementation cynical distancing becomes a preferred coping strategy.

## Cynical Distancing as a Coping Strategy

Knights and McCabe (2000) argue that contradictions in management strategies and practices impel employees to continually make sense of the task at hand, and that the inconsistencies may provide a space for employees to interpret the situation differently. As we saw in the first example of Marianne (along with the portraits of Mark, Paul, Lars and Christine), this space of ambiguity is rather stressful because no matter what choices she makes, she would be penalized. Trying to make sense of such contradictions proves rather taxing. Eventually, the employees of MGP develop a coping strategy in which they cynically distance themselves from their job while in more discrete and subtle ways continue to enact the brand.

While extant theory conceptualizes cynical distance as a strategy for protecting one's "authentic self" from being absorbed by managerial cultural control (Casey, 1996; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kunda, 1992), at MGP employees *want* to become absorbed and to 'live the brand.' The employees portray themselves as service oriented individuals and in some cases, like Christine's, they even decide to quit their job because they are not 'allowed' to fully embrace their service role. Those who stay find ways to bend the rules and continue to enact the brand in an undetected fashion. While the study reports instances of humour, irony, scepticism, apathy, and exaggeration, these expressions are directed to resist the inconsistencies of management control, which prevent the employees from fully servicing the customers. The cynical distance arises more as a coping strategy rather than as a form of active resistance to management's colonization of the employees' subjectivities (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). The employees' cynical distance does not arise due to a lack of passion or identification with the brand or the organization, and the employees' do not present themselves as indifferent towards management or the customers. Instead, they appear to be truly concerned about the customers and to be identifying with the brand values. The employees' concurrent efforts to please the customers and their creative ways of positioning themselves as good customer service employees suggest that they still maintain strong elements of identification with their work role and work place.

The cynical distance appears to be productive in the case of MGP because it gives rise to employees who are both efficient and act as if they believe in the brand values. Fleming and Spicer (2003, 2007) argue that cynicism has some advantages for management, as it works as a form of behavioural compliance that maintains the status quo. The MGP case suggests other advantages of cynical distance. The cynically distanced employees manage to carry off the impossible – they appear to take personal responsibility for the customer, while staying in line with the standardized scripts and procedures. At MGP, the employees engage in cynical distancing to cope with the conflicting demands, but in their associated subtle enactment of the brand values, they achieve the goals of their superiors. Despite the restrictive performance management systems and requirements of standardization the employees still manage to carve out a space of action to perform their preferred role of serving the customer. In this sense the findings come to support what Knights and McCabe (2000) have noted, which is that employees who are subjected to conflicting demands, may 'paper over the cracks' in the control system, due to a genuine commitment to their role and to serve the customer.

## Portrait-based ethnographies

This paper has used a portrait-based style of ethnography in order to capture the identity work undertaken by the call centre employees. Often interviews are used to produce life-stories or biographical accounts, however a portrait-based ethnography moves beyond the discursively constructed narratives in an interview setting and also incorporates observation to demonstrate how the employees' self-positioning are expressed in relation to work roles and management control in interaction with colleagues, management, and in this case, customers. Therefore, this approach enables us to understand the work through the eyes of the employees in relation to both their life-history and to the socially constructed and managerially regulated work identity.

A portrait-based ethnography selects a few to speak for the many. In this case Mark, Paul, Lars, and Christine (and to some extent Marianne) have been chosen to illustrate the common strategies for coping with the conflicting identities prescribed by management: cynical distancing, subtle enactment of the brand values, prioritising one role over another, or exiting. The four portraits, however, also display the differences in background and motivation to engage in the work in the first place, differences that motivate the coping strategy selected. As such, the portrait-based ethnographies aim to balance a perspective on identity regulation and identity work, structure and agency, which enables us to more fully understand the consequences of managerial control in a call centre setting.

## Conclusion

From a critical management point of view, the brand may be considered one of the most powerful organizational symbols for management, employees, and customers alike. The study's findings demonstrate that the brand offers great potential to strengthen the employees' organizational identification, but also to propel cynical distancing and resistance when the brand used as socio-ideological control is conflicting with the technocratic forms of control maintaining standardized and routinized work. The portrait-based ethnography used in this paper offers insight into the employees' identity work and struggle to make sense of, enact, and resist the conflicting identities prescribed by management. While the marketing literature paints a romantic view of employees' eager to be part of their employers' branding activities and who long to "live the brand" (Ind, 2001), the critical management literature examines the 'dark side' of the cultural change programme, which may paint a rather gloomy picture of the negative consequences of management normative control (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). This paper calls for future ethnographic studies to balance views on both positive and negative consequences empirically based on the employees' own perspectives and life-stories, and one way forward could be to advance portrait-based ethnography.

## Acknowledgements

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