

# The liminality of branding: Interweaving discourses 'making up' a cultural intermediary occupation

**Bernadette Loacker**

Lancaster University Management School, UK

**Katie Rose Sullivan**

Lund University, Sweden

## Abstract

This article explores how the occupation of branding and the work it encompasses are discursively constituted and 'made up'. It starts with the premise that branding is a cultural intermediary occupation about whose norms and practices we cannot assume certainty, stability or homogeneity. The study illustrates how branding is comprised of multiple social and occupational discourses, namely, 'creativity', 'discovery', 'business' and 'morality'. Rather than stand alone, these discourses dynamically interweave and intersect. Consequently, branding emerges as an occupation with distinct liminal conditions, being simultaneously about art, science, business and social relational work. Instead of moving towards stability, our findings suggest that branding is an intermediary occupation that *sustains* rather than discontinues liminality and that enduring liminality lends itself to the non-distinctiveness of the occupation. For branders, occupying a liminal occupational position implies various challenges but similarly scopes for flexibility and autonomy.

## Keywords

Branding, cultural intermediary occupation, interweaving discourses, liminal conditions, work

## Introduction

Branding work is ubiquitous and symbolizes wide-ranging transformations in the spheres of production and consumption (Brannan et al., 2011; Kornberger, 2010; Lury, 2004). As such, branding can be understood as a cultural intermediary occupation (Moor, 2008) that occupies a

---

### Corresponding author:

Bernadette Loacker, Department of Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK.

Email: [b.loacker@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:b.loacker@lancaster.ac.uk)

complex and dynamic position in-between work and consumption, organizations and consumers and, more generally, culture and economy (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Whilst intermediary occupations tend to gain in significance within ‘image-conscious’, highly symbolic economies, they are under-explored both conceptually and empirically (Ellis et al., 2010; Smith Maguire, 2010). Therefore, the primary interest of this article is to explore what ‘makes up’ the occupation of branding.

Branding work is often thought to stem from ‘the allied fields of management, marketing, and strategy’ (Schroeder, 2009: 123), and yet important distinctions must be considered. Writing about marketing and management, authors such as Ardley and Quinn (2014), Brownlie and Saren (1997), Skålén and Hackley (2011), and Svensson (2007) argue that scholars should contest dominant functionalist discourses and the grand narratives they endorse and produce, because they ‘fail to capture the complexities and ambiguities’ (Ardley and Quinn, 2014: 100) of this work. Here, the critique surrounds how marketing management is often reified via textbooks and popular accounts as narrow, mechanic, neutral and as a rational and technical enterprise (Brownlie and Saren, 1997).

Such critiques point to how the occupation of marketing, like many occupations, develops standards of practice and seeks to craft a unified public message about what they do and who they are (Ashcraft et al., 2012). The occupation of branding, on the other hand, does not seem to strive for this coherence. A brief review of several prominent branding texts reveals that definitions of branding and the work it involves tend to be multitudinous and multifarious (e.g. Aronczyk, 2008; Kapferer, 2004). Popular expert brand advice rarely appears to engage occupational questions like, ‘what is branding’ or ‘who are branders’ (e.g. de Chernatony, 2009; Kotler, 2005) but instead offers normative and prescriptive ‘best practices’ (Brownlie and Saren, 1997). In other words, unlike marketing, popular branding discourses bypass or fail to generate a clear and comprehensive image of what the work and occupation of branding are about (Moor, 2008). Therefore, we see branding as a more recently occurring intermediary occupation whose practices and norms have yet to be as systematically ‘codified’. Locating ourselves at the disciplinary intersection of critical marketing studies and management and organization studies (MOS), we argue that it is important to explore how this occupation is discursively made up.

In our exploration, we follow marketing and MOS researchers who advocate that scholars look at the context-specific social and discursive practices through which marketing-related types of work are constructed (e.g. Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Svensson, 2007). By taking a Foucault-informed discourse approach, our study looks at how the occupation of branding is constituted by social-cultural discourses, aiming to define ‘what is to be known [and] what is to be done’ (Foucault, 1991: 75) (about the occupation), *and* the practices by which such discourses are enacted and (re)negotiated in the micro-accounts branding professionals give of their work and occupation (see also Ashcraft et al., 2009). Here, we see discourses as composed of variegated orders and practices that *inform*, rather than represent, extant (occupational) knowledge and reality (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Foucault, 1972). Further, discourses are complex and shifting, rather than uniform and fixed (Foucault, 1972), and they are habitually *connected* to other discourses, with which they interweave (Foucault, 1990).

This latter aspect was particularly illuminating for our study as our insights suggest that the branding occupation is shaped by four, partly conflicting occupational and social discourses. Rather than stand alone in branders’ accounts, these discourses – which we name creativity, discovery, morality and business – dynamically intersect and thereby constantly redefine occupational norms, orders and practices. The dynamic intersecting of such diverse discourses notably illustrates and emphasizes that the intermediary occupation of branding is concomitant with a

non-distinct, contested ‘between and betwixt status’ (Turner, 1969) and, by this means, with *persistently* liminal conditions (see also Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Hirschman et al., 2012).

Our study aims to contribute to marketing and MOS studies in three ways. By exploring the ‘allied’ occupation of branding (Schroeder, 2009), we answer calls for critical investigations into the specific discursive practices that make up marketing- and management-related types of work (e.g. Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Svensson, 2007). We add to this research by taking a Foucault-invested discursive approach (1990) that attends to broad social-cultural discourses and micro-discourses, rather than one or the other (Skålén et al., 2006). Second, we answer calls for further discursive studies of cultural intermediary occupations, which currently tend to develop as a central means of organizing (e.g. Bechky, 2011; Cronin, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Moor, 2008). Here, we add insight into how cultural intermediaries construct and navigate their occupation and work in ways that produce challenges and scopes for flexibility. Finally and related, our empirical insight that branding is *persistently* liminal extends contemporary studies on liminality, challenging notions that it is a temporary occurrence (e.g. Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Kozinets, 2002; see also Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960 [1909]), by showing how it plays out as an integrative element of the work and *occupation* of branding (e.g. Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Smith Maguire, 2010).

The article is structured as follows: First, we provide an overview of extant debates within marketing and MOS studies on work and occupations in the current cultural economy. Next, we introduce the context of our study and methodology. In the empirical section, we analyse the intersecting occupational and social discourses that infuse branders’ accounts and illustrate how the branding occupation is made up. The discussion section shows branding as a cultural intermediary occupation with distinct transitory-liminal conditions, being simultaneously about art, science, business and social relational work. To conclude, we reiterate the paper’s research interest, major findings and contributions.

### *The nexus of work and occupations in contemporary cultural economy*

*The emergence of cultural intermediary types of work.* Marketing and MOS studies note that thoughts about work and how it is organized are shifting (e.g. Cohen et al., 2005; McCabe, 2009; Skålén and Hackley, 2011). In ‘industrial times’, work was mainly dominated by technical standardization and efficiency-oriented production processes (Grey and Garsten, 2001). In the so-called post-industrial era or cultural economy, work appears to be more dynamic and ‘knowledge-intensive’ (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008), where ‘light and flexible accumulation’ takes place beyond enclosed organizational spheres (du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Garsten, 1999). Although such shifts are always partial and geographically dependent (McCabe, 2009), and although the production of material goods continues, *immaterial* work (Virno, 2005) has taken on greater significance (Lury, 2004). What this means is that spheres that used to appear as separate – such as production *and* consumption or work *and* life – now appear intermingled. Critical scholars note that this intermingling has also changed the shape of work, as evidenced by the simultaneous calls for efficiency *and* creativity, conformity *and* individuality, control *and* self-management and work-related *and* personal commitment(s) (Kornberger, 2010; Svensson, 2007).

With its emphasis on the symbolic and immaterial sides of work, *branding* seems to be emblematic for the intermingling and blurring of such oppositions (Brannan et al., 2011; Land and Taylor, 2010). For this reason, some marketing and MOS studies have referred to branding – like advertising (Cronin, 2004), consultancy (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) or fashion design

(Pettinger, 2004) – as *cultural intermediary work* (Moor, 2008). Intermediary types of work are mainly those charged with the creation and consumption of images, signs and services with high cultural-symbolic as well as economic value (Bourdieu, 1984: 359). Those involved in the work, referred to as cultural intermediaries, are defined by scholars as ‘persons of symbolic expertise’ (O’Reilly, 2005: 580), ‘producers of added value’ (Smith Maguire, 2010: 269) or ‘arbiters of taste and style’ (Smith Maguire, 2010: 272), who are willing to effectively employ their ‘affective’ and ‘creative competences’ in the practices and relations they maintain (Moor, 2008). As for the organization of work, we note that intermediary types of work commonly take place and are negotiated across different social and institutional spheres and thus go beyond confined profession- and organization-related boundaries (see also Cohen, 2010). As a result, complex and potentially oppositional demands tend to form an integrative element of intermediary work. For ‘cultural intermediaries’, who are typically involved in different organizational and consumer cultures or ‘markets’ (Moor, 2008), occupying and mediating an ambiguous occupational position do not seem unusual.

That said, some MOS and marketing scholars, who have addressed shifts in how, where and with whom work is ‘made up’ and organized in current cultural economy (Cohen, 2010; Skålén and Hackley, 2011), have recently argued for a turn towards the study of *occupations* (e.g. Ashcraft et al., 2009; Smith Maguire, 2010). Following Bechky (2011), in an increasingly ‘image-conscious’ era of ‘change and flux’, occupations tend to supersede organizations as primary means of organizing. Among other things, occupations refer to the growing significance of social discourses for the constitution and organization of work (Cohen et al., 2005; Svensson, 2007). Given our interest in how the intermediary occupation of branding is discursively made up, in what follows, we take a closer look at how occupations are examined in extant marketing and MOS studies.

**Occupations as means of organizing.** Occupations reveal the central yet complex characteristics that typify a line of work (Meisenbach, 2008: 263). They transcend organizational boundaries and are increasingly global (Bechky, 2011). In contrast to professions, they appear more dynamic and transitory as to their functional boundaries and practices, their membership codes and rules and their social recognition (Wright, 2008). Following Ashcraft et al. (2009), occupations are largely constituted by both the broad social discourses that surround and inform the contemporary nature of work *and* the micro-level discourses and practices of the occupational members themselves (see also Foucault, 1990). For instance, Ashcraft et al. (2012) note that most occupations have a public image rife with messages for stakeholders to consume. These public social discourses say something about the general character of work and how it is commonly represented and evaluated. They permeate popular culture, professional and institutional fields and individuals’ perceptions and practices; and they can either enhance or distil an occupation’s significance and value (Meisenbach, 2008). Yet Ashcraft et al. (2012: 477) argue that although an occupation’s public discourses facilitate control, this is always accomplished ‘among stakeholders across place and time’. In other words, large social discourses are important (Svensson, 2007), but they do not have full jurisdiction over an occupation (Bechky, 2011).

For this reason, studies on occupations often emphasize the importance of micro-discourses for examining how those doing the work constitute and make up their occupation (Nelson and Barley, 1997). Noted here is that occupations and their members often face diverse social and discursive demands that are not easily resolvable (Fine, 1996). For many occupations, particularly those in a state of becoming, images are often remarkably contested and polyvalent, and scholars focus on the discursive strategies and campaigns members produce to convince others of their relevance and

legitimacy (Wright, 2008). In MOS, this list includes transitory occupations such as concierges (Sherman, 2010), higher education fundraisers (Meisenbach, 2008) and emergency workers (Nelson and Barley, 1997). Marketing studies occasionally also refer to occupations as 'transitory'; yet, transience here mainly references the uncertain and diffuse statuses and reputations occupations might hold, with less reference to the processes of 'occupational becoming'. For instance, Smith Maguire's (2010) study of wine producers or Cronin's (2004) study of advertising professionals both offer interesting insights on occupational constructions. In the latter, findings suggest that advertising practitioners are asked to negotiate between a diversity of 'needs', such as the commercial needs of producers and the often immaterial and personal desires of consumers. In the process of actively mediating diverse demands, advertising practitioners use a complex mix of discursive strategies and practices, meant to demonstrate and legitimize their particular area of expertise. Regardless, the occupational status and role of advertisers appear to remain provisional and contested.

Whilst not excluding social discourses, on balance, marketing and MOS studies on occupations with transitory elements tend to put focus on occupational members and the micro-discursive strategies or practices they draw upon and enact. Our Foucault-informed (1990) analysis of the intermediary occupation of branding, however, emphasizes how the occupation is constituted and organized by broad public discourses (e.g. business or entrepreneurialism and creativity or innovation) (Townley et al., 2009), and the discursive micro-accounts of branding professionals, dialectically reflecting and (re)shaping the former (Brownlie and Saren, 1997).

As above-noted, brands, brand management and branding best practices have been extensively discussed in normative, functionalist management and marketing studies (e.g. de Chernatony, 2009; Kotler, 2005). Nonetheless extant accounts on the norms and practices associated with the work and occupation of branding remain widely diffuse and fragmented. A passing view of prevalent job titles as broadly delineating as market research, design, copywriting and consulting underlines the contested and uncertain occupational boundaries (Moor, 2008). Against this background, we critically examine how the intermediary occupation of branding is discursively constituted and made up. As we will show, the variegated social and occupational discourses informing the accounts branding professionals give of their work do not allow us to 'pin down' the occupation; yet they help us understand the occupation's persistently 'mixed-state' and *liminal* conditions (see also Hirschman et al., 2012).

## Methodology

This research originates from a larger international project on branding work and workers. The presented empirical material and analysis stem from 16 in-depth interviews that we conducted with branding professionals (5 females and 11 males) from six countries: Austria, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom and United States. Here, branding professionals are those who work with brands or who consider what they do branding work. Job titles for our participants vary but often included brand manager or consultant, marketing, communication, public relations and external relations. Our participants come from industries such as higher education (1), brand consultancy (7), law (1), construction (1), healthcare (1), retail (1) and pharmaceuticals (4). Most participants have held multiple jobs doing branding work and whilst their accounts reflect upon their current and previous roles, Table 1 indicates participants' current position.

We used a semistructured interview guide that allowed for openness around the particular industry or country where the interviews took place. In order to develop an understanding for the

**Table 1.** Sample – branding workers.

Brander	Sex	Function/title	Field of activity	Country
Don	Male	General manager	Brand consultancy	New Zealand
Dwaine	Male	Director	Brand consultancy	New Zealand
Jesper	Male	Owner/partner	Brand consultancy	Finland
Steve	Male	Owner	Brand consultancy	Sweden/United States
Charlie	Male	Consultant	Brand consultancy	United States
Patrik	Male	CEO	Brand consultancy	Sweden
Sacha	Female	Design director	Consultancy	Finland
Bill	Male	Vice president international branding	Healthcare	United States
Tim	Male	Corporate brand manager	Retail	Sweden
Leif	Male	Communications strategist	Higher education	Sweden
Sara	Female	Public relations mandate	Law	Austria
Rupert	Male	Brand manager	Construction	Austria
Hannah	Female	Brand manager	Pharmaceuticals	United Kingdom
Geoff	Male	Brand director	Pharmaceuticals	United Kingdom
Laura	Female	Senior brand manager	Pharmaceuticals	United Kingdom
Mary	Female	Brand manager	Pharmaceuticals	United Kingdom

occupation of branding and the work it involves, the interviews focused on branders as workers, branding as the practice of work, consumers as branders' central audience and brands as the object of work. Interviews were conducted in English. They lasted an average of 1 hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed. To protect participant anonymity, we use pseudonyms for participants and their employers.

Our participants worked in different countries and cultural contexts and although we recognize that branding communities are diverse, like Moor (2008), we observed that branding techniques and strategies tend to be geographically mobile and international. For example, the branders in our study used similar language codes and jargon, explained their work as global and often drew from homogenous examples of brands and branding (i.e. Apple, Nike, and Starbucks) to illustrate their work and occupation. Therefore, whilst we do not denounce culture as distinguishing or important, we also note that brands and branding are often talked about as global, able to transcend cultural boundaries and geography (Moore et al., 2000).

Analysis was centred on our primary interest in exploring how the intermediary occupation of branding is constituted. In line with our discursive approach, we were interested in language and discourse, considering them to be 'world making activities' (Foucault, 1972), wherein interviews are sites in which extant discourses are drawn upon and enacted, thereby illustrating and 'informing' the work and world of branders. That said, we consider discourses to be productive, meaning they produce social and/or occupational practice and reality, instead of representing and determining them (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Foucault, 1972).

We took an abductive approach to analysing interviews (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) by specifically seeking instances where branders refer to occupational norms and practices, as well as being open to new and diffuse categories of meaning. Analysis took place individually and collectively over the span of several months. Through several close readings of the interview transcripts, we discerned that the branders invoked four discourses. We labelled them creativity, discovery, business and morality. We defined creativity and discovery as occupational discourses

that include ideas about branding work and its content and scope. Business and morality are defined as social discourses, since the branding ideas they promote are more generally related to the role and position of brand/ing and branders in contemporary society (Svensson, 2007).

Yet our analytical process was not linear or straightforward (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Both authors found the four branding discourses more often intersect within individual interviews, rather than stand alone. Our analysis initially involved struggle to make sense of what branders were saying about their occupation and work because their accounts appeared to constantly shift, sometimes in contradictory ways. For instance, it was common for a participant to claim that both being creative and following brand formulas are 'necessary for success'. Follow-up questions sought clarity on branders' positions, which was rarely granted. Since our aim was to understand their constructions rather than impart order (Brownlie and Saren, 1997), we explored their talk about work as being informed by multiple norms and orders. That said, the accounts are interesting because they reveal that branders' understanding of their work and occupation is dynamic, tense and often contested. In other words, branders' accounts bring up tensions around what the occupation of branding is (said to be) about, resulting in accounts that are shifting and liminal rather than cohesive and particularly illuminating. Against this background, the final phase of our analysis was especially focused on examining how branding discourses are linked.

### *Empirical analysis*

This section provides insights into the four central discourses, which constitute the work and occupation of branding, including a focus on how branding, branders, brands and consumers are promoted therein. Since these discourses more often interweave than not, the analysis focuses on the intersections between branding discourses. However, to allow the reader to readily follow the presentation of this interplay, we first offer a brief introduction to the four singular branding discourses.

#### *Branding discourses*

*Creativity discourse.* The creativity discourse was a primary and central feature in branders' accounts. It invokes the idea that the occupation of branding and its work are about creativity and the creation of aesthetically appealing images and realities. It refers to art, artistic genius, being different or maverick, and achieving grand reach. Here branders are framed and frame themselves as masters of their craft, whilst considering brands to be works of art that are distinct and persuasive. Simultaneously, this discourse promotes consumers as part of the brand (co)creation process.

*Discovery discourse.* The discovery discourse idealizes branding as a scientific occupation. Here, a correct or true brand identity can be found if branders are rational, consistent and formulaic in their approach to counting, calculating and measuring consumer behavior. As 'scientists', branders can distil and fix the essence of the brand and then represent it – to rather passive consumers. Branders are keen to sustain an 'authentic' connection between consumers and the brand, which is viewed as a given, should branders capture the data correctly.

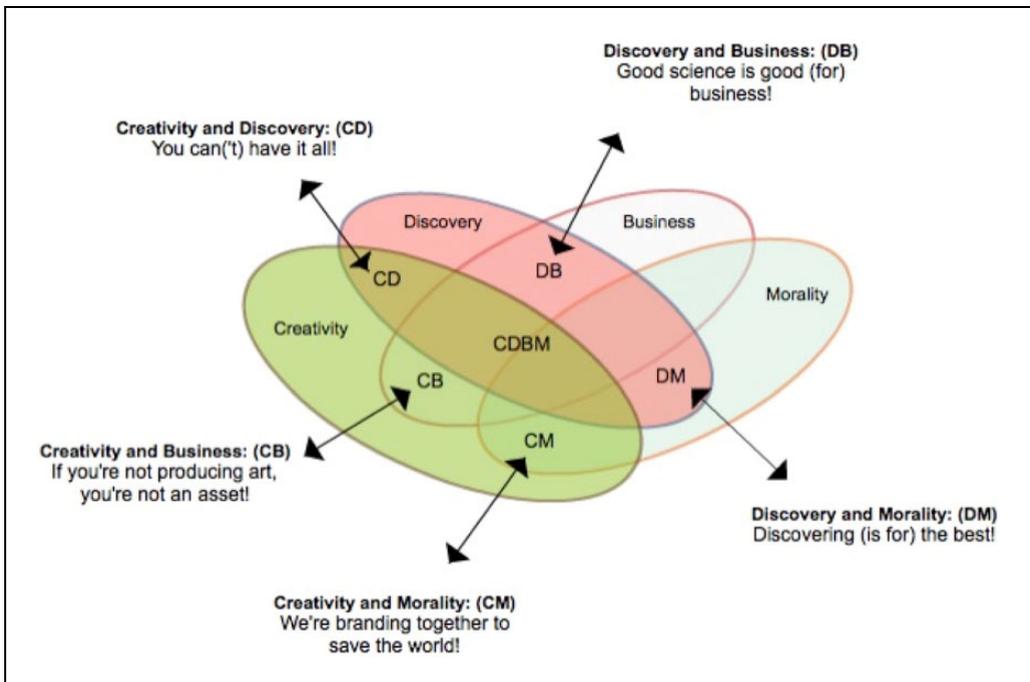
*Business discourse.* The business discourse is rarely invoked on its own. It appears to be a social discourse that foregrounds notions of commerce and competition. Here, branders evoke business concepts such as return on investment, market share and performance orientation as relevant to branding work. Brands are promoted as valuable assets that can be measured and evaluated.

Subsequently, branders are pictured as entrepreneurial, strategic business professionals, whilst consumers are viewed as people with buying power.

*Morality discourse.* Morality is another social discourse that rarely appears on its own, yet structures branding work by providing a moral basis for branding. It allows branders to critically evaluate and/or justify brands and branding practices. Brands are seen as vehicles for social aims and ills, and branding should create value beyond economic and strategic considerations. Here, branders are portrayed as guardians and mediators of brand/ing who should consider the broader implications of the consumers' interests in their work.

### Intersecting branding discourses

The following sections illustrate *how* the intermediary occupation of branding comes into being through the interweaving of the four primary branding discourses. The analysis will foreground the two main branding discourses, creativity and discovery, and explore how these discourses intersect with each other and with the social business and morality discourses. Figure 1 provides an overview of the intersections explored.



**Figure 1.** Leitmotifs in the intersections of occupational and social branding discourses.

*Creativity and discovery discourses.* The intersecting of the occupational creativity and discovery discourses shows, first and foremost, that creativity, despite branders' general insistence that it is the heart of their work, is often captured and reified by drives for scientific rationality and a functional approach to branding work. Importantly, all of our participants appear to take branding and brands

seriously and argue for their value. With branding's value established, what branders contest is the degree to which branding is or should be aspirational and creative *or* scientific and formulaic. What is interesting is how creativity and discovery discourses are kept in play to construct branding.

In part, this interplay between creativity and discovery is maintained through branders' articulations of what branding is *not*. Most branders take pains to point out how branding is different and better than traditional, or what brand consultant Charlie calls 'old school' marketing and advertising mentalities, which he defines as more formulaic than creative. Likewise, Jesper, co-owner of a branding firm, asserts that 'branding is always marketing, marketing isn't always branding', suggesting that branding exceeds what marketing can accomplish. Instead of doing traditional advertising, which brand manager Hannah explains as 'really, really awful', branders draw upon discursive images that exalt branding as 'aspirational', 'motivational' and 'emotional'. Yet, the simultaneously prevalent discovery discourse brings in a conservatism that dampens branding stories of art and genius. Several accounts, such as Mary's – a brand manager at a pharmaceutical company – lament mundane products, such as a cold and flu medication, and a functional approach to branding, and instead note that branders should seek to be creative and produce 'iconic brands', despite these so-called limitations:

God I'm going to sound like a wanker saying this, but you try to end up with something that goes from being a functional piece of communication to something that is more artsy.

Although Mary appears embarrassed, she argues that branding work should be more than function and rationality. Sara, who works for a large law firm, shifts this balance slightly. A desire to stay creative speaks in and through her account(s) whilst, at the same time, there is an acknowledgement that branding should also be formalized:

Even if there might be a rather formalized process, listing different steps that must be considered, I think branders have to be unconventional heads. You must have a vision; you must know how you put all elements into the big picture. Therefore you need creative people. But this is the tricky thing: you have an abstract brand model, but how to apply it?

Curiously, instead of articulating that the 'tricky thing' might be the incompatibility between being creatively unconventional and following a formula, for Sara and Mary, these two branding notions interweave. Although they question how one can simultaneously merge creativity with the more formulaic work of corporate branding (Moor, 2008), they do not articulate these seemingly incompatible demands as tensions. Instead we see vagueness, indeterminacy and 'looseness' infusing their accounts.

However, Geoff, a brand director at a pharmaceutical company, more directly addresses how branders sometimes struggle with occupational demands for creativity, affect *and* discovery and codification:

We can't handle that [messiness]. So we force it into a model that captures purchase-intent through rational information delivery. This business is utterly numeric in the way it tries to run things. So what would it look like here if that didn't matter? [...] We'd probably be much braver in what we do. But you'd see much less consistency in the way our brands went to market.

Although Geoff first appears cynical about the occupation's lack of creativity and reliance on models, he ultimately upholds consistency, not creativity, as 'what matters'. Geoff's account also

sustains branding work as a process of creation that is overrun with occupational and organizational desires to decide, define and dictate, tempered by the assumption that branders must seek to understand the essence of a brand (Ardley and Quinn, 2014).

The interlinking discourses of creativity and discovery above show how branders favor creativity as an occupational norm, despite the fact that their ideation of creativity is often infused with a technical and instrumental tone. Yet they struggle to navigate creativity alongside occupational and/or organizational pressures to 'discover'. The accounts below highlight how the discovery discourse often takes over branders' notions and ideas of creativity. In other words, a balance shifts between the discourses whilst leaving tensions in play.

Brand consultant Jesper's account exemplifies these tensions when he complains about his clients' lack of creativity: 'Companies still think that marketing is just where we put the logo. If it's big enough it will do the trick and it doesn't matter'. A moment later, however, he offers the advice that 'dullness' is the best practice for building and maintaining a brand: 'Follow the rules even though it's dull. It's better to keep it steady rather than to be too creative'.

Steve, owner of a branding firm, takes an even stronger stance in favor of discovery and critiques branders who emphasize tag lines and brand aesthetics. He argues, 'That stuff [brand aesthetics] isn't going to do any good if the brand isn't in order from the start'. Steve's chief concern highlights a tension in the interweaving of these discourses: 'When you start talking about it [the brand] as a religion or poetry, it makes it almost impossible to work with operationally'. Although Steve articulates this tension clearer than most, his assertion that branding typically merges creation and discovery also contributes to ideas that the occupation of branding holds multiple and competing aims and practices.

The intersecting of the two occupational branding discourses also holds clues to how branders frame their work in relation to consumers, their central audience. Within the creativity discourse, the role of branders is mainly to create aesthetically appealing brand images that resonate with consumers, whilst the infusion of the discovery discourse places consumers at the heart of the process by seeking to control and measure their 'brand desires'. Generally, both discourses leave open the possibility that consumers can refer to the brand in 'incorrect' or undesirable ways, particularly if brands are 'not consistent' (Geoff).

Therefore, although branders such as Charlie claim that creating brands 'is a dialogue' with consumers, more often branders appear anxious that consumers will not 'decode' their creativity correctly, and that being formulaic and consistent will ensure messages are transmitted effectively. An account given by Laura, a senior brand manager, is illustrative. Like Geoff, she notes that consumers' co-constructions could be detrimental to branding work:

That's the most dangerous thing for a brand ... people filling in the gaps and making their own assumptions, and that's why things like [branding] are absolutely essential for consistency.

Here, a key tension is whether branding work is considered a creative enterprise or a process of scientific discovery and practice, and the *leitmotiv* that characterizes branders' accounts is, 'you can('t) have it all!'. As we will illustrate next, tensions and complexities regarding the intermediary occupation of branding result from the intersecting of other branding discourses, too.

**Creativity and business discourses.** When the occupational creativity and the social business discourses intersect, branders' accounts are infused with an 'anti-marketing campaign' mentality. Creativity is portrayed as a central occupational mandate, yet one that is open to intense economic

scrutiny. As cultural intermediaries (Moor, 2008), branders draw upon discursive demands and expectations to reach legendary status as craftspeople or artists *and* to act entrepreneurially and make their endeavors profitable. Perhaps in response to such demands, some accounts locate creativity as more important than traditional business-centred advertising and marketing work. Brand consultant Charlie, for example, claims that the work of branding cannot be primarily about financial gain:

When you speak brands, you're speaking a function of emotion. When you speak about campaigns, it's very opportunistic. [...] We have an agenda and we have a sales goal. [...] If you're not producing art or if you're not an asset that people want to connect with emotionally, you are quickly going to become irrelevant.

Charlie's account does not resolve the tensions between creativity and business but instead illustrates the reframing of creativity, including art and genius, as the 'asset' that matters in branding work, whilst 'the rest', as Charlie goes on, 'is just commodities'. Charlie is not the only brander to disassociate 'proper branding work' from that considered exploitative and short-term focused under a business campaign mentality. Compared to 'real' branding, linked with creativity and imagination, advertising and marketing campaigns lack creative mastery, as the following account, given by Patrik, CEO at a brand consultancy, evokes:

It's very difficult for advertising to produce something that really attracts, which reaches out. [...] But it feels like many advertising firms don't even have that as a goal, when they try to sell projects. [...] We try to work as little as possible with people who are stuck in that conventional mode of thought. It smells of advertising when you bring in advertising people, and then it just gets bad.

Sacha, a design director, also argues that the process of brand creation is set apart from advertising; yet, he offers one of the few accounts where money is legitimated:

Branding work is more than just advertising. [...] It's nice to have brand recognition, as we also make money, yeah. [...] But our effort is to make the brand better ... to make it work.

Here, making money is framed as 'nice' but, overall, branders' aspiration should be to 'create a better brand' that is simultaneously appealing and well functioning. Again, we note that both Patrik and Sacha's accounts gloss over, rather than address the tensions between creativity and economic concerns.

The interweaving of creativity and business discourses and related challenges also speak through accounts given by Tim, a brand manager for a popular athletic shoe. He wants to hire someone 'not tied to a budget but to ideas', but then quickly says that branding budgets, and hence branding professionals, are often the first to go during budget cuts. In the face of such pressures, Tim draws forth how branders and their practices are linked to economic value. He explains, 'We are the people who others in the organization look at and they wonder what we do and contribute'. This account exemplarily evokes the occupational intermediary position branders occupy. Branders are charged with 'capitalizing on creativity' (Townley et al., 2009), whilst needing to engage with the competing expectations of multiple audiences and financial realities. In many cases, the occupational position and status of branders tend to remain unclear, insecure and contested (Smith Maguire, 2010). Although a few branders refer to their anxieties, challenges and tensions remain largely unaddressed.

Consumers are rarely invoked in instances where occupational creativity and social business discourses interweave. They are mainly seen as the silent evaluators of branders' creative work, capable of deciding which brands reach 'success on a large scale'. On the whole, the links between creativity and business discourses suggest that branders widely question and/or reject discursive demands that support the adage, 'money matters', and instead adopt the *leitmotiv*, 'if you're not producing art, you're not an asset'.

**Discovery and business discourses.** The interlinks between discovery and business discourses appear to make more comfortable 'bedfellows'. They mainly reveal that business notions amplify demands for large-scale discoveries and reach in branding work, and therefore business heightens and supports discovery. Notable additions to this interweaving are the absence of explorations of creativity and the aspiration for brands to have 'grand reach and impact'. Hannah, active in the pharmaceutical industry, evokes the connections between research and business success when she offers suggestions for best practices in branding work. The nasal strips she branded were confusing to consumers and not performing well until others 'distilled the process':

The team in the United States then did a piece of research on this and went, 'We should just target congestion'. Really, that's what the core of it is about. [...] They've rolled it out in a couple of the core markets like Japan, and all of a sudden it's performing. [...] So actually being more single-minded and straightforward about where the biggest opportunity lies has made the brand perform a lot better.

Beyond foregrounding profit and market share, interestingly, branders argue against being 'too creative' (Jesper) or 'open-minded' in order to 'get things right', as communications strategist Leif puts it. Similarly, Geoff argues that 'capturing the essence' as well as the economic success of brands is the major purpose of branding work (Willmott, 2010):

We are almost paralyzed by our inability to make business decisions without a number to back it up. [...] We are the most rational organization I've ever seen ... So if you see a piece of advertising [we ask]: 'Well, have you tested it? Have you got a quantitative score for what it's going to do to your advertising scores? [If not] it's not good'.

Rupert, a corporate brand manager, also acknowledges that although there are normative understandings around branding as a creative process and brands as art, he questions this if a brand fails to make money:

What matters in the end are numbers. [...] So you have to convince your promoters that what you are doing is worth funding. [...] The best way to do this is to show them some clear figures.

As the need for numerical data is foregrounded, anxieties around failure lead branders to work under the guise of scientific 'risk management' (see also Ardley and Quinn, 2014). As a result, consumers operate once more as silent inclusions: the business discourse acknowledges consumers as important economic resources, without engaging them further, whilst the discovery discourse renders them as passive and predictable, if properly 'catalysed' by the correct appeals. The *leitmotiv* resulting from the interweaving of discovery and business discourses is 'good science is good (for) business'. In what follows, we discuss how the occupational creativity discourse intersects with the social morality discourse in branders' accounts.

**Creativity and morality discourses.** When the evaluative morality discourse links with the far more prevalent creativity discourse, the purpose of branding work is often the creation of brands with broad social value (Svensson, 2007). Here, branding is positioned as a professional activity, writ large. In particular, the morality discourse, fostering occupational values such as ‘authenticity’, ‘mastery’ and ‘participation’ (Charlie), offers branders a way to negotiate the strong discursive demands of staying creative and artistic, as well as socially altruistic, without the tensions of profits and measurements. Sometimes these demands enable a way to (re)frame gaining market share as a social, not business aim.

A few accounts suggest that the social discourse of morality allows branders to distance themselves from their own work and practices and instead turn a moralistic lens on the practices and brands that *other* members of the occupational community promote. For example, brand manager Hannah explains why she uses eco-vert, an environmentally friendly washing detergent, instead of the less-expensive brand:

I’m assuming that the brand is credible . . . it costs me a bit more than if I was using Tesco-own but I imagine that with Tesco-own I’m killing some fish somewhere and with this one I’m not impacting the environment. So for something that’s quite a dull category, you can have quite a strong emotional response to it, if you believe that there is a benefit over and above what [the brand] is doing. It’s an emotional rather than a rational thing that makes you stick with that brand.

Hannah emphasizes that ‘ethical branding’ can bind consumers to a brand so long as it is ‘not dull’. Assuming the work of branding can make a difference, the aim of branders is to be creative in order to convince people to use a ‘good’ product or service ‘that might otherwise be ignored’. Infused with morality, discursive demands for creativity can be seen as either productive *or* destructive. With regard to the latter, we note that a few branders critique campaigns that cause social harm. For example, Jesper, who co-owns a branding firm, laments ‘the environmental dark side’ of branding work, by explaining how bottled water is creatively and purposefully branded to be perceived as ‘special and different’, and then shipped internationally, wasting valuable ecological resources.

When creativity and morality discourses intersect, the picture of branders that emerges is often idealistic or idealizing. Here, branders are presented – and present themselves – as cultural intermediaries with non-calculative or non-materialistic aims who are obliged to society, rather than to single organizations, products or services (Svensson, 2007). Branders often draw upon and enact discursive images such as ‘helping hands’ (Dwayne), ‘communicators’ (Leif) or ‘bridge-builders’ (Steve).

We further see significant differences in how consumers are evoked and portrayed by the intersecting of creativity with business versus morality discourses. In the first case, the consumer is considered a silent evaluator, wielding buying power. In the latter, consumers are treated as crucial in a participation-oriented vision of branding. Charlie, referenced earlier claiming that branding is about art and genius, comments on how (not) to approach consumers: ‘Everyone has their approach to branding and it’s all schmaltz. It’s like, “we’ve got process, blah, blah, blah”’. Instead, he invokes creativity to promote a higher social aim:

We try and bring clients through a [creative] process. It’s really this engagement. I see brands really as dialogue. [ . . . ] It’s important to make it personally engaging, to support people.

An account given by Don, general manager for a brand consultancy firm, also foregrounds the ‘relational sides’ of brands and branding work (Kornberger, 2010): ‘People want to have an engagement with the brand. Brands have got a relationship with society. And branding can help change a culture’.

Both the creativity and the morality discourses are associated with and prompt a rather positive and ideal image of the work and occupation of branding and branders. The resulting *leitmotiv* is, ‘We’re branding together to save the world!’. We now turn to the intersections of discovery and morality discourses.

**Discovery and morality discourses.** When the occupational discovery and social morality discourses intersect in branders’ accounts, brand consistency and scientific rigor are treated as moral imperatives of branding work. The morality discourse heightens the discovery discourse in much the same manner that it heightens the creativity discourse – by turning rigor into a social good and framing the lack of it as a social ill. An account given by Dwaine exemplifies this interlink: ‘Consistency is absolutely essential. Anything you do communication wise must be true to your brand formula. [...] Bad brands, well ... their messages are not consistent’.

The position Dwaine takes up here suggests that branders have a moral obligation to be consistent; yet this obligation often stands in conflict with demands for creativity: ‘Some would say, you know, like “keeping you on your toes” with a brand is a good thing, but I don’t necessarily’. For Dwaine, inconsistency or too much ‘provocation’ by a brand ‘creates an information void’. He furthers that when brands are provocative, ‘They change the kind of emotional connection, almost by playing with my attention’.

Interestingly, ‘playing’ with images and creativity is considered emblematic of good branding work in most accounts. At times, branders’ role as cultural intermediaries even requires it. Yet here, the prevalence of the morality discourse contests too much play and creativity and, instead, promotes and justifies practices that capture, purify and utilize knowledge.

Notable here is also how morality ‘fails’ or refuses to collude with demands for business and profit (Willmott, 2010). Brand manager Don, for example, recounts how he took an executive human resource team, employed at a company called ‘Fish HR’, through a corporate branding exercise where everyone was asked to write one sentence articulating what their brand ‘is’ and represents. Each member of the team wrote down a different answer. For Don this failed to, ‘Convey consistency around what they [Fish HR] did, who they were, and what they actually gave the clients’. Despite the circumstance that the brand was growing and making money, Don, seemingly subjected to both discursive demands for discovery and morality, claims, ‘It has been a lie’. Instead of supporting profitable inconsistency, he thus offered his clients the advice, ‘Let’s pull back, redefine, regroup and then reengage’.

In accounts where discovery and morality discourses interlink, consistency is often linked to moral values such as honesty and authenticity. Brand manager Hannah emphasizes how honesty occurs via processes of discovery:

We’re quite cautious in what we say about our brands. [...] We can’t say anything unless it’s absolutely true because it would be more than our jobs were worth. We have stringent internal regulatory processes to ensure that everything is backed up by masses of data and research; that gives me trust that other big companies work along similar lines.

Unlike Charlie's previous assessment that process is 'schmaltz', Don and Hannah argue that consistency, research and rigorous branding processes are good – especially for consumers. An account given by Bill, vice president of international branding in a healthcare organization, 'captures' a similar idea. Bill explains how hundreds of hours of research on hospital patients' perceptions steered the improvement of organizational practices for the customers' benefit:

We wanted to make our image more compassionate. So we did rigorous research. We identified the seven major satisfiers and dis-satisfiers of the patient experience. Then we put those in the form of healing commitments. [...] The new mission and values are posted everywhere ... to bring extraordinary care to life.

Invoking products, brand manager Tim also claims that consistency in branding is good for consumers because it relates to 'getting the word out'. This rather functionalist stance is also understood as moral, in the sense that:

It [consistency] helps the customer make decisions. Brands allow them to learn about new products and what they can do for them. It helps them forge an identity. It's a way to signify, 'this is who I am'.

Both Bill and Tim's accounts are shaped by the idea that consumers hold certain truths, which branders can discover and 'canalize' into 'something good'. Yet, unlike the 'dialogue' and 'engagement' messages conveyed when creativity and morality discourses interlink (Lury, 2004), here, consumers are not considered active in the branding process, and communication between branders and consumers is framed in a unidirectional manner in which consumers are meant to divulge information that branders can use to bring a brand's 'essence' to the surface. The *leitmotiv* that results from the interweaving of occupational discovery and social morality discourses is: 'Discovering (is for) the best!'

On balance, our empirical material illustrates variegated discursive intersections that infuse and are enacted in branders' accounts of their occupation and the work it involves. Considering that most branders refer to *all* these different intersections, we conclude from our analysis that branding constitutes an intermediary occupation with pronounced *liminal* conditions. What this means and implies will be elaborated in the following discussion.

## Discussion

In a similar way that marketing scholars have been interested in the discursive make up of marketing work (e.g. Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Svensson, 2007), we have been interested in how the cultural intermediary occupation of branding is made up, namely, by social and occupational branding discourses that are drawn upon in the accounts branding professionals give of their work and occupation (Brownlie and Saren, 1997). More specifically, our analysis has put emphasis on two occupational branding discourses – creativity and discovery – that branders particularly refer to and explored how they intersect with each other and with the social branding discourses, business and morality. We have shown that each discursive intersection promotes a *leitmotiv*, which branders enact in a flexible and shifting way. Taken together, branders' accounts show that complex and dynamically interlinking discourses constitute the occupation of branding (see also Foucault, 1990). Rather than creating cohesion or stability, the interweaving branding discourses create transience and fluidity around the practices and norms that organize the occupation, thereby producing both challenges and scopes for flexibility (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003).

As illustrated throughout our analysis, the occupational creativity discourse forms the central reference point in branders' portrayal of their work. Oftentimes, however, this discourse is captured and downplayed by other branding discourses, like discovery and business. Although branders question the significance of discovery in branding practice, they simultaneously give accounts that are repeatedly rife with functionalist connotations, exemplifying that creativity presents a main challenge to the work and occupation of branding. In addition, in instances where branders' accounts are informed by both occupational *and* social discourses, aimed at reaching different audiences and social spheres, complexities about the occupation of branding further increase.

In being discursively promoted as a creative, scientific, social and a business practice, branding hence becomes notably non-distinct and 'open-ended': It seeks to be everything to everyone whilst looking for its place as an occupation. We now argue that it is in this process that branding comes into being as an occupation with distinct liminal conditions. In what follows we discuss what these conditions look like, and what they imply for the intermediary occupation of branding and those involved in it. We reflect upon these questions by drawing on and extending prevalent marketing and MOS studies on liminality (e.g. Beech, 2011; Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Garsten, 1999; Moor, 2008; Smith Maguire, 2010), particularly by delineating how liminality was initially understood by the anthropologists van Gennep (1960 [1909]) and Turner (1967, 1969). We specifically challenge and contribute to knowledge of liminality in *occupations*, in three ways.

First, instead of characterizing liminality as a significant disruption in established order(s), status and practice and hence a state of momentous disorder (van Gennep, 1960 [1909]; see also Cody and Lawlor, 2011), our study suggests that liminality is neither exceptional nor necessarily associated with a complete lack of order and status (Beech, 2011). Instead, the four habitually interweaving social and occupational branding discourses show that in the intermediary occupation of branding liminality is built on and emerges on the basis of *multiple* and transient orders and norms (Hirschman et al., 2012).

Second, our study challenges the common view of liminality as only occurring temporarily and in distinct stages (such as entering adulthood or professional life), marked by specific 'ritualistic structures' (Turner, 1967; see also Kozinets, 2002). Branders' *constant* interweaving of different branding discourses counteracts and undermines the definition and stabilization of what the occupation is about and how it is made up (Foucault, 1990). Rather than being in the process of emerging into an occupation with distinct and uniform social and discursive orders (Turner, 1969), branding seems to *remain* an occupation with pronounced transitory-liminal conditions, constituting diverse and dynamic occupational norms and practices. Here, liminality presents and unfolds as a perpetual phenomenon that cannot be locked down in space, time or (organizational or institutional) culture (Beech, 2011; Hirschman et al., 2012).

Finally, in traditional studies of liminality, states of in-betweenness are frequently viewed as 'dark', 'risky' and *precarious* and, hence, as something for individuals to overcome (van Gennep, 1960 [1909]; see also Cody and Lawlor, 2011). Recent contributions in marketing and MOS also suggest that workers seek resolution to the uncertainties that 'being in flux' creates (e.g. Garsten, 1999, 2008; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Wright, 2008). Czarniawska and Mazza (2003), exploring liminality within the context of consultancy workers, provide one of the few studies that point to the 'double nature' of liminality, the positive side of which gives consultants the necessary flexibility to remain both organizational insiders and outsiders. Similar to Czarniawska and Mazza, we argue that in the intermediary occupation of branding liminality is a condition that both enables

and constrains. Our analysis thus proposes that stability and resolution of order(s) are not the only options that occupations and occupational members have at their disposal.

Although our study is focused on the occupation of branding, we also gain insight into how branders are affected by liminal occupational conditions (Moor, 2008; Smith Maguire, 2010). Above all, the study suggests that in order to navigate the occupation's complexities and tensions branders tend to remain purposefully 'loose' and vague. This looseness staves off occupational closure in ways that can play out productively (Foucault, 1990). Eschewing distinct and firm occupational boundaries can be a brander's means of actively and creatively modulating inroads for occupational claims, norms and practices – a means that appears all-important and beneficial for cultural intermediary workers (Ardley and Quinn, 2014). On a related note, we observe a double-edged sword: dynamically intersecting discourses and, therewith, liminal conditions can be advantageous in that they enable branders to present themselves in a positive and attractive light to diverse, organizational or consumer, audiences. In particular, the social discourses, business and morality, allow branders to engage with audiences beyond the organizational sphere and to make (shifting) claims about what branding is and what it can achieve (such as environmental stewardship). On the other hand, when branders believe they have to please everyone, 'do it all' or construct occupational boundaries to help clarify their work and position, it becomes most obvious that liminality can also turn into a source of tensions and conflicts (see also Cohen et al., 2005).

To recapitulate, our analysis has evoked branding as an intermediary occupation with liminal conditions, stemming from dynamically intersecting social and occupational discourses. Following this, we have suggested that in the case of branding liminality cannot be confined or reduced to specific periods. Rather it presents an immanent condition of the occupation, implying that branding appears to be steadily concomitant with variegated, shifting and non-distinct norms and practices. Incidentally, in the current cultural economy, these claims might apply beyond the branding occupation. In times in which an increasing number of occupations seem to be engaged with 'cultural intermediation' and 'symbolic production' (Cronin, 2004), liminality no longer appears to be an extraordinary 'outsider'-state (Smith Maguire, 2010). Instead, liminal conditions may become the norm for many contemporary occupations and types of work that are constituted and organized across different social spheres and, thus, beyond fixed (organizational) boundaries and orders (Cohen, 2010). We now reiterate the main interest and contributions of the article at hand.

## Conclusion

Starting from the observation that, from a normative functionalist perspective, branding and branding work are admittedly debated in popular discourses and accounts (Kapferer, 2004; Kotler, 2005), this article critically examined the context-specific discursive practices that constitute the cultural intermediary occupation of branding. Following a Foucault-informed perspective (1972, 1990), we have explored the intersecting social and occupational discourses that inform and are enacted in the accounts branding professionals give of their occupation and the work it encompasses. The study showed that there are mainly four discourses – which we labelled as creativity, discovery, business and morality – that constantly and dynamically interweave. We have subsequently argued that branding is made up as an intermediary occupation with persistently liminal conditions.

Among other things, the persistence and simultaneity of creativity, discovery, business and/or morality discourses exemplarily illustrate the social and institutional position of cultural

intermediary occupations as ‘between and betwixt’ (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). In the instance of branding, this position results in the occupation being perpetually implicated in the production and promotion of ‘creative yet formulaic’ goods and services with supposedly high cultural-symbolic and economic value (Smith Maguire, 2010). Asked to mediate their complex and ambiguous occupational position, branders commonly decide to stay ‘purposefully loose’. In so doing, they sustain the occupations’ transitory-liminal conditions. In view of such contestation and transience, we conclude from our analysis that the specifics and ‘distinctiveness’ of branding as an intermediary occupation reside exactly in its ‘non-distinctiveness’.

Against that background, our contributions are as follows: First, the study contributes to critical discourse-analytic studies within marketing and MOS (e.g. Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Cohen et al., 2005; Svensson, 2007). More specifically, we followed calls for questioning prescriptive marketing and branding discourses and, thus, calls for greater conceptual and empirical granularity as to the exploration of marketing- and management-related types of work (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Skålén and Hackley, 2011). Whilst extant studies in these fields often focus on the micro-discourses through which workers enact and make sense of their work and occupation (e.g. Ardley and Quinn, 2014; Meisenbach, 2008; Smith Maguire, 2010), our Foucault-informed perspective allowed us to illustrate the importance of both discursive micro-practices and micro-accounts *and* broad social discourses that inform branders’ accounts (Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Foucault, 1972, 1990). Furthermore, this perspective allowed us to evoke how complex occupational and social discourses dynamically intersect rather than stand alone, making up branding as a liminal occupation.

In addition, our study contributes conceptually and empirically to existent marketing and MOS studies on liminality by challenging traditional notions of liminality in three ways: by questioning the significance of disruption, temporality and the precariousness commonly associated with this state (e.g. Turner, 1969; see also Garsten, 1999; Kozinets, 2002; Moor, 2008; van Gennep, 1960 [1909]). Further, whilst studies on liminality frequently ascribe and apply liminality to individuals, such as consumers or working subjects (e.g. Cody and Lawlor, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Smith Maguire, 2010), our study showed that liminality also affects and informs subject matters like work and occupations (see also Hirschman et al., 2012). Here, we note that liminality can be persistently present, meaning it can constitute an integrative element of occupations.

At last, our study responds to calls to further examine the nature and conditions of cultural intermediary occupations (e.g. Cronin, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Smith Maguire, 2010), of which we see branding as an interesting exemplar. It is also here where we see spaces for contributions through future work. Our study refers to the blurring and contestation of previously taken for granted – social, occupational, organizational and also disciplinary – boundaries via the occupation of branding. Future work could continue to explore how work is currently understood, negotiated and organized as to its spatiotemporal and social dimension(s) (see also Cohen, 2010; Land and Taylor, 2010). The emerging field of the so-called creative industries, for instance, seems to present a notably insightful domain for the additional critical exploration of intermediary occupations with transitory-liminal conditions. Occupational fields, like architecture (Cohen et al., 2005) or film and media production (DeFillippi, 2009), tend to evoke the intertwining of the social, cultural and economic spheres in an ideal-typical manner (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). They thereby reveal some of the paradigmatic challenges and struggles resulting from social and occupational discourses asking, above all, to produce and consume marketable, commercializable and, at the same time, creative and symbolically unique goods and ideas (Cronin, 2004; Townley et al., 2009).

Finally, we encourage further study of how the prevalence of dynamically intersecting discourses and the liminal conditions they promote affect the emergence and constitution of occupational and professional *identity(ies)* (e.g. Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Meisenbach, 2008; Moor, 2008). Whilst studies within marketing and MOS often suggest that occupations and their members strive for overcoming transitory-liminal states and conditions and, hence, seek to establish clear and stable identities (e.g. Cohen et al., 2005; Wright, 2008), our study proposes the contrary: rather than moving towards distinctiveness and stability, branding workers sustain the liminality immanent to the occupation. The various dynamically interlinked discourses that make up the occupation thus suggest that branding is accompanied by occupational *non-identity* rather than identity – a phenomenon worthy of further attention. A question also worth pursuing would be how intermediary occupations ‘lacking identity’ or, at any rate, holding perpetually ‘betwixt’ and uncertain identities inform the individual identity of occupational members. More importantly, in-depth explorations of how cultural intermediary workers negotiate their contested identity in the *mêlée* promise to contribute to the further cross-fertilization between critical marketing and MOS research (Svensson, 2007).

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the editors of *Marketing Theory* and the three anonymous reviewers for their encouragement, feedback and persistence throughout the development of the article. We would also like to thank Dan Kärreman and Carys Egan-Wyer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The empirical research of this article was funded by a grant from Handelsbanken as ‘Image, branding and identity’, Project number P2010-0182:1.

### References

- Alvesson, M. and Kärreman, D. (2011) *Qualitative Research and Theory Development*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Alvesson, M. and Sköldbäck, K. (2000) *Reflexive Methodologies: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Ardley, B.C. and Quinn, L. (2014) ‘Practitioner Accounts and Knowledge Production: An Analysis of Three Marketing Discourses’, *Marketing Theory* 14(1): 97–118.
- Aronczyk, M. (2008) ‘“Living the Brand”’: Nationality, Globality and the Identity Strategies of Nation Branding Consultants’, *International Journal of Communication* 2(1): 41–65.
- Ashcraft, K.L., Kuhn, T. and Cooren, F. (2009) ‘Constitutional Amendments: “Materializing” Organizational Communication’, in A. Brief and J. Walsh (eds) *The Academy of Management Annals*, pp. 1–64. London: Routledge.
- Ashcraft, K.L., Muhr, S.L., Rennstam, J., et al. (2012) ‘Professionalization as a Branding Activity: Occupational Identity and the Dialectic of Inclusivity-exclusivity’, *Gender, Work and Organization* 19(5): 467–88.

- Bechky, B.A. (2011) 'Making Organizational Theory Work: Institutions, Occupations, and Negotiated Orders', *Organization Science* 22(5): 1157–67.
- Beech, N. (2011) 'Liminality and the Practices of Identity Reconstruction', *Human Relations* 64(2): 285–302.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brannan, M.J., Parsons, E. and Priola, V. (2011) 'Placing Branding within Organization Theory', in M. J. Brannan, E. Parsons, and V. Priola (eds) *Branded Lives: The Production and Consumption of Meaning at Work*, pp. 185–96. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Pub.
- Brownlie, D. and Saren, M. (1997) 'Beyond the One-dimensional Marketing Manager: The Discourse of Theory, Practice and Relevance', *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 14: 147–61.
- Cody, K. and Lawlor, K. (2011) 'On the Borderline: Exploring Liminal Consumption and the Negotiation of Threshold Selves', *Marketing Theory* 11(2): 207–28.
- Cohen, L., Wilkinson, A., Arnold, J., et al. (2005) "'Remember I'm the Bloody Architect!": Architects, Organizations and Discourses of Profession', *Work, Employment and Society* 19(4): 775–96.
- Cohen, R.L. (2010) 'Rethinking Mobile Work: Boundaries of Space, Time and Social Relation in the Working Lives of Mobile Hairstylists', *Work, Employment and Society* 24(1): 65–84.
- Cronin, A.M. (2004) 'Regimes of Mediation: Advertising Practitioners as Cultural Intermediaries?', *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 7(4): 349–69.
- Czarniawska, B. and Mazza, C. (2003) 'Consulting as a Liminal Space', *Human Relations* 56(3): 267–90.
- de Chernatony, L. (2009) 'Towards the Holy Grail of Defining "Brand"', *Marketing Theory* 9(1): 101–5.
- DeFillippi, R. (2009) 'Dilemma of Project-based Media Work: Contexts and Choices', *Journal of Media Business Studies* 6(4): 5–30.
- du Gay, P. and Pryke, M. (2002) 'Cultural Economy: An Introduction', in P. du Gay and M. Pryke (eds) *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, pp. 1–20. London: Sage.
- Ellis, N., Jack, G., Hopkinson, G., et al. (2010) 'Boundary Work and Identity Construction in Market Exchanges', *Marketing Theory* 10(3): 227–36.
- Fine, G.A. (1996) 'Justifying Work: Occupational Rhetorics as Resources in Restaurant Kitchens', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41(1): 90–115.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality*. Volume 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1991) 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, pp. 53–82. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Garsten, C. (1999) 'Betwixt and Between: Temporary Employees as Liminal Subjects in Flexible Organizations'. *Organization Studies* 20(4): 601–17.
- Garsten, C. (2008) *Workplace Vagabonds. Career and Community in Changing Worlds of Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grey, C. and Garsten, C. (2001) 'Trust, Control and Post-bureaucracy', *Organization Studies* 22(2): 229–50.
- Hirschman, E.C., Ruvio, A. and Belk, R.W. (2012) 'Exploring Space and Place in Marketing Research: Excavating the Garage', *Marketing Theory* 12(4): 369–89.
- Ibarra, H. and Barbulescu, R. (2010) 'Identity as Narrative: Prevalence, Effectiveness and Consequences of Narrative Identity Work in Macro Work Role Transitions', *Academy of Management Review* 35(1): 135–54.
- Kapferer, J.N. (2004) *Strategic Brand Management*. New York: Free Press.
- Kärreman, D. and Rylander, A. (2008) 'Managing Meaning through Branding – The Case of a Consulting Firm', *Organization Studies* 29(1): 103–25.
- Kornberger, M. (2010) *Brand Society. How Brands transform Management and Lifestyle*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Kotler, P. (2005) 'Foreward by Philip Kotler', in A.M. Tybout and T. Calkins (eds) *Kellogg on Branding: The Marketing Faculty of the Kellogg School of Management*, pp. 9–10. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2002) 'Can Consumers Escape the Market? Emancipatory Illuminations from Burning Man', *Journal of Consumer Research* 29(1): 20–38.
- Land, C. and Taylor, S. (2010) "'Surf's Up": Work, Life, Balance and Brand in a New Age Capitalist Organization', *Sociology* 44(3): 395–413.
- Lury, C. (2004) *Brand: The Logos of the Global Economy*. London: Routledge.
- McCabe, D. (2009) 'Enterprise contested: Betwixt and between the Discourses of Career and Enterprise in a UK bank', *Human Relations* 62(10): 1551–79.
- Meisenbach, R.J. (2008) 'Working with Tensions: Materiality, Discourse, and (Dis)empowerment in Occupational Identity Negotiation among Higher Education Fund-raisers', *Management Communication Quarterly* 22(2): 258–87.
- Moor, L. (2008) 'Branding Consultants as Cultural Intermediaries', *The Sociological Review* 56(3): 408–28.
- Moore, C.M., Fernie, J. and Burt, S. (2000) 'Brands without Boundaries: The Internationalization of Designer Retailer's Brand', *European Journal of Marketing* 34(8): 919–37.
- Nelson, B.J. and Barley, S.R. (1997) 'For Love or Money? Commodification and the Construction of an Occupational Mandate', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 42(4): 619–53.
- O'Reilly, D. (2005) 'Cultural Brands/Branding Cultures', *Journal of Marketing Management* 21(5): 573–88.
- Pettinger, L. (2004) 'Brand Culture and Branded Workers: Service Work and Aesthetic Labour in Fashion Retail', *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 7(2): 165–84.
- Schroeder, J.E. (2009) 'The Cultural Codes of Branding', *Marketing Theory* 9(1): 123–6.
- Sherman, R. (2010) "'Time Is Our Commodity": Gender and the Struggle for Occupational Legitimacy Among Personal Concierges', *Work and Occupations* 37(1): 81–114.
- Skålén, P., Fellesson, M. and Fougère, M. (2006) 'The Governmentality of Marketing Discourse', *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 22(4): 275–91.
- Skålén, P. and Hackley, C. (2011) 'Marketing-As-Practice: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 27(2): 189–95.
- Smith, Maguire, J. (2010) 'Provenance and the Liminality of Production and Consumption: The Case of Wine Promoters', *Marketing Theory* 10(3): 269–82.
- Svensson, P. (2007) 'Producing Marketing: Towards a Social-phenomenology of Marketing Work', *Marketing Theory* 7(3): 271–90.
- Townley, B., Beech, N. and McKinlay, A. (2009) 'Managing in the Creative Industries: Managing the Motley Crew', *Human Relations* 62(7): 939–62.
- Turner, V.W. (1967) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of the Ndembu Ritual*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V.W. (1969) *The Ritual Process*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Van Gennep, A. (1960 [1909]) *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge.
- Virno, P. (2005) *Grammar of the Multitude*. New York: Semiotext.
- Willmott, H. (2010) 'Creating "Value" beyond the Point of Production: Branding, Financialization and Market Capitalization', *Organization* 17(5): 517–42.
- Wright, C. (2008) 'Reinventing Human Resource Management: Business Partners, Internal Consultants and the Limits of Professionalization', *Human Relations* 61(8): 1063–86.

**Bernadette Loacker** works as a Lecturer at the Department of Organisation, Work and Technology at Lancaster University Management School, UK. Bernadette's research interests include contemporary forms of work organization, processes of occupational and professional subjectivity formation, power and critique at work and poststructuralist organization theories. Her work has been published in journals such as *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, *Culture and Organization*, *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Organization*. She

is a member of the editorial collective of the journal *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*. Address: Department of Organisation, Work and Technology, Lancaster University Management School, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, UK. [email: b.loacker@lancaster.ac.uk]

**Katie Rose Sullivan** holds a PhD in communication. She is a research fellow in the Department of Business Administration at Lund University, Sweden. Her research interests in occupations, professionalization and diversity involve analysis of the problems and potentials of communication and identity work. Her work has been published in journals such as *Gender, Work and Organization*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Organization* and *Organization Studies*. She is a member of the editorial collective of the journal *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*. Address: Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Lund, Sweden. [email: katie.sullivan@fek.lu.se]