Branding employees

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Abstract

Purpose – From the optimistic to the critical, the post-structural to the market rational there are varied perspectives on normative control at work. The purpose of this paper is to describe a tactical evolution in normative control practices and explore how this development sits with each perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on a six month participant ethnography incorporating 75 interviews and document analysis. Data are presented from human resources, executives, managers and employees.

Findings – This paper presents an account of a leading, listed, global firm's attempt to align employees to the organisation's goals through fashioning an ideal employee identity based on the organisation brand. Perspectives are provided on the desired role and ultimate failure of this employee branding initiative. Indeed, branding may be a normative step too far. The paper demonstrates how the workplace comprises of a variety of experiential forces and employees are capable of deciding which are the most substantive. However, the existence of varied perspectives on normative control within the workplace can account for both its failure and perpetuation.

Research limitations/implications – The findings highlight the variety of forces that interact to shape perspectives of normative control within a workplace. Consequently, future research may benefit from adopting a more holistic analytical approach to avoid over or under estimating the role of normative control.

Originality/value – The novelty of this paper comes firstly from the account of a tactical normative development and secondly from the demonstration of the value of considering the role and impact of normative control from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Keywords Control, Workplace, Branding, Work identity, Organizational culture, Employee attitudes, Ireland

Paper type Case study

Normative evolutions

The concept of normative workplace control may be entering something of a theoretical stalemate: written off by some and over estimated by others. If normative control is "...a *locus* of shared values and moral involvement in which control rests on shaping workers' identities, emotions, attitudes and beliefs" (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005, p. 201), during the 1980s "corporate culture" was the dominant management mechanism for its achievement (Alvesson, 1990; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1992). The role and impact of corporate cultures has since been a vigorous topic of research and debate. Cultural optimists (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002) presented corporate culture as a move towards a more functional, meaningful, empowering work environment:

> Organisations that socialise effectively manage a lot of internal ambiguity. This tends to free up time and energy [...] Strong culture firms empower employees helping them build this social currency by providing continuity and clarity (Pascale, 1985, pp. 34-5).

On the other hand, critics, particularly poststructuralists, vehemently rejected this, drawing attention to the dark side of corporate culture claiming its potential for insidious intrusion into heart and mind. For example, Wilmott (1993) has argued:

In the name of expanded practical autonomy, it aspires to extend management control by
colonizing the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a
monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently
totalitarian.

A sentiment common to the early optimistic and critical works was that normative
control was capable of appropriating employee subjectivity into a constructed unitarist
framework characterising the organisation as "one family" sharing the same values
and goals. However, subsequent empirical accounts of corporate life raised doubts
regarding the true extent of subjective domination that normative control could bring
about (Casey, 1995; Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Kunda, 1992; Kunda and van Maanen,
1999). Such accounts highlighted the complexity of employee subjectivity making it
"unclear whether normative control was ever as successful as once claimed by both its
champions and some of its critics" (Fleming and Sturdy, 2008, p. 6).

More recently, the concept of "identity" has gathered momentum as a focal point for
exploring normative control at work. Largely explored through a critical, post
structural perspective (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003;
du Gay, 1996; Townley, 1993), research on the management regulation of identity
served to expand awareness of the range of factors that shape subjectivity. However,
some claim that such analyses fail to take due account of dominant structural factors in
workplaces and challenge that it ". . . hints at a shift from understanding organizational
activity in material and substantive ways to constructing organizational activity as
increasingly occurring in the imaginary realm" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004, p. 150),
and that its power is overestimated (Salaman and Storey, 2008, p. 318). It seems that
the identity literatures are once again mirroring the culture wars debates (Alvesson
et al., 2008, p. 7).

In parallel, a "market rational" viewpoint on normative control is gaining increasing
legitimacy. Market rationality relates to the idea that:

[. . .] organisations should so thoroughly internalise the new dictates of the market, so
completely tune into its demands, so smoothly flow along its current, that they should
literally assume its form (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005, p. 202).

There are increasingly loud rumblings that within the context of fast changing, liberal
financial markets that organisations are placing so much emphasis on adhering to the
principles of market rationalism that monolithic normative control is irrelevant
(Fleming and Sturdy, 2008; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2002;
Peters, 1999, 2003; Ross, 2004; Thompson, 2003, 2005). Market rationalism, it is argued,
sets the rules so thoroughly that it "apparently does not have time for culture and is
more interested in reducing than transforming the workforce" (Thompson, 2005,
p. 168). In an environment of high change and financial short-termism, strong
normative control is portrayed as neither feasible nor desirable as they constrain the
flexibility required to survive. An organisation with a strong corporate culture has
been described as "an inward looking, conformist, complacent organisation, sunk into
a morass of groupthink, rigid rather than flexible in its outlook" (Legge, 2005, p. 237).
Furthermore, adhering to market rationalism can lead to negative consequences for
employees further problematising unitarist frameworks as "organizational disloyalty
fuels employee self-loyalty" (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005, p. 213).

With these contrasting views, it appears that there is significant need for nuanced accounts of the role and impact that normative control can play in contemporary, market rational organisations. Warranting specific attention are questions relating to the relevance of normative control, and how normative control practices are designed and experienced amidst other forces shaping workplaces. This paper sets out to explore this by describing one organisation's efforts to achieve normative control in a market rational environment.

The case study – Avatar Ireland

Avatar Ireland is a subsidiary of Avatar Global which is one of the world's largest firms. Avatar Ireland provides high-technology products and services and employs approximately 1,000. The Avatar Ireland workforce consists of primarily white collar workers in roles such as IT, engineering, marketing, sales, customer management, finance, project management, strategy, law and human resources (HR). It can be characterised as a knowledge intensive firm as "most of the work is said to be of an intellectual nature and [. . .] well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the work force" (Alvesson, 2001, p. 863). Various categories of Avatar Global shares are listed on some of the world's major stock exchanges. Shareholder relations are managed by Avatar Global with the Global CEO positioned as the face of the organisation. At the time of the case study, June to November 2007, it was clear that within Avatar Ireland, adherence to the principles of market rationalism and provision of return to shareholders was an understood corporate norm. This was primarily due to the role Global played in stringently measuring subsidiary financial performance, the seeking of increased efficiencies and the introduction of initiatives to boost the share price. When this research commenced, Avatar Ireland had just completed a redundancy program and had numerous outsourcing and cost cutting initiatives underway. It operated in an environment of continuous change and employees were required to continuously apply their knowledge in new ways. The capacity of the knowledge worker to deliver or withhold that extra functional, tacit knowledge prompts intensive normative management practices designed to elicit commitment; consequently their study is of special interest.

Methodology

For a six-month period, I conducted participant ethnographic research within Avatar Ireland. I travelled to and from the organisation on the employee bus, had a desk within the HR department and was in regular attendance at HR team meetings. I attended corporate events, management meetings and team "away days" with various departments. I conducted 75 one-to-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews with an approximate interview duration of 1.5 hours[1]. A wide range of documentation and processes pertaining to the organisations business and people management strategies were also reviewed. This paper will look at one particular people management initiative that was aimed at creating a framework for normative control.

The Avatar Brand Essence

Avatar Ireland's HR Department was made up of approximately 25 staff who managed various HR processes; including a team with specific responsibility for culture. The HR Director was a member of the Irish Executive Team. The Irish HR Department also worked with the Global HR team who designed and disseminated global people

management practices. One such practice was the Avatar prescribed cultural framework: Brand Essence. Brand Essence consisted of a list of desired behavioural characteristics, the enactment of which was positioned as essential to organisation success. For the purposes of confidentiality, the exact language will not be used, however the behavioural characteristics called for employees to be passionate, reliable and innovative [2]. No part of Brand Essence stated that Avatar was committed to employees, nor did it explicitly seek commitment. Instead, the emphasis was on being aligned to organisation goals.

Brand Essence did not start as a Global HR initiative; it originated in Avatar Global marketing following an exercise with a consulting firm to interview customers about the Avatar brand. Avatar Global decided that what was described as being positive and unique about the brand could be harnessed internally to create a normative framework. Explicitly, the branding logic of extracting additional monetary value from consumers through positive association was applied internally to extract extra functional value and discretionary effort from employees. This was described by one executive:

> The whole concept was saying in order to be an ongoing successful company we had to differentiate ourselves in the eyes of our customer and in order to deliver that "wow" customer experience we needed to be a certain way ourselves, to live the brand from the inside out and the way we're going to describe that brand or that customer experience from an internal perspective is that we want to be [passionate, reliable and innovative].

Brand Essence was also positioned as a tool that could be utilised to achieve role and career success. A member of the HR department claimed it was unique and empowering as:

> [...] it leaves it up to the individual to envisage in their mind what it means for them. So it's not telling people what they should do, it's letting them make up their own mind. So it's more them coming to the realisation that these are the concepts and "how can I actually use this?" So for me it works better from that basis rather than being told "you should make sure you smile every day".

Ultimately, Brand Essence was a highly stylised program aimed at stimulating desired employee behaviours by firstly promoting these behaviours to create a feel good association and secondly by sending the message that Brand Essence was a guide for optimum performance and career development. Brand Essence characteristics appeared on many posters and items around the workplace, typically accompanied by dramatic imagery and additional wording to further explain each characteristic. Numerous ideals were used in the explanations with terms such as warmth, humanity, empathy, integrity, life's journey, best in class, challenging, inspiring, creative and optimistic all being mentioned. Brand Essence was tied into some working processes, for example those designing new customer initiatives had to explain how they were consistent with each characteristic. It was also used as the framework for corporate communications. Employees completed Brand Essence workshops and were provided with reading materials and DVDs outlining how to behave and communicate in a way that was consistent with Brand Essence. Considerable emphasis was placed on "living the essence" and specific tips were provided relating to writing, talking and managing one's body language. There was no subtlety regarding the need to self-regulate in order to behave and communicate in a manner that was termed "on brand". A senior manager described the launch of Brand Essence:

There were whole road-shows done on it. So it kicked off with the larger scale management team where there was full day workshops on it off-site, but done in like a really cool way where you sat in beanbags rather than sitting in chairs and stuff like that. That launched the whole idea and the reasons behind it; what it would mean to us, how we were going to work. And then that theme was rolled throughout the rest of the business where managers came back and did de-briefs on it. But then everybody got to go to some sort of workshop or some sort of a session where it was the same sit on a bean-bag type of experience.

Although the rhetoric of the Brand Essence was positive and optimistic, its focus, unusually, was not exclusively aimed towards creating a mutually committed environment. This was perhaps most starkly evidenced by the manner in which some executives and some HR personnel claimed the recent redundancy program had been executed in an "on brand" manner. As stated by one executive:

Restructures and redundancies and things like that you know, it's a big big deal for people [. . .] It was funny because we did talk about when we were doing it that we would do it in a [Brand Essence] way and the funny thing about it is I think, no matter what you say, they [HR] did an incredible job of this because it could have been a hell of a lot worse than it was but I think the actual process from beginning up to actually going through with it and migrating to the new structure was really, really good, really people-centric. . .So actually, funnily enough it was probably one of the best kind of expressions of [*Brand Essence*].

This example underlines that Brand Essence was a normative tool designed to facilitate market rational pressures. Brand Essence took the emphasis off the more substantive issue of what was being done and placed it on how it was being done; it was a normative tool for all situations.

At first glance, Brand Essence highlights how an organisation can design an innovative, compelling, cohesive script for normative control that overtly regulates behaviours, is unique to the organisation, facilitates changing business environments, and absorbs harsh business decisions. However, a move deeper into the data changes the story significantly.

The impact of Brand Essence
While all interviewees were able to articulate the Brand Essence characteristics, when probed almost all described a feeling that it did not have the desired normative impact in reality. Explanations as to why Brand Essence failed focused around two main arguments. On the one hand, there were what might be described as optimist-rational explanations which acknowledged the challenges that market rationalism posited for normative control but felt these could always be overcome with the "right" tool and "effective" implementation. This perspective was offered, in varying degrees, by executives and HR. On the other hand, there were more critical-rational explanations which focused on the gap between the normative rhetoric and their working reality. This group, namely managers and employees, also tended to be critical of the organisation taking overt steps to regulate subjectivity and identity (Figure 1).

The rational-optimists
Those taking a rational-optimist stance came primarily from the executive and HR population. This group claimed, in various lay terms, that normative control, was both necessary and possible. The importance of effecting normative control in a market rational environment was articulated by an executive:
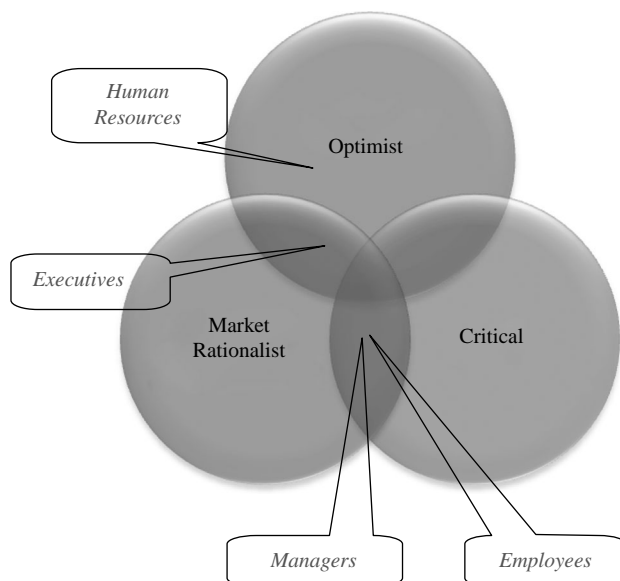
When you have a changing environment you need to be able to execute things quickly, so you need a nimble organisation and that's the flexibility that I was talking about. You need an organisation that is fully aligned with what you're trying to do so that people have a common purpose and you need to have embedded the brand value and culture into the organisation.

However, many executives acknowledged that the positive, rallying rhetoric of Brand Essence was far removed from the market rational realities of working life. This was perceived as potentially problematic, as described by another executive:

If you go out with a mantra then you will be judged against it. So, if your behaviours and everything you do doesn't stack up against it then people will absolutely throw it back at you.

Some executives expressed discomfort with how Brand Essence was implemented, often claiming HR overdid it on one hand and line managers undersold it on the other. When discussing the launch of Brand Essence one executive remarked:

I felt like I was dressing up in strange clothes and kind of prancing around in public [...] I think the concept of what it was trying to achieve was good but the way that people chose it be executed, the terminology and just the construct was felt to be juvenile.

Despite HR's efforts to launch the essence in an innovative "bean bag" manner, another executive claimed:

I think we picked up the term and tried to roll it out in a fairly standard way and that's why we've fallen short because we've rolled it out in a way that really is not meaningful and relevant to our staff.

When discussing how Brand Essence failed to have the desired effect, the other rational-optimists, HR, acknowledged that adhering to the pressures of market rationalism had created what were termed "bad news stories". However, the primary problem according to HR was management implementation, so much so that they had

a term to describe how they perceived most managers not to be effectively using normative tools:

> We communicate to our people managers and the expectation is then that they would cascade it further. But because of the dilemma we have that not all of our people managers understand their responsibilities and affect their accountabilities, you have what one of our team called the "Permafrost effect" so that all the information goes to the permafrost layer of the people managers and it doesn't get below.

For the rational-optimists normative control represented a mirage-like, hazy utopia that they longed for but never quite reached. According to this group, market rationalism represented a key challenge for leveraging normative control as it exposed a rhetoric-reality gap. However, it was largely felt that this could be overcome with "effective implementation" of normative tools. This optimistic emphasis meant failure of Brand Essence had to be attributed to the ineffectiveness of those responsible for its implementation. Executives found fault with the implementation approaches of HR and line managers, whilst HR primarily blamed line managers. This perspective, however, did not fully account for the programme's failure. Executives and HR did not fully appreciate firstly the extent to which the attempts at normative control actually put the spotlight on the negative consequences of market rational decisions and, secondly, how instinctively protective some employees were of their subjectivity.

The rational-critics

Contrary to the account provided by the executives and HR, all managers claimed they attempted to roll out Brand Essence within their teams. Even those that were critical of the initiative recognised that part of their role as a manager was to deliver corporate messages. However, many managers felt employee resistance was so strong that using Brand Essence became counterproductive. Most suggested that the main problem was the rhetoric-reality gap, which came about largely through the need to adhere to market rational principles. In this case, normative control, far from providing a gloss on a harsher reality, only served to focus attention on contradictions. A middle level manager stated:

> People really hate it [Brand Essence]. I was surprised because the way these things come down, as a manager you're sort of told you've got to feed this to your team and fine ok, I'll roll in, I'll do the job and I'll pass it out, it's fairly innocuous, we can ignore it at a reasonable level; and you sort of pass it out. Then you get this whoosh, "will you shut up about that bloody thing, it's awful". People were sort of saying "well they [Avatar] don't tell the truth, they don't do this, they don't do that". So you've got a list of all these things that you want people to do, but you're not doing them yourself, now that came down strongly.

A senior manager whose area had been impacted by redundancies and outsourcing claimed Brand Essence was:

> [...] one of the craziest things that was brought in. I understand and I agree with the sentiments of it, but I think the way it's being rammed down our throats is crazy [...] given everything else that was going on in the company; it was the last straw for people [...] throwing in something like that when they were after doing [redundancies].

Another middle level manager claimed:

> It would be seen probably by a lot of people as, as being a little bit sort of fake [...] If you're not together as a company, putting out a poster saying "we're all together as a company" is

bad rather than good. It's not seeming to address the issues that are over there. And people would say "Well, you know, we can see the problems, we know the problems are there. Why doesn't the company do something about addressing them instead of putting out posters?"

Some managers took a more critical stance towards organisational attempts to shape personal attitudes, values and feelings. It is worth noting that critical managers also claimed they made an effort to communicate Brand Essence to employees. What the critical managers had in common was that they did not interpret the failure of Brand Essence solely in market rational terms. They also interpreted the resistance as an employee aversion to having their subjectivity managed:

That [Brand Essence] was universally slammed in the department I worked in. The key reason I can think of is that inherently I just think it's very patronising from a corporate perspective to dictate to people how they should feel as a company. I just feel that they're treating us a little bit like we're a bit immature or something. That's the overriding sense I get is that people are going "why are you telling me to be dependable, because if I wasn't dependable, I wouldn't be here or I wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing" and I don't think [Executives/HR] have really understood that that's the sense that people get. I think they just think it's a "rah rah Avatar!" kind of thing. But I think the deeper reason is that people are just turned off and go "you're just really patronising me". And I sense that as well. I must say I was thinking it. But again you play the game, if that's what Avatar want you to do, you put it on the end of your e-mails and it's no skin off my nose but it aint' gonna motivate me or make me work any differently. I think they're a bit naive if they think it does.

Another middle level manager claimed:

I tried a couple of sessions where I said ok this is all about [Brand Essence] and you could see people turning off, they're turning off because they don't like it, they just don't like it.

Employees corroborated managers' accounts of instant resistance to Brand Essence. Comments relating to the rhetoric-reality gap conveyed a level of vitriol towards Avatar for launching such an initiative alongside projects that were perceived to be detrimental to what were termed core employee interests:

It's very hard to swallow, extremely hard, they're telling you one day how important you are to them and the next day they're making more redundant. They're telling you there's not enough people to do the job, and they're agreeing that they're trying to do something about it. Then they're letting all these people go and they're not taking people on to replace them. It's just hypocrisy after hypocrisy; they don't eat their own dog food basically.

Another employee stated:

I suppose they want to sell their brand to you so you can go and sell it on, they want you to understand what you're trying to achieve and what they're trying to achieve and how you fit into that big plan. But drawing it up and saying this is what we do really well is bullshit [. . .] When they're ignoring I suppose some of the core issues [. . .] It [the Brand Essence workshop] was about three hours long, and it was about three hours at some ridiculously busy time of the year as well and I thought "I don't need to be sitting here making Avatar feel good about itself".

For employees, Brand Essence was so detached from reality it became an indicator of falseness:

Well the managers were always using it but we'd always shoot her down [. . .] You kind of scratch your head and say "oh come on, you know, we're sitting here and we're having a discussion about something [. . .] we can be frank with each other and be blunt".

At other times, essence was seen as something for "incompetents" to hide behind. As one employee stated:

> There's a few examples who you know that they're not up to the job I suppose and they're, I suppose, brown nosing their way to the top. There'd be one or two and they'd have the [Brand Essence] poster on their desk [...] they've no output, they've no nothing, they [...] no one knows what they do all day.

Although it was HR who launched the essence in Avatar Ireland, most employees intuitively guessed it came from an external marketing agency and referred to it as marketing speak that they prided themselves on seeing through. They were critical of such blatant normative control practices and irritated by the idea that the purveyors of Brand Essence believed they would be galvanised by it:

> The purpose of it from high above would be I suppose to try and get their staff to be more motivated and efficient, but I think what it does in Ireland anyway is just it's annoying. I wouldn't say a single person is a percent more efficient.

Corroborating managers' earlier comments that the programme was seen as patronising, as another employee put it:

> For professionals like me or relatively intelligent people it really is insulting [...] massively negative, it's like "where's my school uniform?" when I'm getting up in the morning. I'm a professional you know, I've been to college and I've done all these things and I've qualified and you know there's people even more qualified than me and they're suffering this.

It was clear that employees saw little real connection between Brand Essence and the reality of their work:

> I don't understand the purpose to be honest. I know you're meant to rally to some kind of common goal but I don't think anyone can rally to something as abstract as [*Brand Essence*]. I think that doesn't give people enough credit for having a brain.

And while HR had claimed the programme had an empowering dimension, another employee offered a slightly different perspective on how this might be the case:

> I think it's actually good in that it forms a common enemy, it has banter around it do you know what I mean, like a bad boss can do that as well, can get a whole team together to slag them behind their back you know [...] everyone clings together a bit better.

A similar perspective was offered by an employee who claimed that Brand Essence was detrimental to getting work done and that for Avatar:

> It probably has a bad effect as people start bitching about it for about half an hour every time somebody says it.

Clearly then, rational-critics within Avatar shared the critical academic viewpoint that corporate attempts to regulate employee subjectivity are unwelcome and intrusive. Employees in Avatar were fully cognisant of the prescribed role of Brand Essence and for them it became a standard by which they measured not their own behaviours but the behaviours of more senior management. From the employee perspective, Avatar as an employer paid far more heed to the principles of market rationalism than the values of passion, reliability and innovation that Brand Essence called for. In this manner,

the effect of Brand Essence was ultimately to draw attention to the negative consequences of market rationalism.

Conclusions

Avatar's Brand Essence represents an interesting development in normative control. Linking an espoused ideal employee identity to the organisation brand unashamedly asks employees to adhere to a blatantly artificial construct. Furthermore, it attempts to seduce employees into delivering extra functional, discretionary effort without offering anything in return. This is arguably normative control in the purest conceptual sense – it involves one party persuading another that something is "right" for no other reason than they say so. The lack of material substance to be found in the branded identity places the emphasis on its purveyors to convince employees of its value. This heightens the requirement to focus on promoting normative practices and galvanising employees through positive association and "fun" events and activities. However, the Avatar case study raises questions about the extent to which behaviours can be regulated through positive association with an obviously artificial construct alone, and suggests that for this company, faced with an underlying market rational value set, that such branding may be a normative step too far.

Avatars use of branding logic to regulate subjectivity demonstrates how normative tools and mechanisms are evolving, but the depth of understanding of them remains limited. Purveyors persist in viewing prescribed normative practices as capable of overriding other forces shaping the employment experience. In the same step, they ignore that the workplace comprises of a variety of experiential forces and, more importantly perhaps, that employees are patently capable of deciding themselves which are the most substantive. Consequently, in workplaces dominated by market rationalism the more that optimists focus on normative positive, rallying rhetoric the more they sow the seeds of failure as the two approaches are largely incompatible. An organisation that produces a normative statement creates a "rhetoric-reality stick" with which it can be beaten, and bouyant, positive rhetoric in an environment of market rationalism risks exposure to a stark rhetoric-reality gap. In fact, it appears that a rhetoric-reality gap can strengthen employee protection of their subjectivity, as it makes employees unwilling to expose their affective domain to an organisation that launches unashamedly contradictory initiatives.

The Avatar case study also demonstrates how middle managers and employees can possess a principled critical aversion to normative control. Whilst this aversion was reinforced by market rationalism, it was also independent of it. Far from being an empowering tool, managers felt that asking employees to display Brand Essence characteristics was to place an additional burden on their staff. Many felt their employees did not need an ideology to work towards and that Brand Essence was of no use to them in their core task of allocating and monitoring work. The strength of employee resistance and the manner in which it was viewed as a slur on individual abilities rendered Brand Essence ineffectual. This highlights how organisational attempts to inject an externally constructed belief system into working lives can be critically interpreted by employees as a disregard for their own judgement and professionalism. The irritation that this interpretation generates can render normative control to be counterproductive. Employee weariness of prescriptive notions of behaviour can cause them to refrain from displaying such behaviours as they view them as indicative of a prescribed ideology they have already decided to reject.

The case highlights how attempts at normative control and resistance are alive and well. However, it also reveals how extreme optimistic and critical interpretations of normative control as all powerful can be misguided, as those subjected to it are fully cognisant of the intentions behind normative practices. In relation to post-structural approaches to understanding workplaces and identity; this case shows how working within an ongoing doctrine of market rationalism creates lasting and dominant impressions that override even the most overt attempts to regulate identity. The concept of identity is certainly a useful analytical construct but those using it must take account of the identity formation boundaries put in place by dominant, lasting workplace structures and practices. Arguably, the Avatar case study best supports the works of academics heralding the primacy of market rationalism. However, it appears that the more extreme market rational viewpoints, which claim that normative control no longer plays a role in organisations, underestimate the continued role of determined normative optimists.

Ultimately, the optimistic, critical and market rational perspectives on normative control all shed some light on how such control is enacted and experienced in workplaces. However, as the case study demonstrates, at the level of the workplace these perspectives function in tandem. Future research may benefit from adopting a more holistic analytical approach to understanding the range of factors shaping workplace control and how these factors interact to shape the employment experience. Within Avatar, it appeared that life reflects academia as various groupings forge their own path largely discounting what others had to say. The irony of normative control is that this blinkered approach can account for both its failure and its perpetuation. This is because normative control practices are generated by optimists who assume that "effective" normative practices can be the dominant factor shaping the employment experience overcoming all challenges. On the one hand, this failure to take due account of other contradictory forces can cause managers and employees to reject normative practices as irrelevant and irritating. On the other hand, as long as optimists deny the impact of other forces, the pursuit of normative control will be considered a plausible management strategy. The seductive power of normative control for senior managers is far greater than its actual power. As long as the blinkered approach continues, normative control practices are likely to persist, albeit haphazardly, in organisations. Normative control is not all powerful, nor is it dead; it is just on continuous life support.

Notes

1. Of the 75 interviewees, 11 were on the director/executive team, seven were from the HR department, 17 were line managers, 35 were employees and five were advisors from outside the organisation. Interviewees came from different departments but reflected the total composition of the organisation.

2. It is worth pointing out that the essence was not a competency model. It was a broader cultural statement of characteristics that were supposedly central and indispensable to Avatar. Avatar also possessed a detailed competency framework which performed a different function than the essence.

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