

Unfolding practices with unfolding objects: standardization work in global branding

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Standardization represents a key concern in global branding. Global brands emerge and thrive through the development and control of common rules that assure consistency, integrity and coherence (Dimofte et al. 2010; Douglas et al. 2001; Ozsomer and Altaras 2008). Uniform brand image across borders underlies a strong identity, which in turn enables a brand to stand out in the crowded global market place (Cayla and Penaloza, 2012; Whitelock and Fastoso 2007). Convergence of consumer tastes all over the world and the growing emphasis on low-cost through economies of scale means that standardization is also an economic imperative (Levitt, 1983; Backhaus & van Doorn, 2007). For over half a century now, marketers have examined the antecedents and outcomes of standardization (Katsikeas et al. 2006; Ozsomer 2012).

Although significant efforts have focused on the question how the standardization of global branding works, very little research concerns standardization work i.e. how actors, objects and practices come together in the development and control of standards (see Chabowski et al. 2013). Whilst branding offers detailed advice on the normative notions such as the need to deliver a consistent and integrated brand (Douglas et al. 2001), practical understanding how these aspirations come about is largely missing (Fastoso and Whitelock 2012). Marketing practices are rarely examined (Araujo et al. 2008; Simakova 2010) and all too frequent discrepancies between aspirations and international branding realities remain unexplained or dismissed as “implementation issues” (Fastoso and Whitelock 2012). By offering values-free normative guidelines, absent from marketing discussions is the contested nature of standardization practice. Yet, the development and control of standards involves power relations, negotiation and conflicts between competing visions and outcomes (Lyytinen and King 2006; Nickerson and Muehlen 2006). The complex standardization practice revolves around objects (D’Adderio 2011). Surprisingly, tools and are technologies of standardization are also absent from marketing literature. Although digital objects, such as websites, social media or sales management systems are omnipresent and enthusiastically adopted by international marketers (Morgan-Thomas and Bridgewater, 2004), there seems a paucity of studies that consider the confluence of digital objects and practices, including standardization practice.

The current study focuses on the entanglement of global branding and digital artifacts. The project explores how digital objects are co-instituted and co-implicated in the generation, stabilization and control of international marketing practice. Our specific focus is on brand standards; we examine how digital affordances mesh with practices to enable and constrain standardization work.

The philosophical stance taken here is that of sociomateriality, an approach that does not privilege neither the deterministic nor the constructivist view of digital objects (Orlikowski 2007; Orlikowski and Scott 2008). The theory of practice specifically Schatzki’s (2002) notion of practice in sites, provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Using practice lens to study digital objects means focusing on marketing practitioners and their activities with close examination of everyday marketing rituals and routines. Practices, that is doings and sayings that are underpinned by practical understandings, rules and teleoaffective structures, are interwoven with multiple digital objects, which are characterised by incompleteness (Garud et al. 2008; Kallinikos et al. 2013). Rather than examine a particular technology, this study takes an affordance ecologies stance (Lindberg and Lyytinen 2012)

and explores how configurations of affordances are enacted through multiple digital objects within practice.

The setting for this examination is a large higher education institution in the UK. Higher education provides an ideal site of global branding practice. The combined effects of the large scale of the organization (6200 employees), its heterogeneity and service nature means that the development and maintenance of brand standards represent an ongoing challenge. The sector has been subject to significant resource cuts and internationalization is a key strategic imperative. The higher-education marketplace is both global and highly fragmented with multiple participants competing for the attention of young consumers. Strong brands as well as digital artifacts, such as websites and social media, represent important facets of the competitive struggles.

Following other studies on situated practice (Prasad 1993), the project employs multi-method approach to data collection. Semi-structured interviews are complemented with the analysis of documents (meetings minutes, jobs descriptions, formal rules and procedures, online materials) and participant observation (shadowing). Data collection occurs at multiple levels of analysis: individual, team and organization. Data analysis follows established procedures (Glaser and Strauss 2011) with continual, iterative cycling between pre-existing theory, the data and emerging theory until the point of saturation.

This study hopes to contribute to our understanding of technology and organization in several important ways. The examination reveals self-referential and self-perpetuating nature of objects and practice. A key contribution here concerns effects of digital objects on practice's teleoaffective structures. In addition to shaping the more observable rules and activities, the development of objects affects macro-level shared perceptions of desirable ends, oughtness, acceptability, that is deontic aspects of practice (von Wright, 1951). These shared understandings then influence localized enactment of practice. The macro-level phenomena exert an overarching influence over the technology choices and implementation processes.

The study offers an account of unfolding practice with unfolding objects where both the practice and the objects are always unfinished and ever morphing, producing continually adjusting interactions. Organization develops as heterogeneous assemblage of digital affordances and practices (DeLanda 2006). The fluid nature of practice with digital objects calls for a major shift in conceptualizing and managing standards (Kallinikos et al. 2013).

The study's straddling over multiple levels of analysis shows how the unfolding nature of practices and objects is subject to power struggles and how standards emerge out of competing interests (Leonardi and Barley 2010). A key finding here is that normative guidelines and best practice approaches are frequently violated by powerful actors elsewhere, whose interests and attention do not concern the specifics of standardization work. Failure of standardization is thus a facet of power struggle and not an implementation problem, as suggested in international marketing literature (Fastoso and Whitelock 2012).

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intermediaries and infomediaries are continuously entangled and disentangled. In order to understand the constitutive entanglement a sociomaterial lens has been applied illustrating with a case of E-service of land records in Bangladesh. In particular, we have applied Barad's diffractive analysis to understand the constitutive entanglement of infomediaries and informal intermediaries (Barad, 2007). The paper outline consists of conceptualizations of infomediary and informal intermediary in the context of developing countries. Thereafter, we discussed precisely methodology and background of the case in section two. Since Sociomateriality is an umbrella approach and has many streams, this paper focused on Barad's diffractive analysis to understand constitutive entanglement (Barad, 2007). Section three gives a theoretical framework of constitutive entanglement. Finally, section four analyzes the process of constitutive entanglement and disentanglement of infomediaries and informal intermediaries in E-service of land records in Bangladesh.

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