**‘Brand work’: constructing assemblages in gendered creative labour**

# Abstract

Recent work has highlighted how brands play an important role within organisational practice, for example, they can act as tools of normative control on employees (Cushen, 2009, Russell, 2011). To extend this discussion, we ask: How do gendered media brands come into being in an organisation by connecting ideas, objects and people? This paper challenges the assumption that brands simply reflect management norms by positioning the brand as an ‘assemblage’ (Lury, 2009) of multiple connections and linkages, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by those that partake in its production. Employees engage in ‘brand work’, i.e., the negotiation of the assemblages of the brand in situated and gendered practices. Brand work is explored here in the gendered creative labour of producing girls’ magazines. Two studies of pre-teen and teenage girls’ magazines in the UK and a Nordic country were analysed in relation to how multiple brand fragments were situated in gendered practices and power relations. Brand work offers an alternative, fragmented perspective to normative forms of control, introducing a simultaneous territorialisation and deterritorialisation process of stabilisation and contestation of the assemblage.

*Key words: brand; brand work; assemblage; control; creative labour; girlhood*

# Introduction

The effort to control products, services and employee behaviour around brand values and meanings has become a core organisational practice (Cushen, 2009; Gabriel et al., 2015; Costas and Kärreman, 2013). Organisation scholars are increasingly interested in how brands impact employees (Brannan et al, 2011) as brands have consequences *within* organisations as well as more widely in society (Kornberger, 2010). Contemporary critical studies of branding have shown that although brands are intentionally inscribed with meanings by organisations, these meanings can be modified and even subverted when brands circulate (Arvidsson, 2006; Holt, 2002; Aronczyk and Powers, 2010). Recent studies have focused on brands as ‘management tools’ (Russell and Brannan, 2016) especially in relation to employees’ identities (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Land and Taylor, 2010, 2011; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Brannan et al., 2011) and organisational values (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 2013; Jeanes, 2013). Employee branding manages employees’ behaviour (Brannan et al., 2015), their dress (Harquail, 2006) and bodies (Timming, 2016). Brands influence everyday practices, such as communication (Mumby, 2016; Vásquez et al., 2013; Russell, 2011), and play a central role in the power dynamics between management and employees (Cushen, 2011; Müller, 2017; Endrissat et al., 2017).

This paper adds to these discussions by exploring creative labour as sites where brands, girlhood, and gendered labour are entangled (McRobbie, 2016). Brands at work have been investigated in customer-facing roles, such as retail employees as ‘creative subjects’ (Endrissat et al., 2017; see also Pettinger, 2004), consulting (Costas and Kärreman, 2013) and call centres (Brannan et al., 2015), and also in back offices where employees are expected to put their ‘lives’ to ‘work’ (Land and Taylor, 2010) by ‘living the brand’ (Harquail, 2006; Ind, 2007; Cushen, 2011). Yet these studies often overlook the social context, such as gendered practices, within which brands are produced. To address this gap, we explore how gendered media brands are formed through their connections, maintained through routines and incrementally changed through situated practices in the office space, a process we call ‘brand work’.

We turn to the approach adopted by Celia Lury (2004, 2009), who argues that brands are assemblages, which ‘involves images, processes and products, and relations between products’ (Lury, 2004:1). Seeing brands as assemblages recognises their heterogeneity, and that they are formed by different processes and organisational activities as well as multiple human and nonhuman actors. Understanding the brand as an assemblage positions the brand as holding numerous trajectories, which necessitates looking forward as well as backward at different relations and linkages (Lury, 2004; Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Recent interest in brands in organisations has focused on management’s use of brands within normative control (Cushen, 2009; Russell, 2011) or ‘brand-centred control’ (Müller, 2017). Brands blur the boundaries of work and life as employees are connected to brands outside of work as well as within (Endrissat et al., 2017; Land and Taylor, 2010, 2011). Normative control compels employees to engage with and adapt to the values and meanings inscribed into brands; however, employees have been found to protest and resist brands in the workplace (Cushen, 2011; Russell, 2011). Brannan et al. (2015: 33) note that employees also influence brands through ‘relying on a collective level of social construction’. Using Lury’s work, we argue that situated practices such as gender form core connections and are embedded within power relations in the organisation.

In this paper we examine two case studies of pre-teen and teenage girls’ magazines to which brands were central to the creative labour of employees (McRobbie, 1999, 2016). This paper contributes toward our understanding of brands as assemblages (Lury, 2009), locating brands in situated and gendered practices and embedded in power relations, where the brand partakes in its own production. This paper is structured in the following way: in the first section of the paper we locate our studies in contemporary discussions on brands in organisations. First, we review brands as assemblages and the implications of this approach to how brands come into being. Second, we explore the situated practices of creative gendered labour in girls’ magazines and, third, we discuss the situated practices in relation to brands as forms of normative control in organisations. In the second section of the paper we illustrate how brands are maintained and contested through brand work in an analysis of gendered creative labour in two magazines for girls. In the final section we will discuss how seeing the brand-in-becoming as a process and an ongoing activity highlights the heterogeneous connections and linkages through which brands develop different temporalities. Theorising brands as assemblages presents a more dynamic view of control as brands are recognised as being simultaneously stable and shifting.

# Brands and situated practices

## Brands as assemblages

Recent studies of brands and branding have focused on *how brands come into being* (Lury, 2004, 2009; see also Vasquez et al., 2013; Ashcraft et al., 2012). Drawing on Callon (1998), Latour (1987) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Celia Lury conceives brands as assemblages — networks of relations between consumers and organisations and complex objects that are performative, distributed and relational (Lury, 2004, 2009; Lury and Moor, 2010). For Lury (2004: 1), a brand ‘is a platform for patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space. It is not simply here or somewhere else, but rather in some-thing that emerges in parts.’ This approach recognises both the agency of objects and people in the shaping of brands and the agency of brands themselves. Lury suggests that assemblages are fragmented and distributed, but also shared and collectively understood. A brand is something that is lived, embedded in activities that have a particular spatial and temporal context. Brands as assemblages recognise ‘the trajectories of diverse practices, technologies and ideas in processes of branding’, and as such ‘play a part in the productions of itself’ (2009: 77). While Lury’s own interest mainly lies in understanding the brand as an outcome of relations in the cultural economy, her approach can be expanded to demonstrate how assemblages form and dissolve, how brands change and are sustained and how the fragmented brand relates to control in organisations.

Brands can be seen as ‘mobile objects of knowledge’ (Ashcraft et al., 2012), which construct and are constructed by links and connections between organisational practices, values, employees and identities (Lury, 2004, 2009). Ashcraft et al. (2012: 477) argue that, through ‘interaction with stakeholders, brands assume “objectivity”, a readily recognizable form or stable essence’. Brands as an interface have a temporal materiality, particularly in terms of looking back from the brand toward the practices that shaped it, but also as a forward-looking object, ‘a set of possible relations and connections’ (Lury, 2009: 68). As such, brands are objects, not of certainty, but of possibilities (Lury, 2004). This view recognises the brand as a ‘dynamic object of knowledge that facilitates control over work… across place and time’ (Ashcraft et al. 2012: 477). Therefore, the brand is in a constant state of becoming, a mobile object (Holt, 2002), which controls work in the processes of production, co-production and reproduction of meaning.

Brands are constructed through everyday practices in organisations (Lury, 2004, 2009; Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Pettinger, 2004; Gabriel et al., 2015; Müller, 2017), and therefore, brands can be explored in relation to situated practices: activities that reflect wider social norms and cultural contexts. These activities are situated particularly in power relations power relations in the workplace, which are downplayed in current ethnographies of brands in organisations (see Harquail, 2006; Brannan et al., 2015; Cushen, 2011). For example, Harquail (2006) discusses how Land Rover employees may be expected to ‘wear the brand’ in their everyday attire, but without reflecting on wider national, class and gendered based concepts of ‘Britishness’ on which the brand is based. Using Lury’s approach, Pettinger (2004) argues that brands are not simply values, but deeply connected to the work that is undertaken in the organisation. She notes that brands are partially codified and formed but still influence work by promoting an idea of the ideal worker and ideal work practices.

Creativity and creative labour can also be seen as forms of assemblages. For example, Duff and Sumartojo (2017) apply a Deleuzian approach to understanding how creativity emerges into human and nonhuman materials in creative labour. ‘Creative practice subsists in the affective, social and material connections forged between these bodies, forces and spaces as they encounter one another, becoming effective, becoming creative, enabling capacities while foreclosing others’ (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017: 419). They highlight the nonhuman components of creative practice and argue that creativity is a function of the encounters of the human and nonhuman. The ‘analysis of assemblages is intended to explain how particular contexts and/or subjectivities actually hold together in experience’ (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017: 423). However, gender is not clearly recognised in the discussion of assemblages, although gender is embedded in the relationships between objects, ideas and people. In the next section, we therefore explore gender within situated practices of creative labour.

## Situated practices: creative labour in girls’ magazines

Creative labour relies on outputs that are tightly bound to the creative worker (Hesmonhalgh and Baker, 2011), as well as being fundamental to the production of brands (Endrissat, et al., 2017). Research on women’s and girls’ magazines has shown how these highly gendered products construct and distribute idealised images of girlhood and femininity (Fraser, 1987; McRobbie, 1991/2000, 1999; Currie, 1999; see also Russell and Tyler, 2002). Since the 1990s, girlhood has prominently featured in media and consumer culture, particularly as third-wave feminism has influenced mainstream media to adopt more empowered images of girls and women (Banet-Weiser, 2004; see also D’Enbeau, 2011). Girls’ magazines are presented as sites where childhood and femininity are continuously constructed and influence the identity of teenage readers (McRobbie, 1991/2000; Frazer, 1987; Gauntlett, 2008).

Arvidsson (2006) argues that media culture produces ambiences, or frameworks, ‘in which life unfolds’ (p.13). Using Lury's (2004) 'platform for action' and Goffman’s (1974) ‘frames of action’, Arvidsson argues that brands produce cultural and social relations ‘through the provision of particular ambiences that frame and partially anticipate the agency of consumers’ (Arvidsson, 2006: 74). While consumers can resist, brand management aims to reduce potential options by providing a prescribed ambience (Arvidsson, 2006). As such, studying brands involves understanding the production and consumption of social relations within these ambiences and how branded goods become tools for consumers to form their own meanings (Arvidsson, 2006). Following this argument, girls’ magazines create ambiences in which girls develop and reflect upon their femininity. Global women’s magazines, such as *Cosmopolitan*, build upon ideologies of ‘independence, power and fun’, producing images where women are ‘fundamentally alone and must hold their own or advance through pleasing and/or manipulating others, and above all through the power which their body and sexuality affords them’ (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003: 454, 488). While these magazines can reinforce stereotypes, global media also circulates numerous discourses of girlhood and womanhood, reflecting the multiplicity of the ambiences. This requires consumers and producers to engage with dispersed ideologies of girlhood and femininity (Duffy, 2013; Griffin et al. 2017; Hunter and Kivinen, 2016; Twigg, 2017). Magazines require employees to draw upon their own experiences of girlhood and womanhood as well as gendered ideology (Banet-Weiser, 2004; D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013; Hunter and Kivinen, 2016; Twigg, 2017). McRobbie (1999) suggests that the writers and editors of women’s magazines might have feminist agendas, albeit ambiguous ones, where feminism appears mostly in advice columns. More recently D’Enbeau and Buzzanell (2013) discussed how strategies and ideologies influenced work within the feminist magazine, *Moxie*. Power differentials based on experience and tenure created hegemony of the editor-in-chief’s view to proclaim a ‘correct’ form of feminism.

McRobbie (2016) argues that the ideological views of creativity within contemporary creative labour form a *dispositif* (drawing on Foucault), ‘a self-monitoring, self-regulating mechanism’ that controls labour (p.38). The worker sells herself as the creative practitioner under a ‘post-feminist masquerade’ (2016: 87) of neo-liberal, individualist gender hierarchies. This vulnerable precariat has gendered implications for how creative practitioners position themselves within their work. For example, in media work on gendered magazines, writing and producing content draws upon the gendered, abject labour of the individual worker (Hunter and Kivinen, 2016). A woman undertaking ‘passionate work’ requires her to both love her work, engaging in both emotional and aspirational dimensions, while also working in low-pay and insecure employment. McRobbie (2016) argues that passionate work is a *line of flight* for many women who may have been traditionally in low-paying, working class occupations as they move instead into lines of work that provide excitement, creativity and aspiration, without economic security. The changing landscape of media work is therefore underpinned by power relations at the individual, organisational and industry levels. By developing how brands feature within the relations between the content, the employees and the ideologies of the magazines, a different contextualised understanding of control and gender can be developed.

## Situated practices: normative control and ideology

Brands influence and control everyday employee behaviour and work practices (Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Cushen, 2009; Russell, 2011). Recent studies have focused on how normative and neo-normative control spans across the insider/outsider divide of branding activities (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Endrissat et al., 2017). ‘Brand-centred’ control, a type of normative control, which specifically refers to the ideological influence of brands, blurs the boundaries between work and personal lives and integrates the role of the external audience in producing normative control (Müller, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2015). Normative, or brand-centred, control is supported by two core concepts: symbolic value shaping the self and, secondly, brands primarily acting as part of management initiatives.

First, brands contain symbolic values, which relate to ideological control of employees (cf. Willmott, 1993; Kunda, 1992; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). The symbolic values of brands and their ‘preferred interpretation’ (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008: 107) encourage employees to adapt their behaviour and identities around ideological aspirations such as the ethical self (Costas and Kärreman, 2013) or leisure and lifestyle values (Land and Taylor, 2010). However, management can also use brands to control employees’ identities through recruitment, selection and integration (Russell and Brannan, 2016), as well as a motivator to undertake unfulfilling work and an escape to an imagined future self (Brannan et al., 2015). Brannan et al. (2015) focus on how brands behave as ‘regulatory mechanisms’ and as ‘regulatory promises’, especially in constructing the self around ideal values and ideologies.

Second, management utilises brands as management tools to shape employees’ behaviours and identities (Cushen, 2009; Gabriel et al., 2015; Costas and Kärreman, 2013). A brand becomes ‘a vehicle for management of meaning’ (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008: 107), which ‘instructs and directs organizational members… as a management and leadership practice’ (ibid: 104). Cushen (2009) shows how ‘brand essence’ has been used by brand purveyors (directors and HR) and brand implementers (line managers) as a tool for management initiatives, even to the point that redundancies were described as being ‘on brand’. This practice may include a policing of the brand to ensure that appropriate organisational objectives are met (Gabriel et al., 2015). Brannan et al. (2015: 30) refer to this as the ‘work of the brand’, or the ways in which ‘brand meaning is mobilized internally as resources that help to sustain employees’ identity work, on the one hand, whilst simultaneously facilitating the pursuit of organisational objectives on the other’. In asking employees to identify with a brand, management also requires employees to link themselves to a brand that may be changeable and reliant on customer satisfaction (Harquail, 2006).

Normative control could arguably make it difficult for employees to protest, revolt or change the influence of the brand in the workplace (Russell, 2011). Costas and Kärreman (2013) discuss how contradictions between the corporate brand and the realities of the everyday lived experience create tensions (see also Cushen, 2009). The impact of branding on employees can vary from superficial accommodation to internalisation and even subversion (Russell, 2011). Ind (2007) argues that employees can be ‘brand champions’, ‘brand agnostics’, ‘brand cynics’ or ‘brand saboteurs’, seeing the cynics and saboteurs as getting in the way of management initiatives for employees to ‘live the brand’ (see also Wallace and de Chernatony, 2009; Holt, 2002). Employees can also influence brands through acts of resistance and appropriation in identity work (Müller, 2017). Müller (2017) discusses different types of distancing from brands, including ‘pragmatic distancing’, i.e., to protect the self from brand-centred control. These form a subtle form of resistance, such as an elusive re-definition of the brand by employees (see also Russell, 2011; Cushen, 2011).

Viewing brands as assemblages offers an opportunity to review control within the context of creative labour. Exploring how brands come into being, this paper asks what types of practices and activities are undertaken in forming brands as assemblages, and how do these reflect power relations in the organisation? How do brands relate to situated practices such as gender and creative labour? As such, a discussion of power shifts from seeing a brand as something imposed on employees to asking how employees, objects and ideologies are part of a system of relationships that produce and maintain creative and gendered labour. Assemblages occupy territories, giving the appearance of stability. However, Duff and Sumartojo (2017) argue that there is also a tendency for destabilisation, in forming *lines of flight*. Therefore, the power relations in an assemblage move simultaneously toward stability and instability. By introducing the concept of brand work, we analyse how brands are produced, maintained and contested. We do so by analysing the multiplicity of brand assemblages (Lury, 2004, 2009) in gendered media work. Ideologies of girlhood form a series of ambiences, suggesting more potential for differences than is recognised in the current literature on normative control and brands. This article addresses this question by investigating the brand in gendered and creative work, highlighting different connections of the brand as an assemblage and exploring the power relations underpinning these connections.

# Methodology

This article draws upon two ethnographically inspired studies of children’s print magazine publishing: a short ethnography of the pre-teen magazine, *Bestie*, publishedin London, UK; and the other, a nine-month ethnography of *Lizzie,* a teenage girl magazine in a Nordic country. Observations and interviews of these magazine offices have allowed us to explore how brands come into being in organisations through everyday practices. Ethnography can be fruitful for exploring the rich empirical contexts of how brands relate to everyday organisational life, including attitudes, behaviours, identities, norms and values (Brannan et al., 2015; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Cushen, 2011). Using ethnography also allows for multiple perspectives on the brand to emerge (Pettinger, 2004), especially voices that may counter or contest dominant hegemonic values, which can be found in media (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013). This article has drawn inspiration from other studies adopting the concept of brands as assemblages to tease out how ‘elements are mobilized, linked and assembled’ (Vasquez et al. 2013: 138). Ethnography is a strong method for illuminating processes that shape assemblages, as it allows complex relationships between people and objects to emerge.

The sites were selected as examples of magazines for a young female audience that produced strong messages regarding femininity. They were distinctly *magazines for girls*, communicated through market positioning and advertising, the anticipated audience, the images and choice of language in the magazines, and the selection of content relevant for a girl readership (cf. Duffy, 2013; Twigg, 2017). *Bestie* aimed to bridge the gap between magazines for pre-school ages and those aimed at teenagers, and contained features on girl’s fashion, popular children’s entertainment and celebrities, activities and fictional stories. The format included fortnightly issues, totalling 26 a year, with seasonal specials, and would include extra calendars, pens, stickers and posters along with the issues. *Lizzie* included stories from summer fashion and celebrities to more serious stories on depression, suicide, online sexual predators and becoming a woman. *Lizzie* was a monthly magazine with posters, accompanied by an active web forum and a yearly school calendar. While specific details cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality, at the time of the studies both were market leaders in their demographics. *Bestie* had an estimated reach of two million children and *Lizzie* had an estimated reach of 179,000, indicating wide readerships.

The studies shared an aim to explore the everyday working experiences within creative work, exploring gender within the context of contemporary media work (McRobbie, 2016). The study focusing on *Lizzie* was designed to investigate how readers influenced the brand in the magazine office, while the study involving *Bestie* focused on the culture of the magazine. While the two studies were carried out separately, there were striking similarities, which reflected the specific conditions of producing magazines for girls (see also Hunter and Kivinen, 2016). Lury (2009) has noted how brands are fundamental to understanding media products, acting as connectors between the organisation and the consumer. Media work is characterised by the construction of unique media products, recognisable as part of a series but representing the sameness of its brand. Although the initial data collection was driven by different research questions, in both cases, an emergent and elusive brand was observed, talked about and challenged. These two studies provided rich sites for research, showing the complexities of contemporary back office work involved in forming these connections (Lury, 2009).

## Data collection

Data was gathered through observations, interviews, and document analysis of handbooks, websites and job advertisements. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. With *Lizzie*, 24 days of observation took place as well as 14 formal interviews with staff members, including staff at the publishing house, whose work related to or had previously related to *Lizzie*. In the case of *Lizzie*, translations into English were done by one of the authors. With *Bestie*, 10 days of observation took place with four formal interviews. The observations focused primarily on interactions among staff in the magazine offices (six full-time employees and one part-time employee at *Lizzie* and seven full-time employees at *Bestie*), all of whom were female and who ranged in age between 20–50. The main staff of *Lizzie* consisted of an editor-in-chief, a managing editor, two senior editors, a writer, an art director and a part-time assistant art director, as well as freelance writers. Some of these people changed during the study. Likewise, at *Bestie*, the staff consisted of an editor-in-chief, a sub-editor, a fashion editor, a writer, a design editor, an art director and a picture editor.

The observations focused on work practices and shadowing staff in the office spaces, which, due to the size of the spaces, allowed the researchers good visibility. Informal interviews took place alongside the shadowing, and consisted of asking participants what they were doing and how they felt about their activities. At *Lizzie*, the researcher shadowed each member of the staff for an hour or two at a time, aiming to divide the time equally between the staff members. The researcher would sit close enough to see what they were working on, while taking notes on activities, practices and communication. At *Bestie*, the researcher sat in the middle of the group and initially shadowed the sub-editor, who explained how the magazine worked as well as the details of layout and checking proofs, and gave background to many of the observed conversations. Later, the researcher interviewed and observed staff in their day-to-day work, as well as talked informally to staff in social situations in the workplace.

Both studies also adopted a series of formal interviews with staff members, which lasted from half an hour to an hour and a half. The interviews included questions regarding work practices, work background and interactions with their colleagues, managers and audiences. Questions also focused on what upheld the brands, whether the employees identified with these ideas and how they felt about working on the brands. The interviews were semi-structured allowing for conversation and themes to emerge. The formal interviews took place away from the immediate work areas: in a private office, the cafeterias in the buildings or a cafe located nearby. As people working in media, being studied and interviewed was experienced by some as challenging, and in particular, the question of anonymity was raised. Media work is embedded in power relations as structures are hierarchical, and there are strong ‘power differentials based on experience and tenure’ (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013: 1462). This could have presented problems with gathering data on control, and in both cases, it was important to build trust and rapport. However, many of the media professionals included in this study felt that the academic interest we showed legitimised the importance of their work and the importance of writing for and about girls. The ethnographic approach in the two magazines allowed the researchers to see fragments of the brands as they emerged in interactions and conversations, in versions of the magazines as they were being produced and in interviews with employees. This allowed the researchers to piece together a picture of brand fragments into an assemblage as a fluid and dynamic object.

## Data analysis

This article was written after the two independent research projects were completed, and therefore, the researchers returned to the data sets to investigate situated practices where the brands emerged. This was done by concentrating on instances where employees referred to the brands of the magazines in observation notes, researcher diaries and formal interview transcripts from the two organisations. Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) highlight five methodological principles for the analysis of data: defragmentation, defamiliarisation, problematisation, broad scholarship, and reflexive critique. In carrying out our analysis, we first focused on defragmentation and highlighted the tension between pattern building and fragmentation of our rich empirical data, noting contradictions, ambiguities and paradoxes. This tension integrated into an analysis that showed not only patterns across the two studies, but also deviations, complementing the assemblage perspective of branding (Lury, 2009). In our reflexive analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), in which we paid specific attention to gender, we critically examined everyday practices in juxtaposition to critical moments when the ordinary was questioned by our research subjects. Using the concept of assemblages, the analysis focused on how brand fragments emerged in the interviews and observations, noting the language and discursive practices that were used for brands (Müller, 2018). Following the flow of the concepts (such as ‘brand’, ‘values’, and ‘the voice’), assemblages of the brand began to emerge.

Working across the two data sets enabled the two researchers to identify patterns, deviations and inconsistencies in how the brand was constructed. In this paper, we have focused on the similarities between the two data sets, notably in the processes and practices that were enacted in producing the magazines. The dialogue between the researchers was crucial in drawing out power relations, which shaped the brand. Differences were also observed, especially around the wider organisational cultures, the target audiences and type of content. As only one of the magazines adopted alternative forms of engagement with the readers in online forums, we did not analyse this data. While not neglecting these differences, the analysis focused more on the similarities in order to argue that the processes of constructing the brands, as well as challenging them, were strikingly similar in two samples collected independently.

# Brand work in girls’ magazines

This section explores how brands as assemblages draw together connections and relations (Lury, 2009) in relation to ‘brand work’, i.e., the activities that are undertaken to produce, maintain and contest the brand. In doing so, we argue that assemblages both construct and are constructed by situated practices, including gendered discourses of girlhood and power relations. The findings demonstrate how connections between materialities, people and discourses are in themselves dynamic and constructed (Lury, 2004; Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). The data, firstly, shows how brands as assemblages are formed through core connections to girlhood, which in turn shape other linkages to ideas, objects and people. In doing so, the data demonstrates how brands develop different temporalities looking to the past and the future (Lury, 2004). Second, by exploring work practices, we ask how brands are maintained, controlled and contested in an assemblage.

## Connecting girlhood and the imaginary reader

Girlhood was core to the assemblage of the brands and centred in almost all conversations. Writing about girlhood required careful consideration, and as the findings show, staff spent a lot of time discussing how girlhood should be presented. Finding the right perspective created connections between stories and the readers.The ‘voice of *Lizzie’* was a common expression, while the ‘ideal reader’ was used in *Bestie.* Staff described *Lizzie* as an older experienced sister, although definitely not a mother. Cate, a former senior writer of *Lizzie*, described the magazine as a ‘a feminist girl magazine’ with the explicit aim of providing girls a space in which they felt recognised as subjects in their own right and that the readers were ‘perfect just the way [they] are’. The editor-in-chief of *Lizzie* stated that ‘[we are] trying not to give a picture that there is only one way to behave. This is perhaps at the centre of [“Lizziness”]’. The ‘voice’ of the magazines strongly influenced not only what the journalists chose to write about, but *how* they wrote.

Difficult topics, like bullying and depression, would often be written from a girl’s experience, using a first-person narrative (observation data, *Lizzie*). There was a noticeable effort to be positive and set healthy role models, and staff acknowledged the impact of their material on the development of their readers. Contradictions emerged around tense issues, such as how to write about body size:

‘you really have to balance how to write about the body and weight. In my opinion, I don’t think we can have a story in [*Lizzie*] about “how to cover your big butt”, as it is part of the ideology of [*Lizzie*] that a big butt is okay. So, for example, “how to emphasise your slim waist or bring forth your slender legs” is the other side of it. […] But you should be able to write about everything, everything that relates to the life of a young girl, but the angle and perspective really need to be carefully considered. Sometimes we argue amongst staff on whether we can do this, or why should we do this or in what way it should be done.’ (Laura, senior writer, *Lizzie*)

Tensions, such as mentioned in the example above, required staff to discuss the material at length before deciding on an approach. Themes at *Bestie* also focused on empowering girls while trying to protect them. Themes including *‘*friendship, belonging, having fun, growing up and being happy. We have themes that we do not touch: boys, kissing, toilet humour, and anything to do with sex’ (job advertisement, *Bestie*). The material providing guidance related to constructing positive and happy visions of ‘being a child’ (Russell and Tyler, 2002), and excluded inappropriate adult motifs that corrupt the innocence of childhood. Tina described it as ‘wholesome’ but noted a shift over time toward celebrities and a more ‘aspirational’ consumerist tone (observational notes, *Bestie*). Contradictions did emerge, for example, the wholesome view of girlhood presented in *Bestie* was reinforced by storylines about how girls should not feel pressure to wear makeup and to be themselves, while at the same time, images appeared in other sections, such as the fashion sections, where models were obviously wearing ‘glittery’ or ‘fun’ makeup.

Several employees at *Bestie* discussed how they aimed to create a ‘safe’ world for their readers: ‘just a nice sort of world of everything that is fun and girly and friendship’ (Kay, art director, *Bestie*). From a more critical perspective some employees argued this world was often shallow: ‘You are kind of in a very girlie world though, so it probably does affect the way you think […] You are in a very pink, quite safe, shallow…’ (Tina, sub-editor, *Bestie*). Their readers were constructed as vulnerable, needing protection and safety: ‘I think it is a safe place for them to look through the magazine… nothing scary, nothing else but their safety’ (Kay, art director, *Bestie*). The connection to vulnerability partially resulted from the awareness of the role of parents in buying the magazine, where being safe was key to connecting to the readers and the parents. Betty argues that Bestie has:

‘a reputation of a really safe brand as you can go. And there are so many magazines which I think probably go too far for the age group. So you just want to make sure it is a magazine that children can really, like, keep relating to… You have to be really consistent I think, just so they know what’s going on’ (Betty, writer, *Bestie*)

The connections assembling feminist, empowering magazines sat alongside connections to a pink, shallow and ‘girly’ world, constructing multiple temporal assemblages of the brand. Backward-looking connections were made to the childhoods of the employees as well as wider narratives of childhood. Employees were passionate about connecting with their own experiences and understandings of childhood, which formed the basis of aspiration (McRobbie, 2016). The idea of the ‘wholesome’-looking girl referred both backward to traditional notions of girlhood and innocence but also merged with contemporary and forward-looking notions of consumerism. Similarly, the discussions amongst staff at *Lizzie* produced an imaginary teenager reader, independent and connected in the world, but also vulnerable and impressionable. In relation to the imaginary reader, the brand acted as a forward-looking object, linking to the future, to what ought to happen, to different dreams and ideals of girlhood. The staff imagined that the magazines could inform and educate, and even carefully warn girls about the dangers of the world. In these imaginary readers, full of contradictions, different ideologies were juxtaposed.

## Connecting objects and ideas

Material objects can be seen as frozen ideas, materialising past thoughts, representations and ideologies (Lury, 2009), and are fragments of brands, connected through relationships. Objects are visual cues and reminders, materialising different temporal notions of girlhood to which brands connect (cf. Fraser, 1987; McRobbie, 1991/2000, 1999). In the workplace, these objects bring thoughts of the past to the present, as reminders not only of past representations but also of relationships between the magazines, the readers and the employees.

In our observations, we noted that past issues would be lying around on desks and tables, as well as issues of other magazines. These were intended to be browsed through for ideas and were frequently referred to in conversations on how the magazine should look. Covers of past issues and posters of teen celebrities also decorated the walls and cubicles. The faces of female celebrities on past covers created a historic pattern and an expectation for future issues, underlining earlier choices and previous assemblages of the brands. Photographs taken of the office space during the observations at *Lizzie* also showed stacks of books: background reading on girls, depression and creativity, and books to be reviewed. Similarly, at *Bestie*, girl’s clothing was observed in the office relating to fashion sections of the magazine, which included stores and pricing of the items. These objects reflected the choices that were made about past and future content of the magazines.

Both offices contained copies of proofs, which staff would continuously work on. For example, in the last few days before *Lizzie* would go to print, there would be A3 colour printouts of proofs either being worked on or neatly stacked in piles. Staff would proofread the pages, add their comments and corrections in different colours and finally mark their name in the corner (observational notes, *Lizzie*). The relationships to the proofs indicated the magazine to be dynamic objects. The brand co-existed in the office in various material forms as the issue developed from initial drafts through to print. At any point in time, numerous texts were circulating within the office and between the office and the freelance writers, all assembling different linkages between the brand, girlhood and the magazine (observational data, *Lizzie*).

Talk around the magazine offices also reflected the gendered nature of the creative labour in the magazines. During meetings, we observed conversations around periods and metaphors for discussing girls’ changing bodies (observational data, *Lizzie*) and careers for women, clothing for girls and activities for girls such as the Girl guides (observational data, *Bestie*). Staff in both magazines were observed reflecting over their own childhood and teen experiences in relation to what they were working on. Staff also reproduced normative gendered behaviours, such as staff at *Bestie* talking about fashion and appearances:

There is a focus on what you look like, and to be funny… so I think those things are valued in the magazine, probably. They like to talk about clothes; there is a lot of ‘Those look fabulous on you! Where did you get that?’... If I had a date you would have five girls around my desk twittering with all curvy bits and hairspray and doing my makeup and things like that. (Tina, sub-editor, Bestie).

Working on the magazines entailed working almost exclusively with women on content designed for girls, but as one staff member at *Bestie* put it, even if men were more present, topics were unlikely to change: ‘I think we don’t really talk about anything else. (laughs) We would just be silent. Um like I can’t imagine that we would suddenly start talking about computing or anything, unless we were (bored) and there was nothing else, “did you see the match last night, Chelsea you know?” (laughs)’ (Betty, *Bestie*). Working on girlhood and other gendered content of the magazine, such as fashion, reinforced a gendered working environment, or ambience.

The material objects and conversations created linkages between the magazine and the staff, and between readers and multiple ideas of girlhood. Some objects, or brand fragments, produced the magazine as a gendered mobile object of knowledge (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Objects provided knowledge of cultural importance for women producing magazines for girls, and connected the writing to the employees’ own experiences of girlhood and other experiences beyond their personal knowledge. As such, the connections to past issues or objects of the magazine, as a backward-looking connection, was significantly present within the assemblages of the brand, as they continued to influence future decisions. The brands as assemblages were therefore heterogeneous, fragmented, and emerged in parts through different linkages to both the past and the future.

# Brand work: maintaining and contesting assemblages

Temporal connections, such as those mentioned above, opened up a potentiality of the assemblage of the brand (Lury, 2004). The following data explores a tension within media work practices that required processes of both continuity and novelty when working on the magazines. First, the routines in work practices maintained the brands and policed them against potential deviations, while second, these same working practices allowed staff to contest and reform assemblages of the brand.

## Routines and the policing of connections

In both magazines, advanced planning and the editing process formed routines that were important for the stability and consistency of the assemblage of the brands. Editing and re-editing of the texts of the magazines ensured the brand appeared consistent regardless of the writer or sub-editor. ‘*Lizzie* is a strong brand and a strong product and they have strong routines, so that it runs by itself’ (Cate, former senior writer). As a result, the staff would put a great deal of time and effort into editing the text. ‘It came as a surprise how much the stories would be edited so that they would look like [*Lizzie*] and be written with the voice of [*Lizzie*]’ (Vera, producer, *Lizzie*). Similarly, Hanna stated that while she had the freedom to write about different topics in *Lizzie*, *the way to write* in the ‘voice of *Lizzie*’ was very specific. She believed having read the magazine herself as a teenager helped her maintain the style: ‘I felt that they perhaps trusted that I had the touch for it.’ The editing focused on multiple goals, including writing in the appropriate style, remaining ‘relevant to the reader’ and ensuring consistency throughout the magazines (Tina, sub-editor, *Bestie*). With every round of editing the individual writer’s voice was modified to fit by adjusting the language and the tone. Both magazines also had norms about the use of specific words and expressions (observational data, *Bestie* and *Lizzie*).

Policing, the monitoring of the brand, was undertaken by both the editors-in-chief (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013) and by employees. In *Bestie*, a mistake in a Robin Hood puzzle used the title ‘Robin’s Wood’ was seen as an inappropriate but humorous example of ‘watching’ for unintended innuendo. Reading the text through adult eyes was seen as ‘quite good because we pick up on things that shouldn’t go through’ (Kay, art director, *Bestie*), and monitoring included reflecting on what parents might ‘read’ into the content. Employees at *Lizzie* also discussed censoring their writing by avoiding topics such as dieting, underage drinking and masturbation.

‘There are of course subjects that are taboo, although we would like to be on the same level with the teenagers. But we need to write a bit for their parents as well. […] We know that all teenagers drink alcohol, but we can’t write about it. Of course, we don’t want to encourage anyone to get drunk, but the parents would get really upset if we wrote about it, or about masturbation.’ (Anna, senior writer, *Lizzie*)

The magazines would censor potentially problematic material or find softer ways to write about controversial topics. For example, Anna continued that writing about alcohol could be acceptable by altering the perspective to giving advice on helping an inebriated friend. This is an example of how the assemblages of the brand could be maintained, but also fluid. Changes in the material could occur, for example, bringing in a taboo subject, if they were written in the right tone of the magazine.

While a collective voice of each of the magazines did emerge, the editors-in-chief played a role in enforcing norms and could reject any changes they felt were counter to the brand. At *Bestie*, the editor-in-chief took a strong position by having the final say on all material, including photographs and text. This translated into everyday interactions where control was clearly visible, including informal meetings around her desk with staff presenting ideas for approval (observational data, *Bestie*)*.* At these meetings the editor had the ultimate say on whether a produced work would make it into the final version to be sent to print, andon rare occasions, she would pull or alter stories or images. This control led some employees to feel frustrated with the lack of individual expression: ‘The worst thing is that you write something you’re proud of and they change it out of all recognition that fits their *Bestie* brand agenda, and it is something that you hate. You feel like you have written something you hate’ (Tina, *Bestie*). At *Lizzie*,the editor-in-chief took a softer role and gave guidance and approval in matters when sought, but otherwise trusted in the routines of the magazine. However, she did makeall decisions regarding cover images. Policing, especially by the editors, aimed to prevent radically different assemblages of the brands forming by preventing alternative connections.

As a result of the routines and policing of the connections and linkages, it could appear as if the assemblages of the brands were relatively fixed, and that the brands were assembled consistently regardless of who worked on the magazines. There were undoubtedly strong processes of routines and policing in place to maintain the assemblage, which were reinforced by the ideologies of girlhood forming the basis of normative control. Additionally, power relations in media work privileged certain views, especially the editors-in-chief. However, in everyday work there was a simultaneous process of fluidity in the assemblage, where the connections were less ‘sticky’—some connections could effectively de-couple, while others would form.

## Contesting connections

In some situations, employees could find space to contest the brand through a negotiation of alternative connections to different ideologies, objects and readers. However, forming alternative connections was deeply embedded in power relations. For example, Hanna commented: ‘[*Lizzie’s*] style is so strong, that only specific people can influence it’. The ambiences of girlhood framed connections, where power relations reinforced some connections while making others more challenging. A key change that had occurred in *Bestie* related to pressure to include more celebrities in the magazine:

‘We used to be a magazine that is much more focused on friendship and learning more about yourself. And then the learning more about yourself is definitely a massive key element to the magazine. But then celebrity stuff came about from reader surveys again. So we up-ed it (celebrity content), but then we are trying to make sure where possible, that if we do a feature say on [a female celebrity] that we will do it, we did one recently on her being silly and then it was like how she overcame it so it was positive.’ (Betty, writer, *Bestie*)

The connections to girlhood had already altered from imagery using wholesome girls and a basic design to the contemporary version with bright colours, celebrities on the cover and in features. Employees identified that the pressure for this change came from reader surveys, reflecting a more consumerist approach. This new assemblage was not appreciated by all staff. Tina strongly identified with educating and empowering young readers, and she questioned the consumerist connection *Bestie* had with its readers.

‘Maybe I thought that I could change the magazine to be something that I was interested in… I felt that the magazine was very celebrity-oriented and it didn’t give the girls much to get their teeth into… Kind of… happy, which I approved of, but just really quite shallow view of life. It is very materialistic and very consumerist. It is definitely pushing the girls to buy a lot. My interest would be more… Maybe learning more about the world and I felt there was room for that in *Bestie* to a certain degree. But some disagree.’ (Tina, sub-editor, *Bestie*)

Tina was passionate about presenting more realistic problems that she thought might reflect the readers’ experiences. As a result, she discussed sneaking messages in to challenge the types of ‘aspiration’ the girl readers might strive for.

Changes in the magazines could open up opportunities to connect with different readers. When the new art director at *Lizzie* started, she had a desire to diversify the representation of girls in the magazines. In the beginning, she was told that she should copy the pre-existing style and layout in her first two issues. By her third issue, she started to amend and develop the visual style of the magazine.

‘They are very careful with [*Lizzie*], as this is such a strong brand. This [making changes] is like fighting windmills. On the other hand, everybody has been really positive to every change I have made. So although they’ve said I can’t make changes, it’s more like they don’t understand [yet] that it can be changed without changing its spirit.’ (Mary, art director, *Lizzie*)

Equating making changes to ‘like fighting windmills’ demonstrates that altering the connections the brand had with particular types of images was challenging, and required negotiations with staff members to show that changes could occur without compromising the brand. Noticeable alterations to the brand image did occur as a result of Mary contesting assumptions (observational data, *Lizzie*). The art director’s discretion in the choice of images and style, and her push to arrange more photo shoots, altered the magazine to be more inclusive. The brands did shift as a result of employee initiatives, for example, varying the images to reflect a wider readership and connecting the magazine to alternative views on girlhood. Therefore, while the editor-in-chief had a significant amount of control, employees did enact changes through small actions.

The multiplicity and fluidity of assemblages required that the brands were maintained, ensuring the linkages were consistent, while still holding on to the potentiality of alternative formations. The routines of the magazines provided the brands with a sense of stability, aiming to achieve a consistent, collective voice, a territory which the assemblage could occupy (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Assemblages undergo territorialisation as they draw together materials into structures, a tendency to temporarily rather than permanently occupy space. Having a ‘voice’ of the magazine allowed employees to set out ways of repeating strong linkages between ideologies, materials and peoples. Routines formed within the situated practices of writing, editing and designing girls’ magazines, particularly as a backward-looking process from the brand toward repetition of the past and looking toward the future. Territorialisation of the assemblage was also an outcome of the power relations that shaped decisions employees made, and ultimately ensured that routines would continue. The assemblage was maintained by policing the borders of the brand (Gabriel et al., 2015), through normative control of the idea of girlhood by employees and editors. Despite control being visible in the routines and policing, alternative connections were still made, which opened up the brand to other potentialities, and in doing so, altered the assemblage.

# Discussion

The aim of this article was to analyse how gendered media brands come into being through the work undertaken by creative workers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016). Our findings add to the argument of Brannan et al. (2011, 2015), that brands are constructed by exploring how situated work practices form important contexts in which brands operate. We define ‘brand work’ as the negotiation of different links and connections of the assemblage of the brand in everyday activities. The situated practices of creative and gendered labour were found to enable the assemblage to be simultaneously constructed and contested. The multiplicity revealed in the data presents changing power relations and the potentiality of different assemblages of the brand. This discussion looks at two implications of brand work. First, brand work requires that connections to people, ideologies and objects are maintained through situated practices, here explored in gendered creative labour. Second, control is embedded in the assemblages of the brands, which shape the nature of brand work. We argue that control creates repetition and routines, while also allowing different potentialities and *lines of flight* to emerge.

## Brand work and gendered creative labour

The everyday practices in the magazine offices contextualised the nature of brand work and demonstrated the gendered creative labour required by staff to construct the assemblages of the brands. As such, brand work was highly embedded in multiple notions of girlhood (Duffy, 2013). In the girls’ magazines, collaborative practices of ‘doing’ the brands (Vásquez et al., 2013) involved discussing these connections at length to assess if they matched the ‘voice’ of the magazines. Multiple discourses of girlhood and femininity emerged in brand fragments, which included empowering girls and creating aspirations, while protecting their safety and maintaining their innocence (Fraser, 1987; McRobbie, 1991/2000). Paradoxical assemblages of the brands co-existed in the magazines: the magazines could be both shallow and educational, include sexual innuendo while also being ‘safe’, or allow drinking while also maintaining positive role models for the readers. Creative labour is often passionate work (McRobbie, 2016) and employees were seen in both of the studies to express deep connections to the gendered ambiences of girlhood (Arvidsson, 2006). These connections, which shaped and were shaped by girlhood, were made up not only of ideologies but also of objects, employees, editors, customers and parents. This expands the argument by D’Enbeau and Buzzanell (2013) that ideologies are an important strategy in producing women’s magazines by noting how relationships between multiple people, objects and ideologies shape contemporary creative work.

Brand work requires the reproducing and maintaining of connections to the past and replicating previous versions of the magazine. Ashcraft et al. (2012) argue that brands are mobile objects of knowledge. In the magazines, the brands as backward-looking dynamic objects connected to both individual and shared knowledge of girlhood, as well as were mobile across time and space by reproducing past work practices. The brand as a forward-looking object (Lury, 2004, 2009), can connect to or separate from other ideas and materialities and shift toward different readers or alternative notions of girlhood. One implication of brand work was that employees were expected to engage with a brand that was shifting and heterogeneous, which is central for our understanding of contemporary creative and gendered labour. However, the creative labour in making these connections was also embedded in the power relations of the organisations.

## Control and assemblage: territorialisation

When reflecting on these situated practices, brand work becomes an alternate perspective to understanding normative control within an assemblage that is emergent, temporal and fragmented (Lury, 2009), and where the assemblage is continuously stabilised and contested by employees who are simultaneously controlled by the assemblage. Normative control assumes that ideologies are imposed upon employees (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013), and while recognising that employees construct the brands (Cushen, 2009; Costas and Kärreman, 2013, Müller, 2017), the data here suggests a dynamic and fluid understanding of power relations located within the assemblage itself. The brands did have hegemonic dimensions (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013), giving the illusion of being stable objects by referring to them as ‘strong brands’ (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Brands formed connections between employees, objects and management, and played out through unsettled power relations, a dimension of assemblages largely overlooked by Lury (2009).

We argue that assemblages are formed in the context of power relations that reinforce some connections while discouraging others. From the perspective of brands as assemblages, although brands are in a constant state of becoming, fragmented and dispersed, they can take on the appearance of permanence that controls behaviours in an organisation. The policing of the associations by editors and staff were embedded in norms, expectations and understandings of girlhood (Gabriel et al., 2015; D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2013). In the magazines, tensions emerged around ‘aspiration’ while also setting boundaries around the ‘safety’ of their readers. These two juxtaposed sentiments blurred together, and at other points, sat in opposition. However, contradictions within the assemblage could be identified and removed by employees and editors who policed these connections. Brand work was needed to maintain and police connections, thus demonstrating that the assemblage was fragile even as it appeared ‘strong’.

The brand-in-becoming was a simultaneous process of territorialisation and deterritorialisation of the assemblage (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Because of this solid yet fluid state, brand work continuously solidified and contested the boundaries and connections of the assemblage. The fluidity of the brand as an assemblage enabled the brand to adapt to different contexts and persons, shifting between different meanings. Territorialisation marked out common associations by drawing on the past and stabilising connections. Routines, such as editing the stories in the magazines, ensured that staff would reproduce the ideologies of girlhood that would maintain the assemblages. Deterroritorialisation presented potential alternative connections as a result of power relations (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Alterations over time were also important, as some connections de-coupled and re-established in different ways, which suggests an option to contest the brand as well as maintain it. As part of the assemblage, employees reached out to alternative concepts and readers, a deterritorialisation that was enabled through the situated practices that created *lines of flight* through possible future connections.

# Conclusion

Adopting the concept of brands as assemblage emphasises that brands take part in the expression of themselves (Lury, 2009). By shifting our focus to brand work in organisations, we highlight how employees and management participate in producing, co-producing and reproducing the brand as an assemblage (Ashcraft et al., 2012; Vásquez et al., 2013). We position brand work as the continuous negotiation in everyday work practices through which linkages and connections are continuously established between ideas, people and objects (Lury, 2009). Through these situated practices and gendered creative labour, brands come into being in fragments that can be continually rearranged, offering a potential territorialisation and deterritorialisation of the assemblage (Duff and Sumartojo, 2017). Employees engaged in ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie, 2016) where they communicated strong connections to the brands, while also recognising the practices in place which maintained and contested the brand as an assemblage. Considering that brands are attributed with great importance in fulfilling the aims of an organisation, power relations embedded in these assemblages express dynamic and changing connections and linkages within and across organisations. Seeing brands as assemblage requires an understanding of how these practices are situated, in this case through gendered discourses that shaped past, current and future associations, and that brands are produced and maintained through gendered creative labour. The brand as assemblage offers an alternative perspective to normative forms of control (Cushen, 2009, Russell, 2011), introducing a simultaneous process of stabilisation of the assemblage but also contestation, as power is observed in the relationships within the assemblage. The brand as an assemblage reconstructs a complex and, at times, fragmented form of control through being a site of collaboration as well as resistance. Where the opportunities to challenge, question and resist brands can be scarce and far apart, the dynamic brand also makes it an elusive object taking on ever-changing forms and connections.

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