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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Worlds Apart? – The Challenges of Aligning Brand Value for NGO's

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## Abstract
Brands are increasingly part of how international aid and development Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) operate, but there are challenges in aligning NGO brand value across diverse stakeholders. This research explores how key decision makers within one major NGO – Oxfam—construct the challenges of brand value alignment, using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. Three master-themes emerge demonstrating key tensions around aligning NGOs brand value: the difficulty of balancing competing stakeholder needs, the internal cultural conflict around branding, and the existential dilemma underlying the societal effectiveness of NGOs. This paper proposes that NGOs can better navigate these intra—brand tensions using *Brand-as-Purpose* as an organizing principle; framing shared identity, creating a dynamic container for stakeholder interests and cultivating *Moral Capital* strongly anchored in increasing recipient wellbeing. This paper is one of the first pieces of research which explores how NGOs make sense of aligning brand value in the context of complex stakeholder cultures and recipient sovereignty. Brand-as Purpose is put forward as an organizing principle to help balance three key tensions around brand value alignment. This paper proposes that Moral Capital anchored in recipient wellbeing underpins NGO brand value and societal legitimacy and needs to be paramount in how NGO's establish and legitimize their brands.

**Keywords** NGO · Brand · Purpose · Stakeholder Alignment · Moral Capital

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## 1 Introduction

There is an on-going debate in the positivist and critical literatures around branding as to *whether, how* and *for whom* brands create value. Proponents of branding argue that brands are a mechanism to align the value, expectations and experiences of consumers (Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002), shareholders (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 2001) and the wider constellation of stakeholders (Iglesias et al., 2013; Jones, 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Normann and Ramirez, 1993) with the interests of the organisation. Yet critical opponents of branding raise challenges about whether this 'alignment' privileges the interests of brand owners over brand consumers (Adorno, 1991; Arvidsson, 2005; Johansson, 2004, 2006; Ritzer, 1993) and whether the voices and interests of low-paid employees or low-cost suppliers (Gereffi, 2005; Kaplinsky, 2000; Klein, 2000) are fairly represented within the brand value-chain.

Central to this debate is whether brand value can be co-created by dynamically aligning internal and external stakeholders' motivations and needs (Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Ligas & Cotte, 1999). Many recent theoretical frameworks for branding have moved from a dyadic relational construct between the producer and consumer of a single good (Aggarwal, 2004; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002; Woodside, 2004) to a symbolic interactionist construct between multiple internal and external stakeholders which self-regulates around a degree of shared understanding, expectations and experiences of the brand in question (Balmer, 2012; Hatch and Schultz, 2009; Igelsias et al., 2013; Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Jones, 2005). This symbolic interactionist perspective has proposed that brands have moved beyond simply representing products, services or companies and have come to represent the overall vision of the organization, uniting the interests of all internal and external stakeholders behind the pursuit of a common cause (Hatch & Schultz, 2009).

Ligas and Cotte (1999) have argued that in order to negotiate strong brand alignment between and across multiple stakeholders that three key elements need to be aligned – alignment between the brand promise and the brand effectiveness, alignment between the brand image and the audience self- image, and alignment through social exchange (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) between how individuals see themselves in the eyes of other stakeholders and how these stakeholders validate that shared meaning. Hatch and Schultz (2009) have acknowledged that this dynamic process of alignment is not easy and requires ability to listen deeply, integrate other's perspectives, and understand broader societal context. Researchers like Kates (2004) have explored how a beer brand's intended legitimacy with Gay consumer communities was eroded by the beer company's homosexual discrimination as an employer. In China, Guo et al. (2017) investigated how a green energy brand promise was undermined by poor green energy performance, demonstrating how the practice of 'greenwashing' can erode brand legitimacy.

### 1.1 Brands and Branding in the NGO Sector

Non – governmental organisations (NGO's) have been defined by the World Bank in Operational Directive 14.70 as 'private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, protect the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development' (World Bank, 1995). The 2020/2021 Yearbook of International Organisations has recorded almost 30,000 international NGOs and they are broadly considered to be a sub-set of the non-profit sector (Werker & Ahmed, 2008). Brands and branding have played an increasingly explicit role in NGOs in recent years (MacLachlan et al., 2010). At the same time, despite broad agreement that trust and reputation have always been fundamental to the existence of non-profits (Burt, 2012; Burt & Dunham, 2009; Hansmann, 1980), the sector has been slow to fully embrace the formal language and practices of marketing, brands and branding (Bishop, 2005; Hankinson, 2001; Stride & Lee, 2007, Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel, 2013).

Empirical researchers (Gromark and Melin, 2012; Napoli, 2006; da Silva et al., 2020) have demonstrated that brand orientation is an important strategic lever to maximise effectiveness in increasingly competitive non-profit contexts. Despite this evidence, Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel (2013) have found that around half of non-profit representatives have expressed visceral ambivalence around the value of brands and branding for the sector. Specific objections to brands and branding have included over-commercialism, exploitation of beneficiaries, leadership vanity, over-competitiveness, and symbolic resistance to change. Lee (2013) has identified three key tensions around rebranding in the non-profit sector including balancing image and identity, managing stakeholder dialogue and aligning market needs with organizational mission. Dean and Wood's (2017) study has revealed three different levels of emotional conflict around ethics and effectiveness for non-profit fundraising; playing out within individual fundraisers, within the specific organization and within the whole non-profit sector.

Laio et al. (2001) have proposed that a stakeholder orientation is critical to aligning brand value for non-profit organisations and Mitchell & Clark (2019) have recommended that the quality of stakeholder engagement should vary according to the life-stage of non-profit brands versus over-arching organizational goals. Andreasen (2012) has argued that non-profit brands are more dependent than commercial brands on complex social exchanges between multi-valent stakeholders and he has therefore proposed that non-profit brands should represent best practice in navigating and aligning stakeholder interests. Despite these theoretical arguments, recent bibliometric analysis of non-profit branding (Sepulcri et al., 2020) has shown that research on how NGO decision makers understand and manage brand value alignment is sparse. This highlights a need for deeper exploration on if and how brands can align the needs, interests and interconnections of stakeholders within an NGO context.

### 1.2 Challenges for Aligning Brand Value in the NGO Sector versus in other Sectors

In the NGO sector, there are three additional stakeholder and market dynamics which further complicate aligning brand value across stakeholder constellations. The first concerns the nature of relationship between NGO stakeholders, where unlike in commercial organisations, there is an indirect relationship between the people who pay for the services and the people who experience the services. This physical, geographical and chronological distance can create psychological distance between donor and recipient (Laidler-Kylander et al., 2007; Liao et al., 2001; Mitchell and Clarke, 2019). This distance aspect differs from commercial contexts, where theorists (Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Jones, 2005; Mitchell, 2005) have argued that brand can smoothly align the experiences and expectations of all stakeholders from producers to consumers to media and investors. Mittelman and Dow (2018) have investigated the marketing system around international humanitarian aid and argued that there are two separate 'customers' whose needs need to be satisfied within this system – the donor who wants to help and the distant recipient who needs aid. If we view brand as a simplified value-chain, then there is the possibility that NGO stakeholder value exchanges cannot self-regulate and need to be mediated by governments, the media and the NGO itself in order to ensure a healthy balance between donor expectation and recipient experience. This key difference in how expectations and experiences are aligned across the commercial value chain versus the NGO "aid chain" (MacLachlan et al., 2010) is depicted in this simplified schematic below (See Fig. 1 below):

This separation of donor from recipient of NGO services raises a deeper question about the relative power-imbalance between stakeholders across the value-chain within the NGO brand. In the business realm, proponents of branding (for example Hunt, 2019; Keith, 1960; Kotler, 1967; Keller, 2001) have long argued that Consumer Sovereignty is the cornerstone assumption underpinning the value 'exchange'

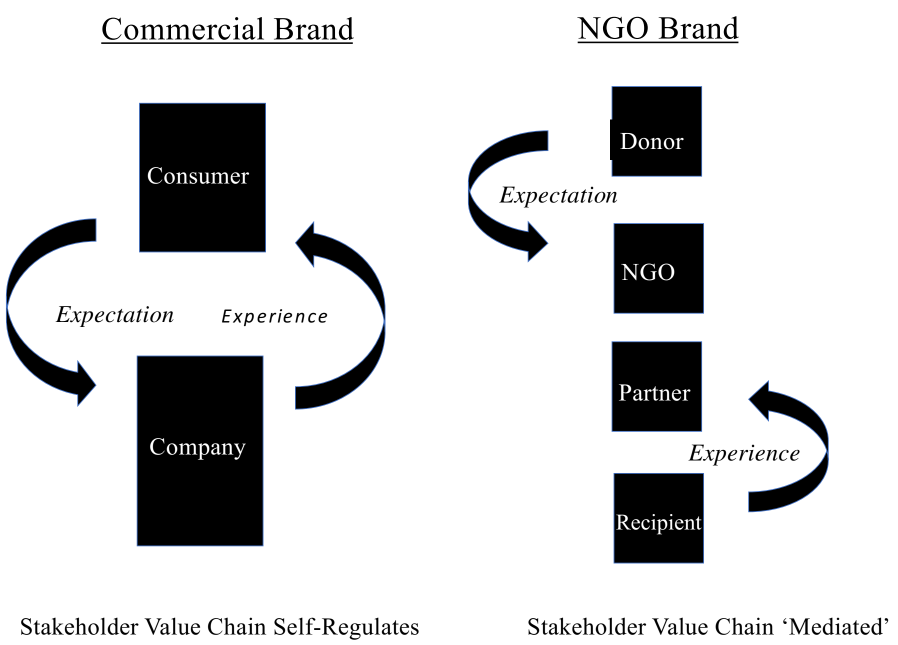


**Fig. 1** Stakeholder Regulation Differs in Value-chain for Commercial Brands versus NGO Brands

between producers and consumers. The NGO brand value chain supposedly exists to benefit the recipient (Sargeant, 2009) but it can be legitimately asked by critics of aid to what extent Recipient Sovereignty (Fraser, 2006; Kilby, 1999) is the driving imperative behind the value-exchange implicit in NGO branding. These broader concerns about social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) within the NGO value-chain around donor bias – where donor's subjective evaluations of problems are mis-aligned with recipient real problems and needs—have been raised by humanitarian psychologists, economists and developmental scholars (Campbell et al., 2001; Chambers, 1997; Moyo, 2009). Interestingly, Hatch and Schultz (2009) have acknowledged that the dynamic process of stakeholder alignment and brand value co-creation does not automatically repair or rectify structural power imbalances between stakeholder groups.

A third difference between for-profit brands and NGOs may lie within the relative importance of societal mission versus agency self-interest and survival (Hatcher, 2012; McKnight, 1989). The Paris Declaration (2005) as an international agreement has set down key processes including alignment and harmonization for all development actors including NGOs to collectively tackle the Millennium Development Goals (2010) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). Critics of branding in the NGO world (for example Edwards, 1997; Levine, 2009) have argued that brands are fundamentally self-promoting, distracting individual NGOs from the harmonized, collective objectives of aid and development. On a deeper level, socio-political scholars (Ossewaarde et al., 2008; Keating and Thrandarottir, 2016) have argued that the rational Accountability Agenda represents only one aspect of NGO legitimacy and a holistic legitimacy framework is needed to help reverse any NGO crisis in trustworthiness.

Taken together, these three challenges highlight the difficulty in aligning brand value across NGO stakeholder constellations: the indirect relationship between donors expectations and recipients' experience, the power imbalances within the aid system and the potential conflict between societal mission and organizational survival. The purpose of this paper is to empirically and theoretically examine the alignment of NGO brand value in light of these multi-valent stakeholder interests, power dynamics and tension between societal mission and agency self-interest. The first research question seeks to empirically explore the challenges of aligning brand value for NGOs *as experienced and constructed by* internal NGO decision-makers. The second research question theoretically explores whether the alignment of NGO brand value *differs in kind or in degree* from aligning brand value across stakeholders in other sectors. The overall objective of this research paper is therefore to investigate both questions and address this gap in knowledge around NGO brand value alignment, drawing on a working practice case study within Oxfam International.

2. Research Methodology.

This study was designed and conducted as an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, 1996), a qualitative research method which seeks to respect the experiences, reflections and interpretations of research participants and the researcher. IPA was chosen as a qualitative methodology because it puts priority on shared sense—making between the research participants and the researcher (Frechette et al., 2020). Branding is a relational concept grounded in intersubjective meaning (Hatch & Schultz, 2009), which encompasses how internal employees see themselves and how they make sense of their stakeholders. Phenomenological qualitative research has been used to explore systemic stakeholder meaning within corporate brands (Pranjal & Sarkar, 2020). IPA has recently been used as a methodology exploring the meaning and subjective value of work for non-profit employees (Dee et al., 2021). For NGO branding, interpretative inquiry allows us to integrate the critical reflections of decision-makers into our understanding (Jopling 1996).

Oxfam International was chosen as a representative NGO, which could reveal the challenges and opportunities for aligning brand value across NGO stakeholders. Oxfam is one of the largest NGOs in the world and has received a lot of attention from scholars as a prototypical NGO (Berry and Gabay, 2009, Eyben et al., 2008, Scurlock et al., 2020, Shouyan, 2019). At the time of this research, a global brand-identity project was in process and there was a working consensus around a brand identity of Practical Visionary. The on-going process meant that decision-makers were conscious of brand as a concept and how it worked or conflicted with aspects of self or shared identity. It was extremely valuable to listen to the experiences, perspectives and critiques of decision-makers who are working with and within a process of articulating and implementing the Oxfam brand in the real but messy world of an NGO. The integration of tangible experience with intangible meaning became a useful framework for exploring how these decision makers constructed and experienced brand value alignment in relation to diverse Oxfam stakeholders.

### 1.3 Sample Selection and Data Collection

IPA sampling was purposive (Smith et al., 2009) in that the sample was selected on the grounds of being information-rich in terms of the research question (Patton, 1990). Permission was obtained from the Oxfam CEO and initial contact made with the Head of International Communications and Marketing. Within the final ten research participants, half the sample had worked in private sector organizations and half the sample had worked only in NGOs or the public sector. Everyone was working within the broad Oxfam culture which lent an appropriate amount of homogeneity to study them as a group but there was also deliberate seeking of different perspectives in order to ensure a richness in the data, interpretation and analysis. In light of the small sample size and risk of individual identification, no more specific detail on age or professional background could be included.

Participants received a briefing form in advance of the interview and written consent was obtained for all. Participants were sent a draft interview schedule in advance of the session (See Appendix 1). Eight interviews took place face to face and one interview took place on the telephone and one took place on Skype. The duration of interviews was between 30 min and two-and-a- half hours, with average interview length being 90 min. Permission was obtained for tape-recording, and written notes were also taken.

### 1.4 Analysis

The process of analysis was an iterative process in which the lead researcher initially engaged with the data *line-by-line* and identified specific and discrete units of meaning, which were meaning-tagged and recorded. Units of similar meaning were then reviewed and brought together to generated emergent themes. These themes were then discussed and developed with the co-researchers who helped to refine them, where necessary, by linking them back to the transcripts. From there, the researchers worked to generate a more interpretative dialogue between the researcher and the data, where the researchers attempted to link the data to previous literature in development, organisations and brands. Then the researchers began to construct a working framework or *gestalt* to help illustrate the relationship between themes.

## 2 Findings

This section highlights the three main themes that emerged from analyzing the interviews with the ten participants. The themes are interconnected and seek to understand branding from the individual to the cultural to the systemic and from the cognitive and emotional to the symbolic and universal. The three master themes and the sub-themes that underpin them are depicted below (See Table 1):

### 2.1 Divided Selves

This theme discusses the value of the Oxfam brand to various stakeholders from donors to recipients to Oxfam employees and whether the brand is aligning and harmonising these stakeholders' needs and interests. This potentially unifying aspect of branding is debated through the psychological separation of these different stakeholders and what they might need from the brand.

First interviewees discuss the value of the Oxfam brand to recipients versus the needs of donors. Participants disagreed as to the relevance and role of the

**Table 1** Master Themes Emerging from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of Branding with Oxfam Decision Makers

| Super-Ordinate Themes | Sub-Themes |
|---|---|
| 1. Divided Selves | *1.1 Inside—Out* |
| | *1.2 Outside—In* |
| | *1.3 Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?* |
| 2. Cultural Legitimacy of Branding | *1.2 Hero versus Villain?* |
| | *2.2 Assimilation versus Integration?* |
| | *2.3 'Theory of Brand'* |
| 3. Underlying Legitimacy of NGO's | *3.1 Under Siege* |
| | *3.2 Managing Expectations* |
| | *3.3 'Becoming'* |

Oxfam brand to recipients and whether it was inappropriately hegemonious or simply part of recipient-accountability. Pragmatic interviewees argued that NGO branding in the field may merely be part of the background to the provision of humanitarian or development services. Others argued that a brand can be a visual symbol of hope or even understood as a positive mechanism of accountability, while critics of branding saw the presence of branding in recipient countries as an act of post-colonialism.

> Alison: Well it doesn't have the same intensity with all your stakeholders – by the time you get to the sharp end of what we do, it's more of a watermark (to signify quality or integrity) … you don't want beneficiaries with Oxfam stamped all over them – it's not empowering – so– if for example people see "Oxfam" on a water-tank (at the delivery end) – it means the water is good quality – it is not going to kill you -– when Oxfam arrives, at least the water is safe.
> Emily: Jeff Smith [very Senior Oxfam person] was [visiting in the field} a couple of weeks ago and – we were looking at the water bladder there – and Jeff pointed at this … and he said 'That's my problem with Aid – it's all a competition between the NGOs to get visibility and tell our donors that we're here' and I actually disagree with him – because I feel that the main reasons for visibility in humanitarian contexts is accountability to your beneficiaries …

Secondly the participants explore the role of brand in the context of stakeholder power-dynamics. There is an underlying debate about whether the Oxfam brand *resolves tensions* and creates a bridge between stakeholders or whether the brand *creates and compounds tensions* between stakeholders by contributing to Oxfam social dominance versus partners and beneficiaries. This complexity is compounded by the geographical, chronological and societal distance between stakeholders and the difficulty of striking the right balance between emotional engagement and rational accuracy.

> Claire: When people ask me what is the difference between working in Oxfam and the private sector I say this is the biggest one for me is that when I worked in XYZ, we would run the message which would have most traction with the general public /consumers – but in Oxfam – we don't always have that luxury even though we know that the messages to get most money from our audience … our agenda is dictated by what's best for people in poverty and not what people who give us the money want … we rely on them absolutely but we can't be guided by what they want ... In terms of stakeholder alignment, there is potential for them to be massively out of sync and I suppose the role of the brand is to try and resolve that tension …

This theme highlighted the difficulty for an NGO brand to align the needs and interests of all stakeholders across the brand value chain. These interviews highlighted the emotionally charged debate within non-profits ( as previously seen by Dean & Wood, 2017) about the relative priority of various stakeholders within the definition and application of the Oxfam brand. This theme could speak to a fundamental dilemma around how the act of branding frames power relations between an NGO—its employees, its partners and its recipients. There is the possibility that the needs of end-recipients may be diluted, excluded or exploited (Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2013) by how brand is conceptualized and applied. These social dominance conflicts between NGO self-interest and NGO social mission have been discussed in the broader literature on aid and development, notably by Chambers (2007) in a debate around the relative importance of aid recipients versus other stakeholders, entitled, "*Whose* Reality Counts?".

Within the symbolic interactionist school of branding (Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013; Ligas & Cotte, 1999), these findings raised an important issue around defining a healthy centre of gravity for an NGO brand. The challenge of balancing motivation between *doing good* and *doing well* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in different sectors and within different stakeholder cultures has been discussed by ethicists like Jones et al. (2007). The implication for a given altruistic organization like an NGO would be that the center of gravity for stakeholder-related decisions would need to be the wellbeing of recipients, for this is the stakeholder, on which the moral authority of all other internal and external stakeholders depends (Fraser, 2006; Kilby, 1999; Slim, 2002). However, in practical terms, the balance between ethics and effectiveness will be critical for NGO brand sustainability (Dean & Wood, 2007) and following MacQuillin (2016) it could be argued that the ultimate strategic challenge for NGO branding will be to strike the balance for donor and recipients as equally important 'customers'.

### 2.2 Cultural Legitimacy of Branding

This theme discusses the value of brands and branding as a sub-culture within the broader Oxfam culture. The interviewees highlight that brand is not always seen as a legitimate part of Oxfam culture. This resistance is traced to a number of factors within broader NGO culture: a dislike of selling or competing, an opposition to persuasion or manipulation, a reluctance around spending money on ourselves, a distrust of simplifying our identity and/or a fear of being held-to-account by funders, recipients and the media:

> Alison: When I first arrived, brand was a dirty word – you would be hung, drawn and quartered for it. In the NGO world, it was seen as commercial language and language like exploiting your brand didn't fit with the culture.
> Claire: Very early on in my Oxfam experience, I did a workshop on brands – the facilitator said 'what comes into your head when you hear the word 'brand'? – people started saying Coca Cola, Nike sweatshops, evil … and I'm sitting in the corner thinking 'Oh my God – what have I done?' Very different now… you wouldn't get that type of reaction to the word 'brand' now … it's a different place..

At a deeper level, participants debate the implications of wide-scale cultural participation and consultation in the branding process; whether branding is deeply integrated into overall Oxfam culture or merely assimilated at a surface level:

> Sarah: I do not feel that there is enough value of marketing expertise in Oxfam – everyone can and does have a view …

Interviewees explore the underlying cultural assumptions around branding within the broader Oxfam culture, which builds a picture of conflicting theories of brand. Three separate but connected debates emerge: first, *what* is brand? (Is it merely logos or does it include organizational behavior), second, *how* is brand? (Is it imposed from head office, or is it created from recipient country experiences?) and thirdly and most importantly, *why* is brand? (Which stakeholder does it serve in practice? What are the implications for dynamics between stakeholders?):

> Daniel: All NGO's, no matter how large or small or what sector they work in, understand the power of communication – and creating a brand positioning is their daily bread …
> Rosemary: There is a real lack of understanding that a brand drives culture and behavior and communication … It does affect the reputation and the brand – if you're not aligned you create reputational risk.

This theme reflects whether brands and branding are seen as culturally legitimate within Oxfam's organizational culture. The rejection of brands and branding on the grounds of cultural fit has been referenced in much of the academic ((Bishop, 2005; Deatherage, 2009; Nissim, 2004; Sargeant, 1999; Stride & Lee, 2006; Kylander & Stone, 2012) literature on branding within charities and non-profits. However, the findings from this study provide a deeper perspective and highlight the fundamental identity split between embarking on a branding to manage organizational identity and simultaneously rejecting the identity implications of being the type of organization which brands and is branded. Previous non-profit qualitative research (Lee & Bourne, 2017; MacQuillin and Sargeant, 2019) has revealed similar tensions in non-profit cultures between the utilitarian role of non-profit branding in generating funds and the normative role of non-profit branding in publicizing the social mission.

The lack of cultural legitimacy around branding could explain why the tactical use of branding to secure funds from donors might be accepted as a necessary evil but a more strategic use of branding to guide internal employees and volunteers (for example Mitchell & Clark, 2020) could still be rejected as simplistic, wasteful and counter-cultural. This theme around the cultural legitimacy of branding with NGOs could also be part of a bigger conflict within non-profit identity, explored by Kreutzer and Jager (2011) as the cultural clash between Volunteerism and Managerialism. If branding is seen as a tool of business and markets aggressively applied to the pro-social sector, it is unlikely to perform a role of symbolic unity between internal and external stakeholders (Sargeant, 2009;

Stride & Lee, 2007). However, if brand-orientation is seeded, adapted and grown from within the non-profit culture (Hankinson, 2001), then empirical research has shown that brand -orientation can help unite internal and external stakeholders behind a common meaning (Napoli, 2006; da Silva et al., 2020).

### 2.3 Underlying Legitimacy of NGOs

This theme highlighted the pressure on Oxfam to justify its value and existence at all levels and to all audiences. Individual interviewees felt under attack from the critical discourses in the media, academic scrutiny and the general public. There were questions being raised as to whether Oxfam was delivering effectiveness and accountability:

> Claire: Corrupt African dictators getting all the cash … Inefficient bumbling – no impact … 'Do- Gooders' … being 'Political' – being involved in things that are nothing to do with you … 'Why can't they just get on with dropping in a bag of rice'? And most fundamentally– 'what difference does any of it make anyway?' … Accountability has a cost associated with it, so we'd better hope it has a benefit associated with it …
> Rosemary: Monitoring and Evaluation is very tricky – it's very expensive… for example our Dutch affiliates have 69 criteria they need to show success to the Dutch government … We have set up Effectiveness Audits … We're constantly trying to balance all these things - we just have to do the best we can …

Interviewees struggled with the difficulty of managing the expectations of the public, striking the balance between motivating people and being accountable:

> Emily: We have to get a lot better about managing expectations … [As a donor] I need to have my expectations managed … If I gave £20 to the crisis in Hekla- I know it's ridiculous - but I would expect there to be some progress made on famine …
> Alison: Well… there will always be the 'Charity Begins at home' argument– should we waste our time trying to alter these attitudes? Or should we take a more positive tack – you can get much more value for your charity donation in the poor world than in the rich one ...
> Daniel: I wouldn't shy away from any journalist or academic on any question – we have an open policy … feel free to criticize – 'come and get it' … it shouldn't be swept under the carpet — we need to take 'the fail' out of failure …

The idea behind these critiques was raising doubts and concerns about the future viability of Oxfam in the broader development context. There was some acknowledgement that the Oxfam global identity would always hold tension, continually learning and adapting as the future emerged:

> Emily: I think a huge challenge is going to be the 'Aid Debate' – how we react to it and how we deal with [it] … We need to come out much more

strongly on our own limitations. We need to have a much more honest conversation with the public?

This theme went to the heart of the basis for trust in NGO brands, whether NGOs should focus on people at home versus abroad (MacQuillin, 2016) and whether NGOs could demonstrate effectiveness in tackling global problems (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). Interviewees discussed the critiques that were being levied at NGOs in terms of the inefficiency, ineffectiveness or even mal-effectiveness of humanitarian and development interventions. Ebrahim (2003) has found empirical evidence that NGOs put priority on upward short-term donor accountability and under develop downward internal and long-term accountability mechanisms. Many commentators (Ebrahim & Ranjan, 2010; Forsyth & Maclachlan, 2009; Keating & Thrandortittor, 2007, Singer, 2014) have argued that a critical element of future NGO effectiveness will lie in their ability to evaluate performance in an evidence-based manner, acknowledge failure, and actively learn from it.

The very legitimacy of NGOs was anchored in being good and doing good (Martens, 2002; Werker and Ahmed, 2008), but if this espoused identity is not seen to be congruent with behavior and outcomes, it can undermine and erode collective and personal work identity (Stets and Burke, 2000) and shared brand meaning (Miller and Merilees, 2011). For both internal and external stakeholders, this has the potential to create an existential dilemma. If the NGO brand is constructed as a project (Sartre 1956/1943), it raises questions around: What is it 'being'? What is its current role in the world? and importantly, Where are the seeds of its 'becoming'? These types of existential debates have recently been discussed in the marketing literature, outlining the risks of perpetrating the 'white-saviour' complex, consumer xenocentrism and implicit racism within cause-related marketing and brand activism (Foster Davis, 2018; Heynen & van der Meulen, 2021; Rojas-Méndez and Chapa, 2021).

This existential dilemma could have different implications for NGO branding, depending on (i) how NGOs choose to see branding (ii) how NGOs choose to tackle the attacks on the sector's legitimacy and (iii) whether NGOs see branding and sector legitimacy as connected. At one extreme if an NGO sees branding as superficial and unconnected to the real impact of an NGO in the world, there is no reason to seek to use the brand or branding to help tackle these critiques. On the other hand, if an NGO sees branding as a deeper relational construct (Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Iglesias et al., 2013), which symbolically and functionally connects all stakeholders around making a difference, then part of the role of the brand is to demonstrate the difference being made, using evidence and measurement; being transparent about success and failure and continually learning what works and what does not. An evidence-based approach to NGO branding can counteract the risk of brand promise being de-coupled from organisational behaviour (Guo et al., 2017; Kates, 2004) and instead help build brand legitimacy. This work-in-progress approach to branding, would allow an NGO to behave as a movement brand, in which intention is continually updated by programme learning and feedback from stakeholders.

## 3 Discussion and Conclusion

Brands have been proposed as ecosystems of symbolic exchange which can align the interests and needs of internal and external stakeholders (Hatch & Schultz, 2009) but this brand stakeholder alignment has not been explored in the context of NGO's. The Paris Declaration (OECD, 2005) has set down the importance of aligning donor aid and NGO intermediaries to the needs and wants of recipients. The three themes emerging from this research with decision-makers all spoke to the challenges of alignment for branding within NGOs. There are challenges at multiple levels if a given NGO brand is to optimise coherence: within the shared meaning between stakeholders, the organizational culture and the wider societal discourse and validation of the NGO sector. The difficulties identified in constructing brands and branding go to the heart of how NGOs make sense of their overall identity and how this is manifested in structures, behaviour and societal value. The issue of branding brings out the complexity and clashes within NGO identity, it does not itself create them.

The first theme 'divided selves'—highlighted a danger that branding can symbolically divide stakeholders from one another, reinforcing what Carr et al. (1998) have dubbed 'donor bias', where the expectations of donors can be misaligned with the experiences of recipients within the NGO marketing system (Mittelman & Dow, 2018; MacQuillin, 2016; MacQuillin and Sargeant, 2019). The second theme spoke to the cultural legitimacy of brands and branding in NGOs—if the brand concept (as expressed in language and practice) is not accepted and valued from within (Hankinson, 2001), it could be seen as a necessary evil and at best achieve assimilation within the overall NGO culture, rather than true and valuable stakeholder alignment (Mitchell and Clarke, 2019). Finally, the third theme entailed credibility challenges to the overall sector and pointed towards an important decision for the sector regarding the use of branding – if it is merely surface level branding, then at best it could buy the development NGO sector some short-term protection from its detractors; whilst at worst it could compound the denial of reality. If alternatively, it is to be deeper authentic branding (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Vrendenberg et al., 2020), it would need to be transparently linked to the efficacy of NGO actions and interactions—both hard and soft evidence—in order to build trust and confidence in what had been achieved and how the NGO actually delivers its social value and contributes to the Sustainability Development Goals (OECD, 2008).

### 3.1 Towards an Integrated Model of NGO Branding

There is an opportunity for an integrated branding framework within NGOs, to keep identity-centered around brand-as-purpose. Purpose has been empirically shown to be crucial for individual work motivation (Ariely et al., 2008) and McKnight and Kashdan (2009) have argued that purpose can be the key to integrating health, well-being and self-concept on an individual level, defining it as:

> Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning. Purpose directs life goals

> and daily decisions by guiding the use of finite personal resources. Instead of governing behavior, purpose offers direction just as a compass offers direction to a navigator; following that compass (i.e., purpose) is optional. Living in accord with one's purpose, however, offers that person a self- sustaining source of meaning through goal pursuit and goal attainment. Furthermore, purpose is woven into a person's identity and behavior as a central, predominant theme—central to personality as well … (p. 242).

Beyond the individual, shared purpose can be an important basis to unite an organization and its stakeholders with diverse interests and the broader system (Hevey et al., 2015; Mazzucato, 2018; Meadows, 2008). Similar organizing principles like shared value, common cause and public value co-creation have been proposed in the commercial (Porter & Kramer, 2011), social change (Crompton, 2010; Darnton & Kirk, 2011) and public goods (Dudau et al., 2019) sectors. In corporate contexts, recent large scale multivariate analysis has demonstrated evidence of links between purpose-clarity and financial performance over time (Gartenberg et al., 2016). Purpose could also be argued to overlap with much of the strategy and management language about mission, vision, proposition, and objectives (Collins & Porras, 1996). However, it can also be argued that shared purpose works on a more integrated level as a construct, in terms of aligning behavior and identity explicitly with goals while allowing a dynamic relationship for feedback between the entity itself and its stakeholders (Edwards & Sen, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2009; Laidler-Kylander & Stenzel, 2013).

Importantly defining brand-as-purpose, rather than brand-as-promise or brand-as vision' could help to keep an NGO anchored in present reality, while integrating with the past (experiences) and the future (expectations). As Kenneth Burke (1954) explained it, this cyclical process is how we humans make meaning: 'Work both expresses our interests and informs them' (1954, p.234). Slim (2002) has proposed that NGO legitimacy is both derived and generated; where it is initially derived by morality and law and then continually generated by veracity, tangible support and intangible good will. All of these elements are anchored in a relationship of care, grounded in what Slim describes as narrow accountability of action, but also the moral accountability of voice and to what extent the NGO represents the intended beneficiary of care. This moral transgression within brands has been recently investigated by Vrendenberg et al. (2020) as 'woke-washing' within inauthentic brand activism. As Slim (2002) has expressed it:

> It is obviously important for NGOs … to be clear about where their voice comes from in a given situation and to be transparent about it. The precise nature of their legitimacy will change depending on which voice they are using. But they will lose all legitimacy if they are found to be masquerading- a sort of ventriloquist to the poor and oppressed (p.7).

### 3.2 Theoretical Implications of this Research

This research can also contribute to the theoretical question: do NGO brands *differ in kind* or *differ in degree* from brands in other sectors? At a deeper theoretical level it can be argued that the underlying value system for NGOs, non-profits and charities is not financial capital or even social capital, but *moral* capital (Kane, 2001). In his analysis of the socially progressive impact of long-purposed politicians like Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, Kane (2001) has proposed that moral capital is created by four interconnected elements – cause, action, exemplar and rhetoric/symbolism (Kane, 2001). As Kang and Glassman (2010) have argued, moral intentions and moral effectiveness are separate although connected constructs, where moral intentions build positive self-image for donors as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2001) and moral effectiveness builds increased wellbeing for recipients as social capital (Putnam, 2001). Following Dewey (1922/1939) it is important to strongly connect moral intentions to moral outcomes through *vital experience* (1929), where the voice and participation of the recipient is an essential valuable input to the overall moral evaluation. If moral intentions of donors are not translated into increased recipient wellbeing, there is a risk that the altruistic self-image of the donor operates as a cultural myth or *illusio* – where well-meaning donors are 'taken in and by the game'- (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.116) masking the lack of real improvement in recipient's lived experience.

Understanding NGOs as grounded in moral capital means the assumptions and practice of branding will be fundamentally different from commercial brands, which are grounded in financial or social capital (Jones et al., 2007). Brands and branding will need to earn their moral stripes (Rodgers, 2018; Vrendenberg et al., 2020) in this non-profit sector, not by claiming trustworthiness but by demonstrating it in every stakeholder action and interaction. This moral imperative for NGO brands goes further than the moral imperative for commercial brands where Hunt (2019) has strongly argued that the voluntary consumer choice is the moral underpinning of the free-market. In the case of the humanitarian marketing system, as Mittelman and Dow (2018) have argued, there is not a transparent marketing exchange between the buyer and seller and there is the need for the NGO to contribute trustworthy context to ensure that both donor and recipient are authentically served.

Felix and Firat (2019) have investigated the betrayal felt by consumers when a commercial brand 'sells its soul' through offshoring. Aaker et al. (2004) have argued that if a sincere brand lets customers down, it will suffer more reputational damage with its public than an 'exciting' brand. Reimann et al. (2018) found that brand betrayal is experienced as moral violation and demonstrated that the experience of brand betrayal versus brand dissatisfaction involves greater psychological loss, self-castigation for previous faith in the brand, indignation-focused anger and rumination. An understanding of NGOs as grounded in moral capital helps explain why the cultural resistance to marketing and branding as immoral (Hunt, 2019; Sargeant, 1999) can be so problematic for the NGO sector. Ultimately, branding will only be fully integrated into NGO cultures when it can demonstrate how it serves and appreciates moral capital rather than dilutes or destroys it. Our argument that brand is best conceived and practised as purpose therefore implies that moral capital can be reframed as *moral purpose*.

In particular, the specific debate about the value of brands within the NGO sector is anchored in whether brands are purposefully/purposed as symbols of trust and effectiveness (which in broad terms would support the stakeholder agenda of the pro-social sector) or whether brands are purposefully the instrument of what Markus and Conner (2014) have called the "businessification" of the pro-social sector, which can conflict with the value and values of many pro-social stakeholders. As economic philosopher Sandel (2012) has warned, there are moral limits to markets and there is a meaningful and real difference between a market economy, in which markets are a useful way to promote efficiency, and a market society, in which markets are the self-proclaimed answer for every societal need and problem. This paper proposes the need for stakeholder responsiveness to remain central to how non-profit organisations brand themselves and create societal value (Andreason, 2012, Mitchell & Clark, 2019).

### 3.3 Limitations of Research

As a working-practice case study, from members of one organization, this research is *idiographic* rather than nomothetic. Nonetheless, the participants did have extensive experience in the sector, including previously in other aid and development organisations, so it is possible that the emergent patterns of meaning may well have relevance more broadly in the sector. An additional limitation is that aid partners, recipients or donors, were not interviewed directly, so these stakeholder views are represented indirectly through the understanding of the study participants. This recognizes that the research sample may therefore be seen as only a partial view and might be replicating social dominance within the sector (MacLachlan et al., 2010). However, our particular interest was to understand how this specific cadre of stakeholders construct their understanding of branding in their own work context. It will be important to incorporate other stakeholders in future research on branding within the NGO sector.

### 3.4 Future Research

Future research needs to explore the role of purpose further with respect to different NGOs and all of their stakeholders and investigate any differences between large and small NGOs in terms of conceptualization and application of branding. It will also be important to explore how ethical fundraising (MacQuillin and Sargeant, 2019) can optimally balance donor needs and recipient rights. Theoretically it is important to further understand how NGO brands differ from other brands in kind or in degree and if there are commonalities between NGO brands and other non-profit or nation brands (e.g., political parties, religions, nations, federations). Specifically, it would be interesting to build on the research of Reimann et al. (2018) and to compare how the consequences of brand betrayal are experienced within commercial contexts versus pro-social contexts, across fixed and growth mindsets (Septiano, 2020).

### 3.5 Policy and Practical Implications of Research

Regarding policy and practice, the important implication from this research supports Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel's (2013) recommendation to incorporate brand into theory of change (Vogel/ DIFID, 2012). Critically, it is important to make explicit theory of brand, including assumptions about the relevance of and relationship to branding for all stakeholders and the potential role it plays for the NGO and the sector in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Hand et al., 2016). On a practical level, volunteers are a highly valuable resource for non – profits (Zboja et al., 2020) and they need to be engaged in the non-profit branding process (Mitchell & Clark, 2020). There is the potential to address misconceptions around the value of non-profit branding and adopt brand-as-purpose as a coherent construct that unites stakeholders within the international humanitarian aid marketing system (Mittelman & Dow, 2018) around common goals.

### 3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings, interpretations and analysis demonstrate that there is potential for brand to lead to division, confusion and lack of coherence at all levels but also potential to for brand-as-purpose to heal divisions, by enabling multi-level coherence for the NGO and its cause. Slim (2002) has argued that the authority of NGOs needs to be anchored in the combination of doing (what NGOs achieve) and being (how NGOs relate to others). NGO brands at their best can be universal frames for collective activism (Benford & Snow, 2000), symbols of social innovation (Krlev & Lund, 2020) and catalysts for societal change (Von Stumer, 2019). A conceptualization and application of brand-as-purpose can provide a working identity (Ibarra, 1999) for NGOs, which can act as a shared crucible for the intentions, actions, and interactions of global transformation.

## Appendix 1

**Discussion Guide for IPA Research with Brand Decision Makers in Oxfam.**

1. Introduction
2. Who I am ? Why I am here ? The background to this research? Permission to record – confidentiality and anonymity, individual consent to be interviewed.
3. Decision Maker's Brief Background
4. how have they ended up here? What were the other worlds they may have worked in – academia, business, government, media, civil service, other?
5. What is this organisation about?
6. how do you describe it to outsiders ?
7. how do you see it as insiders ?
8. How have you adapted and changed recently?
9. In response to which 'triggers'?
10. What makes this NGO different/special?
11. from other NGO's in your area?
12. From other NGO's ?
13. From other organisations?

14. How does the NGO relate to different stakeholders?
15. head office
16. local offices
17. general population – donor countries
18. general population – recipient countries
19. state donors
20. large corporate donors
21. individual philantropists
22. the media
23. specific suppliers
24. other NGO's
25. CSO's – local countries
26. Specifically how have you responded to the 'accountability' and 'participation' critiques ?
27. who is behind them and what are their motives ?
28. how well is your NGO dealing with them?
29. How does the NGO brand and the process of branding help or hinder your overall objectives or specific sub-goals?
30. does it 'sit' easily with your overall objectives?
31. Does it clash with any of your sub-goals?
32. Does it work against any of your stated objectives?
33. Where if any are the 'sticking points'?
34. How does the NGO brand and branding 'fit' with the other processes and activities of this NGO?
35. as language how does the term 'brand' resonate with different sections of the organisation?
36. How comfortable are people with the processes and consequences of branding?
37. What differentiates those who are more and less comfortable?
38. Any advice for this research?
39. Who else should I speak to about this NGO?
40. Is there any seminal document or documentary that I must really read or see?
41. Who else should I speak to about NGO's in general?
42. Is there any NGO critic who you feel is extremely important?
43. (How do you currently counter or respond to them?)
44. Any last thoughts from you on this subject or my approach?

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