Performing Identities
Processes of Brand and Stakeholder Identity Co-construction
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Performing identities: Processes of brand and stakeholder identity co-construction[1]

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Abstract

This article provides in-depth insights into the dynamic, performative co-construction of stakeholder and brand identity in the context of the LEGO brand. Based on detailed considerations of individual and social identity theory, a critique of research on brand identity, and a review of current performative approaches to branding, this study applies a performativity theory perspective. Brand performances—encompassing playing and liking, basement building and showcasing, creating and innovating, community building and facilitating, storytelling, missionizing, and marketplace developing—exhibit generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities and co-construct involved identities. The findings contribute to a dynamic view of brand identity, highlighting brand identity's performative construction alongside constructions of stakeholder identities and the strong interrelatedness of company and stakeholders as agents of brand performance.

Keywords: Brand, Stakeholder, Identity, Co-construction, Performativity theory

1. Introduction

This study analyzes the co-constructive development of two theoretically distinct types of identities and investigates how brand identity is built alongside constructions of stakeholder identity. In line with recent calls to include a stakeholder perspective in branding research (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Hemetsberger & Mühlbacher, 2015; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Scott & Lane, 2000; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), this article addresses a multitude of stakeholder identities involved in constructing brand identity. Brand stakeholders, according to that literature, are active participants in brand interaction and co-creators of brand meaning (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Merz et al., 2009; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). While recent branding literature increasingly agrees on a dynamic and co-constructive perspective, stakeholder-oriented literature strongly advocates the heterogeneous character of co-construction of brands among a multitude of actors. Hillebrand, Driessen, and Koll (2015) introduce the notion of continuous multiplicities of stakeholder relations that are deeply intertwined and, in their interrelatedness, develop a characteristic and distinct dynamic, in which the properties of the whole emerge from the interactions between the parts (DeLanda, 2006), which is different from simple dyadic relationships.

This process perspective on brands also affects traditional conceptualizations of brand identity. Accordingly, brand identity can no longer be reduced to a stable essence (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 1986) but continuously develops through multiple actors' social interactions in varying social contexts (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Contrary to the common assumptions that identities must be strategically aligned and brand identity solid and stable (Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Urde, 2013), Csaba and Bengtsson (2006), da Silveira, Lages, and Simões (2013), and Lucarelli and Hallin (2014) describe brand identity as meanings that are dynamic, fluid, enacted, truly processual, and multiple. Rather than viewing brands as ostensive,

consisting of a bundle of components, this article adopts the perspective of brands as complex

social relations that develop among a multitude of enacted identities (Lucarelli & Hallin,

2014; Mühlbacher & Hemetsberger, 2012). Consequently, the article assumes that a

multitude of actors perpetually develop, negotiate, and enact brand identity and stakeholder

identity in situ. In an attempt to pursue identity, stakeholders use, talk about, and construct

brand identity while enacting their own identities. Conversely, other stakeholders—more or

less intentionally—construct their own identities, weaving their realities into brand identity

construction.

These arguments for a continuous multiplicity view are accumulating; yet empirical

insights into the multi-layered, dynamic process of brand identity co-construction among a

multitude of stakeholders are still under-developed. Drawing on recent literature on brand

identity on the one hand and extant literature on individual and social identity on the other

hand, this article introduces an agentic view of identity co-construction, based on a

performativity perspective (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010). This perspective suggests that

identity is not something that one "has" but rather something that one "does" or "performs"

(Goffman, 1959, 1967). Accordingly, brand identity is not constructed in isolation, let alone

by management, but rather by multiple, dynamic performative co-constructions (Butler,

2010) of brand identity and stakeholder identity that transcend conventional organizational

boundaries (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). This article aims to further develop a process

perspective on brand identity by illuminating the performative co-construction of stakeholder

and brand identity in networks of actively involved stakeholders, including brand

management. Applying an interpretative case study approach (Woodside, 2010) involving

narrative interviewing with 29 highly involved stakeholders of the LEGO brand as well as a

netnographic study of naturally occurring LEGO brand performances, this study provides in-

depth insights into seven performances that exhibit generic ludic, creative, economic, and

socializing qualities and dynamically co-construct a multiplicity of identities. The findings

highlight the important role of managers as active performers, facilitators, and guardians of

brand identity co-construction.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Dynamics of stakeholder and brand identity

The recent rise of stakeholder- and process-oriented perspectives leads to a radical

shift in branding thought (see Merz et al., 2009), necessitating a re-conceptualization of the

concept of brand identity. Critical voices raise concern about the missing theoretical

foundation of conventional conceptualizations of brand identity, as well-established

definitions of brand identity as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist

aspires to create and maintain" (Aaker, 1996, p. 68) or the idea that a brand should act as "a

long lasting and stable reference" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 37) show limited consideration of the

origins of the identity concept (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Some literature criticizes these

conventional concepts for using identity only as a metaphor and for not paying adequate

attention to the dynamic context in which brands are embedded (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006;

da Silveira et al., 2013).

In line with social theories, which perceive identity as created through continuous

interaction in social contexts (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959, 1967; Hall, 1996), Csaba

and Bengtsson (2006) question the core assumptions of conventional brand identity concepts

by arguing that in a dynamic multi-stakeholder environment, (1) brand strategists can no

longer define brand identity in isolation; (2) brand identity is not enduring and stable, but

dynamic, fluid, and adaptive over time; (3) brand identity does not represent the essence or

the true substance of a brand, but refers to a multiplicity of meanings that multiple

stakeholders reflexively constitute, negotiate, and eventually contest; and (4) a distinction

between an internal and external locus of identity construction becomes obsolete as stakeholders' brand-related activities transcend company borders.

Insights from identity research in sociology, psychology, and organizational theory highlight the social and contextual aspects of identity formation and provide the basis for further developing the idea of brand identity arising from a continuous dialectic process of social interaction among multiple brand stakeholders (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Organizational theorists conceptualize organizational identity construction as "dynamic, reciprocal, and iterative in nature" (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 45; see also Gioia, 1998; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Identity construction processes develop through iterative interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders, who reflect on, appraise, negotiate, and contest these meanings (Scott & Lane, 2000).

While engaging in organizational identity construction, all involved stakeholders "are simultaneously engaged in the construction of their individual identities" (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 44). Individual identity reflects stakeholders' needs for self-definition and "is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like" (Schlenker, 1986, p. 23). Individual identity construction is contextual and relies on social exchange with salient others in which stakeholders perform behaviors to convey impressions that serve their self-interests (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Drawing on "beliefs about their self-concepts, values, and goals" as well as on "initial assessments of audience (e.g., their expectations, goals, and beliefs) and situational characteristics (e.g., social rules and roles)" (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 46), individuals attempt to construct identity in interactions with relevant others, which becomes situated if validated by others and generalized if accepted by the same audience over time (Schlenker, 1985).

Integrating these insights, da Silveira et al. (2013, p. 28) conceptualize "brand identity as dynamic, constructed over time through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents (e.g., consumers)." They conclude that brand identity should be flexible and fluid, though scant evidence indicates how brand identity is continuously adapted among social constituents and management. Recent contributions, for example, in the area of brand transformation (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2014) provide a promising avenue for a better understanding of the adaptive co-construction of brand identity among stakeholders—a fruitful perspective of the dynamics of identity co-construction that this article adopts and outlines subsequently.

2.2. The performative construction of stakeholder and brand identity

Aiming to enhance an understanding of the multi-layered, dynamic process of brand identity co-construction among a multitude of stakeholders, this article draws from the important works of Butler (1990, 2010), Callon (1998), Austin (1975), and Lash (2015) in the area of performativity theory, as well as on recent empirical findings on brand performativity. Performativity theory is concerned with performative constitutions of reality in the broadest sense, or constructing and performing identity. As such, performative thinkers strive to counter logics of apparently stable phenomena, or the presumption that social objects have a metaphysical substance that precedes their expression (Butler, 2010). Performativity describes a set of processes that bring about a certain ontological reality—processes that bring things into being and lead to certain kinds of binding consequences (Butler, 2010). Thus, a series of performative practices constitute and re-constitute social objects/brands as existing and autonomous reality.

In line with performativity literature, this article suggests that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler,

1990, p. 25). A performance is not an essential, inherent feature of an object, but a relationship among performers, actions, and audience. "Performance isn't 'in' anything but 'between'" (Schechner, 2006, p. 30) and implies the process of enactment through and in discursive formations (Bode, 2010). Performativity means to constitute reality through language and practices that exert an intentional (illocutionary) force and—under specific environmental circumstances—a related, intentional, or unintentional effect (perlocutionary act) that has some kind of binding consequences (Austin, 1975; Butler, 2010). Identities are contextually variable and open to continuous re-definitions (De Fina, 2011); "projecting an identity is regarded as acting and speaking in certain ways in concrete social encounters or communicative situations" (De Fina, 2011, p. 266). This view assumes that identity construction is rather a process of identification and a kind of social and discursive work (Zimmermann & Wieder, 1970).

Building on these theoretical groundings, Nakassis's (2012, p. 626) discussion of brand citationality and performativity offers an interesting perspective on brands that derives from Derrida's (1988) and Butler's (1993) discussion of citationality as reflecting "the property of iterability, the reproducibility of a form, and the norm that governs its intelligibility and producibility, over distinct discursive time-spaces." Citations weave together the many voices and identities that take part in brand discursive events over time into one complex entity called brand. Nakassis further defines brands parsimoniously as a relationship between some set of brand instances, or tokens, and their material qualities and a brand identity, or type, and its immaterial qualities. "From this point of view, a brand is an ongoing articulation between brand tokens, a brand type, and a brand ontology" (Nakassis, 2012, p. 628). Consumer engagement with a brand is a form of citation of brand identity for the purpose of performing self-identity, or self–other relationality, but ultimately not the brand's identity.

While Nakassis's (2012) view on brands is genuinely (meta-)semiotic and focused on consumer–brand interactivity, Onyas and Ryan (2014) and Lucarelli and Hallin (2014) introduce a stakeholder perspective to their performativity view on branding. Both articles rightly criticize the consumer-centric focus of much of branding literature but, first and foremost, the implicit ostensive understanding of brands as additive entities that consist of images, identities, audiences, and more. In an attempt to understand brand transformation and regeneration, Lucarelli and Hallin (2014) introduce a sociology of translation approach to brand performativity, based on Callon's (1986) discussion of four moments of translation— problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. The study discusses brand regeneration as processual, multiple, and political, thereby adding important empirical evidence to a dynamic perspective of stakeholder performativity. The authors also introduce Lury's (2009) argument that brands should be viewed as inhabiting multiple spaces as well as shaping different locations. Lucarelli and Hallin's (2014) perspective also adds an interesting agentic angle to brand performativity that emphasizes actors, performance, and socio-materiality as important constituents of performativity. In Callon's (1998) terms, to become performative, a statement must create a socio-material assemblage, or *agencement*. Viewing brands as part of an assembled brand world, Onyas and Ryan (2014) emphasize the coordinating function and inter-connectivity of a brand with several social actors and related collective performativity. Yet, by situating the brand outside of its own world, important stakeholder relations are—again—defined as external audience. In contrast, the present study privileges an inclusive stakeholder perspective that puts into focus the dynamic, perpetual performativity of stakeholders within and in the name of the brand.

Contrary to Nakassis's (2012) view of consumer citations as non-intentional in the formation of brand identity construction, this study assumes equality of intentionality in the performative construction of brand identity. Although some actors—at times—might be more

influential than others, social brand interaction does not privilege performers. From a managerial perspective, brand identity is therefore, at best, intended (eventually exerting an illocutionary force) and, as such, perpetually performed by management, but also continuously re-performed and re-interpreted by a multiplicity of stakeholders, who perform their own identity needs and understandings. The effect (perlocutionary act) of performativity is subject to dynamic co-construction.

This study investigates performative identity co-construction from a multi-stakeholder perspective (Hillebrand et al., 2015), taking linguistic and socio-material acts (Callon, 1998) as important ingredients in the performative construction of brand and stakeholder identities (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2014) over time and across spaces. By applying this agentic performative view of identity co-construction to a real-life context, this article provides new and in-depth insights into the multi-layered, dynamic process of stakeholder and brand identity co-construction.

3. Empirical study

The empirical study applies an interpretative approach to "studying a contemporary complex social phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 2003, quoted in Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013, p. 1507). This goal can be achieved by adopting a case study approach, which involves performing a comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon of interest in the context of one brand (Yin, 2003). In line with Yin (2003), the ideal unit of analysis clearly relates to the main research interest, such that a suitable case brand in this study (1) attracts multiple stakeholders' interest; (2) these stakeholders engage in brand-related interactions, which are ideally freely accessible to the researchers; and (3) management perceives itself as part of the stakeholder network and actively interacts with other stakeholders.

3.1. The case

When you become an Adult Fan of LEGO (AFOL), you might at some point

stop and ask yourself, "Why me? Is there something coded in my DNA to be

overly enthusiastic about a children's toy?" The plain and simple fact is that it is

doubtful that you are genetically disposed to seek a meaningful connection with

plastic bricks. Rather, many AFOLs show a unique set of circumstances that

determine whether or not they become what they are today.

(http://thebrickblogger.com/2011/04/the-evolution-of-a-lego-fan/)

This study sets out to investigate the "unique set of circumstances" that actors

involved with LEGO ascribe to their identity formation as, for example, LEGO brand fans. In

the same way as LEGO is about building and constructing, this study investigates how

LEGO's brand identity is built alongside constructions of stakeholder identity.

The LEGO Group, which is renowned for its LEGO bricks, is the largest toy company

in the world (Davidson 2014). LEGO is particularly appropriate for studying the phenomenon

of interest because the brand attracts massive interest by multiple stakeholders and is well-

known for its proactive and transparent approach to handling stakeholder relationships (see

Hatch & Schultz, 2009).

Founded in 1932, LEGO expanded through constant product innovation and

international growth. In the 1990s, LEGO plunged into debt from an unrestrained innovation

process, in which designers had free reign to create evermore fantastic (but costly) products.

Creativity moved from children to LEGO's own designers (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013).

Another critical incident occurred in 1998 with the introduction of LEGO Mindstorms (kits

containing software and hardware to create customizable, programmable LEGO robots)

(Antorini, Muñiz, & Askildsen, 2012). Though originally designed for children, LEGO

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Mindstorms attracted massive attention from technic-interested adults. LEGO management

needed to acknowledge that the brand's core identity aspect of "construction and creativity"

was attractive for a much broader and more active target group than originally thought. The

development of Web 2.0 at the beginning of the 2000s further added to the massive increase

in these AFOLs' influence on the brand. The special demands of different stakeholders led to

the establishment of the "Community, Education and Direct" team to liaise with these groups.

In an effort to integrate external stakeholders into LEGO's innovation process, the company

became more open and transparent, providing multiple platforms for stakeholders to interact

and co-construct LEGO's brand identity, as well as supporting stakeholders' own co-

construction initiatives.

This study focuses on the LEGO stakeholder groups that are, according to LEGO's

community management, particularly active in brand-related interactions with management

and other stakeholders. These include AFOLs, curators of LEGO platforms (highly involved

AFOLs who adopt the role of traffic builders on LEGO-generated online platforms), LEGO

employees, and LEGO managers who actively engage in stakeholder interaction/community

development and in marketing/customer relations.

3.2. *Research approach and procedure*

Drawing on the important groundwork of Austin (1975) and Butler (1990, 2010), this

study focuses on the performative constitution of reality. Applied to the case of LEGO, this

performative perspective assumes that stakeholders (including brand management) perform

LEGO's brand identity as well as their own identities through both linguistic and non-

linguistic, socio-material acts over time and across spaces (Callon, 1998; Lucarelli & Hallin,

2014). Building on Austin's (1975) work, this article assumes that performances can (but do

not have to) exhibit an illocutionary force (i.e., the capability to perform intentionality) as

well as a perlocutionary act (i.e., produce an effect, intentionally or unintentionally). Whereas Austin's approach is purely linguistic, this article adopts a broader conceptualization of performativity that includes socio-materiality and performative acts constituting identity.

To gain a deep understanding of stakeholders' brand performances and their (potential) illocutionary force and perlocutionary act, this study triangulates various methods of data collection. In-depth narrative interviewing seems particularly appropriate for achieving the aim of this study. This method finds frequent application in similar studies on consumer identity projects to provide an understanding of how brands become meaningful to consumers (e.g., Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006). In-depth, narrative interviews with 29 stakeholders who are involved in particularly active stakeholder groups (the majority of whom have been continuously involved with the LEGO brand from their childhood until today) and are widely diverse in terms of age, gender, profession, and cultural background (10 AFOLs, 11 LEGO curators, 5 LEGO employees, and 3 LEGO managers—multiple group affiliations are possible and indicated in Table 1) provide insights into various stakeholders' viewpoints of how their own and other stakeholders' performances contribute to their own and the LEGO brand's identity. Interviewees were identified on the basis of relevance and availability using the LEGO stakeholder database as a source. The interviews were mostly conducted via Skype, owing to stakeholders' geographical dispersion (except for the interviews with managers and some employees that were also conducted at the LEGO headquarters in Billund, Denmark), lasted from 20 to 60 minutes, and resulted in 1,296 minutes of recordings. All interviews were tape-recorded and literally transcribed on 454 pages of text (Times New Roman, single spaced). Table 1 provides a detailed overview of sample characteristics and interviewees' brand performances.

Table 1 here.

The interview process was designed to support stakeholders in simulating active identity construction during the interview. Accordingly, the interviews had a reflexive and hands-on point of departure, which mimed the very nature of LEGO products. Before the interviews, stakeholders were invited to build "their own LEGO experience" with LEGO bricks, that is, a non-linguistic, socio-material artifact synthesizing their LEGO-related performances. Pictures of these "LEGO experience MOCs" (LEGO jargon for "My Own Creation") served as "stimuli for projective interviewing" (Heisley & Levy, 1991, p. 257; see also McCracken, 1988). Open, grand-tour questions encouraged respondents to unfold their life world experiences of the LEGO brand. Inspired by Fournier (1998), the interviews focused on the person, rather than the brand. This approach avoided researchers pre-framing respondents within certain pre-understandings and allowed respondents to share their very personal views on their own identity needs and intentions, on what their and other stakeholders' roles were in performing LEGO's brand identity, and on how their LEGO-related performance reflected back on their own identity.

A netnographic study complemented stakeholders' narratives by offering a "window into naturally occurring behaviors" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). During the interviews, stakeholders provided links to online spaces (two links per respondent on average) in which they experience and perform LEGO most actively. Naturalistically and unobtrusively observing stakeholders' actual online brand performances added to further understand respondents' identity constructions and provided insights into performances of other, related stakeholders in the network.

Data analysis involved an iterative process of inductive categorization (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Spiggle, 1994), implying a continuous movement from "part to whole, both within and across the interviews" (Joy, Sherry, Troilo, & Deschenes, 2010, p. 341). The researchers first independently analyzed all interviews and the netnographic data

material to derive major themes related to actual LEGO-related performance and their (eventual) illocutionary force (intention) and perlocutionary act (effect). A comparison of interpretations allowed gaining a consensual understanding of the data (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Kreiner et al., 2006). Emerging performances were reflected in the light of extant research and together informed the theorizing regarding stakeholder and brand identity co-construction.

4. Research findings

This study's findings provide in-depth insights into the dynamic, performative construction of stakeholder and brand identity in the context of the LEGO brand. The study identifies seven types of LEGO-related identity "performances". The following paragraphs set out to present these performances—considering involved linguistic and non-linguistic, socio-material acts—and to situate the findings in the context of prior research. Performances encompass illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects on concomitant performative constructions of brand and stakeholder identity. Performances unveil generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities.

4.1. Performance 1: Playing and liking

The LEGO brand identity is foremost performative in a socio-material sense. LEGO bricks are performative because they intentionally induce playing and building and do so very effectively, thus exhibiting a strong perlocutionary act. Playing and liking is therefore the core performance in which millions of LEGO fans, including LEGO company members, engage. This performance does not involve serious, creative building but mainly assembling prefabricated LEGO sets and embedding them in a playful way into new or existing stories (e.g., Star Wars, Lord of the Rings). As such, playing and liking satisfies a deep identity need

to maintain a playful, almost child-like passion and the connection to a beloved past (Braun-La Tour, La Tour, & Zinkhan, 2007), thus unveiling a distinct facet of stakeholder identities: "It [LEGO] allowed me to continue [to] use my imagination to continue loving the idea of play from childhood all the way to adulthood without any real break" (Robert).

Much of the socio-material expression and linguistic discourse related to this performance happens at home, establishing the basis for social interactions and relationships with immediate peers such as family and friends.

> I have several large containers full of LEGO sets—and I do not have to see it as a children's toy and put it away. But that is something that is still part of me and part of my relationships. (Robert)

> I do it actually with my family. We've built some big LEGO creations. I have a couple of nephews who are very excited about it, so we build together. And I can get my parents and even my grandparents to engage. So I think that's the cool thing. (Matthew)

LEGO thus performatively constructs family and peer-related identities and, by being integrated in family activity, is defined and re-defined as a brand inducing very particular social relations. Similarly, playing and liking also finds expression online, to a limited extent through the sharing of own creations but more strongly through observing, adoring, occasional commenting, and sharing of other people's creations. These online performances are driven by a simple hedonic pleasure of enjoying the aesthetic value of creations as well as by a wish to share the passion of play with like-minded peers in a safe, socially risk-free environment.

> The internet is full of … negativity.… The LEGO community is very much not like that. You are not being judged harsh. The discussions I have seen or participating in are always as … in an ideal world where children and adults

can treat each other as equals and without fear, without anger … as I wish the

world in real life for everyone. (Robert)

Specialized LEGO offline events are not the right place to perform playing and liking, but

LEGOLands (www.legoland.com) definitely are: "It's the pilgrim's way that I have to make"

(Robert).

Both the community and the bricks provide LEGO fans who engage in playing and

liking with the adventure they are seeking. As such, playing and liking most immediately

feeds into LEGO's brand identity by adding a more adult element to the original meaning of

fostering "construction and creativity" through play. Owing to its large scale, performative

play can have a strong perlocutionary effect on the brand's identity. For LEGO, company

members' playing and liking is an important means to establish mental proximity with

AFOLs (e.g., Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008) and to become authentic members of the

community: "They are not stupid; they know who is a real LEGO person and who is not"

(Anthony). Stakeholder engagement also exerts a strong perlocutionary effect by suggesting

company brand performances.

4.2. Performance 2: Basement building and showcasing

Basement building reflects strong performativity of the LEGO brand identity on

stakeholders, who build own LEGO creations in isolation, at home, and eventually showcase

them on online platforms or at offline LEGO events.

I mainly build for myself. When I finish a project I usually post it on the

internet – I get lots of reviews … which is sort of rewarding, people appreciate

what I do and that is really cool. (Christian)

As such, LEGO performativity involves a strong socio-material element, while linguistic

expressions mainly play a supportive role. A strong individual identity need drives this

performance: basement building supports stakeholders in integrating an element of LEGO brand identity—namely, creativity—into their self-definition. The ultimate authentication of this self-element necessitates social exchange with salient others. Basement building needs its "own stage" (Christian) for showcasing creations and performing a "reality check" (Oliver). The "show and tell" metaphor one respondent introduces in his "LEGO experience MOC" (see Fig. 1) well reflects this dynamic identity performance: "You bring something from back home; you show the world what you have built and receive feedback and appreciation" (Oliver). These linguistic and socio-material acts contribute strongly to a stakeholder-induced strengthening of LEGO's creative brand identity and affect stakeholder identities through creative self-presentations.

Fig. 1 here.

Basement building is ultimately about taking, not giving, and aims to stimulate feedback, kudos, and confirmation from relevant peers. Collaboration and interaction are not of value per se, but only if they produce some intended, self-relevant outcome for the stakeholder. This effect can, to some extent, also be achieved without interaction, for example, by lurking on relevant online platforms (Mathwick, 2002). Lurking seeks inspiration from other AFOLs' creations that are available online and can lead to enhanced building and problem-solving skills, which ultimately support the expression of creativity.

> I spent a lot of time looking at people's creations … and I think at that point my skills, my building abilities really went way up, just from observing what other people are doing. (Jacob)

Though pursuing mainly individually oriented illocutionary intentions, basement building has important perlocutionary effects on other stakeholders and LEGO's brand identity. The sharing of authentic creations adds to LEGO's intended brand identity and provides inspiration for other LEGO fans, creating what management calls "brand heat" (Matthew).

Especially in the case of young builders (Tim and Jacob), basement building can be an "initiating performance" that gradually transforms into an even more serious and collaborative type of performance termed "creating and innovating" (e.g., Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008).

4.3. Performance 3: Creating and innovating

Creating and innovating encompasses a set of semi-professional activities, including the engagement in creative artistic performances, which produce something visually different and striking with LEGO bricks, and LEGO technology development (i.e., engineering and programming). The strong artistic or technical interest driving these activities relates to stakeholders' individual identity constructions, particularly their actual or imagined professional role and the development of related skills (Kozinets et al., 2008; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

> What I really, really wanted to do in life was to become an engineer. But that's not something my parents wanted me to do. So that's how I'm stuck in what I'm doing right now. But at least the LEGO thing I'm working on is a little bit more towards engineering. (Oliver)

In some instances, these activities even involve the transfer and application of LEGO bricks and building skills to professional contexts, for example, through prototyping in the field of machine engineering (see Fig. 2).

> All I know about machines I learnt it from LEGO.… Without LEGO I would not have the job that I have today … because I built this machine with LEGO and presented it at an international tradeshow for foam materials in 2012…. The experts saw the machine in motion … and I got a job right away. (Carl)

This strong performativity of LEGO through the socio-material capacities of the bricks, the sharing of creations, and the performativity of collective creativity demonstrates the bi-directionality of co-construction of stakeholder and brand identities and exemplifies how powerful these brand performances are for identity co-construction on an individual and collective level.

Fig. 2 here.

While part of creating and innovating happens in isolation, this performance involves more collaboration and interaction than basement building, reflecting social identity needs. The strong socio-material element characterizing this performance (i.e., the creating and sharing of actual LEGO creations and building instructions) is complemented by a lively exchange about building techniques and aesthetics among experts

The thing I am most interested in is the discussion; it can be about the technical

site or constructive criticism, what is good, what is bad. (Simon)

Expert discourse manifests itself on expert online platforms (e.g., www.brothers-brick.com, www.eurobricks.com, www.rebrickable.com, www.lugnet.com) in the form of a common language that clearly delimits the "real builders" (Sebastian) from outsiders (Greenacre, Freeman, & Donald, 2013), or as LEGO manager Matthew noted:

It's quite difficult if you go to eurobricks.com and get into the hobby there

because it's really, really sophisticated. They have all these terms of what they

do, for example, 'oh that's really ... you built a 'rainbow warrior' with 'burps'

and some 'poop' right? (Matthew)

(A LEGO glossary is available at http://www.brothers-brick.com/lego-glossary/ and at http://gimmelego.blogspot.dk/p/lego-glossary.html.)

Creating and innovating culminates in stakeholders' interactions and collaborations with the LEGO company: "They get fired up by mental and physical proximity to the LEGO

Group" (Matthew). Unexpectedly getting the chance to provide LEGO management with feedback during conventions (Oliver) or receiving an invitation to participate in LEGO lead-user workshops (Simon) provides recognition (Kozinets et al., 2008; Schau et al., 2009) and adds an extra quality to stakeholders' engagement, which positively reflects back on their self-definition. While stakeholders themselves are often not aware of the perlocutionary force their creating and innovating can have on the LEGO product and brand (in terms of product innovation, improvement, and brand meaning), the LEGO community (in terms of inspiration and excitement and as intermediaries between the community and the company), or the LEGO company (in terms of publicity and financial outcomes), LEGO management clearly acknowledges the performative power of these stakeholders' activities.

> It's the hallmark of the LEGO community. The LEGO community is in the news and science defined by these users' innovations" (Matthew); "I think there is no question that our fan community has a huge impact and bears a significant importance, which became most obvious when looking at how involved they got in product-redesign when we launched LEGO Mindstorms.
> (John)

LEGO management consciously stimulates creating and innovating by providing programs (e.g., the LEGO ambassador network: https://lan.lego.com/) and platforms (e.g., LEGO ideas: https://ideas.lego.com) to bundle these highly brand-relevant illocutionary and perlocutionary forces.

4.4. Performance 4: Community building and facilitating

The core aspect of this performance is the development and maintenance of social relationships among LEGO fans. Community building happens both online and offline through the establishment of spaces for interaction, which exhibit illocutionary qualities

inviting lively exchange. A deep personal interest in LEGO-related topics as well as the need to achieve and maintain a role in a relevant social group that provides feedback and recognition drives LEGO fans to engage in relating.

> Around 2001 when Bionicle came out I was really into it and … it just really
> kind of added to the experience so much to talk to other people who are also
> really into it … that I actually started a LEGO fan site BZ Power
> [www.bzpower.com] in 2001 and today I am one of the admins and
> coordinator so it is definitely a big part of my daily life. (Adam)

Community building and facilitating often results from a strong involvement with the LEGO brand by creating and innovating. Building community gradually replaces building with bricks: "I don't build as often as I used to but mostly because I am so much involved with the LEGO community" (Simon). Hosting online platforms, organizing offline events, or publishing in public magazines consumes resources that some stakeholders are more than willing to sacrifice to satisfy their identity needs. Some stakeholders even consider changing their lives to become more engaged with and for their LEGO community.

> In Finland you have to travel far and I live quite far. So I don't meet so often
> with my LEGO friends as I would like … but I think in the future I will have to
> move somewhere where there are some other people that I will meet face to
> face. (Simon)

Too intense engagement though can ultimately also result in identity conflicts between perlocutionary brand performativity and other facets of stakeholder identity.

> Management is aware that the overall effect of this performativity is invaluable and
strongly affects LEGO fans' brand experience as well as the brand's identity.

> The community couldn't do without these people – they are the ones that create
> a picture repository as brickshelf.com, create blogs or websites that facilitate

discussion or pioneer LEGO fan events. They are for the LEGO fans the most

important people in the community, as most of the interaction and exciting

things wouldn't happen if they were not present. (Matthew)

Stakeholders' performativity actually becomes part of the brand identity and complements

the company's community work, which consists of connecting, encouraging the sharing of

ideas, animating, authenticating, and legitimizing LEGO as a community member by

"making sure that people get the most out of it" (Anne). Hanna's "LEGO experience MOC"

well reflects the company's performance of social facilitation (see Fig. 3).

I am a gardener: I let the site grow for LEGO fans and LEGO as a company: I

don't know what's out there ... unhappy users or things that backfire.... But in a

lot of ways it's this thing that can evolve into anything. And it can grow and

grow. (Hanna)

LEGO fans appreciate this approach: "I appreciate that LEGO management stays very much

in the background. LEGO initiates sites, but does not dominate them" (Marc); "It seems like

they use it like any other user. Linking things … it's kind of cool actually" (Jacob).

Fig. 3 here.

4.5. Performance 5: Brand storytelling

Brand storytelling performatively co-constructs brand identity by "narrating the

brand." Two major groups of brand-related narratives exist: fan-fiction and non-fiction. The

first group of narratives develops fictitious stories by relying on existing or developing new

characters and universes. This fan-fiction finds expression in storied performativity, such as

short stories or novels, and in socio-material artifacts, such as MOCs, LEGO-based drawings,

or stop motion videos, that stakeholders collaboratively develop and distribute on relevant

online platforms (Megehee & Woodside, 2010). In addition to mainstream science fiction

themes such as Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and the Hobbit, two story universes that the

LEGO company created attract AFOLs' story-telling performances: LEGO BIONICLE and

LEGO space.

The LEGO BIONICLE line was launched around 2000, together with an epic story

revolving around heroes fighting against the rising evil on a mystical island. The LEGO

company continuously expanded and distributed the story through comic books, online

games, and films, exciting the masses—until the discontinuation of the product line in 2010.

By then, BIONICLE had already become a relevant part of fans' self-definition and social

relations: "Bionicle obviously had a great storyline to it and a rich universe drawn from so it

inspired a lot of people" (Adam). BIONICLE fans simply continued collaboratively telling

"their story," thus contributing to their own identities and to a brand identity element that

management apparently no longer intended. Throughout the years, the site

www.bzpower.com provided BIONICLE fans with space for all kinds of BIONICLE-related

performativity (for an example of BIONICLE fan-art, see

http://reier.deviantart.com/art/Bionicle-Matoro-Mahri-Lineart-154842851).

> People do kind of read those stories that take place in the universe so we have a
>
> place there for that as well…. We have short stories you know kind of a just a
>
> few hundred words but then people will write … chapter upon chapter and
>
> some of these things get almost novel style I would say. (Adam)

Today, the LEGO company officially re-performs the BIONICLE line and story

(http://www.lego.com/en-gb/bionicle?ignorereferer=true).

Other stakeholders continue with stories related to LEGO space, a LEGO line from

the late 1970s featuring astronauts and spaceships. This includes a book with instructions for

building the LEGO space universe (http://www.amazon.com/LEGO-Space-Building-Peter-

Reid/dp/1593275218), LEGO stop motion videos

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbMOf9Zwnpk), and lively online fan discussions

(https://www.flickr.com/photos/legoloverman/15389933417/in/pool-/).

       Non-fiction stories focus mainly on storytellers' own expressions of pure creativity by

means of LEGO bricks as well as their vision for and relation to the LEGO company.

Stakeholders performing these stories define themselves through their proximity to the LEGO

company. They perceive themselves as LEGO ambassadors who safeguard what they see as

the brand's core values. Spreading their LEGO-related story is part of these ambassadors'

mission: they usually try to receive extensive press coverage by writing articles or performing

on television, explaining about LEGO and their relationship with the brand (e.g., see the

Danish LEGO ambassador Thomas: http://politiken.dk/tv/kultur/ECE904921/65-aarig-

klodsmajor-boltrer-sig-i-lego/). Also organizing collaborations and events with outside

partners such as non-profit organizations is part of brand performativity (e.g., Thomas

organized events with the Danish Post Museum and the French embassy in Denmark). These

storied performances provide purpose to identities and can exert considerable impact on

LEGO's brand identity. Stakeholders literally weave their own reality into the brand's

identity. Examples for such storytelling are manifold (see, e.g., https://vimeo.com/9581676).

4.6. Performance 6: Missionizing

       Missionizing consists of spreading the word and the brand. On the one hand, this

performance involves spreading the word through linguistic performativity; for example,

> I tell it to everyone to buy LEGO for their children. It enhances fantasy,
>
> technical understanding, it is the best thing that can happen to a child, children
>
> learn a lot with LEGO, it educates them. (Carl)

Such linguistic performativity also involves defending the LEGO brand when under attack.

> Often when LEGO is being attacked, for instance, by consumer stories we
>
> always have friends out there protecting us. It is our fans fighting for what is
>
> right and wrong. So I think we have really strong advocates for LEGO and for
>
> the brand. (John)

On the other hand, missionizing involves spreading the brand in a socio-material way, such as

using LEGO as an educational tool ("I use LEGO for homeschooling my son in creative

disciplines. LEGO is a means to express creativity but also to teach structure and seriousness.

My son gets credits for his LEGO creations," Lisa) or for gift giving ("I have some nieces

and nephews that are being pushed to get playing with LEGO.… Every single time when they

have birthdays coming up or Christmas you know the only thing I get for them as a gift will

be LEGO bricks," Oliver; "I gave part of my old LEGO bricks to a children's home and have

never seen so much joy in children's eyes," Carl). In addition to fulfilling the strong idealistic

purpose of educating the "builders of tomorrow" (Robert), this performance might satisfy a

more personal, social need for involved stakeholders to grow future builders with whom to

share their passion: "My nieces and nephews are getting older and I really do hope that they

will keep their love of LEGO as I have" (Robert). This performance resembles management's

illocutionary intentions—namely, to "inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow"

(http://www.lego.com/en-us/aboutus/lego-group/mission-and-vision).

4.7. Performance 7: Marketplace developing

Marketplace developing involves professional collecting, exchanging, and re-selling

of old and new LEGO products. On the one hand, this performance results from stakeholders'

very personal LEGO-related needs, for example, to exchange LEGO bricks. Bricklink

(www.bricklink.com) is an example of an emergent LEGO marketplace that, by now, consists

of more than 5,800 online stores and allows LEGO fans to trade and exchange used LEGO

bricks. The concept was so successful that a Korean gaming company acquired Bricklink in 2013. On the other hand, marketplace developing arises from a purely commercial and financial interest driving involved stakeholders.

> Some of them are professional fans, meaning they have an own website, they
>
> make maybe half a million dollars in revenue per year. Some of them they have
>
> shops, they do events such as BrickFair. (Matthew)

In addition to developing its own marketplace by influencing "what we should be developing, in which direction we should be developing and also executing it out in the market, so being responsible for how we actually end up doing it" (John), the LEGO company recognizes the relevance of emerging marketplaces for LEGO's brand identity as well as for the LEGO community and reacts supportively. An example of a collaborative effort between the LEGO company and commercially active stakeholders is the LEGO Certified Professionals network: "a community-based program made up of adult LEGO hobbyists who have turned their passion for building and creating with LEGO bricks into a full-time or part-time profession" (http://www.lego.com/en-gb/aboutus/lego-group/programs-and-visits/lego-certified-professionals?ignorereferer=true). This network comprises builders and businesspeople who engage in a business-to-business relationship with the LEGO company. LEGO certifies them to organize LEGO-based public events and to use the LEGO brand for their own commercial purposes (see, e.g., http://www.brickville.ca/), thus inviting them to co-construct LEGO's brand identity and to use the LEGO brand for their own identity constructions.

5. Discussion

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, the study adds the perspective of performative identity co-construction to recent literature on dynamic brand identity and exemplifies the interrelatedness and multiplicity of brand and stakeholder identity co-

construction with an extensive case. In doing so, the study expands existing brand identity

literature and adds to a continuous multiplicity view of stakeholder–brand relations. Second,

this study carves out important linguistic and socio-material brand performances, adding an

important repertoire of brand performativity to brand management literature.

This research further contributes to recent stakeholder literature on continuous

multiplicity of stakeholder relations by showing how different actors, institutionalized sites,

and single stakeholders change performativity across different contexts, situations, and time,

thereby altering identities. By prioritizing stakeholder performativity over stakeholders as

actors or institutions, the findings clearly reveal a multitude of performances stakeholders

pursue to fulfill their identity needs, thereby contributing to and altering brand identity in

multiple ways. If stakeholders were reduced to their "roles" or specific "stakes," their

contributions would be limited. Brand performances, however, show a broad range of

important linguistic and socio-material manifestations that derive from and drive multiple

identity constructions.

Table 2 here.

As Table 2 outlines, brand performances exhibit ludic, creative, economic, and

socializing qualities that are reminiscent of basic performative categories in anthropology and

sociology: *homo ludens*, *homo faber*, *homo economicus*, and *socializing agents*. *Playing and

liking* refers to socio-material brand objects as expressions of brand passion and serves

intimate relationship building with a brand, thus developing companionship (Fournier &

Alvarez, 2012). The findings reveal that brand and stakeholder identities are co-constructed

through the socio-materiality of a brand, through places and spaces for brand performativity,

through the multiplicity of stakeholders, and through institutions developed from and for

brand performativity. Performativity comprises small and rudimentary forms, from the

individual and private level to group, community, and economic level co-constructions

(arrows in Table 2 indicate these levels). *Basement building* serves primarily to showcase and raise brand interest, thereby contributing to both the brand and the stakeholder identity of the builder. *Creating and innovating* resembles notions of user innovation and brand co-creation (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011; Füller, Schroll, & von Hippel, 2013) and exerts strong illocutionary forces to market launch. Although stakeholders pursue strong individual identities, *community building and facilitating* constitutes an important collective quality of a brand, which exerts strong illocutionary forces and perlocutionary acts of sharing, authenticating, and legitimizing (Arnould & Price, 2000; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Identities are narrated, which makes *brand storytelling* a natural performance to occur in brand discourse (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2010) as well as in more visual ways through portrayals of creations, movies, and other socio-material artifacts (see Megehee & Woodside, 2010). Most radically, various stakeholders are also *marketplace developing* and engaging in *missionizing* the brand. Both performances strategically launch the brand into the future through illocutionary forces directed to target markets. Contrary to forms of fandom or evangelizing practices (Schau et al., 2009), performances imply selling and educating activities by multiple stakeholders that continuously flow among stakeholders, company, and brand.

Several general elements of continuous multiplicity are striking. First, consumers, fans, distributors, employees, and management all engage in identity constructions that evolve into different performances over time and across spaces. Playing and basement building, for example, often culminate in creative performances of brand identity and innovation; innovating often results in self-standing marketplace development and in building the LEGO community. Corroborating Lucarelli and Hallin's (2014) findings, several transformations of stakeholder identities go along with brand identity development over time. Brand performance is transformative and influences stakeholder identities sustainably.

Second, stakeholders perform brand identity in multiple ways that go far beyond their ascribed "stakes". For consumer marketers (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010) and user innovation (Bogers, Afuah, & Bastian, 2010), this finding is not all news, but marketplace developments and traditional corporate activities by stakeholders are still under-theorized in brand management literature. Third, regarding performativity, boundaries of stakeholder groups disappear as stakeholders engage in various activities across spaces/platforms that relate to a multiplicity of different "stakes" and add to their identities in a variety of ways. Stakeholders define themselves by innovating and community building as well as sharing, marking them as (co-)managers (though often non-corporate actors), whereas others lurk on sites and like, build, and engage in compelling storytelling, marking them as (co-)consumers or fans (also regularly constituting employees or managers). Traditional manager and stakeholder identities disappear; identities are defined by activity/performativity, rather than roles.

The findings of this study show how intensely brand identity is interwoven with identity construction of stakeholders, particularly in its socio-material expression. Identity construction performatively culminates in active brand engagement that company and stakeholders perform in union. Thus, the findings corroborate observations that "brand making does not privilege any actor … but is a collective achievement of multiple market actors" (Onyas & Ryan, 2014, p. 160). The study also highlights the dynamic and fluid character of brand identity (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006) and exhibits instances of Doppelgänger brand images (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006) in stories and brand socio-materiality. Instead of problematizing realities and virtualities of existing brand creations and stories, the study shows that reality and fiction, existing and non-existing brand creations, (must) co-exist in brand identity performances so as to give credit to stakeholder identity performativity. Particularly important is the case of actors, who pursue their

understanding of brand identity performativity as facilitators in a multitude of ways. At times, intended brand identity is described as classical company "push" strategy, while at other times, company performativity is rather humbly described by the metaphor of "gardening". Similarly, creative/innovative performances by stakeholders entail a multiplicity of illocutionary forces, ranging from sharing and helping to strong forces of requesting product (re-)launches on the market. In addition, socio-material creations exert powerful perlocutionary effects on stakeholders and the brand by initiating myriad ways—for the company and others—to engage in constructions of stakeholder and brand identity (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2014), thus performing a brand.

These findings highlight the importance of managers acting as performers, facilitators, and guardians of brand identity co-construction. Managers could do so by supporting generic ludic, creative, economic, and socializing qualities, thus facilitating and guarding multiple performative co-constructions by stakeholders. Encouraging brand performativity by creating and managing brands that engage stakeholders and speak to their identity development needs and by providing technology and places to do so are important managerial task for sustaining powerful performative brands.

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All web references in the text were last accessed on May, 3rd 2016.

Figures and Tables

Please note: Figures are provided in color for online publication and in black and white for the printed version (see additional figure files that have been submitted with the article).

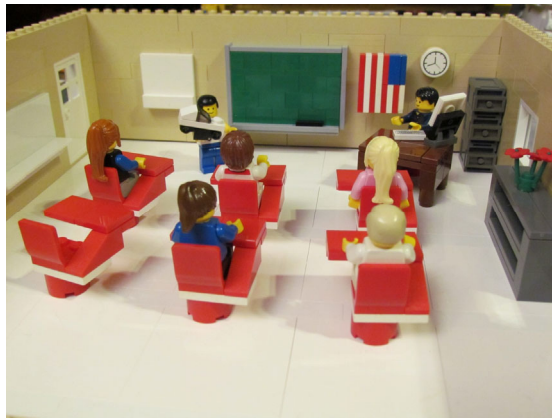**Fig. 1.** MOC featuring a "show and tell" situation.

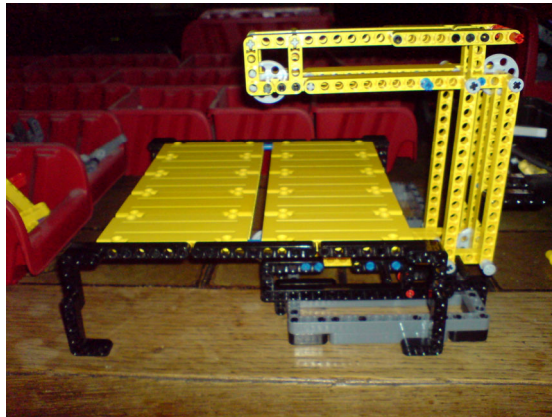**Fig. 2.** Prototype of a machine built with LEGO bricks.

Fig. 3. MOC depicting management's community facilitation as "gardening."

Table 1
Sample characteristics and interviewees' brand performances.

ID	Pseudonym	Age	Country	Profession	Stakeholder group	Brand performance
1	Adam	26	USA	Computer engineer	AFOL	Community building
2	Christian	46	Netherlands	Helicopter engineer	AFOL	Basement building
3	Carl	30s	Poland	Machine engineer	AFOL	Creating and innovating, missonizing
4	Sebastian	44	Ireland	Tax director	AFOL	Creating and innovating
5	Robert	44	USA	Editor	AFOL	Playing and liking, missonizing
6	Miranda	30	Australia	Office clerk	AFOL	Playing and liking, marketplace developing
7	Oliver	40	USA	Restaurant manager	AFOL	Creating and innovating/basement building, missonizing
8	Simon	20s	Finland	IT master student	AFOL	Community building, creating and innovating
9	Marc	38	Germany	Vehicle builder	AFOL	Basement building, creating and innovating, marketplace developing
10	Daniel	26	Russia	IT specialist	AFOL	Marketplace developing
11	Martin	18	USA	Not available	Curator/AFOL	Creating and innovating, some community building
12	Steven	26	USA	Graphic designer	Curator/AFOL	Creating and innovating, community building
13	Paul	41	Brasil	Petroleum analyst	Curator/AFOL	Basement building and community building
14	Lisa	40s	USA	Stay at home mom/unemployed	Curator/AFOL	Missionizing
15	Max	48	Venzuela	Political analyst	Curator/AFOL	Creating and innovating, missonizing
16	George	36	USA	Computer programmer	Curator/AFOL	Creating and innovating, community building
17	Arthur	40	Poland	Computer programmer	Curator/AFOL	Basement building, community building
18	Nathan	35	Serbia	Consultant	Curator/AFOL	Creating and innovating, community building
19	Tim	16	Portugal	Student	Curator/AFOL	Basement building
20	Jacob	20	USA	Student	Curator/AFOL	Basement building
21	Thomas	70	Denmark	Retired airforce officer	Curator/AFOL	Brand storytelling
22	Anne	37	Denmark	Community editor	Employee	Community facilitating, playing and liking
23	Liam	31	Denmark	Software developer	Employee	Community facilitating, playing and liking
24	Anthony	30	Denmark/Germany	Community manager offline	Employee/AFOL	Community facilitating, playing and liking/basement building
25	Hanna	27	USA	Community editor	Employee	Community facilitating, playing and liking
26	Maria	33	Denmark	Community editor	Employee	Community facilitating, playing and liking
27	Matthew	37	Denmark	Head of co-creation	Management	Community facilitating, playing and liking
28	Lucas	57	Denmark	Head of community development	Management	Community facilitating, playing and liking
29	John	30s	Denmark	Marketing / customer relations	Management	Marketplace developing

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Table 2
Performativity in brand and stakeholder identity co-construction.

Performing entities	Performativity/intentionality	Generic performative quality
Socio-materiality/objects	Foster illocutionary forces of playing, building, liking, creating, and innovating	Ludic
Places, spaces	Support illocutionary forces of collective sharing, relating, storytelling, authenticating, and legitimizing	Creative
Multiplicity of stakeholders/managers	Send illocutionary intent of brand and self-identity (co-)construction; community-building and facilitating	Socializing agents
Institutional entities/company/founded by stakeholders	Enable company- and stakeholder-facilitated missionizing and market development	Economic