

CAPITALIZING ON CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: A REVIEW AND INTEGRATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH ON SYMBOLIC MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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Symbols are habitually used by organizations to transform the meaning of their actions and intentions in ways that enable them to manage complex stakeholder relationships and achieve competitive advantage. However, applications of symbolic management across disciplines and research traditions in the organization sciences are fraught with theoretical ambiguity pertaining to the meaning of symbols, the value of symbols to organizations, the tactics used by organizations to manage symbols, and the outcomes of symbolic management. Thus, we review the literature to solidify our theoretical understanding of organizational symbolic management. Based on our review, we advance a *process framework of symbolic management* to describe the relationships between organizational approaches to managing symbols, the forms of symbolic value organizations seek to create and capture, and the prevailing outcomes of symbolic management. Using this framework, we also examine the literature for insights pertaining to the management of symbols for competitive advantage in separate contexts of organization–stakeholder interaction, leading to the development of a *strategic framework of symbolic management*. We conclude by outlining a set of directions for future research that evoke pressing questions about the role of symbolic management in organizations to encourage new pastures of scholarly inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, organizations and organizational scholars have increasingly recognized the importance of symbols to capture and convey meanings capable of advancing the organization's pluralistic objectives (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Westphal & Zajac, 1994). As Ashforth (1985: 843) has pointed out, "properly managed, symbols can become the cognitive skeletons around

which controlled information flows, inference mechanisms, and social influence processes flesh out the construction of organizational reality." The concept of symbolic management rests on the belief that reality is largely a social construct (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and that purposeful attempts to create, sustain, or modify meanings are fundamental to organizational persistence (Staw, 1985). For example, studies suggest symbols are valuable to organizations as indicators of relative performance (e.g., industry rankings; Benjamin & Podolny, 1999), organizational identity (e.g., organizational names; Glynn & Abzug, 2002), professional conformity (e.g., popular management practices; Westphal & Zajac, 1998, 2001), and political influence (e.g., acts of protest; King & Haveman, 2008).

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Yet, over the years, the concept of symbolic management has been applied across numerous disciplines and research traditions, each adopting a unique view about the meaning and value of symbols to organizations (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Zott & Huy, 2007). Although this body of research has advanced our understanding of the importance of symbols to organizations in a variety of ways, there are frequent and often conflicting applications found throughout the literature. There have also been limited attempts to integrate and structure the central tenets of organizational symbolic management, including the nature of symbolic value as well as how such value is harnessed via symbolic management processes. Consequently, our collective knowledge about symbolic management has remained fragmented and disjointed, with little integrative understanding of the overarching processes that turn symbolic resources into competitive advantage.

The objective of this review, thus, is to bring some clarity and theoretical discipline to an important but diffuse concept. To assess the literature in a way that informs our understanding of symbolic management, we respond to calls for greater emphasis on the basic properties of symbols as well as how organizations manage them to gain strategic advantage (Desai & Kouchaki, 2017; Ravasi & Rindova, 2004; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009; Zajac & Westphal, 1995). Specifically, our review seeks to clarify answers to four broad questions: What do we mean by symbols? What is the nature of symbolic value for organizations? How do organizations harness this value through symbolic management? What are the prevailing outcomes of symbolic management? Through developing answers to these four questions, we advance a *process* framework of symbolic management. Using this framework, we then assess the literature for insights on the strategies adopted by organizations to manage symbols in separate contexts of organization–stakeholder interaction, leading to the development of a *strategic* framework of symbolic management.

In answering our first question, we recognize that the first pivotal step is to summarize various views about the meaning of symbols and to set forth the boundary conditions of symbolic management. Thus, we begin by distinguishing symbols from non-symbols, which we refer to as substance. Next, we examine prevailing definitions of symbols found in the organizational literature for their underlying similarities and differences. We find that existing applications of symbols vary widely across research

traditions and researchers have largely neglected to compose common definitions and nomenclature. Through our analysis of existing definitions, we identify certain characteristics that explicitly or implicitly underlie virtually all applications of symbols in the organizational literature. Based on this analysis, we provide a common definition of symbols as *categories of social construction with ascribed meanings defined by the agents and audiences who use them*. We then consider the boundary conditions of symbolic management by discussing the symbols organizations actively manage versus those they do not.

In answering our second question, the literature shows symbols can carry resource characteristics that are critical for developing competitive advantage based on the valuable meanings they convey (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Barney, 1986, 1991; Oliver, 1997; Westphal & Graebner, 2010; Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Yet, researchers seldom discuss the nature of symbolic value (i.e., how it is produced and the multiple forms of value that symbols provide to organizations). In an attempt to advance our understanding of the nature of symbolic value, we examine the literature for indications of its deeper sources and types. Our analysis reveals symbols can take on three different forms of value—ideological, comparative, and isomorphic. We discuss each form of value, paying particular attention to the ascribed qualities that produce them in symbols and the benefits they provide to organizations.

In answering our third question, the literature points to a variety of practices that support organizational symbolic management. These practices are commonly used by organizations to navigate stakeholder relationships in the course of seeking competitive advantages (Elsbach et al., 1998; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Lindenberg & Foss, 2011; Zott & Huy, 2007). However, applications vary widely, and the specific practices organizations adopt to manage symbols have yet to be systematically integrated. Thus, we examine common methods and tactics used by organizations to manage symbols. As part of this analysis, we identify and discuss three separate approaches to organizational symbolic management: creating new symbols, elaborating the meaning of existing symbols, and gaining association with recognized symbols.

In answering our fourth question, the literature shows organizations can use symbols to acquire needed resources, secure repeat business, mitigate social scrutiny, and implement successful change (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Bhat & Reddy, 1998;

Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994). To gain these strategic benefits, we recognize that symbols are vital to influence stakeholders' ways of knowing, interpreting, and judging organizational actions, events, and outcomes. Based on our review, we identify three factors that enable organizations to reach desired outcomes—perspective making (advancing the *unique* knowledge of the organization), sensemaking (producing *common* knowledge and understanding), and social judgments (generating desirable opinions about the social properties of the organization)—and discuss how organizations influence these factors through their symbolic management efforts. These factors, in turn, enable organizations to achieve advantages such as superior performance and successful change.

Finally, having established the conceptual foundations of symbolic management from our review (which we summarize into a process framework of symbolic management), we then examine the conditions that enable organizations to strategically capitalize on symbols by considering when it is most advantageous for the organization to engage in one form of symbolic management or another. Our review indicates that organizations vary their approaches to symbolic management according to stakeholders' levels of awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. The organization's ability to capitalize on symbols depends on its ability to adapt its symbolic management approaches to these contextual conditions. Thus, we advance a strategic framework that considers the conditions that impel organizations to shift their symbolic management tactics to achieve desired outcomes, with implications for understanding the pacing and sequencing of strategic moves that enable organizations to capitalize on symbols.

We conclude by suggesting directions for future research. As part of this discussion, we identify opportunities to advance knowledge within existing domains and research traditions using the symbolic management frameworks from our review. We also highlight opportunities for knowledge development that redirect our attention toward untapped areas of scholarly inquiry. These areas include research into the antecedents of symbolic management, the modes of symbol delivery to stakeholders, the role of symbolic management in the production of cultural products, the role of institutions in shaping organizational symbolic management, and the dark side of symbolic management.

APPLICATIONS OF SYMBOLIC MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

The explicit concept of symbolic management first emerged in the organization sciences with the publication of a series of seminal articles referring to symbols and symbolic action in the 1980s (Daft, 1983; Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983; Swidler, 1986). Since then, many research traditions and perspectives in the organization sciences have helped us to understand symbols and symbolic management processes. For example, studies focused on stakeholders' intangible social evaluations show how organizations can capitalize on symbols that underlie reputation and status by using them to acquire resources and secure repeat business (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Rao, 1994; Roberts & Dowling, 2002; Zott & Huy, 2007). Research focused on organizational identity and identification shows how organizations can use symbols to construct and portray their identities among both internal and external stakeholders (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Glynn, 2000; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Pratt, 1998). Similarly, research on organizational impression management describes how symbols can be used to influence audience attitudes and beliefs through "verbal accounts or explanations" (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Bundy, Shropshire, & Buchholtz, 2013; Elsbach, 1994: 58; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Elsbach et al., 1998; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Oliver, 1991; Westphal & Zajac, 1994, 1998; Zott & Huy, 2007). In addition, research on institutional entrepreneurs and leaders of social movements has shown how symbols can "subvert the established institutional order" (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009: 82) in ways that generate desired organizational and social change (Garud, Hardy, & Maguire, 2007; Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004).

Collectively, studies in these and related traditions have examined organizational symbolic management as a way to navigate both internal and external stakeholder relationships (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Bundy et al., 2013; Rindova et al., 2009). In doing so, many of these disciplines and research traditions also emphasize the management of symbols by organizations for the creation and maintenance of strategic advantage (Elsbach, 1994; Zott & Huy,

2007). Given this emphasis and recognizing the pervasiveness of research on symbols and symbolic management in the organization's literature, our review specifically focuses on studies that meet the following two qualifications: 1) they consider the use and management of symbols by organizations or their representatives, and 2) they focus on the use and management of symbols specifically for the advancement of strategic interests. Thus, our review excludes studies examining broader properties of the symbolic environment that circumscribe organizations (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Zilber, 2006) and studies of symbols used by organizations and their representatives for purposes outside of advancing their strategic interests (e.g., the unsupervised, spontaneous symbolic activity of organizational members in the "unmanaged organization"; Gabriel, 1995).

To collect articles representing the full complement of relevant literature referring to symbolic management, we conducted a search to identify articles using the term "symbolic management" beginning in 1980 from well-known scholarly journals representing the research traditions mentioned previously. To supplement this set with other potentially significant contributions, we used a snowballing technique to search for articles through Google® Scholar using a two-pronged approach. First, we searched for keywords such as "symbolic management" and "symbolic action" to sample broadly from the organizational literature. Within this set, we retained articles for review that referred to organizational symbolic management as their primary topic of interest. Second, we searched for articles and concepts that appeared related to symbolic management but did not use the specific language of "symbols" or "symbolic management." This step enabled us to collect relevant studies examining similar underlying phenomena using different terms (e.g., myth making; Boje, Fedor, & Rowland, 1982; Brown, 1994). Next, to include the practitioner view, we scanned major practitioner-focused journals beginning in 1980 to include articles that discussed symbolic management. Finally, we reviewed several books that discussed symbols, symbolic management, and symbolic action.²

Within this body of research, studies show managing symbols can provide organizations with

competitive advantages through the construction and maintenance of individual and collective beliefs and paradigms (Pfeffer, 1981; Zimmer, 1969). Yet, despite considerable interest in the topic of symbolic management across various disciplines and research traditions, cross-referencing of these literatures has remained limited. To collate this literature in a way that yields new insights, we first integrate the literature to develop a clear and consistent understanding of the meaning of symbols. This analysis is needed to build an intuition of *what* the organization is managing in studies referring to symbolic management.

THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS

In the 1980s, research on symbols and symbolic processes devoted considerable attention to distinguishing "symbols" from "substance" and leveraging insights from reference disciplines (e.g., semiotics) and complementary theoretical perspectives (e.g., symbolic interactionism) to circumscribe the study of symbols in organizations (Daft, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy et al., 1983). Over the years, scholars have built a vibrant foundation of knowledge about the meaning and boundary conditions of symbols by providing illustrative examples of their management in organizations across various contexts and conditions (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Gioia et al., 1994; Zajac & Westphal, 1995; Zott & Huy, 2007). In the following sections, we summarize and advance prevailing knowledge about the meaning of symbols by examining the correspondence between symbols and substance, the definition of symbols, and the aspects of symbols organizations seek to manage.

Symbols versus Substance

To distinguish what a symbol is from what it is not, it is helpful to recognize the difference between symbols and substance (Pfeffer, 1981). Notably, "symbols hold the mind to truth but are not themselves the truth" (Zimmer, 1969: 2). That is, symbols are representations of truth rather than direct experiences of truth. For example, a board meeting is substantive to the extent that it occurs in a given organizational context with actions and results. Symbolic meanings are generated and perpetuated to represent, in some cases only loosely, alternative interpretations of the board meeting. Thus, "the board meeting" (as symbolized) is equated, extrapolated, and morphed into a representation of truth (e.g., it may come to represent a pivotal or a pointless

² Notable among them are *Language as Symbolic Action* by Burke (1966), *Organizational Symbolism* by Pondy et al. (1983), *Symbolic Action Theory and Cultural Psychology* by Boesch (1991), and *Artifacts and Organizations: Beyond Mere Symbolism* by Rafaeli and Pratt (2006).

meeting). These representations of truth differ from substance in that they are “created subjectively” rather than objectively experienced (Hirschheim & Newman, 1991: 33).

Our review indicates that symbolism can occur in and around all acts of substance (Pfeffer, 1981). Yet, some substances are routinely treated as carrying little symbolic meanings (e.g., an office chair is generally viewed as a substantive object rather than as a symbol) and some symbols are treated as highly abstracted from substance (e.g., organizational values generally do not refer to specific substantive actions). In part, symbolic management involves managing the subjective features of such substantive objects and actions. For example, the role of symbolic management in an organization’s toxic chemical emissions (a symbolized representation of substance) might be found in its ability to emphasize how “low” they are to stakeholders (Kim, Bach, & Clelland, 2007). In a similar vein, the role of symbolic management in an organization’s relative appearance in the media might be found in its ability to show how “prominent” they are (Deephhouse, 2000). Thus, the words “low” and “prominent” indicate aspirational aspects of symbolism that carry symbolic value when ascribed to the organizational contexts of toxic chemical emissions and appearance in the media.

Across studies referring to symbolic processes, organizations vary in the extent to which they demonstrate agency, awareness, and creativity when managing symbols. Some organizations adopt a narrow approach to symbolic management, focusing the most of their attention on substantive rather than symbolic issues presumed to influence, for example, profitability. These organizations focus more on developing their products or perfecting their technological capabilities and invest less in the skillful presentation of their products and organizational characteristics (Zott & Huy, 2007). Others consider a wide variety of approaches to managing symbols. Among many illustrations, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) found that organizations use symbols in a variety of ways to persuade their audiences to accept institutional change. Based on our review, activities that do not involve managing the symbolic aspects of objects, actions, events, and structures (i.e., substance) fall outside the scope of symbolic management and are more appropriately classified as substantive management.

The Definition of Symbols

Across research traditions, organization scholars have defined the concept of “symbols” using one of

three basic perspectives: the semiotic perspective, the symbolic interactionist perspective, and the general use perspective. The semiotic perspective examines symbols across various contexts of organizational activity through the lens of cognition and signification processes (De Saussure, 1974; Eco, 1976; Fiol, 1989; Williamson, 1978). The symbolic interactionist perspective examines symbols through the prism of the sociology of organizations and social interaction (Blumer, 1986; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Mead, 1977; Prasad, 1993). The general use perspective implicitly evokes elements consistent with one or both of these perspectives (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Gioia et al., 1994; Zott & Huy, 2007). That is, studies in the general use tradition borrow elements from the semiotic and/or symbolic interactionist perspectives without necessarily grounding their claims in a particular view. As we describe in the following paragraphs, all three perspectives share a common underlying emphasis on certain characteristics that enable an integrative definition of symbols to be developed.

From the semiotic perspective, organization scholars have defined symbols as devices that signify the content to which they refer. Symbols are referred to as “signifiers” in this perspective (Barley, 1983b). The underlying content, as the thing symbolized, is referred to as the “signified” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997: 45). A signifier gains meaning through the association it shares with the signified and the set of cognitions it evokes. Thus, the symbol of an “accountant” (as signifier) refers to an occupational group performing a certain function (the signified) (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). The primary purpose of symbols in this tradition is to segment “worlds into sets of actors, activities, events, and settings” (Barley, 1983a: 3) by providing categories (i.e., cognitive classification schemes; Kaplan, 2011) that aid organizations in labeling, organizing, and providing meaning to their surroundings (Fiol, 1989; Hancock, 2005; Phillips & Brown, 1993).

From the symbolic interactionist perspective, organization scholars have defined symbols as socially negotiated and interpreted devices “through which social structures are processed and social processes become structured” (Maines, 1982: 217). Unlike the semiotic perspective, which refers largely to symbols as devices used for labeling and categorization purposes, the symbolic interactionist perspective places emphasis on the ascribed meanings of symbols that have a tendency “to reflect a blend of truth and untruth” (Basu, Dirsmith, & Gupta, 1999: 507). For example, a modification or increase in CEO pay

undertaken at a board meeting could be symbolically interpreted “either as an indication of corruption in the upper echelons of management or as a deserved reward for an extraordinary CEO” by stakeholders (Zajac & Westphal, 1995: 284). From the symbolic interactionist perspective, consensus among individuals about either of these meanings “provides a sort of social validation such that they are regarded as socially constructed facts” (Ashforth, 1985: 839). Thus, the symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes symbols as constructs capable of providing meaning to social reality through consensus built from social interaction.

From the **general use** perspective, some scholars define symbols in ways that align with the basic principles of the semiotic view. For example, Gioia et al. (1994: 364) suggest that a symbol “can be any sign (an act, event, logo, etc.) that represents some concept; thus, the representation of the concept becomes the symbol’s meaning.” In a similar vein, Swidler (1986: 273) argues that symbols are categorical devices that enable people to “express meaning.” Others define symbols in ways that follow the basic principles of the symbolic interactionist view. For example, Weick (1995) asserts that symbols are integral parts of people’s knowledge structures and assumptions that result from social interaction and help them make sense of social reality. Similarly, Morgan, Frost, and Pondy (1983) characterize symbols as conveying socially constructed meanings that facilitate interactions between actors familiar with the cultural norms of a given social milieu. These studies propose that understanding organizational reality requires an appreciation of the symbols that carry significant meanings to the agents participating in the construction of that particular reality (Dutton et al., 1994; Simpson, 2009; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987).

Across these perspectives, a number of important insights exist that enable a more nuanced understanding of the definition of symbols. First, although the semiotic perspective differs from the symbolic interactionist perspective by its emphasis on symbols as signifiers of some underlying content, it shares a common view of symbols as *socially constructed* with the symbolic interactionist perspective (Phillips & Brown, 1993; Prasad, 1993). Second, although the symbolic interactionist perspective differs from the semiotic perspective through its focus on the meaning of symbols in social interaction, it shares a common view of symbols as *categories with ascribed meanings defined by the agents who use them* with the semiotic perspective

(Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Morgan et al., 1983). Taken together, these insights enable a general definition of symbols that adds specificity and nuance to the organizational literature. Specifically, *symbols can be defined as categories of social construction with ascribed meanings defined by the agents and audiences who use them* (Gioia et al., 1994; Swidler, 1986; Trevino et al., 1987; Weick, 1995). Within this definition, the agents and audiences who use symbols include organizations and their representatives as well as external stakeholders and audiences who receive, interpret, and apply them (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993).

The Symbols Organizations Seek to Manage

Using variations of this definition, our review indicates that symbols with ascribed meanings that are strategically consequential to the structures, actions, and intensions of the organization are those that are most likely to be actively managed (Bundy et al., 2013; Elsbach et al., 1998; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Thus, following from our earlier discussion, an organization’s chemical emissions and appearance in the media are candidates for symbolic management if the organization perceives these symbols as strategically consequential. When they do, the organization’s ability to ascribe favorable meanings to these symbols can enable it to compete more effectively in “contest[s] of social construction” that underlie constituents’ evaluations about the organization (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005: 32). Furthermore, *failing to attend to the management of strategically consequential symbols can have significant performance implications*. For example, Zott and Huy (2007) found that entrepreneurs who were less attentive to the management of strategically important symbols were less likely to acquire resources.

The literature provides a variety of examples of the tactics organizations use to manage symbols that are perceived as strategically consequential (Brown et al., 2006; Lindenberg & Foss, 2011; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). However, studies have progressed in distinct directions yielding multiple views about the value of symbols, the actions organizations take to manage symbols, and the outcomes of symbolic management. Yet, developing an acute understanding of the types of value symbols provide is pivotal to establish insights pertaining to *why* organizations manage symbols. In addition, synthesizing common approaches to symbolic management is critical to provide a pragmatic picture of *how*

organizations manage symbols. Furthermore, understanding symbolic management outcomes is vital to understand *what* strategic benefits organizations gain from symbolic management. Therefore, in the following sections, we examine the nature of symbolic value, the management of symbols by organizations, and outcomes of symbolic management. Combining them together, we present insights from this analysis in the form of a process framework of symbolic management (Figure 1).

THE NATURE OF SYMBOLIC VALUE

Existing views about resource characteristics that underlie the development of competitive advantage generally refer to substantive aspects of the organization (work processes, technology, raw materials, etc.; Barney, 1991). However, many of the resource characteristics that generate competitive advantage in the substantive realm also apply in the symbolic realm (Barney, 1986). For example, desirable

symbols associated with organizations—whether they be brands, logos, practices, policies, or artifacts—are resources that can be used to influence stakeholders' beliefs and expectations (Elsbach, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). These symbols can carry symbolic value, which Ravasi and Rindova (2004) characterized as the set of meanings associated with symbols that convey attractive attributes (e.g., prestigious products). As Khaire (2010: 169) has stated, “symbolic value ... is a firm resource, with significant performance implications for organizations.” Similarly, Gioia et al. (1994: 365) have argued “symbols have influential capacity” based on their ability to convey desirable meanings. Such symbols provide organizations with an important stock of resources “to achieve valuable strategic positions” based on the meanings they convey (Dalpiaz, Rindova, & Ravasi, 2010: 175).

Thus, the literature indicates one way that competitive advantage can be achieved is by developing, deploying, and capitalizing on symbolic value.

FIGURE 1
A Process Framework of Symbolic Management

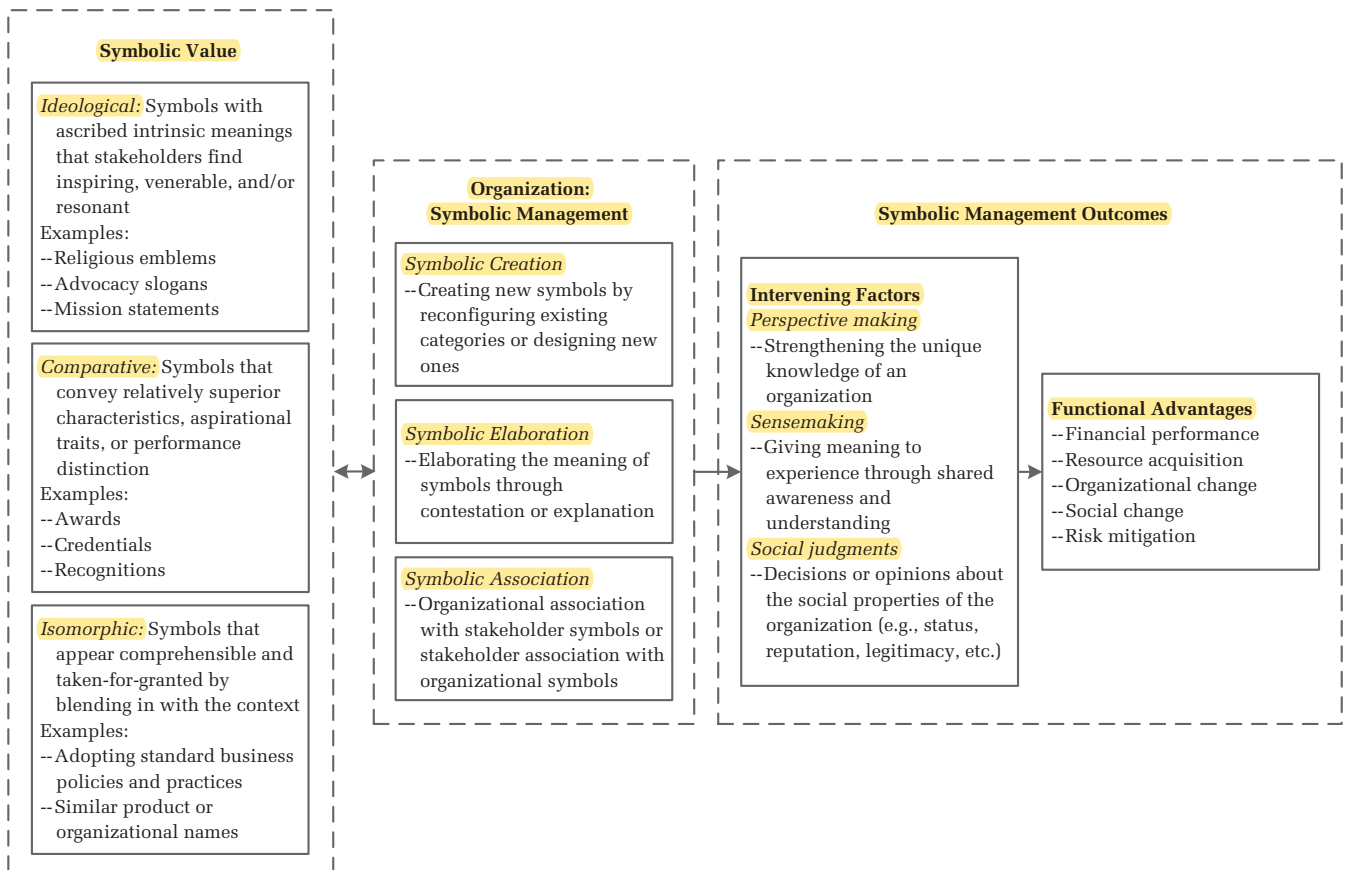


TABLE 1
Exemplary Articles Referring to Symbolic Value

References	Illustrative References to Forms of Symbolic Value in the Literature		
	Ideological	Comparative	Isomorphic
Bass and Avolio (1993)	New rites provided by the firm to employees (e.g., ceremonies) that underlie cultural change	—	—
Eisenberg (1984)	Organizational myths, sagas, and stories that capture and convey organizational values	—	—
Gehman, Trevino, and Garud (2013)	Artifacts and actions that manifest organizational values such as ethics programs and charismatic leadership	—	—
Gioia et al. (1994)	Visionary images that change existing patterns of acting . . . The construct for rallying around a unified direction	—	—
Lindenberg and Foss (2011)	Clear and consensual vision and mission statements that aid in mobilizing energy to a cause	—	—
Melucci (1985)	Objects with a prophetic function that go beyond material goals and are intended to change people's lives	—	—
Misangyi et al. (2008)	Idealistic, simple, and coherent claims used to establish a new identity and change institutional logics	—	—
Pedriana (2006)	Categories that activist organizations use to frame their grievances, identity, and objectives	—	—
Ashforth and Gibbs (1990)	—	Product endorsements by celebrities or membership on the board of directors by prominent citizens	—
Bhat and Reddy (1998)	—	Artifacts underlying relative status and prestige (e.g., high-end watches)	—
Malter (2014)	—	Reports underlying perceptions of status and reputation (e.g., rankings and other class associations)	—
Padgett and Allen (1997)	—	Recognition indicating performance excellence based on prior activities (e.g., service awards)	—
Prasad (1993)	—	Objects indicating relative intelligence (e.g., computers in office spaces)	—
Van den Bosch, De Jong, and Elving (2005)	—	Accolades representing both current accomplishments and future ambitions for performance excellence	—
Zott and Huy (2007)	—	Actions, artifacts, and language conveying achievement and network position to stakeholders	—

TABLE 1
(Continued)

References	Illustrative References to Forms of Symbolic Value in the Literature		
	Ideological	Comparative	Isomorphic
Edelman (1992)	—	—	Policies indicating compliance with laws (e.g., equal employment policies)
Elsbach (1994)	—	—	Explanations and rationalizations consistent with stakeholder expectations
Fiss and Zajac (2004)	—	—	Documents indicating a level of identification with a particular governance regime
Fiss and Zajac (2006)	—	—	Documents conveying frames of change that are institutionally appropriate
George, Chattopadhyay, Sitkin, and Barden (2006)	—	—	Actions that personify myths to maintain legitimacy during times of uncertainty
Glynn and Abzug (2002)	—	—	Organizational names that are understandable and interpretable to target audiences
Lepoutre and Valente (2012)	—	—	Rules, norms, and belief systems that achieve low sensitivity to institutional influences
Westphal and Zajac (1994)	—	—	Policies signaling commitment to institutionalized governance practices enabling decoupling
Westphal and Zajac (1998)	—	—	Socially accepted language enabling formal structures to be decoupled from actual practices
Zajac and Westphal (1995)	—	—	Documents conveying appropriate explanations about governance decisions
Zajac and Westphal (2004)	—	—	Documents indicating a commitment to stakeholder interests enabling increased confidence in the firm

However, despite frequent reference to the notion of symbolic value, researchers have struggled to explain the forms it takes and how it is produced (Ravasi, Rindova, & Dalpiaz, 2012). Based on our review, we identify three types of symbolic value—ideological, comparative, and isomorphic—commonly found in the literature (see Table 1 for exemplary articles referring to each form of value). Studies also show the concept of ascription is key to understanding the production of symbolic value (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Berg, 1986; Edelman, 1992; Elsbach, 1994; Zott & Huy, 2007). Thus, as we describe in detail in the following paragraphs, the three types of symbolic value stem from the qualities that are ascribed to the symbol's intrinsic, relative,

and contextual meanings. Together, our characterization of symbolic value provides a framework for understanding the basic properties of symbols that enable them to exist as valuable resources to the organization.

Ideological Symbolic Value

Ideological value is found in symbols that indicate “the right thing to do” based on beliefs respondents find attractive or admirable (Suchman, 1995: 579). They are often characterized as conveying moral, ethical, normative, or virtuous meanings that distinguish right from wrong (Berg, 1986; Booth & Richard, 1998; Glynn, 2000). Accordingly, symbols

with ideological value are often indicated to stakeholders by their high level of moral and/or dispositional legitimacy (e.g., symbols conveying honesty, trustworthiness, or wisdom; Suchman, 1995). For example, Misangyi, Weaver, and Elms (2008) explained how collective organizations could use symbols indicating moral reasoning to reduce the prevalence and likelihood of corruption in society. Lindenberg and Foss (2011) described how organizations could use symbols indicating helping, sportsmanship, and civil virtue to motivate joint production toward shared goals. Similarly, Gardner and Avolio (1998) detailed how ideological symbolism allows CEOs to create meanings that inspire followers to pursue their vision.

Ideological symbolic value is a function of the *intrinsic* meaning of symbols. The intrinsic meaning of a symbol includes complex sets of beliefs and ideas that are ascribed to a symbol in the absence of its relationship to other symbols and are, therefore, often difficult to copy or imitate (Hall, 1986). For example, symbols indicating a particular religion (e.g., the Christian cross or the star and crescent symbol of Islam) are ascribed specific ideological meanings that stem from beliefs about the existence of God and the nature of reality (Denzau & North, 1994; Desai & Kouchaki, 2017). In the context of organizational names, the symbols PETA and Earth First! convey intrinsic beliefs about the importance and treatment of animals and the natural environment (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). In a similar vein, symbols of national identity or political affiliation include meanings that convey intrinsic beliefs about social, economic, and government policies and objectives (Snow, 1993). In addition to such political symbols, vision and mission statements in organizations convey intrinsic beliefs about the objectives and purpose of the organization (Lindenberg & Foss, 2011).

Symbols with intrinsic meanings that are ascribed compelling, wise, or otherwise resonant qualities appear to be those with the most ideological value. National charters (e.g., the U.S. Constitution), certain organizational names (e.g., the Red Cross), and religious emblems (e.g., the Christian cross) are examples of symbols that have the capacity to carry a high level of ideological value based on the intrinsic meanings ascribed to them (King & Haveman, 2008). For example, studying the Japanese-based Buddhist movement Nichiro Shoshu/Sakagakki (NSS), Snow (1993) found that incorporating cultural symbols such as the American flag into their communications enabled the NSS to achieve greater ease in

transitioning into the United States, where such symbols were ascribed intrinsically valuable meanings such as trustworthiness, decency, and wisdom. In a similar vein, when the messages conveyed in the organization's vision statement signals "collectively valued purposes" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977: 349), the organization is able to more easily motivate behavior and solicit support.

Comparative Symbolic Value

Comparative value is found in symbols that indicate superior characteristics or desirable traits (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Wade, Porac, Pollock, & Graffin, 2006) or above-average credibility and goodwill (Elsbach, 1994). These symbols are often ascribed meanings that provide answers to questions of "better or worse" and "superior or inferior" based on the criteria stakeholders find attractive. Accordingly, symbols with comparative value often underlie perceptions of a positive reputation, high status, or prestige (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Kim et al., 2007). For example, an office address located at the top of a corporate building can be used symbolically to evoke perceptions of high standing (Schubert, 2005). A retailer attempting to enhance its status can do so by displaying symbols that are associated with other high-status retailers, such as hiring a uniformed door attendant (Barron & Rolfe, 2012).

Comparative symbolic value stems from the *relative* meaning ascribed to a symbol based on the symbol's relationship to related symbols. Unlike intrinsic qualities that are ascribed to ideological symbols in the absence of their direct relationship to other symbols, relative qualities are only possible to ascribe when symbols are evaluated in relation to similar symbols. For instance, high wine ratings and desirable intercollegiate athletics team rankings are valuable symbols through their ability to convey relative status (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Washington & Zajac, 2005). Returning to our earlier examples, an organization's low-toxic chemical emissions and prominent appearance in the media are valuable symbols through their ability to convey aspirational meanings in a manner that exceeds competitors (Deephouse, 2000; Kim et al., 2007). In addition, a desirable office address, fine art, and other goods available for conspicuous consumption are valuable symbols through their ability to convey relative prestige.

Symbols with relative meanings that are ascribed desirable, aspirational, or high-performing qualities

appear to be those with the greatest comparative value (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In the literature, these are often referred to as symbols with the potential to yield direct benefits based on their ability to signal value beyond competing symbols. For example, Malter (2014: 272) identified a “causal symbolic effect of status on the prices organizations charge for their products” indicating comparative symbols interpreted as high in status are associated with perceived quality and higher prices. In addition, Zott and Huy (2007) found that status secured by entrepreneurs based on their symbolic actions enables them to acquire resources. Considering another example, organizations often seek to gain recognized association with such comparatively valuable symbols to achieve performance advantages (e.g., restaurants seeking to be awarded Michelin stars; Johnson, Surlemont, Nicod, & Revaz, 2005).

Isomorphic Symbolic Value

The literature shows isomorphic value exists in symbols that adhere to expectations of comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness (Suchman, 1995). These symbols convey answers to questions of “appropriate or inappropriate” and “common or uncommon” based on prevailing cultural expectations. They are critical to “legitimate the organization to its constituents both within and outside its boundaries” (Pfeffer, 1981: 5). Accordingly, symbols with isomorphic value are often indicated to stakeholders by their high level of cognitive and/or sociopolitical legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011; Rao, 1994; Suchman, 1995). These symbols are particularly important to the organization because “a firm’s existence and competitive advantage is strongly affected by its institutional environment” (Bresser & Millionig, 2003: 220). Given the importance of institutional conformity, organizations can use symbols with isomorphic value to “exploit and reinforce myths about the effectiveness and appropriateness” of their actions (Westphal & Zajac, 1998: 129).

Isomorphic symbolic value stems from qualities that are ascribed to the symbol based on the *context* of its use (e.g., professional attire during formal business meetings). Unlike intrinsic and relative qualities ascribed to ideological and comparative symbols, these symbols are ascribed meanings based on how they “blend-in” with the surrounding cultural environment. Thus, isomorphic value is determined not by a comparison between the focal symbol and similar symbols (i.e., comparative value) but by a comparison between the focal symbols and

prevailing assumptions about the adequacy of that symbol in the cultural context. For example, the act of naming the organization is “predicated upon efforts to be understandable, interpretable, and desirable to target audiences” (Glynn & Abzug, 2002: 277). These efforts often result in “symbolic isomorphism,” which refers to the resemblance of the organization’s symbolic attributes to those of others in the field (Glynn & Abzug, 2002: 267). Such symbols are “indispensable to sustainable competitive advantage” (Oliver, 1997: 697) because of their ability to miss the eye of the observer as a potential arena for social and political scrutiny. Consistent with this, Sutton and Callahan (1987) and others (Elsbach et al., 1998) have found that symbols with isomorphic value can be used to ward off stigma or otherwise evade social scrutiny.

Symbols with contextual meanings that are ascribed anticipated, implicitly expected, or acculturated qualities appear to be those with the most isomorphic value. For example, in the context of public companies, professional symbols conveying the organization’s financial performance (e.g., 10-K reports) are ascribed anticipated meanings about the organization’s adherence to prevailing rules and regulations (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). In a similar vein, business licenses are commonly displayed to convey that the organization is sanctioned to conduct business according to prevailing regulatory standards, making them potentially high in isomorphic value (Rao, 1994). Furthermore, organizations often adopt symbols from professional constituents (e.g., fashionable management practices) to signal to stakeholders their conformity to popular modes of organizing (Westphal & Zajac, 1998; Zajac & Westphal, 1995). These symbols are often difficult to substitute given their taken-for-grantedness in the cultural environments within which they are used (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997).

Synthesizing Symbolic Value

Taken together, the literature shows symbolic value is a function of the intrinsic, relative, and contextual meanings ascribed to symbols. These meanings provide separate forms of value such that an enduring organizational symbol (e.g., a company name) can provide ideological, comparative, and isomorphic value based on its intrinsic, relative, and contextual meanings (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007). Yet, if the organizational symbol conveys meanings that are intrinsically uninspiring, comparatively weak, and

contextually unknown, it will not likely carry much symbolic value. In a similar vein, a verbal account (e.g., a retroactive organizational account of events) gains ideological, comparative, and isomorphic values based on its ascribed intrinsic, relative, and contextual meanings (Merkl-Davies & Brennan, 2011). When the verbal account is interpreted as intrinsically apathetic, poorly executed, and contextually inappropriate, it will not likely carry much symbolic value (and may even convey negative symbolic value).

Moreover, our review indicates that a single symbol or symbolic act can convey multiple distinct meanings, each providing a unique form of value to navigate stakeholder relationships. Such combinations of different value types can be especially useful in achieving competitive advantage, as studies in the substantive realm of strategy have shown regarding the combination of resources and capabilities that amplify their rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability (Kogut & Zander, 1992; Teece, 2007). In a similar manner, Berg (1986: 557) defined the organization's stock of symbolic resources as "metaphors, images, etc., which in a condensed form represent complex organizational phenomena, and which can be developed and utilized to guide strategic corporate action." Thus, certain symbols with ascribed meanings that are more socially complex and organizationally contingent might have resource characteristics that can create sustained competitive advantages (Barney, 1991; Dalpiaz et al., 2010).

Based on our review, we see two paths to ascribing meanings for such competitive advantage: vertical and horizontal. *Vertical* ascriptions layer symbols with multiple desirable meanings within a given category of symbolic value. For example, an organization might display multiple venerable qualities that elevate its overall ideological value in ways that are difficult to imitate (e.g., morality, care for employees, sustainability, and fair dealings with customers; Victor & Cullen, 1988). In addition, the organization might be ranked highly across different categories of performance that combine to elevate its overall comparative value in ways that are hard to copy (e.g., speed of entry into new markets, product quality, and operational efficiency; Boyd, Bergh, & Ketchen, 2010). Furthermore, certain organizational practices are ascribed meanings that are isomorphic across multiple distinct contexts, making them potentially less susceptible to substitution (e.g., broadly shared corporate governance practices; Fiss & Zajac, 2004).

Our review also indicates that the strategic importance of a symbol is elevated through *horizontal* ascriptions across multiple categories of symbolic value. For example, environmentally friendly products featured highly in product quality rankings will carry both ideological and comparative value, potentially increasing their inimitability (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Rivera, 2004). Similarly, vintage or nostalgic organizational products (e.g., collectable cars) can carry both ideological and comparative value (Feldman & March, 1981). Furthermore, as the organization's reputation for superior performance gains recognition across stakeholder groups, it develops both comparative and isomorphic value, possibly increasing its non-substitutability (Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011; Padgett & Allen, 1997). In a similar vein, organized public rallies that adhere to laws governing the process of peaceful protest will carry both ideological and isomorphic value, potentially limiting the allure of other mobilization efforts (Giugni, 2004; Hirsch, 1990). Each of these symbols is potentially more useful to gain strategic advantage based on the combination of value types it conveys.

At the extreme, symbols convey complex sets of meanings that indicate multiple forms of ideological, comparative, and isomorphic value. For example, in the United States, NASA's accomplishment of landing on the moon in 1969 was an event that conveyed multiple forms of ideological value (e.g., courage, teamwork, and the pursuit of the seemingly impossible), comparative value (e.g., technical capabilities to launch into space, land on the moon, and safely return to earth for the first time in history), and isomorphic value (e.g., based on broad social, cultural, and political support for space exploration) (Logsdon, 1989; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). The multiple forms of value associated with NASA's Apollo 11 mission has enabled executives in the United States to use it as a symbol to muster support, motivate action, and provide evidence of the United States' aerospace competence for decades (Gisler & Sornette, 2009; Launius, 2005).

Although our review indicates that such complex symbols are strategically advantageous based on the multiple meanings they convey, the literature does not point to a specific empirical configuration or theoretical formulation that would lend insights into the most beneficial combinations. Instead, it is possible that different configurations of symbolic value will support the accomplishment of distinct organizational objectives, and the relationships between certain configurations and organizational outcomes might be context dependent. Furthermore, existing

research examining the boundary conditions that might limit the usefulness of such complex symbols is scarce. For instance, it is currently unclear if conditions exist that might diminish the overall value of complex symbols when specific types of value interact in undesirable ways (e.g., ideologically inspiring but non-isomorphic symbolic acts). Therefore, we see many opportunities for future research to yield empirical and theoretical insights that further circumscribe the strategic benefits and potential limits of complex symbols to organizations.

Beyond the characteristics of symbolic value, understanding how organizations capitalize on symbols also requires knowledge of the tactics organizations adopt to manage symbols. As Ashforth (1985: 843) has pointed out, “the astute manipulator of symbols can provide compelling and parsimonious images for anchoring and organizing social constructions.” Following the aforementioned examples, symbolic management appears to entail decisions and actions that symbolize events and experiences as meaningful, modify or transform the elements of meaning that are ascribed to symbols, and leverage symbols as instruments of economic exchange. Although many studies describe organizational approaches to manage symbols in such ways, how these varied approaches come together to form a coherent framework of symbolic management remains less well understood. In the following section, we analyze the literature to develop a framework of common organizational approaches to symbolic management.

SYMBOLIC MANAGEMENT

Symbolic management entails managing symbols perceived to ascribe strategically consequential meanings to the structures, actions, and intentions of the organization. These symbols can be internal (e.g., a brand that characterizes the structures, actions, and intentions of the organization) or external (e.g., a law that enables or inhibits the organization’s structures, actions, and intentions) to the organization. Based on our review, we have identified three possible approaches to symbolic management: creating new symbols, elaborating the meaning of symbols, and gaining association with recognized symbols (see Table 2 for exemplary articles referring to each approach). Each of these tactics attempts to establish, influence, or leverage the ideological, comparative, and/or isomorphic value of symbols, as detailed previously. In the following sections, we

expand on these approaches to symbolic management. However, we note that the three approaches are not independent, and after introducing each approach to symbolic management, we consider their interrelationships in more detail.

Symbolic Creation

Symbolic creation refers to the establishment of new categories intended to classify emergent experiences, objects, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, companies engage in symbolic creation when they add new labels to products (Ravasi & Rindova, 2008). Advocacy groups participate in the creation of symbols through unconventional actions that draw attention to a cause (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Boycott organizers engage in the creation of symbols when they introduce new slogans intended to bring attention to corporate misconduct (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004). Political organizations engage in symbolic creation when they assert new laws (Edelman, 1992). These activities rely on the establishment of new symbols (e.g., new labels, actions, slogans, and laws) to enable the development of potentially valuable meanings.

Glynn and Abzug (2002) explain the underlying mechanisms enabling the organization to benefit from symbolic creation in the context of organizational names. The act of naming the organization “encode[s] central features of meaning and organizational identity . . . thereby individuating and differentiating organizations . . . and categorizing them into membership groups” (Glynn & Abzug, 2002: 267). The success of organizational names depends on the extent to which they appeal to the interests and sentiments of various stakeholders who ultimately endow them with legitimacy (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Thus, the value of new symbols depends on their ability to convey attractive meanings to a potentially broad array of salient stakeholders (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). For example, in the context of ideological symbolic creation, the “green cross” emblem of medical marijuana in the United States was originally designed to portray marijuana as a medical treatment to skeptical stakeholders by combining the green color of the cannabis plant with the shape of the Red Cross logo.

We identify two primary activities that underlie symbolic creation from our review: *reconfiguration* and *design*. The *reconfiguration* of symbols refers to the combining of existing categories with identifiable meanings to form a new category (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Rojas, 2010). For example, the use of

TABLE 2
Exemplary Articles Referring to Symbolic Management

References	Illustrative References to Forms of Symbolic Management in the Literature		
	Creation	Elaboration	Association
Ashforth (1985)	Creating a new language, slogans, ceremonies, stories, or myths centered around a philosophy of management	—	—
Berg (1986)	The creation of innovative symbolic systems to frame the context of human resources in the company	—	—
Berg and Kreiner (1990)	The designing of corporate buildings and office spaces to convey status, good taste, and other desirable attributes	—	—
Glynn and Abzug (2002)	Encoding central features of organizational identity into new or modified organizational names	—	—
Chaffee (1985)	The construction or development of new symbols that enhance strategic interactions with stakeholders	—	—
Cornelissen and Clarke (2010)	Combining symbols to construct meanings that frame a comprehensible picture of new ventures to stakeholders	—	—
Suarez, Grodal, and Gotsopoulos (2015)	Creating symbols that aid the emergence of new industry categories by shaping stakeholders' perceptions.	—	—
Lindenberg and Foss (2011)	Designing emblems, logos, and slogans that support the mission and vision of the organization	—	—
Ashforth and Gibbs (1990)	—	Using accounts, apologies, and other forms of communication to extend, maintain, and defend legitimacy	—
Elsbach (1994)	—	Using verbal accounts to manage perceptions of legitimacy following controversial events	—
Fiss and Zajac (2006)	—	Using specific framing language about strategic change that fits with divergent stakeholder preferences.	—
Hambrick, Werder, and Zajac (2008)	—	The use of symbolic language to enhance compliance with societal norms and values.	—
Merkel-Davies and Brennan (2011)	—	Espousing socially acceptable goals using accounts such as excuses, apologies, and justifications	—
Navis and Glynn (2011)	—	Using claims to elaborate shared versus distinctive aspects of new venture identities	—

TABLE 2
(Continued)

References	Illustrative References to Forms of Symbolic Management in the Literature		
	Creation	Elaboration	Association
Petkova, Rindova, and Gupta (2008)	—	Engaging in activities intended to educate and explain new technology to customers	—
Robert and Lajtha (2002)	—	The use of myth and implicit signs to manage interpretations of crisis situations	—
Zajac and Westphal (1995)	—	Using language to communicate the rationale underlying the firm's CEO compensation decisions to investors	—
Bermiss et al. (2013)	—	—	Organizational positions in respected rankings yielding certifications of quality
Jensen and Roy (2008)	—	—	Gaining symbolic exchange value by associating with partners carrying prestigious social positions
Khaire (2010)	—	—	New ventures that mimic the activities of established firms and affiliate with high-status entities
Markóczy, Sun, Peng, Shi, and Ren (2013)	—	—	Adoption of symbolic practices that conform to societal rules, norms, and expectations
Stevens, Steensma, Harrison, and Cochran (2005)	—	—	The symbolic adoption of policies to address social pressure from different classes of stakeholders
Westphal and Zajac (1994)	—	—	The symbolic adoption of Long-Term Incentive Plans (LTIPs) to signal owner–manager interest alignment
Westphal and Zajac (1998)	—	—	The symbolic adoption of compensation plans that engender significant positive stockholder reactions
Zott and Huy (2007)	—	—	Adopting symbolic actions that convey capability, performance, prestige, and other socially desirable attributes

the term “gender confirmation surgery” as a substitute for “sex change operation” by medical subspecialty organizations represents an attempt to recast the procedure’s intrinsic and contextual qualities through symbolic reconfiguration (Schechter, 2016). In this example, “gender confirmation surgery” exemplifies a symbolic creation through the reconfiguration of existing categories with identifiable meanings (i.e., “gender” and “surgery”) and positive connotations (i.e., “confirmation”) to form a new category.

In addition, studies show newly created symbols often rely on *design* processes that blend attributes and categories with less identifiable meanings (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Elsbach & Bechky, 2007). For example, in the context of comparative symbolic creation, Apple Inc. has been successful at designing attractive features in products such as the iPod, which “symbolically communicates . . . the cutting edge of technology” to stakeholders (Flint, 2006: 359). Although the creation of the iPod involved a new symbolic expression, the precise meanings from

prior symbols used in the design and delivery of the iPod (e.g., the color, texture, size, features, and packaging of the product) and how they independently combined to form the symbolic value of “iPod” is difficult to identify. Thus, compared with the creation of symbols from reconfiguration, designing the iPod as a sleeker alternative to competing products reflects an approach to symbolic creation that integrates a more nuanced assortment of attributes and categories (Rindova & Petkova, 2007).

Symbolic Elaboration

Symbolic elaboration refers to clarifying, justifying, and explaining the meaning of symbols in an effort to amplify, reify, or assert their value (Elsbach, 1994; McDonnell, Wohlgezogen, & Zajac, 2011). Unlike symbolic creation, which concerns organizational approaches to assert new categories, symbolic elaboration pertains to the reconstruction of meanings found in existing categories without altering the categories themselves. For example, professional organizations such as law firms, consultancies, and medical treatment centers engage in symbolic elaboration when they provide explanations of prevailing laws, popular management practices, and medical treatment options, respectively. In addition to these firms, religious and other non-profit organizations engage in symbolic elaboration as a means to spread spiritual doctrine or bring attention to social and environmental issues (King & Haveman, 2008). Organizations also engage in symbolic elaboration when they attempt to justify their actions to shareholders and the media when faced with accusations of corporate misconduct (Elsbach, 1994).

In the impression management literature, Elsbach (1994) explains the underlying processes enabling symbolic elaboration. Using the concept of verbal accounts, Elsbach found that organizations were able to navigate accusations of misconduct through justifications and explanations that elaborated the underlying meaning of their activities following controversial events. In her study, the meaning and value of “food safety, human health, and environmental concerns” were contested between activists and representatives of the California cattle industry (Elsbach, 1994: 60). Because these categories were perceived as important to both parties, they were not subjected to reconfiguration or redesign. Instead, symbolic elaboration occurred as the meaning and value of “food safety,” “human health,” and “environmental concerns” were discussed and debated in

the context of the conduct of organizations in the California cattle industry (e.g., using acknowledgements or denials). Thus, representatives engaged in symbolic elaboration rather than symbolic creation.

We identify two types of symbolic elaboration from our review: contestation and explanation. Organizations engage in symbolic *contestation* when they debate the intrinsic meaning of symbols (e.g., Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, who has engaged in debates about “same-sex marriage” with shareholders and advocacy groups in the United States; Dodd & Supa, 2014), relative meaning of symbols (e.g., Tesla’s contention that bypassing dealers is a “best practice” in the automobile industry; Rubenoff, 2016), and contextual meaning of symbols (e.g., Apple’s contention that cooperating with U.S. authorities to unlock its technology will put customers’ “information privacy” at risk; Foxx & Lee, 2016). Together, these approaches to symbolic elaboration involve the use of rhetoric, verbal accounts, and claims to assign new elements to the categories (or reinforce existing elements in the categories) being debated, thereby shifting or amplifying their boundaries and meanings in desired ways. Thus, they represent attempts to alter or defend the meaning of a given category without creating a completely new symbol (Fiss & Zajac, 2006).

In addition to such contestation, studies show symbolic elaboration is useful “with respect to helping people inside the organization make sense of what their organization is about and in explaining it to external constituents and audiences” (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996: 472). We term this type of elaboration symbolic *explanation*. Such explanation includes the organization’s attempts to convey knowledge about a given category to naive stakeholders (e.g., describing a “desktop computer” using relevant words and examples, Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012: 57). As organizations and their representatives fill gaps in stakeholder knowledge about these categories, they often actively or unwittingly assign new elements to them. For example, Jones and Livne-Tarandach (2008: 1075) have documented the rhetorical tactics used by architectural firms to “communicate who they are and what they can do to gain access to opportunities and resources from clients.” In the course of describing their craft, architectural firms explain professional symbols such as “design” using selected words and examples that resonate with particular audiences. Thus, symbolic explanation is another means of elaboration that can alter the elements of a category, thereby potentially

shifting its boundaries and meanings in desired ways without the creation of a new symbol.

Symbolic Association

Symbolic association refers to the organization's actions to gain affiliation with already valuable symbols. Unlike symbolic creation and elaboration, symbolic association refers to managing associations with existing symbols carrying relatively fixed meanings that are seen as impervious to modification or replacement. For example, the organization might espouse normative objectives virtually all stakeholders find attractive (e.g., sustainable products; Mazar & Zhong, 2010), seek credentials stakeholders find notable (e.g., industry awards and high standing in third party rankings; Landon & Smith, 1997), or demonstrate conformity using a style that stakeholders find acceptable (e.g., corporate leaders shaking hands with Western stakeholders and bowing with Eastern stakeholders; Francis, 1991). Each of these examples represents an attempt to position the organization in the best possible light by managing its association with symbols carrying relatively undisputed meanings to stakeholders.

Staw and Epstein (2000) explain the underlying mechanisms enabling symbolic association. They found that firms were able to enhance their reputations by adopting fashionable management practices (e.g., total quality management and employee empowerment) that resonated with particular groups of stakeholders (also see Bermiss, Zajac, & King, 2013). They argued that this effect occurred because these practices embodied the interests and beliefs of the audiences who ascribed the reputations to the organizations (cf. Love & Kraatz, 2009). By aligning with audience interests, the organization is able to develop positive category associations that enable it to be more influential, important, and acceptable to stakeholders (Westphal & Zajac, 1994).

Our review indicates organizations can develop such positive category associations in a variety of ways. For example, a jeweler might symbolically enhance its status by moving to a retail location associated with other high-status jewelers, such as London's Bond Street (Barron & Rolfe, 2012). Yet, securing desirable symbolic associations often requires organizations to meet certain resource, relational, or performance qualifications (e.g., network relationships and capital needed to lease the retail space). Thus, symbolic association frequently concerns the organization's actions to associate with symbols perceived as important to its stakeholders in

exchange for something (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Deephouse, 2000; Landon & Smith, 1997; Washington & Zajac, 2005). We refer to this type of association as *organizational* association. Specifically, organizational association refers to the receipt of symbolic value (e.g., a prestigious address, industry award, or credential) from an outside organization or institution in exchange for something (e.g., money, time, and effort) provided by the focal organization.

In addition to organizations attempting to associate with symbols stakeholders find valuable, the literature shows organizations can benefit from stakeholder attempts to associate with organizational symbols. For example, the desire for customers to want to associate with an organization advancing a resonant ideological campaign by purchasing its products (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). In a similar vein, students often follow symbolic cues in their university environments that steer them toward wanting to associate with certain organizations offering prestigious careers (Binder, Davis, & Bloom, 2016). Furthermore, religious and not-for-profit organizations often capitalize on the skillful management of symbols that draw a desire for association from their benefactors (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2010; Desai & Kouchaki, 2017). We term the development of important organizational symbols for the purposes of drawing constituent interest *stakeholder* association. That is, stakeholder association refers to the provision of symbolic value by the organization (e.g., a degree granted by a university) to another organization or stakeholder in exchange for something (e.g., money, time, and effort) provided by the other organization or stakeholder.

Beyond the benefits accruing from such stakeholder associations that enable organizations to potentially monetize their symbolic capital, we note that stakeholder disassociation can result when organizational symbols are tainted with negative symbolic value. For example, our review indicates stakeholder association will be reduced when critical organizational attributes are stigmatized such that they carry negative symbolic value (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009). To reduce the potential for disassociation, researchers have considered a variety of organizational approaches (e.g., impression management and identity work; Carberry & King, 2012; Hsu, Kocak, & Kovács, 2018) that rely on symbols and symbolic management processes to destigmatize the organization. For example, Hudson (2008) identified two general stigma-reducing strategies: reducing the salience of the

negative symbolic attributes of the stigmatized organization or elevating the salience of the positive symbolic attributes of the stigmatized organization. Given the importance of symbols to such strategies of stigma reduction, we see research at the intersection of symbolic management and organizational stigma removal as a promising domain for future research.

Synthesizing Symbolic Management

Across these approaches to managing symbols, organizations often participate in the sequential creation, elaboration, and association of symbols for strategic advantage (Fernandez-Alles, Cuevas-Rodríguez, & Valle-Cabrera, 2006; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997). For example, the creation of the symbol “iPod” by Apple Inc. was followed by the elaboration of the product’s features, functioning, and image to promote its attractiveness and enhance customer associations (i.e., purchases). In this example, Apple was successful in sequentially establishing, elevating, and capturing symbolic value through symbolic creation, elaboration, and association, respectively. Following the opposite sequence, organizations appear similarly capable of engaging in consecutive tactics. For instance, organizations often associate with popular management practices and subsequently elaborate them internally to their employees (e.g., total quality management, see Zbaracki, 1998). In the course of implementation, these practices often require the creation of new symbolic expressions that provide tailored meanings to facilitate local adaptation (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010).

In addition to such sequential forms of symbolic management, organizations often simultaneously adopt multiple tactics to layer symbols with desirable meanings both vertically (within a given type of symbolic value) and horizontally (across types of symbolic value). For example, the product commonly known today for its ability to reduce bad breath—Listerine—was originally invented in the 1880s as an ointment to be applied to wounds and areas of the body that might become infected from disease-causing agents. Listerine only became widely known as a salve for bad breath in the 1920s when it was pitched as a solution to halitosis—a then obscure medical term for bad breath. Halitosis gained traction in the minds of consumers through advertisements for Listerine that positioned it as “an embarrassing medical condition that urgently required treatment” (Clark, 2015). By simultaneously elaborating the meaning of halitosis and Listerine (both of which were established categories) and

associating them together, company executives were able to portray Listerine as an attractive option to treat bad breath.

As these examples illustrate, symbolic management involves identifying symbols with conceivable strategic implications for the organization, adopting approaches to manage their symbolic value, bundling various tactics together, and timing those tactics to achieve desirable outcomes (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Lindenberg & Foss, 2011; Zajac & Westphal, 2004; Zott & Huy, 2007). In the course of seeking desirable outcomes, our review indicates understanding how stakeholders interpret and judge the value of the symbols managed by the organization is critical to explain the effectiveness of symbolic management (Brown, 1994; Elsbach, 1994; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). However, the relationships between the symbols organizations manage, stakeholder interpretations and judgments of those symbols, and the attainment of outcomes that underlie competitive advantages are less clear. To elevate our understanding of the influence of certain symbolic management tactics on outcomes that might yield competitive advantage, we consider prevailing outcomes of symbolic management next.

SYMBOLIC MANAGEMENT OUTCOMES

Studies show symbols can be used to cultivate a variety of functional advantages. From our review, these advantages include enhanced performance, resource acquisitions, organizational and social change, and risk mitigation. For instance, associating with symbols that carry comparative and isomorphic value (e.g., popular governance practices) can engender significant positive stockholder reactions (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Symbols with comparative value are also useful to acquire resources and secure repeat business (Beatty & Ritter, 1986; Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Zott & Huy, 2007), whereas symbols with ideological value are useful to reduce the prevalence and likelihood of corruption in society and motivate joint production toward shared goals (Lindenberg & Foss, 2011; Misangyi et al., 2008). Organizations with associations to isomorphic symbols are able to more easily gain stakeholder acceptance (Marquis & Qian, 2014) and elevate stakeholder “confidence and good faith” (Zajac & Westphal, 2004: 441) while warding off threats to their identities and performance capabilities (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996) and discouraging “closer scrutiny” of their actions (Fiss & Zajac, 2006: 1175).

In the course of pursuing these functional advantages, our review indicates symbols “work through” the perspectives and judgments of stakeholders. Specifically, the literature commonly characterized stakeholder perspective making, sensemaking, and social judgments as critical intervening factors that aid the organization in accomplishing its objectives (Bitektine, 2011; Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017; Lange et al., 2011). These intervening factors are frequently referenced as proximal outcomes of symbolic management (see Table 3 for exemplary articles referring to each intervening factor). For example, the symbolic value of an organization’s brand can be a function of certain ideological (e.g., “Earth First!”; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), comparative (e.g., Best “X” company), and isomorphic (e.g., similarly ambiguous company names such as “CSX” and “USX”; Glynn & Abzug, 2002) qualities. An organization can attempt to manage the symbolic value of its brand by creating a new one, elaborating it, or associating it with other symbols in novel ways. However, to the extent that these tactics create functional advantages (e.g., higher performance or access to resources), the organization must first be successful in influencing how stakeholders perceive, understand, and judge the organization. As such, as intervening factors, stakeholders’ perspectives, sensemaking, and social judgments connect an organization’s symbolic management efforts to the eventual functional advantages that it seeks. Based on our review, we consider three specific intervening factors.

Perspective Making

Perspective making denotes activities that strengthen the *unique knowledge* of an organization or community (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). In the literature, perspective making often results from the organization’s symbolic creation efforts. As Johnson (1990: 193) has pointed out, “the creation and manipulation of symbols over time have impact to the extent that they reshape beliefs and expectations.” For example, in institutional entrepreneurship and social movement research, organizations often create ideological slogans to assert a new perspective about right and wrong behavior or just and unjust conduct (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Rojas, 2010). New organizational and product names (e.g., Uber or iPod) can fundamentally shift perspectives about existing product and service quality (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Rindova & Petkova, 2007). Together, these studies show that symbolic creation often results in

perspective making through new ways of defining and categorizing organizational objectives, products, and services. These perspectives, in turn, can facilitate functional advantages such as financial returns and desirable forms of social change.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking involves the ongoing development of “plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005: 409). Unlike perspective making, which specifically considers the creation of new perspectives, sensemaking considers the attribution of meaning to experiences to elevate shared awareness and understanding without necessarily evoking a new perspective (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). In the domain of organizational identity and impression management research (Cornelissen & Elving, 2003; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; McDonnell & King, 2013), studies commonly refer to sensemaking as an outcome of the organization’s symbolic elaboration efforts. For example, symbolic elaboration can enable the organization to “facilitate both cognitive understanding and intended action” (Gioia et al., 1994: 363). It also enables the organization to clarify objectives and muster attention to a cause (Lindenberg & Foss, 2011) as well as explain its rationality for strategic change to stakeholders (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). In the context of change management, “symbolic processes of sensemaking play a critical role in reestablishing understanding after a restructuring or organizational change” (Cornelissen, Osrick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008: 10). This sensemaking, in turn, can facilitate the passage of favorable laws that support organizational goals (Posner, 1998).

Social Judgments

Finally, *social judgments* refer to a stakeholder’s “decision or opinion about the social properties of an organization” (Bitektine, 2011: 152). Although related to perspective making and sensemaking, which refer to developing unique knowledge and shared understanding, social judgments are expressed more specifically as evaluations of the organization’s status, reputation, and/or legitimacy (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Lange & Washburn, 2012). Across research referring to social judgments, scholars commonly examine symbols as catalysts to achieving desirable evaluations in the context of the organization’s symbolic associations (Malter, 2014; Rao, 1994). For example, achieving a high symbolic position in respected rankings can have significant

TABLE 3
Exemplary Articles Referring to Symbolic Management Outcomes

References	Illustrative References to Intervening Factors in the Literature		
	Perspective Making	Sensemaking	Social Judgments
Briscoe and Safford (2008)	The adoption of contentious practices (e.g., domestic partner benefits) symbolizing a landmark industry change	—	—
Isabella (1990)	Symbolic gestures of new leaders (e.g., recognizing employee birthdays) revealing a shift in organizational culture	—	—
Lounsbury (2001)	The creation of new roles (e.g., recycling coordinator) that underlie the espousal of new ideals (recycling advocacy)	—	—
Stigliani and Ravasi (2012)	Leveraging the symbolic properties of artifacts (e.g., drawings and models) to define a new courses of action	—	—
Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey (2008)	Symbols used to forge collective identities that support the creation of new markets (e.g., grass-fed meat and dairy)	—	—
Zietsma and Lawrence (2010)	The use of dramatic language (e.g., “earth rape”) to establish new perspectives about logging practices	—	—
Anand and Watson (2004)	—	Organizational rituals that promote a shared understanding of the social world	—
Balogun and Johnson (2004)	—	Symbols used in organizational restructuring that influence employees’ sensemaking processes	—
Byron and Laurence (2015)	—	Workplace symbols (e.g., degrees) that trigger sensemaking regarding role prescriptions and values	—
Dutton and Dukerich (1991)	—	Significant speeches that structure dominant interpretations about social issues (e.g., homelessness)	—
Fiss and Zajac (2006)	—	Specific forms of language framing and decoupling that shape constituent sensemaking	—
Hiatt, Sine, and Tolbert (2009)	—	The symbolic role of alcohol to mark social occasions and signify social solidarity and friendship	—
Maitlis and Lawrence (2007)	—	The construction of narratives that help leaders shape the sensemaking processes of organizational members	—
Blum, Fields, and Goodman (1994)	—	—	Adopting policies that yield legitimacy (e.g., providing employee benefits that are similar to other companies)
Glynn and Abzug (2002)	—	—	Creating symbols to capture legitimacy (e.g., naming the firm so it resembles other organizations in the field)

TABLE 3
(Continued)

References	Illustrative References to Intervening Factors in the Literature		
	Perspective Making	Sensemaking	Social Judgments
Huy, Corley, and Kraatz (2014)	—	—	Symbolic actions of top managers (e.g., involving subordinates in decision-making) used to earn legitimacy
Prasad (1993)	—	—	Incorporating artifacts that signal high status (e.g., sophisticated technology in organizations).
Rindova et al. (2005)	—	—	The reputation and status gains afforded to organizations affiliated with the holders of prestigious degrees
Sine, Mitsuhashi, and Kirsch (2006)	—	—	Adopting organizational titles (e.g., CFO or vice president) that signal legitimacy and status
Westphal and Khanna (2003)	—	—	Number of board appointments and prestige of appointments signaling elite board member status

implications for organizational reputation (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Furthermore, individuals and organizations with affiliations to compelling ideological symbols (e.g., associations with influential religious or ethical figures and symbols) are able to build confidence in their normative orientations (Desai & Kouchaki, 2017; Misangyi et al., 2008). Such symbolic associations can engender the social judgments of moral and/or sociopolitical legitimacy (Pedriana, 2006; Rao, 1994; Suchman, 1995) leading to functional advantages such as resource acquisitions and risk mitigation.

Synthesizing Symbolic Management Outcomes

To further clarify the relationship between an organization's symbolic management efforts and these proximal outcomes dealing with stakeholder perspectives, sensemaking, and social judgments, consider the example of an organization's brand and reputation. As detailed previously, the organization is the primary agent responsible for categorizing and ascribing meaning to a brand, whereas stakeholders are the primary agents responsible for categorizing and ascribing meaning to reputation as a social judgment (Bitektine, 2011). Because stakeholders consider various symbolic and substantive inputs in the course of developing a perception of organizational reputation (Lange et al., 2011), the brand is a resource that can influence perceptions of reputation but it

cannot constitute it. Although our review shows that such symbolic value in the brand can be used to influence stakeholder evaluations, the symbolic value of the brand alone is insufficient to predict if stakeholders will ultimately regard the company as having a high reputation. Thus, although the brand and the reputation are symbolic resources that can underlie functional advantages, the reputation is distinct from the brand because it is primarily overlaid onto the organization by its stakeholders as a social judgment, rather than developed internally by the organization.

This distinction is noteworthy, as it clarifies the relationships between symbols under management by the organization and the stakeholder perspectives, sensemaking, and social judgments that result as outcomes. Furthermore, it has potentially important implications for understanding how organizations manage stakeholder relationships toward the attainment of functional advantages. Specifically, our review indicates that the organization's symbolic resources (e.g., brands, practices, events, awards, credentials, and décor) are critical to accomplish various strategic outcomes through their influence on stakeholder perspective making, sensemaking, and social judgments. Thus, this distinction sheds light on the role of symbolic management in supporting desirable perspectives, sensemaking, and social judgments toward the accomplishment of functional advantages.

In the previous paragraphs, we identify from our review that there are general relationships between

the symbolic management approach of symbolic creation and the proximal outcome of perspective making; between the approach of symbolic elaboration and the outcome of sensemaking; and between the approach of symbolic association and the outcome of social judgments. Although evidence of these associations exists in the literature, the relationships between specific symbolic management approaches and perspective making, sensemaking, and social judgments are not exclusive, and it is possible that any of the symbolic management approaches could lead to different proximal outcomes. For example, although examination of symbolic elaboration by Fiss and Zajac (2006) highlights the importance of stakeholder sensemaking in strategic change, the facilitation of desirable social judgments is also evident. In addition, although Westphal and Zajac (1994) discuss how certain symbolic associations can engender desirable social judgments, the underlying tenets of sensemaking and perspective making are also present in their study. Furthermore, although the study of Glynn and Abzug (2002) of the creation of organizational names refers to social judgments as important outcomes, the basic properties of perspective making are also discussed.

In the course of pursuing desirable outcomes, the literature provides less theoretical guidance about the conditions prompting organizations to implement particular symbolic management approaches or to pace/sequence them in specific ways. Although researchers have examined the implementation of different tactics under various conditions, a synthesis of the contingencies inducing organizations to modify their symbolic management approaches has yet to be undertaken. Thus, in the following section, we examine the literature to clarify the conditions of organization–stakeholder interaction that help us understand potential spaces for the creation of new symbolic meanings, prompt symbolic elaboration as a means to manage stakeholder relationships, and enable the capture of symbolic value through association. In doing so, we hope to shed light on the conditions that impel organizations to shift their symbolic management tactics to achieve desired outcomes, with implications for understanding the timing of strategic moves that enable organizations to capitalize on symbols.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CAPITALIZING ON SYMBOLS

The articles we reviewed are bound, for the most part, by the organization's management of symbols

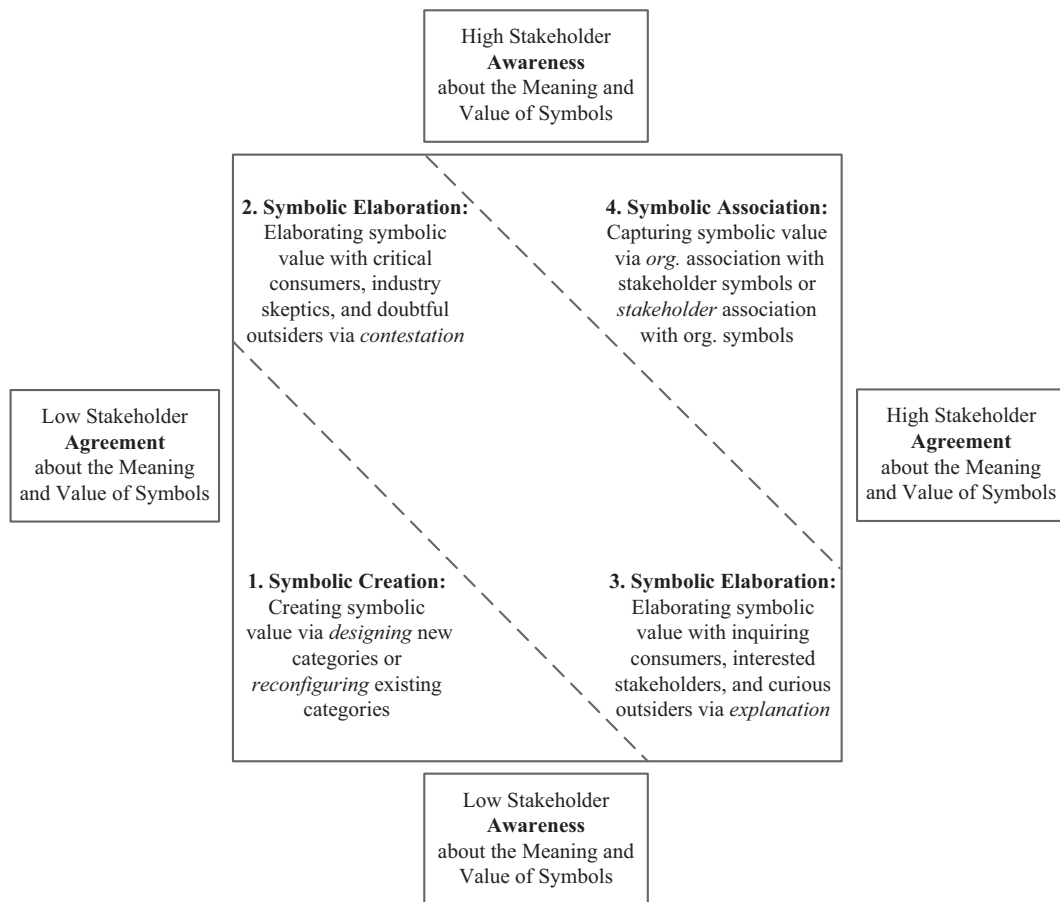
to navigate stakeholder perspective making, sensemaking, and social judgments and the strategic advantages resulting from those efforts (Brown, 1994; Bundy et al., 2013; Elsbach, 1994; Zott & Huy, 2007). Thus, existing and potential stakeholders appear to be the primary targets of symbolic management, and advantages are gained when organizations create and capture symbolic value to navigate stakeholder relationships in desired ways. However, as foreshadowed in our discussions about the subjective properties of symbols and the multiple audiences who use them, stakeholders are embedded in different social structures and cultures, potentially limiting their *awareness* of the meaning and value of certain symbols (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008). In addition, symbols are multifocal and subjective, potentially limiting stakeholder *agreement* about the meaning and value of symbols (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Elsbach, 1994; Misangyi et al., 2008).

The literature provides numerous examples of the circumstances in which organizations are able to capitalize on symbols in such mixed contexts of high/low stakeholder awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols (Elsbach et al., 1998; Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Rindova et al., 2009). Yet, the literature currently lacks integration that distills common characteristics between these examples to inform our understanding of the conditions that prompt organizations to shift their symbolic management tactics. Our review indicates organizations are more likely to achieve desired outcomes when they tailor their approaches to symbolic management according to the levels of stakeholder awareness and agreement they encounter. Thus, we develop a framework of organizational approaches to capitalize on symbols according to separate conditions of stakeholder awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. A summary of this strategic framework depicting the conditions implicating specific tactics is presented in Figure 2.

Low Levels of Stakeholder Awareness and Agreement

Studies of symbolic creation are often located in environments of low levels of stakeholder agreement and awareness about the meaning and value of symbols. In such environments, the creation of new categories can provide meaning to novel organizational products, services, goals, messages, and practices, with implications for perspective making

FIGURE 2
A Strategic Framework of Symbolic Management



and achieving functional advantages (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). For example, creating new categories around innovative products can trigger a variety of cognitive and emotional responses that underlie initial perceptions of product value (Rindova & Petkova, 2007). In addition, the creation of slogans and messages can build collective momentum toward organizational goals (Lindenberg & Foss, 2011). Symbolic creation can aid the emergence of new industries by establishing a scaffold of unique meanings that shape stakeholders' interpretations (e.g., in the early automotive industry, cars were variously characterized as "electric buggies," "automobiles," and "horseless carriages," Suarez, Grodal, & Gostopoulos, 2015). In each of these examples, organizations gain strategic advantage based on their ability to assert new categories that fill voids of awareness about new products, goals, and industries.

Furthermore, the creation of new categories can aid organizations in mending rifts in understanding

due to conflicting interpretations of reality (Philippe & Durand, 2011). In the organization sciences, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) have provided an excellent illustration of this type of symbolic creation as they chronicled the purchase of a law firm by an accounting firm in 1997. The purchase ruptured historically distinct boundaries between lawyers and accountants leading to conflict between proponents and opponents of the new organizational form. In the course of attempting to establish a shared understanding, the category of "multidisciplinary practice" or MDP was born. Once created, agents engaged in jurisdictional struggles over "what can or cannot coexist" in MDPs to elaborate the meaning of the symbol (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005: 51). Thus, symbolic creation is pivotal for organizations involved in the initial phases of categorizing unknown experiences and practices for future diffusion (Fiss & Zajac, 2004).

By contrast, symbolic elaboration in contexts characterized by low levels of awareness and agreement has a lower likelihood of yielding positive outcomes. For example, in the context of symphony orchestras, no amount of elaboration could meld prevailing utilitarian values encoded in symbols such as “the bottom line” emphasized by orchestra executives with normative values encoded in symbols such as “cymbals” held dear by musicians (Glynn, 2000: 287). These symbols represented distinct identity elements to orchestra executives and musicians resulting in conflict, tension, and the eventual strike by musicians. Despite continued attempts by executives and musicians to elaborate these symbols, identity conflicts ensued “even after the strike concluded . . . [as] ideologies of artistic excellence did not fully bridge the gap between the discordant identity elements” (Glynn, 2000: 293). In a similar vein, symbolic associations drawn to one particular symbol or another will likely do little to buttress the distance between organizations and stakeholders under conditions of low levels of awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols (Vergne & Swain, 2017).

Mixed Levels of Stakeholder Awareness and Agreement

Unlike studies of symbolic creation, studies of symbolic elaboration are commonly located in environments of high levels of stakeholder awareness but low levels of stakeholder agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. For example, in 2012, fast food chain Chick-fil-A’s chief operating officer engaged in symbolic contestation by making a series of short comments supporting “the biblical definition of the family unit” and opposing same-sex marriage (Blume, 2012). Although these statements resonated with some groups of stakeholders, they also resulted in boycotts and protests by members of the LGBT community (Lendon, 2012), prompting Chick-fil-A to engage in further elaboration by expressing regret for its statements (O’Connor, 2014). In this case, broad awareness existed about the importance of the symbol of “marriage” with less consensus about its meaning, resulting in attempts by Chick-fil-A to influence stakeholder sensemaking through symbolic contestation. In a similar vein, symbolic contestation often underlies debates between organizations and dissatisfied employees (Scott & Lane, 2000). Thus, when a general awareness exists about the meaning and value of symbols, organizations often navigate issues pertaining to lack

of agreement by engaging in symbolic elaboration with the goal of influencing stakeholder sensemaking and reducing stakeholder antagonism (McDonnell & King, 2013).

In addition to such crises and conflicts, studies of symbolic elaboration often appear in contexts of low levels of stakeholder awareness but high levels of stakeholder agreement about the meaning and value of symbols (Edelman, 1992). Specifically, symbolic explanation is useful in the context of onboarding new hires, conveying messages to naive constituents, and “educating the market” around new products or services (Lee & O’Connor, 2003). In the case of onboarding new hires, “newcomers may become involved, co-opted, and indoctrinated” through various forms of symbolic explanation that influence their sensemaking (Ashforth, 1985: 843). Similarly, in the context of elaborating a trustworthy message, “the understandability of the language used to explain a decision may be viewed symbolically as evidence of the decision maker’s ability and motivation” (Elsbach & Eloffson, 2000: 81). Regarding educating the market, Jones and Livne-Tarandach (2008: 1093) found that architecture firms use symbolic explanation to “anchor the firm in shared words that resonate with multiple audiences and expand the firm’s perceived competencies by pragmatically mixing and matching unique and shared words to persuade clients that the firm can solve its problems.”

Across these examples, the presence of one dimension (agreement or awareness) appears sufficient to enable organizations to capitalize on symbols through symbolic elaboration. However, symbolic creation and association appear less effective at producing advantages. For example, rather than creating a new symbolic representation of marriage, Chick-fil-A found value in bridging the discord with its stakeholders by acknowledging (but not necessarily associating with) an alternative interpretation of marriage through elaboration. In a similar vein, symbolic elaboration is necessary to educate the market about a new product because symbolic creation and association alone will likely be insufficient to clarify the underlying meaning and value of the product being introduced (Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008). Thus, symbolic elaboration appears to influence stakeholder sensemaking and generate functional advantages in contexts of high levels of stakeholder awareness but low levels of stakeholder agreement (or low levels of awareness and high levels of agreement) about the meaning and value of symbols.

High Levels of Stakeholder Awareness and Agreement

Finally, studies of symbolic association are often found in environments of high levels of stakeholder awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. The value of symbols (across the three possible dimensions) is easier to apprehend in such environments, enabling the cultivation of desirable social judgments. As Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, and Lounsbury (2011: 337) have noted, “organizational rules . . . become more clear, better specified, more uniform and integrated than before” in less complicated settings. Because of the recognized value of symbols in environments of high stakeholder awareness and agreement, organizational associations can generate significant competitive advantages. For example, gaining recognition for high performance in competitively important categories can yield prominent awards, perhaps leading to elevated perceptions of organizational reputation and new customers (Anand & Watson, 2004; Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Deephouse, 2000; Landon & Smith, 1997; Washington & Zajac, 2005). In addition, conforming to stakeholder expectations of professionalism and comprehensibility can bolster perceptions of organizational legitimacy and enhance stakeholder relationships (Fiss & Zajac, 2004; Westphal & Zajac, 1994).

Furthermore, the literature indicates symbolic associations can generate competitive advantages in such environments when organizational symbols are attractive targets to stakeholders. For example, ideological stakeholder associations arise when customers perceive venerable or honorable qualities in the organization and, therefore, seek closer association to the organization, perhaps in the form of donations or volunteering (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Lawrence & Phillips, 2002). In addition, the symbolic attributes of organizations (e.g., perceived competence and relative prestige) have been shown to explain job applicant perceptions of company attractiveness (Van Hoya & Saks, 2011). Isomorphic symbolic characteristics of organizational brands can also draw valuable customer associations. As Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986: 136) note, “a brand with a symbolic concept is one designed to associate the individual with a desired group, role, or self-image.” In each of these examples, symbolic associations can enable functional advantages as stakeholder awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of organizational symbols increases.

Attempting to restructure meanings embedded in such contexts through symbolic creation is a potentially perilous path to navigating stakeholder relationships. For example, in developing countries, the dominant method of trying to stimulate large-scale economic growth is to adopt (i.e., associate with) uniform institutional blueprints (e.g., agricultural, industrial, and financial practices) from developed countries (Evans, 2004). Challenging or modifying those blueprints with new symbols and practices that reflect the interests and beliefs of local constituents (as opposed to the interests of European and Western power brokers) has proven to be exceptionally difficult (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Evans, 2004). However, organizations in developing countries that demonstrate successful adherence to the basic tenets of uniform economic principles generally gain more support from institutions in developed countries (Guler, Guillén, & Macpherson, 2002; Rivera, 2004). In a similar vein, the potential benefits from symbolic elaboration are reduced in environments of high stakeholder awareness and agreement, as salient audiences are likely to resist organizational attempts at augmenting or modifying their practices.

Together, this framework has implications for identifying potential arenas of stakeholder interaction that could benefit from the creation of new symbols, prompt symbolic elaboration as a means to navigate stakeholder relationships, and enable value capture through symbolic associations. In addition, we believe this framework informs the conditions that should impel organizations to shift their symbolic management tactics to achieve desired outcomes, with implications for understanding the timing of strategic moves that enable organizations to capitalize on symbols. Specifically, as the level of awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols changes, so too should the organization's symbolic management approaches. We see a variety of applications of this framework for future research to unpack the strategic management of symbols for competitive advantage.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Our review indicates that symbols are pervasive in organizations and their meanings have substantial resource, relational, and performance consequences (Beatty & Ritter, 1986; Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; Brown, 1994; Lange et al., 2011; Westphal & Zajac, 1998; Zott & Huy, 2007). In this article, we

distinguished symbols from substance, provided an integrative definition of symbols, and discussed the boundary conditions of symbolic management. We then synthesized existing studies to advance a process framework that describes the nature of symbolic value, symbolic management tactics, and symbolic management outcomes. Finally, we advanced a strategic framework of organizational approaches to capitalize on symbols according to stakeholders' awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. We believe these frameworks provide a variety of opportunities for rigorous theoretical and empirical advancements. We consider a handful of such opportunities in the following paragraphs, starting with a focus on specific research areas before considering broader applications and ideas.

Opportunities in Specific Research Areas

In the realm of organizational social evaluations and judgments, the literature shows comparative symbolic value often underlies evaluations of status and reputation (Bermiss et al., 2013; Rao, 1994; Rindova et al., 2005; Zott & Huy, 2007). However, research in this tradition is only just beginning to examine the explicit relationship between the organization's stock of ideological and isomorphic symbolic value and its status and reputation (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Hubbard, 2016). Future research might examine the contribution to organizational status and reputation that symbols with high ideological and isomorphic value make (Lange et al., 2011). Such studies would inform important questions related to the configurations of specific types of symbolic value that provide optimal status positions and reputational traits as well as potential limitations on certain forms of symbolic value to contribute to the organization's image and reputation (Fiss, 2011; Hatch, 1993).

Furthermore, organizational identity research appears poised to gain from examining the types of symbolic value that underlie identity claims and attributes (Cornelissen & Elving, 2003). For instance, research might examine the symbolic value of different identity claims (e.g., "we are the best" versus "we are purpose driven") and how they support or suppress certain identity types and stakeholder relationships. In addition, studies might survey how organizations use categories of social construction with symbolic value for various identity enhancing purposes (e.g., the symbolic value of physical surroundings and organizational dress; Elsbach, 2003;

Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). This line of research might examine the ideological, comparative, and isomorphic properties of organizational artifacts (e.g., furniture and dress) that underlie different organizational identity types.

In a similar vein, we see potential for researchers of organizational identification to incorporate ideas from our review (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cornelissen et al., 2007; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Using quantitative approaches, studies might advance our understanding of symbolic creation as a means of developing a new categorical representation of the organization vis-à-vis symbolic elaboration as a means of reifying historical beliefs about the organization (Johnson, 2000; Kramer, 1991; Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2015). Furthermore, studies might examine the role of symbolic association for regulating membership in the organization. For example, scholars might examine the unique symbolic attributes of potential employees sought by organizations in their hiring processes or the symbolic attributes of organizations viewed by potential employees as most desirable.

Research on impression management can gain from this review by propelling our understanding of symbols in impression formation processes (Avery & McKay, 2006; Elsbach et al., 1998; Gardner & Martinko, 1988). Currently, impression management implicitly considers the organization's understanding and use of categories of social construction to deploy effective verbal accounts (e.g., meanings ascribed to acknowledgements or denials and reference to institutional or technical characteristics; Elsbach, 1994). We believe future research can develop this idea further by examining the meanings ascribed to symbols embedded in different kinds of accounts and explanations and their effectiveness when used for impression management purposes.

From the institutional entrepreneurship perspective, studies might examine how actors alter the meaning of symbols that constitute industry activity. Using insights from our review regarding the multiple forms of value symbols convey, researchers might examine the discursive processes by which actors recontextualize symbols so they "become global, in that they represent a more widely shared symbol system" (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004: 640). Such studies might advance our knowledge about the processes and dynamics that enable institutional entrepreneurs and social movement leaders to use symbols with different types of value to shape industry beliefs and paradigms (Benford &

Snow, 2000; Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2015; Hardy & Maguire, 2008; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

Beyond advancing our understanding of symbolic management processes and strategies across these domains and research traditions, we identify five untapped opportunities for future research on symbolic management based on our review, including research into the antecedents of symbolic management, the modes of symbol delivery to stakeholders, the role of symbolic management in the production of cultural products, the role of institutions in shaping organizational symbolic management, and the dark side of symbolic management. We consider each of these avenues for future research in the sections that follow, with specific emphasis on identifying where applications of the frameworks we develop from our review can aid researchers in pursuing these opportunities.

The Antecedents of Symbolic Management

The first area for future research we identify refers to gaining a deeper understanding of the antecedents of organizational symbolic management. Although articles in our review provide guidance about the antecedents of symbolic management, few studies consider the conditions that lead to symbolic management directly. Our review shows that symbolic management differs from substantive management based on the emphasis placed on managing representative versus tangible features of organizational action (Pfeffer, 1981). From this foundation, we see opportunities to examine when symbolic management supersedes substantive management as an effective strategy by examining the conditions leading organizations to devote valuable resources to symbolic management rather than substantive management (Bundy et al., 2013; Durand, Hawn, & Ioannou, 2018).

Furthermore, the strategic framework we provide indicates conditions that impel certain approaches to symbolic management based on stakeholders' levels of awareness and agreement about the meaning and value of symbols. Although these conditions are rooted in our review of the literature, future research might examine additional considerations beyond stakeholder awareness and agreement that drive organizations to adopt specific symbolic management approaches. For example, studies might assess the possible existence of dispositions held by organizational leaders favoring a particular approach to symbolic management across contexts of organization–stakeholder interaction, bridging

the study of symbolic management with research on upper echelons (Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

The Delivery of Symbols

Studies show organizations deploy symbols through explanations and justifications (Elsbach et al., 1998), statements to shareholders (Craig & Brennan, 2012), product design and labeling (Rindova & Petkova, 2007), policies and procedures (Westphal & Zajac, 1994), and various forms of individual and collective action (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). However, the specific mechanisms that enable organizations to deliver symbols to their internal and external audiences have yet to be systematically scrutinized. Although a strategic understanding of symbolic management should include consideration to not only “what” the organization manages but also “how” the organization manages it for competitive advantage, existing research on symbolic management has focused primarily on the content of symbols and their implications for organizations rather than the mode of delivery of symbols to stakeholders.

A fruitful area for future research might broaden the strategic framework we provide to include propositions about the most effective modes of symbol delivery to stakeholders. Consistent with this, some promising work on the delivery of symbols by executives has recently emerged that highlights the importance of language (myths, stories, metaphors, etc.), behavior (role modeling, acts of selflessness, etc.), events (e.g., meeting locations, types of invitees, and dress codes), and physical arrangements (e.g., facilities, office décor, and materials) (Hambrick & Lovelace, 2018). We see additional fertile opportunities for studies to advance our understanding about the delivery of symbols to stakeholders that links research on symbolic management with research on organizational communication, information systems, and social networks (Aral & Walker, 2011; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Eisenberg, 1984; Loewenstein et al., 2012).

Symbolic Management and the Production of Cultural Products

The commercial production of cultural products includes the manufacture, circulation, and consumption of social, material, and esthetic goods and services (e.g., entertainment, art, publishing, architecture, and fashion; Berg & Kreiner, 1990; Dalpiaz, Rindova, & Ravasi, 2016; Hirsch, 1972; Jones, Maoret,

Massa, & Svejenova, 2012; Lawrence & Phillips, 2002). Our review shows cultural products, as symbols, gain ideological, comparative, and isomorphic values when they are ascribed certain meanings. Thus, we see opportunities to examine the symbolic management of cultural products. For example, studies might investigate the role of symbolic elaboration in the diffusion of language that advances certain cultural professions and logics (e.g., architecture or fashion, Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008; Ocasio, Loewenstein, & Nigam, 2015) or the role of symbolic association in the movement of cultural elites from one professional identity to another (e.g., in French cuisine, Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003).

In a similar vein, we see tremendous opportunities to examine cultural production using the framework of symbolic value we develop from our review. This framework provides a nomenclature for understanding the ascribed properties that distinguish the symbolic value of cultural products. Using this framework, studies might examine how organizations shape prevailing trends in cultural production through the development of products that carry commensurate intrinsic, relative, and contextual meanings (Espeland, 1998; Glaser, Fiss, & Kennedy, 2016; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005). For example, studies might examine the production of new fashion lines that adhere to certain isomorphic principles of design (e.g., following conventional garment sizes) but break free from others (e.g., using unconventional materials or radical styling) in pursuit of comparative advantage (Djelic & Ainamo, 1999).

The Role of Institutions in Shaping Organizational Symbolic Management

Institutional theory suggests that symbols are “the building blocks of institutions and cultures” (Hatch & Zilber, 2012: 95) and “much organizational behavior occurs in response to social pressures arising from the symbolic environment” (Suddaby, Seidl, & Lê, 2013: 330). Institutions provide overarching sets of principles or “logics” that guide the ascription of meaning to symbols and endow them with value (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton, 2004). Unlike institutional entrepreneurship, which suggests agents can influence these logics through symbolic actions; institutional theory suggests these logics can influence the symbolic actions of agents (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). However, how institutional forces influence the organization’s symbolic management tactics is only narrowly

understood (e.g., as decoupling, concealment, or rhetorical responses; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991; Tilcsik, 2010; Zbaracki, 1998).

Using the frameworks of symbolic management we propose, studies might examine the contingencies that cement the meaning and value of symbols such that they require organizations to modify their symbolic management strategies. Such studies might advance our understanding of the reasons organizations adjust their strategies in response to symbols that gain or lose symbolic value in the environment. For instance, since the mid-20th century, health concerns related to smoking tobacco have reduced the symbolic value of cigarettes in the United States. As a result, many organizations in the United States have disassociated themselves from smoking by adopting the “popular initiative” of smoke-free workplaces (McNally et al., 2006: 192). This example illustrates the importance of institutions in shaping the value of certain symbols in the symbolic environment, and we encourage future research that examines how organizations modify their approaches in response to these forces.

The Dark Side of Symbolic Management

With few exceptions (MacLean & Behnam, 2010; Walker & Wan, 2012), our review reveals that most existing research has studied symbolic management from a beneficial or otherwise positive perspective (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Lepoutre & Valente, 2012; Misangyi et al., 2008; Zott & Huy, 2007). We agree with this perspective and see many more opportunities for future research to uncover the positive outcomes of symbolic management. However, we also see opportunities for future research to unpack the potentially adverse consequences of symbolic management. For example, symbolic management is frequently studied in the context of decoupling. Although decoupling can yield a variety of positive benefits to the organization (Fiss & Zajac, 2006; Westphal & Zajac, 1998, 2001), it represents a special form of symbolic management driven by a lack of veracity, transparency, and authenticity about the underlying content of the organization’s actions (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

Such forms of symbolic management “may serve to obfuscate CEO abuse of power” (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006: 1052), resulting in positive outcomes for the organization but harm to stakeholders and society. To shed light on this, future research might study uses of symbols for duplicitous purposes aimed at portraying unethical or illegal

activities as venerable or high performing. In addition, researchers might consider examining how powerful actors use symbolic management tactics to “leverage symbolic resources into coercive resources” by inducing fear or prejudice into stakeholders’ sensemaking (Rojas, 2010: 1263). This research might add to existing knowledge about how leaders of powerful regimes use symbols to maintain or expand power imbalances and status positions (Hirsch & Bermiss, 2009). Furthermore, they might inform the possibility that symbolic value can accrue to powerful actors or subgroups within organizations without necessarily benefiting the organization or even harming the organization.

Concluding Comments

Taken together, we hope that this review of symbolic management will aid scholars from separate disciplines and research traditions (e.g., reputation and status, organizational identity, organizational identification, impression management, institutional entrepreneurship, and others) to advance our understanding of the important role of symbols to generate strategic advantages for organizations. In addition, we encourage additional dedicated research on symbolic management across various contexts to advance our knowledge pertaining to the antecedents and consequences of organizational symbolic management. Finally, we hope that our review of symbolic management will support new lines of inquiry in related disciplines (e.g., research on upper echelons, cultural production, and institutional theory) that often refer to symbols and symbolic processes but heretofore have lacked a general framework for their examination.

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