Trapped free: school responses to institutional logics in quasi-markets

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Introduction: This paper examines how brand-sensitive public sector schools respond to marketization and branding pressure, and whether and how responses differ between marginalised and privileged schools.

Methods: Textual statements on the social media profiles of upper secondary schools in Oslo and two surrounding areas were examined by content analysis with thematic coding. Marginalised and privileged schools were identified by admission statistics for public sector upper secondary schools.

Results: The study uncovers that market position influences branding strategies, with privileged schools adopting more differentiating branding than marginalized ones. The study identifies six ideal types of schools which represent a typology of different response strategies related to market-driven branding pressures.

Discussion: Consequently, it is difficult for schools to avoid or defy branding pressure and not engage in branding efforts, which, in turn, adds to marketization, making it even more difficult to break free from the negative spiral.

1 Introduction

Following the widespread adoption of New Public Management principles in the public sector during the 1990s (Møller and Skedsmo, 2013), deregulation has become the standard approach in various domains, including education. In Norway and particularly in its capital, Oslo, policymakers have adopted a neoliberal approach to public sector education, reflecting trends seen in the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and other industrialized nations (Hovdenak and Stray, 2015).

This neoliberal approach aligns with what Gunter (2023) describes as a *claimocracy*, in which efforts are powered by a crisis narrative framed to assign blame through "targeted accusations" (Gunter, 2023, p. 2) towards underperforming teachers and schools, while advancing solutions like increased school autonomy and corporate-style leadership. Norwegian policymakers depicted the lower-than-expected school performance in the first PISA assessments in 2000 as a crisis requiring intervention (Helgøy and Homme, 2016). Their response followed a change leadership strategy, in which the construction of a crisis is followed by imperatives for reform, and a 'what needs to be done' agenda." This agenda placed considerable pressure for schools to "secure and demonstrate success" (Gunter, 2023, pp. 3–4) primarily by measurement of student results. These performance indicators were regarded as proxies for knowledge, and served as the core mechanism for governing education by knowledge production (Gunter, 2023).

Ellis et al. (2024, p. 15) characterize the changes in Norway as part of a new political economy of educational management, rooted in an "enterprise narrative" that invites private sector principles into the education system. Their emphasis on "narrative power rather than the dynamic of privatization per se" captures developments in Norwegian education, where privatization remains relatively limited, but market-based mechanism are employed to govern public sector schools.

Oslo city authorities embraced knowledge production as the basic principle in school governance. Initiated in the 1980s and realized in the 2000s, authorities organized public sector upper secondary education as a planned and supervised quasi-market (Glennerster, 1991; Hall et al., 2015; Rasmussen and Dovemark, 2022). Quasi-markets are markets because they facilitate competition between service providers, but are they are *quasi*-markets because services are financed by central government and produced by public sector service providers or a mixture of public and private sector providers, both for-profit and non-profit (Grand, 1991). Quasi-markets should augment school efficiency, raise transparency, and amplify consumer choice. In Oslo core elements are accountability through measurements, testing, and reporting, plus free choice of schools combined with per capita funding where funding is tied to the student and her results (Haugen, 2020). Popular and less unpopular schools can do little else than join the competitive discourse, and compete for students (Dahle and Wæraas, 2020). To succeed, they have to take measures to boost their attraction and try not to become less attractive in the eyes of prospective students and their parents. Free choice of schools is currently the rule in Oslo and its surrounding municipalities, but the Oslo school field demonstrates a higher level of marketization than areas around the city (Dahle, 2023).

Biproducts of such marketization of public sector schools are the introduction of institutional market logics, and, as a consequence, the necessity of school branding. School principals are under pressure to build and maintain a solid school brand (Dahle and Wæraas, 2020). Free choice of schools and per-capita funding, especially, in theory work as powerful incentives to engage in efforts to brand the schools as attractive, unique and worthy of applying to – in order to attract high-performing students.

However, how public sector schools react and respond to market-fueled branding pressure remains somewhat unclear. By analyzing data from public sector upper secondary schools, educating 16–19 year olds, the present study examines school strategies for how to respond to and cope with branding pressure in a quasi-market institutional setting. Schools on this levels are chosen because they are organized in quasi-markets and are exposed to marketization. The schools are situated in the Norwegian capital of Oslo and two surrounding areas, which together represent the greater Oslo area. They thus represent an interesting setting in which to explore the study's research questions (Dahle and Wæraas, 2020; Haugen, 2021). The study responds to calls for research into "the potential benefits and possible shortcomings of using branding principles in public organizations" (Leijerholt et al., 2019, p. 133). The research is guided by the following questions:

1. *How do public sector upper secondary schools respond to branding pressure?*
2. *In what ways do marginalized schools respond differently to branding pressure compared with privileged schools?*

The present study contributes to existing scholarship in several ways. First, it contributes to branding research in public sector organizations operating in quasi-markets. Second, it highlights market position as a structural driver of branding strategies. Third, it sheds light on how a weak market position restricts effective school branding. Fourth, it provides clues to how market exposure runs parallell with institutional logics rooted in market thinking, and how this facilitates a drive towards branding. Fifth, it puts the spotlight on how marketization inhibits certain responses to market logics. Sixth, the paper utilizes a comparative design by examining the issues in one highly marketized and one less marketized area.

Seventh, the study suggest that institutional logics materialize itself as branding, and that school branding is market logics in actioned form. Eight, the study adds to the literature by unveiling actual respondes to branding pressure and developing a typology of common ways schools cope with market pressure. The methodology is inspired by Paradeise and Thoenig (2013), who developed a typology of universities based on standards of excellence judgments and reputational concern.

The next section of the paper describes branding in general, branding in schools, and branding in public sector schools in relation to institutional logics theory, including organizational responses to institutional logics. After a presentation of the research context and methods, empirical findings are described, followed by a discussion of how the findings contribute to scholarship.

1.1 Branding of schools

Scholars find that organizational identity is somewhat unstable and prone to change (Gioia et al., 2000), necessitating identity building, maintaining and protecting, for example through branding (Kornberger, 2010). Organizational branding is defined as the "systematic effort to develop and present the organization as one unified brand" (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 64), ideally achieved through strategic communication of its core values and identity (Fombrun et al., 2004; Wæraas, 2020). Branding should differentiate an organization from others by creating a symbolic representation that integrates elements such as a name, sign, or symbol, and/or design (Eshuis and Klijn, 2012, pp. 10–11). This process encompasses two key dimensions; an internal dimension, which focuses on branding from within to ensure that employees will embody, promote and *sell* the brand and its values to external stakeholders (Leijerholt, 2021; Miles and Mangold, 2004; Wæraas and Dahle, 2020). The external dimension, which is the focus of this paper, involves communication aimed at establishing emotional connections between the organization and its stakeholders (Leijerholt et al., 2019). Such communication should positively shape and reinforce" the image organizations create in the minds" of stakeholders (Mau, 2021; Miles and Mangold, 2004, p. 67).

Public sector branding is about systematically building lasting associations "with unique and attractive values, meanings, and characteristics" (Dahle and Wæraas, 2020, p. 3), and less about creating awareness through private sector product marketing. Much of the existing branding research have been carried out in private sector organizations. In their review, Leijerholt et al. (2019) identified 92 relevant papers on public sector branding. Research on public sector branding is still in its relative infancy, with contradictory findings and a limited theoretical basis (Leijerholt et al., 2019). Pronounced scholarly attention has been given to branding of higher education institutions and private or independent primary, secondary, and upper secondary schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Polat et al., 2010;

Trivitt and Wolf, 2011; Varadarajan, 2016), while less attention has been given to branding of public sector schools.

Among the relatively few relevant studies, Gewirtz et al. (1995) found that public sector schools in the UK aimed to develop distinct identities in order to attract high-performing students from families in well-off areas. Kotok et al. (2021, p. 373) found in, their study on schools exposed to branding pressure-exposed schools in 3 U.S. areas, that many, but not all, principals felt obliged to market their schools. Dahle and Wæraas (2020) and Dahle (2020) used grades necessary for admission[1] as proxies for privilege in the form of a good market position (Haugen, 2020), and found that marketization and the creation of a quasi-market provides both privileged and marginalized schools with strong incentives for school branding. The main reason is that it is difficult to avoid the branding pressure set up by quasi-markets.

Gustafsson (2010), on the other hand, unveiled that public sector schools generally struggle to build strong brands due to a lack of symbolic capital. Similarly, Rowe (2020, p. 184) argued that schools aiming to succeed in quasi-markets "struggle to define meaning and identity." Cucchiara (2008) found that re-branding of open-enrollment public sector elementary schools in downtown Philadelphia attracted children from well-off families, but made entry more difficult for qualified, but less privileged, children. DiMartino and Jessen (2016) unveiled that partner organizations commonly incorporate their names in school names, logos, symbols, and promotion material in New York City's public sector high schools, which proved attractive for well-off students and parents. Dahle (2021) found unpopular schools to rely on generic characteristics with a supportive and non-elitist flair, while popular schools used unique, elitist, and differentiating characteristics.

1.2 Institutional logics in schools

The links between marketization of public sector high schools, school branding, and responses to branding pressure are understood in light of institutional logics theory (Alford and Friedland, 1985; Friedland and Alford, 1991). Institutional logics are defined as "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Such logics set up non-written rules for action and interaction manifested in belief systems and "supraorganizational patterns of human activity" (Friedland and Alford, 1991, p. 243). Consequently, institutional logics should help organizational members interpret the reality within the organization, as posited by Thornton and Ocasio (1999). These logics guide understanding, behavior, and communication within the organization (DiMaggio, 1979). One resulting phenomena is normative isomorphism, as laid out by Hattke et al. (2016). Furthermore, multiple institutional logics may coexist and be active simultaneously within an organization (Greenwood et al., 2010).

Since institutional logics are seen as lodged in essential societal institutions, these processes take place in institutional sectors like

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1 In Norwegian public sector upper secondary schools grades are the sole criteria for intake.

democracy, the (bureaucratic) state, capitalism, family, science and religion (truth) (Friedland and Alford, 1991), and, as revised by Thornton and Ocasio (1999) and Thornton et al. (2015), in states, markets, corporations, organizations, families, industries, religions, networks, local communities, and professions, including teachers' professional logics, rooted in values for standards of quality and methods of teaching.

Since the field is governed by neoliberal ideas, instrumental principles, and market arrangements (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015), it is plausible that market logics, too, are active, potentially representing the dominant paradigm within education. These logics provide legitimacy to specific practices in schools, as described by Lounsbury (2007). Since the field is governed by a bureaucratic municipal administration operating within legal frameworks set by the state (Helgøy and Homme, 2016), bureaucratic logics, characterized by "process control, democratic participation, and state intervention" (Hattke et al., 2016, p. 238), are arguably present in the educational domain. Furthermore, local politicians influence school governance, indicating that political logics also play a part.

1.3 Branding and responses to institutional logics

School executives' branding initiatives are understood as reactions to these institutional logics, and, in turn, as responses to market exposition. They are analyzed according to identified ways of reacting and, subsequently, responding. Oliver (1991) identified five main types of strategic responses to institutional processes: Acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation.

Acquiescence means that organizations accede to institutional logics, either by fully adhering to them by following taken-for-granted norms, rules or values (habiting), by "mimicking institutional models" (Oliver, 1991, p. 152) and copying the strategies of other organizations (imitation), or by consciously obeying institutional norms, values or requirements (compliance).

Compromise is considered when organizations face contradictory institutional demands or "inconsistencies between institutional expectations and internal organizational objectives" (Oliver, 1991, p. 152). In such cases compromise tactics are sought, either through balancing the expectations or demands of different stakeholders (balancing), staging some resistance, but otherwise accommodating, appeasing or placating expectations, in order to partially conform with the expectations of stakeholders (pacifying), or negotiating with institutional stakeholders (bargaining).

Avoidance, on the other hand, is about averting institutional expectations and demands. This may be done by "disguising nonconformity behind a façade of acquiescence" (Oliver, 1991, p. 154), so that it appears that institutional requirements are met, but, in reality, they are not (concealing). It may be done by attempting to limit external inspections or evaluations, so that internal activities are decoupled or buffered from external contact (buffering). And it may be done more radically by altering goals or practices in order not to have to conform with expectations at all (escaping), in contrast to the total conformity of acquiescence and the partial conformity of compromise.

Defiance is to go a step further and actively resist institutional demands or expectations. This form of active resistance may take on

three forms. One is about outright ignoring expectations (dismissing), either because the risk of doing so is considered to be low or because internal objectives differs radically from external demands. Another is about contesting institutional pressures actively, (challenging), which is a more active form of defiance than dismissing. An even more active way of defying institutional pressures is to aggressively and intensely "assault, belittle, or vehemently denounce institutionalized values" (Oliver, 1991, p. 157) (attacking).

Manipulation is the most active response, since the aim is to influence or control expectations or the sources that express and enforce them. Tactics include importing stakeholders to change forces behind the pressures (co-opting), changing reigning values and belief systems (influencing), and dominating the external constituents that apply pressure on the organization (controlling).

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Sampling and data collection

The present study is based on two sources of data: (1) Admission statistics for public sector upper secondary schools, and (2) textual statements on schools' social media profiles. The latter include statements on schools' web sites and social media profiles. For each school, the front page of its website, the 'About us' section and the under-sections for 'Our profile', 'Strategic plan', 'How we work', and/or 'History'[2] were studied in order to examine the schools' branding efforts. In addition, the front page and the 'About' section of their social media outlets, specifically Facebook and Instagram, were examined. Characteristics that help the schools stand out and differ from other schools (Fombrun et al., 2004; Kapferer, 2008) were given extra attention. All examined statements were translated from Norwegian into English by the author.

The samples in the present study consist of 30 upper secondary schools in Oslo and the nearby areas of Follo and Romerike. Fifteen schools in Oslo, nine schools in Romerike, and six schools in Follo were studied. The sample represent two-thirds of the public sector upper secondary schools in Oslo, 6/7 of the schools in Follo, and 3/4 of the schools in Romerike. Purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013) was applied, so that schools on three different admission levels were sampled. In public sector high schools in Norway, school placements are determined by students' grade scores alone. As follows, admission levels were determined by admission statistics for the *Specialization in General Studies* program, which provides students with access to universities and colleges, for the academic year of 2022/2023. The statistics, provided by the Oslo and Akershus municipal administrations, identified the grades necessary for admission, operationalized as the average of the final grades from secondary school calculated as admission points (The municipality of Oslo, 2023). These grades, as the deciding criteria for admission, represent the second source of data in the study. They are seen as a proxy for the schools' popularity among applicants and, thus, the schools' position in the upper secondary school market. In Oslo, five schools were at the highest admission level (45 to 60 admission points necessary for

admission), and were deemed as popular and privileged. Five schools were at a medium admission level (30 to 44.9 points). Five schools were at the lowest admission level (10 to 29.9 admission points), and were regarded as unpopular and marginalized. In the areas of Follo and Romerike, four schools were at the lowest, marginalized level[3], six were at the medium level, and five were at the highest, privileged level.

2.2 Analysis

Branding statements retrieved from the 30 schools were analyzed using content analysis with thematic coding (Kuckartz, 2014), performed with the software Provalis QDA Miner. With content analysis verbal or textual communication is systematically examined by "breaking down the text into single units of analysis, and oriented to a system of categories" (Mayring, 2004, p. 267). It is, ultimately, a classification of codes and categories. Thirty-six codes were identified during the first data-driven step of coding, when first-order codes were linked to branding statements. Axial coding, which is about grouping the codes into second-order categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), was applied in a second coding step. Codes like 'mastery', 'supportive', and 'common characteristics' (first-order) were coded as 'generic' (second-order), while 'awards received', 'better than others', and 'famous alumni' (first-order) were coded as 'differentiating' (second-order), leading to the 3 second-order categories 'generic', 'middle', and 'differentiating'. An outline of the coding is shown in Table 1.

3 Results

3.1 Responses to branding pressure

The study shows that branding efforts, as institutional logic responses, vary with market position, but not quite in the fashion identified by Dahle (2021). Some popular schools demonstrated strong branding and efforts to distinguish them from other schools, while some unpopular schools demonstrated only generic branding efforts with few differentiating qualities. However, some schools with an unfavorable market position demonstrated strong branding apt for distinguishing them from other schools, and some schools with a favorable market position demonstrated weak or middle-level branding. Moreover, six ideal types of school responses to institutional logics and branding pressure are identified. Together, these findings present answers to research question no. 1. The typologies are shown in Figure 1.

3.2 School typologies

The identified ideal types are presented with excerpts (in single quotation marks) from textual statements found on the schools' websites and social media profiles.

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[2] Not all school web pages had a section for 'History'.

[3] Due to lower admission levels in Romerike, the level for the privileged group of schools in Romerike was set to 43 points and above.

TABLE 1 Codes and categories extracted from the schools' branding efforts.

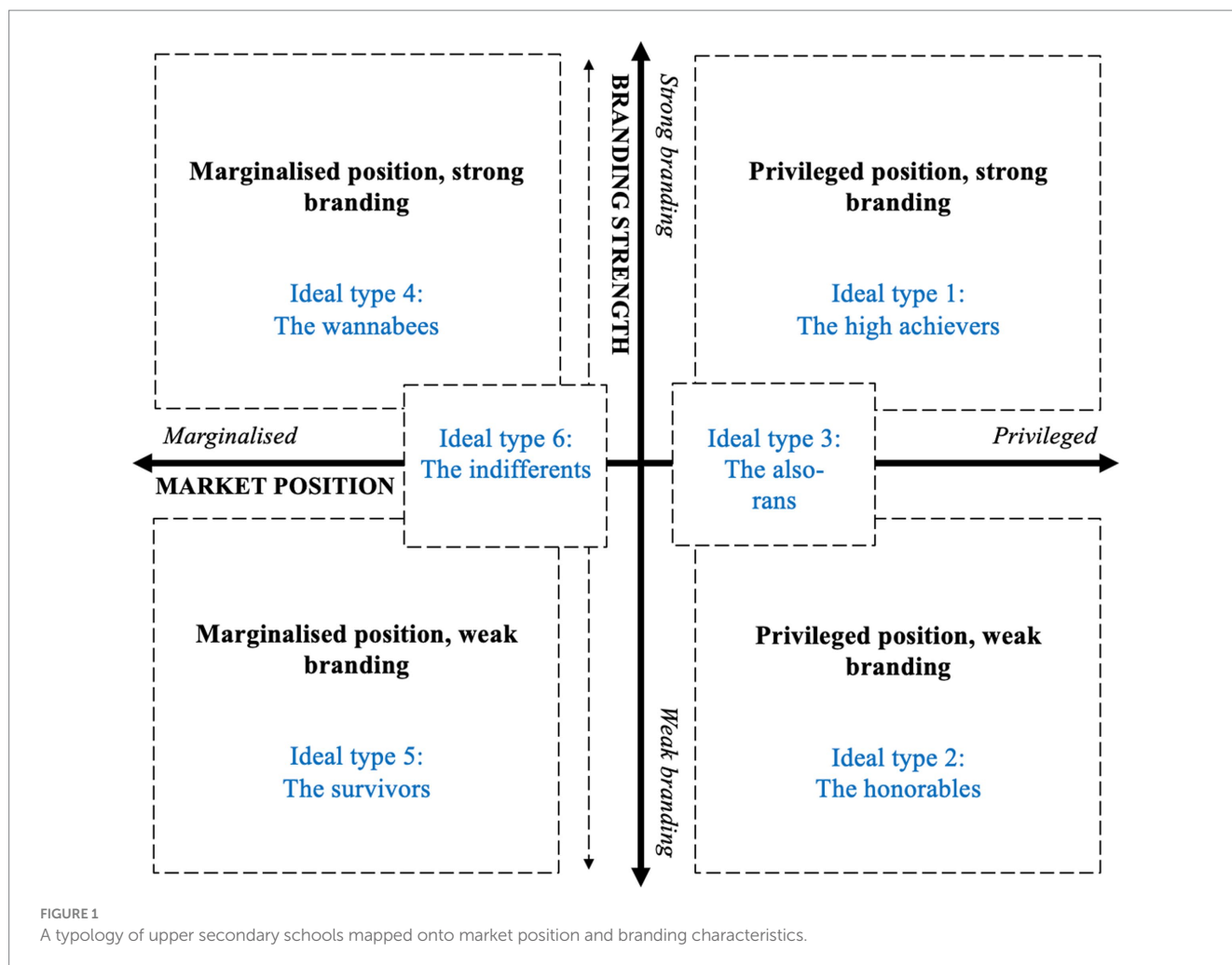| Codes	Categories	Example quotes
Better than others	Differentiating branding	"Proud academic traditions"
Top results		"The mathematician Niels Henrik Abel's school"
Ambitious		"Nobel prize winner Trygve Haavelmo went to school here"
Many applicants		"Among the country's leading schools"
University collaboration		"Good results for many years"
Business cooperation		
STEM focus		
Famous alumni		
Awards received		
History		
Pride		
Progressive		
Specialisations		
Talent programs		
Both generic and differentiating	Middle level branding	"Traditional and forward-looking"
Both supportive and challenging		"Oslo's second oldest secondary school"
Competent staff		"A diverse school with university cooperation"
Modern buildings		"Oslo's best school for entrepreneurship"
Up-to-date equipment		"An inventive school"
Extra-curricular activities		
Unleash potential		
Forward-looking		
Special vibe		
Curiousity and exploration		
Common characteristics	Generic branding	"Inspiring learning environment"
Good enough		"Proud, varied and united"
Graduation focus		"Safety and well-being for all students"
Reduce absence		"Everyone fits in"
Student attachment		"Low threshold, high tolerance"
Extra help to students		
Student voice		
For all		
Mastery		
Tolerance		
Supportive		
Safety		

3.2.1 The high achievers

The schools in this group have both a solid market position and demonstrate branding with strong differentiating qualities. Students need to have very good grades to be admitted into these popular and privileged schools, which mainly are situated in Oslo. The schools seem to nurture their reputation carefully, most of them demonstrate strong branding, with *the academic hatchery* and *the STEM stimulator* as the most pronounced examples.

The STEM stimulator presents itself as a school with ambitions, and targets the smartest and ambitious pupils with a special interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Its logo is reminiscent of logos belonging to certain well-known universities. Online it promises to lift and develop prospective pupils, and claims to be a 'school of the future' engaged in 'cooperation with private companies', taking schooling to 'another level'. Slogans state its care, cooperation, and 'ambitions'. The school is eager to point out its cooperation and collocation with a prestigious medical research institution.

The academic hatchery, a very popular school, presents itself as a progressive school with modern teaching methods, interdisciplinary

FIGURE 1
A typology of upper secondary schools mapped onto market position and branding characteristics.

programs, and its own 'research program'. Its logo signals modernity and ambition, and the school profiles itself as technologically advanced. The school has 'an auditorium ready for television broadcasting with multi-camera production', a science center with 'laboratories for chemistry, biology, and natural sciences, special rooms for geology, physics, and technology', and a 'wave basin with wind tunnel'.

Both schools have succeeded in positively distinguishing them from other schools. They are the market leaders in the Oslo upper secondary school market, and are regarded as success stories. Historical admission statistics reveal that one of them has enjoyed this position for decades, while the other was more recently established and has risen rapidly through the ranks.

3.2.2 The honorables

The schools in this group, predominantly situated in Oslo, are at the highest admission level. They are popular, hold a favorable market position, and can be described as privileged. However, they do not demonstrate branding with particularly differentiating qualities. Historically, they are traditional institutions with a favorable reputation and a lasting position in the eyes of the public, reducing the need for strong branding efforts.

The historic business lab is a good example. The school possesses an established brand built over time, related to its profile as a commerce school. As this profile has been developed over a long period of time, the school uses its history since 1875 in its somewhat cautious branding efforts, underlining its 'special place in the history of Oslo's schools', and 'traditions developed for more than 100 years'. Simultaneously, the school strives to appear modern, hence the slogan 'traditional and modern with a focus on learning', and contemporary offerings like 'innovation meets business', 'internationalization', and a 'Euro class' with a semester at a British school.

Another historical school demonstrates modest branding through emphasis of the school's 'special vibe', and its 'diverse, open and tolerant' student environment, but does not underline other more distinguishing characteristics. Similarly, three other historic schools, one Oslo school which traces its roots back to the 12th century, one which is the second oldest in Oslo, and one suburban school established in the 18th century, demonstrate a rather muted branding with relatively few differentiating features.

3.2.3 The wannabes

The schools in this group, also mainly in Oslo, are at the lowest admission level and, thus, do not have a strong market position; they can either be characterized as marginalized due to a weak market position or find themselves in a middle position somewhere between marginalized and privileged. What they have in common are more or

less eager efforts to improve their market position through distinguishing branding strategies; they actively strive to become more popular.

The best example is the partly marginalized and partly privileged *high-tech vocational school*. This rather new school declares that it is 'Oslo's major initiative with vocational education' providing 'the best The Oslo school can offer within vocational education', and is among 'the best vocational schools' in the country. The positive undertow to this branding angle is ambition, as shown in the slogan 'We educate tomorrow's best vocational workers'. School executives brand it as 'a frontrunner in school development and professional collaboration with the industry'. One distinguishing feature is a strong focus on technology. The logo has an industrial and technological look, and the school offers a science-heavy specialization in General Studies.

The sports talent factory, on the other hand, is currently rather unpopular among prospective students, but the school's branding reveals eager efforts to become more popular and improve its market position, mainly through branding the school as good at nurturing sports talents. This is seen in slogans like 'the talent factory', 'our talent is to nurture talents. What is yours?' and 'the school that lets you realize your talent'. Half of the students specialize in sports and the school cooperates with local skiing, tennis, bandy, running and football clubs. The sports branding strategy is not reflected in the school's logo, but is strikingly present in the school's written communication and in imagery in social media and on the school's website.

3.2.4 The also-rans

Schools in this group, located in all three areas, are in a somewhat privileged position, but their characteristics and branding efforts differ from *the high achievers* and *the honorables*. *The also-rans* can neither boast about the top-level results delivered by *the high achievers,* nor the prestige and history of *the honorables*. They neither demonstrate the strong differentiating branding of the former nor the relatively muted branding of the latter. Instead, their branding only partly distinguishes them from competing schools. Thus, they represent one of two middle-level categories of school branding.

One school is a prime example. From an upper medium-level market position it engages in branding with few real distinguishing qualities, but utilizes generic statements like 'engaged and involved', and 'open, safe and pleasant'. Yet, the branding describes a school 'characterized by ambitions', and boasts of the entrepreneurship class 'CRE8SLO', and exchange programs with schools in Germany, France, and Spain. Another school enjoys a relatively good market position, but its branding lacks strong differentiating qualities. The branding efforts are dominated by generic statements about diversity and unity, plus statements like 'the students are the stars in our universe'.

3.2.5 The indifferents

Schools utilizing middle-level branding make up the second middle category. But unlike their more or less privileged counterparts among *the also-rans*, their market position is more marginalized. These schools, situated in all three areas, are not very successful in the quasi-market, but yet they do not demonstrate strong branding efforts in order to improve their market position. The branding efforts they do demonstrate cannot be characterized as very differentiating. In sum, they are somewhat indifferent to the market pressure.

One Oslo school mentions its university collaboration plus exchange programs with schools in Germany, Poland, and Spain, but this is not given a prominent place on the school's website or its social media profiles. In the non-metropolitan areas of Follo and Romerike, two schools stand out as rather indifferent to branding despite their market position. Even the most popular school in these areas demonstrates modest branding efforts, and does not even mention the school's popularity and high-performing students online or in social media. A STEM program and a university collaboration show traces of differentiating branding, but apart from this the school seems to be rather uninterested in branding.

3.2.6 The survivors

The schools in this group, present in all three areas, are at the lowest admission level and have a weak market position. They are unpopular, marginalized and demonstrate weak branding. Most receive fewer applications than the number of places they offer, and have to accept all applicants who have completed middle school, regardless of their grades. Thus, the survivors accept academically weak students. Their branding lacks characteristics which distinguish them from competitors and help them build strong brands. They resort to supportive wording ('caring', 'safe', 'inclusive') and generic ('inspiring', 'open', 'united'), and express modesty when aiming for students to 'complete and graduate' instead of excelling academically.

One school is a prime example, as it utilizes statements like these: 'Here the threshold is low and the tolerance level high', 'we facilitate learning in a safe and open environment', 'fantastic diversity', and 'do not just think about what you will become, but also who you will become'. The choice of such wording is probably both strategic and a consequence of the fact that the school, like other *survivors*, possesses few positive features fit for branding purposes. Yet, a few schools demonstrate minor branding efforts, for example a Cambridge college collaboration emphasized by one school.

Answering research question no. 2, the study highlights that a favorable market position does not necessarily imply that schools engage in strong branding. Being popular can stimulate branding efforts, as is the case with schools in the *high achievers* category. But it can also have a contrary outcome: Popularity can entail a certain degree of contentness, or even laziness, working as a rationale for seeing branding efforts as unnecessary, which seems to be the case for schools in the *honorables* category. And vice versa; an unfavorable market position may not stimulate strong branding efforts, as we see is the case with schools in the *survivors* category. Alternatively, it may trigger a will to improve the market position through branding efforts, as demonstrated by schools in the *wannabes* category.

3.3 School typologies and responses to institutional logics

When analyzing school strategies as responses to market, bureaucratic, and political logics behind marketization and branding pressure in light of the categorization by Oliver (1991), novel findings come to view.

The high achievers respond by taking on the market pressure and engage in strong branding efforts of their schools so as to improve their already favorable market position. As such, their strategies seem to be acts of "conscious obedience to or incorporation of values, norms, or institutional requirements" (Oliver, 1991, p. 152). It may also be that their branding efforts are examples of habit; that they follow taken-for-granted norms or values rationalizing marketization and branding efforts. Both

habit and compliance entails that their main response is acquiescence. *The wannabes*, too, can be said to respond with acquiescence. These schools seem to consciously choose "to comply with institutional pressures in anticipation of specific self-serving benefits" (Oliver, 1991, p. 153), for example an improved market position. It may even be that they choose mimicry, and imitate the ways that more successful schools go about improving their market position.

As illustrated in Table 2, both *the indifferents* and *the also-rans* demonstrate medium-level branding with only partly differentiating qualities, and arguably choose compromise as their primary response. They do not fully acquiesce, but compromise by balancing different institutional logics and demands by different stakeholders.

TABLE 2 School responses to institutional logics and branding pressure.

The wannabes	The high achievers
• Acquiescence	• Acquiescence
• Differentiating branding	• Differentiating branding

The indifferents	The also-rans
• Compromise	• Compromise
• Generic/differentiating branding	• Differentiating/generic branding

The survivors	The honorables
• Compromise/avoidance	• Compromise/avoidance
• Generic branding	• Generic branding

Exemplified, they balance the logics of professions, parents and family, geographical communities and markets, bureaucrats, and politicians. *The honorables* find themselves in such a favorable market position that they can afford another response, namely avoidance. Their good reputation arguably works as a means of concealing their non-conformity, and possibly as a buffer against heavy scrutiny. To some extent they, too, partly respond with compromise through balancing different logics. The professional logic probably stands relatively strong in these more or less elite institutions, necessitating a need for balance. *The survivors*, on the other hand, find themselves in such an unfavorable market position that concealment and buffering cannot be used–due to a cause of necessity rather than will; they have fewer positive differentiating features to use for branding purposes than privileged schools. These schools instead choose escape, mainly by altering goals towards providing education 'for all' instead of being 'best'–possibly in tandem with compromise through balancing logics.

Yet, *the honorables* and *the survivors* cannot escape completely; they engage in some degree of branding, but mainly of the generic type. This suggests that it is difficult for schools to fully escape from the reigning logics, arguably due to institutional arrangements like free choice of schools, per capita funding, and test-based accountability. Such arrangements are so strong that schools generally find it difficult to respond with defiance or manipulation, highlighting how quasi-market mechanisms make resistance an unrealistic option for schools. Marginalized schools tumble into a negative spiral they find it hard to escape from, as illustrated in Figure 2. When their students achieve mediocre results, the marginalized schools receive less funding than popular schools, which leads to layoffs, and ultimately to lower
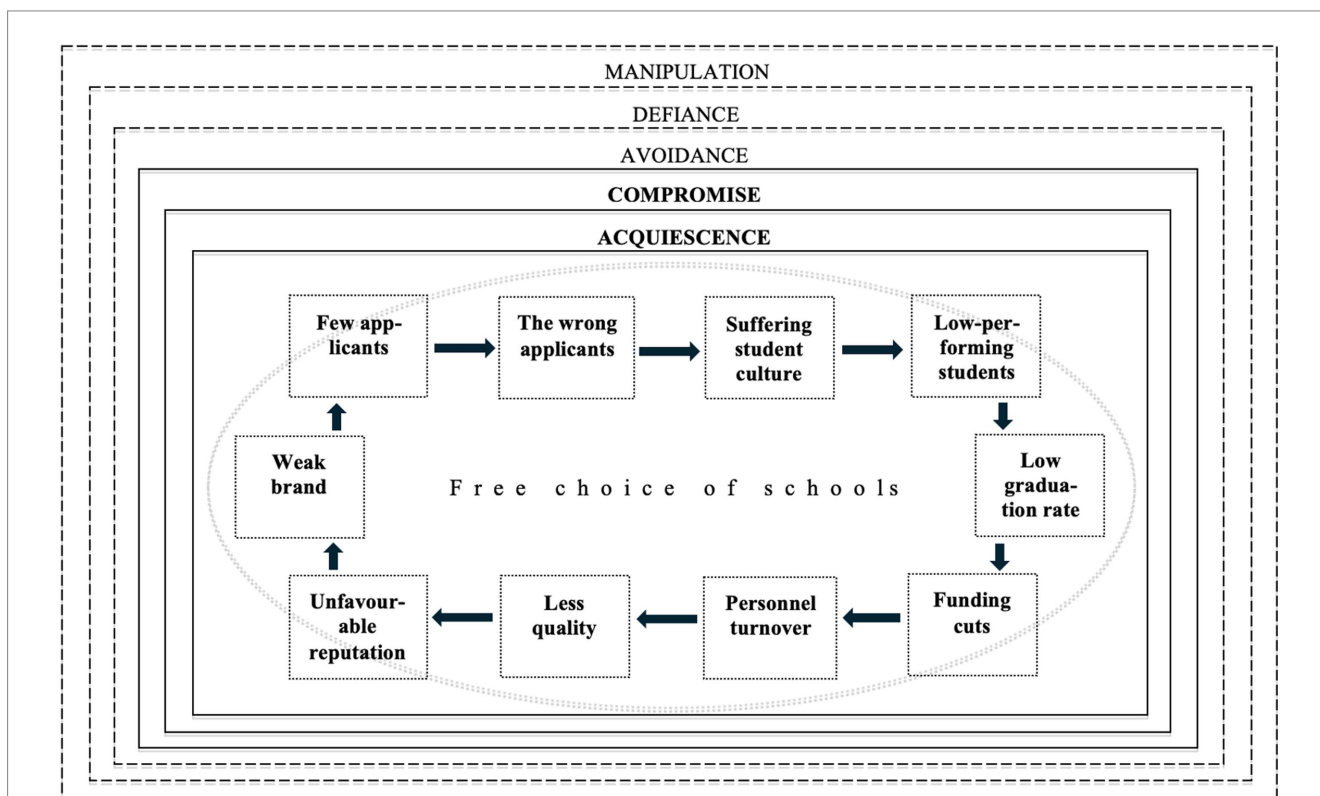

FIGURE 2
The negative spiral of school quasi-markets and responses to institutional logics.

teaching quality, an unfavorable reputation, a suffering brand, fewer high-performing applicants, a less performance-oriented student culture, which in turn leads to mediocre student results. This is reminiscent of Weber's stahlhartes Gehäuse (Weber, 1958), meaning *'shell as hard as steel',* trapping people and organizations in "systems of rationalization, efficiency, and control" (Weber, 1958; Dahle, 2020). This practically rules out Oliver's responses of defiance, manipulation, and, to some extent, avoidance. Instead school executives have no choice but to engage in some form of branding.

The negative spiral seems to be less pronounced in the areas of Follo and Romerike than in Oslo, probably due to moderate marketization, less real free choice of schools, and limited per capita funding as compared to Oslo. In comparison with schools in the capital, schools in these areas are not fully governed by knowledge production, do not fully correspond to a claimocracy (Gunter, 2023), and do not fully reflect the new political economy of educational management (Ellis et al., 2024). In reality, schools in these areas do not have to face a functioning quasi-market where the market logic is the dominating governing force, although they experience some competition for students and demonstrate some branding efforts. As a result, Oliver's responses of defiance and avoidance are not ruled out per se. Schools in these areas do not explicitly defy the pressure, but as branding efforts are much less pronounced and of a less differentiating character, schools arguably show signs of avoidance; they try to avoid the market pressure by demonstrating modest and muted branding efforts. This applies to both privileged and marginalized schools in Follo and Romerike, while privileged schools, particularly the high achievers and the wannabes in Oslo, choose to acquiesce, while marginalized schools like the survivors respond with compromise. The negative spiral powers a divisive motion among schools in Oslo, but not in Follo and Romerike, suggesting why the division is less pronounced in the areas surrounding Oslo than in Oslo itself.

4 Discussion

In summary, the findings suggest that a privileged market position co-varies with differentiating branding, leading to differences between privileged and marginalized schools. However, these differences were smaller in the non-metropolitan areas of Follo and Romerike. Six ideal types of schools were identified.

4.1 Theoretical implications

The findings are in line with institutional logics theory, suggesting that broad belief systems are in existence and shape cognitive and behavioral patterns of human activity in the upper secondary school sector in Oslo. Belief systems are fuelled by and fuel a market logic at the expense of the professional logic of educators. Since market logics are linked to the phenomenon of marketization, the study expands existing theory on both institutional logics and branding by treating organizational branding as a materialization of institutional logics. The findings provide a link between the socially contructed practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules within institutional logics and the shaping of a symbolic, communicative and differentiating construct behind branding. Consequently, branding of schools is seen as the actioned version of market logics.

Moreover, the findings indicate the presence of parallelism: Marketization of public upper secondary schools, more school branding, and a dominant institutional market logic at the expense of a professional logic occur in tandem. Such a parallelism constitutes a powerful shift towards a situation where school marketization, in the case of Oslo, is settling into persistent patterns guided by the market. These forces seem to be less present in the less marketized areas of Follo and Romerike than in Oslo.

Successively, the paper contributes to and expands theory related to responses to institutional logics. Contrary to responses described by Oliver (1991), the findings reveal that institutional arrangements, in this case a link between free choice of schools and funding in the Oslo school market, trap schools in a negative spiral which effectively eliminates responses like defiance and manipulation. It is very difficult for schools affected by it to escape by not engaging in branding activities. As shown in Figure 2, this makes negative responses unavailable for schools in highly marketized organizational fields, rooted in a political economy based on a reform claimocracy and governed by knowledge production. Instead, they respond by branding in an effort to attract incoming students and, thus, funding. As a consequence, the number of possible ways of responding to market pressure is reduced. No negative responses to a dominating market logic imply no resistance to such a logic, which may lead to the professional logic of educators in Oslo schools to wane even more.

4.2 Practical implications

For decision makers, especially in Oslo's municipal school administration and politicians in the Oslo city government, the quasi-market and governing by knowledge production proves to be an effective mechanism of school governing. By linking free choice of schools and funding school executives are locked in a system where resistance and disobedience is costly, with funding cuts as the price for low-performing students. From a governing viewpoint, this seems to be an effective way of getting schools to act according to market rules. However, this is no fix for the pronounced divide between privileged and marginalized schools, which can be ascribed to free choice of schools in a socially and economically segregated city (Ljunggren and Andersen, 2015). Decision and policy makers will possibly have to deal with this situation as long as they allow for free choice of schools. Even if they succeed in getting school management to compete in the market, for example through branding, they will still face a pronounced division between schools.

The division may even increase. The present paper unveils that schools with the most desirable market positions, like the high achievers, utilize the most differentiating branding. Such an outcome may lead to privileged schools being even more popular due to effective branding, while the marginalized schools, such as the survivors, to a certain extent lack distinguishing features fit for effective branding and fall even further behind their more privileged counterparts in terms of student intake, funding, and thus, quality of the education they provide. Since weaker students with lower grades can only gain entry to marginalized schools, weak students may become even weaker. An overall outcome of such a negative spiral may be a spur and growth of A- and B-level players among both schools, students, and teachers. On the other hand, it may give a boost to both

privileged schools and students and lift some of them to elite status, which will be desirable for some policy makers.

Another implication may be elite flight from marginalized schools in the suburban surroundings to the most privileged schools in the capital itself. As the privileged schools in the capital concentrate on boasting about differentiating qualities, they may attract top-performing students from the surrounding areas, with A- and B-level areas, and not only A- and B-level schools, as a result. On the other hand, with a continuing absence of pronounced marketization in Follo and Romerike, they may develop further into areas without the division between A- and B-level schools, which may implicate a more even quality of education and characteristics of the learning environment than in Oslo.

4.3 Limitations and avenues for future research

The present study, like other studies, has limitations. One limitation is that active institutional logics in the schools have not been empirically examined. Doing so could have bolstered the link between the empirical and the theoretical parts of this paper. In itself this represents an avenue for future research.

Relatedly, a second limitation may be that principals and teachers in the respective schools were not interviewed in the study. This could have a provided a thicker description of the examined issues, as these stakeholders would have valuable insights. Yet, the spotlight was deliberately put on actual branding efforts through textual statements. To include school employees as informants represents an avenue for future research.

A third limitation is that the level of branding may not be as high in public upper secondary schools in Norway as in similar schools in the Angloamerican and Asian world. As these schools in Oslo demonstrate a low to middle level of branding (Dahle and Wæraas, 2020), they may not be as representative of public sector secondary schools as desired. On the other hand, Oslo as a zone of school experimentation (Ellis et al., 2024) represents an exciting setting for a study of school marketization and branding in light of institutional logics.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

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