

Nike: A Case Study

Identity Claims in a Complex Global World

Abstract: This case study of Nike explored the relationship of an organization's history and the recollection of critical organizational events in the evolution of its identity claims. Data collection involved interviews, observations, and document review. Six identity claims were found: athlete/sport/performance-driven, competitive, innovative, passionate, relationship-focused, and integrity-based. The claims remained the same over time and featured prominently in the discussion of significant events, which included the signing of Michael Jordan, air technology, and the founding. The case study makes several contributions. It further articulates the relationship between an organization's history, the recollection of that history, and the evolution of its identity claims. It also expands the conceptualization of the history of an organization from a sociological perspective (Schwartz, 2000) on collective memory. Finally, it expands the social actor theory of organizational identity by providing empirical support for its phenomenological component (Whetten, 2006).

Key words: organizational identity, collective memory, commemoration, history, founding stories

In recent months, significant media attention has focused on a “growing outcry” over working conditions at Apple’s Asian factories, prompting “protests and petitions” and the scrutiny of “several labor rights organizations” (Duhigg & Greenhouse, 2012, p. 1). In today’s digital world, corporate actions, such as those surrounding Apple’s complex labor issues, are dissected almost instantaneously around the globe, reinforcing the reality that boundaries between organizations and their external environments are ever more permeable and fuzzy (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Jenkins, 1996; Rindova & Schultz, 1998). As Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen (2000) commented, “Increasingly, organizations compete based on their ability to express who they are and what they stand for” (p. 1). Indeed, the communicative and symbolic expression of identity has become critical for doing business in a highly competitive, knowledge-based world (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Olins, 1998; van Reil, 2000), driven by a transparent market climate with exposure to the sometimes critical voices of stakeholders who pay attention to what used to be the private lives of organizations, sometimes exposing a divergence between corporate image and organizational actions (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Like Apple, Nike, the world’s leading athletic and sports apparel and equipment company, found itself at the crux of global outrage over labor conditions in the 1990s, “blindsided when activists launched an all-out campaign against it because of working conditions in its supply chain” (Zadek, 2004, p. 4). As a result, the company was forced “to take a long, hard look at corporate responsibility” (p. 1). Nike’s labor issues and other significant events over its 40-year history have required profound, fork-in-the road strategic choices. Its growth from “selling running shoes out of the trunk of a van to a global sport and fitness company,” as one employee described it, provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between Nike’s collective memory and its organizational identity (OI) claims.

OI has been defined as the “central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). These attributes or claims preserve the organization’s social space and are “reflected in its unique pattern of binding commitments” (p. 220). The binding commitments are most frequently captured in the significant “fork-in-the-road” events in an organization’s history, as it responds to external forces and internal crises, seeking to remain competitive in an ever-shifting landscape.

The OI literature has studied how this construct forms (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Tobin & Casey, 2007) or evolves in response to critical events (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In addition, process models of OI have been proposed, and factors such as external pressures and historical events (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) have been studied that appear to influence OI processes. Some literature has articulated the importance of an organization’s past, as King, Felin, and Whetten (2010) have noted: “An organization’s point of view (as a social actor) is the path dependent result of an organization’s history” (p. 6), especially as the past surfaces in profound “fork-in-the-road” events (Whetten, 2006). As the OI literature has developed, debate has emerged relative to this construct’s enduring aspects and the role an organization’s history plays in its identity processes. While both sides in that debate have articulated a role for an organization’s history in conceptualizing OI, social constructionists have asserted that identity claims adapt to meet the needs of the external environment, drawing from postmodern theories of memory and history, which have proposed that an organization’s past is reconfigured to meet the needs of the present (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In contrast, the social actor view has purported that an organization’s unique history contributes to the essential foundation of its OI and its stability over time, stressing the critical role of the founders and the nature of each organization’s unique history to support its claim that

OI is both core and enduring, differentiating an organization from others in its industry over time (Whetten, 2006). More recently, identity theorizing has suggested that these two views of OI may be more complementary than previously conceptualized (e.g., Gioia et al., 2010; Elstak, 2008; van Rekom, Corley, & Ravasi, 2008), especially related to their sensegiving and sensemaking processes (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Throughout the history of this complex, multifaceted discourse, however, the relationship of an organization's identity claims to its past has been underconceptualized and understudied. Given this reality, our study was built upon two premises. First, a key factor in OI's evolution is each organization's unique history, which includes the most significant events in that organization's past, a view more compatible with the social actor perspective of OI (Whetten, 2006). Second, there is little theory and empirical research from the well-defined theories of collective memory. Thus, we have drawn upon Schwartz's (2000, 2005) sociological theories of collective memory, proposing to explore and further articulate the role of history and commemoration as they relate to the evolution of OI, since these two components of collective memory play critical and distinct roles in this evolutionary process. History is a stabilizing influence on OI processes, while commemoration—in particular, commemoration or “co-remembering” of significant events in an organization's history—offers opportunities for further elucidation of identity claims to meet the changing needs of internal and external environments (Schwartz, 2000).

The purpose of this case study was to further articulate the relationship of an organization's history and the recollection/commemoration of critical organizational events in the evolution of its OI claims. Nike was chosen as the site because it represents an exemplar organization with a strong identity. It has a clearly articulated history, having evolved from a

small Oregon shoe company to a leading global sport and apparel company, with over 35, 000 employees in 160 countries. Two research questions guided this study: (1) How have Nike’s identity claims evolved over time? (2) What is the relationship between the most significant or “fork-in-the-road” events in Nike’s history and the evolution of these identity claims? Data were gathered and analyzed from individual and focus group interviews, observations, and documents over a 4-year period.

Given the global world in which organizations like Nike operate, academics and practitioners alike place even greater emphasis on understanding the effective expression of an organization’s identity. Identity researchers continue to theorize and study the identity concept, noting that it has “burgeoned as both a topic of interest and a key concept in organization studies and has been linked to a variety of important phenomena” (Clark, et al., 2010). This case study makes several contributions. It further articulates the relationship between an organization’s history, the recollection of that history and the evolution of its identity claims. It also extends the conceptualization of the history of an organization through the lens of a sociological perspective (Schwartz, 2000) on collective memory. Finally, it further expands the social actor theory of OI by providing empirical support for the phenomenological component of OI (Whetten, 2006).

Literature Review

Organizational Identity

The complexities around the construct of OI have been a catalyst for a dynamic, sometimes contentious, body of theory and research for more than 25 years since Albert and Whetten (1985) first introduced it into the literature (Corley et al., 2006; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elstak, 2008; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007; van Rekom et al., 2008; Walsh & Glynn, 2008). This ongoing identity conversation has raised questions about multiple aspects: its content and

structure (Gustafson, 1995); its enduring nature in response to identity threats (Casey, 1997; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997); multiple identities (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2001; Gustafson & Reger, 1999; Pratt & Foreman, 2000); and identity's relationship to other phenomena, like organizational culture and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and collective memory (Casey, 1997; Linde, 2000).

Some of this literature has emphasized the founder's critical role in initially framing OI as well as the influence of founders over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Balser & Carmin, 2009; Byington, 2007; Casey, Byington, & Nissley, 2003; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Walsh & Glynn, 2008; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Other literature has linked identity with history (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2000; Humphreys & Brown, 2002), with the commemoration of significant events (Casey, 1997; Nissley & Casey, 2002), and with heritage, tradition (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), and legacy (Walsh & Glynn, 2008; Wood & Caldas, 2009).

Reflecting on the history and future of OI in an extensive literature review, Corley et al. (2006) summarized major inconsistencies in the assumptions, definitions, related theories, models, and empirical studies around this construct. While they identified convergence around some elements of identity's meaning as a self-referential, inherently contextualized, and comparative construct involving "a shared understanding by a collective" (p. 87), they also described the evolution of two distinct perspectives, with different underlying ontological and epistemological views: the social constructionist and the "essentialist" or social actor.

The social constructionists conceive of a fluidly formed OI, evolving through continuous, emergent conversations among members, dynamically constructed in ongoing internal and external dialogue (Gioia et al., 2000) by "all the organizational stakeholders who join in the dance" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002, p. 1004). This view, further articulated by Hatch and Schultz

(1997, 2000, 2002) and others (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 1991, 2001, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Nag et al., 2007), has raised issues of divergent and emergent meanings over time and questions of multiple identities (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 1994; Gustafson & Reger, 1995; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Gioia et al. (2000) proposed that while organizational members might “use the same labels to describe the elements of a core identity” (p. 75), the labels may be “subject to multiple and variable interpretations” (p. 75), resulting in different identities or variations of the same identity over time. Though suggesting that identity may remain stable for cross-sectional research, they invited those involved in “longitudinal studies and more complex portrayals” of OI to take into account the “dynamism,” “ambiguity,” and “mutability” of OI (p. 76), concluding that “the strategic concern of management is no longer the preservation of a fixed identity but the ability to manage and balance a flexible identity” (p. 79) over time.

Seeking to more fully articulate the social actor perspective, King et al. (2010) situated the organization in “a broader social landscape by examining what is unique about the organization as a social actor” (p. 290); their view was framed around two underlying assumptions: external attribution and intentionality characteristics, driven to action by goals and identity claims. This “essentialist” (Corley et al., 2006), “institutional” (Elstak, 2008), or “social actor” view, articulated by Whetten (2006), emphasizes that the most central and enduring attributes, distinguishing an organization from others in its social category are reflected in a “unique pattern of binding commitments across time and environments” (p. 220). The deepest commitments are often invoked when members are grappling with profound “fork in the road choices” (p. 221). This articulation of identity’s binding commitments over time, most especially at the highest social level, supports the premises of this study of the uniqueness of an organization’s history.

Whetten further delineated three identity components: (1) *ideational*: “members’ shared beliefs in answer to the question, ‘Who are we as an organization?’”; (2) *definitional*: “a specific conceptual domain . . . characterized by the CED [core, distinctive, and enduring] features of an organization”; and (3) *phenomenological*: which “surfaces . . . during significant organizational crises or threats” (p. 220); he noted that research has focused almost exclusively on the *ideational* component.

While acknowledging the definitional and theoretical differences that separate the social actor and social constructionist perspectives within the OI literature, Corley et al. (2006) challenged researchers to work toward greater clarity of definition and theoretical assumptions. In a spirit of reconciliation, they suggested viewing the social actor/essentialist core and the social constructionist/emergent view as “two different parts of an organization’s identity” (p. 95) that may serve and enhance the other depending upon the situation. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) also stressed connecting links between the *social actor-sensegiving* function of providing members with “a consistent and legitimate narrative” and the *social constructionist-sensemaking function* of creating shared meaning as members redefined their collective self-perceptions. Elstak (2008) described the current concept of OI as a “sanctuary” for all the different voices; while she has questioned the *field* itself for its lack of quantitative studies and for its almost “sole focus on the more socially constructed perceived organizational identity” (p. 277), she has argued, like others (e.g., van Rekom et al., 2008), for greater integration, which could “provide us with a better understanding of the effects of both sensemaking and sensegiving processes in organizational identity formation” (p. 280).

Collective Memory

Collective memory theories are drawn from Halbwachs' (1950/1980) work. Halbwachs was a student of Durkheim (Beim, 2007) whose work on collective representations and social facts set the stage for Halbwachs' thinking. Collective memory is defined as 'the representation of the past embodied in *both* historical evidence and commemorative symbolism" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 9). Theories of collective memory focus on how the past is used to understand and frame the present and future. These theories often focus on products of memory, such as the recollections of significant events (Fine, 2007; Casey, 1997), historical figures (Schwartz, 2000), and built spaces such as memorials (Wertsch, 2008). How these products are framed to understand present decisions and issues is also part of this discussion, and the views range from revisionist history perspectives to historical realist perspectives.

Schwartz suggested a compromise between approaches to collective memory, surfacing the role of collective identity in our remembrances and interpretations of the past. History and commemoration represent the core elements of collective memory and are the two primary ways we access the past (Schwartz, 2000). History, "objectively conceived" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 10) and upheld and limited by evidence, is external to a collective and is the process of "establishing and propagating of facts about the past" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 76). This record is portrayed in museums, monographs, or other researched documents that are independent of a group's present interests and concerns. These accounts of events are often produced as part of a commemorative activity (Schwartz, 2005). Once stabilized, central elements in a history remain the same, while peripheral elements may change to meet present needs and understanding (Schwartz, 2000). Commemoration, or remembering together, selects events from history that are most reflective of the identity of the collective and affirms "its members' mutual affinity" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 10).

At the same time, commemoration is grounded in historical evidence. Commemoration leads to new patterns of perception or thinking in a culture while maintaining old ones. Both commemoration and history are the “vehicles of collective memory” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 64).

Methodology

This study employed a single case study design. A case study design is an appropriate method when the phenomenon of interest and the context are interconnected (Yin, 2009). We sought a research site where OI was important to the organization and where there was an indication that organization memory and history were also central. We also considered an organization where the founder or founding group is near retirement, as the loss of a founder is often a critical event in an organization’s history when identity will be prominent.

The study site is Nike, a global “designer, marketer and distributor of authentic athletic footwear, apparel, equipment and accessories for a wide variety of sports and fitness activities” (Nike, 2012). From its founding on a handshake between Bowerman and Knight in 1972, it has grown to a global company with \$20.9 billion in revenues at the beginning of fiscal year 2011 (Nike, n.d.-a). An early tour of the headquarters campus in Beaverton, OR showed that Nike is a well-established organization with a developed sense of identity, articulated by the guest relations coordinator and other employees. It was also clear from the campus tour that Nike allocates considerable resources to exhibiting its history and the history of sports.

Data Collection

For this study, three data collection methods were used: interviews (individual and focus group), observations, and document analysis. Interviews were the primary data collection method. Triangulating and converging data from all three sources (Yin, 2003; Patton, 2002) culminated in a greater understanding of the overarching research questions.

Interviews. Participants were chosen based on purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2001), with a goal of seeking participants with various tenures with the organization and from different departments. Given these broad parameters, an initial group of employees was identified by our gatekeepers, and we later worked through human resources to broaden the pool. We also relied on snowball sampling, asking interviewees to identify other possible informants. In all, 53 Nike employees were interviewed, individually or in focus groups. Seven employees represented the 1970s hire cohort; 8, the 1980s; 12, the 1990s; and 26, the 2000s. Interviewees had a range of functional roles, representing the departments of footwear and apparel, design, supply chain, human resources, communications, information technology, archives, environment issues, consumer services, and customer relations.

Observations. Since OI and commemoration of significant events are very prominent in socialization processes in organizations, we attended leadership development programs (*Next Step*) and new employee orientation programs (*Running Start*). The latter is a week-long program, with the first day dedicated to Nike's history. We also attended VIP tours of the campus. Some of the legendary early employees of Nike were part of these tours, as well as the orientation and leadership development programs. We also took notes as we visited the buildings and offices on the history-laden campus throughout the study, which includes the Coos Bay Gallery, a small museum at the visitor entry point to the campus. Each building is named for an athlete and dedicated to a sport and to Nike's involvement with that sport through time.

Document analysis. Nike has a well-documented history, both internally and externally. Documents were analyzed throughout the case study. In the preliminary mapping period, we were given many public relations documents by the guest relations coordinator. In addition, several of our early contacts and interviews were with employees in the archives. We obtained

copies of multiple marketing materials throughout Nike's history. In addition, we analyzed Nike's timeline and other parts of the Nike website. Some of the most valuable documents were Nike's annual reports for the past 25 years. We analyzed the mission statement as well as the CEO's letter to the stockholders in these annual and corporate responsibility reports.

Study Duration

Data collection and analysis spanned a 4-year period divided into three phases. In Phase 1, we focused on data collection with ongoing analysis, completing 32 interviews, 4 focus groups, observation, and document analysis. In Phase 2, we analyzed the data collected thus far, assisted by a doctoral student, and presented a preliminary report to the archivist and a more complete report to a senior executive team. During the presentations, the Nike staff asked clarifying questions, and the discussions served to validate our initial findings. Following the reports, we collected additional data via observation and document review. In Phase 3, we reviewed the annual reports and additional documents and presented conclusions to the senior executive team.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data following each interview, observation, and document review as well as after completing journaling and contact sheets. This iterative approach to data collection and analysis was suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and provided direction for revising and rethinking, including different emphases on particular interview questions and probes. More intensive analysis was completed toward the end of the data collection when we were making sense of the whole process over the length of the study.

We used Atlas.ti qualitative software to support data collection, coding, and analysis. An initial list of codes was developed from the constructs of the conceptual framework and the

study's research questions. Other codes emerged during the iterative process, again, guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-phase coding and analysis process that moves from descriptive coding to more interpretive, inferential coding, with the ultimate goal of reducing the data to meaningful themes or patterns that reflect the phenomena being studied. Identity codes met the core, distinctive, and enduring criteria. Criteria to determine the most significant events in the data were based on the degree to which the events were labeled by the participants or the documents as turning point or "fork-in-the road" events. Interview data were categorized by hire date cohorts and then analyzed within and across cohorts (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore the relationship between Nike's OI with a focus on Whetten's (2006) social actor perspective and collective memory encompassing history and commemoration, based on Schwartz's work (2005; Schwartz & Kim, 2002). We discuss the findings around the two research questions that framed our study: (1) How have Nike's identity claims evolved over time? (2) What is the relationship between the most significant or "fork-in-the-road" events in Nike's history and the evolution of these identity claims?

Evolution of Nike's Six Identity Characteristics over Time

Participants were asked about the most core, enduring, and distinctive qualities of Nike and what made Nike unique as an organization. The six identity claims—athlete/sport/performance driven, competitive, innovative, passionate, relationship-focused, and integrity-based—are supported by quotes from the interviews, as well as some selections from annual reports, in Table 1. The findings suggest that the meaning of the six identity claims that emerged has not evolved over time but has remained essentially the same over the four decades of the company's growth and development. Members expressed that meaning using different examples

or by telling different stories, depending upon the nature of their lived experiences and memories during their time at Nike, as well as stories they had been told. Yet, they expressed meanings for these identity claims essentially through the same identity lens, evidenced by their responses, even as the complexity, size, and nature of Nike's enterprise changed over time.

The Significant Events in Nike's History and the Evolution of Identity Claims

To identify significant events in Nike's history, we asked participants to identify the organization's two most significant events over the past 25 years, based either on their own experience or what they had heard. We asked about the stories related to the significant events, who told them the stories, and why the events were significant. Finally, we asked how they saw the events affecting the organization's current decisions and actions. As part of triangulation, we also noted events that were highlighted in the orientation programs, tours, and museum as significant in Nike's history. For example, the founding story was an integral part of Running Start, the one-week orientation for new Nike employees, and was a major part of the Coos Bay Gallery. In addition, we noted key events that were highlighted in annual reports and corporate responsibility reports.

Signing Michael Jordan was the most significant event across and within all hire date cohorts, sometimes connected to air technology. The second most significant event was the founding of Nike. The invention of air technology itself was the third most significant event across cohorts, with the exception of the 2000s cohort. No one significant event emerged in third place for this cohort; instead, they noted a mixture of more recent events such as the Run Across America (in 2001) and the global labor issues of the 1990s. These events were further validated in observations and document analysis.

Examples of the identity claims that surfaced in the description of these significant events are noted in Table 2. Overall, the identity claims that surfaced in the most significant events remained the same. The stories of the events might have featured different aspects of the claims. For example, the relationship claim was mostly described in terms of the relationship between athletes and Nike but at other times described the relationship between student and mentor (founding story) or Nike and the community (local or global).

Evolution of the Integrity-Based Claim in Relationship to Significant Events

To trace the evolution of the identity claims in relationship to significant events, we specifically focused on the evolution of the meaning of one identity claim, *integrity-based*. Discussing one identity claim in depth, especially in relation to “fork-in-the-road” events, provided an opportunity to bring greater detail to one claim regarding its language and meaning. This particular claim was chosen because data from the document analysis, especially the annual reports and the corporate responsibility reports, both substantiated and expanded its evidence and meaning.

The integrity-based claim was very evident in the founding story, which emphasized the importance of honest business practices and the critical importance of trust. In the context of this story, participants discussed keeping commitments, trust, honesty (e.g., “your word was your bond”), and being authentic (e.g., “being true in its heart”). These descriptions were linked to the founders and their principles as well as to the values associated with athletes during that era.

The integrity-based claim also emerged in stories of significant events from the 1980s. These claims highlighted the importance of quality products, service, and people and being authentic or trustworthy in your practice. A 1980s cohort member stated: “And that’s authentic

performance product, whatever it is, and that we remain true to. And we don't make anything that's going to fall apart. It's well made and thoughtfully developed."

Many of the significant events from the 1990s and early 2000s focused on the global labor issues Nike encountered in the 1990s and its response during the decade that followed. The integrity-based claim emerged in these stories, and even though the context and examples were different, the meaning and often the words associated with integrity remained the same. For example, in a 2001 corporate responsibility report, the CEO stated, "Our world has become much bigger, our impact felt beyond sports. . . . As a global corporation, we have somewhat broader goals. . . . As a citizen of the world, Nike must Do the Right Thing" (p. 1).

In a 2007 corporate responsibility report, collaboration and sustainability were highlighted, with an example of "minimizing our environmental impact." These stories of collaboration and sustainability discussed the need to apply Nike's core competencies of innovation and design to bring about environmental, labor, and social change. "We want to create innovative and sustainable products; we live to innovate."

In a corporate responsibility report (2004-2006), the integrity-based claim surfaced in terms of the importance of transparency: "a time to take transparency to scale and in doing so, unlock greater collaboration." Transparency is evidence of honesty, and integrity is linked to "greater collaboration," or a focus on relationships. In this same report, another example of the claim surfaced in discussions of "creating an environment of responsible competitiveness." Again, two identity claims are connected: integrity (responsible) and competitiveness. This report also offered examples of the integrity-based claim in discussions of Nike practices. For example, when actions related to market forces were discussed, Nike emphasized that they weren't "talking about meeting the lowest common denominator or achieving compliance," but

instead were “looking to embrace market forces as an enabling mechanism that fosters innovation and creativity.” As in past examples, this example demonstrates the interrelatedness of the claims, in that integrity is linked with innovation.

Finally, evidence of the integrity-based claim frequently surfaced in the founder and CEO’s letters to stakeholders in corporate responsibility reports. For example, Nike’s 2004 letter from the founder and then CEO stated: “Our goal in writing this report has been to be as accurate, complete and honest as we can be about how Nike performs.”

Discussion

Six identity claims emerged through our data analysis. These claims and their meaning appeared to be stable from Nike’s past to present. These findings emerged both from the recollections of significant events from employees in answer to interview questions, as well as through analysis of events documented in the organization’s history. This relationship between identity claims and significant or “fork-in-the-road” (Whetten, 2006, p. 221) events supports the premise that OI (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006) emerges when organizations are in crisis and when one decision versus another at a fork in the road has “the potential to alter the collective understanding of ‘who we are as an organization’” (Whetten, 2006, p. 221). Although the connection between OI and significant events has been proposed in the social actor perspective on identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006), this study provides empirical evidence of the relationship between identity claims and recollections of significant events and the importance of this relationship to the organization.

Whetten (2006) also suggested three components of OI. One is the ideational component, composed of members’ beliefs about “who are we” as an organization; the second is the definitional component, focused on the core, distinct, and enduring criteria for OI; and, the third

is the phenomenological component, which suggests that discussions about OI most often occur “in conjunction with profound organizational experiences” (2006, p. 220). Whetten further asserted that most theory and research has focused on the ideational component with minimal exploration of the phenomenological component. This study provides an in-depth description of the phenomenological component of OI, as well the relationship between the claims and specific types of events or phenomena.

The identity claims were also resident in the three most significant events recollected by Nike employees. In these recollections, up to five of the six claims were noted in stories told of these events, with the claims being critical to the story. In other events noted as significant in the interviews and in the annual reports, identity claims also emerged. Similarly, in these recollections, multiple OI claims emerged and were explained in great depth in connection with the critical turning points in the stories. An interesting future study would be to explore patterns of claims that might surface in specific types of crises or in specific environmental conditions and how organizations resolved these events with specific patterns of claims. It’s also possible a hierarchy of claims might be triggered in certain environmental conditions.

An additional insight into the relationship between significant events and identity claims is that the stories of these events were framed in positive terms. The recollections focused on how Nike solved problems primarily using mechanisms linked to identity claims such as innovation (e.g. “It’s our nature to innovate”). The significant events were often recollections of innovative solutions or solutions from relationships with athletes and sport, instead of recollections of the crises that prompted the solutions.

This finding also supports the premise that OI claims are by definition positive core attributes of an organization. It therefore shouldn’t be surprising that these claims emerged or

were described in positive terms and were connected with positive events. Albert and Whetten (1985) asserted that OI is grounded in the theory of individual identity, which by definition is composed of positive attributes of the individual. Nike employees recollected some of the most positive and inspiring past events, which Nike has commemorated in socialization events such as new employee orientations, leadership development programs, and campus tours, as well as in their marketing endeavors.

Theories of collective memory also support the relationship between identity and significant events. Schwartz (2000, 2005) suggested that even if the significant events recalled may not be the same across generations, the significance, or why they are important and therefore recalled, is due to a common societal or cultural identity. These significant events are often negative events.

Founding Story

The founding story was ranked by interviewees among the top three most significant events both across and within the cohorts. As with the other two most significant events, four or more of the identity claims were embedded in their recollections and why they were important to the organization. As noted by participants, the story is about “athletes and sports and basic principles such as trust” (1970s cohort), and, “The Nike story is about passion, innovation, one man’s vision. It’s about athletes and our relationship to athletes and . . . we’re a company of sports” (1990s cohort).

It’s not surprising that the founding story was one of the most significant events. Whetten noted that these founding events often serve as “institutional reminders of significant organizing choices” and “binding commitments” or “morals embedded in well-told stories of the defining moments of an organization’s history” (2006, p. 221). As noted by the participants, the founding

was “momentous because without it, there is nothing else.” The founding event also set the stage for a pattern of identity claims that served as a foundation for commitments throughout the next decades that surfaced to solve issues that emerged, including the major layoffs in the mid-1980s and the solutions through the birth of air technology and signing Michael Jordan.

These founding identity claims also surfaced in other Nike events that emerged as important to the organization. The identity claims served as a foundation or template for critical choices such as the deployment of the Nike Supply Chain, which represented innovation (“it was truly unique and one of the first”), competition (“it is the best in the world”), relationship (“facilitates serving our customers and community around the world”), and sport and athletes (facilitates athletes and Nike’s performance). Some of these founding identity claims also surfaced in recollections of recent events such as Run Across America: “It’s our innovation, how we’re going to help in a way that’s Nike-ish” (2000s cohort).

Essential Meaning of Nike’s Identity Claims

As noted earlier, the findings indicated that the essential meaning of Nike’s six identity claims has not evolved over time, affirming Whetten’s (2006) social actor view that OI is the “most central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations” (p. 220) and represents a “unique pattern of binding commitments” (p. 221) that “remain constant over time.” This perspective is in contrast to literature that suggests that OI is defined by multiple identity claims that change over time—what Gioia et al. (2000) referred to as adaptive instability. Our study supports the view that identity claims are enduring and the organization and managers employ strategies to sustain the claims over time, retaining a sense of “who they are” as an organization, through recollections of past significant events. Nike’s six identity claims provided a broad yet stable base from which the organization grew, adapted, and

prospered in very complex changing global environments over 40 years. The claims provided a stable yet flexible foundation of meaning for strategic choices at critical junctures.

As further evidence of the stability of meaning of the identity claims, we examined the integrity-based claim or, as it has been called by Nike leadership, “Do the Right Thing.” Like the other claims, this one has not essentially changed in meaning, though it has been the focus of significant external challenges, beginning in the late 1990s when complex global labor issues became prominent and created intense scrutiny and media attention. Nike’s response to this global outrage was first to deny wrongdoing—but as Zadek (2004) explained, “The athletic giant was forced to take a long, hard look at corporate responsibility faster than it might have otherwise” (p. 1). Doing the right thing has become harder in the complex, global world; yet the meaning of the claim itself has remained essentially the same to the interviewees at Nike, as well as CEOs in annual reports and related corporate documents.

Theoretical Conversations Bridging the Theorist-Practitioner Gap

Our study lends credence to Corley and Gioia’s (2011) case for the development of theories that address problems of greater relevance to practice and the wider world of work, “drawing more from the world of practice and the experience of real people” (p. 22). Citing those, like Brown and Duguid (2001), who have taken a more pragmatic approach to theory, Corley and Gioia argued for greater emphasis on knowledge as process, its production considered more like a recursive conversation (citing Huff, 1999) between theorists and reflective practitioners. They suggested that scholars may accomplish this more fully by developing theoretical *prescience*, anticipating the type of managerial knowledge needed to deal with coming societal and organizational concerns (p. 23), using as a prime example issues around *sustainability* and “employee and leadership issues arising from the economic shifts

accompanying green organizing and green firms” (p. 24). In arguing for this prescience approach to theorizing, Corley and Gioia (2011) cited Abraham Lincoln’s statement: “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” Interestingly, the founder and CEO of Nike often expressed a similar idea: “The best way to deal with change is to create it.”

There is another connection as well; as Nike has more fully framed its integrity-based identity claim to meet the complex demands of society, there is a focus on the issue of sustainability, as noted in 2001 corporate responsibility report: “Nike must Do the Right Things—try to be transparent about what we are doing right and about what are doing wrong, embrace diversity, drive sustainability.” It would thus seem likely that a similar interest from both theorists and practitioners could well lead to the kind of “multidimensional conversations” that Huff (1999) envisioned, as cited by Corley and Gioia. Theorists may find ready examples of engagement with problems or places for conversation about the issues and nature of complex global leadership, framed around issues of what it means to provide integrity-based leadership around issues of sustainability, when a company creates strategies to actualize an identity claim such as Nike’s integrity-based or Do the Right Thing claim in a complex global world.

Conclusion

Zadek (2004) argued that Nike’s actions over the past decade have helped to steer it on a path to sustain it as a learning organization. Our findings would suggest that this learning has been a process of articulating its essential identity claims during a fork-in-the-road crisis, adapting policy and practices to meet the challenges of the changing world. Remaining true to its claims, Nike has used its innovative, passionate, and competitive identity claims to propel itself into a stronger integrity-based corporate leadership role toward greater corporate responsibility through sustainability, as succinctly explained in Nike’s corporate governance statement:

Nike was founded on a handshake. Implicit in that act was the determination that would build our business based on trust, teamwork, honesty and mutual respect. As we have grown from a two-man partnership . . . to a global business, our task has been to maintain this same ethic across our operations. We have put in place corporate governance policies and practices to help us achieve this. (Nike, n.d.-b).

Organizations as social actors in society need to play a critical role in the sustainability of our increasingly globally connected universe. This role offers great promise as well as great responsibility, in considering the organization in a “broader social landscape” (King, Felin & Whetten, 2010). The robust theory and research on organizational identity developed over the past 25 years has furthered our understanding of organizational actions in the past and present, as this case study has empirically demonstrated, by reinforcing the importance of each organization’s unique history and recollections of this history in the evolution and enduring nature of this organizational identity. We have also noted the integrative promise in the multiple yet complementary perspectives of OI, which are beginning to shape the future of identity research, as well as challenges presented by organizational studies theorists (e.g. Corley & Gioia, 2011) who have suggested a reconsideration of theorizing, placing greater emphasis on knowledge as process and recursive conversation between theorists and reflective practitioners.

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Table 1. Identity Claims Described by the Participants from Four Different Hiring Cohorts

Claim	Hiring cohort	Participant quotes
Athlete/ sport/ performance driven	1970s	<p>“It’s about athletes.”</p> <p>“The core of that thinking is going to come from the sports base.”</p> <p>“I mean all these guys just loved sports.”</p>
	1980s	<p>“We still come to work here saying it’s absolutely about athletes, about giving people a good experience through sport or activity or products and attitude.”</p>
	1990s	<p>“So that sense of what’s really at the ‘core’: We are here to support athletes . . . and it’s evolved; now today our mission statement is to bring integration and inspiration to every athlete in the world.”</p> <p>“We are at our core, and our history and our heritage, a sports company that is here to provide footwear apparel and now equipment to athletes and when we started originally it was truly competitive athletes.”</p>
	2000s	<p>“That’s one of the maxims, which is ‘remember the man,’ because the whole inspiration with BB—just his passion for the athlete because the whole company is really based on producing products for the athlete to make things easier . . . for the athlete.”</p> <p>“It’s a sports company for athletes, and we do anything to make you perform better.”</p> <p>“When they started.... the core group of players all had the same thing, which was the drive, and they were also . . . athletes as well.”</p> <p>“Adding value to the daily athletes, to the competitive athlete, was the first core. . . . That’s an important evolution in the company: the clear definition of who is an athlete.”</p>
Competitive	1970s	<p>“PK was fiercely competitive, desire to win, no such thing as second place almost desire and that firm commitment to the athlete that makes us unique, competitive heart and spirit.”</p>
	1980s	<p>“The number 1 sports and fitness company in the world.”</p> <p>“...Aggressive competitiveness striving for success, being number 1.”</p>
	1990s	<p>“Energy and that competitiveness.”</p> <p>“Willingness to do what it took to get it done.”</p> <p>“A level of competitiveness that seems to make a difference.”</p> <p>“We’re the number 1 sports and fitness company in the world.”</p>
	2000s	<p>“You want to be there in the front.”</p> <p>“It’s the number 1 sports company.”</p> <p>“The really nice thing about competition with Nike is it’s a very sports-oriented competition, so there’s rules and boundaries, and we’re always pushing that envelope, but we’re not crossing it in an illegal or unethical way: We always want to win but we want to play within the rules.”</p> <p>“The status quo is not okay, and so the drive for success and understanding our consumers and that ambition to be number 1.”</p>
Innovative	1970s	<p>“...making products to help runners run better.”</p> <p>“Build products to serve athletes.”</p> <p>“If we don’t keep the competition and the sports minded and the innovation minded, then we won’t be who we are going forward. We may stay a company but we won’t be Nike as it is.”</p>
	1980s	<p>“He [BB] was all about innovation—just doing things no one had ever thought of before. And basically had a reason for it: he was trying to help his athletes perform better.”</p>

Claim	Hiring cohort	Participant quotes
		“Our culture here is about innovation. That can be in product but can also be in business or in communication or advertising.”
	1990s	You have to know BB to know Nike. A lot of people don’t know what role BB plays in the history of Nike and what our grassroots are—so that and just Nike’s love for sports and his intense reputation for innovation.” “The thing that makes us different is also emphasis on innovation.” “My experience is Nike puts a lot of pride first into design and technology and innovation, more so than the other companies.” “I think innovation, and that word has been since day one going forward and because they were so innovative back then.” “The Nike story is about passion, innovation, one man’s vision.”
	2000s	“It’s our nature to innovate.” “And that’s what they’re doing: they’re innovating and they’re trying, and they’re coming up with things. Now does it make it to the front line to be made? Sometimes it doesn’t, but that’s part of it. You’re constantly going out there and producing something new.” “It’s about innovation; they take a small thing and they just make it bigger and bigger.” “I think it was about innovation, I really do, and today we’re still in that.”
Passionate	1970s	“Nike is an emotionally charged sports environment.”
	1980s	“Passion, optimism and can-do spirit.” “Passionate about sports.” “Years ago PK is emotional.”
	1990s	“Our passion and love is for athletes.” “Emotional ties are in place.”
	2000s	“The whole inspiration with BB—it was just his passion for the athlete.” “PK, it was his passion for the company to get big.”
	Annual reports	2000, CEO: “First and foremost we are a company dedicated to innovation and the passion to create great product.” 2005: “Nike evolution comes from bright, passionate people.” 2006: “See pride and humility in the eyes of our employees as the human potential we serve plays out on the world stage. . . . See and share tremendous enthusiasm for the product design and development.”
Relationship focused	1970s	“One of the biggest things that really set us apart from so many of our competitors was that we knew that we had to create relationships.” “There’s a very strong camaraderie. Yeah, I mean, it’s a team.” “I think all of that comes back to understanding that consumer. . . . And I think that is the essence of who we are. We totally get it.”
	1980s	“Nike was a company that came along and said, ‘We understand you.’ In fact, we worked really hard to design products that would help you. And everything about the company just spoke toward that.”
	1990s	“But I think that really supported creating those emotional ties, both aspirational and inspirational. It’s about athletes and our relationship to athletes and . . . foremost we’re a company of sports.”
	2000s	“You feel like you are a part of a family and you are given tools to help yourself grow and any suggestions and ideas and creativity that you have is encouraged.” “These are the things that are important to us, you know, our athletes are important and so are our employees. And in the case of ‘Run Across America,’

Claim	Hiring cohort	Participant quotes
		<p>America is important and our employees care.”</p> <p>“Another thing is how we do community service.”</p> <p>“Nike can be successful at the matrix. Nike is all about relationships. It’s all about networking; it’s about knowing who to go to for what.”</p>
Integrity-based	1970s	<p>“PK as an athlete and those principles I just talked about because that was our symbol, I think, our corporate symbol of what we were going to be like as a company.”</p> <p>“The honesty of them. They rang so true.”</p> <p>“I think our core value is always to do the right thing.”</p> <p>“I know who’s running the top of this place, and there’s no way we’d do anything like that. PK doesn’t operate that way.”</p> <p>“To be number 1, you must be responsible for everything we do, everything!”</p>
	1980s	<p>“I think it’s still the grassroots, still integrity. It’s always been about integrity. It’s always been about being there for the athlete even if they’re injured. It’s been about doing the right thing.”</p> <p>“That’s authentic performance product, whatever it is, and that we remain true to. And we don’t make anything that’s going to fall apart. It’s well made and thoughtfully developed.”</p> <p>“I think the integrity and just still that grassroots essence.”</p>
	1990s	<p>“What I realize over the years too is this whole idea, ‘Do the right thing.’ I’m surrounded by people that take sustainability seriously and human rights seriously.”</p> <p>“You have to do the right thing; you have to do business properly. And I remember another story, I guess it is when someone was talking about someone had engaged in some behavior that was not appropriate, and PK’s comment was: We don’t do business that way. So when we do business we will do it the right way.”</p> <p>“I think the personality of Nike is one that likes to have fun but at the same time if you’re gonna do it, do it right.”</p>
	2000s	<p>“Nike has a social conscience, a big one, . . . and they’re very humble about it. There are so many programs that—and so many ways that Nike donates to communities both here and overseas that people don’t even know about.”</p> <p>“We are globally responsible. . . . I do defend it a lot and people just don’t know. . . . Do the research and then come back at me!”</p> <p>“There’s a lot of integrity. There is—I mean for my own group, there’s a huge amount of it.”</p> <p>“I think what’s most important to the company, though, is integrity with itself and with other people.”</p>
	Annual report	2001, PK: “As a global company, we have somewhat broader goals. As a citizen of the world, Nike must Do the Right Things—try to be transparent about what we are doing right and about what are doing wrong, embrace diversity, drive sustainability.”

Table 2. Significant Events Described by the Participants from Four Different Hiring Cohorts

Significant event	Hiring cohort	Participant quotes (with identity claims in italics)	
Signing Michael Jordan	1970s	<p>“New way to talk about <i>sports</i>.”</p> <p>“Could build an incredible array of activity around an <i>athlete</i>.”</p> <p>“It set the market on its ear.”</p>	
	1980s	<p>“Changed the whole business.”</p>	
	1990s	<p>“He was a great <i>athlete</i>, the product was right, the marketing was great. . . . It was really the first time a company and their athlete were able to be identified as one.”</p> <p>“We now had a <i>new way</i> to talk about <i>sports</i>.”</p>	
	2000s	<p>“It was a great <i>marriage</i>.”</p>	
Air technology	1970s	<p>“We <i>learned</i> some things, . . . always knew <i>product</i> was king, but once again total reinforcement.”</p>	
	1980s	<p>“Big, bold technology can solve problems <i>in ways completely different</i> is the Air Max example.”</p>	
	1990s	<p>“Air technology fell right into the whole idea of what we did, . . . <i>innovating</i> for the purpose of elevating the performance of an <i>athlete</i>.”</p>	
Founding story	1970s	<p>“BB was 100% committed to the team. He started making athletic shoes for his <i>athletes</i> because he wanted to <i>make a better-fitting lightweight shoe</i> so they could <i>compete</i> faster.”</p> <p>“The company was founded on a handshake. It was that <i>trust</i> and then it carried through.”</p> <p>“It’s about <i>athletes and sports</i> and basic <i>principles such as trust</i>.”</p> <p>“<i>Your word was your bond and you did what you said you would do</i>.”</p> <p>“<i>Best products for best performance</i>.”</p> <p>“Well, I think the <i>honesty</i> of them . . . they rang so true.”</p>	
		1980s	<p>“Unique <i>collaboration between student and mentor</i>.”</p> <p>“It’s about being a start up; the <i>innovation</i> is legendary . . . <i>exciting, believed in something</i>, gave everything to it, vision.”</p>
		1990s	<p>“<i>Continually find a more efficient way</i> to get his <i>athletes</i> moving faster. And so with the waffle iron . . . he kept <i>coming up with different ways</i> to be more efficient.”</p> <p>“Can go back to BB and the <i>waffle iron and . . . sewing up shoes</i>.”</p> <p>“It’s about <i>innovation, performance improvement, collaboration, and athletes</i>.”</p> <p>“It’s about <i>passion, sacrifice, doing what you love . . . connected</i>.”</p> <p>“<i>Entrepreneurial . . . created that emotional tie</i>.”</p> <p>“The Nike story is about <i>passion, innovation</i>, one man’s vision. It’s about <i>athletes</i> and our relationship to athletes and . . . we’re a company of <i>sports</i>.”</p> <p>“It’s about the role of <i>teachers and mentors</i>.”</p> <p>“We make products for <i>athletes</i> and our passion and love is for athletes.”</p>
		2000s	<p>“Their <i>passion for sports</i>.”</p> <p>“The creativity and the <i>innovation</i>. . . . They loved what they’re doing.”</p> <p>“The story is about creativity, . . . <i>innovation . . . and working hard</i>.”</p> <p>“It’s been there for a thousand years; . . . it’s just passed along. I’m sure the story might change a little bit but <i>it’s true in its heart</i> and it’s going to be the same in its heart.”</p>