Identity and image

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20 Identity and Image: The Soul and Face of Organizations

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> *Every man builds his world in his own image. He has the power to choose, but no power to escape the necessity of choice* (Ayn Rand).

Organizational identity and image are the anima and persona of organizations, the basis of their link with internal and external stakeholders (members, clients, providers, competition etc.). The interplay between the various images of an organization, between organizational identity and image, and between organizational identity, image and member identification are some of the most investigated forms of organizational dynamics.

The complex environment of today's organizations, as well as the increase in the number and variety of their stakeholders makes improbable any longer the uniqueness of an organization's image. Organizations present themselves differently to different stakeholders. Furthermore, stakeholders perceive organizations differently from how they have presented themselves. Under these circumstances, the balance between the volatility of these multiple images and the organization's need of consistence (in its quest for identity) becomes difficult to manage. This very thing has made it an extremely appealing topic for researchers from various fields, from corporate communication, management, marketing, organization theories, consultancy, organization behaviour, social psychology etc. (Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007). This broad interest in the topics of organizational identity and image has lead on the one hand to thorough theoretical and methodological advancements, and on the other, to a multitude of sometimes overlapping concepts and theories.

At this stage of theory development, a number of researchers (Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten, 2006; Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 2000) have attempted to bring some structure, if not unity, into these theories, by proposing broader frames of study that could encompass all these concepts. In the current chapter, we draw on Brown et al.'s (2006) framework to start our discussion of the dynamics between organizational image, organizational identity and stakeholders' identification with organizations.

Brown et al.'s framework considers the organization and the stakeholders as the two main actors in the identity-image interplay. Hence, by defining who are the target and the recipient of each of the main questions that underlie various definitions of identity and image, they separate between identity and three types of images (see Figure 1).

Starting from this simple scheme, they coin the terms organizational identity, intended image, construed image and reputation to distinguish between the various names identity and image received in the literature. The argumentative basis for this distinction lies in the question that each of these concepts tries to address (see Table 1).

Based on this framework, we employ in this chapter the term organizational identification to refer to the internal system of shared meanings of an organization with respect to how it defines itself, and organizational image to refer to the distinctive public image that an organizational entity communicates, how external stakeholders perceive it, and how internal stakeholders think the others perceived it.

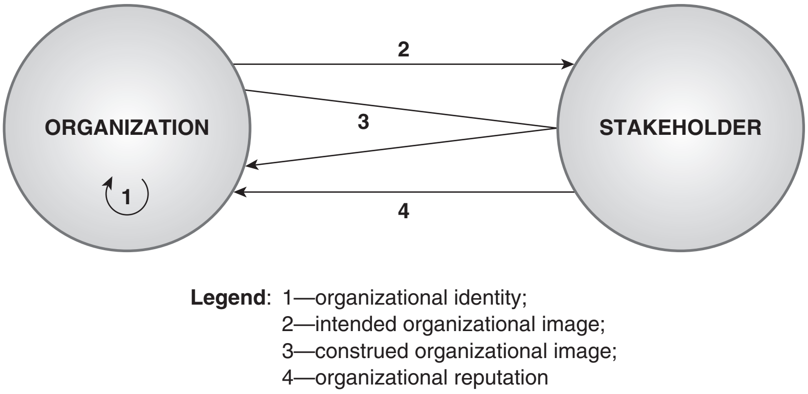

Figure 20.1 A view of organizational identity and image, according to Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten (2006)

Table 20.1 A summarization of the definitions of organizational identity and image, as proposed by Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten (2006)

Concept	*Question*	*Brief description*	*Names in the literature*
Organizational identity	Who are we as an organization?	Mental associations about the organization held by organizational members	Collective identity, corporate personality, organizational identity, perceived organizational identity…
Organizational image (intended)	What does the organization want others to think about the organization?	Mental associations about the organization that organization leaders want important audiences to hold	Corporate identity, desired identity, desired future image, image, projected image…
Organizational image (construed)	What does the organization believe others think about the organization?	Mental associations that organization members believe others outside the organization hold about the organization	Construed external image, perceived external prestige, perceived organizational prestige, reflected stakeholders appraisals…
Organizational image (reputation)	What do the stakeholders actually think about the organization?	Mental associations about the organization actually held by others outside the organization	Company/corporate evaluation, corporate image, corporate identity, organizational image, organizational reputation…

For each of the two core concepts (i.e., identity and image), we shall briefly overview the main theoretical and methodological perspectives that tackled them. We summarize the core findings about identity and image and link each of them with organizational members' identification. Our analysis will hence take us from an organizational to an individual level, and explore the dynamics that take place within and between these levels.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE

As Brown et al. (2006) pointed out in their review, organizational image is a concept tackled in the literature under various names: corporate identity (e.g., Dacin & Brown, 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 1997), construed external image (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Gioia, Schutz & Corley, 2000); perceived organizational prestige (van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995) and many others (see Table 1 for a broader overview). Therefore, they proposed a differentiation of these concepts based on the source that creates the image and the intended audience (see Figure 1). Consequently, three different concepts apply for the various images of the organization: intended image; construed image and reputation.

The concept of *intended image* refers to how an organization expresses and differentiates itself in relation to its stakeholders (Alvesson 1990; Olins, 1989; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). It is the distinctive public image that a corporate entity communicates that structures people's engagement with it (Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007).

According to Olins (1989), it can project four things: who you are, what you do, how you do it and where you want to go. Most researches on organizational image come from marketing, corporate communication, and management literature. By and large, there are two schools within marketing studies that are preoccupied with the concept of organizational image: the visual school and the strategic one (Balmer, 1995). The roots of the 'visual school' are traced to the graphic design community, which traditionally concerned itself with the creation of a company name, logo, colour, house style, trademarks and other elements of the visual identity program. The 'strategic school' focuses on the central idea of the organization, which includes the vision, mission, and philosophy of the company (Olins, 1989; van Riel, 1995). The intended image becomes therefore part of the strategic process linking corporate strategy to company image and reputation (van Riel, 1995; Fombrun, 1996).

Dutton et al. (1994) defined *construed image* as a member's beliefs about outsiders' perceptions of the organization. Unlike the concepts of intended image and organizational reputation, which are concerned with outsiders' view of an organization, construed external image focuses on employees' assessments of what outsiders think about the organization for which they work (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994).

Finally, organizational *reputation* refers to the actual perception an external stakeholder holds of an organization. Unlike the other types of images, this one is external to the organization. While it is to a certain extent influenced by the message the organization wants to send (the intended organizational image), it also depends on other outside sources, such as competitors, industry analysts, consumer activists, the media etc. (Brown et al., 2006). Therefore, this image is less controllable by strategic communications of the organization. In turn, reputation can affect the construed external image, although studies have proved that the link between the two is not always so strong (members' interpretations of how the others perceive their organization are largely influenced by other factors, from organizational values to coping mechanisms that intervene when the reputation is negative – e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE ON MEMBER IDENTIFICATION

Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) propose a model of member identification, in which they consider the relations between identification and organizational image. In this model, they state that: the greater (1) the attractiveness of the organizational image, (2) the consistency between the attributes members used to define themselves and the attributes used to define an organization, as well as (3) the distinctiveness of an organizational image relative to other organizations, the stronger a person's organizational identification.

The more an organizational image enhances a member's self-esteem, the stronger his or her organizational identification. This point of view appeared in early writings on this topic (e.g., March & Simon, 1958). This increased propensity of identification with prestigious organizations is easily explained through the self-enhancement motivation, which predicts that the more prestigious the organization, the greater the potential to boost self-esteem through identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). One way this happens is that high prestige helps one come to assimilate the superiority of the organization and 'bask in the reflected glory' (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 366).

Most studies so far have focused on the positive relation between *organizational prestige (i.e., reputation)* and identification. Ever since 1971, Lee noted that both perceived prestige of the profession, as well as perceived organizational prestige were important determinants of organizational identification among a group of scientists in a division of the Federal Public Health Service (Lee, 1971). Mael and Ashforth (1992) observed that the identification of college alumni increased with perceived organizational prestige. Iyer, Bamber and Barefield (1997) found the same relation for accountant alumni and their former organization. Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen (2005) proved that when a customer sees the construed external image of a company as attractive (i.e., customers believe that the attributes that distinguish the company are positive and socially valued by relevant others), the customer's identification with that company is strengthened.

Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) though proposed that the strength of organizational identification is mainly enhanced via the attractiveness of the *construed external image*. An organization's members' interest in its external image is related to the answer to the question "How do outsiders think of me because of my association with this organization?" (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). They noted that how insiders think may not be identical to how outsiders actually see the organization. Therefore, they propose that the image of an organization affects members' identification by means of how they think others evaluate this image. This external judgment will then be linked to their own self-esteem. If this relation enhances their self-esteem, the identification will increase.

Empirical findings support Dutton et al.'s (1994) proposal that if a member believes that outsiders are likely to view the organization favourably, this enhances the organization's image from the member's point of view, which, in turn, should encourage further alignment between a member's self-concept and organizational definition. Therefore, when the construed image of an organization is assessed as attractive, the construed external image strengthens members' organizational identification (Wan-Huggins et al., 1998).

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Organizational identity defined. The concept of organizational identity (generated by organizational studies) refers to how organizational members perceive and understand 'who we are' and/or 'what we stand for' as an organization. Organizational identity tends to be seen as a system of shared meaning, that an organizational entity is understood to have that arises from its members' (and others') awareness that they belong to it (Cornelissen et al., 2007). Social scientists and management scholars depicted this term in order to address belief systems and value orientations underlying organizational behaviours (Dutton et al., 1994). Whetten and his co-authors (Whetten, 1997; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998) distinguished between two main lines of research regarding organizational identity: researchers interested in the "identity of" and those concerned with "identification with" the organization. These two lines are related, since the identity of the organization creates a basis for member identification with the organization by providing a cognitive and emotional foundation on which organizational members build attachments and with which they create meaningful relationships with their organization. We shall tackle this relation in a following section.

Within the 'identity of organization' research line, Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition remains the cornerstone conceptualisation, despite numerous critiques raised by this somewhat static notion of identity as that which is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization. The contention with this definition has been manifested either by challenging one or several of the three dimensions, or by challenging the entire conceptualisation. For instance, in their research on academia, Gioia and Thomas (1996) question how enduring identity really is. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) actually propose the concept of adaptive instability to challenge the classical perspective of identity being stable. Sevon (1996) questions the distinctiveness of identity, referring to the pervasive imitation processes that might make organizational identities institutionally determined. With respect to the more fundamental challenges addressed to this perspective, some authors take a narrative or storytelling approach. Czarniawska (1997; see also Czarniawska-Joerges 1994), or, more radical dynamic (such as postmodernists) views portray the essence, coherence, and continuity of identity as illusions created and maintained by processes of social construction. Therefore, in the next section, we summarize the three main approaches to organizational identity that currently underlie most researches.

Main paradigms in the study of organizational identity. This section introduces the three main paradigms in the study of organizational identity, namely the functionalist, interpretive and post-modern ones. Our presentation is structured around three dimensions: core assumptions of the paradigm, the portrayal of identity (the way it is defined and the subsequent implications of this definition), and positioning towards research (topics, methods, and ends).

The functionalist approach predicates realism and objectivism as ontological assumptions, having its roots in the natural sciences models. It assumes identity is a social fact that exists "out there" and can be an object of scrutiny, that it is a variable that can be operationalised, measured, manipulated, put and tested in relations to other variables. Its approach towards identity assumes as preconditions for the methodological scrutiny it proposes the fact that identity is objective, stable and manipulable (Gioia, 1998).

Organizational cognitions and behaviours are the final targets and interests of the functionalist perspective. Hence, identity is viewed as a shared cognition that elicits certain emotions and behaviours from the part of organizational members (Rindova, Bouchikhi & Rao, in Bouchiki et al., 1998).

With respect to the research perspective, functionalism assumes a clear distinction between researchers and researched, and therefore places the observer outside, as an impartial stance. Its focus is on hypotheses testing and proposing models that allow for the testing of causal relations in a deductive manner, the purpose of inquiry being to uncover, describe, measure and put to use the obtained findings. Data are gathered from observed actions and the study of statements of organizational members, while the preferred instruments are psychometric in nature (Rindova, Bouchikhi & Rao, 1998). As a consequence of this position, research in this paradigm is written in fairly dispassionate, theoretical terms (Gioia, 1998).

The interpretive perspective, on the other hand, stems from a hermeneutic tradition and is based on nominalist ontologic assumptions. In other words, it presumes that identity is a subjective, socially and symbolically constructed notion, intended to lend meaning to experience (Gioia, 1998, Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). It stems from the group members' need for some stability and convergence of meaning around who they claim to be (Fiol & Gioia, in Bouchiki et al., 1998).

These theoretical assumptions are reflected in research practices in several ways: first of all, the distinction between researcher and the researched is blurred, the project of the researcher becoming that of faithfully rendering the constructions of the informants and accurately representing their interpretations (Gioia, 1998). In other words, the aim of research becomes the description and insightful explanation of identity, disclosing and understanding the meaning structures that are negotiated among organizational members. Because of this end, the research process is inductive in nature and often uses participant observation as the fittest method. In the interpretive perspective, research is conducted at two different levels: the first attempts to represent identity in the actual words and symbols used by the informants themselves, hence reflecting the organization's members' level of representation. The second one is aimed at building a grounded, theoretical explanation for the patterns observed in the participants' representations of their identity, hence building conceptual explanations, frameworks and models that constitute the researchers' level of theoretical representation (Gioia, 1998). As a result of this research perspective, interpretive accounts usually take on a narrative form, shaped as an interesting, readable story, which has depth, richness, but at the expense of demonstrable generalisability.

A third theoretical stream is constituted by the post-modern perspectives. These are based on extreme subjectivism and the assumption of indeterminacy. The postmodernists' core traits lie in the fact that they challenge judgment on most ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, and replace them with the questioning of the basis for all belief and study, including their own. They prefer diversity and fragmentation instead of integration, differences to similarities and synthesis, complexity in lieu of simplicity (Rosenau, 1998).

Postmodernists argued a lot about individual identity, which they consider to be just a linguistic manifestation. Unlike interpretivists, they not only assume that language and communication allow for the expression and negotiation of identity, but that identity is produced by the use of language, that identity is a myth, and, in the end, a mere illusion (albeit a necessary one) (Gioia, 1998). Because of their focus on plurality and multiplicity of opinions, they postulate the indeterminacy of meaning and consider identity to be an accidental collection of forms clustering in moments in time. There are hence no central traits of identity, the human systems being characterized by fragmentation, ambiguity and indeterminacy (Hatch, Schultz & Golden-Biddle, in Bouchiki et al., 1998).

In the case of organizational identity, postmodernists move the focus from a stable, distinct origin of identity towards a chameleon-like imitation of images prevailing the marketplace. Baudrillard (1985) traces the progression of image from its beginnings as a reflection of some basic reality, to a means of masking and perverting a basic reality, then to masking the absence of a reality, and finally to no longer bearing a relation to reality. Hence, image not only supplies identity; they both end up as illusions (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000).

The post-modern thought fights primarily against consecrated and immovable power structures, which, they claim, are reproduced through these very illusions of identity. In this sense, they challenge the classical perspectives on organizational identity as reflecting the views of a very few, who are in control and try to perpetuate their position by the construction of this identity. This is why, in terms of research, the post-modern focus is on discourse deconstruction, giving voice to silences and pointing to absences (Hatch, Schultz & Golden-Biddle, 1998).

To conclude, Albert & Whetten's (1985) definition of organizational identity has marked the research on this topic for the past 20 years. Whether they subscribed to it or deconstructed it, scholars as well as practitioners have taken a stand in relation to it and used it as a starting point for their own definitions and operationalisations of organizational identity.

From the definition to the assessment of organizational identity. A different approach to organizational identity is one that focuses less on paradigmatical assumptions and is more research-driven. Barney, Bunderson, Foreman, Gustafson, Huff, Martins, Reger, Sarason & Stimpert (1998) claimed that Albert & Whetten's (1985) definition (or its refinements, for that matter) does not always constitute the best way to tackle this research topic, so they focused on what would be necessary to conduct proper research. Instead of defining what organizational identity is, they proposed a number of dimensions of identity, not as part of its defining characteristics, but as dimensions along which it can vary. These dimensions are: homogeneity, intensity and conviction, complexity, abstractness, content and context. Their operationalisation can be consulted in Table 2. As one can see, not all dimensions are equally clearly defined (for instance, there still is a lot of conceptual debate around the notions of abstractness and context – Reger, Gustafson & Sarason, 1998).

Table 20.2 Dimensions of organization identity (apud Reger, 1998, in Barney et al, 1998)

Dimensions of organization identity
1. Homogeneity: members of the organization share a common set of beliefs about the organization's identity
2. Intensity (conviction): strength of belief and degree of positive affect toward the identity
3. Complexity: number of beliefs that comprise the identity and the number of identities
4. Abstractness: extent to which the identity is couched in abstract language
5. Content: what the identity is
6. Context: the internal and external context, identity is path dependent

The added value of this conceptualisation though is given by the possibility to assess the accuracy and appropriateness of the methods and instruments employed in the study of identity. These instruments should be able to provide clear data on the aforementioned dimensions. For instance, they must give information on the content of an identity (What are the attributes used to define identity?), the homogeneity of this representation among organizational members (Is there one homogeneous perception of the identity or several different ones? How widely is this perception of the identity shared?), its intensity (How much do members adhere to it? How strong is their belief that this is the identity that defines their organization?), and complexity (Is it a simple or a multifaceted identity? What are the dimensions along which identity is defined?).

The impact of organizational identity on organizational identification. For the researchers investigating the identification with the organization, a key issue is the interrelationship between personal and social aspects of identity construction, whether it is in terms of self-categorisation ("feeling of oneness with the organization", Ashforth & Mael, 1989), defining oneself with the same attributes used to describe the organization (Dutton et al., 1994), or the affinity one has towards his or her organization (van Riel, 1995).

When individuals consider those attributes that are central, enduring, and distinctive for an organization (according to Albert & Whetten's definition), they are in effect constructing a "perceived organizational identity" (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Perceived organizational identity is an individual-level construct and refers to the identity of the organization as understood by each of its members. A perceived organizational identity is attractive to an individual when it satisfies three principles of self-definition: self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002). A perceived organizational identity that helps the individual maintain a consistent sense of self, distinct from others, while enhancing self-esteem, will be viewed as attractive. This, in turn, will lead to stronger organizational identification.

Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) proposed two concepts that can be considered as facets or aspects of the identity of an organization, which influence the members' identification: *organization's identity strength* and *incongruence*. They define a strong organizational identity as one that is widely shared and deeply held by organizational members, as manifested in members' sense of their organization's history, traditions, symbols, practices, and philosophy (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). A strong organizational identity is likely to provide a clear beacon for prospective organizational members ('This is who we are'), allowing them to decide if the organizational identity (OI) suits their needs and wants. Thus, an organization with a strong OI will tend to attract and retain those who feel some resonance with the OI (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). Other authors though (Cole & Bruch, 2006), define organizational identity strength as the degree to which its members perceive the identity as being special or unique (Milliken, 1990) and operationalise it as an individual-level construct believed to reflect individuals' perceptions of identity strength more so than actual strength (i.e., within-group agreement). Accordingly, the word 'strength' as used by them is not meant to signify a unit-level characteristic common to climate research (cf. Schneider, Salvaggio & Subirats, 2002), but an individual-level one, intended to measure the members' perceptions.

Strong OI perceptions appear to act as a perceptual screen that can influence individuals' processing and interpretation of information (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Milliken, 1990). In Milliken's (1990) study, for example, university administrators who perceived their organization as having a strong identity tended to be more certain that the university could endure and respond effectively to environmental changes. Similarly, strong OI perceptions could be expected to shield members from construing problematic events as being problematic, which might otherwise increase one's intention of quitting the organization (Cole & Bruch, 2006).

On the other hand, *organizational identity incongruence* refers to an organization that sends contradictory or mixed messages to its stakeholders regarding what it stands for and why. Kreiner and Ashforth (2004) presume that the mixed messages associated with an incongruent OI will foster correspondingly mixed attitudes and ambivalent identification: employees may identify with one set of messages while disidentifying with another. The reason given by them for the occurrence of OI incongruence (as opposed to OI strength), is that organizations often have multiple or hybrid identities. These identities may sometimes (although not necessarily) be contradictory. Multiple identities are likely to emerge and become contradictory if the organization is dealing with contradictory demands from the environment or key stakeholders or is in a state of flux (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND IMAGE: LOOKING AHEAD

Traditionally, intended image is presumed to be the top management's position on how the organization should present itself to its external stakeholders, through mediated communication channels (such as advertising or PR campaigns). At the other end, organizational identity is what all the members of the organization believe the core of the organization to be, it is a definition that has an internal audience (it is "what we believe about ourselves"), and it is built and communicated through direct interpersonal interactions (Hatch & Schultz, 2000).

These clear-cut boundaries are subject to deconstruction in the nowadays organizational reality (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). For instance, managerial and organizational perspectives on identity are not independent of one another. On the one hand, the management's contributions to identity become part of organizational identity when members of the organization use these proffered corporate symbols in their everyday organizational lives. On the other hand, the symbols of identity and narratives about themselves that organizational members produce often constitute the resources top managers use when they develop corporate identity statements, symbols and/or programs. Further on, the distinction between recipients of identity messages as external and internal stakeholders is being muddied by the amount of overlap between these groups (i.e. by the taking-up of multiple roles by some individuals who are simultaneously employees, customers, investors, and members of the public). The fact that organizational members may also belong to various external stakeholder groups implies that organizational members receive mediated communications of corporate identity just as other external stakeholders do. Even more, they may be more attentive to these mediated messages than other stakeholders are, and then carry their impressions of corporate identity into their organizational lives and compare them to their understanding of organizational identity as it derives from their direct experience (Hatch & Schultz, 2000).

Therefore, in this context of increasing complexity, simplifying solutions, such as using unitary terminologies or trying to bring together various fields and methodologies seems an option that would only steal the richness of approaches and depth of understanding (Cornelissen et al., 2007). On the other hand, there is an increasing need to find common ground so that findings from various perspectives would be shared. This common ground is given by integrative frameworks (such as the ones proposed by Brown, Dacin, Pratt & Whetten, 2006; Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007; Hatch & Schultz, 2000) or by methodological requirements for future research (such as those proposed by Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007).

For practitioners however, the conceptual underpinnings are less relevant than the relations between these concepts and their implications for organizational life. Brown et al.'s (2006) framework offers a solid starting point for analyzing the dynamics of organizational identity, images and member identification in organization. The relations posited in this chapter are useful both for diagnostic and strategic purposes. They can help to explain internal dynamics such as resistance to change, as well as external dynamics, such as the success or failure of organizations on new or existing markets. Keeping in mind that an organization's image and identity play at organizational level the role of personality, and impression management at individual level, is a key in understanding the dynamics of an organization's interface with internal and external stakeholders.

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