

The external presentation of organizational identity: A study of employment advertisements 1975-2015

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study analyzes organizational expressiveness over a 35-year period. On the basis of 1307 official self-narratives retrieved from employment advertisements published in a major Norwegian newspaper between 1980 and 2015, the study tracks the expression of organizational identity labels over time. It seeks to determine how organizational expressiveness evolves and changes in symbolic meaning, including which overarching identity – the utilitarian or the normative identity – becomes more prevalent over time. Specifically, expressed labels change (1) in terms of their prevalence, suggesting that some labels display increasing long-term trends whereas others display declining trends, and (2) in terms of their composition and meaning, suggesting that organizations gradually rely on an increasing portfolio of labels to express who they are and what they represent. Over time, these changes weaken the expression of a utilitarian identity whereas the normative identity is strengthened.

Keywords: Organizational expressiveness, organizational identity, organizational identity labels, employment advertisements

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Introduction

Faced with growing pressures to manage reputation, build unique organizational brands, and attract customers and talented employees, modern organizations compete based on their ability to “put themselves out there, to convey who they are, what they do, and what they stand for” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 95). In so doing, organizations express their identities through labels that reflect their central, unique, and enduring features (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

The assumed enduring nature of organizational identity suggests that expressions of identity remain relatively constant over time. During the last 10-15 years, however, scholars have begun to treat organizational identity as an unstable and flexible phenomenon. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) distinguish between the labels used by organizational members to express who they are as a collective, and the meanings associated with these labels, arguing that the labels persist while the meanings gradually evolve. Others have noted that organizational identity is about determining “who do we want to be”, thereby reflecting a deliberate movement from one state to a more desired state (Dacin & Brown, 2002; Dowling & Otubanjo, 2011; Gioia, Corley, & Fabbri, 2002). Again others have suggested that organizational identity is ongoing work-in-progress involving questions such as “how are we becoming” rather than “who are we”, highlighting the need for a process perspective on organizational identity (Schultz, Maguire, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2012).

If organizational identity changes over time, then the external expression of organizational identity is likely to change as well. Empirical research into such change, however, is scarce. The literature has focused more intently on the internal dynamics of identity communication under conditions of external identity threats (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), identity ambiguity (Corley & Gioia, 2004), organizational change (Clark,

Gioia, Ketchen Jr., & Thomas, 2010), and internal conflict (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Glynn, 2000). The lack of focus on change in externally expressed organizational identity labels is unfortunate for at least two reasons: First, official organizational identity expressions influence external as well as internal stakeholders (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Hagen, 2008; Hatch, Schultz, & Larsen, 2000). If we can understand how organizational expressiveness evolves and changes, we will be in a better position to understand how strategic efforts to influence stakeholders' perceptions of organizations change over time as well as the potential effects that these expressions could have for stakeholders and the organizations themselves. We could also be able to better understand how organizational expressiveness is influenced by broader cultural and social change in organizational environments. Second, expressed identity labels can be assumed to vary according to whether organizations understand themselves as having predominantly utilitarian or normative identities. Although previous research distinguishes between these two identity categories (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Brickson, 2005; Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005; Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014), the lack of longitudinal studies prevent us from acquiring insights into how these overarching identities come to expression over time.

To address this research gap in the organizational identity literature, this longitudinal study examines over 3,000 organizational identity labels retrieved from over 1,300 employment advertisements published between 1980 and 2015 in a large Norwegian newspaper; *Aftenposten*. It makes the following contributions: First, by tracking variation over time and across sectors in the collected identity labels, it offers insight into the characteristics of organizational expressiveness in a longitudinal light, showing how organizational expressiveness arises and evolves over time. Previous studies have noted an increase in contemporary organizations' concern for expressiveness (Carson, Hagen, & Sethi, 2015; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Schultz & Hatch, 2008; Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000; van Halderen, 2008). By contrast, this study tracks the *actual* increase and change over time and identifies which identity labels increase in

prominence and which labels decline, demonstrating change in both the prevalence and composition of identity labels. Second, the study provides insights into changes in the symbolic contents of organizational expressiveness in competitive settings, showing how expressions of the utilitarian and normative identities evolve over time and which type becomes more and which becomes less prevalent.

The next section presents the concept of organizational identity and the theoretical perspectives used by scholars to examine it. The paper then describes how identity relates to organizational expressiveness, followed by a discussion of the need for empirical studies of change in organizational expressiveness. After describing the methods used to investigate these matters, the findings of the study are presented. The paper concludes by examining the theoretical implications of the findings and offering some suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Observations

Organizational identity

Organizational expressiveness is fundamentally related to organizational identity. A widely cited definition of organizational identity states that an organization's central, distinct, and relatively enduring characteristics constitute its identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013). These characteristics can be examined from social constructivist, social actor, and institutional perspectives (Corley et al., 2006; Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Whereas the social constructivist perspective treats identity as a shared belief about relatively enduring and distinct features of the organization that members collectively produce in sense-making processes, the social actor perspective sees identity as a core phenomenon at the organizational level that exists in its own right and is associated with membership in defined categories (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). From the institutionalist perspective, identity is defined internally but subject to strong influences from the external environment, elevating the study of identity to

the macro level and linking it to issues of legitimacy and isomorphism (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2004).

The three perspectives provide a starting point for understanding and analyzing organizational expressiveness. Points of interest include the labels through which organizational identity characteristics are expressed, their contents and meanings, and how they evolve over time.

Organizational expressiveness

Organizational expressiveness is defined here as the official communication of organizational identity labels and their meanings. It concerns how organizations “put themselves out there” (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004, p. 95), i.e. how they present their central, distinct, and enduring characteristics to internal and external stakeholders (Carson et al., 2015; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Schultz & Hatch, 2008; Schultz et al., 2000; van Halderen, 2008). The definition entails several important insights:

First, organizations express their identity through labels. Labels take the form of names, logos and other visual and sensory evidence of identity, in addition to verbally expressed messages (Schultz & Hatch, 2008). Verbally expressed labels are the focus of this paper. These labels are expressed in (or implicated by) official organizational self-narratives, which in the case of this study are the short texts employers write about themselves in job advertisements. Self-narratives may, for example, include the identity claims “our company is all about innovation”, “we are a knowledge organization”, “we are a public utility agency”, “we are entrepreneurial”, and “we are leading”. The expressed organizational identity labels contained in these claims, then, could be adjectives (“leading”, “entrepreneurial”), values (“innovation”, “knowledge”), and other organization-level characteristics and descriptors associating the organization with a specific category (e.g. “we are an [X type of] organization”).

The nature of labels is somewhat contested by the three perspectives. From the social constructivist perspective, identity labels follow from ongoing member negotiations of the organization's core features, providing a basis for the construction of a collective, unique sense of self and giving meaning to members' experience of the organization (Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). From the social actor perspective, labels of identity are expressed in sense-giving processes in attempts to influence external and internal perceptions of the organization (Whetten et al., 2014). The institutional perspective opens up the possibility that labels reflect pressures from the institutional environments whereas the 'actual' organizational identity remains intact (cf. Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2004).

Regardless of perspective, however, the more organizations communicate labels of identity in their official self-narratives, the more expressive they are. Figure 1 outlines the components of organizational expressiveness and the relationship between them. It suggests that narratives include multiple claims of identity, which in turn include one or more identity labels.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Second, organizational expressiveness is a symbolic activity involving both sense-giving and sense-making aspects. In accordance with the social actor perspective, organizations seek to encourage specific interpretations of their expressed identity labels (sense-giving). At the same time, and in accordance with the social constructivist perspective, internal and external stakeholders develop understandings of the labels and attribute meanings to them (sense-making). The sense-giving dimension of organizational expressiveness is particularly significant because identity labels are chosen with the purpose of invoking favorable perceptions of the organization among stakeholders. Organizations are likely to try to convince external

stakeholders about their virtues by explaining their identity characteristics, and they are not likely to introduce labels of identity in their official self-narratives if these labels convey a negative image of the organization, even if those labels reflect members' 'actual' understanding of the organization. In the case of employment advertisement, the overall purpose of expressing identity labels is to attract qualified and talented employees and support the organization's brand or reputation. In this sense, organizational expressiveness differs from the definition of organizational identity communication proposed by Schinoff, Rogers, and Corley (2016). Whereas the latter focuses on the micro-level matters of "conveying both organizational identity labels and their respective meanings to organizational members" (Schinoff et al., 2016, p. 222), organizational expressiveness predominantly concerns itself with externally expressed identity labels and their meanings.

Third, the symbolic meaning of identity labels can be classified according to the normative-utilitarian typology suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985). Normative and utilitarian identities embody contrasting member understandings and organizational features resulting in the expression of different identity labels and ultimately in different stakeholder perceptions of the organization. Utilitarian organizations are oriented towards economic production. This orientation makes them likely to express their identity on the basis of 'hard' labels relating to work, energy, individuality, economic production, profit, and efficiency. By contrast, normative organizations are "pattern-maintenance" organizations (Parsons, 1960) emphasizing cultural, normative, and moral aspects. This feature makes them likely to express 'soft' labels emphasizing collective welfare, moral values, and relationships (cf. Brickson, 2005).

It should be noted that organizational identity scholars, with some significant exceptions (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Hatch et al., 2000; Moufahim, Reedy, & Humphreys, 2015; Rafaeli, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Schultz & Hatch, 2008; Sillince & Brown, 2009), typically leave most of the external dimension of organizational identity

expressions to corporate communication, branding, and reputation management literatures. Corporate identity is the preferred term in these literatures, referring to "the many physical attributes of a company, including names, brands and symbols" (Argenti & Forman, 2002, p. 1994), "created as part of a corporate plan by communication strategists" (Dolphin, 1999, p. 43) who craft and professionally convey the organization's desired characteristics to create differentiation from competitors (Alessandrini, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2000). In a review of organizational identity research approaches, Ravasi and Canato (2013) note that recent empirical studies (after 2002) mainly have focused on the formation of collective identities, how identity evolves with other organizational and strategic changes, and how organizational members make sense of changes in the organizational identity. It follows that organizational identity research could do more to pursue the external dimension of organizational identity expressions, thereby responding to the call made by Hatch et al. (2000) almost two decades ago to study how organizations make official, external claims about themselves – including how these claims change.

Change in organizational expressiveness

A basic assumption in the dominant social constructivist perspective on organizational identity is that organizational identity labels change very rarely (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2000). Even when organizational identity beliefs held by organizational members change over a certain period of time, there is no clear assumption in this literature that identity change leads to a corresponding modification in identity labels. The reasoning behind this argument is that while the labels themselves rarely change, their *meaning* does (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2000). A similar stance is offered by the social actor perspective on organizational identity. Emphasizing that identity claims and labels must allow organizational actors to "be the same yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p. 396), the perspective assumes that labels change rarely and never easily.

Nevertheless, if external stakeholder preferences change, so do typically organizations in various ways. An organization that seeks a better public image, for example, must rely on a socially accepted vocabulary of labels when expressing who it is and what it stands for in an official setting. Not doing so could render organizational expressions ineffective with respect to their impact on stakeholder perceptions and negatively affect organizational legitimacy. This is the essence of the institutional perspective on organizational identity (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007). Similarly, if an organization undergoes an identity category change (e.g. from “charity” to “business”, or from “normative” to “utilitarian”), it is likely to express its identity in a different way. Not doing so could imply misrepresentation and potentially miscategorization. The latter is a problem for a social actor whose legitimacy depends on its identity labels signaling membership in de facto well-known, established identity categories (King & Whetten, 2008).

As a result, it seems reasonable to assume that externally oriented identity labels may not have the same enduring nature as internal ones. Organizations need to periodically renew their official self-narratives and the claims and labels included in these narratives. This argument, although not well researched, finds support in a longitudinal case study of Bang & Olufsen by Ravasi and Schultz (2006) where competitive threats and environmental change induced organizational leaders to revise their organization’s official identity claims three times during a 26 year period. Similarly, Glynn and Abzug (2002) analyzed 1,587 organizational name changes over a six year period. They observed how names are embedded within and influenced by institutional environments, changing in response to cultural change in these environments.

These studies suggest a need to search for more insights into organizational expressiveness relating not to names but to verbally expressed identity labels, and not to micro-level change but to macro-level change across multiple decades. A similar need pertains to the question of how such change implicates change in expressed meanings and affects the relationship between utilitarian and normative organizational identities over time. Accordingly,

the purpose of this study is to determine how organizational identity labels are expressed verbally in competitive settings, how they change over time with respect to their contents and meanings, and how they implicate overarching utilitarian and normative identities.

Methods

Data collection

This research gathered a large database of self-narratives retrieved from employment advertisements. The contents of such advertisements are an underexplored area of research, perhaps because these advertisements may seem “trivial”, often appearing “in the back pages of newspapers, and because it is not clear who actually reads them” (Rafaeli, 2000, p. 219). However, for students of organizational identity, they constitute a rich and valuable data source. Many employment advertisements present a short narrative at the top of the advertisement that includes formal claims of the hiring organization’s central character, distinctiveness, and temporal continuity.

The digital archive of the Norwegian national newspaper *Aftenposten* served as sampling frame. It was chosen for this study because of its accessible comprehensive database dating back to the newspaper’s origin in 1860, and because it is one of Norway’s largest, most respected, and oldest newspapers. These features make it an attractive outlet for employers looking to hire. Pages containing employment advertisements were downloaded from the newspaper’s archive in five-year increments starting in 1950 and ending in 2015, from printed morning issues four times each year (first available morning issue in February, May, August, and November, respectively). These increments increase the manageability of the size of the dataset, while at the same time allowing for a longitudinal approach. The approach also has the benefit of generating a random sample of texts, as there is little reason to expect organizations to advertise systematically every fifth year and only in the first issue of the months selected for this study.

The selection procedure yielded a total of 8,898 advertisements. However, the period from 1950 to 1980 generated almost no identity narratives and was therefore excluded from the analysis of labels. Similarly, advertisements posted by recruiting companies were deleted from the database because they did not include *self*-narratives. These procedures resulted in 1,307 self-narratives from a period of 35 years (1980-2015) (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The 1,307 texts were imported into the qualitative data analysis software package Provalis QDA Miner 4.0, by typing or by copying depending on whether the newspaper issues were saved as page images in the archive or as digitalized text (the latter for issues after 2000). Each self-narrative was then categorized by year and sector affiliation (private, public, and non-profit sector organization). After performing a content analysis (see below), the texts were also coded according to whether the majority of labels included in the text reflected a utilitarian or normative organizational identity (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985). Narratives were coded as utilitarian when labels implicating a utilitarian self were in the majority, and they were coded as normative when normative labels were in majority. If the number of each label was tied, the text was coded as neutral.

Data analysis

The data analysis in this study involves thematic coding in accordance with established procedures for qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2012). This type of analysis identifies themes or patterns, aiming to describe “the meaning of qualitative material” (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). Accordingly, of interest in this study are the

meanings of the labels included in the hiring organizations' self-narratives. The analysis is based on the assumption that expressed identity labels have apparent meanings (cf. Schinoff et al., 2016), and that these meanings can be interpreted and classified regardless of the variety of meanings that might be assigned to the labels by organizational members.

Pinpointing these labels and their meanings necessitated considerable data reduction due to the sheer number of labels. Coding proceeded in three steps: The first step involved a thematic analysis whereby data-driven first-order codes were assigned to any self-referential claim (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). This step followed the notion of open coding whereby codes were developed during the data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The codes are "text-centric", most of them *describing* the meaning of the label (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The remaining codes are *in-vivo* in the sense that the assigned codes are labels used in the text by the hiring organizations themselves (Strauss, 1987). As an example of the coding process, the claim "CGG Veritas is a leading international geophysical company" was coded as "leading". In a different case, the claim "The Supreme Audit Institution shall ensure that the public use of resources and values be in accordance with Parliament's regulations" was coded as "contributes to society". The process resulted in a coding scheme of 140 first-order codes assigned to a total of 3,264 labels, corresponding to an average of 2.49 labels per self-narrative (Table 1).

The second step of analysis relied on axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) in order to reduce the codes into a more manageable set of second-order categories. The process involved searching for relationships between the first-order codes that could provide a basis for grouping them together (Gioia et al., 2012). As examples, "leading", "largest", and "better than others" (first order codes) were coded as "competitive" (second order), and "service oriented", "market oriented", and "customer oriented" (first order codes) were coded as "customer oriented" (second order). In-vivo codes conveying the same meaning were merged into the same second-order category. The procedure resulted in a total of 20 aggregate, second-order categories (Table 2). As a reliability test of this coding stage, a second coder unaffiliated with the research project

coded a sample of the data. The sample consisted of 65 randomly selected text segments from the data corresponding to about five percent of the full set of texts. Intercoder agreement was 94% (Kappa =.84).

In a third and final coding step, the 20 codes were grouped into two overarching themes building on the distinction proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) concerning utilitarian and normative identities (Table 2). Given that these identities have been described as involving incompatible values (Etzioni, 1975; Parsons, 1956), the analysis is based on the assumption that the expressed labels can be coded into one category but not the other. Hence, second order themes such as competitive, rational, and successful were coded as utilitarian because they reflect individualistic and self-interested aspects of the utilitarian identity. Themes such as customer oriented, workplace oriented, youthful, and socially responsible were coded as normative because they reflect ‘soft’ self-definitions emphasizing organizations’ relationship with their constituents or values and characteristics that are important in such relationships. A similar coding method was employed by Brickson (2005).¹ The second coder applied the two overarching codes to the 20 second-order themes as a reliability check of the final coding step, again without knowing the results of the other’s coding. Intercoder agreement was 90% (Kappa=.80). The structure of the data is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Limitations

Before presenting the findings, two important limitations of the study design should be acknowledged. First, any observation of change in identity labels in this study occurs at the aggregate level. The study focuses on a large number of identity labels in employment

advertisements regardless of who the organizations are. As a result, any observed change cannot be traced to a particular organization, only to particular types of organizations and to particular trends occurring over time.

A second, related limitation is that the study does not specifically address the ‘actual’ identity of organizations. The study explores the projected identity as it is revealed through officially expressed identity labels in self-narratives drawn from employment advertisements. Although it could be argued that labels and meanings are (or should be) closely related (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), externally expressed labels could be unrelated to how organizational members actually define themselves as a collective if the labels express a desired rather than ‘actual’ identity. The chosen aggregate design approach for this study only allows for speculations about how organizational members see themselves as a collective.

35 Years of Expressiveness

General trends

Looking at some of the more general expressiveness trends, we first note how the average number of labels per advertisement grows consistently in the studied period (Table 3). Whereas the total number of employment advertisements containing a self-narrative declines from the 1980s and the 1990s towards 2015, the proportion of labels per advertisement nearly doubles from 1980 to 2015. This suggests that organizations become more expressive over the years, relying on an increasingly broader portfolio of labels to convey who they are and what they stand for. This long-term increase is notable because it either implies letting external organizational identity communication occupy more space in the advertisement at the expense of the rest of the text describing the desired qualifications of applicants, or making the advertisement larger and therefore more costly. In both cases, the findings underline the willingness of organizations to “put themselves out there” when seeking to attract job applicants.

Insert Table 3 about here

Figures 2a and b show the total number of employment advertisements for every year in the entire database (2a) as well as the proportion of employment advertisements containing a self-narrative (2b). While there is a sharp decline in the number of employment advertisements from 1,082 advertisements per year at its peak in 1950 to only 117 advertisements in 2015, the proportion of advertisements containing a presentation of the hiring organization increases considerably during the same time span. From having no such self-narrative in 1950 and continuing to generally not have one until the beginning of the 1970s, the advertisements reach their peak in 2010 with almost 70 percent of them containing a presentation of the hiring organization. It follows that having and expressing an identity is a modern phenomenon whose importance has grown considerably over the years.

Notable differences exist between public, private, and non-profit sector organizations concerning their share of the total number of employment advertisements. Whereas private businesses represent the majority of the advertisements until 2000, non-profit and especially public sector organizations quickly take an increasingly larger share from then on. This happens at the same time as business organizations become gradually less interested in using the newspaper as an outlet for their hiring announcements (Figure 2a). Whereas they placed a total of 1,059 employment advertisements in 1950, they only posted 44 in 2015. We also note that private sector organizations have a much larger share of employment advertisements containing a self-narrative until 2000, at which point especially public sector organizations increase their share, in 2015 even surpassing that of private organizations. Thus, whereas private sector

organizations become less expressive after 2000 in terms of their tendency to present themselves in the advertisement, public sector and non-profit organizations become *more* expressive.²

The data suggest that organizational expressiveness is a phenomenon beginning in the late 1970s and from then on increasing in prominence. An employment advertisement is initially a functional part of the recruitment process but gradually takes on a symbolic dimension whereby organizations develop self-narratives describing their organizational identities as a way of attracting applicants. As such, the employment advertisement is no longer just a means of communicating a job opportunity, it is also a means of expressing organizational identity.

Insert Figures 2a and 2b about here

Patterns of identity label change

The following section concentrates on the 3,264 identity labels to examine if they remain the same or change throughout the studied time period, and if they change, whether any long-term change patterns can be identified. It restricts the focus to employment advertisements published in 1980 and after. This limits the longitudinal perspective to a certain extent, but it is necessary to do so because the number of employment advertisements and codes in preceding years is too small to generate meaningful statistics.³

Figures 3a and b display the development and presence of second-order categories in the identity presentations. They reveal that identity expressions are not constant and that the choice of labels varies with time period as some labels are characterized by a long-term declining trend whereas others are characterized by a long-term increasing trend.⁴ Specifically, eight types of labels (youthful, future oriented, dignified, industrious, established, successful, important, and competitive) decline noticeably from making up 75 percent of the total number of labels in 1980

to barely 30 percent in 2015. Although the slope is somewhat uneven, the overall long-term declining trend is consistent and unequivocal.

By contrast, 12 labels (rational, customer oriented, collaborating, unconventional, well reputed, quality oriented, employee oriented, value oriented, workplace oriented, innovative, socially responsible, competent) are characterized by a general, consistent, long-term increase in this time period. Whereas the 12 labels do not represent more than 25 percent of the total in 1980, their share increases to almost 70 percent by 2015. Again, the slope is not linear, but the general proliferation pattern of these labels is considerable. These findings lead to the suggestion that organizational expressiveness is not a constant symbolic activity, as the labels seem to be substituted over time. The difference in the number of labels (Figure 3a) that are declining versus those that are increasing (Figure 3b) further confirms the observed pattern in Table 3, suggesting that organizations gradually rely on a greater number of labels to express who they are and what they stand for.

Insert Figures 3a and 3b about here

Figures 4a and b illustrate the overarching trends as they relate to the distinction between utilitarian and normative expressions of organizational identity. Figure 4a shows an important development over time: Utilitarian labels tend to decline in importance relative to the total number of identity labels whereas normative labels increase correspondingly. This is to say, towards the later part of the observation period, organizations increasingly tend to portray themselves as employee oriented, value oriented, workplace oriented, customer oriented, collaborative, innovative, and so on, while they to a lesser extent claim to be competitive, competent, industrious, dignified, and established.

It is possible to identify the last five years towards the millennium shift as the period when normative identity labels begin to acquire an increasingly larger share of the labels. This shift is gradual and by no means complete, as utilitarian self-expressions continue to be the most prevalent towards the end of the observation period. Nevertheless, Figure 4a points to an important long-term change in the choice of labels used to convey organizational identity.

Insert Figures 4a and 4b about here

The last part of the analysis directs the attention to the self-narratives as the coding unit. The question is, do the overarching identities implicated by the narratives also change over the years, and if so, which identity do they move away from, and which identity do they move towards? In order to answer this question, proportions of the utilitarian, neutral, and normative identity were computed for each year. Figure 4b shows the respective proportion of self-narratives coded as normative, neutral, and utilitarian, depending on the type of label dominating the text. Narratives predominantly expressing a utilitarian identity dominate throughout the period, although the beginning of a declining tendency can be observed after 1995. Whereas 86 percent of all texts tended to have a stronger utilitarian emphasis in 1980, the corresponding share has dropped to 55 per cent by 2015. By contrast, texts with a predominantly normative focus nearly doubles in prevalence from 11 per cent in 1980 to 21 in 2015. Neutral self-narratives also display a growing trend, but in a less systematic way.

Overall, the longitudinal patterns observed in the study suggest two different types of changes occurring to the expressed identity labels. One type of change is that some labels increase in prevalence whereas others decline. Normative labels are characterized by an increasing trend whereas utilitarian labels tend to decline. This change suggests some degree of

substitution of labels whereby new labels replace old ones, and furthermore, that organizations seek to be associated with labels conveying new meanings over time. The other change is that the portfolio of labels becomes broader over time as organizations rely on an increasing number of labels to express who they are and what they stand for. In other words, organizations possess and express a larger vocabulary of labels to describe their identities towards the end of the observation period compared to the beginning. This finding also confirms an increasing degree of expressiveness over time.

As such, the findings provide insights about change in the contents of organizational expressiveness by showing how overarching identities conveyed through the narratives gradually change. Although the utilitarian identity is the most frequently implicated at any given time during the observation period, it declines towards 2015. The difference between expressed utilitarian, neutral, and normative identities becomes less significant over time.

Discussion

How organizations define themselves is one of the “great debates” in organizational identity research (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). The findings from this study offer insights into this debate by addressing the official definition and expression of organizational identity. Most simply, the study allows us to look at the phenomenon of organizational expressiveness longitudinally and retrospectively. By pinpointing the onset of expressiveness to the late seventies and the beginning of the eighties, and further demonstrating a growing emphasis on organizational identity expressions in employment advertisements from then on, the study provides solid longitudinal empirical support to the statement that organizations have become increasingly expressive in the last decades (Hatch et al., 2000; Schultz & Hatch, 2008).

Beyond confirming this trend, the findings make several contributions to organizational identity and expressiveness research. First, the study provides insights into *how* the contents of expressiveness change. The study identifies long-term changes in the labels and in their

associated meanings through substitution and a gradual expansion of the total portfolio of identity labels. Although internally expressed organizational identity labels could remain constant while their meanings change over time, as suggested by the social constructivist and the social actor perspectives on organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002), this is not the case for externally expressed labels. The findings point to a dynamic relationship between external organizational identity labels and their apparent meanings: If a label is substituted, a new meaning is likely to accompany it. If we accept that internally expressed labels remain constant, as assumed by the social constructivist and social actor perspectives, then the relationship between the contents of externally expressed labels and their meanings appears to be different from the relationship between internally expressed labels and their meanings. The implication is that organizational identity and expressiveness research should distinguish more clearly between internal and external labels of identity and acknowledge their different features in empirical research.

The gradual substitution of labels observed over time, however, should be interpreted with caution. The pool of organizations submitting their job advertisements can be expected to change significantly during the 35-year observation window of this study. Many organizations typically go out of business, some are merged with others, and multiple new organizations are founded during such a long time period. In addition, macro-level changes concerning technologies, such as the IT revolution and the internet explosion, occurred during this specific period and facilitated a high founding rate of new organizations with different missions, business models, and self-understandings than previous ones. As a result, the substitution of labels over time does not necessarily reflect the discarding of old labels, it could simply occur because new organizations rely on a different set of labels than 'old' organizations because they are different than previous organizations in many respects and understand themselves, and want to be understood, in a different way.

Second, the study contributes to a better understanding of the overarching identities implicated by expressed identity labels. The emerging transition from utilitarian to normative labels across different types of organizations represents a pattern that stands in contrast to the social constructivist and social actor perspectives. If organizational identity is a unique phenomenon, as envisioned by these perspectives (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2000), then changes in externally expressed labels should not be expected to occur as general patterns observable at the aggregate level. Yet the findings imply that particular identity labels have a tendency of multiplying in numbers, thereby contributing to increased homogeneity between organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and conversely, that other types of labels have a tendency of declining in prominence. Instead of choosing from an infinite supply of unique identity labels, organizations converge around a limited set of labels with similar apparent meanings (cf. Glynn & Abzug, 2002).

These findings are consistent with the institutional perspective on organizational identity, extending previous studies that point to the existence of legitimate, macro-level pressures for identity labels in the institutional environments (Glynn & Abzug, 1998, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007). They do so by drawing attention to legitimate vocabularies for organizational identity self-narratives and, specifically, their contents and apparent meanings. Any change in the contents of external identity communication can at least partly be explained by institutionalized notions of appropriate vocabularies. If these vocabularies change over time, organizations too must adapt expressed identity labels in order to conform with prevailing standards and maintain their organizational legitimacy. In this study, imitation patterns and macro-level change seem to have induced organizations to increasingly drop labels such as dignified, established, successful, important, and competitive, instead making them rely on other – and seemingly more legitimate – labels such as customer oriented, collaborating, well reputed, employee oriented, and innovative. This tendency of increasingly choosing ‘soft’ identity labels expressing a normative identity is consistent with macro-level trends described by various

authors as the emergence of the post-industrial society (Inglehart, 1990), experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011) or dream society (Jensen, 1999) in which individuals move away from utilitarian self-descriptions (Buchmann & Eisner, 1997) and where organizations define themselves in relation to the well-being of their stakeholders (cf. Brickson, 2005). Embedded in these societies, organizations are less likely to choose utilitarian identity labels and more likely to choose normative labels because prevailing norms for appropriate organizational identities induce them to do so.

Normally, from the institutional perspective, similarities in macro-level patterns generally lend weight to the conclusion that external organizational representations are the result of ceremonial conformity, decoupled from internal realities (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For the present study, this interpretation implies that external labels are different from internal labels. Taking this argument further, it could be inferred that external labels are strategic (and perhaps even insincere) expressions designed solely for image-building purposes, having little or no association with members' understanding of their own organization. The methodology employed here, however, does not permit such a conclusion. It is thus an open question whether external labels generally reflect an internal reality or not. Still, it should be noted that the distinctions between 'actual' and desired identity, and between identity, culture, and image, are arguably blurred, complex, and dynamic (Gioia et al., 2000; Morsing, 1999; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Any identity expression concerning "what should we be" and "how do we want to be perceived" is not produced independently of current identity understandings and organizational culture, nor is it simply a reflection of institutional pressures or logics: It belongs to an ongoing process of developing and maintaining an identity as an organization and of understanding what the organization is "really about" (Christensen, 1995; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2000, 2002; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Even if the identity expressions studied here are at the aggregate level, this line of reasoning suggests that organizations should generally not be expected to put any identity "out there" when

expressing themselves to external audiences – it will probably always have *some* relationship with member understandings.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

Research has typically examined organizational identity change at the organizational level of analysis. By studying change in external organizational identity labels over a 35-year period, this study has contributed new knowledge about how organizational expressiveness changes over time at the aggregate level. It found that expressed labels change in terms of their prevalence, suggesting that some labels display increasing long-term trends whereas others display declining trends. It also found that organizational expressiveness changes with respect to the composition of labels, suggesting that organizations gradually rely on an increasing portfolio of labels to express who they are and what they represent. These changes gradually weaken the symbolic expression of a utilitarian identity whereas the normative identity is strengthened.

Given the limitations of this study relating to its aggregate level focus, the findings point to a need for future empirical research to examine the linkages between internally and externally expressed labels in a longitudinal light. Whereas the present study offers data on changes in external identity expressions, a more complete understanding of change in organizational expressiveness can only be obtained by combining a longitudinal focus on the labels used by organizational members with the labels used for official self-presentation purposes. Doing so could provide insights into how ‘actual’ organizational identity relates to communicated identity over time, thereby answering important questions of whether external identity communication is merely image-building and whether the presence of image-building has grown or declined in importance over the years. It could also allow for direct comparisons between internally and externally expressed identity labels and their associated or apparent meanings.

Another potential future research avenue is to follow the external identity communication of a group of organizations over time. Such a design would allow for more

robust conclusions regarding change because the changes could be traced to specific organizations. It would also allow for a better understanding of how strategic differentiation relates to organizational expressiveness and how it changes over time, which is a topic not addressed by this study.

Finally, the finding that organizations gradually want to be associated with a normative organizational identity offers stimulating opportunities for future research. Examining this transition could help resolve the causes and broader implications of this change but also identify and explain potential category differences concerning the tendency to express a normative identity between, for example, public, private, and non-profit organizations, or between different groups within these categories.

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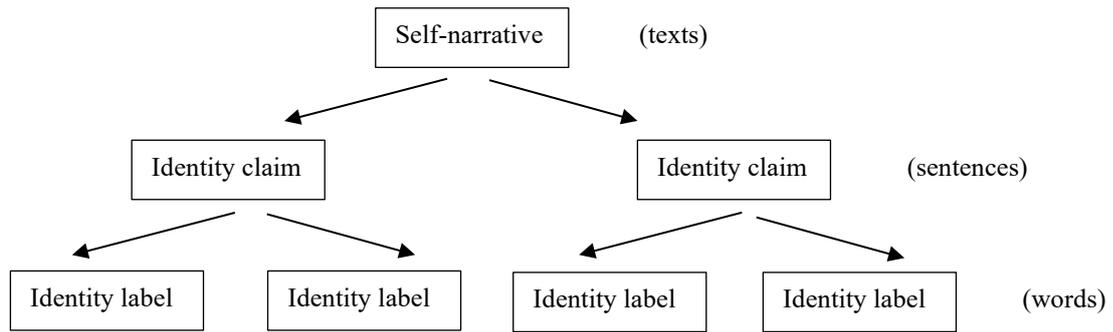


Figure 1: Organizational expressiveness components in verbal self-narratives.

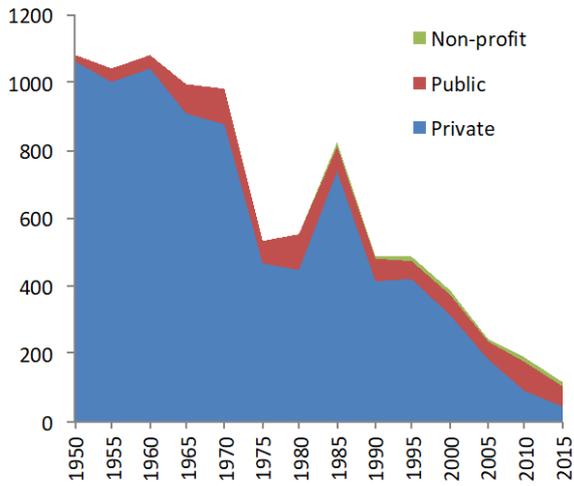


Figure 2a: Number of employment advertisements in the database by sector and time-period. N=8998

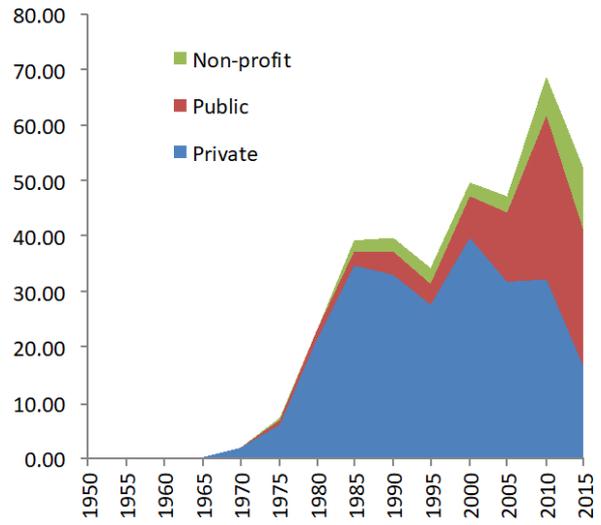


Figure 2b: Proportion of employment advertisements containing a self-narrative, by type and time-period. N=8998

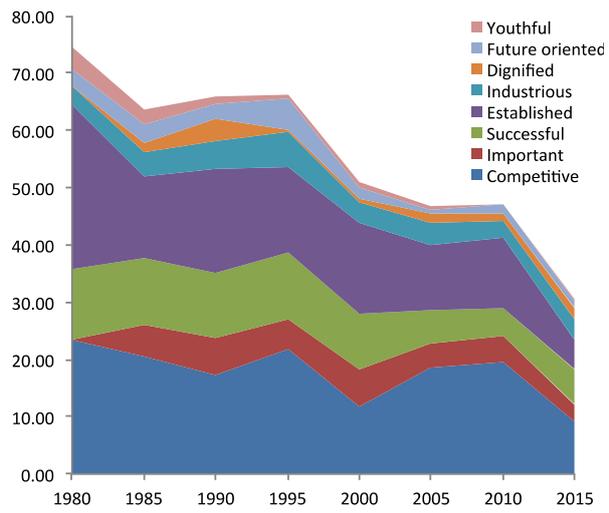


Figure 3a: Labels declining in prevalence. N=1870

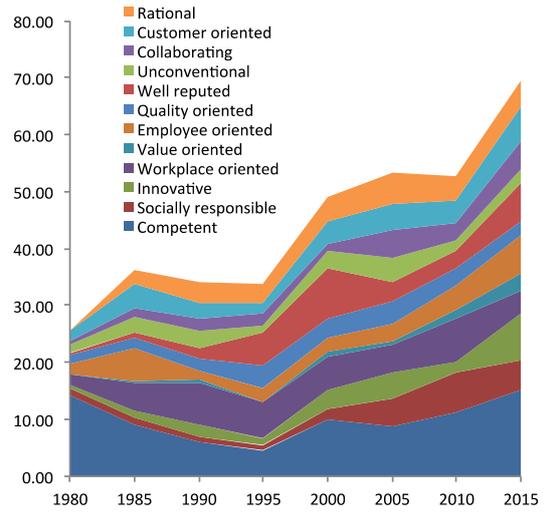


Figure 3b: Labels increasing in prevalence. N=1394

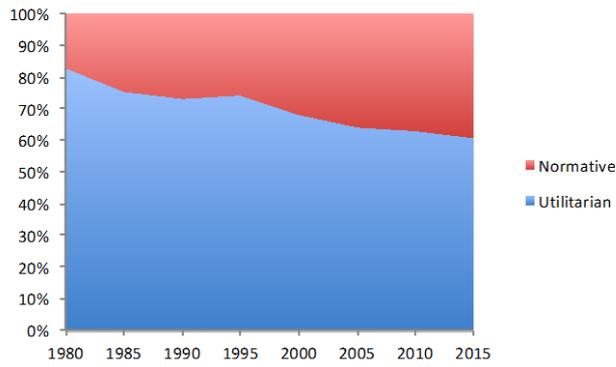


Figure 4a: Labels coded as utilitarian and normative over time (N=3264).

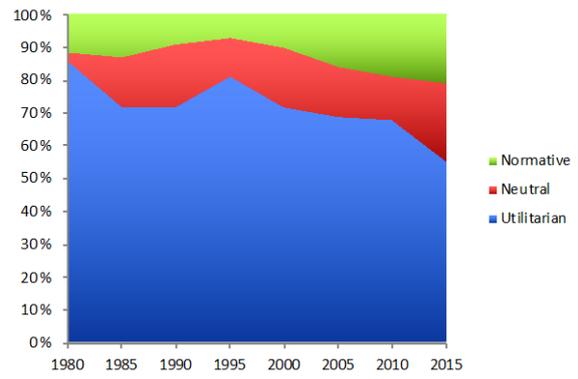


Figure 4b: Self-narratives texts coded as utilitarian, neutral, or normative over time (N=1307).

Table 1: Descriptives	
Advertisements	8998
Self-narratives	1307
Words	73932
Average number of words per narrative	54
Identity labels	3264
Average number of identity labels per narrative	2.49

Table 2: Data structure

First-order codes	Second order categories	Overarching themes	
Leading, largest, great achievement or responsibility, better than others, competitive	Competitive	Utilitarian	
Experienced, competent, specialist, research intensive, high tech, professional, knowledge-based, increasing employees' knowledge	Competent		
Well established, international, well connected	Established		
Prepared for the future, has a bright future, future oriented, development oriented, change oriented	Future oriented		
Important, has important customers, selling or providing famous brands	Important		
Producing good results, creating value, large producer, continuously improving, hard-working, rational production, engaged, hands-on	Industrious		
Long history of operation, oldest, rich in tradition	Dignified		
Selling or providing quality products, exclusive, quality oriented, world-class	Quality focused		
Integrated, goal oriented, results oriented, effective, efficient, ambitious, modernizing, optimizing, strategic, well-organized	Rational		
Financially sound, in high demand, growing, expanding, successful	Successful		
Reliable, strong, solid, well-reputed, attractive	Well-reputed		
One of a kind, untraditional, independent	Unconventional		
Young, modern	Youthful		Normative
Collaboration, team spirit, collaborating with others, collaborating, informal collaboration	Collaborating		
Service oriented, market oriented, customer oriented, mutual respect, clear, connecting people, helpful, friendly, open, caring, flexible	Customer oriented		
Innovative, dynamic, renewing, progressive, active, entrepreneurial, visionary, creative	Innovative		
Facilitating personal development, employee oriented, decentralized, gender balanced, providing medical services, providing job security, offering flexible work hours	Employee oriented		
Value oriented, principle oriented	Value oriented		
Contributes to society, environmentally friendly, serving the country, providing equal opportunities, solidarity, affirmative action, helping underprivileged groups	Socially responsible		
Facilitating a good work environment, nice work atmosphere, exciting workplace, diverse workplace, compassionate work environment, inspiring work environment, fun work environment	Workplace oriented		

Table 3: Frequencies

Years	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Number of advertisements	129	323	193	168	192	114	130	61
Number of labels	212	706	468	432	535	334	381	196
Number of labels per advertisement	1.64	2.18	2.42	2.58	2.78	2.92	2.93	3.21

¹ Brickson (2005) relies on a third category; a relational identity orientation, which emerges from the normative (collectivistic) identity. In this research, this category is integrated into the normative identity type.

² The large reduction in the total number of advertisements, as well as the reduction in advertisements posted by private sector organizations, should be seen in connection with the growth of online and mobile IT technologies after the year 2000. As a result of this development, a number of alternative opportunities for posting employment advertisements in competition with traditional newspapers are available. With a population that has become increasingly larger users of online and mobile IT technology, hiring organizations must post their employment advertisements where they believe they can reach the most relevant target groups, which, today, probably means spreading them to more outlets than before.

³ For example, the number of codes was 30 in 1970 and only 1 in 1965 and 1960.

⁴ To determine whether a tendency is increasing or declining, a scatterplot trend line was calculated for each label.