The Role of Organizational Identity on Strategic Management Applications

Tuba Bozaykut Buk

Abstract The new millennium started with evident hints that strategic management is one of the most required skills for business success. Previous research has shown that as a competitive advantage factor, organizational identity affects strategic thinking, planning, decisions and actions. Based on the past research, at the core of this chapter lies the idea that organizational identity can act as a detector for identifying strategic issues and can be an influential factor in developing strategies in response to change. Moreover, a strong organizational identity is a valuable organizational capability that can create competitive advantage through its urge to adapt to changes. Conversely, a loose identity is weak in detecting changes or threats directed to the organization. Thereby, the chapter focuses on the interaction between identity and strategy when organizations face challenges in the turbulent business environment.

1 Introduction

The vital role of strategic management on business operations, performance and success becomes apparent especially in managing changes that arise in the environment. As the logic of strategic thinking requires adaptation to external change, it is pivotal for firms to develop the ability to cope with uncertainties and changes in the environment. Accordingly, firms can use various strategies for responding to changes or crises they face. Strategies can be either directed outward at industry dimensions or inward toward the internal processes of the firm (Chattopadhyay et al. 2001). As an internal capability, the identity of an organization is a facilitating factor in achieving competitive advantage and a "strategic tool" for positioning in the market (Stensaker 2015). Hence, identity is not an issue that can be separated from the strategic thinking of the organization.

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In relation to environmental adaptation, organizational identity is regarded as one of the important determinants of strategic action and provides a base for strategic responses to environmental pressures (Hatum et al. 2012). Past studies point out that organizational identity affects strategic issue interpretation, strategy formulation, strategy making and strategic action. Therefore, the concept of organizational identity within the strategic management field is described as a "generator for strategies, a screen, a constraint, a filter, an enabler and an influence on strategy", thereby constituting a competitive advantage factor (Barney et al. 1998: 166).

This chapter develops a framework for understanding the role of organizational identity as an influential organizational feature on strategic thinking and planning in responding to changes or challenges. For this aim, firstly, the significance of the concept of identity and its definitions are briefly explained. Then, the chapter continues with a focus on the relationship between identity and strategy. Finally, the interplay between identity and strategy in times of change is discussed in order to provide a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of strategy and identity.

2 Organizational Identity

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1978), individuals define themselves according to various self-categorizations such as age, gender or religious beliefs (Ashforth and Mael 1989) and form collective identities based on social categorizations. Similarly, organizational identity is related to a sense of belongingness in organizations. Organizational membership is associated with organizational identity formation, but the main bond that links members to the organization is the emotional and cognitive attachment through which members are tied to that organization (Greene 2004).

Albert and Whetten (1985: 265) defined the concept of organizational identity as the "central, distinctive and enduring characteristic of an organization". Dutton et al. (1994) contribute another perspective on this definition with their emphasis on the cognitive link formed between the individual and the organization. To Dutton et al. (1994), organizational identity is deeply constructed in the minds of the members, such that organizational identity is the sum of the individualistic evaluations concerning the general conduct of the organization.

In the literature, many authors refer to organizational identity as an answer to the question, "who are we as an organization?" (Stimpert et al. 1998). What's more, identity "provides a lens through which managers interpret organization-level issues and conceive and disseminate strategic impulses to address them" (Hatum et al. 2012: 306). Thereby identity influences both members' and managers' interpretation of themselves, their organization and the environment.

Focusing on the identity construction process, Berger and Luckmann (1966) pointed out the association between social processes and identity formation. To Berger and Luckmann (1966), an organization's social structure and social exchanges play a significant role in its identity construction. From the perspective of social identity theory, the relationship with stakeholders as a pivotal social exchange form is acknowledged as one of the main determinants of organizational identity construction (Brickson 2005). Surpassing individual perceptions, an organization's social identity refers to "socially shared conceptions that define a common interpretive framework on group history or a shared sense of future direction" (Postmes 2003: 8).

Organizational identity is also constructed through transmitting organizational values that are directly linked to the identity. That's to say, identity is constructed through dialogues with other reference groups (Välimaa 1998). Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) examined organizational messages and put forward the idea that organizations strategically communicate certain values for public acceptance. The ways of developing a distinguishing identity, to Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994), are to advertise, to convey and to be an advocate for certain values that are to be associated with the identity. Bick et al. (2003: 839) supported the idea that organizational identity is "the communication of the core values, philosophy, and the strategy of the organization through the delivery of its products and/or services". Hereby, the construction of organizational identity refers to a dynamic process of discourse exchanges between insiders and outsiders (Coupland and Brown 2004).

3 The Interplay Between Identity and Strategy

To function as an organizational guide in times of turmoil, the strategic management philosophy should cover "the cognitive terrain of the organization" (Fiol and Huff 1992: 278). One of the major constituents of the cognitive terrain is organizational identity. Organizational identity is also noted as one of the strongest organizational capabilities that link members to the organization and shape their attitudes and behaviours.

Barney's (1991) resource-based view of firms is among the first approaches to emphasize internal capabilities as competitive advantage factors. To Barney (1991), firms can achieve competitive advantage by developing strategies based on internal resources that are "rare and can't be imitated or substituted". Similarly, Barney's (2001) later study showed that firms that develop their strategies based on intangible assets have better performances compared to those which develop their strategies based on tangible assets. To be competitive, then, organizational identity can be approached as one of the most valuable intangible assets for strategy formulation.

In Fig. 1, Barney et al. (1998) display the interaction between organizational identity, strategy and action. The reciprocal interdependence can be seen in the figure; both identity and strategy affect organizational action and are affected by it.

To Ashforth and Mael (1996), as an answer to the question of "who we are", organizational identity indicates the firm's service area and industry. In addition, organizational identity influences the strategic thinking that guides the organization

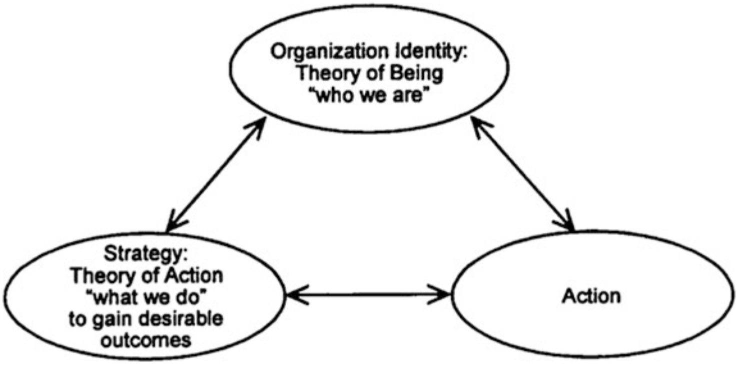

Fig. 1 The link between organizational identity and strategy (Barney et al. 1998: 114)

for competitiveness in the industry. In other words, by defining the organization's central and distinctive features through identity, the core competence and the attributes for attaining competitive advantage are also determined. For instance, a bank identifying itself as a participation bank indicates that it will operate in a different environment than a bank positioning itself as a commercial bank.

In their article on identity and strategy, Ashforth and Mael (1996: 19) explain the relation between strategy and identity as in the following lines:

> Identity can serve as a wellspring for strategy, although identity and strategy are reciprocally related such that identity is enacted and expressed via strategy, and inferred, modified, or affirmed from strategy. Identity and strategy are claims that are articulated and negotiated by organizational stakeholders and members.

Ashforth and Mael (1996) also propose that the relation between identity and strategy is dynamic and bidirectional for three reasons. The first one is "the principle of equifinality", which suggests that "for realizing a given organizational identity, the firm can use various strategies and not stick to a given strategy" (p. 33). Secondly, for many different reasons such as weak identity, different self-interests or lack of organizational resources, the relationship between identity and strategy can be loosely coupled. The third reason, according to Ashforth and Mael (1996: 33), is the fact that an organization can reflect its identity though strategy and/or "may infer, modify, or affirm an identity from strategy and the responses it evokes". As an example, a financial institution that specializes in giving loans to entrepreneurs may identify itself as a "microloan" organization.

Similar to Ashforth and Mael, Corley (2004: 1157) in his study of organizational spin-off empirically shows that top management is more concerned with outsiders' perception of the organization, considering organizational identity as "a driver of organizational strategy". Top managers see organizational identity in relation to the organization's strategy and purpose and "as something that needed to adapt with the demands and constraints placed on the organization by outside forces" (Corley 2004: 1169).

Another point of identity and strategy relation is that they are significant resources for organizational control (Ashforth and Mael 1996). Members' identification with the organization means that they embrace the targets, beliefs and values of their organization as their own and act according to the organizational identity and values. Accordingly, identity and complementary strategies can be taken into account as "substitutes for costly control systems" (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 49).

In their study on the application of strategic management principles regarding identity management, Kruger and Mama (2012) propose a holistic model incorporating business strategy formulation with identity management strategy formulation. They approach identity as a "strategic resource, which can lead to improvements in an organization's internal processes and value chain" (p. 156) and argue that identity implementations should be "an integrated part of strategy formulation" (p. 158). The authors propose that a firm should first set its vision, mission and objectives, state its business question, analyse its competitors and industry, understand the threats and opportunities in the external environment and its internal strengths and weaknesses and then construct its identity.[1]

Another aspect of the relation between identity and strategy is that the lack of a strong identity can have negative consequences on strategic planning (Ashforth and Mael 1996). The inability to construct an appropriate organizational identity would mean that the firm has difficulties in finding the right path to follow or may follow too many paths, wasting organizational resources. Another handicap is to have multiple identities construed in the organization that would create various identities and lead to conflicts of interest. In such scenarios, members who adopt a sub-identity would not follow the main objective of the organization. Further to that, as identity and strategy merge into each other, they become more "institutionalized in structures and processes" (Ashforth and Mael 1996: 36). Therefore, it is vital that there is coherence between identity and strategy.

4 Organizational Identity, Strategy and Change

The emergence of an unexpected external situation and a "mismatch between the corporate strategy and this new environmental trend" means that a company is facing a "crisis situation" (Appelbaum et al. 2012: 292). A time of crisis implies that changes will be experienced both in the environment and in the organization. Likewise, change can be defined as deviations "from the present state and moving to an unknown future state" (Fox-Wolfgramm et al. 1998: 87). On the other hand, organizational identity stands for "who we are", and because changes can distort perceptions, it may not be so easy to answer that question in a time of crisis. What's

[1] Also see Kruger and Mama's (2012) recommendations for five steps to guide the application of strategic management principles in identity management implementations.

more, it is possible for firms to revise their strategies toward the external or internal environment, which in turn may affect organizational identity.

To Dutton and Penner (1993: 92), organizational identity defines what strategic issues are of top priority for firms and acts as a "cognitive filter" influencing members' participation in the strategic change processes. Identity affects individual perceptions and may influence members to act in a certain way. When a change in strategies is in question, members may approve or disapprove of the process depending on the rationale of the organizational identity. In other words, organizational identity may determine the members' willingness to participate in the changes. Dutton and Penner (1993: 93) also propose that if members notice an organizational identity-related issue that requires attention, they will be more motivated to put the issue on the strategic agenda of the firm.

In a similar manner, Kovoor-Misra (2009) asserts that perceptions related to an identity change can vary depending on members' perception of the crisis situation. If members evaluate the crisis as an opportunity, they won't oppose the change and will participate in the process. Conversely, if they see the crisis as a threat, then they will disapprove of the process and won't support the identity change, wanting to stick to the values of the existing identity. Kovoor-Misra's (2009: 494) findings showed that in threat situations, individuals will be more interested in perceptions of "who we are" and in opportunity situations "who we could be". The pattern of reaction would be the same for strategy changes. If members see the strategy change as a threat to organizational identity, or if they see the change as something that would conflict with the principles of organizational identity, they may not accept the strategy change in the firm. This is called "identity resistance": because of the change, a gap between current identity and the envisioned identity would occur and members would not leave the current identity (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Fox-Wolfgramm et al. 1998).

Besides identity resistance, firms can witness "virtuous resistance". Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) describe virtuous resistance as the perception of evaluating the change unnecessary as it is "already a part of the identity". To provide an example, Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) examine a defender and a prospector bank's reactions to regulatory pressures arising with the enactment of a Community Redevelopment Act. Echoing Greenwood and Hinings (1993), Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) evaluate organizational identity as a determinant factor that influences responses and adaptation to the changes in the environment. To the authors, strategic orientation is another determinant of either complying or resisting environmental pressures. The defender bank identifies itself as a "small, and safe hometown bank" and firstly perceives the Act as a "big city issue" and not an issue for their concern (p. 106). When the Act is introduced, the prospector identified as one of the leaders in the market similarly doesn't respond to the Act, but for completely different reasons. For the prospector, the resistance results from identity resistance. The identity of the bank does not fit the Act's demands. On the other side, the prospector bank's non-response relies on the idea that the bank is at its best in fulfilling the institutional pressures by leading others; hence, there is no need for a change (virtuous resistance). Based on their findings, Fox-Wolfgramm

Table 1 Summary of the previous studies

Author	Subject	Methods	Findings
Dutton and Penner (1993)	Importance of Organizational Identity for Strategic Agenda Building	Literature review	Organizational identity affects strategic change through its links to the processes of agenda setting Organizational identity systematically has effects on the perception of issues and their motivation to invest in and act on the issue
Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998)	Examination of a "defender" and a "prospector" bank's strategic adaptation to the Community Redevelopment Act across 7 years	Case study and printed documents and records from banks, regulatory agencies and community groups were used	Strategic orientation of organizations operates as "an interpretive structure resulting in (1) different reasons, based on the organization's identity and image, for complying with or resisting institutional pressures for change and (2) different patterns of change in organizational structures and systems" (p. 102).
Kovoor-Misra (2009)	Perceived organizational identity (POI) on organizational members' perceptions and behaviours during crisis and change situations	Case study	Individuals' POI will "differ based on whether threat or opportunity is perceived during crisis and change situations The scope of POI change is also dependent on perceptions of identity cost and the identity gap" (p. 494).
Ravasi and Phillips (2011)	Strategic change and its congruent with organizational identity	Case study	Identity management is an important organizational mechanism that preserves the congruence between identity and strategic changes There is a significant "connection between identity claims and beliefs and strategic projections" (p. 103).

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Author	Subject	Methods	Findings
Appelbaum et al. (2012)	Organizational crisis and organizational change management	Literature review and a case analysis	Identification of firms has influences on strategic issue interpretation and strategy development processes
Hatum et al. (2012)	Organizational identity and its links with the processes of issue identification, strategic impulse definition and implementation	Longitudinal and comparative case studies	Organizations with strong identities are able to forecast relevant changes. They can answer back with definite adequate strategic responses Having a loose identity can cause misinterpretations of industry trends and strategic paralysis
Chatterji et al. (2015)	The competition between US banks and credit unions in the aftermath of the financial crisis	Secondary data on banks and credit unions from 2004–2012	Credit unions that had distinct identities from banks increased their market share after the crisis
Gerstrøm (2015)	Organizational identity constructions in times of death	Interviews with 20 organizational members of a bank that went bankrupt Documents were complemented by secondary interviews with other members of the financial industry	Legacy organizational identity and death are affected by each other. The narrative constructed by members can cover a legacy organizational identity transformation and can include several identities conflicting but combined into a coherent narrative

et al. (1998) propose that identity is more influential in sustaining change than success (Table 1).

Similarly, Ravasi and Philips (2011) assume that beliefs related to organizational identity influence how members project their organizational image to outsiders. To Ravasi and Philips (2011: 105), these projections, called “strategic projections”, are central to organizational image and should be consistent with the strategic actions of the firm. The threats and opportunities in the environment, known as “strategic issues" (Ansoff 1975), are mainly detected by top management or the decision-makers in the organization. The interpretation of strategic issues as threats or opportunities is influenced by the features and values of the firm's organizational identity. Based on organizational identity, events in the environment are evaluated as threats or opportunities; on the basis of these evaluations, strategic actions are taken (Sternad 2012).

Another feature of organizational identity is its degree of power in supporting strategy changes. Ashforth and Mael (1996: 53) emphasize Thomas and Gioia's (1991) finding that a strong organizational identity provides the base for standing still when faced with external threats. Similarly, various studies show that a strong organizational identity is an influential facilitator for strategy formulation and action. As a clear example, Hatum et al. (2012) empirically show that a strong organizational identity confirms adaptation to severe shocks. Hatum et al. (2012: 328) describe the strength of an identity as "the permanence or dilution over time of core organizational values", and in line with their definition, they evaluate organizations that can keep their original value labels permanent over time as having strong identities; conversely, they define organizations that lose their original value labels over time as having loose identities. The findings of Hatum et al. (2012: 306) imply that "strong identities managed to adapt in an evolutionary (i.e. gradual, non-turbulent) manner; conversely, organizations with loose identities could only adapt in a revolutionary (i.e. sudden, almost violent) way for survival". Hatum et al. (2012) also find that identity plays a meditating role in issue recognition, strategic impulse definition and implementation in adapting to external challenges. On issue recognition, organizations with strong identities would have a clear vision and evaluate external challenges in a realistic manner. Those with loose identities would have difficulties in detecting changes and responding accurately. About strategic impulses, Hatum et al. (2012) argue that strong identities are advantageous in taking actions over the loose identities that can be myopic to changes. In implementing the selected strategies, Hatum et al. (2012: 328) evaluate strong identities as "the psychological anchor organizations required to perform smooth, evolutionary transitions".

On the other hand, a strong identity can also result in "inertia or myopia" by limiting or preventing optimal responses to external threats or opportunities. A strong identity can be a factor in slowing down or hampering strategic changes, as in the prospector bank example of Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998). Bouchikhi and Kimberly (2003) define this situation as an "identity trap" because of its surpassing dominance over changes (Roch and Boivin 2006: 1). In her recent case study on the identity of a bank that went bankrupt during the global economic crisis, Gerstrøm (2015) shows how the positive perceptions of the organizational identity of the bank as "robust and risk-adverse" act as an identity trap and lead members not to see the crisis as a serious threat that would affect their bank. As a consequence, the bank couldn't respond to changes or revise its strategies and collapsed as a result. Another example of the effect of identity perceptions on strategic actions can be found in Appelbaum et al.'s (2012) study on the organizational change management of two firms, Lehman Brothers and Paulson & Company, during the global financial crisis.

The study shows how two firms differed in their identification, strategic issue interpretation and strategy development in responding to the financial crisis. To Appelbaum et al. (2012: 297–300), Lehman Brothers' evaluation of itself as "too big to fail" and its assumption that there was no need for a change in their operations resulted in its collapse; conversely, Paulson & Company "was able to turn the crisis into an exploitable opportunity through proper identification and reaction".

As a final recent example, Chatterji et al. (2015) in their study on the influences of the recent financial crisis on market share for American banks and credit unions provide empirical evidence that credit unions gained market share from banks because of their traditional identities that are distinct from common banks. Chatterji et al. (2015) wrote that regulations in the field created an identity change for credit unions. Credit unions became more like banks and started to attract mainstream customers instead of narrowly defined social groups. To Chatterji et al. (2015) credit unions that address a particular group and have distinct identity features (such as single-bond credit unions) attract more customers and hence gained market share compared to common banks addressing everyone after the crisis. Based on their findings, Chatterji et al. (2015: 29) made the assumption that to the extent that credit unions keep their identities distinct from banks, they would benefit from legitimacy threats to banks. Conversely, to Chatterji et al. (2015) if they try to evolve their identities and resemble banks, they may lose their competitive advantage, become "indistinguishable" and be fragile and harmed further in future crises.

While new developments and changes occur externally, firms may need to change or revise their inner structure and organizational identity as a strategy to adapt to these changes. This can be also seen in the case of firm acquisitions, mergers, joint ventures, etc. The change process may be overcomplicated as identity clashes or identity tensions may occur (Appelbaum et al. 2012). In order to manage identity challenges during crises, it is important for managers to think strategically and implement strategies that would help to end these tensions. Therefore, managing identity clashes and tensions appropriately has a vital importance in overcoming the fatal effects of the challenges.

5 Conclusion

Leaving big question marks on their legitimacy, environmental challenges bear witness to the collapse of many institutions and enterprises. However, organizational identity as a valuable organizational capability can embrace and support the reformation of strategic thinking and activities in responses to the changes. Also, the interaction of identity and strategy is critical as both have their own ways of responding to changes in the environment. Moreover, both constitute the cognitive terrain of organizations in shaping the perceptions and behaviour of those involved in a firm's activities. Strictly speaking, identity and strategy influence each other, and the alignment of identity and strategy helps firms to reach organizational targets in a more efficient and effective manner.

The significance of organizational identity comes forth when challenges arise, as it can either help an organization to adapt to changes or act as a hindrance to change efforts. As it has a strong impact on perceptions and acts like an organizational detector, organizational identity highlights environmental challenges as strategic issues to be handled. Thereby, it acts as a sensing element for the organization in reading environmental changes and labelling them as strategic projections. In other aspects, identity can also act like a resistance mechanism to changes if there is a gap between the actual or projected identity and the strategies. Therefore, it is difficult to manage identity and strategy congruently, and further studies are needed to elucidate the relationship between the two concepts.

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