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THE EXTERNAL PRESENTATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY ORIENTATION: A STUDY OF EMPLOYMENT ADVERTISEMENTS 1975-2015

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study analyzes organizational identity labels and their implicated organizational identity orientations. The data consist of 1348 self-presentation texts retrieved from employment advertisements published in a major Norwegian newspaper over a 40 year period and containing more than 3,000 identity labels. The study shows that the expression of organizational identity orientation is an organization-level phenomenon, that the contents of labels and orientations change over time, and that identity labels should be understood as malleable and dynamic. More specifically, identity orientations change (1) in terms of their composition, suggesting that the same identity orientation is communicated through different labels over time, and (2) in terms of their relative prevalence, suggesting that organizations may shift the emphasis from one orientation to another over time. Implications for the expression of organizational identity orientation, the contents of external identity communication, and the nature of organizational identity labels are discussed.

Keywords: Employment advertisements, organizational identity, organizational identity change, organizational identity labels

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INTRODUCTION

Faced with growing pressures to manage reputation, build unique organizational brands, and attract customers and talented employees, modern organizations increasingly seek competitive differentiation 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; Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000). When doing so, they rely on labels describing how they understand themselves and how they want to be seen by others. They are also likely to select labels that convey their identity orientations toward external stakeholders, revealing whether they see themselves as separate and distinct from their stakeholders (corresponding to an "individualistic" identity orientation), as dyadically connected to them (corresponding to a "relational" identity orientation), or as connected to them through a larger group membership (corresponding to a "collectivistic" identity orientation) (Brickson, 2005, 2007).

Limited knowledge exists on the expression of organizational identity orientation in formal settings and how it develops over time. To date, 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), or internal conflict (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Glynn, 2000). Accordingly, the definition of organizational identity communication proposed by Schinoff, Rogers, and Corley (2016, p. 222) focuses on the micro-level matters of "conveying organizational identity labels and their respective meanings to organizational members." In comparison with the attention given to internal organizational identity expressions, the call made by Schultz et al. (2000) almost two decades ago to study how organizations make formal external claims about themselves has yet to generate a significant amount of attention. Some progress has been made on this subject with respect to the determinants (Brickson, 2005) and effects (Bingham, Dyer Jr, Smith, & Adams, 2011) of organizational identity orientation, and to organizational identity labels in the form of organizational names (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2006, 2007). However, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the types of labels used when organizational identity is communicated externally in formal settings and the identity orientations implicated by these labels.

Furthermore, recent research has significantly improved our understanding of organizational identity change, effectively resolving the debate on whether identities are rigid or fluid (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013, p. 126). The conclusions of these studies, however, pertain predominantly to micro-level understandings of identity, not directly to changes in the external presentations of organizational identity. A dominant assumption in the literature has been that labels remain constant and only the meanings associated with them change (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). This tendency to focus on the meanings held by organizational members rather than the labels themselves leaves a gap in our understanding of the extent to which the labels used in external identity communication change, impoverishing our knowledge of the large-scale trends in recent decades in how organizations want to be seen in relation to external stakeholders.[i]

Addressed to these research gaps, this study examines over 3,000 organizational identity labels retrieved from over 1,300 employment advertisements published between 1975 and 2015 in a large Norwegian newspaper; *Aftenposten.* The study tracks variation over time and across sectors and organization types in identity labels and their implicated identity orientations. Through this focus, the paper highlights the connection between organizational identity orientation, external organizational identity communication, and organizational identity labels, providing insights into the identity orientations with which organizations seek to be associated. Such insights are important because identity orientations are not reflected in identity labels as merely a “surface” or “image” phenomenon; rather, they may have profound implications for the organization’s relationship with important stakeholders. As observed by Brickson (2007, pp. 577-578), knowledge about how relations with others are reflected in identity claims allows us to “predict and to understand organizations’ policies, practices, and behaviors toward employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, alliance partners, and communities.”

This study contributes to existing research in three ways. First, and most simply, the study extends previous findings concerning organizational identity orientation as an individual-level phenomenon (Brickson, 2005, 2007). This research finds that these orientations are strongly reflected in the official identity claims organizations make to external stakeholders, making the expression of organizational identity orientation an organization-level phenomenon. Second, a key contribution is to reveal the changing contents of external identity communication and, consequently, how the nature of organizations’ assumed relations with their external stakeholders evolve. The study identifies two types of change, one related to a shift in the internal composition of labels used to express a particular identity orientation, and an other related to a gradual shift from one identity orientation to an other. Third, and relatedly, in contrast to previous studies emphasizing the enduring nature of labels, the findings from this study suggest that identity labels should be understood as malleable and dynamic, more likely to undergo gradual rather than rapid or no change.

The paper proceeds by outlining theoretical underpinnings. Next, after reviewing the methodology used to investigate the research challenges stated above, the findings are reported along with a discussion of their implications for existing theory and research. The paper closes with future directions for research at the interface between external organizational identity communication, organizational identity labels, and organizational identity orientation.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Organizations' self-presentations before external stakeholders represent a prominent aspect of organizational identity. Defined as "those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are central to the organization's character or 'self-image', make the organization distinctive from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having continuity over time" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 125), organizational identity evolves in relation to "others" as a relational phenomenon by nature. Organizations develop their identities through the relationships they have with others and cannot know their defining features unless they compare themselves to these others (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Bridging the concepts of "us" and "them" (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), organizational identity implicates questions about how organizations define the relations they have with others and the way in which they seek to influence others' perceptions of them.

How organizations define themselves is one of the "great debates" in organizational identity research (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). Contributions approach the debate from various perspectives including the social actor (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002), institutional (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2006, 2007), and social construction perspectives (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010; Gioia et al., 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011), each with their distinct but partly overlapping views on identity.

Focused on organization-level expressions, the paper at hand takes the social actor perspective on identity as its starting point. From this perspective, labels of identity are "organizational self-definitions" claimed by organizational elites in sense-giving processes (as opposed to sense-making processes emphasized by the social constructivist perspective (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p. 435)) in attempts to influence external and internal perceptions of the organization (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Glynn, 2000). These self-definitions include one or more identity labels, which in turn implicate one or more identity orientations (Brickson, 2005). It follows that officially expressed labels of identity not only inform us of how organizations view themselves as a collective and how they want others to see them, they also inform us of how organizations understand themselves in relation to relevant others.

Organizational identity orientation refers to “the nature of assumed relations between an organization and its stakeholders (Brickson, 2005, p. 577). Initial conceptualizations of this construct suggested that organizations either saw themselves as independent of other entities advancing their own self-interests, or as social entities promoting the interests of a larger group. This dichotomy is evident in, for example, Albert and Whetten’s (1985) distinction between utilitarian identities emphasizing for-profit, monetary, or economic focused self-understandings, corresponding to an individualistic identity orientation, and normative identities emphasizing a variety of ideological, religious, cultural, aesthetic, and non-monetary focused self-definitions, representing a collectivistic identity orientation. An individualistic identity orientation is expressed through labels such as “aggressive”, “ambitious”, “profit-oriented”, and “status conscious”, while a collectivistic identity orientation entails labels such as “community-oriented”, “promoting a cause”, “politically active”, and “providing a public service” (Brickson, 2005). Later research highlighted the need to distinguish between collectivistic and relational identity orientations, the latter promoting relationships as an end in themselves rather than serving a collective purpose. A relational identity orientation comes to expression in labels such as “caring”, “accommodating”, “considerate”, and “trustworthy” (Brickson, 2005).

The external communication of identity orientation

Previous works have analyzed determinants and consequences of organizational identity orientations. Brickson (2005) examined how the statements of employees concerning their organization reflected identity orientations that depended on whether the organization is production-based or a professional firm. The same study also found that firms serving businesses are more individualistically oriented than firms serving nonprofits, public agencies, and public consumers, and that production-based firms structured as cooperatives are more collectivistically oriented than non-cooperatives. Other works have been more interested in examining how collectivistic identity orientations motivate participation in corporate social responsibility initiatives (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Bingham et al., 2011; Richter & Arndt, 2016; Wickert, Vaccaro, & Cornelissen, 2017). Notwithstanding these scholarly efforts, organizational identity orientation is a rather neglected and insufficiently explored empirical area of research.

Identity orientation is revealed in statements of organizational identity (Brickson, 2005). Such statements are not only made by organizational members in informal settings, they are also expressed in formal settings to external stakeholders. When organizations “put themselves out there” in this way, they can be expected to carefully select labels to project an identity with which they want to be associated and that can help them acquire goodwill from external stakeholders. Employment advertisements, for example, are likely to deliberately avoid identity claims with negative connotations, even of these refer to central, distinct, and relatively enduring organizational characteristics. As a result, employment advertising can be conceptualized as “an attempt to manage (or manipulate) organizational images” (Rafaeli, 2000, p. 220). Part of this image management, according to institutional perspectives, may be that organizations select labels to signal “ceremonial conformity” with broader cultural prescriptions (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 40). The emphasis on the conscious construction of a desired identity also connects externally expressed labels with approaches used in marketing, public relations, and corporate communication literatures where identity is ”created as part of a corporate plan by communication strategists” (Dolphin, 1999, p. 43) who craft and professionally convey the organization’s desired characteristics (Alessandrini, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Together, considerations such as these have led scholars to conceptualize organizational self-presentations as activities belonging to an “image order” rather than “substance” (Alvesson, 1990), potentially reducing identity to illusions (Gioia & Corley, 2002).

This is to say, externally communicated identity labels and their implicated identity orientations might not reveal much about how organizations actually see themselves in relation to others.

It would be too simplistic, however, to assume that external identity communication in formal settings is only about image-building or institutional ceremonialism with institutional environments with little or no correspondence with members' perceptions of their own organization. The distinctions between "actual" and desired identity, and between identity, culture, and image, are blurred, complex, and dynamic (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Morsing, 1999; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Identity claims concerning "what should we be" and "how do we want to be perceived" mutually constitute an ongoing dynamic process of understanding what the organization is "really about" (Christensen, 1995; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2000, 2002; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Projected identities and official claims and labels are constrained by the cultural heritage of organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), by what organizational members' think their organization is and can be (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), and by a "deeper set of organizational changes involving shifts in strategy, structure, and leadership" (Glynn & Marquis, 2007, p. 18). The reverse relationship between understandings and claims has also been suggested: Identity labels used in claims, also those aimed at external audiences, may provide a spill-over effect on internal members' conceptualization of who they are and what they stand for (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Morsing, 1999). Projected desired identity labels, for example, may induce members to understand themselves in new ways. Identity understandings affects identity claims, but claims also affect understandings (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

This dynamic relationship between understandings and claims blurs the boundaries between internal and external definitions of organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). As a result, organizations should generally not be expected to put just any identity "out there" nor reflect just any identity orientation when presenting themselves to external audiences. Their expressed identity orientations are partly a function of how organizational members see themselves as an organization, partly how organizational elites want others to see the organization, and partly a reflection of institutional environments. This pragmatic approach is consistent with recent studies arguing for the need to apply multiple perspectives in order to understand the formation and development of organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Change in labels and orientations

The literature has accepted that organizational identities evolve (Gioia et al., 2013) and, perhaps, are in constant motion (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). However, attention to temporal changes in externally communicated organizational identity labels and their associated identity orientations is rare, and has not yet taken the form of a dedicated longitudinal study.

Current contributions written from the social construction perspective tend to address change in meanings associated with organizational identity labels rather than change in the labels themselves (Chreim, 2005; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). As noted by Gioia et al. (2000, p. 75), "it is deceptively easy to presume that identity is stable or enduring. The durability is in the labels, however – not in the interpretation of the meanings that make up the ostensible core." A similar conceptualization of change is found in works inspired by the social actor perspective (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Here, contributions presuppose that identity labels change "rarely and never easily" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p. 434), and more generally that "if it changes, it is not identity" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 135).

This skepticism pertains predominantly to internally expressed identity labels. For externally expressed identity labels and their implicated orientations, changes are arguably more likely to occur. First, organizational legitimacy inevitably arises as a concern when organizations use overt claims to reveal how they see themselves in relation to their stakeholders. In order to attract job applicants, for instance, organizations are likely to rely on labels deemed acceptable by potential employees. From the institutional perspective, these labels are symbols that can be expected to change in response to changing demands in an organization's institutional environments (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). By implication, when institutional logics and "rules of the game" change, organizations adapt by changing their identity labels more or less concurrently. This does not mean that labels only serve to generate ceremonial conformity, as noted earlier. Still, changes in identity labels could manifest as patterns reflecting the dominant institutional logics of the times, meaning that organizations express how they see themselves in relation to stakeholders and how they want to be perceived in this regard in different ways in different time periods. Second, changes in identity orientation may result from identity change across categories (e.g. from "bank" to "insurance", or from "train company" to "transportation company"). In these cases, organizations are likely to modify the labels they use to describe themselves to others in order to match a certain level of coherence expected from social actors (King et al., 2010; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Otherwise they face the risk of misrepresenting themselves, which potentially could lead to miscategorization. From the social actor perspective on identity, the latter is a problem because legitimacy depends on identity labels signaling membership in de facto well-known, established identity categories (King & Whetten, 2008). In such change processes, radical transformations of organizational identity may entail "a whole new vocabulary" (Fiol, 2002, p. 664) to express the new identity and its orientation towards stakeholders, even if it takes stakeholders a while to become aware of the changes (Tripsas, 2009).

METHODS

Data collection

The labels and their associated identity orientations examined in this research are retrieved from employment advertisements. Their contents are an underexplored area of research, perhaps because employment 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, these advertisements tend to include noteworthy information about organizational identity. Many employment advertisements include a short text in which the hiring organization describes who it is. These descriptions represent an important aspect of the hiring organizations’ external identity communication.

The digital archive of the Norwegian national newspaper *Aftenposten* served as sampling frame. It was chosen for this study not only because of its accessible comprehensive database dating back to the newspaper’s origin in 1860, but also 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 preserving the longitudinal structure with which to observe temporal patterns. The procedure yielded a total of 8,898 advertisements. However, the period from 1950 to 1975 generated almost no self-presentation texts and was excluded from the analysis. Similarly, advertisements posted by recruiting companies were deleted from the database because they do not include *self*-presentations. These procedures resulted in 1,348 self-presentation texts from a period of 40 years (1975-2015) (Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The 1,348 self-presentation 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 digitized text (the latter for issues after 2000). Each self-presentation text was then classified by year and organization type, i.e., production-based or sales- and services-oriented, as well as distinctions between private sector and public sector organizations.[ii] [iii] Almost all public sector organizations are categorized as sales- and services-oriented. Those that are not are classified as regulatory, although this code was eventually dropped from the analysis due to insufficient observations.

Qualitative content 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 is a systematic type of analysis particularly well suited to study verbal communication. Words, sentences, or paragraphs (i.e. the coding units of the analysis) are classified into the same category based on similarity of meaning. Similarity may be determined based on the precise meaning of multiple coding units (e.g. when words are synonyms), or on coding units sharing the same connotations (e.g. when coding units express a concern for the same issue). Thus, qualitative content analysis identifies themes or patterns, aiming to describe "the meaning of qualitative material" (Schreier, 2012, p. 1)

Of interest in this study are the labels included in the hiring organizations' self-descriptions. 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 individual members. However, in this study, pinpointing these labels and their meanings necessitated considerable data reduction due to the sheer amount of labels. More specifically, coding proceeded in three steps: The first step involved data reduction through a thematic analysis whereby data-driven first-order codes were assigned to labels in the form of characteristics, adjectives, values, and other self-describing claims (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). This step followed the notion of open coding whereby codes were developed during the data analysis rather than before (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The codes are "text-centric", with most *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, I coded the statements "CGG Veritas is a leading international geophysical company" and "CGG Veritas has the world's largest and most versatile seismic fleet" as "leading". In a different case, I coded the statement "The Supreme Audit Institution shall ensure that the public use of resources and values be in accordance with Parliament's regulations" as "contributes to society". In-vivo coding was used when texts included relevant core values, adjectives, and other self-referential terms. The process resulted in a coding scheme of 140 first-order codes assigned to a total of 3,341 labels, corresponding to an average of 2.47 labels per self-presentation text (Table 1).

In the second step of analysis, I relied on axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to reduce the codes into a more manageable set of second-order themes. 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, I coded "leading", "largest", and "better than others" (first order codes) as "admirable" (second order), and "service oriented", "market oriented", and "customer oriented" (first order codes) as "customer oriented" (second order). In-vivo codes conveying the same meaning were merged into the same second-order theme. After numerous iterations, the procedure resulted in a total of 20 aggregate, second-order themes (Table 2).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In the final coding step, I applied Brickson's (2005) scheme to the 20 second order themes on the basis of the latter's correspondence with the individualistic, collectivistic, and relational identity orientations, respectively (Table 3). For example, I classified the second order theme "employment oriented" as implicating a relational identity orientation. The theme "successful" was classified as expressing an individualistic identity orientation. Labels subsumed under "socially responsible" implicated a collectivistic identity orientation.

A second coder, unaffiliated with the research project, coded two reliability samples of the data. The first sample consisted of 67 randomly selected text segments from the data corresponding to five percent of the full set of texts. The coder assigned Brickson's three categories directly to labels in these segments as a check of the data reduction process without knowing the author's coding. Intercoder agreement was 94% (kappa =.84). The second coder then applied Brickson's categories to the 20 second-order themes as a check of the final coding step, again without knowing the results of the author's coding. Intercoder agreement was 80% (kappa=.59), but increased to 90% (kappa=.80) after negotiation.

FINDINGS

Looking at some of the more general 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-presentation text declines from the 1980s and the 1990s towards 2015,[iv] the average number of labels per advertisement nearly doubles from 1980 to 2015. The increase occurs despite a relatively constant number of words per self-presentation text throughout the period. 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 identity labels 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 expensive. In both cases, the findings underline the willingness of organizations to prioritize external identity communication when seeking to attract job applicants.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figures 1a and b display the development and presence of second-order labels (themes) in the identity presentations. They reveal that some labels are characterized by a long-term declining trend while an increasing trend can be observed for others.[v] More specifically, eight types of labels (young, future oriented, mature, industrious, established, successful, important, and admirable) decline noticeably from making up almost 80 percent of the total number of labels in 1975 to barely 30 percent in 2015. Although the slopes vary to a certain extent, the overall long-term declining trend is evident. 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 21 percent of the total in 1975, their share increases to almost 70 percent by 2015. Again, the slopes follow somewhat varying patterns, but the overall long-term proliferation of these labels is striking. The increase in the number of labels from Figure 1a to 1b from 8 to 12 further confirms the pattern from Table 3, suggesting that organizations gradually rely on a greater number of labels to express who they are and what they stand for.

FIGURES 1A AND B ABOUT HERE

Also noticeable is the difference in the *meaning* of the labels expressed in the figures above. The difference represents a gradual but persistent change in identity expressions in the 40 year period from 1975 to 2015. Declining labels predominantly identify the hiring organization as an impressive and admirable entity, promoting utilitarian values and "hard" achievements related to success, production, competition, and work. All these expressions reflect an individualistic orientation, relying on such first-order labels as "leading", "largest", "competitive", "better than others", "well established", "international", "well connected", "hard-working", "hands-on", "growing", "producing good results", and "world-class", among others. Even if some labels reflecting an individual identity orientation (subsumed under "rational", "unconventional", "well reputed, "quality oriented", "innovative", and "competent") display an increasing trend (Figure 1b), the others contribute to an overall, consistent long-term decline (Figure 2). From representing over 90 percent of all labels in 1975 and 1980, labels implicating an individualistic identity orientation drop to 70 percent by 2015.

All identity labels implicating relational and collectivistic identity orientations display increasing trends (Figures 1b and 2). These labels tend to portray the hiring organization as possessing "soft" characteristics related to customer orientation, social responsibility, employees, the workplace, and collaboration. A large range of first-order labels is involved including "team spirit", "mutual respect", "contributes to society", "friendly", "caring", "value oriented", "offering a nice physical work environment", "open", "collaborating", "compassionate work environment", "exciting workplace", and so on. Such labels are almost insignificant before 1985, representing less than 10 percent of the total expressed labels in 1975 and 1980 (Figure 2). After 1980, their prevalence increases gradually but consistently. By 2015, labels implicating a relational identity orientation represent almost 25 percent of all expressed labels, thereby almost tripling their share of all labels since 1980. In contrast, the collectivistic identity orientation undergoes a more modest increase from being non-existing in 1975 to 5 percent in 2015 after peaking at 7 percent in 2010. This is in contrast to the enormous emphasis placed on corporate social responsibility in recent years in areas such as marketing and branding (Bertels & Peloza, 2008). Together, the relational and the collectivistic identity orientations account for almost 30 percent of all labels in 2015.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figures 3a, b, c, and d compare changes across business areas and sectors. They suggest notable differences between public and private organizations, and between production-oriented and sales- and service-oriented concerning their expression of identity orientations, thereby adding important nuances to the previous figures.[vi] For private organizations (Figure 3a) and for production-oriented organizations (Figure 3c), the individualistic identity orientation is by far the most prevalent throughout the entire period, never accounting for less than 80 percent of their labels. The relational identity orientation is only modestly represented for both, and the collectivistic identity orientation never has much of a presence. These findings suggest that the external identity communication of private sector and production-based organizations is relatively constant, predominantly relying on labels implicating the individualistic identity orientation.

For public and sales- and services-oriented organizations, the tendencies are different (Figures 3b and d). The individualistic orientation is, somewhat surprisingly, the most prevalent throughout the period for both of these types organizations. Public organizations are, as social actors, inherently concerned with the greater good and could therefore be expected to emphasize the collectivistic identity orientation more in their self-presentations. Conversely, sales- and services-oriented organizations base their success on the relations they develop with customers and could be expected to emphasize the relational identity orientation more. However, the individualistic identity orientation's lead on the relational and collectivistic orientations is progressively narrowed down towards 2015. For public organizations, the relational identity orientation accounts for almost 35 percent of all labels communicated in 2015. The tendency is almost the same for sales- and services-oriented organizations. Together, the relational and the collectivistic identity orientation account for about 45 percent of all labels communicated by public organizations in 2015, up from 28 percent in 1985. For sales- and services-oriented organizations, the relational and the collectivistic identity orientations account for 33 percent of all labels in 2015, up from 9 percent in 1980. These findings point to a notable change in the external identity communication of public organizations and sales- and services-oriented organizations, as they include increasingly larger amounts of labels reflecting a relational orientation over time.

FIGURES 3A, B, C, AND D HERE

DISCUSSION

My aim with his research was to understand how identity orientations are expressed in formal settings to external stakeholders and how these expressions change over time. The findings revealed organization-level identity orientations displaying both general change patterns as well as more sector-specific patterns in the time period under study. In this section, I discuss the contributions of the study to the literature on organizational identity as they relate to our understanding of the expression of organizational identity orientation, the contents of external identity communication, and the nature of organizational identity labels (for an overview, see Table 4). Before doing so, however, an important limitation in the data must be acknowledged. Any observation of change in identity labels and orientations occurs at the aggregate level. The study focuses on identity expressions in employment advertisements regardless of who the organizations are, making no attempt to examine whether the expressions identified in later observation years come from organizations that are the same as those expressing their identities in earlier years. Although the study detects changes in identity expressions, it cannot determine *which* organizations change their expressions. This limitation has implications for the conclusions that can be drawn and will be properly taken into account in the following discussion.

The expression of organizational identity orientation

To date, much of the research on organizational identity has taken a micro-level view, examining how organizational members understand their own organization, the labels they use to express it, and the meanings they associate with these labels. This focus is typical for studies relying on the social constructivist perspective. The current study, however, shows that neither organizational identity labels nor identity orientations should be understood as exclusively micro-level phenomena. Both are likely to be expressed at the organizational level as part of organizations' (or organizational elites') external identity communication. Whereas organization-level external identity communication has been examined by others (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007), this study is one of the first to extend the research on organizational identity orientation to external identity communication.

The identity labels studied in this research are communicated in the competitive setting of securing resources from the external environments in the form of qualified and talented human resources. Because identity orientations are implicated by the expressed labels in this setting, the findings suggest that orientations have a role in organizations' attempts to strategically manage stakeholder perceptions. More specifically, not only do organizations compete on the basis of who they are and what they stand for, they also compete on the basis of their assumed relations with stakeholders. As such, the findings extend prior works highlighting the increased expressiveness of organizations in recent years (Schultz & Hatch, 2008; Schultz et al., 2000). Expressing an individualistic orientation, for example, can be effective as a way of impressing external audiences because it showcases organizations as highly rational, competitive, and independent social actors in pursuit of efficiency and profit. As stakeholders increasingly evaluate organizations socio-politically on the basis of their congruence with efficiency and 'actorhood' values (Meyer & Bromley, 2013), stakeholders are likely to confer legitimacy to the extent that they see organizations as individualistically oriented. Similarly, communicating a relational identity orientation can be effective in stimulating the emotional attachment of stakeholders. This could be particularly relevant in a time when the proliferation of reputation management and branding requires organizations to connect with their stakeholders on an emotional level (Hill, 2007; Jensen, 1999; Kunde, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Finally, a collectivistic identity orientation has the potential to generate moral legitimacy based on stakeholder perceptions of whether organizations "do the right thing" or have the right priorities (Suchman, 1995). These potential benefits of expressing specific orientations in external identity communication give organizations incentives to "put themselves out there".

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The contents of external identity communication

Despite a growing scholarly interest in the expression of organizational identity in recent years, the contents of external identity communication has been a rather neglected area. The tendency of analyzing the micro-level aspects of organizational identity has left a gap in our understanding of how organizations communicate their identities in formal settings to external stakeholders, the identity orientations they reflect in their communication, and how these orientations vary between different types of organizations. In addition, the lack of longitudinal studies limits our understanding of change in the contents of these self-presentations.

Against this backdrop, the study reveals a multitude of labels used to express organizational identity, and change as well as continuity in the implicated identity orientations. The findings suggest that organizations, as social actors, generally portray themselves as individualistic and independent, seeking to impress on the basis of production, competitive ability, and achievements when relying on their identities to attract potential job applicants. However, the findings also suggest that expressed identity orientations vary depending on sectoral and business contexts. This is in accordance with the study by Brickson (2005), who already identified important differences in orientations (expressed by members) relating to industry, client type, and cooperative structure. When expressed in official external identity communication, identity orientations are more individualistic for production-based and private sector organizations, and increasingly more relational for sales- and services-oriented organizations and for public organizations. It follows that externally expressed identity orientations should not be understood as constant. The findings suggest that changes in identity orientation could occur in two ways: First, whereas one particular identity orientation may be dominant over time, the labels used to express it may vary depending on temporal context. In the observation window of this study, for example, the individualistic identity orientation is initially expressed through labels subsumed under such second order categories as “established”, “industrious”, “important”, “admirable”, and “successful”. These labels gradually lose ground towards the millennium shift. In the later part of the observation window, the same identity orientation is expressed through values and characteristics such as “rational”, “competent”, “innovative”, “well reputed”, and “quality oriented”. Whereas the first labels are declining in prevalence, the latter ones are increasing. Although the labels are different, and therefore imply a change in the contents of the organizational identity communication, they reflect the same identity orientation.

Second, the findings suggest that organizations also change the *relative* emphasis on identity orientation over time. One identity orientation could be reflected more than others at one point in time, and a different orientation could be more dominant at a later point in time. Overall, when considering the external identity communication as it develops over time in general (Figure 2), a general increase in the prevalence of the relational identity orientation at the expense of the individualistic identity orientation was observed. A radical shift in one identity orientation to an other was not observed, although the increase in the relative emphasis on the relational identity orientation is particularly noticeable for sales- and service-oriented organizations, and for public organizations. For sales- and service-oriented organizations, this change seems to be in accordance with their identities as social actors (Whetten & Mackey, 2002), in contrast to production-based organizations, as they deal directly with customers by nature and have much to gain from addressing the well-being of their customers in their communication. For public sector organizations, the shift in emphasis from an individualistic towards a relational identity orientation could occur because public organizations have come to be seen as “machine” bureaucracies over the years, therefore facing greater reputational challenges than private organizations (Wæraas, 2014, 2015; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). To compensate and attract the most qualified job applicants, they may seek to “re-enchant” themselves through identity communication implicating a relational identity orientation (Suddaby, Ganzin, & Minkus, 2017). The implication of these observations is that category identities held by organizations define the labels they use in their external identity communication (Whetten & Mackey, 2002).

The nature of organizational identity labels

A dominant part of the organizational identity literature has, as noted earlier, tended to understand identity labels as constant whereas only the meanings attached to the labels change (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). As long as the empirical focus is on meanings attached to labels by organizational members, however, little progress is made with respect to understanding change in the labels themselves. There is a need to examine change in labels used in internal as well as external identity communication, and this study concerns itself with the latter.

It is clear from this study that expressed organizational identity labels do change when observed over time at the aggregate level. The findings show that particular identity labels have a tendency of multiplying in numbers whereas others have a tendency of declining. Different labels may express similar meanings, but observed over time, organizational identity is likely be communicated in new ways over the years with new labels symbolizing new meanings. Taking the limitations of the aggregate research design into account, the findings suggest that organizations, as social actors, not only make formal claims about who they are and what they stand for, they are also likely to redefine these claims over the years (cf. Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The implication is that identity labels should be seen as malleable and dynamic symbols of organizational identity.

However, again, it is important to acknowledge that this study only concerns itself with externally communicated labels. A possible interpretation of the findings is that labels expressed in formal settings to external stakeholders change more easily than labels expressed internally by organizational members. From the institutional perspective, such change could be seen as expected. According to this perspective, externally communicated labels are chosen from available, socially accepted “industry recipes” within a larger institutional context (Glynn & Marquis, 2007). These labels provide legitimacy and ensure that organizations conform with important field logics and prescriptions. When these logics change, communicated labels also change. That said, the observed changes in this study occur rather slowly, and those occurring to private sector organizations and production-based organizations imply little change in identity orientation. More rapid changes from one type of labels to others across all types of organizations, and perhaps back again, could have generated stronger confidence in the idea that organizations design their external identity communication to satisfy shifting demands in their institutional environments. As such, the findings stand in some contrast to studies of other types of externally communicated identity labels, e.g. Glynn and colleagues' studies of organizational names (Glynn & Abzug, 1998, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007), whose changes are interpreted predominantly from an institutional perspective.

The findings from this study further suggest a need to integrate the notion of change in our understanding of social actors' identity labels. Whereas the social actor perspective on identity deemphasizes change in identity labels, organizations inevitably undergo a number of changes affecting their category memberships over such a long time period as the one examined in this research. Potential changes include mergers, acquisitions, product and service developments, and the introduction of new business areas and technologies. New organizational forms and categories are also likely to emerge. These changes have implications not only for members' understandings of their organization and of the labels they use to describe their organization, but also for the official labels that organizations use to express who they are and how they relate to their stakeholders. As social actors, organizations can be expected to seek consistency between their category identities and the labels they use to represent themselves to external stakeholders so as to avoid legitimacy problems arising from miscategorization (King et al., 2010; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Based on this line of reasoning, it would be surprising if identity labels "change rarely and never easily" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p. 434).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Previous studies have examined identity communication in organizations, focusing on the labels individual members attach to their organization in “sense-making” processes and the identity orientations implicated by these labels. By contrast, this study examines the external identity communication of organizations. This type of identity communication is strategic, designed by organizational elites, and communicated in formal “sense-giving” settings to external stakeholders.

The study shows that organizations become increasingly expressive in terms of the number of labels they use to describe themselves in such settings. The contents of their expressions also change, including the implicated identity orientations, albeit in undramatic ways. Some identity labels are gradually phased out, whereas others increase in prevalence. Changes in the relative importance of identity orientations reflected by the labels occur for sales- and services-oriented organizations and public sector organizations, but radical shifts from one identity orientation to an other were not observed. Overall, the findings challenge previous theoretical assumptions concerning change in organizational identity labels when a longitudinal perspective is applied at the aggregate level.

Future research should seek to test the findings from this study using other appropriate outlets for official identity communication, such as organizational web pages, annual reports, e-mails to employees and shareholders, and CEO speeches. Such studies could rely on either a micro or a macro perspective, but the most theoretically interesting plot is probably to see the identity labels of a few specific organizations in a longitudinal light and examine the long-term relationship between internally and externally expressed identity labels. By doing so, it would be possible to determine whether the aggregate level findings from this study are confirmed at the micro level, but also extend them by adding data on the relationship between “sense-making” and “sense-giving” aspects of organizational identity communication.

Future research would also benefit from examining the potential implications of expressed identity orientation for organizations’ policies and behaviors towards their stakeholders. Identity orientations should not, as argued earlier in the paper, be understood as merely image-building or deterministic reflections of institutional environments. Changes in expressed identity orientations generate a need to understand the actual consequences of these changes for both internal and external stakeholders. A shift towards a more relational identity orientation, for example, could be accompanied by more lenient human resource management practices for employees and greater emphasis on developing emotional bonds with customers. The opposite could be the case in a shift towards a more individualistic identity orientation. Such changes are not without significance, and should be investigated more than they have to date.

In sum, there is a need to better understand the relationship between organizational identity labels, organizational identity orientation, and external organizational identity communication. Separate literatures exist for each of these aspects of organizational identity, but very few studies, if any, address all three aspects at the same time. A more focused research effort on all three aspects would give valuable insights into the questions mentioned above.

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Table 1: Descriptives

Number of self-presentation texts	1348
Number of words	73932
Average number of words per text	54
Number of identity labels	3341
Average number of identity labels per text	2.47
Labels by private sector organizations	1065
Labels by public sector organizations	215
Labels by production-based organizations	900
Labels by sales- and services-based organizations	2343

Table 2: Data structure

First-order labels	Second order themes	Identity orientation	N
Contributes to society, environmentally friendly, serving the country, providing equal opportunities, solidaric, affirmative action, helping underprivileged groups	Socially responsible	Collectivistic	85
Leading, largest, great achievement or responsibility, better than others, competitive	Admirable	Individualistic	600
Experienced, competent, specialist, research intensive, high tech, professional, knowledge-based, increasing employees' knowledge	Competent	Individualistic	298
Well established, international, well connected	Established	Individualistic	510
Prepared for the future, has a bright future, future oriented, development oriented, change oriented	Future oriented	Individualistic	87
Important, has important customers, selling or providing famous brands	Important	Individualistic	164
Producing good results, creating value, large producer, continuously improving, hard-working, rational production, engaged, hands-on	Industrious	Individualistic	140
Innovative, dynamic, renewing, progressive, active, entrepreneurial, visionary, creative	Innovative	Individualistic	84
Long history of operation, oldest, rich in tradition	Mature	Individualistic	51
Selling or providing quality products, exclusive, quality oriented, world-class	Quality focused	Individualistic	93
Integrated, goal oriented, results oriented, effective, efficient, ambitious, modernizing, optimizing, strategic, well-organized	Rational	Individualistic	117

Financially sound, in high demand, growing, expanding, successful	Successful	Individualistic	329
One of a kind, untraditional, independent	Unconventional	Individualistic	85
Reliable, strong, solid, well-reputed, attractive	Well-reputed	Individualistic	125
Young, modern	Young	Individualistic	50
Collaboration, team spirit, collaborating with others, collaborating, informal collaboration	Collaborating	Relational	74
Service oriented, market oriented, customer oriented, mutual respect, clear, connecting people, helpful, friendly, open, caring, flexible	Customer oriented	Relational	121
Facilitating personal development, employee oriented, decentralized, gender balanced, providing medical services, providing job security, offering flexible work hours	Employee oriented	Relational	123
Value oriented, principle oriented	Value oriented	Relational	22
Facilitating a good work environment, nice work atmosphere, exciting workplace, diverse workplace, compassionate work environment, inspiring work environment, fun work environment	Workplace oriented	Relational	185
TOTAL			3343

Table 3: Frequencies									
Years	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Number of advertisements	38	129	323	193	168	192	114	130	61
Number of labels	77	212	706	468	432	535	334	381	196
Number of labels per advertisements	2.02	1.64	2.18	2.42	2.58	2.78	2.92	2.93	3.21

Table 4: Contributions of this study

Theoretical issue	Current knowledge	Additional knowledge provided by this study
The expression of organizational identity orientation	Organizational identity orientation is reflected in the identity statements made by employees (Brickson, 2005). The expression of organizational identity orientation is a micro-level phenomenon.	Organizational identity orientation is reflected in organizations' official external identity communication to specific stakeholders. The expression of organizational identity orientation is an organization-level phenomenon.
Contents of external identity communication	Organizational identity orientations vary between different types of organizations as they are expressed by organizational members, but it is not known how contents change over time (Brickson, 2005).	Officially expressed identity orientations vary with time, types of business, and sector. Changes in contents manifest as (1) a shift in the internal composition of labels expressing a particular orientation, and (2) a shift from one identity orientation to an other.
Nature of organizational identity labels	Labels of organizational identity tend to be constant, whereas meanings change (Gioia et al., 2000). Labels are reflections of institutional environments (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2007).	Organizational identity labels expressed by organizations in formal settings change over time. Labels should be understood as malleable and dynamic.

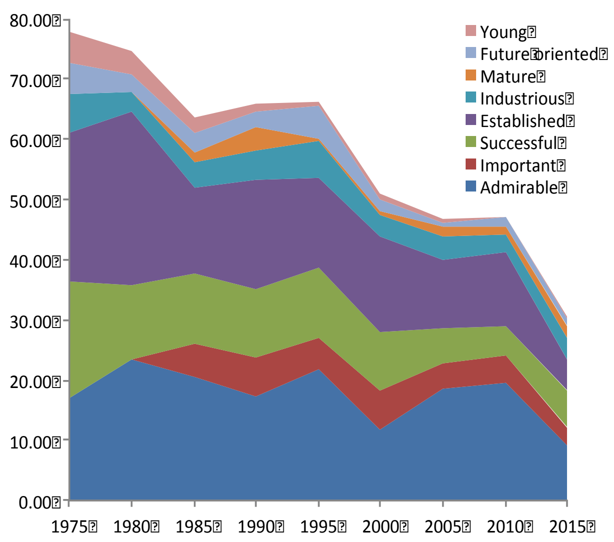


Figure 1a: Labels declining in prevalence. N=1930

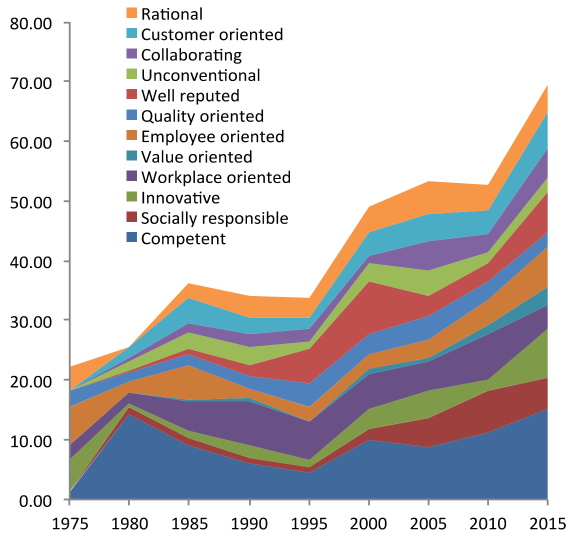


Figure 1b: Labels increasing in prevalence. N=1411

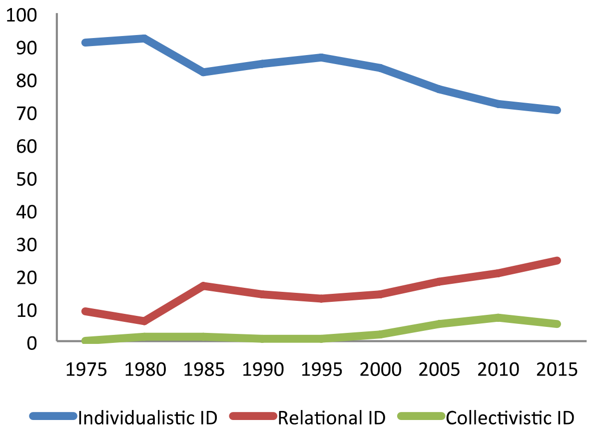
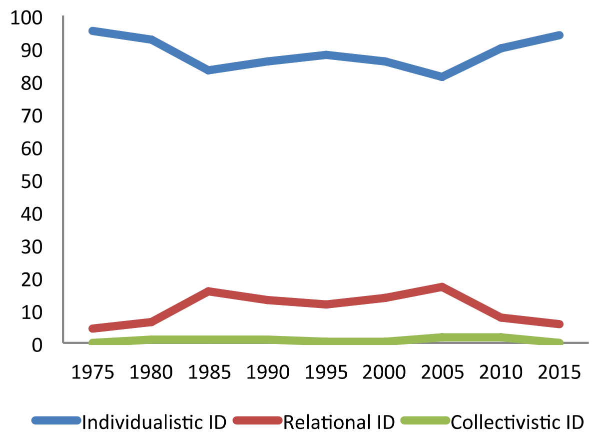


Figure 2: Identity orientations 1975-2015. N= 3341



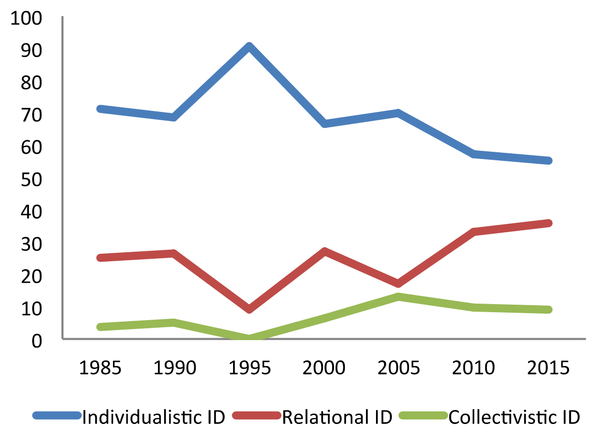
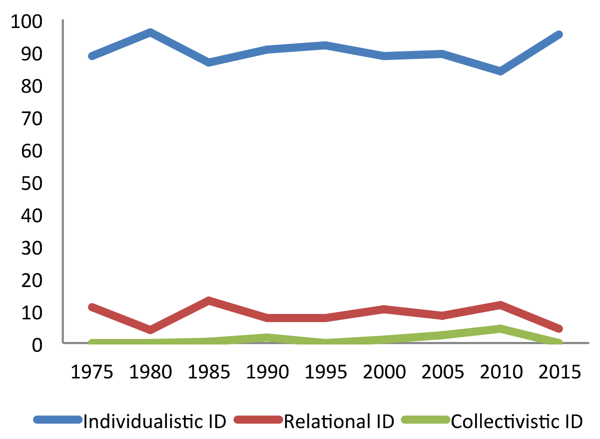


Figure 3a: Expressed identity orientations, private sector organizations. N = 2680

Figure 3b: Expressed, identity orientations, public sector organizations. N = 501



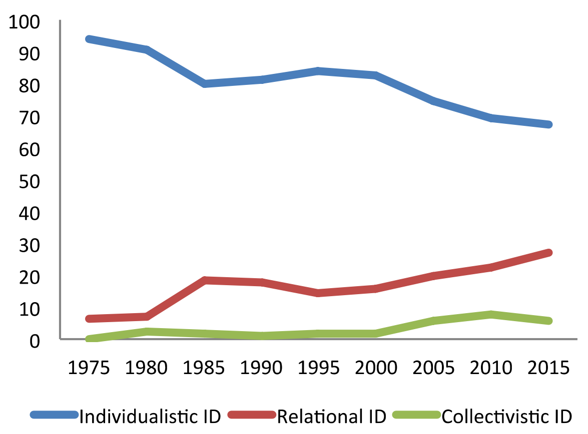


Figure 3c: Expressed identity orientations, production-based organizations. N=900

Figure 3d: Expressed identity orientations, sales- and services-based organizations. N=2343

Notes

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[i] The distinction between "internal" and "external" stakeholders is not always clear. In this study, employees are primarily understood as "internal" and potential job applicants as "external". The distinction is based on organizations' formal boundaries.

[ii] A third category (not pursued here) was added for organizations whose core function was none of the two, or not possible to clarify.

[iii] A category for non-profit sector organizations was initially used, but later dropped from the analysis because of a very low number of observations.

[iv] The dramatic reduction in the total number of ads, 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. In Norway, the most important digital employment sites are finn.no, jobbnorge.no, karrierestart.no, and tjenester.nav.no, in addition to company websites and other sites (e.g. online newspapers). Faced with a population that has become an increasingly larger user 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.

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

[vi] For public organizations, the years 1975-1980 are omitted from the figures because frequencies were missing or too low to generate meaningful statistics.