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Identity resilience in times of mediatization: Comparing employees' with citizens' perceptions of a public organization

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ABSTRACT

Some organizations are highly visible in the media. This media coverage informs employees about others' perceptions of their organization. Consequently, perceived visibility may be related to how employees think about their organization and how they construe organizational identity. This study empirically tests this proposition. It therefore combines aspects of Hatch & Schultz' model of organizational identity dynamics with mediatization to understand to what extent employees are sensitive toward their environment when forming an organizational identity. In two online surveys comparing employees' ($N = 109$) and a representative sample of citizens' ($N = 1417$) views on a highly visible Dutch public organization from the crime sector, we disentangle the identity-reputation process considering the role of perceived media impact. We further compare identity perceptions of two intraorganizational sub-groups. We find that citizens view the organization more positively than employees, which points to a misalignment between employees' and citizens' perceptions of the organization. In one of the two organizational sub-groups, the findings show that the larger the misalignment between construed reputation (how do employees think that citizens perceive their organization?) and actual reputation (how do citizens in fact perceive the organization?), the weaker employees' perception of identity. Furthermore, employees appear to be sensitive toward the media coverage of their organization and citizens' reputation perceptions. Yet, this environmental sensitivity does not impact on their organizational identity. We interpret this as a resilient identity, which represents the maneuvering of employees between their organizational identity perception (what they perceive as central, distinct, and enduring) and external stakeholders' (i.e., the media, citizens) perceptions of the organization that over time positively distinguishes what the organization is and will remain.

1. Introduction

When organizations operate in a media-heavy environment and are constantly in the spotlight, employees can hardly avoid absorbing the news about their organization. Media coverage can exert effects on employees' behavior when they communicate in and about their organization (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). Furthermore, media reports can impact on how employees construct and define their organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Korn & Einwiller, 2013), i.e., on how they define their collective (Pratt et al., 2016, p. 4). Established models of organizational identity assume that organizational identity is formed dynamically (Kopaneva & Cheney, 2019), subject to influences of organizational culture and employees' perceptions of the environment, such as the construed and actual reputations that stakeholders have of

the organization (Foreman et al., 2012; Johnston & Everett, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi, 2016). Media coverage is regarded as one of the most important mirrors of reputation (constructing and reflecting others' judgments) that affect identity perceptions (Dutton et al., 1994; Kjærgaard et al., 2011). Yet, how the environment, i.e., the hybrid media landscape and stakeholders' reputation perceptions, is related to organizational identity, is an open question.

Media can amplify, replicate, reinforce, and co-construct identity perceptions (Albu & Etter, 2016; Kjærgaard et al., 2011), either by taking organizational identity as a news topic, or by covering other organizational topics that implicitly spillover to identity perceptions. Employees also actively co-construct media coverage of their organization by media relations activities (Heckert et al., 2022; Kjærgaard et al., 2011). These media strategies serve to align actual reputation and

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identity (Gioia et al., 2013; Huang-Horowitz, 2015). In addition, media coverage about the organization may trigger employees' sensemaking of their identity perceptions and commitment (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Models of reciprocal effects (Kepplinger, 2007; Korn & Einwiller, 2013) suggest that media coverage directly and indirectly affects the subjects of these reports: Employees face the opinions and attitudes that other citizens have of the organization they work for, which are informed by media coverage. However, organizational identity is fluid and identity perceptions can differ across organizational subgroups (Cornelissen et al., 2007).

There is a burgeoning literature describing mediatization processes, i.e., how organizations adapt to an environment in which the media are a highly relevant institution (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2016; Sandhu, 2009). For instance, organizations introduce offensive and defensive strategies to either attract or avoid media attention (Kantola & Vesa, 2022; Nölleke et al., 2021), because exposure in the news has consequences for organizational (or actual) reputation (Jonkman et al., 2020). Mediatization processes are particularly likely to occur in organizations operating at the center of public attention such as those with a public function (Nölleke et al., 2021).

This study analyses a public organization of the crime sector. Crime and jurisprudence have been considered a classic newsworthy subject since the beginning of mass media (Katz, 1987). In consequence, the activities and professional domain of judicial bodies attract journalistic attention, such that the judicial institution itself becomes a subject of the news, similar to other organizations with public tasks (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). However, existing public relations research on public organizations has focused on government communication in or in the aftermath of crises (e.g., Liu et al., 2018), mediatization (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020), or community engagement efforts (Canel et al., 2022). What we lack is an understanding of how these environmental conditions affect employees' identity perceptions and, relatedly, public relations practices within public organizations that are high on the media agenda.

In this study, we therefore explore the interrelations between employees' *identity perceptions* (who are we, as an organization? (Pratt et al., 2016)), their *construed reputation* (how do employees think that citizens perceive the organization?, Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), and the organization's *actual reputation* (how do citizens perceive the organization?), and how mediatization affects these relations in a public organization that regularly hits the news. Thus, the study tests aspects of the dynamic model of organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) that describes the reciprocal relations between actual reputation, construed reputation, and organizational identity and culture, and extends it by explicitly analyzing the role of the media in affecting the identity formation process. It also pays attention to intraorganizational identity dynamics between two sub-groups within the organization. Therefore, it theoretically bridges and empirically tests dynamic organizational identity conceptions and mediatization theory. The main research question¹ is:

In how far do employees' organizational identity perceptions relate to citizens' construed and actual reputations of a highly visible public organization, and to what extent are employees sensitive toward the media?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Identity-reputation relations in a media-heavy environment

Organizational identity refers to an "essential question of social existence: Who are we as a collective?" (Pratt et al., 2016, p. 3). Following the classical definition by Albert & Whetten (1985), identity refers to characteristics that are central (core) and enduring (lasting over time) to

an organization, and distinguish it from others. Employees of an organization construct the identity of their organization in a social process where they relate their experiences to the attitudes of others in the organization (Kopaneva & Cheney, 2019; Albert & Whetten, 1985). Employees who reflect on the identity of their organization also rely on information and their interpretations of people who are not members of the organization, i.e., outsiders (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). These can be citizens, consumers, or other stakeholders of the organization who are neither members nor employees. In that regard, Whetten & Mackey (2002) make a distinction between "what outsiders think about an organization" (p. 400), employees' perceptions thereof ('how do we think they see us?'), and employees' efforts to influence outsiders' thoughts about their organization.

In their model of organizational identity dynamics Hatch & Schultz (2002) outline how organizational identity and outsiders' perceptions are dynamically interlinked: employees make sense of how they think outsiders see the organization (mirroring; also described by Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), which can affect the organizational culture (reflecting), while culture also makes itself visible in identity perceptions (expressing), and employees engage in identity-based communication to affect others' images of the organization (impressing). While this process is assumed to happen in all sorts of organizational types, organizational identity is unique to every organization requiring an organization-based measurement of identity traits (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Cannato & Ravasi, 2013). 'Mirroring,' as one of the four processes in the model of identity dynamics, thus provides a metaphor to describe one of the relationships of interest in this study: The relationship between employees' construed reputation ('how do others see us?') and employees' organizational identity perceptions ('who are we, as an organization?').

Next to organization-level identity perceptions, identities can also manifest themselves at the level of sub-groups such as teams or departments (Cornelissen et al., 2007). Taking sub-group identity perceptions into account is especially interesting in organizations in which the organization's mission almost inherently causes tensions between different groups, for instance, when they simultaneously try to meet competing values (e.g. Heckert et al., 2021; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012) or when one organizational group is dependent on decisions by another group and can eventually overturn them. Thus, how identity is perceived depends on the hierarchical level of employees and is different across organizational groups (Corley, 2004). Organizations host multiple identities that are not necessarily in conflict with one another but co-exist (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Since these multiple identities all refer to the organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), they are not always perceivable from the outside, also because stakeholders often do not know about different groups within organizations.

Organizational reputation has received considerable academic attention in public relations, but most of the work in this field has focused on perceptions of for-profit organizations (Jacobs & Liebrecht, 2023; Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006; Chun, 2005). Organizational reputation can be defined as "a set of beliefs about an organization's capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences" (Carpenter, paraphrased in: Carpenter & Krause, 2012, p. 26). For organizations with public tasks, four dimensions are stressed, such as morality and legal-procedural aspects (the extent to which the organization exhibits rule-following behavior), and its performance and technical capacities (Carpenter & Krause, 2012). The measurement of public sector reputation or bureaucratic reputation has recently received empirical attention. For instance, both Lee and van Ryzin (2019) and Overman et al. (2020) developed a measurement instrument for this concept. Empirical studies of public sector reputation that take the media into account often conceptualize media as an audience whose perceptions of the organization can be measured (Bustos, 2021).

Following Hatch and Schultz (2002), we assume that construed reputation and identity are interlinked. 'Dynamic congruence' between

¹ The formulation of the RQs slightly differs from the preregistration, following peer feedback.

actual reputation, construed reputation, organizational identity, and other-identity related aspects is often mentioned as an aim of public relations (Balmer et al., 2009; Chun, 2005), whereas misalignment is an undesirable state: “Where meaningful identity misalignments occur the result can be deleterious.” (Balmer et al., 2009). ‘Misalignment’ thus refers to discrepancies in the relationships between construed reputation, actual reputation, and identity perceptions.

2.2. Mediatization in public relations

Mediatization refers to the significance of the media institution in the environment of organizations and its impact on organizational ways of working, for instance, on decision-making processes, the allocation of resources, and public relations (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020; Nölleke et al., 2021). Mediatization is not a process that is exclusive to organizations that perform public tasks, but they are assumed to be particularly prone to mediatization processes given the importance of the media institution in their environment. As a fourth branch of government, the media keep a critical eye on power exerted by political actors and organizations in public functions (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020). An interview study among communication managers from Dutch public sector organizations also pointed at the perceived importance of the media for these organizations: “[...] media attention often is an intermediate goal to establish or maintain stakeholder relations or follow other strategic organizational goals” (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019, p. 932). That study also revealed that these communication managers in public sector organizations find social media ‘challenging’ and refer to the impact of traditional media as a reason to “focus on traditional news media” (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019, p. 926). From a democratic perspective, mediatization can be dysfunctional or functional to organizations (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014), because it is important that citizens are informed about the functioning of organizations that “have the force of law; hence stakeholders have no choice over whether to accept them” (Luoma-aho, 2007, p.127). Since the media play an important role in democracies, adaptation to a media-heavy environment can help to get the strategic message across more effectively (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2020).

2.2.1. Mediatization and reputation

Organizational reputation is co-constructed in and by the media. On the one hand, organizations actively try to construct the (media) reputation of their organization by means of public relations (Dhalla, 2007; Heckert et al., 2021). Media function as a platform on which organizational information is created, shared, re-interpreted, and amplified. For instance, newspapers can amplify messages posted on social media, and vice versa, which increases the reach of the initial message (Etter et al., 2019). Organizational stakeholders use media coverage to construct their organizational perceptions (Albu & Etter, 2016; Einwiller et al., 2010; Jonkman et al., 2020). In addition, journalists act as stakeholders by scrutinizing organizational activities (Dhalla, 2007; Jacobs & Schillemans, 2019). Consequently, (social) media coverage is not a neutral reflection of organizational information. The selection of organizational news topics is, amongst other factors, driven by their potential news value. For instance, personification, valence, and controversy are factors that affect journalistic news selection (Eilders, 2006). Also, on social media some organizational matters such as social impact have higher chances to be covered than other topics (Araujo & Van der Meer, 2020). Thus, media coverage about organizations and, consequently, the information that stakeholders receive is constructed by media logics and therefore filtered (Foreman et al., 2012).

2.2.2. Mediatization and identity

Mediatization impacts organizational identity dynamics in that it describes how environmentally sensitive employees are (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2019). Employees of organizations that operate in a media-heavy environment with a hybrid news system in which

information goes back and forth between social media platforms and traditional media (Aula, 2011), each having their own logics and ways of working, face a variety of information that affects the sense-making of their organization’s identity. Studies that focus on reciprocal effects discuss how media coverage can have direct effects on employees, such as on their behavior or emotions, but also indirect effects, such as changed behavior of other actors towards employees as a consequence of media coverage (Kepplinger, 2007). This effect can also occur when employees ‘consume’ news about the organization they work for. Korn and Einwiller (2013) found that media coverage on a critical organizational issue indeed had an impact on employees: “Most employees exhibited a high interest in information and media content; they perceived media coverage as biased, discussed media content with colleagues, thought about media effects on others, showed highly emotional reactions, and sought to defend their organisation or explain the situation to outsiders.” (p. 460). These consequences were also found to be dependent on the employees’ degree of identification of the organization (Korn & Einwiller, 2013).

Identity is a relational construct formed in interaction with others, and based on information shared in the media, which implies that employees who try to make sense of outside images are confronted with multiple platforms that have their own ways of selecting, reporting, and discussing organizational information: “As the media publicizes information about an organization, public impressions of the organization and of the organization’s members become part of the currency through which members’ self-concepts and identification are built or are eroded.” (Dutton & Dukerich, 1994, p. 241). Kjærgaard and colleagues (2011) found “that members and the media are constantly engaged in an ongoing co-creation of meaning that provides media with appealing newsworthy stories, and addresses members’ needs for self-enhancement” (p. 536). For some organizations, this co-creation strongly impacts their identity and leads to a hyper-adaptation, where the core traits get potentially lost (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). At the other extreme, external pressures on the identity can result in employees deflecting these impressions to protect their identity, which has been described as identity narcissism (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). A more dynamic approach to the outside-inside relations can be borrowed from psychological theory where identity resilience is the “certainty of who one is and will remain despite individual and social changes that occur” (Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 167). This concept describes how people continuously absorb and evaluate new information to test against and possibly re-conceptualize their evolving identity. As also organizational identity is measured at the individual level and aggregated to a group-level construct, this idea can be adopted for organizations to describe how their distinctive, central, and enduring identity traits evolve and adapt over time. It is further in line with a communicative approach to organizational resilience, where a shared identity is seen as constituting a resilient organization (Anderson & Jones-Bodie, 2022).

2.2.3. Mediatization of identity-reputation dynamics

Mediatization can affect the relation between how employees think that people outside of the organization perceive it (construed reputation; Lievens et al., 2007; Corley, 2004) and the actual perceptions of the organizations that outsiders have (actual reputation), which informs the formulation of communication strategy. In the following, we here refer to construed reputation versus actual reputation to clearly and consistently differentiate between construed external image and reputation. Employees, in particular those in public relations functions, are engaged in ‘ongoing meaning constructions’ in relation to their media environment (Van Ruler, 2015). Dutton et al. (1994) assumed that a ‘wide dissemination’ of an organization’s reputation via media coverage likely correlates with the construed reputation (by employees), but at the same time note that “Organizational members sometimes have a distorted impression of what others believe, either believing their organization is perceived in a more positive or a more negative light than outsiders see it.” (Dutton & Dukerich, 1994, p. 249). However, their observations

were made in a different media landscape. Considering that today's media landscape is characterized by a highly active audience and fragmentation, organizational reputation is assumed to be less homogenous compared to traditional media landscape times. In the hybrid media system, employees are subject to a variety of cues when they make sense of outsiders' perceptions of the organization (construed reputation) (Etter et al., 2019). Furthermore, the reputation that the media portrays about an organization and the reputation or image that citizens perceive can diverge, which can be interpreted in terms of their identity resilience (Breakwell et al., 2022).

To capture the role of the media in the interplay between identity perceptions, construed reputations, and the organization's reputation, we rely on employees' individual-level perceptions of the impact of the media on their organization. More specifically, we build upon the concepts of mental mediatisation (Marcinkowski, 2014) and media orientation (Kohring et al., 2013; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016), to describe employees' assessed importance of the media for the organization and its impact on decision-making and impact of the role of the media for their organization. The concept 'perceived media impact' captures several dimensions of the experienced role and impact of the media on organizations, such as perceived consequences for strategic decision-making, the experienced necessity to attract media attention, and the valence of coverage (perceived hostility and perceived favorability; Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017, 2019; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016).

RQ1: What are the relations between construed reputation and perceived impact of the media on the one hand, and the strength of organizational identity perceptions on the other?

RQ2: a. To what extent does employees' construed reputation align with the organization's reputation, b. in how far is this (mis-)alignment related to the strength of organizational identity perceptions, and c. do the multiple identities within the organization affect these relations?

RQ3: In how far does employees' perceived media impact on the organization either a. reinforce (moderate) or b. impact (mediate) the reputation-identity process?¹

3. Method

We conducted two online Dutch-language surveys to capture external views on the organization (survey with citizens) and internal identity-construed reputation relations (survey with employees) at a single point in time, given the exploratory nature of the research. The study design was preregistered (anonymized link for peer-review). Both surveys were reviewed and accepted by the institutions' ethical review board. The organization was selected based on its very high visibility in the Dutch media (for which we found confirmation in survey 1 by the high perceived media visibility) and the presence of – at least – two organizational sub-groups, creating the opportunity to assess intra-organizational identity and construed reputation perceptions. The organization performs public tasks determined by legislation, is state-owned, tax-funded, and operates to a very large extent independent of the minister because it is a central element of the judiciary (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). Judicial bodies operate in a non-competitive environment and have no profit orientation. Since crime and jurisprudence have been considered a classic newsworthy subject since the beginning of mass media (Katz, 1987), judicial bodies face intense media scrutiny.

3.1. Samples

3.1.1. Survey with citizens: actual reputation

The actual reputation of the organization was measured by conducting an online survey among a sample ($N = 1417$) representative of the Dutch population in terms of age ($M = 50.16$, $SD = 16.24$), gender (54,7% female, 44,9% male, 0,04% other or preferred no answer), and location administered by a professional panel company at the end of October 2021. 19,6% of the respondents indicated that they had

obtained a 'low' education level, the education of 51% can be considered as 'middle' level, and 27,3% was highly educated (whereas 2,1% of the respondents indicated that their highest obtained degree was different from the ones mentioned). The survey was part of a larger research project, the measures analyzed for this study were: public sector reputation, interest in news (general), interest in specific news, media visibility, and familiarity with the organization.

3.1.2. Survey with employees: identity dynamics and mediatisation

To capture the relations between organizational identity and mediatisation, we conducted an online survey among selected employees of the organization in the Netherlands ($N = 109$). The survey was conducted in April 2022. The organization can be divided into two groups that stand in a hierarchical relationship. Both organizational groups fulfil a crucial role in the Dutch justice system. In particular, the decisions taken by sub-group A ($n = 76$, response rate = 6.1%) can at a later stage be overturned by sub-group B ($n = 33$, response rate = 28.45%), which puts both in a special relationship to one another that is also marked by professional competition. In both sub-groups, specific groups of employees were invited to participate: Those in key operating and decision-making positions and those responsible for or working in communications and media relations. Organizational identity is measured at the group-level of sub-group B (Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006), because we were interested in internal perceptions of this sub-group, following from the slightly competing functions that they have and their hierarchical-like relationship.

3.2. Measures

All scales in both studies were previously validated and measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "fully disagree" to "fully agree," unless indicated otherwise. Summative scales were calculated for all multiple-item measures. The items were forward-back translated by a Dutch mother tongue speaker and both the English and Dutch versions double-checked with the authors, a scholar with extensive expertise in organizational identity, and employees.

3.2.1. Survey with citizens: Variables

Actual reputation. Most operationalizations of reputation reflect a strong corporate orientation, i.e., refer to outsiders' perceptions of for-profit organizations that operate in a competitive environment (Kopaneva & Cheney, 2019). Following the public nature of the organization with its focus on societal functions and given the fact that it operates in a non-profit and non-competitive environment, we use an operationalization of reputation that is specific to public sector organizations (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Lee & van Ryzin, 2019; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). Building on the conceptualization by Carpenter and Krause (2012), we measured public sector organization with a scale (Lee & van Ryzin, 2019) composed of 10 items such as "Overall, this agency has a good reputation" and "This agency treats people fairly" (forward-back translated into Dutch) and its reliability was established with Cronbach's alpha = 0.94 ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.79$).

Familiarity with the organization was measured as general familiarity with a single item measure and as mediated experience (familiarity via news media and social media with binary answer option yes and no; Yang, 2007; $M = 3$, $SD = 1.04$).

General interest in news was captured by a single-item scale asking "How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news?" (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019) answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "not at all interested" to "very much interested" ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.91$).

Interest in news (specific) was captured by a single-item scale reading "How interested, if at all, would you say you are in news about: politics, sports, culture, crime, economy, international, entertainment, science" (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; $M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.04$).

Perceived media visibility was measured with a single-item scale:

“Please indicate how much you think you, personally, have been exposed to media coverage about [organization] last week” (Yang, 2007) and answered on a continuous 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from never to often ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.97$).

3.2.2. Survey with employees: variables

Organizational identity. Following previous empirical approaches (Ravasi & Canato, 2013), we measured organizational identity based on a set of identity traits. A long list of 40 traits were extracted from close reading of the organization’s strategy and vision document. The authors then brain-stormed in how far these were central, distinct, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and created a short-list. This reduced trait list of 19 was then presented to a group of the organization’s communication and leadership team who in an expert round decided which of these traits best describe their organization. The final reduced list of nine traits was then used for measuring organizational identity in the organization at the group-level when employees indicated in how far they think these traits apply to their organizational group (5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “not at all” to “to a great extent”). A principal components factor analysis with oblimin rotation ($KMO = .85$, Bartlett’s test $p < .05$) revealed that all but one item (offender-oriented) loaded on one factor, suggesting that this trait measures something else than the rest. Additional scale reliability tests using Cronbach’s alpha suggested that internal consistency would increase if this item was deleted. Two survey participants indicated in a comments box that they found this item to be “strange.” Therefore, it was decided to measure identity based on an eight-item scale (in Dutch, English translation by the authors) that deal with the organization’s competence and core tasks including independent, responsible, committed, careful, visible, law-executing, just, and magisterial. The scale shows high internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.57$).

Group-level identity was measured for sub-group B with the same eight-item scale as described above and showed $M = 4.03, SD = 0.54$.

Internal image of sub-group B was measured with the same eight-item scale resulting in $M = 3.67, SD = 0.56$.

Construed reputation. We measured construed reputation with the reputation scale for public organizations (Lee & van Ryzin, 2019) by asking in how far employees thought that citizens would rate the organizations along these items (Lievens et al., 2007). It is composed of ten items such as “Overall, this agency has a good reputation” (forward-back translated into Dutch) and its consistency was established as Cronbach’s alpha = 0.94 ($M = 3.15, SD = 0.62$).

Construed media visibility was measured with a single-item scale: “Please indicate how much you think that citizens have been exposed to media coverage about [organization] last week” (Yang, 2007) and answered on a continuous 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from never to often ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.88$).

Perceived media impact is a nine-item scale measured by combining employees’ media orientation and the perceived media coverage of the organization, adapted to this organization (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Kohring et al., 2013; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016). Media orientation consists of four items, two on attention seeking (degree to which the organization actively seeks media attention, according to its employees) and two on strategic impact (perceived role of media coverage on internal decisions). Perceived media coverage is measured via perceived media hostility (two items, e.g., “the media only cover negative news about my organization”) and media favorability (three items) to capture whether media coverage is perceived as unbiased and correct (adapted from Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016; Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017). Principal components exploratory factor analysis was conducted to see in how far the items measured perceived media impact ($KMO = .68$, Bartlett’s test of sphericity significant with $p < .05$). A three-factor solution was obtained. Factor one explained 31.11% of the variance with six items capturing the dimension of perceived media coverage containing all items of media orientation with loadings above .63 and one item originally contained in attention seeking that

loaded highest on this factor yet with a relatively weak loading of .52. Factor two explained 15.94% of the variance and contained the two items of strategic impact both loading higher than .8. Factor three explained 11.5% of the variance with one item from the original attention seeking scale that loaded .85. The internal consistency of this scale is established with Cronbach’s alpha of .68 ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.51$).

General interest in news measured the same way same as in the survey with citizens above ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.74$).

Construed interest in news (general) adapted the single-item scale of Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019), “How interested would you say are citizens in news?” and was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from “not at all interested” to “very much interested” ($M = 3.34, SD = 0.8$).

Demographics. We further asked for internal function (1.8% board, 64.2% prosecution, 15.6% communication, 7.3% strategy, 12.8% other), work experience in the organization ($M = 17.3$ years, $SD = 9.32$), inner-organizational group membership (sub-group A or B, see sampling), leadership function (11.2% were team leaders, and spent, on average, 66.42% of their time with leadership tasks), and communication tasks (29.4% indicated to fulfill communication tasks).

3.2.3. Comparable measures between surveys

The internal and external studies were designed to include comparable measures. Table 1 indicates which variables were directly compared between both surveys and provides descriptive statistics on each variable.

3.3. Analysis

The research questions are answered calculating correlations, independent samples t-tests, and multiple linear regression analyses in SPSS 28. Mediation and moderation models are tested using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). A priori power analysis with GPower revealed that the regressions are sufficiently powered if $N > 107$, which is fulfilled.

4. Findings

4.1. Identity: organizational versus group-level identities

The strength of identity perceptions was measured at the organizational level ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.57$) and at the group-level to illuminate in how far sub-group B is perceived internally. We measured the strength of perceived identity traits of sub-group B employees ($n = 33, M = 4.04, SD = 0.54$) and compared it with the ranking of those traits that sub-group A performed of sub-group B ($n = 76, M = 3.58, SD = 0.56$). This

Table 1
Comparable concepts and measures in the survey with citizens and employees, with respective descriptive statistics.

Concept and measure	Variable & descriptive statistics survey with citizens	Variable & descriptive statistics survey with employees (N = 109)
Interest in news (general) (single-item scale, Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019)	Interest in news: N = 1417 ^a , M = 4.0, SD = 0.91	Interest in news (general): M = 4.5, SD = 0.74 Construed interest in news (general): M = 3.34, SD = 0.8
Media visibility (single-item scale Yang, 2007)	Media visibility: n = 1287 ^a , M = 3.0, SD = 0.97	Perceived media visibility: M = 4.0, SD = 0.88
Reputation (10-item scale Lee & van Ryzin, 2019)	Actual reputation: M = 3.48, SD = 0.79	Construed reputation: M = 3.15, SD = 0.62

^a N = 130 participants indicated not to be familiar at all with the organization and thus did not answer this question.

difference is significant ($t(62.83) = -3.21, p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.55$).

4.2. Indicators of mediatization

Employees show very high interest in the news and think that their organization is highly visible in the media (Table 1). They think that citizens are much less interested in the news than employees. Citizens, on the contrary, are on average more interested in the news than employees think. Citizens perceive the organization to be less visible than employees do, but a large majority (85.7%) still indicated that they saw a specific group of this organization at least 'sometimes' in the news last week. Employees think that the media impacts the organization ($M = 3.43, SD = 0.51$). The degree of employees' perceived media impact significantly relates to how they perceive citizens to view the organization (Pearson's $r = .31, p < .05$). The precise role of perceived media impact is further explored in RQs 1 and 3.

4.3. RQ 1

The first research question refers to the extent to which construed reputation and perceived impact of the media predicts the strength of organizational identity, or vice versa.

An ordinary least squares multiple linear regression model was calculated to test in how far organizational identity (DV) is influenced by perceived media impact, which resulted significant ($F(2, 106) = 5.53, p < .05$) and explained 10% of the variance (R^2). The results indicate that construed reputation ($M = 3.15, SD = 0.62$) moderately predicts the strength of organizational identity perceptions ($\beta = .28, p < .05$). The perceived impact of the media can be tentatively seen as predicting identity, too ($\beta = .06, p = .05$), even though this influence is very small and at the border of significance.

To test, vice versa, in how far construed reputation (DV) is predicted by the strength of identity perceptions and perceived media impact, another multiple linear regression model was estimated. This model (Table 2) shows that construed reputation is moderately predicted by the strength of organizational identity perceptions and perceived media impact.

In sum, the way employees think the media reports about them (perceived media impact) also predicts how they think citizens view them (construed reputation). Furthermore, we find that the identity-construed reputation relation is dynamic in that organizational identity is predicted by how employees think others (i.e., citizens and very tentatively the media) view their organization.

4.4. RQ 2

The second research question asks a. to what extent employees' construed reputation aligns with the organization's reputation, b. in how far this (mis-)alignment is related to the strength of organizational identity perceptions, and c. whether sub-group identity perceptions affect these relations.

For RQ2a, we find a misalignment between employees' construed reputation and the actual reputation citizens have of the organization, in that citizens perceive a significantly ($t(139.1) = -5.16, p < .05$) higher reputation ($M = 3.48, SD = 0.79$) than employees ($M = 3.15, SD = 0.62$; see also Table 1), representing a large effect (Cohen's $d = 0.78$).

Table 2
Multiple linear regression model (RQ1).

DV: Construed reputation	β	p	t	VIF
Constant		= .05	1.93	
Organizational identity	.26	< .05	2.91	1.02
Perceived media impact	.27	< .05	2.96	1.02
R^2	.16			
$F(2, 106)$	10.12	< .05		

To operationalize misalignment to answer RQ2b, we calculated a measure deducting each case's construed reputation value from the mean of the citizens' reputation perception ($M = 3.48$) resulting in a delta (in absolute numbers). Testing in how far misalignment is related to the strength of identity perceptions (RQ2b), we calculated the correlation of construed reputation and the misalignment measure which did not result significant (Pearson's $r = -.15, p < 0.06$ one-tailed) across all organizational sub-groups ($N = 109$). When checking this effect per sub-groups A and B, we find that for sub-group A ($n = 76$) the misalignment is related to identity in that the larger the misalignment between construed reputation and actual reputation, the weaker the perception of identity (Pearson's $r = -.24, p < .05$ one-tailed). This was not the case for sub-group B (Pearson's $r = -.1, p = .3$ one-tailed). Thus, the misalignment between employees' ideas of how citizens think about their organization and the actual reputation that citizens hold is not related to identity perceptions at the organizational level. Yet, at the group level, the misalignment is related to sub-group A's identity.

4.5. RQ 3

In how far does employees' perceived media impact on the organization either a. reinforce (moderate) or b. impact (mediate) the construed reputation-identity process?

RQ3a was tested with a multiple linear regression model using the PROCESS macro (model 1; Hayes, 2018) with organizational identity as the dependent, construed reputation as the independent variable, and perceived media impact as the interaction effect. The model resulted significant ($F(3, 105) = 4.11, p < .05, R^2 = .11$), while all predictors were not. When setting construed reputation as the dependent variable and perceived media impact as the independent to test the reinforcing effect of perceived media impact on this main effect, the model resulted significant ($F(3, 105) = 6.83, p < .05, R^2 = .16$), while again all predictors were not significant. Thus, perceived media impact does not reinforce the identity-construed reputation relationship.

We estimated a simple mediation model to analyze RQ3b (model 4, PROCESS) with organizational identity as the dependent, construed reputation as the independent variable, and perceived media impact as the mediator. The model was significant ($F(2, 106) = 10.12, p < .05, R^2 = 0.16$). The results indicate that perceived media impact does not impact the process of mirroring (Fig. 1). Yet, construed reputation predicts perceived media impact, pointing to a reciprocal influence of construed external and media images.

When estimating the same model (mediator: perceived media impact) with construed reputation as the dependent and organizational identity as the independent variable, the partial model with perceived media impact as the dependent variable does not result significant ($F(1, 107) = 2.45, p = .11$), which is why we can neither infer a mediation effect.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to assess the relations between actual reputation of an organization (as perceived by citizens), construed reputation (how do employees think that citizens perceive their organization?), and the strength of employees' organizational identity perceptions. Inspired by insights on the reciprocal effects of media coverage about organizations on employees (Korn & Einwiller, 2013), we analyzed the perceived role of the media (e.g., perceived media visibility of the organization) in these relations. This study revealed three misalignments between employees' perceptions of their organization and those of citizens.

First, we noticed that employees underestimated the news-interest of citizens. Second, we find that employees overestimated the visibility of their organization in the media. Third, the differences in citizens' actual reputation perceptions compared to employees' construed reputation are striking: citizens' reputation perceptions are more positive than employees assume them to be. Previous studies showed that negative

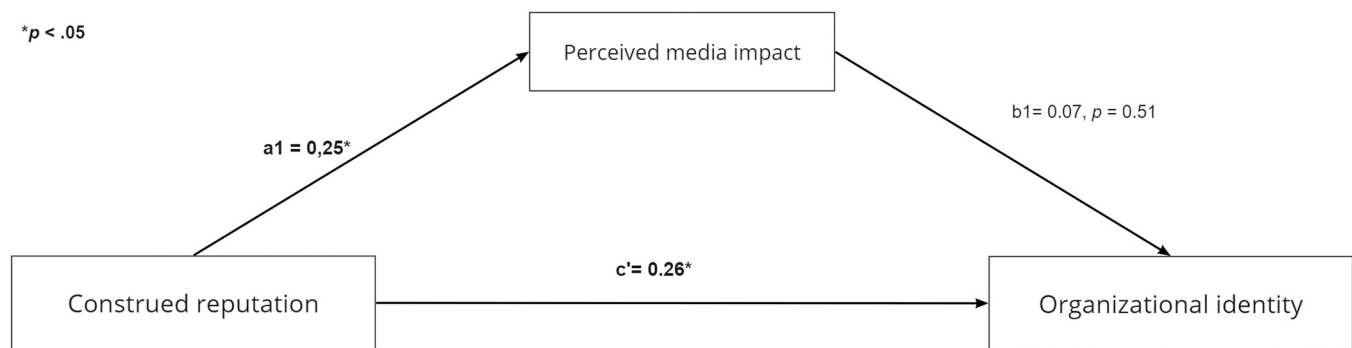


Fig. 1. Simple mediation model showing unstandardized coefficients (RQ3b).

news compared to positive news stronger impacted the evaluation of organizations and even that “mere exposure to corporations negatively affects reputation” (Jonkman et al., 2020, p. 272). Although they focused on the general public’s perceptions, this effect might also apply to the employees in this study: They perceived the organization to be more visible in the news than it actually is, and also expected it to be lower in reputation than what citizens perceived. These findings point at the perceived bias regarding media coverage that employees experience when reading the news about their organization (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). They also trigger future research questions to further disentangle the relations between media coverage about organizations and its reciprocal effects on employees, for instance, how media coverage affects the internal communication amongst employees (Korn & Einwiller, 2013). In terms of implications for professional communication practice, all three assumptions regarding lower interest in the news, higher visibility, and lower reputation, can affect how employees interact with their environment and tailor their public relations activities. Thus, these findings highlight the practical importance of explicating organizational assumptions that underpin public relations strategies and the empirical assessment thereof, which can inform communication strategy that is based on empirical evidence.

This study suggests that organizational identity is related to expectations of how citizens view the organization from the outside, and marginally, how the media impacts the organization. Vice versa, if employees identify strongly with the organization and perceive it to be highly impacted by the media, they also expect that citizens think highly of it. Thus, there seems to be a reciprocal influence of construed reputation perceptions by citizens and perceived media impact. We interpret these findings as traces of mediatization (Etter et al., 2019; Wonneberger & Jacobs, 2016) and reciprocal effects (Kepplinger, 2007). These findings suggest that employees are environmentally sensitive (van Ruler, 2015), not because they have a realistic assessment of the actual reputation of their organization (as evident from the misalignment between actual and construed reputation), but because they seem to rely on their own expectations of how citizens and the media regard the organization. These effects are, as we also find, stronger the more employees identify with their organization (Korn & Einwiller, 2013).

Yet, this environmental sensitivity is not strongly related to organizational identity formation, because perceptions of citizens moderately and those of the media only marginally influence organizational identity. This could be interpreted as identity narcissism (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), where employees - actively or passively - protect themselves from outside influences on their organizational identity. A crucial assumption of the dynamic model of organizational identity (Hatch & Schulz, 2002) is that organizations flexibly adapt to environmental demands and perceptions, and consequently, their identity. For organizations whose core functions are fixed by the law and cannot be changed by employees (Canel et al., 2022), there is little room for non-legislative outside influences on organizational identity (cf. Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012; Sandhu, 2009). Thus, we tentatively suggest that public organizations

might be less prone to identity flexibility. Yet, given the moderate influence of construed citizen reputation on organizational identity and the perceived high impact of the media, identity narcissism as a dysfunction (Hatch & Schulz, 2002) is not what we find, because employees appear to absorb external perceptions of the organization. But they do not instantly adapt to these in their organizational identity.

Thus, employees find themselves maneuvering between two pull factors. On the one hand, their strong organizational identity reflects the extent to which they experience enduring and central characteristics of their organization. On the other hand, they find themselves in a fast-changing and media-heavy context, where citizens form their opinions about the organization based on information that is co-constructed by the media. This describes the process of identity resilience in organizations where new information (pull factors) are accommodated for and evaluated (Breakwell et al., 2022). For organizations, we therefore propose the following definition of identity resilience informed by the study’s findings and adapted from Breakwell and colleagues (2022, p. 167) and following the idea that resilience, just like identity, is communicatively constructed (Anderson & Jones-Bodie, 2022): “Organizational identity resilience represents the dynamic maneuvering of employees between their organizational identity perception (what they perceive as central, distinct, and enduring) and external stakeholders’ (e.g., the media, citizens) perceptions of the organization that over time positively distinguishes what the organization is and will remain.”

We therefore interpret these findings, rather than identity narcissism, as signs of a *resilient identity*, in that employees perceive a strong identity with the organization and their sub-group, and are sensitive toward external influences, but do not instantly adapt their identity to these “stressors” (Breakwell et al., 2022, p. 169). Just like multiple identities exist can we also assume that different levels of identity resilience are present in organizations, which can explain the different findings per sub-group. This assumption is underlined by the finding that the misalignment between the construed reputation and actual reputation by citizens (Dutton & Dukerich, 1994) does not ‘mirror back on’ (is not related to) organizational identity. Yet, a mirroring effect exists if we accept the idea of multiple identities in the organization (Corley, 2004; Heckert et al., 2021), as the hierarchically lower sub-group’s identity is impacted by the misalignment. What we might observe, thus, is that the hierarchically higher sub-group’s strength of identity perceptions is less flexible, i.e., more resilient, than the hierarchically lower one, speaking to strong co-existing identities.

What does it mean for an organization to have two sub-groups with different levels of identity resilience? A study by Heckert et al. (2022) shows that organizations with multiple identities may encounter legitimacy problems, as “[...] legitimacy is based on the conformity to norms and values, the area where the identities clash” (p. 555). They suggest that strategic communication with a focus on transparency about both identities might help publics to evaluate the organization “within the right paradigm” (p. 567), thus fostering legitimacy. Although their study does not take identity resilience differences into account, their

recommendations might work well for different levels of identity resilience, too: Explicitly taking differences between organizational groups into account (either in terms of identity characteristics, or in terms of the strength of identity perceptions) may indeed help internal and external stakeholders to properly evaluate different groups of the organization, especially in times of environmental turbulence (e.g., heightened media attention).

From a normative point of view, these findings regarding identity resilience can also be reassuring, in the sense that public values and missions that are institutionalized in the identity of these organizations seem to prevail over employees' more volatile interpretations of the organization's environment (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). Although the organizational context is different, this was also recently confirmed in a study on ideal types of public relations professionals in the public sector, as Figenschou and colleagues (2022) found that they "underlined their adherence to traditional bureaucratic values [...]" (p. 13). Enduring and resilient identity perceptions thus tie the organization to its democratic and constitutional functions, which anchors them as a backbone of democratic governance. Identity resilience also raises questions on the effectiveness of political decision-making to affect public organizations' tasks: How does identity resilience within an organization affect the implementation of political decisions regarding the public organization's tasks? Organizational identity resilience can be seen as a superordinate construct to organizational identity (Breakwell et al., 2022) and can be a point of departure to explain the relations between identity, construed reputation, and actual reputation in a media-heavy environment. It is a contingent factor influencing an organization's relationships with its environment and can be considered, in concert with actual reputation, a strategic goal of public relations.

6. Limitations and future research

This study opens further possibilities for research into hybrid organizational identities in a mediatized environment, invites the testing of the identity resilience concept, and encourages studies on public sector organizations.

This research employed a cross-sectional design. A further central question in the study of organizational identity is the matter of stability and change (Schultz, 2016). Thus, to what extent organizational identity remains the same over time and which factors could explain identity resilience. Future research may therefore use a longitudinal design to analyze employees' identity perceptions and test the concept of organizational identity resilience considering mediatization processes. Such research could also take into account the consequences of major identity-impacting events (for instance, incidents that attract a lot of media coverage).

Future research may also assess hybrid organizational identities (Heckert et al., 2022) across levels and groups of an organization, and thus apply a broader sampling strategy. Since we invited specific groups of employees (among those the employees that are responsible for media relations), some findings might also echo these sampling decisions, for instance those related to the news-savviness of employees as "communication professionals rate media awareness as significantly more important compared to the other civil servants." Figenschou et al., 2022, p.10). Yet, for the purpose of this study, the sampling decision was justified by our specific interest in mediatization processes.

With the elaborate research design building on two surveys, this study shows the interrelations between organizational identity, construed reputation, and the role of the media therein. Yet, it does not allow for causal inference. By its focus on public sector reputation, this study contributes to our knowledge on organizational identity dynamics within the current media landscape in this often-neglected form of organization that is central to democracies.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

Both authors declare: The study was financially supported by the participating organization, which had neither influence on the research design nor the analysis and interpretation of results.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Acknowledgments/ declaration of interest

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