



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Balancing multiple organizational identities

*The communication and evaluation of multiple identity organization Sanquin*

Heckert, R.

#### Publication date

2022

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Heckert, R. (2022). *Balancing multiple organizational identities: The communication and evaluation of multiple identity organization Sanquin*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



## **Introduction**



The identity of an organization plays a leading part in how organizational members identify with their organization and in how external stakeholders perceive, assess, and support the organization. When the organizational identity is multiple, the internal sense-making and the organization's external comprehension, its communication, and its support might be more complicated. The overall research problem this dissertation tries to cover is the intractable character of a multiple identity organization (MIO) and the repercussions of this character for how the organization is perceived and assessed. The dissertation aims to clarify what a multiple identity organization is and how its representation in unmediated and mediated communication influences the way the internal and external stakeholders perceive the organization. The casus that is considered in the empirical studies is the Dutch blood supply foundation Sanquin. The findings of this dissertation will be relevant beyond MIO cases, because they exemplify the key challenges and the general importance of identity-related communication management.

This chapter will introduce the dissertation by first discussing the theoretical background and introducing the casus Sanquin, followed by the central aim of clarifying the implications of organizational multiple identity and by the outline of the dissertation. Further, the applied methods will be elucidated with specific attention for the triangular methodological approach. The next section will demonstrate the theoretical and practical significance of the dissertation, focusing on insights in nature and being of MIOs and their vulnerabilities. After the conclusions and discussion, the special context of the study is portrayed. Finally, the most pressing limitations will be considered as well as potential avenues for future research.

## THEORY

### What is identity?

Who am I? Although we might not ask ourselves that question every day, it is important for both individuals as well as for organizations to know who they are. The answer has preoccupied the minds of people for centuries. The Greek philosopher Plutarch (first century AD) for instance was already intrigued by the quality of continuity regarding identity. He used the story of Theseus' ship to illustrate the refractory character of identity. Is the ship of which the Athenians year by year replaced parts with identical replacements still the same ship as it was used by Theseus a millennium ago? Has its identity changed?

The entity asking "who am I" can be an individual, or a collective, like an organization, or even a country. In 2015, the Netherlands were portrayed by essays on 51 objects, like a crumb-sweeper, face flannel or cheese slicer. The portraits together tried to capture various aspects of the identity of the country in the 21st century (Brands & Kan, 2015).

Regarding identity, the seminal work of Albert and Whetten (Albert & Whetten 1985) is a standard reference and has been reiterated throughout much of the organizational identity literature (Schultz, Hatch & Holten Larsen, 2009, p. 15). Albert and Whetten state that specific

identity traits must express the organizational core in what members perceive as central, distinctive, and enduring in character and contribute to *how* they define the organization and their identification with an organization. *To what extent* the employees identify with their organization is affected by what employees consider their organization's identity and how they relate to the identity's underlying values (Jäger & Schröer, 2014). A certain degree of identification is needed for the motivation of the workers. More identification is not always better. A too strong identification strengthens the resistance to identity change, but a too weak identification causes apathy and lack of commitment (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 134). During changes the communication climate plays a central role, mediating the impact on organizational identification of the content of communication (Smidts, 2001, p. 1051). Identification is especially critical during organizational change, and it helps ensure that members maintain their connection with the organization (Elstak et al., 2015, pp. 32–33), even more during merging processes (Sung et al., 2015).

Centrality traits show the degree to which certain characteristics are evenly spread throughout the organization (Van Riel, 2012, p. 17) and show what members feel are fundamental traits for the organization. Often centrality is understood as an internally consistent system of beliefs, values, and norms that inform sense-making and action of organizational members (Schultz, Hatch and Holten Larsen, 2009, pp. 36–37). Distinctiveness traits set the organization apart from others. They are almost unique and are not found at competitors or similar-sized firms (Van Riel, 2012). Enduring traits are those traditions, practices and expressions that show a link between the past and the present, like Volvo, Virgin acquires companies in its own industry and in others, successfully and unsuccessfully, thereby changing its commercial scope, but protecting its “break the rules” mentality (Hatch & Schultz, 2009, p. 24).

Most scholars mentioned above state that the organizational identity is held by its organizational members. Scott and Lane view organizational identity as emerging from complex, dynamic, and reciprocal interactions among managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 43). This suggests that identity cannot exist on its own but exists only then when the organization is in interaction, like a play, which is in fact not a text in a book nor a script but comes alive in a performance on stage for and with an audience.

### **Projected identity.**

The projected identity refers to the image communicated by the organization. It is “the corporate image embodied in visual icons, corporate logos, tag lines, and message points. It also refers to the desired image that the dominant coalition in the organization projects through mission and vision statements, credos, speeches, and expressions of organizational identity and core values” (Carroll, 2008, p. 3466). These communications are tactics used to affect audiences' perceptions (Elsbach, 2003).

It is generally accepted that the projected identity sprouts from the organizational identity, as a self-presentation of the organization *through communications*. Identity will lead the projection rather than vice versa (Davies and Chun, 2002), although the organization's portrayal, especially

internal, for its part also influences the organizational culture and the identity in the long term (Schultz, Hatch and Holten Larsen, 2009). Organizations also convey, through communication, aspirational values (Cian & Cervai, 2014). This is an important consideration for this dissertation, because the essence of the tension in an MIO can be found in seemingly incompatible value-based identity traits of the organization, as described below. The communication by such an organization itself may reveal the organizations' preferences about which part of the identity is highlighted to render the desired image.

### **Portrayed identity.**

Operating in a mediatized world (Jansson & Lindell, 2018) it is key for an organization how it is portrayed by the media. When the media portray an organization in their productions, they engage in the "character development" of the organization. One way in which journalists can develop the character of a firm is by providing information about the firm's culture, identity, and leadership, because these organizational attributes reveal values, beliefs, and behaviors that are distinctive characteristics of the organization (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006, p. 58). This enables audiences to like or dislike and identify with the organization.

How media portray organizations is likely to be affected by the communication of the organization itself. The communicated messages of an organization impact the quantity as well as the quality, the content, of media coverage (Van Riel, 2015), though coverage cannot be fully controlled by corporations (Friedman & Miles, 2006, p. 228). Organizations' communications are only one of the many sources that journalists use for their news production. They also use their own experience and other authoritative, official, and designated sources (Randall, 2000, p. 180). The relationship between organizational identity and mediated communication is in fact a relation of mutual constitution (Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010, p. 3).

How journalists report about MIOs can substantially be explained by journalists' professional *role perceptions*. These guide the journalistic production process and thereby the news content (Skovsgaard et al., 2013, p. 36). Part of this journalistic role perception is the adoption of a critical attitude toward the established order (Deuze, 2008, p. 21), being a watchdog of society (Norris 2014). Furthermore, media appear to be primarily interested in bad news (Friedman & Miles, 2006, p. 228). Journalists might have a systematic *negativity bias* in their news coverage. Negative news is generally thought to garner more attraction (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). Besides negativity ("bad news"), journalists, when assessing the newsworthiness of a situation or issue, consider the presence of other news factors like surprise, controversy, impact ("magnitude"), and eliteness (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). These news factors might carry a specific meaning in the context of an MIO, as we will see below.

### **Multiple identity.**

Among several other scholars (see Corley et al, 2006, p. 87) Pratt and Foreman (2000) demonstrate that the answer to the identity question ("Who am I?") is often not a single answer. They

argue that multiple identities within the same individual and within the same organization not only exist, but that those multiple organizational identities can and should be managed. This can be done by communication management, making sets of identity characteristics more salient or less salient. It is a matter of an executive decision to integrate, compartmentalize, or aggregate identities or even to try to delete one of the identities. This kind of interventions are meant to release the tension of competing or incompatible value systems within an MIO.

### *Normative and utilitarian identities.*

Foreman and Whetten (2002) follow Albert and Whetten (1985) to define an MIO as “an organization whose identity is composed of two or more types that would not normally be expected to go together (...). It is not simply an organization with multiple components, but it considers itself (and others consider it), alternatively, or even simultaneously, to be two different types of organizations” (Foreman and Whetten, 2002, p. 621). They consider a particular type of MIOs, namely “those that are constituted according to two seemingly incompatible value systems (...): a normative system (emphasizing traditions and symbols, internalization of an ideology, and altruism), like that of a church or family; and a utilitarian system (characterized by economic rationality, maximization of profits, and self-interest), like that of a business” (Foreman & Whetten, 2002, p. 621). They stress that multiple identities refer to the organization as a whole and that multiple views on the identity traits are not necessarily antithetical. Nor need these views to be universally held by all organizational members. Those members do not even have to be conscious of the distinct views.

Lack of consciousness is present in the case of an ideographic multiplicity. The multiple identities in this case are retained by specific subgroups that exist in different parts of the organization. An example of an ideographic multiplicity is the case study discussed below dealing with an American orchestra, with an “artistry” and a “utility” identity. When each of the multiple identities inherent in the organization is held by all organizational members, we call it a holographic multiple identity (Sillince & Brown, 2009, p. 1832). An example of a holographic multiple identity that is discussed in scientific literature is Medlay, a health care organization. In this organization, latent contradictions in the organizational identity emerge. Directors are faced with a conflict of upholding one dimension of identity while undermining the other. The mission of Medlay is “to eliminate particular diseases through research, education, and service” (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997, p. 595). In this non-profit the tension between the identity of a “family of friends” (conflict avoidance) and the identity of the volunteer-driven “guardian of public trust” (vigilance and volunteer-control) was espoused across all subgroups in the organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000, p. 21).

### *Is an MI problematic?*

While Pratt and Foreman (2000) simply make the case that multiple identities exist, Van Riel suggests that any organization probably has multiple identities, because members of the or-

ganization will have a variety of visions about the organization's most typical characteristics. This need not be a problem per se, but "it can become an issue when senior-management and communication professionals do not realize or acknowledge that multiple identities exist, or if they do not reflect and make use of those traits in stories, advertisements, position papers and marketing collateral that present the company to stakeholders" (Van Riel, 2012, p. 29). This external communication perspective is important, but also the internal consequences of a multiple identity must be recognized. In short, multiple identities need to be managed. More internally focused, Pratt and Foreman state that identities that are too unrelated may increase the likelihood of identity conflicts. Identities may even be "incompatible because they either hold conflicting values or they impose conflicting demands on organizational members" (Pratt and Foreman, 2000, p. 23). It looks like Pratt and Foreman are adopting a conception of conflict avoidance. Seemingly, they search for "what unites us rather than what divides us". This approach might be not so far from what Sanders and McClellan (2014) frame as "productive tension", because the inherent tension of two value systems will not disappear completely.

Another complication of multiple identities is that they may lead to ambivalence within the organization (Ashforth et al., 2014, p. 1457). Ambivalence is the coexistence of positive and negative feelings towards the same object. The managerial responses, as strategic considerations of the organization's management, to ambivalence (Ashforth et al., 2014) will differ from the responses to multiple identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). That is why it will be important to determine how organizational members appreciate the identity traits of the organization. Coexistence of identities is possible, provided there are enough harmonizing elements in the overarching identity of the company as a whole. Problems generally only arise when companies try to foster alignment among sub-identities that are fundamentally at odds (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 74).

The potential implications of being an MIO are not confined to internal sense-giving but may also affect the external image, for instance substantiated in news coverage. The MI conception implies the prominence of news factors, as mentioned above, that might foster the critical attention of journalists. I will elucidate those factors briefly.

*Surprise* is something unexpected, used interchangeably with *deviance* (Shoemaker & Vos 2009, p. 127). Commercial activities in a non-profit organization might be unexpected. In this context, *controversy* is a struggle of an MIO about normative and utilitarian values with internal or external stakeholders (e.g., Glynn 2000). *Impact* or *magnitude* (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) is the reach and social significance of an event or issue (Shoemaker & Vos 2009, p. 127). The impact may be stronger when it regards an elite organization. This *eliteness* relates to the importance, uniqueness, or indispensability of an organization, sometimes called a "high-reliability organization" (Belasen, 2008, p. 19).

### *Where to find multi-identities?*

MIOs can be found in both profit and non-profit companies as well as in semi-public organizations. Scholars seem to target their multi-identity research on professional organizations like hospitals, law firms (see Pratt & Foreman, 2000) and universities (Lam, 2010), or cooperatives (Foreman, 2002). Non-profit MIOs adopt market and business strategies while pursuing a social mission. They use market principles to meet idealistic goals. Jäger and Schröer take the definition of an MIO a step further for non-profits: Non-profit organizations are characterized by “an organizational identity that systematically integrates civil society and markets, exchange communal solidarity for financial and non-financial resources, calculate the market value of communal solidarity, and trade this solidarity for financial and non-financial resources” (Jäger & Schröer, 2014, p. 1281). Jäger and Schröer observe a tension between the social mission of this kind of organizations and their strategy to acquire funds. The non-profits are in a way forced to create business-oriented strategies because of resource scarcity.

To make clear what multiple identities look like in practice, three examples are provided: the profit company Nestlé, the American orchestra ASO and the Red Cross.

#### *Sugar versus health: Nestlé.*

An example of an ideographic multi-identity commercial company is Nestlé. One identity is selling sugar-based products from its start in the late 19th century. The other is now developing preventive treatments and therapies for lifestyle diseases in foodstuffs in its Institute of Health Sciences. Ironically, the scientists that manage the institute are sports-loving people that hardly ever touch a candy-bar (Campbell & Gretler, 2016). The goals of both parts of the organization could hardly be more contradictory. The overarching identity trait is “food”. The two identities are managed by setting them apart organizational, physically as well as staffing and marketing-wise. It is too early at this moment to know if Nestlé will be able to come off well with this dual identity.

#### *When cymbals become symbols: Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.*

Another example of an MIO, and of problems stemming from that identity, can be found in a qualitative case-study of the 1996 musician’s strike at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO). Glynn (2000) calls the orchestra’s identity “multifaceted”. The root of the conflict in the orchestra about the allocation of resources, is in the two “ideologies”. The central identity elements, artistic excellence (at any cost, the musicians) on the one hand and economic utility (at the expense of musical development, the administrators) on the other, hybridize the organization’s identity. Both groups’ claims about core capabilities differ as well: The musicians see the orchestra as a producer of high-quality classical music, while the management consider it as a low-cost, community responsive producer of classical music. Typically, the use of principles of the one value system in the other is part of the confusion about MIOs (Glynn, 2000).

The orchestra case shows the different views on central identity traits, the evolving confusion or even struggle about the essence of the identity. It is a warning where the clash of antithetical identities can lead to. Since the identities of the ASO can be defined as normative and utilitarian, this warning might be applicable to the Sanquin case.

*To delete an identity: the Red Cross.*

The principal activities of the Dutch Red Cross at the start of this century were the emergency relief by professionals and the volunteer work for ill and elderly people. The combination of these two activities complicated internal identification, blurred the proposition of the organization and was difficult to manage: a professional organization and a volunteer organization, combined in one association with the General Meeting at the helm. Identification internally and a clear positioning externally were troubled by these two identities, both with their own identity characteristics. It is the difference between short-term and long-term, action and calm, tough, and somnolent, live-saving blood and smelling feces, to put it bluntly. Internal alignment surveys showed high agreement and appreciation by organizational members of the Red Cross's mission rather than its strategy and the organization itself. Recently, the Red Cross has tightened up its strategy and decided to focus on emergency aid, a duty established in a Royal decree. The other activities are gradually being passed on to other NGOs.<sup>1</sup>

The case is an illustration of how an identity can change by executive decision. Deletion is one of the four managerial responses that Pratt and Foreman (2000) distinguish.

The examples show the significance of an organization's identity in how it affects the organization's communications and its public perception. The cases have in common that there is a potential tension between the ideological and the utilitarian identity. Tension between identities can cause serious problems (ASO), it hampers unambiguous external communication and a coherent image, but the identity can be managed (Red Cross). The introduction of a new identity in a commercial company might introduce a new challenge, but it could also support the legitimacy of the enterprise (Nestlé).

## **Identity change.**

Traditionally, identity is viewed as an enduring state, as illustrated by the classic definition of Albert and Whetten (1985), which considers centrality, distinctiveness and *continuity* as defining parameters. But even a centuries old monastic order's identity can be subject to change after a few hundred years of continuity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000, p. 29). Managers "often attempt to foster the perceptions of continuity by simply couching the organizational identity at a higher level of abstraction" (Schultz, Hatch & Holten Larsen, 2009, pp. 258–9).

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is based on a personal interview with Frank Tebbe, 26 August 2016. Frank Tebbe is Head of Communication at the Dutch Red Cross.

Although the subject has been touched upon before (e.g., Weick and Quinn, 1999), scientific literature on organizational identity change does not go back much further than the early years of this century (e.g., Fiol, 2002; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Chreim, 2005). The idea takes root that identity is dynamic (Navis & Glynn, 2010), or that at least the organization's narrative is evolving over time (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), that identity can be managed (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), constructed (Sillince & Brown, 2009), or formed (Kroeze & Heugens, 2012). Earlier publications elucidate organizational change (e.g., Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995), but do not cover the concept of changing identity. Gioia and Thomas (1996) already suggested though, that under conditions of external change, top management team members' perceptions of identity and image, are key to the sensemaking process and serve as important links between the organization's internal context and the team members' issue interpretations. The liaison with "political" issues suggests that identity cannot be immobile over time because the political context is always on the move. It supports the concept of adaptive instability (Gioia et al., 2000).

In an elaborate review of identity literature Gioia adds the "dynamic identity proposition" to the "enduring identity proposition" (Gioia et al., 2013, pp. 124, 131). Identity appears to be not enduring per se, but it has continuity. The labels that an organization uses to describe its identity are stable, but the meanings of those labels are malleable. Especially the lower echelons in the organization change the meanings associated with the labels, while the upper echelons might change the labels themselves (Gioia et al, 2013, p. 143). The intangible attributes (beliefs) at the core of the organization are difficult to change, whereas more tangible identity attributes like products being at the periphery are more changeable (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 176). We will establish below if these mechanisms can be observed in the Sanquin case.

The idea that identity cannot be understood as a fixed entity is also generally accepted in other knowledge fields such as Cultural Studies. Focusing on a people living in diaspora, cultural identities are described as constantly producing and reproducing themselves, through transformation and difference, like everything which is historical. Cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" more than of "being", positions people within the narratives of the past and lives by hybridity (Hall, 1989, pp. 225, 235). Consistent with the view of Gioia et al., the Hall school opposes the view that there is a "transcendental, general and eternal essence of a thing" (Zhang, 2017).

Selznick's theory of organizations (King, 2015) implies that organizations are "personalities", social actors, equivalent in many aspects to human actors, with their own characters and identities. This theory makes comprehensible that organizations relate and respond to their environments and thereby develop their identities. An individual human being and an organization have in common that there is some kind of central steering committee that guards coherence. A people living in diaspora often lacks this kind of coordination and is forced to adapt to local circumstances. Gioia and colleagues conclude that it is a mystery how such an essential concept as identity can apparently be both immutable and mutable, and plead for more research, also

on the multiple identity issue (Gioia et al., 2013, pp. 183–184). This conclusion fits in with the central question of this dissertation.

## CASUS SANQUIN

The case of Sanquin Blood Supply Foundation is more than appropriate to research multiple identity issues. It is an illustrative and, in a sense, an ideal type of an MIO since the organization is even legally an MIO: the collective supply of blood as a monopolist on the one hand and the commercial activity as a pharmaceutical industry on the other. One third of the yearly turnover is made by the blood bank activities and two third by commercial activities (Sanquin, 2020). The embeddedness in Dutch legislation of the organization chart, public and market activities, implies that the boundaries are set and that there might be little elbow room left to manage the identities by reconstitution interventions.

In the second decade of the 21st century semi-public organizations find themselves in a turbulent field of force. The interference of government and other superintendents is increasing (Duursma & Logtenberg, 2015). Members of the Executive Board of Sanquin feel that in many situations their organization is not getting the benefit of the doubt by many important stakeholders: hospitals, politicians, civil servants, media, and blood donors.<sup>2</sup> Even management complains about clarity about who they are as an organization, the organization's identity. And what could be a plausible explanation for this incomprehension? Is Sanquin an easy-to-understand identity? Pratt and Foreman (2000) recognize that the answer to the identity question is not a single answer for some organizations. This may well be the case for Sanquin. The combination of public and market activities with their underlying ideological and utilitarian value systems makes Sanquin an MIO. And this Janus-faced character of the organization could very well provide the explanation for the difficulties in understanding and accepting the character of the organization.

### **The organization's history.**

Sanquin Blood Supply Foundation was established in 1998 through a merger between the 22 Dutch blood banks and the Central Laboratory of the Netherlands Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service (CLB). CLB was an Amsterdam based research institute, blood bank and small pharmaceutical factory. The Foundation is responsible for blood supply on a not-for-profit basis and advances transfusion medicine. Sanquin delivers products and services, conducts scientific investigations, and provides education, instruction, in-service training, and refresher courses. Sanquin produces plasma-derived medicines. The combination of a public service (blood supply) and pharmaceutical industry (medicines derived from blood plasma) competing internationally

---

2 The author of the dissertation held a position near the Executive Board of Sanquin during a decade. This yielded useful observations for this study. The observations of this paragraph shall be scrutinized in Chapter 5.

was meant to nourish synergy, create efficiency and to avoid difficult choices for donors about where to go and donate blood. The merger was and presented itself as a Blood Bank with a research and diagnostic institute. The pharmaceutical activities were underexposed and still are. Since 2010 the demand for Blood Bank products falls with five percent a year. At the same time the pharmaceutical activities grow. A large part of the growth is in the contract manufacturing: producing medicines or intermediates (e.g., purified blood plasma) for other pharmaceutical companies (Sanquin, 2015; Sanquin, 2020).

### **Merger.**

There is no indication whatsoever that the implications of the merger for identity management have been top of mind for the then management of Sanquin. On the contrary: The tangible aspects of the former corporate identity (Argenti, 2013, p. 72) were left intact.

Within the organization there was still the Amsterdam based and Amsterdam-centric research institute with a highly educated staff, nourishing identity traits of contained anarchy, and having strong ties with the academic world. The pharmaceutical factory started as a spin-off of the research institute. The other part of the organization was the Blood Bank organization, donor focused and nationally spread.

### **Recent history.**

Several surveys on employee satisfaction show that the Sanquin employees tend to identify with the goals of the organization rather than with the organization itself. The satisfaction about the communication climate and about communications, especially by the management, is below benchmark (Effectory, 2013). What might trouble identification is that the organization does not have a single identity. It is becoming more and more what Jäger and Schröer (2014) describe as a hybrid non-profit that tries to act business-like while pursuing a social mission. Their wording is not tailored toward organizations such as Sanquin, but is meant for organizations like Amnesty International, that needs to exploit a web-shop selling candles, fashion, books, and postcards to finance its actions. It is obvious that this is not core business, nor core competence. At Sanquin the public duty and the market activities are both part of the foundation's mission. The argumentation used, at least internally, has been the same as Jäger and Schröer describe. The business model of Sanquin rests upon two pillars. The Blood Bank takes care of the blood supply and provides the fractionalizing factory with blood plasma; the medicine production delivers the funding for research and development. To keep producing medicines in an efficient and justified manner, increasing in scale was executed mainly by contract manufacturing<sup>3</sup>.

---

3 See footnote 2.



## UNDERSTANDING AN MIO IN ALL ITS FACETS: A MULTIMETHOD APPROACH

This dissertation draws on a variety of methods and data. *Chapter 1* chooses a mixed-method approach to determine organizational identity multiplicity. First, the theory-derived characteristics of both the ideological and the utilitarian identity are identified. Second, qualitative in-depth interviews with organizational members of MIO Sanquin allow the universal indicators for the identities to be refined in an iterative process. Third, this grounded theory approach yields a set of issues and questions for semi-structured interviews and propositions to be quantitatively scored by employees. Applying the identity concepts of the first chapter, *Chapter 2* introduces a systematic method to analyze the projected identity of an MIO by a quantitative, manual content analysis, demonstrating the presence of the utilitarian and ideological identity over the years. An exploratory factor analysis reveals identity constructs. In *Chapter 3*, the previously developed identity indicators are used again for a manual quantitative content analysis to determine how news media portray an MIO. After relying on quantitative methods for a great deal in the first chapters, *Chapter 4* reflects a completely qualitative interview study, based on a grounded theory approach. It demonstrates how qualitative research deploys methods to assure validity and credibility of the results. The interviews yield in-depth insights in the professional considerations of journalists when reporting on MIOs. The empirical part of *Chapter 5* includes journalist and stakeholder interview data as well, but the basic assumptions about the perception and reputation and legitimacy judgments of stakeholders regarding MIOs, were deduced on a theoretical basis. The illustrative newspaper headline quotes were obtained by a concise text analysis of Nexis Uni data.

## OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

### Chapter I

#### **Identification by Identity: Organizational members in search of the balance between identities.**

The first chapter has an internal focus. It examines how to determine what a multiple identity organization (MIO) is and then inquires the consequences for internal identification. The continuity aspect of organizational identity proposition is challenged.

Since identity is conceptualized as what *organizational members* find central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of their organization, the answer to the identity question is obtained by semi-structured interviews with employees and by a questionnaire. The empirical data make clear that Sanquin, like other documented MIOs (Pratt, 2016), indeed holds an ideological and a utilitarian identity. The multi-identity character of the organization hampers the identification

of organizational members. It is not always evident for them which identity of the two to identify with. They rather identify with the organization's mission than with the organization itself. Moreover, the interviews indicate that the organization's communication climate has shortcomings, such as a lack of trust in senior management to provide adequate information about the organization's strategy. This is important since the communication climate mediates the impact on organizational identification of the content of communication (Smidts, 2001).

The theorized distinction between an ideographic MIO (identities retained by subgroups) and a holographic MIO (identities held by all) is not that sharp in our observations. Sanquin is a "light version" of the ideographic MIO, with an emphasis on ideological values in the Blood Bank and on utilitarian values in the pharmaceutical company.

Further, the employees observe a changing relation between the two identities. In their observation the utilitarian identity has partially displaced the ideological identity in a few years' time. Whereas identity is traditionally defined as what organizational members considered as central, distinctive, and *enduring* characteristics of their organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), this observation evidently puts the assumption in perspective that identity is enduring. In – at least – an MIO identity is *dynamic* over time rather than enduring. The notion of "temporal continuity" (Albert & Whetten 1985, p. 265) does not obviate this detection.

## Chapter 2

### **Projected Identity: An MIO in search of likeability.**

In the second chapter the perspective shifts from the internal communication climate and identification to the external communication of the organization. The projection of the two identities by the organization through its external communication is substantiated by analyzing the prominence of the identities' characteristics in annual reports for a period of two decades by means of a quantitative content analysis. Annual reports are chosen since they are a central communication device of an organization (Breton, 2009, p. 191). Both identities increase over the years. This development is in the opposite direction of the growing commercial activities of the organization. The prominence of the ideological identity is more than twice the utilitarian identity. When the organization emphasizes a text by using a streamer or a quote, or when short texts are used, the utilitarian identity is even almost absent.

The utilitarian identity outperformed the ideological identity only once. An all-time high in the prominence of the utilitarian identity coincides with the short stay in office of an entrepreneurial CEO of the organization. Under the reign of his successor this was "corrected" with a top score of the ideological identity and the bisection of the utilitarian communication.

The in Chapter 1 empirically determined organizational identity can be compared with the projected identity in Chapter 2. Neither the projected identity nor the development of this projected identity over the years reflects, in the case study, the internally observed identity entirely. It is especially the swift altering balance between the two identities with a growing

prominence of the utilitarian identity that is not reflected in the projected identity. The findings support that organizations try to send desired image-driven positive messages (Rutherford, 2005) and convey, through communication, aspirational values (Cian & Cervai, 2014, p. 191). For a not-for-profit organization the ideological identity is more suitable and socially acceptable than the utilitarian identity is (Taylor & Littleton, 2008).

## Chapter 3

### Media Portrayal: How media portray an MIO.

Chapter 3 delves into the question how news media portray an MIO and how this portrayal interplays with journalists' supposed role perceptions and use of news factors. It explores whether a negative portrayal by the media can be added to the list of potentially undesirable consequences of having a multiple organizational identity.

The media are an important intermediate between an organization and its internal and external constituencies (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015). How they portray an organization is important for their reputation (Deephouse, 2000). The representation of organizations in the media constitutes a critical factor in the construction of organizational identity (Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010). Compared with the organizations' own projections the media image often has higher credibility, because it is created by third parties (Rindova, 1997). The media reputation influences both internal and external perceptions.

To get a hold over the complicated question of MIO portrayal, identity characteristics, news factors and the tone of the media coverage are measured and specified across outlets.

The in Chapter 2 empirically determined projected identity can be compared with the media portrayal in Chapter 3. Whereas the organization emphasizes its social character (Chapter 2), the media stress the dependency of the organization on its most important stakeholder, in this case the blood donor.

The tone of the media coverage is most of the time neutral or positive (76.4%), but the tone that media employ when attributing the characteristic *commercial* is 3 times more often negative than positive. National and quality newspapers apparently find this characteristic more important than regional and popular newspapers. A salient news factor (34%) in the newspaper articles is *controversy*, which indicates a clash of interests or insights between the organization and individuals, groups, or government. The *tension* between the organization's two identities is discussed in 13 percent of the articles.

## Chapter 4

### Media Power: Journalists in Search of Controversy.

Organizations put a lot of effort in sound media relations. They understand that a good media reputation is an important asset (Deephouse, 2000). But do they know what journalists think of

an MIO and how this may work out for media coverage? Whereas Chapter 3 concentrated on professional practice (what journalists really do), Chapter 4 delves into their cognitive orientations (what they *want* to do), and narrated performance (what they *say* they do) (Hanitzsch & Vos 2017, p. 124). It sheds light on journalists' considerations and clarifies what makes an MIO newsworthy.

The journalists' attitude toward MIOs varied from positive or neutral to critical or negative. The critical journalists recognized the inherent tension between the identities that is inclined to cause problems and even doubted the compatibility of the identities.

Since professional role perceptions can predict professional practice (Skovsgaard et al., 2013), we asked newspaper journalists how they understood their work. The two main role perceptions are the educator or explainer role and the watchdog role. The first category considers explaining complicated matters in understandable language for their readership as its main task. The watchdog journalists are guided by considerations that are grounded in their role for a well-functioning democratic society (Norris 2014, p. 14). We found a clear relationship between role perception and attitude toward an MIO. The more "explainer" one was the more positive the attitude, or the more "watchdog" the more negative.

The tension between the organizational identities can make an MIO newsworthy, especially in the eyes of critical journalists. The journalist's favorite news factor, controversy, seems to be deep-seated in the being of an MIO. We found several triggers in the attitude or behavior of an MIO for critical reporting by journalists, like integrity breaches and a lack of transparency about commercial activities.

## Chapter 5

### Reputation and Legitimacy of an MIO: Stakeholders in Search of a Paradigm.

A thorough inquiry into multiple identity and the consequences for internal identification (Chapter 1), the way an MIO projects its identity (Chapter 2), and how media portray (Chapter 3) and consider (Chapter 4) MIOs, leaves an important question unanswered. What are inherent or potential implications of MI for the perception, reputation, and legitimacy of an MIO? Chapter 5 aims to answer this question based on a theoretical deduction, empirical support by a case study and a newspaper headlines analysis.

How the identity of an organization is perceived depends on the projected identity (Chapter 2) as well as on outsider-generated communication (Price et al., 2008). Both communicate elements from the ideological and the utilitarian identity. This might confuse stakeholders since they do not expect multivocal messages. Still, the reputation judgment, measured as a TRI<sup>®</sup>M Index score (O'Gorman & Pirner, 2006) among the general audience by third party research of the case organization Sanquin is higher than benchmark organizations, but its legitimacy is, witness the stakeholders' quotes, at risk. A legitimacy judgment is oriented towards compliance

with social values and beliefs. It is exactly the clash of the two identity underlying value systems that causes discomfort in understanding and judging an MIO. Stakeholders might apply the values from the ideological logic when judging the utilitarian performance and communication. Likewise, stakeholders can be disappointed in their expectations applying a utilitarian paradigm to judge performance and communication in the ideological domain.

The main threats for legitimacy are a lack of transparency about both identities and “explain away” other touchy subjects like compensation of the organization’s top executives beyond public standards, a monopoly position that allows laziness and high prices, and failing as a commercial enterprise.

The case study results do not support the assumption that stakeholders would gradually render legitimacy to an MIO. This assumption—derived from Gopakumar, 2017—implied that stakeholders would get familiar with the utilitarian characteristics of the organization and accept them over time.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISSERTATION**

Organizational identity is a thoroughly documented field of academic study. Research in the area of MIOs, however, has been relatively sparse (Ramajaran, 2014; Pratt, 2016). There is hardly any empirical research that explored how organizational identity multiplicity influenced the organization’s relationship with external stakeholders (Pratt, 2016, p. 108). This study aims to fill the gap and inform the academic discussion on organizational multiple identity. The relevance might exceed the scope of MIOs, because the study enlightens the importance of identity management *in general*. The findings underscore the importance of the need for communication professionals to acknowledge the organizational identity implications in the communication to stakeholders.

The significance of organizational multiple identity studies is growing. The classical examples of MIOs were semi-public or non-profit organizations like universities, agricultural cooperatives, and housing corporations. These kinds of organizations with an ideological core developed a utilitarian identity, often because of liberalization in their sectors. Nowadays commercial companies feel the necessity of starting activities on an ideological basis, thereby constituting an ideological identity (Bian et al., 2021).

The general contribution of the study is providing deepened insights in nature and being of MIOs and their vulnerabilities. The contribution is both theoretical and practical.

A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) has been applied to empirically determine whether an organization is an MIO. This thoroughness of the investigation (Bryman, 2004) is unique in this research field. Another understudied issue is the volatility of an MIO’s identity. Other scholars already indicated that an organization can develop its character like human beings do (Gioia et al., 2013; King 2015; Ashforth, Schinoff & Brickson, 2018). The systematic

method introduced in the current study makes this assumption tangible by first measuring what organizational members state about identity change and then by quantifying projected identity and identity in the media during a period of twenty years.

Content analysis is often applied, but in this study, it serves to identify identity constructs and to measure the prominence of each identity. The method could be useful for unfolding other MIOs.

The narrated performance of journalists concerning MIOs has not been documented before. This study provides insights in journalists' considerations in the news selection and production process. Their contextualization of MIOs and of their professionalism explains the important intermediary role of the media between organizations and stakeholders and as co-creators of organizational identity.

The interplay between the identity of an MIO and the organization's public perception, reputation and legitimacy has hardly been investigated. This dissertation identifies the points of interest that an MIO faces in maintaining reputation and legitimacy at an acceptable level. This dissertation is, of course, a proof of academic competence, but it might also bring in useful insights for MIOs in general and for Sanquin in particular.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

All studies carried out for this dissertation tried to disclose the specific characteristics of an MIO and to determine what the significance of the organization's nature was for how such an organization would be perceived and judged. The main advantages and vulnerabilities of MIOs that are related to its multiple identity character will be summarized here. The other conclusions will be incorporated in the Discussion section.

### The eight key findings on MIOs.

#### 1. *Multi-identity is extra-dynamic.*

In the seminal work on organizational behavior and identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985) the determinants of identity were described as central, distinctive, and *enduring*. The current study reinforces the more recent scholarly vision that identity is dynamic rather than enduring (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; King, 2015). The organization redefines itself during its existence, responsive to external and internal changes. Some organizational traits live through the years, others do not. Like an individual character, an organization develops its identity characteristics. In our casus, the organizational members observed a swift evolution from a dominantly ideological organization toward a more and more utilitarian oriented organizational identity (Chapter I).

## **2. *Multi-identity is manageable.***

The identity characteristics of a single identity organization belong to one coherent set of identity traits and underlying values. The identity characteristics of an MIO belong to two contrasting sets of ideological and utilitarian identity traits and values. This study demonstrates that an MIO can draw on these two domains, which facilitates fast identity changes by choosing another mix of the ideological and utilitarian identity traits in the internal and external communication. The identity mix that underlies this identity volatility enlarges the organization's elbowroom in identity management (Chapter 2), but it is also at the basis of less favorable implications, as will be shown below.

## **3. *Identification is difficult.***

The more unambiguous the organization's identity is, the easier it is to identify with. When the organization's identities are grounded in two antithetical value systems, i.e., in the ideological and the utilitarian domain, organizational members experience difficulties in choosing the identity to identify with (Chapter 1). Difficult identification with the organization does not necessarily harm the commitment to the mission of the organization. The organization's management should focus on the common grounds of the organization to relieve the tension between the identities.

## **4. *Multi-identity causes ambivalence.***

The multiple identity nature of an organization causes feelings of ambivalence toward the organization, which means that employees may harbor positive as well as negative feelings for —specific characteristics of— the organization (Chapter 1).

## **5. *Internal and external identity differ.***

When an organization has a complex (multiple) identity, there is more room for the organization to project its identity otherwise than how the identity is felt internally. We found a substantial difference in the relative proportions of both identity characteristics when measuring the internally perceived identity and the projected identity respectively (Chapter 2). The common tendency is to give more weight to the ideological identity in the external communication.

## **6. *External identity and media portrayal differ.***

News media appear to be insensitive to the MIO's overexposure of the ideological identity. They use less ideological and more utilitarian identity characteristics to portray the organization than the organization itself uses in its external communication (Chapter 3).

## **7. *Multi-identity is newsworthy.***

Issues of identity multiplicity resonate in the media. Organizational identity multiplicity triggers the critical attention of journalists, either by an inherent tension between the identities or by

attitude and behavior of the organization (Chapter 4). Media that portray an MIO mention the tension between the ideological and the utilitarian identity. References to the incompatibility of the identities were found in those news articles (Chapter 3). Multiple identity seems to perform as kindred news factors as controversy and surprise. The utilitarian identity of a semipublic organization is considered as something unexpected by journalists. The tone that newspapers employ when they attribute the utilitarian characteristic “commercial” is negative. Journalists’ critical approach of MIOs can be explained by their role perception.

### **8. Multi-identity endangers legitimacy.**

The combination of two identities based on antithetical value systems is difficult to be understood by stakeholders. It complicates the perception, influences the reputation, and endangers especially the legitimacy of the organization since legitimacy is based on conformity to norms and values. Applying the norms of the ideological identity to judge utilitarian communications and performance, or the other way around, affects legitimacy negatively (Chapter 5).

### **Discussion.**

The project delivered some interesting additional findings. First, the two identity underlying value systems that we found in MIOs bear a strong resemblance to the professional contrary role conceptions of journalists. We described the tension between the ideological or normative organizational identity that is based on a well-understood social role and on the other hand the utilitarian identity that takes commercial goals as a basic assumption. In the same vein journalists either perceive their role as a social countervailing power, employing a normative logic, or they are mainly driven by market competitiveness, focusing on consumers’ demands, employing a commercial logic.

All five chapters show that multiple identity is difficult to be understood and appreciated by stakeholders, although this contrast between ideological and utilitarian logics is not restricted to MIOs. As we saw, the tension between ideological and utilitarian logic is also observable in the newsroom and in journalists’ philosophies (Chapter 4), but it is documented in several other social contexts as well (e.g., attitudes toward immigration, Welsch, 2019).

Second, the importance of *context* was convincingly demonstrated. This was particularly evident in the media coverage on the case organization, as we saw in the fourth chapter. The critical attitude that journalists employed toward the organization under study completely melted away during the COVID 19 pandemic. The explanation can be found in the pandemic as a media storm and in the special position of Sanquin. The media coverage of the pandemic is a classic example of a media storm (Hardy, 2018). It goes on as long as the crisis goes on and the audience stays tuned. The position of Sanquin as one of the “pandemic fighters” intensified the focus on positive news instead of critical reporting.

The importance of contextual knowledge was also demonstrated in other chapters. A thorough knowledge of the casus helped to interpret and explain qualitative and quantitative

outcomes of the research (all chapters), for instance the influence of the top executive in charge on how the identity was projected (Chapter 2). This observation confirms earlier findings about how changes in leadership may affect corporate discourse in projected identity (Bayle-Cordier et al., 2015). Another example of the importance of context knowledge is the explanation of a sudden increase in the media coverage for the tension between Sanquin's two identities (Chapter 3). This explanation was found in the accumulation of three factors. First, there was the rise of an active association of critical blood donors. Second, the non-profit organization introduced a medicine on the American market. And third, the wider context was favorable for a critical frame that emphasizes that semi-public organizations were too much focused on commercial activities rather than on their ideological fundamental principles. The public debate included a dispute on the compensation of top executives. The presence of such a discursive opportunity structure (McCammon, 2013) facilitated media coverage that aligned well with the audiences' pre-existing ideas and experiences. This fostered critical media attention for the national blood supplier. These observations make the case conclusions more understandable and robust.

Sanquin's logo, a stylized pelican with a drop of blood on its chest, refers to the legend of the Dalmatian pelican. This pelican is said to have fed her starving young with her own blood. Just as the mother pelican so selflessly saved the lives of her offspring, so do generous donations of blood save the lives of patients  
(Sanquin, n.d.).

The blood feeding pelican is the symbol of ultimate altruism. It is a *pars pro toto* for the projected identity of Sanquin. It is this identity that has put external stakeholders on the wrong foot to appreciate the organization's utilitarian identity.

The central aim of the study was to survey the implications of organizational multiple identity. I wanted to get to grips with its alleged intractable character by studying the vision of organizational members, journalists, and external stakeholders and by exploring an MIOs external communication and its media portrayal. Weighing up the relatively high potential flexibility in identity management (key finding 2) on the positive side and the severe vulnerabilities of an MIO in the field of internal and external support and a critical approach of the media (key findings 3–8) on the negative side, the conclusion is that the ideological and the utilitarian identity are uneasy bedpartners.

## **CONTEXT OF THE DISSERTATION**

“Wouldn't life be much easier for you if Sanquin would sell its pharmaceutical factory?” The underlying thought of this question, posed to me by an Erasmus University professor, was that the organization's ideological identity (associated with the Blood Bank activities) and its utilitar-

ian identity (associated with the pharmaceutical activities) would not get along very well, at least not in the public perception. The question triggered a quest for insights in the multiple identity character of organizations. Close to a master's degree in Communication Science I started the preliminary investigation for this dissertation. My job at the time was communication manager of Sanquin Blood Supply Foundation. Holding this position gave me easy access to rich internal information and it made it easier to interpret the external sources and the collected data. At the same time, I realized that being so familiar with the case study organization could color the interpretation of my findings. To ensure the credibility of the results I took various measures.

Of course, there were my supervisors of the University of Amsterdam and there were the formal statistical tests for the quantitative research and validity measures for the qualitative research, but besides that I called in professors and assistant professors as proof-readers from other universities (Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands; University Gent, Belgium; Aarhus University, Denmark) as well as colleagues at Sanquin (Netherlands). They did not report any biases due to personal involvement on my side. The Sanquin leadership did not intervene in any way in my research. I gave several internal presentations of the intermediate results of the dissertation studies (see CV).

In recent years the tension grew between the ideological identity —personified by the blood bank depending on the voluntary non-remunerated gift of the donor— and the utilitarian identity, based on the market activities of the pharmaceutical company. The increasing political pressure on Sanquin to separate the pharmaceutical activities from the blood bank's public mission led to an inescapable decision. Sanquin announced to detach the pharmaceutical company and found a commercial enterprise by July 2021 (Sanquin, n.d.), after submission of all five papers (Chapters 1–5).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The theoretical insights as well as the qualitative data of this study go beyond one example, but still it could be argued that much is based upon a single casus. How strong of a limitation is that?

The conventional objections against the use of case studies are tenacious, but they are also convincingly refuted (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The most relevant, for this study, of five misunderstandings that Flyvbjerg considers, is the alleged difficulty of generalizability of case studies. In the author's view, the choice of method should depend on the problem under study. Flyvbjerg does not reject research that focuses on large random samples, but he argues that often a well-chosen case can add more knowledge than large scale statistics. A case can better approach the complexities and contradictions, the "rich ambiguity", of real life (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 237). He concludes:

One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may

be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas “the force of example” is underestimated.

(Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228).

The limitation here is not the focus on a specific case. The limitation is the scope of the study that focuses on cases within the area of public and semi-public non-profits, situated in Western Europe. A central thought in the studies is that values underlie the respective identities of an organization. The tension between identities that we describe in this dissertation is based on the tension between antithetical value systems. The importance that is attributed to certain values will differ dependent on regional culture (Hofstede, 1980). This might influence the generalizability of conclusions transferred to another hemisphere when they concern internal and external stakeholders’ judgments of MIOs (Chapter 1, 2, and 5). Journalistic role perceptions that affect the attitude of journalists toward MIOs (Chapter 3, 4 and 5) are also values-driven.

Still, underlying principles explaining the vulnerability of MIOs are more universal, like “ambiguity tolerance”. When a person’s ambiguity tolerance is low, there is an aversion toward stimuli that are complex, unfamiliar, and insoluble (McLain, 2009). This notion has briefly been addressed in Chapter 3 but would deserve further research.

Commercial companies are increasingly understanding that pursuing only utilitarian goals is no longer accepted, like Shell that was forced recently by a court rule to reduce its emissions (BBC, 2021). In the wake of an increased emphasis on corporate social responsibility commercial enterprises are encouraged by public pressure to adopt normative identity characteristics. When these characteristics get a substantial foothold within the organization, an MIO comes into being. The dynamics of such new-born MIOs might be different from the traditional MIOs, like hospitals, housing corporations and universities (Pratt, 2016). The multiple identity of profits is an increasingly relevant area of inquiry.