



Anti-identity strategizing: The dynamic interplay of “who we are” and “who we are not”

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journals.sagepub.com/home/soq**Sarah Stanske**

European University Viadrina, Germany

Madeleine Rauch

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Anna Canato 

Luxembourg School of Business (LSB), Luxembourg

Abstract

In this article, we investigate the strategy–identity nexus by illustrating the interaction between organizational identity, anti-identity, and strategy. While extant research illustrates the potentially constraining role of organizational identity on change trajectories, less is known about the role of organizational anti-identity. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a leading German distributor’s 32-year history, we highlight the importance of organizational anti-identity for both continuous and discontinuous change initiatives, and illustrate how organizational members can overcome identity ambiguity by referring to “who we are *not* as an organization” rather than to “who we are as an organization.” We further show how managers who draw on identity reservoirs may have greater leeway when exploiting anti-identity, and how ambiguity and resistance may be overcome by referring to “who we are not” as an organization. Our findings broaden our understanding of the role of anti-identity for strategy selection and contribute to the burgeoning literature on the strategy–identity nexus.

Keywords

anti-identity, identity reservoir, organizational identity, strategizing

Do not ask us for the word that scrutinises

Our shapeless soul, [...]

All that we can tell you today is this:

Corresponding author:

Madeleine Rauch, Copenhagen Business School (CBS), Kilevej 14a, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark.

Email: mra.si@cbs.dk

What we are not, and what we wish not for.

E. Montale, 1925, 2012

The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.

M. Porter, 1996

Introduction

Change is challenging for organizations. Even when environmental shifts are noticed, change might be problematic due to the reciprocal relationship between organizational being (i.e. organizational identity) and organizational doing (i.e. strategic initiatives) (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011; Schultz and Hernes, 2019; Tripsas, 2009). Discontinuous changes, implicating deviations from past trajectories, challenge identities (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016; Gioia et al., 2013b) and are difficult to implement (Nag et al., 2007a). Studies have shown how organizational members may suffer from identity ambiguities (Corley and Gioia, 2004), engage in time-consuming identity reinterpretations (Fiol, 2002), or adapt strategic initiatives to existing organizational values (Canato et al., 2013). Even more continuous changes are subject to identity work (Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Gioia et al., 2013b), as they necessitate stretching, that is, the broadening of identity understanding (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016). From this perspective, identity might be perceived as a liability rather than an asset in fast-changing environments, and as a possible drawback to successful organizations (Gioia et al., 2013b).

More recently, scholars have adopted a processual perspective underlining the fluidity of organizational identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Schultz and Hernes, 2013) and the possibility of strategy–identity realignments (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). In line with this, Kroezen and Heugens (2012) introduce the metaphor of an *identity reservoir*, a socially constructed cognitive understanding from which organizational members draw claims and attributes to describe their organization. The authors highlight the appearance and recombination of new elements and the occasional choice not to retrieve other elements, to enable fluidity. From this perspective, identity work can also spur alignment with new strategies (e.g. Dalpiaz et al., 2016).

Although such studies are pivotal to start uncovering the strategy–identity nexus, suggesting that organizational identity does not necessarily posit a constraining influence on strategy, less focus has been given to the concept of anti-identity, that is, “who we are not as an organization” (Reger et al., 1998). Earlier reflections on organizational anti-identity suggested that a “*via negativa*” (Gioia et al., 2010: 38) may contribute to redefining organizational identity during discontinuous change; however, less is known about how anti-identity affects strategy and which specific roles it might play.

Based on our inductive case covering 32 years of organizational life, we illustrate how organizational members at Musterman¹ created and maintained not only an identity reservoir but also an anti-identity reservoir. We observe how the maintenance of an anti-identity reservoir enabled Musterman to distance itself from specific strategic options and to refine, over time, its organizational identity as well as its strategy. Our contributions are threefold: first, we introduce the notion of an *anti-identity reservoir*, defined as the set of claims and substantiating formal and symbolic attributes from which members draw flexibly to express who they are not and who they do not want to become. Second, we contribute to the burgeoning literature on the strategy–identity nexus by illustrating how managers may have greater leeway during organizational changes when exploiting an anti-identity. And third, our findings contribute to the literature on identity ambiguity by suggesting how change recipients can exploit the dimension of “who we are not” as a substitute for managerial guidance in times of uncertainty.

The strategy–identity nexus

Strategic management addresses managerial initiatives with the goal of improving organizational performance (e.g. Nag et al., 2007b). The emphasis is on the selection, execution, and expression of (intended) organizational doing and the consequent effort to maintain a favorable position (Ravasi et al., 2017). Thus, organizations may need to engage in continuous and discontinuous change to fit into ever-shifting environments. Continuous initiatives represent gradual changes along prior trajectories and involve incremental adjustments (Gioia et al., 2013b), while discontinuous changes represent deviations from former paths, necessitating exploration and the abandonment of former strengths (Nag et al., 2007a).

Managerial initiatives, both continuous and discontinuous, are intertwined with organizational being, that is, organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013b; Ravasi et al., 2017). Ashforth and Mael (1996) find a reciprocal relationship between identity and strategy by highlighting that strategy expresses organizational identity and that members likewise infer their organizational identity from strategic initiatives. Pioneered by Albert and Whetten (1985) as the central, enduring, and distinctive organizational attributes, organizational identity provides an answer to the question, “who are we as an organization?”. We follow scholars theorizing that organizational identity both resides in members’ cognitive frames, resulting in shared understandings of who the organization is becoming (i.e. a social constructionist perspective) (Gioia et al., 2013b; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), and is substantiated by organizational attributes that are enacted in claims toward audiences (i.e. a social actor perspective) (Whetten and Mackey, 2002).

For the purpose of our study, we are interested in the emergence of change initiatives and the subsequent strategy–identity re-alignment that occurs (Beech and Johnson, 2005; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011; Sillince and Simpson, 2010). Studies highlight the influence of identity on change initiatives and highlight how organizational identity might preclude certain initiatives by allowing, foremost, the selection of cognitively closer options (Nag et al., 2007a). Discontinuous changes are especially difficult to realize due to path-dependencies (Tripsas, 2009; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000). Continuous, more gradual changes are less researched (Gioia et al., 2013b) but are often easier to achieve because identity enhancement, or stretching, tends to be more easily accepted than are identity changes (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016; Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998). Although managers might be able to introduce cognitively more distant strategic initiatives, members might not accept them (Nag et al., 2007a), initiatives might be refused or revised in the longer term (Canato et al., 2013), or the change could require a considerable amount of time and energy to implement (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

Organizational identity reservoir

Recently, identity scholars have taken a processual perspective, focusing on the micro-processes surrounding the formation and construal of organizational identity (Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Empirical studies have started to explore the interplay between organizational identity and organizational culture and have analyzed the flexibility of symbolic attributes (Gioia et al., 2012; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Such studies conceptualize organizational identity and organizational culture as different yet interdependent entities (Ravasi, 2016; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). *Organizational culture* is defined as a “set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations” (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006: 437), which are manifested in practices and symbolic forms (e.g. artifacts and narratives) (Martin, 2002; Trice and Beyer, 1984). To distinguish between organizational culture and organizational identity, scholars have suggested that identity is

Table 1. Overview of key constructs.

Construct	Definition
Organizational identity reservoir	Socially constructed cognitive understanding from which organizational members draw claims and attributes to describe their organization in regard to who it is
Organizational anti-identity reservoir	Socially constructed cognitive understanding from which organizational members draw claims and attributes to describe their organization in regard to who it is not
Organizational culture	Set of shared mental assumptions that guide interpretation and action in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations
Identity claim	Label describing the organization in regard to who it is (e.g. “we are innovative” or “we are a distributor”)
Anti-identity claim	Label describing the organization in regard to who it is not (e.g. “we are not a conglomerate”)
Symbolic identity referents	Attributes of a symbolic nature (such as artifacts, narratives, and rituals) that substantiate identity claims
Symbolic anti-identity referents	Attributes of a symbolic nature (such as artifacts, narratives, and rituals) that substantiate anti-identity claims
Formal identity referents	Attributes of a formal nature (such as practices, business models, and hierarchical structures) that substantiate identity claims
Formal anti-identity referents	Attributes of a formal nature (such as practices, business models, and hierarchical structures) that substantiate anti-identity claims

narrower and more explicit than culture (Hatch and Schultz, 2000) and is comparative in nature, as members strive for distinctiveness when answering the question of who they are as an organization (Corley et al., 2006). For the purpose of clarification, Table 1 provides an additional overview of the key constructs referred to in this study.

For example, Ravasi and Schultz (2006) explain culture by drawing on a toolkit analogy, in which culture facilitates the construal of identity, as members use cultural elements as a reservoir from which they can draw to support or mediate organizational identity (Ravasi, 2016). Swidler (1986) introduced the toolkit analogy, indicating that *culture* is composed of the “available symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (p. 273). Subsequent studies have used the cultural toolkit to model the dynamic relationship between organizational and societal values (Dalpiaz et al., 2016; Harrison and Corley, 2011; Rindova et al., 2011). Drawing on this literature, Kroezen and Heugens (2012) focused on the intra-organizational dimension of organizational identity and introduced the notion of an “identity reservoir,” from which members make “bounded draws” to define their organization to insiders and outsiders by flexibly drawing from organizational claims and attributes. *Identity claims* are labels used by organizational members to describe their organization in regard to “who we are” (e.g. “we are innovative” or “we are a distributor”). Reservoirs are further substantiated by identity attributes that can be *symbolic identity referents*, which are attributes of a symbolic nature (such as artifacts, narratives, and rituals), and *formal identity referents*, which are attributes of a formal nature (such as business models, operating practices, and hierarchical structures). By *substantiated*, we refer to that attributes which support the given labels; for instance, modern handling processes in a logistics center undergird the claim of “being a distributor,” and an artifact, such as a certificate of excellence, can support the label of being “an industry leader” or “innovative.” A key insight from this analogy is that organizational identity is malleable and strategically adaptable

as new elements are allowed to enter and enable new combinations of identity referents with potentially different meanings.

Although the perspective of organizational identity as a reservoir provides important insights regarding the malleability of identity in the wake of changes, less is known about the contribution of anti-identity in this strategy–identity nexus.

Organizational anti-identity

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that the root of anti-identities lies in the field of dis-identification (Elsbach, 1999), in which “individuals’ social identities and self-concepts are defined by the groups or organizations from which they perceive their identities to be separated” (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001: 394). Anti-identities answer the question “who are we not?” (Reger et al., 1998: 151). Drawing on this research, Ashforth and Johnson (2001) introduce the concept of an *identity foil*, which occurs when an entity sees itself as the antithesis of something. An identity foil stems from the desire to be different from others, such as from a higher-ordered entity (Ashforth et al., 2011).

Similar to a Hegelian antithesis, anti-identity represents the opposite of an organizational identity (Carroll and Levy, 2008; Pratt and Foreman, 2000) and helps organizational members in the formation and subsequent construal of their organizational identity. Gioia et al. (2010: 38) illustrate that new players in nascent fields use a “*via negativa*” to describe who they are not during identity formation. Moreover, as anti-identities can reflect old labels that are no longer desirable, they are important for redirecting cognitions (Fiol, 2002; Tripsas, 2009). Contrary to organizational forgetting, where undesirable claims are not stored in the organizational memory but deleted (Anteby and Molnár, 2012), the concept of anti-identity allows members to maintain such claims while still distancing themselves from them. Similar to organizational identity, Carroll and Levy (2008) suggest that anti-identities evolve over time, also noting that research has only employed the concept of anti-identity sporadically and has generally depicted it as static, despite its dynamic nature (e.g. Fiol, 2002).

How anti-identity is formed and developed and how this concept fits into the strategy–identity nexus remains an open question. Hence, our research question is as follows: *How does organizational anti-identity contribute to change initiatives and to subsequent strategy–identity realignment?*

Methods

Research context

We conducted a longitudinal case study of a large German distributor, in line with existing research on organizational identity (Ravasi and Canato, 2013), which emphasizes that qualitative case studies are especially suitable for examining members’ understandings of their organizational reality. Incorporated in the 1980s, Musterman is one of the main distributors in Germany in the field of telecommunications and electronics. Musterman was founded by two friends, Peter and Martin, with the aim of “earning some extra money while studying.” Today, the organization has a turnover of 350 million euros and has more than 270 employees. The founders, who started their business by selling answering machines and designer telephones from their parents’ houses, still act as co-chief executive officers (CEO) and sole owners, which is also demonstrated by the name *Musterman*, which is Peter’s surname.

Over its entire history, Musterman has experienced no change in leadership. However, changes in the industry and to regulations led to alterations in both strategic doing and organizational being. The deregulation of the German telecommunications market had an especially significant influence on Musterman's strategy. Liberalization led to the decay of the Deutsche Post's monopoly, and from 1995 onwards, non-Post telephones could be connected to the German network, which allowed for new market entrants. Prior to this, connecting unlicensed telephones to the German network was illegal and punishable by prison sentences of up to 2 years (Computerwoche, 1990; Sarkar, 2001).

After this liberalization, Musterman became a producer of licensed products. However, as competition increased and technology became more sophisticated, the organization could not compete as a producer any longer and focused on the distribution of telecommunications products, establishing itself as one of the top German telecommunications distributors. Over the years, the organization pursued a radical change, introducing the distribution of non-telecommunications products to its purview. For example, the introduction of "guest products," that is, products that are outside the scope of their traditional realm, had a substantial influence on the organization. An overview of the organization's history is depicted in Figure 1.

This organization and its industry are particularly interesting to study for multiple reasons. First, the telecommunications industry is strongly characterized by the need for adaptation. Second, Musterman provides the very rare opportunity to access and observe the unfolding of organizational identity and strategy in the absence of a change in leadership. Its relatively small size of 270 employees also facilitated an in-depth study and made it an ideal research setting to study the strategy–identity interplay.

Data sources

We chose an inductive longitudinal case study design and relied on a broad range of data sources (see Table 2), such as interviews, archival documents, and participant observations. The first two authors collected data in the field. Relying on "peer debriefing" (Gioia et al., 2010: 9), the more distant researcher played the "devil's advocate" by offering alternative explanations and raising additional questions.

Semi-structured interviews. We conducted semi-structured, partly retrospective interviews in March 2017. Interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes with all seven managers employed at Musterman during the time of the study as well as 30 additional employees. In total, we conducted 37 interviews, with an average length of 59 minutes, which amounted to more than 35 hours of audio data. Our questions were open in nature and pertained to the history of Musterman. We paid special attention to strategic development and organizational cognition over time. Drawing on our industry knowledge derived from prior web research, we asked questions regarding the competition, the product offering, and the financial performance. All interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim. We conducted four follow-up interviews during field visits between April 2017 and November 2017 on emergent themes, such as strategic initiatives and critical events in the firm history that were of relevance to both the company's doing and being. Our informants also made available archival data to which they referred throughout the interviews. We conducted a final round of three follow-up interviews between July and October 2018. In these interviews, we discussed, with knowledgeable informants, statements from previous interviews and emerging interpretations.

Our research design forced us to rely partly on retrospective accounts. To mitigate potential bias and for impression management regarding the retrospective interviews, we followed existing best practices (e.g. Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). We ensured that highly knowledgeable informants

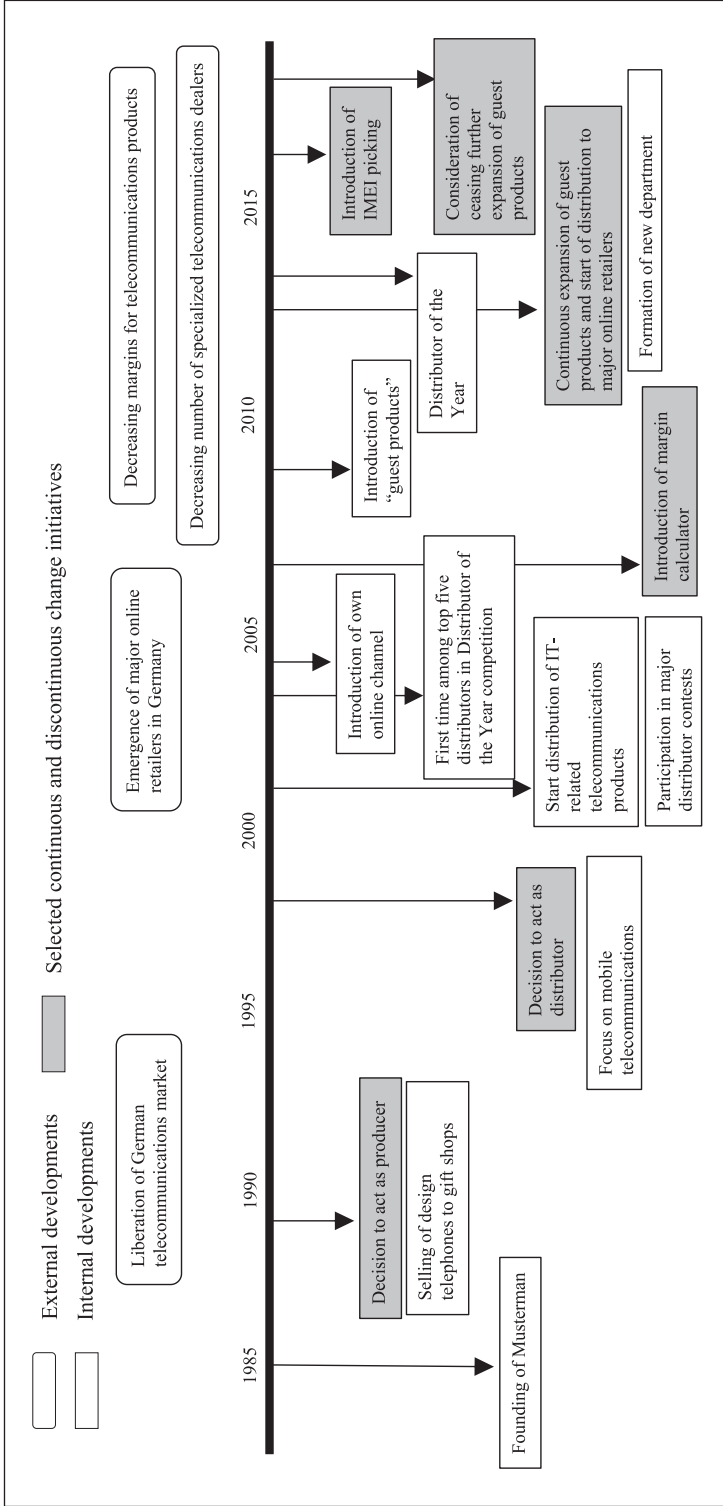


Figure 1. Timeline of Musterman.

Table 2. Overview of data sources.

Data source	Number
Interviews <i>CEOs, managers, team leaders, clerks</i>	37
Follow-up interviews I <i>Managers, clerks</i>	4
Follow-up interviews II <i>CEOs, managers, clerks</i>	3
Participant observations <i>Fairs, department meetings, meetings of the board of directors, informal gatherings</i>	61.5h
Telephone follow-ups	9
Pictures <i>Local art, buildings, rooms</i>	49
Documents <i>Internal memos, protocols from meetings, PowerPoints to employees, corporate statistics, internal newsletters, emails, press releases, press articles, advertisements, catalogues, brochures, employee handbook, corporate website, blog entries</i>	508
Videos <i>CEO live performances, promotional video</i>	3

were interviewed from all hierarchical levels, and we relied equally heavily on numerous archival documents as a means of triangulation.

Archival documents. Before entering the field, we collected publicly available data, such as website contents, industry reports, business press articles, and advertisements from throughout the firm's 32-year existence. We delved into the historical contexts, such as the market and industry conditions at the time of the firm's foundation, to sensitize us to the context. In situ, we requested copies of documents mentioned during interviews, informal conversations, and meetings. Musterman generously provided us with access to confidential documents (e.g. documents on strategic visions, strategic activities, and strategic plans).

Participant observation. Following our initial round of interviews, the first author conducted participant observations from April to November 2017, where she attended strategic meetings, fairs, and department meetings. As an observer, she could talk to participants in more informal settings and ask for additional clarification about topics that emerged during the interviews or from internal documents.

Data analysis

We used the data sources for three primary purposes: (1) to build an understanding of the organizational and strategic context, (2) to record how organizational members reacted to strategy–identity issues, and (3) to triangulate participants' perceptions with other data sources. We subsequently engaged in multiple iterations between our data and the emerging interpretive framework (Locke, 2001). Following Ravasi and Phillips (2011), we present our analysis in three sequential steps.

Phase 1: context familiarization and longitudinal reconstruction of events. We wrote a detailed narrative of Musterman's development, from its founding in 1985 to the state of the firm in 2017 by drawing

on multiple data sources. The narrative entailed perceptions of Musterman's nature, strategic initiatives, motivations for changes, and members' reactions. We relied on temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999) to delineate different periods within the organization's history. We displayed different accounts to comply with the tenants of interpretive research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Following Langley (1999), we drew a timeline of events to which we could relate our interpretations (see Figure 1). In doing so, we relied primarily on archival documents, to which we attached memos if we needed further clarification. This procedure helped us to prepare for the interviews and allowed us to enter the firm with a rough understanding of its development. We filled in the timeline iteratively, while working in parallel on the case narrative. Following Huy et al. (2014), we initially allowed a high level of complexity to avoid prematurely discarding aspects that might consistently re-appear. We noticed that perceptions of who Musterman is as a company changed significantly over time and that members particularly highlighted the "who we are not" dimension both in the archival data and in interviews. Consulting the existing literature, we noticed that few studies have considered anti-identity, thus rendering it an interesting phenomenon to explore.

Phase 2: coding and development of a grounded model. Following Gioia et al. (2013a), we distinguished between first- and second-order codes. While first-order codes remain close to the informants' language, second-order codes are closer to the researchers' voices and include more theoretically oriented constructs. This "tandem reporting of both voices" (Gioia et al., 2013a: 18) ensures transparency by providing insights into our data and our own interpretations. In doing so, we categorized in vivo codes into an initial set of categories, which was the basis for a subsequent comparative analysis (Gioia et al., 2013a). We gradually collapsed codes that were similar and created first-order categories. The final first-order categories included (1) leaders' aspirations, social references for creating the firm, and available resources to set up the organization, to illuminate the early years of Musterman; (2) symbolic and formal elements used by members to answer the questions about who the firm was and who it was not at different points in time; (3) managerial decisions regarding continuous and discontinuous change initiatives; (4) processes of alterations regarding formal and symbolic elements; and (5) responses on behalf of members who were not involved in change decisions.

To avoid dependence on a single person's interpretations, all authors were involved in the analysis (Gioia et al., 2010). The analysis of the material was coded independently by the first two authors. A subsequent comparison showed substantial accordance. The third, more distant, author served as a check for the plausibility of the results and offered distance from the data, along with expertise in the literature. This enabled us to move from provisional to more advanced categories (Locke, 2001). At the same time, we conducted the first follow-up interviews, presenting our initial interpretations. An overview of the codes and selected evidence are presented in Table 3.

Phase 3: triangulation and substantiation of the emerging interpretive framework. We engaged in axial coding at the later stage of our analysis to discover relationships among the categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This process was iterative in nature, as we went back and forth between different sources and pieces of literature. Following Gioia et al. (2013a), we consistently compared our informants' reports to discern differences across time and groups and iterated between the literature and our data to generate more theory-driven second-order categories. We then discussed, in various iterations, alternative explanations for our findings. In particular, the third, more distant, author drew our attention to the possibility of alternative explanations and highlighted articles on the toolkit analogy to embed our interpretations theoretically. This process led to the final set of categories given in Table 3. Finally, we arranged our derived categories into a process

Table 3. Supporting data.

Overarching themes	Second-order categories	First-order categories	Selected evidence
Formation of organizational reservoirs	Initial forces enabling creation of venture	Leaders' aspiration Social referents Available resources	<p>"We always wanted to make money." (Interview, CEO Peter)</p> <p>"It was always our dream to have our own company. We never just wanted to be students working like other normal students at a bar or being a paper boy. It was always 'how we can make money? Where and how we can make more money? Which markets are attractive?'" (Informal Conversation, CEO Martin)</p> <p>"In the early 1980s, technology was in its infancy and provided great opportunities for firms. Especially, the telecommunications industry was still in its infancy." (Document 242)</p> <p>"We looked at different markets and questioned what could be the next big thing in terms of technology and market opportunities." (Informal Conversation, CEO Peter)</p> <p>"In the beginning of the organization, we needed to be very mindful and creative in the way we conducted our business." (Interview, CEO Martin)</p> <p>"In the beginning, we fixed the products in the living room of the parents of one founder. I was their first employee, in charge of maintenance and fixing products. I brought my own tools from my home because the firm just did not have them in the beginning." (Interview, Maintenance Technician)</p> <p>"We were sellers of Musterman design telephones in all forms." (Interview, Employee)</p> <p>"Musterman: Telephones, answering machines, and accessories. Production, Import, Selling." (Press Release, 1992; Document 108)</p> <p>"Through the selling of 2,000 Musterman telephones, we could increase our revenues significantly." (Sales Report, 1994; Document 408)</p> <p>"We developed our own design telephones in collaboration with designers." (CEO Martin, Interview in a Press Article, 1994)</p> <p>"A special example is the Mickey Mouse telephone, which is now in the marketing office. ... Since 1986, it contributed significantly to Musterman's success. The true success story, which could not have been told by Disney. Mickey remains as a souvenir at Musterman and is treated carefully by us." (Musterman Blog Entry, 2016)</p> <p>"Why does a company that produces telephones and accessories purchase a replica of the Apollo 13 and put it in its garden? That is easy to answer ... one of the telephones is Star Trek and a copy of the starship Enterprise." (Press Article, 1996)</p> <p>"Well, it was clear to us that we were not the technologically most advanced company, despite our own production site. In fact, we were selling our products to gift stores." (Informal Conversation, Manager and CEOs, emphasis added)</p> <p>"Right from the beginning, we knew that this was our company and that we did not want to have an investor. We did not want to become a conglomerate. This is not how we saw our company." (Informal Conversation, CEO Martin)</p> <p>"Peter reported about the legal changes effective October 10th, 1994. ... This has major implications for our organization. The labeling on the devices is required. As producers, we need to provide explanations for each device." (Protocol from Management Meeting, 1994; Document 403)</p>
	Initial organizational identity reservoir	Identity claims: reflections on who we were in the beginning Formal attributes substantiating who we were in the beginning Symbolic attributes substantiating who we were in the beginning	
	Initial organizational anti-identity reservoir	Anti-identity claims: Reflections on who we are not Formal attributes substantiating who we were not in the beginning Symbolic attributes substantiating who we were not in the beginning	

Table 3. (Continued)

Overarching themes	Second-order categories	First-order categories	Selected evidence
Anti-identity strategizing			<p>“Should somebody call in the next days from the Federal Office for Post and Telecommunication, please pass him directly to me. Do not distribute any information to him [to avoid confusion].” (Internal Memo, 1994; Document 409)</p> <p>“You need to know about the story of the firms’ name, which is often communicated during special events by the owners. From the beginning, it was Musterman. Musterman is the last name of one founder. We did not hide behind acronyms like others. We also used this last name to sell our products. It was always obvious [that] we did not want to follow competitors by selling products under a different name.” (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p> <p>“Our customers are not a number but personified with their names. We guarantee a personal addressing. This is a ritual. This is almost extraordinary for this environment.” (CEO Martin, Interview in a Press Article, 1996; Document 79)</p> <p>“We were angry when our customers said, ‘Well, you are selling charcoal but not the newest iPhone’. We are not a general store. People did not understand it. And thus, we separated the target groups and sold such products only to specific customers.” (Follow-Up Interview, CEO Martin)</p>
	Strategic initiative	<p>Managerial decision pertaining to discontinuous change initiatives</p> <p>Managerial decision pertaining to continuous change initiatives</p>	<p>“When presenting our interpretation about the importance of anti-identity in the company’s strategizing of discontinuous change initiatives, both Martin and Peter agreed with it. Martin added the following about the importance of ‘not being a corporation’: ‘This makes sense to me. It reminds me a bit of the 80s where we had the saying, ‘better dead than red.’ For us, it would mean better dead than a big corporate. It is the ultimate argument in this company.’” (Field Note, October 2018)</p> <p>Musterman will also in the future hold to its concept of selling to only specialized shops. Peter explains: “In contrast to other distributors, we are not reigned by a group of investors. We are not other-directed. We will only sell to specialized shops, not to the final customers or hardware stores. We keep our promise to be a true partner.” (Press Article 1999, Document 61)</p> <p>“We are not the hardest negotiators. We are no penny pinchers, always searching to squeeze the last penny out of people. We treat everybody with respect and ensure that everybody will get a fair profit share.” (Follow-Up Interview, Martin)</p> <p>“We spoke for the first time about being a distributor in a meeting. We summed up that we should rather be a distributor and not a producer.” (Informal Conversation, Manager and Employees)</p> <p>“He [Peter] was standing there with this antifreeze mixture and we said we are a distributor now. Not a distributor with a focus on telecommunications products, but just a distributor.” (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p>
	Alterations in the organizational identity reservoir	<p>Adding claims to who we are</p> <p>Adding symbolic or formal attributes to who we are</p>	

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Overarching themes	Second-order categories	First-order categories	Selected evidence
Alterations in the organizational anti-identity reservoir	Adding claims to who we are not Adding symbolic or formal attributes to who we are not		<p>"Best conditions: According to the Beta computer news, we are the best! [Selection as Certified Distributor, 2003]." (Internal Presentation for Sales Employees, 2003; Document 421)</p> <p>"When mobile phones started to become more affordable ... we opened our first department dealing with such products. ... we needed people doing this because we never have done this before." (Interview, Assistant to the CEO)</p> <p>"Providing a maximum credit line for our clients; introduction of solvency checks for customers." (Suggestions for Improving Business Processes; Internal Document 439)</p> <p>"Well, with all the things going on here, I feel that we are moving away from a specialized distributor on telecommunication products, it feels as if things are changing." (Informal conversation with two employees)</p> <p>"I felt that labelling us as a producer was not applicable any longer." (Informal conversation, employee)</p> <p>"We could not keep the old procedures in the logistics. This did not work anymore, and we needed to build a new center, fitting better to our needs." (Informal Conversation, Logistician)</p> <p>"I noticed that the logo, which was used for the production of design telephones, vanished from internal documents for the first time in 1999. When asking the head of marketing, he answered, 'we did not use it anymore because it was a thing from the past; it did not fit to us anymore.'" (Field Note, November 2017)</p>
Overcoming ambiguity and resistance through anti-identity	Initial thoughts of members not involved in decision process Making sense of the change initiative		<p>"In the beginning, it was a bit confusing to have charcoal, hair rollers, and everything. Sometimes, I went through our product lists and did not recognize anything anymore." (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p> <p>"What to do with such products? No idea, literally no idea! Suddenly, I have to see how I fit a lawnmower into our warehouse." (Interview, Employee)</p> <p>"I like that we are not like others. You can see it in these brochures. It makes sense to me. Not necessarily because we are a distributor, but because we are not like the other big corporations." (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p> <p>"I know that it still somehow fits to us, being a distributor. However, I kept on asking myself why we were the only ones in making this big turmoil? However, then I kept on telling myself that this is exactly what Musterman brought so far. We are not a conglomerate; we go the extra mile." (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p> <p>"Musterman is the distributor for telecommunications products." (CEO Peter; Interview in a Press Article, 2008; Document 229; emphasis added)</p> <p>"We are a generalized distributor—not necessarily telecommunications anymore." (Informal Conversation, Employee)</p>
Revised reservoirs	Revised organizational identity reservoir	Identity claims: Reflections on who we are after the change initiatives	

Table 3. (Continued)

Overarching themes	Second-order categories	First-order categories	Selected evidence
		<p>Formal attributes substantiating who we are after change initiatives</p> <p>Symbolic attributes substantiating who we are after change initiatives</p>	<p>“Traditionally, we are rooted in the telecommunications sector, but if you look at our structure and our product offerings now, that has changed.” (Interview, Manager)</p> <p>“We changed a lot and introduced a new department and new products. ... this is why some say we became a more generalized distributor.” (Field Note, 6 April 2017)</p> <p>“A sales employee working in the entrance area explained that the Weber grill has become a symbol: ‘We always refer to the Weber grill when pointing that we are moving in a new direction. Or to the antifreeze.’” (Field note, 19 May 2017)</p> <p>“We had three things in the beginning, which become iconic I think; I will call these products guest products. ... In the beginning, we had multiple plugs, antifreeze, and reprographic paper.” (Follow-Up Interview, CEO Martin)</p>
	<p>Revised organizational anti-identity reservoir</p>	<p>Anti-identity claims: Reflections on who we are not after change initiatives</p> <p>Formal attributes substantiating who we are not after change initiatives</p> <p>Symbolic attributes substantiating who we are not after change initiatives</p>	<p>“I think the better question is not who we are but who we are not. I believe that this is more central to us. We are not like our corporate competitors, and this is how we define us.” (Informal Conversation, Sales Employee)</p> <p>“The past is still relevant, but this has nothing to do with us anymore. One still remembers this Mickey Mouse telephone, it was important earlier. Earlier it was very important to us.” (Interview, Manager)</p> <p>“Peter does not want to turn this into a highly bureaucratic company. We do not fill in 17 formulas to put it in envelope 8. ... This is not who we are—others can do it, that’s fine, but that is not Musterman.” (Interview, Assistant to the CEO)</p> <p>“There are no financial jugglers or investors behind our company, but two entrepreneurs.” (Internal Document: Employee Handbook, 2007; Document 503)</p> <p>“There is no Mr. Telekom, no Mr. Sony, and no Mr. Vodafone!” (Interview, CEO Martin)</p> <p>“The name Musterman is still very important. ... It is their life work, and it is important that this name remains. ... We are not like the other big conglomerates.” (Interview, Manager)</p>

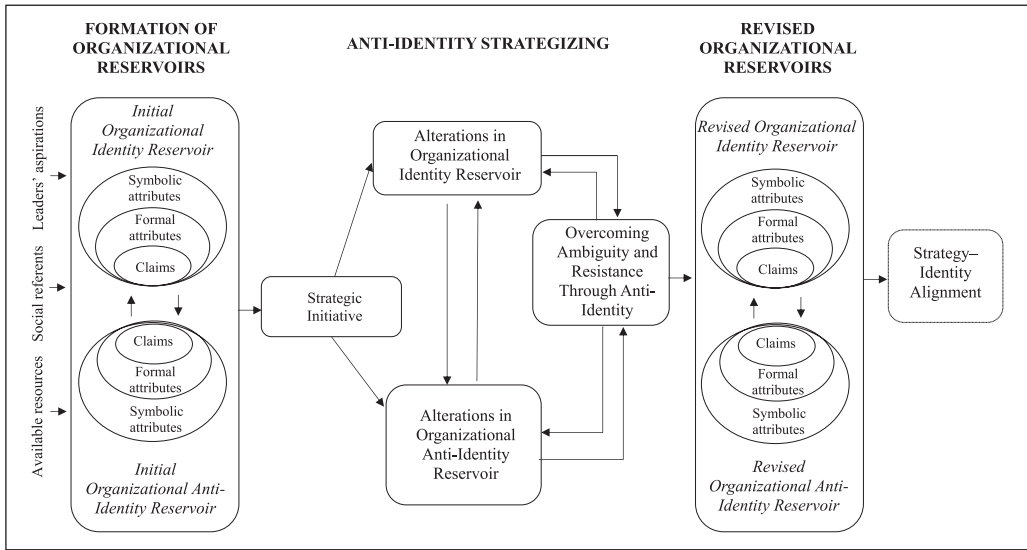


Figure 2. Process model of the formation of and changes in organizational identity reservoirs and anti-identity strategizing.

model. We initially developed alternative theoretical models, which we then “tested” by going back to the empirical data and, subsequently, synthesizing those aspects that most closely matched our observations. To strengthen the credibility and accuracy of our model, we subjected our findings and the derived model to further checks (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). More specifically, we presented our findings at Musterman to share our interpretation and elicit reactions. The audience agreed that our model provided an adequate representation of events. The final process model is depicted in Figure 2 and is presented in the next section.

Findings

In this section, we begin by illustrating the formation of the organization’s identity and anti-identity reservoirs and their interplay with strategic activities. Then, we describe how the organization used, in particular, its anti-identity reservoir to motivate new strategic initiatives. Finally, we explain how members delved into the anti-identity reservoir to overcome ambiguity.

Formation of the organizational identity reservoir

An initial identity reservoir and anti-identity reservoir were formed during the first strategic initiatives aimed at selling designer telephones (see Figure 3 for an example). As initial statements started to be considered as essential, they represented the first points of reference when answering the question, “who are we as an organization?” The formation of the organizational identity reservoir was, in particular, influenced by the strong aspirations of the founders, by social references (e.g. to what was going on in the environment at the time), and by available resources when starting the corporation.



Figure 3. The classic Mickey Mouse telephone (as shown in a Musterman Blog Entry).

Leaders' aspirations. The aspiration of both founders to earn money was central in the formation of the organization. CEO and founder Peter acknowledged the central role of money when referring to the initial motivation that led both he and Martin to establish a new venture:

We wanted to make instant money. We did not want to stand behind a counter an entire night, if we could earn the same amount of money in 30 minutes by selling products! (Interview, CEO Peter)

This consideration is echoed in the words of one of the managers: "There is one premise for Musterman: maximizing gross profit" (Interview, Manager). The strong aspiration for profit maximization also manifested in a press article in the founding years of Musterman, which stated, "Musterman expects even bigger revenue margins in the newly generated markets" (Internal Document).

Combined with their aspiration for profit maximization, the founders searched for an industry in which they could "make easy money." More specially, the founders were in search of dysfunctional market mechanisms and, accordingly, chances to make money. In the years to come, an essential part of their identity was "to look for loopholes" in markets, always in pursuit of making (more) money (Informal Conversations, CEO Peter).

Social references. Technology and market conditions were also of importance in the creation of the new venture:

We thought, "what do people want to buy?" It was pure coincidence that we chose answering machines as the initial starting point of our company ... It is not my personal calling to sell telephones or answering machines. If I am honest, it bores me. (Interview, CEO Peter)

This quote illustrates the definition of the main field of activity of the organization. More specially, its *raison d'être* was not linked to a specific calling or product idea but rather to the consideration of products that, at that period of time and in that geographical area, seemed very appealing for customers (Press Article).

In the initial phase of the organization, internal documents referred to notions such as being "innovative" and "unique." These ideas refer to securing a pioneering position in the market by selling liberalized telephone products. Such products were significantly different from the distributed products of the Deutsche Post, which held a monopoly in the 1980s. Martin described the

success of their strategy as follows: “The products that we offered were a blow off! We sold the most technologically advanced products. We had the newest and coolest technological telecommunication devices of all” (Interview, CEO Martin).

Social references, in the form of market opportunities and technological advancements, paired with the leaders’ aspiration for profit maximization, were important pillars in the foundation of the organization and had important implications for the subsequent creation of both the organizational identity and anti-identity.

Available resources. Similarly, the available resources, such as human resources, financial resources, and others, also played an important role. As Musterman was founded by two young students starting their first business activities in their parents’ homes, the aspect of available resources and resource scarcity, especially financial resources, was of high importance. Because their business model was tailored around the selling and distribution of telephones that were not available in Germany at that time, the exploitation of economies of scale was important to their trading orientation. As Peter acknowledged,

We bought articles abroad, and of course, when we order abroad, we do not order only two pieces. ... It was at this point of time that the idea of the wholesale trade was born. (Interview, CEO Peter)

Both owners have been “creative” in saving financial resources and using existing resources efficiently since the early days of the company. For example, early on, the two owners used the living room of one owner’s parents to start their business. The leaders’ aspiration for profit maximization seemed to exceed all other values, including ethical ones. For example, an expensive copier was purchased to print their early catalogues only to be returned to the store after it had served its purpose. As one employee stated,

There is a very illustrative story with the printer. They set it up but returned it after they did not need it anymore, claiming it had never worked properly. They always have been “innovative” in regard to the usage of resources, although not always playing according to the rules. (Interview, Employee)

This illustration highlights that available resources, paired with the leaders’ aspiration for profit maximization, have been important pillars since the foundation of the organization for the continuous formation of its identity and anti-identity reservoir. In summary, we observe that the leaders’ aspiration, social reference, and available resources paved an essential path for the organization’s future.

Identity reservoir

In the early years of its existence, Musterman claimed to be a producer of designer telephones and related accessories. For example, one informant reported, “The beginning was clearly centered on the Mickey Mouse; that’s how we were founded. We were producers and sellers of designer telephones” (Informal Conversation, Manager).

Such claims were relayed to both internal and external populations. For instance, documents that were distributed internally, such as memos and protocols from early strategy meetings, were decorated with Musterman’s producer logo, which pertained only to Musterman products; these were described as “innovative,” “state of the art,” “funny,” and “a bit crazy.” Likewise, catalogues and brochures targeted at external audiences referred to the “innovative Harley Davidson telephone” the “funny banana telephone” and “a fully digital answering machine.”

Despite congruence concerning such claims, members highlighted further that terms such as “state of the art” and the very idea of being “a producer of telecommunication devices” (statement from the two owners in internal memos and reflected in external press releases and brochures) were interpreted differently by organizational members on different occasions:

For some, we were the producers of accessories that they could buy in gift shops. For others, we were the state-of-the-art company, which finally brought momentum into the German market. I think it depended slightly whether you wanted to buy our Mickey Mouse telephones or our answering machines. In addition, we also targeted our communication to that. (Informal Conversation, CEO Martin)

These claims were substantiated by both formal and symbolic identity attributes, as illustrated by the tripartite circles in Figure 2. In terms of formal attributes, the strategy of Musterman at this time was to sell products under its own name produced in its own production facilities, thus making it a producer in the eyes of organizational members.

In addition, symbolic attributes in the form of artifacts and narratives played a pivotal role in the substantiation of claims. For example, employees remembered that a Mickey Mouse telephone was always prominently placed in the organization. This Mickey Mouse telephone was an artifact to remind the people working at Musterman, as well as visitors, that the two owners were the “founding fathers of the modern German telecommunication industry” (Informal Conversation, Manager). It acted as a symbol of Musterman’s “innovativeness and entrepreneurial spirit” (Informal Conversation, Employee) and as a reminder that the two owners are, at heart, “little anarchists” with a desire to explore new things not common in the industry (Interview, CEO Peter).

Anti-identity reservoir

Intriguingly, organizational members did not only answer the question “who are we?” but also “who are we not?” in the early stages of the organization. Stated differently, in interviews, informants not only focused on who they used to be as an organization but also relied on claims about who they were not. More specifically, members referred repeatedly to being “not criminal,” although they described themselves as “little anarchists.” For example, one manager recalled the following: “What I know for sure is that we were not doing anything forbidden. We played with the rules, but we were no criminals” (Interview, Manager).

Likewise, informants also reported that they perceived themselves as a state of the art but not as a technologically leading company:

We used technologies that already existed in the market; we had no patents or anything like this. In this sense, we were no engineers. We were state of the art in the German market but definitely not technology leaders. (Interview, Employee)

Another illustrative example represents “not being a corporation” as an anti-identity claim. An employee acknowledged the following in a conversation:

The very core of Musterman was always what we were not [a big corporation]. Already, at the very beginning, it was clear that we are not a big corporation and that we do not want to become a big corporation. That is why they decided [on] the name Musterman. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

Similar to organizational identity, we conceptualize organizational anti-identity as claims residing within a reservoir, from which people make “bounded draws” (Kroezen and Heugens, 2012: 98). Although there are potentially myriads of anti-identity claims to consider, organizational members

did not make random draws but relied on claims that were industry-relevant. One informant explained the following:

Well, considering us as “not an operator of swimming pools or theaters or whatever” would be too far-fetched. I would not use this statement to describe who we are or who we are not. (Interview, Employee)

Similar to the identity reservoir, these claims were presented to both organizational insiders and outsiders and varied over time and depending on the occasion, rendering the reservoir a “basin” from which members can choose. As such, identity claims of being “modern” and “state of the art” were used in combination with the anti-identity claim of “being no criminal”; while the claim of “not being a corporation” remained unarticulated, it was present in members’ minds. One employee explained,

Although we did not mention specific things actively here [pointing to the map of internal documents], it was still an important aspect, but we cannot tell everything at once. Sometimes we had to choose. (Interview, Employee)

Again similar to the identity reservoir, anti-identity claims were also substantiated by formal and symbolic attributes. For instance, Musterman’s formal practice of putting stickers on technical devices, as required by law, to instruct buyers to connect them to the German telecommunications network, demonstrates the interplay between the organizational identity reservoir and its Hegelian antithesis (Pratt and Foreman, 2000: 31) by informing constituents about the company’s legality: “We are little anarchists; we test the system, but we are not criminal or dishonest. We place stickers on them [the telephones], and therefore, we are not criminal” (Informal Conversation with CEOs Martin and Peter).

However, the absence of specific practices also corroborates members’ understandings of “who are we not as Musterman”:

We were never interested in getting investors on board like other companies did at that time. We did not want to become a corporation, which is big but anonymous and impersonal. (Interview, Employee)

Artifacts, too, such as the brand logo, which is composed of the first letter of the name of one of the owners, remind employees that the company is not an international conglomerate, as were many other firms entering the German telecommunications industry at the time of Musterman’s founding (as expressed in informal conversations during a social gathering).

Anti-identity strategizing

In the early years of the company’s existence, organizational members also used elements from the organizational anti-identity reservoir for future strategizing. Here, we illustrate how anti-identity strategizing shaped the selection of strategic initiatives and influenced the constellation of claims relating to attributes within the two reservoirs. We draw on two discontinuous change initiatives—namely, the shift from being a producer to a distributor of telecommunications products at the end of the 1990s and the subsequent shift to being a general distributor offering products such as hair rollers and grills in the late 2010s—and on two continuous change initiatives that occurred while the organization was a distributor of telecommunications products.

Strategic initiatives. Intriguingly, discontinuous strategic initiatives emerged based on elements in the anti-identity reservoir. We define *discontinuous change initiatives* as initiatives that deviate

from past trajectories (Nag et al., 2007a) and have a deep impact on the two organizational reservoirs. Based on our informants' reports and on archival data, such a strategic shift occurred at the end of the 1990s, as Musterman evolved from being a producer of designer telephones and answering machines to a distributor of general telecommunications products.

This shift was discontinuous, as key customers changed and new products entered the portfolio that contradicted the organization's claim of "being a producer of their own products." Informants confirmed that suddenly offering other producers' products was a significant shift: "I remember that, very clearly, we used this specific expression: 'do we prostitute ourselves and start to sell products from people who were our competitors before?'" (Interview, CEO Peter). Internal documents corroborate this observation, as employees needed to be trained in how to address non-Musterman products and who would now be considered a legitimate target audience for Musterman.

This entrance into completely new territory was triggered by the anti-identity reservoir. More specifically, it was the absence of profound research and development (R&D) activities—a formal attribute, substantiating the former anti-identity claims of "we are not a high-tech company" (Interview, Manager) and "we are not a company targeting tech-affine people" (Interview, CEO Peter)—that sparked the strategic initiative. Management drew on the anti-identity reservoir, and not on their identity reservoir, to initiate change: "Products became more complicated, technically more complex. We did not want to engage in R&D any longer. In fact, we are not engineers" (Interview, CEO Peter). Thus, by indicating what Musterman was not and what it did not want to become, Peter emphasized that identity claims needed to be changed accordingly: "We needed to change something, moving more in the distribution direction; we had no choice because we never engaged in profound R&D activities" (Informal conversation, CEO Peter).

A second discontinuous initiative occurred while we were in situ. This initiative involved the shift from being a distributor of telecommunications products to being a general distributor, offering products such as grills, cookware, and antifreeze. Internal documents provided further evidence of the extensive growth of an already broad scope of products, which occupied a large part of the warehouse and replaced the classic telecommunications products (Internal Document 505). Informants confirmed that the initiative had little to do with their traditional core business and activities, rendering it, thus, a discontinuous shift:

This has nothing to do in regard [to] what Musterman was doing before. However, Martin liked the idea and that was the first step in uncharted waters because Musterman had never done anything in this direction before. (Interview, Employee)

In interviews, managers relied heavily on the organization's anti-identity; when asked about the sudden strategic shift, one manager explained that they are not a big corporation reigned over by a group of investors but rather an independent, family-owned distributor. By referring to its anti-identity, "not being a corporation," management enjoyed greater strategic leeway, offering possibilities that competitors did not consider:

The two owners provide the money, but we are not bound to anybody or anything. If they say we can repair cars, let's open a car workshop, we will do it. (Interview, Manager)

Martin also referred to the element of "not being a producer," drawing on the anti-identity reservoir in order to explain the new strategic initiative:

We do such things because we are no producer. We don't have any patents, we do not develop anything anymore. ... We cannot simply move boxes, this is not enough. (Follow-Up Interview, Martin)

Our observations when attending strategic meetings regarding the expansion of distribution activities to non-traditional online channels corroborate our informants' accounts. During one such meeting, Peter announced this initiative to be important for Musterman because it is a good way to distance the company from the values inherent to conglomerate competitors:

Just to be very clear here: we do it because we can do it. ... Every specialized shop needs a coffee machine from time to time, and they will not get it from the big corporates but from us. In addition, that is the reason why we are doing it, we are not like them. (Field Note, November 2017)

Intriguingly, anti-identity elements were equally important for continuous change initiatives. If an initiative occurred without leading to a radical deviation from past strengths and could be easily added to the existing reservoirs, we refer to it as a *continuous change*. For example, the introduction of an International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI)-picking system,² the offering of a postal service by a new provider, and the launch of a margin calculator for specialist telecommunications shops represent continuous changes. This is because such new elements are aligned with the claim of "being a distributor for telecommunication product," even though such initiatives had not been introduced by other distributors and, thus, still represent an innovative step. For instance, when being asked about IMEI picking, one informant referred to "not being a corporation" as a major reason for launching the system:

We see things a bit differently here at Musterman because we are not a company with a group of investors behind us. However, this means that we also do not have the same resources as they have. We often cannot compete on prices because we are not such a conglomerate. We also do not want to do this, and that is why we need to offer the extra service. (Interview, Manager)

This statement is confirmed by Martin, who likewise drew on the element of "not being a big corporation" to justify the introduction of a new postal service, which was a novelty in the industry. He further argued that the anti-identity of "not being a big corporation" makes Musterman more creative:

Bigger companies treat all clients equally. They have standardized processes. This can be successful, but we can make more exceptions. It is similar to big insurance companies. For example, if you are autistic, and apply for an expensive dolphin-assisted therapy, they will decline the request because it is not covered by the basic health insurance. Instead, one needs see to the traditional doctor to receive expensive medicine, and the insurance company will pay that. In our opinion, a more extraordinary approach would be better, but a traditional insurance company will not provide this, which brings us back to "not being a big corporation." Our competitors are not making these exceptions. For us, it is the client that is in the center, and therefore, we offer those extras. (Follow-Up Interview, CEO Martin)

Internal documents also illustrate how implemented initiatives were based on "who we are not." One example is the "Musterman Run," a game developed by Musterman for an annual industry fair to promote the margin calculator. Similar to the "Super Mario" video games, clients take on the roles of the two owners as avatars, jumping over hurdles and avoiding foes such as the big corporate players. The marketing manager explained that they developed this game because it illustrates that the organizations' values and ways of approaching tasks are different from those of big corporations: "As we are not such a classic corporation, such as an Alpha or Beta, we thought that this game format is the perfect fit for us to illustrate this" (Interview, Manager).

Alterations in the organizational identity reservoir. While elements of the anti-identity reservoir triggered the initial engagement in new strategic initiatives, elements of the organizational identity reservoir were subsequently affected by both continuous and discontinuous change initiatives.

With engagement in discontinuous change initiatives, new claims entered the organizational identity reservoir, at first without any substantiation from formal or symbolic attributes. More specifically, when moving from a producer to a distributor position at the end of the 1990s, new claims entered the organizational identity reservoir and subsequently replaced the prior claims of being a producer. One manager recalled the following: “We came up with this new claim that we are distributors now. However, we still needed to adapt the processes and everything afterwards. This involved quite some effort” (Informal Conversation, Manager).

Similarly, a second discontinuous change initiative occurred when Musterman became a general distributor. Another member illustrated this, as follows:

Within a meeting we were informed that we are a generalized distributor. I did not understand why because nothing had changed, but they told us that changes are coming soon. (Informal Conversation, Sales Employee)

As soon as new claims emerged in the reservoir, new formal practices were also implemented. The organization moved to a larger site with the decision to become a distributor because it needed a larger warehouse for its new operations. Internal documents celebrate the emergence of advanced logistical structures, which had not been needed before when operating under the claim of “being a producer.” In a similar vein, new formal attributes arose with the claim of being a general distributor. For example, a change in the organizational structure involved the creation of a new department in charge of the new lifestyle products. A newly hired employee in this department explained, “It was something completely different and they needed me to realize it. I had the contacts and the experience” (Interview, Employee). Finally, it was only over time that new symbolic attributes also entered the identity reservoir. For instance, it was only after 3 years that awards for being one of the most successful distributors in Germany could be won and subsequently displayed within Musterman.

The introduction of IMEI picking and the margin calculator are instances of continuous change initiatives. While they did cause changes in the organizational identity reservoir, these changes were continuous in character, resulting in a subsequent adaptation of formal attributes. For example, during a biannual sales meeting, one manager repeatedly highlighted that new practices needed to be introduced with the emergence of the IMEI picking system in daily routines: “Everybody wants to use this IMEI picking, and you need to be trained in telling them [the clients] the procedure” (Field Note, April 2017). Likewise, another manager outlined how the IMEI-picking system changed the daily routines for logisticians:

It was some effort establishing it. Now, employees have to separate the devices that you use for the IMEI picking. Logistically, we have to store them now differently and logisticians have to know where to look. (Informal Conversation, Manager)

He further clarified that such practices are also a “part of Musterman” and help members to “understand what makes Musterman unique.”

Drawing on Kroezen and Heugens (2012), we argue that such practices alter the organizational identity, as they enter in the form of alternative identity referents and replace previous practices. As new formal attributes substantiate existing claims, such as “being a true partner for industry” (Field Note, September 2016) and being a “distributor for telecommunication products” (Internal Document 502), such initiatives represent instances of identity enhancement, as innovative activities and the existing organizational identity are aligned (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016). Informants emphasized that such initiatives help to keep the traditional target market: “Such activities help us to sustain and acquire the specialized shops” (Interview, Employee).

Alterations in the organizational anti-identity reservoir. While continuous change initiatives represent instances of identity enhancements during which new formal elements are added to the identity reservoir, discontinuous changes not only lead to changes in the identity reservoir but also lead to changes in the anti-identity reservoir, thus rendering the boundary between the two reservoirs permeable. The following paragraph underpins our observations by drawing on the two discontinuous change initiatives that have occurred over the course of Musterman's existence.

Drawing on the first discontinuous change initiative, namely, turning the organization from a producer of designer telephones into a distributor of telecommunications products, our informants reported that their perceptions of "who we are not" changed accordingly. With the emergence of new claims in the identity reservoir, rival claims as well as initial formal and symbolic identity attributes were removed from the identity reservoir to avoid a clash with the newly emerging claims. With the decision to distribute other producers' products, practices pertaining to the development of their own products became obsolete, as Musterman was careful not to be considered a competitor to its own customers. One employee recalled the following:

Earlier, we had our own brand and even considered own stores as a legitimate solution, but this suddenly did not work any longer. Why should a producer give another producer his products? This does not make sense. Anyway, our research activities were never very profound so that [there] was no problem of getting rid of them. (Interview, Employee)

With the deletion of such formal practices, previous identity claims, such as being "pioneering" and "innovative," became obsolete and, thus, entered the anti-identity reservoir as elements that the organization is not any longer: "We lost it; we were no longer pioneers" (Interview, Manager).

Moreover, artifacts connected to the claim of being a producer of designer telephones, such as the prominently placed Mickey Mouse telephone, were banished to less visible places within the organization (Informal Conversations with Employees). However, instead of forgetting the past, the two owners ensured that this earlier era remained an important part of organizational members' memory by placing abstract Mickey Mouse artwork in their organization (see Figure 4). Former identity attributes pertaining to the identity perception "we are a producer of designer telephones" were not simply forgotten but became an important part of the anti-identity reservoir from which members extract what Musterman is not (any longer). While showing us around, for example, one manager explained the following:

It is still an important part of us because this is where we came from. However, it is a thing of the past, something which we are not any longer. (Informal Conversation, Manager)

Similarly, the vanishing of symbolic attributes, such as narratives, turned the former identity claim of being a comprehensive distributor of telecommunications products into an anti-identity claim. An employee from the logistics team noted the following:

I used to tell people that I know perfectly where to find the different products. Everybody in the organization said, go to Miss Miller, she knows where it is and what we have; it was a running gag: if I do not know about the product, we do not have it. Yet, today, they cannot do this any longer because we have so many weird products, which are continuously changing, that I lost the overview. Now, I have to ask myself [laughing]. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

Overcoming ambiguity and resistance through the anti-identity reservoir. The anti-identity reservoir played a pivotal role, helping not only management to engage in strategic initiatives but also organizational members who are not directly involved in the decision-making process but who still need to make sense of the new initiatives.



Figure 4. Abstract Mickey Mouse art in the contemporary foyer of Musterman (own photo).

As highlighted previously, continuous changes led to the emergence of new formal attributes within the identity reservoir that further corroborated existing organizational identity claims. Although the organizational identity reservoir plays a pivotal role in making sense of strategy, organizational members primarily draw from an anti-identity reservoir in the case of uncertainty. For instance, when the IMEI-picking system affected existing formal practices, members justified such an intervention by drawing on the anti-identity of “not being a big corporation”:

We never have stability. ... We have the possibility to really serve the customer. And this is what makes us unique. We are not mechanized and industrialized [like our corporate competitors are]. We are not doing everything by the book. We still have the attitude to realize customers' demands on an individual basis. (Interview, Employee)

Intriguingly, organizational members also readily accepted new claims offered by management in the course of discontinuous change initiatives even though they were initially not substantiated by formal or symbolic attributes. Organizational members overcame this potential void of meaning by drawing from attributes of the anti-identity reservoir. In other words, attributes from the anti-identity reservoir nourished unsubstantiated identity claims until new formal and symbolic identity referents entered the identity reservoir. For instance, referring to the second discontinuous change initiative, a Musterman member drew our attention once again to the anti-identity of “not being a big corporation”:

It was confusing. They told us that we are selling antifreeze and coffee machines now. We were all like “what? how so?” It is very hard to imagine when you are coming from the telecommunications direction. However, then I started to think that this is actually a logical step for the organization because we are not a plain corporate distributor which is only looking to get the maximum out of a client. For us, it is the relationship and the maximization of value creation that counts; we are not an Alpha. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

Hence, the anti-identity played a key role not only for the management but also for the change recipients. This is further evidenced by members' reactions toward management's recent decision to cease a further expansion of guest products for the time being. While the anti-identity of "not being a conglomerate" used to be an argument for the start of such activities, it serves now equally well to justify stopping the expansion:

If this business gets bigger and bigger. ... We have to remember that our primary buyer is now a big American conglomerate, with no personal care, no people talking to each other. They have systems and structures that simply do not fit [with] us. (Interview, Employee)

Likewise, another employee stated, "This customer does actually not fit [with] us. They are the only clients with whom Peter and Martin have not talked personally." (Interview, Employee)

Revised organizational reservoirs

With alterations in the organizational identity reservoir in the case of continuous change initiatives and in both the organizational identity reservoir and the organizational anti-identity reservoir in the case of discontinuous change initiatives, members could now draw on a new set of attributes to describe Musterman to both insiders and outsiders.

Revised organizational identity reservoir. The following paragraph illustrates the revised identity reservoir after Musterman changed from being a producer to being a distributor of telecommunications products. After the emergence of new elements in the identity reservoir and the deletion of former attributes pertaining to the claims of being a producer, many respondents relied on the overall telecommunications industry to describe Musterman but simultaneously highlighted aspects that made the organization special: "At heart, we are a distributor of information technology and telecommunications products. However, we are a special distributor, very familial, as everybody knows everybody here" (Interview, Manager). CEO Martin confirmed this statement and added,

We are a very reliable and trustworthy company. With us, you know where you are. We really take care of both our employees and clients. Yes, the term "taking care" fits really well. It is like a baby, you have to nourish it, and this is what we do every day. (Interview, CEO Martin)

Taking a closer look at such statements, the identity of Musterman shifted—that is, it morphed from being a producer to being a distributor—but claims of being "special" and "caring" remained within the reservoir.

As with the first identity reservoir, pertaining to being a producer, members again shared a congruent opinion concerning Musterman's identity after becoming a distributor. Although members agreed on claims of being a "distributor of information technology and telecommunications products" and being a "partner for the industry" (as expressed in internal documents, informal conversations, and interviews), such claims were interpreted differently in different situations. For example, a sales manager explained that being a distributor can indeed mean different things at different points in time: "We are consultants for the specialist shops. We are partners and consultants" (Informal Conversation, Employee). The employee further stated,

We have very different roles at times. Sometimes, we are the evils that come to complain; sometimes, we are the big brother and friend with a helping hand. Somehow, we are everything; we are almost schizophrenic. (Interview, Employee)

This is also congruent with the observations we made while visiting the organization. For example, conversations between clients and Musterman during the annual fair demonstrated how Musterman enacted different roles. The organization acted, on one hand, as a financial institution—that is, as a bank lending money to its clients to enable them to purchase new furniture for their shops—and, on the other hand, as an adamant opponent if the specialist shops did not pay for the ordered products delivered by Musterman in the previous months (Field Note, May 2017).

As depicted in Figure 2, such claims were substantiated by formal and symbolic attributes. Formal practices embedded in the accounting department corroborate the organization's claim of being a distributor, which occasionally meant credit was given to the specialized shops:

Over time, we developed very specific procedures concerning financing. You have to contact the account staff and be very clear on the subject. You have to enter a client number, and they decide subsequently whether we will give them a loan. ... Yes, and that makes us a bank [on] some occasions. (Interview, Manager)

In addition, attributes in the form of artifacts and narratives played a pivotal role in the substantiation of claims. As new artifacts and narratives emerged over time, the revised organizational identity claims were now also supported by new attributes. For example, one manager referred to a collection of numerous “Distributor of the Year” awards that were received in previous years and displayed in the foyer of the organization, which, in her view, represent evidence of a “bridge between the industry and specialized shops” and that the company is a “reliable and highly trustworthy partner” (Informal Conversation, Manager; Field Note, March 2017). Moreover, stories narrated on occasions such as New Year's receptions, evening activities during the annual fair, and the biannual sales team presentation, communicated important material substantiating claims. For instance, the two owners acted out the story of Musterman during the annual fair, depicting the organization as a family-owned distributor that is always close to both its customers and its employees (Field Note, May 2017).

Revised anti-identity reservoir. Along with a revision of the organizational identity reservoir, elements of the anti-identity reservoir were also reconfigured. In the subsequent paragraph, we present the revised anti-identity reservoir after Musterman changed from a being a producer to being a distributor of telecommunications products.

Interestingly, certain elements of the anti-identity reservoir remained the same over the years, despite the discontinuous strategic initiative. Our informants' indication that the essence of Musterman pertains to it not being a big corporate player strengthens our interpretation that specific elements of the anti-identity reservoir act as an anchor for organizational members. An employee from the purchasing department drew on the following anti-identity claim:

Who we are? To understand who we are you must know who we are not. We are not an Alpha and not a Gamma. We are *not* a big corporation. This is the essence of Musterman. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

Members substantiated their anti-identity claims both with the existence and absence of formal and symbolic attributes. For instance, members believed that the *absence* of specific formal hierarchical elements actually substantiates their anti-identity:

We can handle things very quickly here. Other companies need years because they have all these juridical departments—supervisory board, board of managers, division managers, working council. We did

everything with four people in six weeks. Six weeks from an idea to the actual start. ... We simply do not have this hierarchical structure. (Interview, CEO Martin)

In addition, a manager drew on the absence of formal attributes to corroborate the anti-identity claims: "We are not like big corporations; we do not have a detailed strategic outline for 2017. It does not exist" (Interview, Manager). Moreover, and similar to a Hegelian antithesis (Pratt and Foreman, 2000: 31), members also drew on formal attributes within the organizational identity reservoir:

Our structure is that of a family-owned business. This is really important. We are not an enterprise, but a familial family-owned distributor. Hence, we are not like the others in our industry. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

This statement illustrates that anti-identity and identity claims are enacted simultaneously by organizational members and that the members draw on both reservoirs to formulate claims. Likewise, narratives about the owners hugging pregnant employees and finding them new, more pleasant tasks within the organization, offering wage advances, and knowing each employee by name, corroborate the anti-identity claim that "we are not a corporation" and, similar to the Hegelian antithesis, simultaneously corroborate the organizational identity claim of being "family-like."

With the shift from being a producer to a distributor of telecommunications products, new elements also entered the anti-identity reservoir, endowing organizational members with a greater selection of elements from which to draw when communicating to both insiders and outsiders who the organization is. Informants now referred repeatedly to "not being a producer," which had before been a pivotal identity claim. Managers highlighted numerous times the disadvantages of being a producer, arguing that competitors could copy concepts easily, as Musterman could not protect itself through patents. Informants drew a clear line between being a producer and being a distributor: "These are two different levels. In addition, we should differentiate here clearly: we are not a producer!" (Informal Conversation, Employee).

Finally, informants were now also emphasizing that they are not a "small specialized shop." However, one employee noted the following:

There are some players in the market that are smaller and more specialized than us. Players that we perceive as a competitor. Yet, we are not like them. We are not small and not specialized to the degree that they are. (Informal Conversation, Employee)

Similar to claims in the identity reservoir, these claims were presented to both insiders and outsiders and varied over time depending on the occasion. During the biannual sales presentation, participants frequently switched between describing Musterman as "not a financial conglomerate," "not a specialized shop only focused on a specific subset of products" or "not being a producer" when clarifying financial reports (Field Note, April 2017). The organization also used both internal and external documents to communicate its anti-identity. For instance, to communicate the essence of Musterman, the two owners decided to send a letter with handwritten comments in the margins depicting what Musterman is *not*. The ending of the letter, "*Greetings from [place]*," was crossed out, and the comment next to it read, "*Best, Peter*." In addition, the general phone number to the secretarial desk was crossed out and supplemented by a comment in the margin providing the telephone extension of Peter himself (Internal Document 479). One manager emphasized the following:

To understand Musterman, it is very important to know what Musterman is *not* epitomizing. We distributed this little letter to our most important consumers before the fair. It was a sign for both our sales people and our customers illustrating everything that our company is not. Man, our competitors were pretty angry! (Interview, Manager)

In sum, after the discontinuous initiative (i.e. the move from being a producer to being a distributor), members referred to a different set of organization-specific claims than they did before the initiative took place. Through the illustrated interplay between both the reservoirs, drawing heavily on anti-identity strategizing, the organization (re)-aligned their strategy and (anti)-identity. In numerous conversations, members shared similar perceptions of who they are as an organization. Furthermore, a joint understanding emerged regarding who they were no longer.

Discussion

In this article, we explore the relationship between organizational identity, anti-identity, and strategy. While existing studies illustrate how organizational identity might have a “constraining role” on change trajectories (Nag et al., 2007a; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000) due to identity ambiguity among members (Corley and Gioia, 2004), the effort required for the re-construal of organizational identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), or the need to realign strategy and identity after change initiatives (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), less is known about the role of organizational anti-identity. Drawing on Musterman’s 32 years of existence, we highlight the importance of organizational anti-identity for both continuous and discontinuous change initiatives, and demonstrate how members can overcome identity ambiguity and resistance by referring to “who we are not” rather than to “who we are as an organization.” Consequently, this study extends our understanding of the role of anti-identity for strategy selection and subsequent strategy–identity alignment.

The anti-identity reservoir

Extant studies have focused on organizational identity and its ability to adapt to shifting environments (Schultz and Hernes, 2013). We extend this literature by introducing the notion of an anti-identity reservoir. We argue that an organizational anti-identity reservoir contains a set of anti-identity elements, which are symbolic and formal in nature and substantiate a set of available anti-identity claims. This conceptualization resonates with Kroezen and Heugens’ (2012) notion of an identity reservoir. Organizational members refer to this “basin” to make bounded draws from this set when answering the question “who are we not as an organization?” (Reger et al., 1998: 151). By recombining elements and allowing for new elements to enter, members are more flexible in describing their organization on different occasions. With the introduction of the anti-identity reservoir, we follow Carroll and Levy’s (2008) insight to also conceptualize anti-identities as malleable.

Although we draw on Kroezen and Heugens’ (2012) notion of a reservoir, which might convey a functionalist imagery of memory as “bin-like,” it is important to emphasize the socially constructed character of identity and memory (for an overview, see Suddaby et al., 2010). Organizational memories are not as “objective” as a “bin-like” metaphor might portray; however, the reservoir analogy is useful to depict the leeway left to managers and employees during identity–strategy realignment. In other words, identity and anti-identity claims rely on both formal and symbolic elements. Not only are these memory elements but they also involve operating practices—that is,

activities that organizations do (i.e. formal elements) and organizations' narratives and artifacts (i.e. symbolic elements, which are closer to memory).

Our findings regarding the interplay of the two reservoirs also extend Pratt and Foreman's (2000: 31) notion of Hegelian antithesis by highlighting how boundaries between the two reservoirs are permeable. This permeability allows for members to shift attributes that are no longer perceived as appropriate into the anti-identity reservoir. Based on this observation, we conceptualize the anti-identity reservoir as a form of collective memory, which is different to Anteby and Molnár's (2012) concept of *organizational forgetting*. We find that members did not engage in forgetting but rather maintained the attributes in their collective memory. Shifting elements into the anti-identity reservoir is an instance of distancing from the past.

Yet, despite this distancing, members were proud about their past and enjoyed thinking about former times without desiring to return to them. It was thus neither nostalgia, that is, a longing to go back, nor nostophobia, that is, a desire to escape from the past (Strangleman, 1999) that occurred. Our findings reveal that the two owners did not attempt to "rubbish the past" (Munro, 1998: 221) but embraced it as a part of the organizational anti-identity. While we acknowledge that forgetting might prevent organizational lock-in (Anteby and Molnár, 2012), an anti-identity reservoir, as a form of collective memory, secures confluence, that is, simultaneous continuity and change (Chreim, 2005) by letting go of the past while maintaining it in the memory. Importantly, the anti-identity reservoir is also distinct from Hatch and Schultz's (2017) latent history, as the attributes of an anti-identity are actively enacted and are not latent but at the surface. Future studies may look into the interplay between forgetting, latent attributes, and (anti)-identity attributes. More specifically, it is important to investigate under which circumstances organizational forgetting or the creation of an anti-identity reservoir are favorable. In addition, the role of the initial formation of an (anti)-identity reservoir may be an interesting avenue for future research beyond the strategy-identity nexus (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

Using the anti-identity reservoir as a basis for strategic initiatives

We identify the importance of the anti-identity reservoir when engaging in (dis)continuous change initiatives. At Musterman, change initiatives were not based on "who we are as an organization," as postulated by earlier studies (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000) but instead pertained to "who we are not as an organization." Consequently, we extend the literature on the strategy-identity nexus, as prior research has foremost highlighted the role of organizational identity in change initiatives. Notably, the notion of "not being a corporation" drove multiple strategic initiatives, making this part of the organization's anti-identity strategizing. In particular, our observation that discontinuous identity elements can enter the identity reservoir based on anti-identity strategizing offers fruitful avenues for future research. Indeed, past studies indicate established firms' difficulties in reinventing themselves (Tripsas, 2009; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000) in the face of environmental change. Even if firms manage to circumvent inertia and adapt their organizational identity by rediscovering elements of the past (Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), such attempts are arduous and time consuming. However, Musterman's management performed such shifts with relative ease, as they remained true to themselves, that is, "not being a corporation" while embarking on more discontinuous change trajectories. Hence, anti-identity has the potential to provide organizations and their leaders with greater "wobble room" which enables them to push boundaries when used strategically.

Indeed, the owners admit that the anti-identity—and not their identity—is the "ultimate argument in a debate" and justifies any initiative. Even the most "abstruse" ideas, for example, opening a car workshop or selling charcoal, appear reasonable when based on the anti-identity. The strategic use

of the anti-identity is especially intriguing when considering prior research highlighting not only the potentially constraining role of organizational identity but also the effort to re-align identity and strategy after major shifts. Instead of needing to rediscover who they once were as an organization through an extensive sensemaking process (Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), managers could act quickly and rationally, as elements of the anti-identity reservoir were “readily available” and did not need to be further explored. In this vein, we extend the literature on organizational anti-identities by illustrating that anti-identity not only emerges in the course of a change process (Reger et al., 1998) but also remains an important definitional component throughout, acting as an important driver for organizational change and innovation.

Observing the importance of anti-identity for (dis)continuous change initiatives also leads to interesting insights for literature focusing on categories (e.g. Zuckerman, 1999). Continuous change initiatives may lead to optimal distinctiveness in relation to competitors (e.g. Brewer, 1991) while remaining in the same category, while discontinuous change initiatives may lead to the exploration of new categories (e.g. moving from being a producer to a telecommunications distributor, and subsequently to a general distributor). Consequently, the use of an anti-identity might enable organizations to become more flexible and to cross category boundaries. While we stress the importance of an anti-identity, we do not neglect Zuckerman’s (1999) warning concerning not belonging to a category. While an anti-categorization, such as “we are not a corporation” spurred strategic initiatives, Musterman was careful to always forge new positive identity claims and to progressively substantiate coherent formal and symbolic attributes. For instance, formal practices such as new organizational structures enabling the fast and reliable processing of new goods, including buying and selling, were adopted to make sure that the claim of “being a distributor” was substantiated.

Instead of focusing their arguments for or against a change initiative on a more precise organizational identity, for example, “we are a distributor of telecommunications products,” when pursuing discontinuous trajectories, Musterman’s leaders drew flexibly from elements of the broader anti-identity reservoir, such as “not being a producer” and “not being a corporation.” This seemed to grant them greater leeway for interpretations, experimentations, and strategic actions. Albert and Whetten (1985) already noticed the important role of “distinctiveness” or of being different from other companies, yet research in this direction has so far remained underdeveloped. Suggesting anti-identity as a source for innovation and for (dis)continuous change is thus an intriguing new avenue for future research.

Overcoming ambiguity and resistance through anti-identity

We complement research on identity ambiguity by illustrating that members may use an anti-identity reservoir to overcome phases of uncertainty and resistance. Past studies indicate that identity ambiguity emerges in times of uncertainty, which makes it difficult for members to make sense of “who they are as an organization” (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Subsequently, organizational members may resist suggested changes and return to old habits (Nag et al., 2007a) or may need to engage in extensive sensemaking processes to re-align new strategic initiatives with existing organizational identities (Fiol, 2002; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Therefore, overcoming identity ambiguity is a pivotal part of change management (Tripsas, 2009).

Interestingly, our findings suggest that organizational members were less affected than expected by identity ambiguity and resistance. Although some degree of resistance was present, our findings suggest that organizational members were able to reconcile and accept managerial decisions, as they drew from their anti-identity reservoir more prominently than on their understanding of what Musterman was or ought to be. In doing so, claims that were new and

that potentially rivaled the current view seemed to be believed based on the coherence with the perceived anti-identity, even when the new identity was not yet substantiated by formal or symbolic attributes. Substantiation voids were closed through attributes and claims from the anti-identity reservoir until new formal and symbolic attributes emerged. Thus, where anti-identity provided leaders with a great amount of flexibility in their strategizing, it also appeared to help members reduce uncertainty and overcome resistance. This suggests not only the malleability of anti-identity but also that members' reliance on the anti-identity may serve as a source of stability during constant flux. Thus, contrary to past research highlighting that anti-identity might contribute to ambiguity among members (Tripsas, 2009) or might occur only at times of uncertainty (Sarason, 1998), we observed that anti-identity is more pervasive and may contribute to resolving tension and overcoming resistance.

In this vein, the conceptualization of "enduringness" (Albert and Whetten, 1985) pertains in this case study particularly to elements of the anti-identity reservoir and *not* to items of the identity reservoir. Indeed, informants highlighted the "true essence" and "soul" of the organization was "not being a corporation." By relying on a "bounded set of elements" emphasizing who the organization is not rather than on who the organization currently is (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000), members have greater leeway and more possibilities for accepting and reconciling organizational change.

Boundary conditions

While we have focused our empirical study on a unique setting and are therefore not in a position to generalize our inductive findings, the consideration of our findings in light of existing theories triggers the question of when anti-identity strategizing may be especially relevant for organizational dynamics—that is, in which cases we might expect organizational leaders to resort to anti-identity considerations in their change initiatives. Based on what we observed in Musterman's case, we expect this to happen for contender organizations in innovative, volatile industries; for nascent companies that specifically intend to push boundaries and disrupt the status quo; and for early ventures.

In the first case, leaders might also strategically use anti-identity strategizing as a signaling instrument both to insiders, such as their employees, and to outsiders, such as customers and potential future customers—particularly in times of fierce rivalry and uncertainty. For example, in the financial sector, financial cooperatives are particularly proud *not* to be like traditional banks, and they use their anti-identity of "not being a bank" as a strategic resource to attract customers. More specifically, in the financial sector, in times of turmoil and competition with Wall Street and hedge funds, cooperatives use their anti-identity to penetrate markets, such as by introducing new products and services that convey the message of "not being a bank."

Second, anti-identity could be an important dimension in industries that are volatile and face high technological uncertainty. Where organizations cannot meaningfully rely on product characteristics or technologies and need to continuously reinvent their position in the market, relying on an anti-identity and "who we are not" might be an effective strategy by which organizational members can envisage future and present changes. More precisely, we argue that in times when industry boundaries are blurring and when technologies emerging in one field might have a great impact on other industries, a more abstract organizational anti-identity might be advantageous, as it allows greater leeway for strategizing and even the exploration of new industries or categories (Zuckerman, 1999). For instance, Langlois (1992) describes the emergence of light-weight diesel engines and showcases how dominant players in one category failed to accept technologies emerging from other industries. After the new technology was used in submarines, practitioners believed that this

technology could be likewise used in locomotives. Yet, the dominant players in the locomotive industry failed to cooperate and even fought the new development (Langlois, 1992).

Similarly, Tripsas (2009) argues that players from one category have difficulties applying emerging technologies to other industries due to existing perceptions of “who we are as an organization.” The essence of this challenge is that organizational identity often includes beliefs about the technologies used and prevents the consideration of more distant opportunities (Nag et al., 2007a; Tripsas, 2009). Having a more abstract organizational anti-identity, not bound to a specific industry, might allow the exploration and discovery of more distant opportunities arising in different industries.

Anti-identity strategizing may also be of importance to new ventures and start-ups, and organizations that aim at pushing boundaries and disrupting markets. As also highlighted by Gioia et al. (2010), during company creation, organizations lack the history and tradition on which identity is based, and it might be easier and more powerful to present initiatives based on how different one is from an established way of doing things. For example, Uber used anti-identity strategizing when creating and establishing their organization. Today, Uber is among the most high-profile new companies of its generation, generating billions in revenue in the recent years and disrupting the traditional taxi industry. When Uber started off in 2009 as a small start-up founded by two serial entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley, it clearly stated, “Uber was not in the taxi business” but was a “private luxury car service catering to San Francisco and Silicon Valley executives” (Moon, 2017: 2). Analyzing the history of Uber carefully, it is evident that over the past years, Uber used its knowledge about “who they do not want to become” in their strategizing process. Furthermore, the firm had never wanted to become a traditional taxi company, such as employing taxi drivers or owning taxis and other physical assets, and it had less of a focus on one geographical area, such as Manhattan or New York City. Instead, Uber used its anti-identity for further strategizing and expanding their business activities, such as by relying on independent contractors who drove their own cars instead of hiring regular permanent employees, and providing the platform to connect the ride-seeker with an available driver to provide the service of transportation.

Before concluding this article, we are careful to point out that “anti-identity strategizing” is not meant to be a universal weapon against organizational inflexibility. In fact, it is important to reflect on when anti-identity strategizing might not be a good basis for strategizing. Similar to organizational identity, a too narrow or too wide anti-identity may harm the strategy process. In the first case, organizational members might exclude opportunities prematurely that they later regret excluding. For instance, by focusing on the industry-based anti-identity “we are not an online streaming platform” (and the identity “we are a brick-and-mortar video rental service”), Blockbuster’s top management team declined an offer to cooperate with Netflix. Ten years later, the former market leader went bankrupt (Satell, 2014).

In turn, if an organizational anti-identity is too wide, organizational members might be lost within a plethora of options and unable to agree on any strategic option, leading to a high degree of uncertainty. Indeed, Musterman’s anti-identity seemed to have just the right scope, as it was not so narrow as to exclude options but was narrow enough to anchor members and provide a basis for strategic orientation. In a similar vein, we noticed that not just any anti-identity can be chosen, as this might create little or no meaning for organizational members and might lead to ambiguity. For example, members of Linco, a digital photography company, for instance, suffered from uncertainty after the emergence of a new anti-identity (Tripsas, 2009). In contrast, Musterman relied on anti-identities in which they believed and that were emotionally laden, including “not being a big corporation,” “not being an engineer,” and “not being a producer.” It was thus not any random, newly emerging anti-identity they embraced but meaningful perceptions that could be used for strategizing. Finally, no anti-identity strategizing is complete without the forging of its respective

counterpart, that is, organizational identity. For example, members at Linco suffered from ambiguity because they did not forge a new identity to supplement the new anti-identity (Tripsas, 2009). This is an important difference to Musterman, where members continuously forged their perception of “who are we now.”

Conclusion

As contemporary environments are changing relentlessly, organizations must be able to cope with continuous evolution while maintaining their distinctiveness and *raison d'être*. Organizations with a stable and successful organizational identity might suffer from competitive drawbacks, as they encounter path dependence (e.g. Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000). Understanding the processes underlying changes, and how leaders and organizational members navigate them, is therefore an important research endeavor. Our findings indicate the pivotal role of an anti-identity reservoir. Our findings and model provide an important first empirical step toward a more elaborate consideration of the conceptualization of organizational identity reservoirs generally and of anti-identity in particular.

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Notes

1. This is a fictional name given to maintain confidentiality.
2. International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) picking allows for final resellers to reserve the serial number of a product that they are about to sell. Musterman's logistic systems ensure that the reseller will receive the product with the designated unique serial number. Consequently, resellers can immediately collect revenue from the producer of the product (e.g. Apple or Nokia) and do not have to wait upon delivery.

ORCID iD

Anna Canato  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5054-9745>

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Author biographies

Sarah Stanske is a doctoral student at the European University Viadrina and the German Graduate School of Management and Law. Her main research interests include organizational identity, sustained innovation in organizations, time and temporality, and the legitimizing of new products and services.

Madeleine Rauch is an assistant professor at the Department of Strategy and Innovation at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. She holds a PhD from the European University Viadrina, Germany. Her main research interests are in the areas of strategic decision making, heuristics, and organizing in extreme contexts.

Anna Canato's interests focus on organizational change, and in particular, how organizational culture facilitates or hinders transformation initiatives and how leaders navigate change. She is currently managing a team in a public organization and serves as a visiting professor at the Luxembourg School of Business. Previously, she was Full Professor and Research Director at IESEG School of Management. She holds a PhD from Bocconi University and an HDR from Université Lille 1 and was a postdoctoral researcher at Imperial College Business School. Her works have been published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Dynamics*, the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, and the *British Journal of Management*, among others.