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Organizational Image

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Abstract

Organizational image is a contested concept in interdisciplinary research, drawing upon organizational communication, corporate communication, organization, marketing, and public relations studies. As such, organizational image is seen as the impression of an organization that exists among both external stakeholders as well as organizational members themselves as “construed external images” and “desired images.” This entry discusses the relationship between organizational image and organizational identity at both the collective and individual level, and outlines current debates around the linkages between image and “reality.” It concludes by highlighting current practices and problems of image management.

Keywords: image; image management; individual identity; organizational identity; reputation

Introduction

Organizational image is a concept that bridges organizational communication, corporate communication, corporate branding, public relations (PR), and organization studies and has occupied researchers from these different schools of interest because of its central importance in linking organizations with their audiences. Corporations today spend an increasing amount of resources on building attractive, distinct, and legitimate organizational images using corporate branding, corporate communication, or corporate reputation management tools as well as culture management to align the organizational behavior with the strategically communicated official self-images. Although these efforts are allegedly directed at external audiences, research has demonstrated that organizational image is directly connected to the organizational processes of identity formation at both collective and individual levels. Image, therefore, is also a concept that blurs the external/internal boundaries of an organization and challenges our very conception of what “the organization” is.

Defining organizational image

The prominence of the concept of organizational image is highlighted in Gioia, Hamilton, and Patvardhan’s (2014) recent article “Image Is Everything.” Yet, the definitions of what organizational image is or what it means are highly contested across the different research traditions and associated epistemologies. Organizational image is often viewed as a cognitive construct signifying the perception of an organization and defined as an impression created in the mind of an audience. As an example, Dowling (1986) provides the following definition: “an image is the set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. That is, it is the net result of the interaction of a person’s belief, ideas, feelings and impressions about an object” (p. 110). Yet, scholarly debates circulate around questions of who or what creates these images in an organizational context. What do the images refer to or reflect? To whom do the images matter and with what consequences?

Researchers rooted in or inspired by corporate branding or public relations tend to view organizational images as located among external stakeholders – for example, customers, the media, politicians, suppliers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Here organizational image is often labeled “corporate image” and defined as “who others think we are,” which is the

way the organization is perceived by primarily external constituents. Such external organizational image is considered vital in order to build and manage stakeholder relationship, and a positive image is argued to achieve organization legitimacy and a unique brand position, which makes the organization attractive and a “preferred choice” across all stakeholders (e.g., Dowling, 1986; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Scott & Lane, 2000).

Researchers drawing on a social psychology tradition within organization studies, however, typically view organizational image as located inside the organization. From this internal viewpoint organizational image is defined as “who we think others think we are,” often labeled the “construed external image.” In other words, it is the organizational members’ perception of how outsiders perceive the organization. Research on construed external images has yielded insight on how such images influence the issue of interpretation (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991) and organizational identification (Dutton, Duckerich, & Harquail, 1994), and may be considered a threat to organizational identity (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

Within both management studies and communication studies, scholars point out that images may also be held by the management of the organization. This can involve a visionary perception of the organization, which the management would like both internal and external stakeholders to have at some point in the future, also labeled “desired organizational image” (Scott & Lane, 2000; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). To influence the stakeholders, such desired images are often communicated and projected by the organization to its stakeholders in the form of an official “self-image” (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). When we critically assess if an organizational image matches the realities, the image we refer to is often this official “self-image.”

The external and internal dimensions of an organizational image blur the understanding of who or what “produces” it. The perception of the organization may be largely produced by the individuals based on associations, events, experiences, interactions, and history with the organization, yet scholars interested in organizational communication, management, reputation management, and brand management would largely argue that these perceptions can be managed by the organization via the projected, intended, and desired image of the organization. As such, disagreement exists as to whether organizational images may be controlled or manipulated, or if they should be seen as mental constructs produced only by the individual stakeholder. Perhaps

we might understand an organizational image as existing in between the sender and the receiver and thus a product of both a “communicated image” and a “sensed image.”

Organizational image and related concepts

The term *organizational image* is often used interchangeably with *corporate image* or *organizational reputation*. Corporate image is typically defined as the way in which an organization is perceived now, while organizational reputation is seen as collective judgments by outsiders of an organization’s actions or achievements that have accumulated over time. Often, however, the major difference in use between organizational image, corporate image, and organizational reputation is the research field and traditions in which the study is embedded. The corporate branding literature frequently uses corporate image (or brand image) to signify more or less manageable impressions of the organization among customers, whereas corporate reputation is most often used in research from public relations who view a positive corporate reputation as an end goal in its own right in terms of building positive relationships with various external stakeholders. However, organizational image is used in organizational studies – and to some extent also organizational communication – to understand *intraorganizational dynamics* related to the external impressions.

Organizational image and organizational identity

Working from a symbolic interactionistic approach, studies of organizational identity have illustrated how the organizational image provides a “mirror” for members’ reflexive understanding and examination of the organizational identity definition. From this perspective, an image may be seen as a destabilizing force, which propels members to revisit and reconstruct their own understandings of the organization. Hatch and Schultz (2002), for example, argue that organizational identity is formed through identity conversations between insiders rooted in the organizational culture and the organizational image held by external constituents (media, government, customers, suppliers, etc.). The organizational image provides a mirror in which the organizational members sees themselves reflected in the eyes of others and propels collective, organizational action in situations of gaps of perception between the external image and the internally perceived reality.

Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) describe how organizational image may temporarily threaten the organizational identity, yet they argue that alignment can be achieved either by changing the organizational image among external stakeholders or by changing the organizational identity among organizational members themselves. Scholars within this perspective assert that alignment between the organizational image and the organizational identity signifies a successful organization; however, gaps of perception between organizational image and organizational identity may serve as drivers for change to achieve alignment between the two. Hatch and Schultz (2002), in a similar vein, advocate that the continuous identity conversations between organizational insiders and outsiders serve to achieve alignment between organizational identity and image.

Critiques of this line of research rooted in organizational communication traditions offer a different perspective on the relationship between organizational image and identity. Christensen and Askegaard (2001) argue that organization studies traditionally uphold distinctions between the organizational “outsides” and “insides,” between “image” and “organizational reality.” Christensen and Askegaard (2001) propose instead a semiotic perspective in which the symbols and stories of the organization (located in logos, architecture, and advertisements) are signs through which we “meet” fragments of the organization. These signs are interpreted into images that make us behave in certain ways as a response to the organization. This perspective embraces the ambiguity and arbitrariness of interpretation, and thus the organizational signs will be reflected not in “one organizational image” but in multiple different images, which will never be fully aligned.

Critical scholars such as Alvesson (1990) argue that with the extended focus on “how we look in the eyes of others,” organizations are increasingly occupied with pseudo-events, pseudo-actions, and pseudo-structures to manage people’s impressions of the organization, rather than focusing on important and substantive matters. As such, organizational image becomes an end in itself, manipulated and constructed separately from the organizational identity to which it refers. In response to this argument, Christensen and Askegaard (2001) argue from their semiotic perspective that access to such a “truer” and more “substantive” organizational reality is never possible, but can only occur by assessing other organizational signs and thus forming other impressions and images of the organization. Reality is an image in itself. As such, we might experience gaps between different images when the so-called pseudo-events, -actions, and -

structures create a type of image, which is not accepted as an “accurate” representation of the organization in comparison with the images we have of the “real” organization. The organizational images thus hold the power to decide which signs can be accepted as representations of the organizational reality.

Organizational image and individual identity

Organizational image is argued to have a significant influence not only on organizational identity formation, but also in relation to organizational members’ individual social identity. Based on the social identity theory tradition, scholars have demonstrated that the organizational image informs the way the organizational members think of themselves as members of the organization. This research typically assesses the construed external image and argues that this image led the organizational members to question how outsiders think of them because of their association with the organization (Dutton, Duckerich, & Harquail, 1994). The research proposes that a positive organizational image positively influences organizational identification as organizational members gain a positive social identity from their organizational membership. The attractiveness of the organizational image leads members to bask in the reflected glory and obtain self-affirmation through organizational membership. A negative organizational image, however, is proposed to lead to organizational disidentification, depression, stress, and embarrassment. Because members seek to achieve a positive social identity, social opportunities, and prestige, a negative organizational image is seen as a threat to the members’ construction of a positive self-image and thus a decrease in organizational identification is anticipated.

More current research on the influence of organizational image on individual and organizational identity work within organizational communication research challenges this view and suggests that the influence of a negative or disgraced organizational image may not be “as linear” or “as problematic” as suggested by the social identity theory literature. These studies divert from the cognitive approach to organizational image and instead view it as a dominant, externally constructed identity discourse of the organization. As such, the interest is not in “gaps of perception” but rather in how the external discourses are mobilized, amended, twisted, or re-scribed by organizational members in relation to their individual identity work. As an example, Frandsen (2012) demonstrates that professionals working in a low-prestige telecom company are

able to uphold positive self-image by simultaneously distancing themselves from the organization, yet using discursive resources related to their profession and work team to narrate an alternative image of the organization. Such a study is illustrative of microlevel communicative acts utilized by employees to navigate and negotiate their organization's images.

Empirical studies of organizational images

In research, organizational image is empirically studied through various means depending on scholarly interests and traditions. Within marketing, the focus is typically on documenting the brand image through consumer studies or brand measuring instruments. Research within human resources tends to document the organizational image among prospective employees by using quantitative measures to establish the influence of organizational image on the attractiveness of the organization in the eyes of potential employees. Within research on corporate communication, public relations, and organizational communication, intended organizational image is documented by textual and rhetorical analysis of corporate communication messages. Specific attention has been given to "image repair" or "image restoration" strategies as well as "issues advertising" in times of crisis. Rankings, newspaper coverage, and interviews with organizational members have been used by organizational studies as well as organizational communication research to document the internal implications of organizational images in qualitative case studies.

Empirical studies of the relationship between organizational images and organizational identity tend to focus on the implications of organizational images that are either positive, prestigious, or have celebrity status, or that are negative, tainted, or stigmatized. The research on positive organizational images is not nearly as developed as research on negative organizational images; however, Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2011) present an in-depth, longitudinal case study of the hearing aid company Oticon, and show how the organizational members become captivated by the organization's celebrity status, to the extent that they work hard to maintain the positive organizational image regardless of its disconnect with the organizational "realities." Also, Kärreman and Rylander (2008) find in their study of branding that the prestigious organizational image of the consultancy firm provides the employees with an elite status and thus strengthens their organizational identification.

Empirical studies of negative organizational images label these as “identity threats” and study the dynamics in a situation where the organizational identity is exposed to such threats. Dutton and Duckerich’s (1991) seminal study of the New York Port Authority illustrates how the negative image associated with the Port Authority’s handling of homeless people influence organizational members and prompt them to change the organizational conduct. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) study organizational members’ responses to the declining ranking of their business school in *Business Week*. They analyze the categorization tactics the organizational members utilize to minimize the dissonance between the organization and their own perceptions of the organizational identity. Fombrun and Rindova’s (2000) study of Royal Dutch/Shell in the wake of its Brent Spar crisis likewise demonstrate that outsiders’ negative evaluation of the organization drive managerial efforts to rebuild a more positive image through articulation of desired organizational images. All of these studies view the organizational image as temporarily damaged by an organizational crisis propelled by a stigmatizing “event,” that is considered recoverable through the management of organizational image or organizational identity.

In contrast to the studies of organizational images tainted by stigmatizing events, more recent studies have been conducted in contexts of “core stigmatized” organizations, where the external organizational image is on a more permanent basis considered illegitimate due to the (often amoral) operation of the organization – for example, brothels, men’s bathhouses, abortion clinics, tobacco companies, and so on (Hudson, 2008). Wolfe and Blithe (2015) focus on image management of legal brothels to illustrate that, in contrast to organizations working explicitly to recover from a spoiled image, the members of core-stigmatized organizations selectively and simultaneously engage in *ongoing* revelation and concealment practices to ensure an organizational image that is both hidden from the broader audience, yet visible to and positively evaluated by workers and users of the organization. Moreover, core-stigmatized organizations serve as examples of a broader category of hidden organizations, where studies of organizational image are linked to debates about openness and transparency versus concealment and secrecy (Scott, 2013).

Managing organizational images

In the current globalized environment we witness an increase in critiques of corporations, including NGOs, news-hungry media, and politically aware consumers. As a response, corporations invest substantially in managing their organizational image. The management of organizational image is often driven by an ambition to leave a consistent image in the mind of the stakeholders. Integrated (market) communication research proposes that corporate design (logos, uniforms, architecture), corporate communication (advertisement, formal storytelling, PR), and corporate behaviors (culture, values, attitudes) among both management and employees in interaction with stakeholders should be aligned to create a clear, uniform, and consistent impression of the organization. Following these ambitions, corporations today engage in an array of external corporate communication activities to project a distinct, favorable, and coherent organizational image. The marketing departments work with corporate branding and customer relationship management. The public relations departments work to foster good relationships with stakeholders and increase positive media attention. The human resources (HR) departments and general management also engage in internal branding activities, core value proposition, and mission statements with the purpose of closing gaps between the projected promises and organizational experiences in service encounters. As such, corporations recognize that it is not only formal communication but also the behaviors of organizational members that leave an impression. The extended focus on managing organizational image is thus no longer only a matter of establishing an attractive “one look” for the firm, but also of achieving normative consistency across all organizational touch points and a consolidation of internal and external communication activities.

Resources are also used to continually document and monitor the organizational image and effects of corporate initiatives. The Reputation Institute is one of the global agencies occupied with quantitative measurements of corporate reputation in regard to both products/services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership, and performance. As such, reputation agencies attempt to define which factors make up the image among external stakeholders and to provide advice to organizations on how best to strategically modify their images. Such documentation is typically used in departments such as marketing, communication, HR, and strategy, as well as being a general managerial tool. Some employee satisfaction questionnaires also include questions about “the construed external image,” which is how the

organizational members themselves believe others perceive the organization. This way, corporations and public institutions hope to be able to constantly monitor any major or minor changes in their images.

Studying image management

The empirical studies of the management of organizational image are often linked to the techniques deployed by the management of the organization. For example, Sutton and Callahan (1987) examine stigma management strategies in response to a spoiled organizational image following bankruptcy, while Elsbach (1994) studies impression management techniques among spokespersons within the tainted cattle industry. Brinson and Benoit (1999) study image restoration strategies of Texaco's tarnished image due to allegations of racism. Ravasi and Schultz's (2006) study of the Danish audio-video producer B&O, moreover, is illustrative of management's construction and projection of desired organizational images rooted in the organizational culture in response to drifting organizational image among customers and loss of attraction in their market. With the development of online media, more recent studies have been illustrative of how both management and employees seek to manage the organizational image by direct contact with external stakeholders via online media. For example, Coupland and Brown (2004) use email exchanges to document the dialogue between "insiders" and "outsiders" following an identity threat posed by the outsiders' negative perception of the organization in relation to its sustainability profile.

Although Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) suggest that discrepancies between organizational image and organizational identity would trigger attempts to alter either the internal perceptions of identity or the external perceptions of the organizational image, later research has shown that such attempts may not be easily accomplished. Humphrey and Brown (2002), for example, illustrate how attempts to redefine the organizational image of a British institution of higher education to be recognized as a university may be rejected by the members because the projected organizational images are perceived as decoupled from the organizational history, tradition, culture, and identity. Hatch and Schultz (2000) point out that image management may result in dysfunctional organizations, as too much focus on projecting organizational image leads to organizational narcissism, while too much focus on the external

images may lead to hype-adaption and a loss of culture. Furthermore, Christensen and Cheney (2000) argue that external audiences may in fact not be as interested and involved stakeholders as corporations tend to assume, and thus projecting images serves primarily as self-interest in the pursuit of visibility and legitimacy in the organizational environment.

Future directions

Aligned images have long been proposed as an ideal in the management of organizational image, yet, as evident in this entry, more and more studies point out that organizations are surrounded by multiple images that most likely will never be fully aligned – and in some instances, indeed, remain competing, contradicting, and yet still coexisting with each other. Future research may more fully theorize and empirically document how the ambiguity of multiple coexisting organizational images is navigated and managed at both organizational and individual levels. Furthermore, future research should take into account the patchy and polyphonic nature of today's online environment and develop a more nuanced theorizing of the contribution of multiple stakeholders to the construction of the organizational image. The online environment has implications for the success of image repair strategies, which until now have been studied in one-way directed communication situations. Future research may take up the challenge to study the dialogical process through which organizations work on their images in times of crisis. Finally, the framework of communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) currently influencing organizational communication research may additionally provide an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the traditional conceptualization of organizational image as a largely cognitive construct in order to gain renewed insight into organizational images' organizing effects.

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]bio[**Sanne Frandsen** (PhD) studies the relationship between organizational image and identity dynamics at both the organizational and individual level. She uses ethnographic methods in case studies of organizations that are surrounded by low-prestige and even stigmatized images. In such contexts she explores employees' communicative responses that construct ambivalence, cynical distancing, and tales of paranoia in reaction to the organizational image.