

Public and private dimensions in the identity-mission nexus: the BikeMi case

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Abstract

The paper investigates the management of multiple organisational identities in hybrid organisational contexts, or, more specifically, those characterised by a guiding vision (or mission) informed by both *publicness* and *privateness*. The exemplary case of a public bike-sharing service (BikeMi) born from the partnering of the Comune di Milano (City of Milan) with the business firm Clear Channel Italia (CCI), a subsidiary of a global media and advertising group, opens an insightful window to the identity-mission nexus. The study delivers preliminary evidence of the elements of materiality that help shape the organisational identity of CCI; the *publicness* and *privateness* of BikeMi; the symbiotic relationship between the normative (in terms of social impact and public accountability) and the utilitarian (in terms of business goals) dimensions of the CCI organisational identity; and the pragmatism of top management.

Key words: publicness, organisational identity, public services

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1. Impetus and purpose of the research

Organisational identity, originally defined as that which members believe to be central, enduring and distinctive about their organisation (Albert & Whetten, 1985) is a salient enquiry domain in the management literature as in the broader social sciences (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). However, the original connotation of the 'endearing' attribute has since fallen into oblivion, and recent studies refer increasingly to a plurality of organisational identities (Lerpold, Ravasi, Van Rekom, & Soenen, 2012; Ravasi & Canato, 2013). A possible way of articulating this plurality in business organisations is the normative-utilitarian dimension. According to Pratt (2016, p. 107) utilitarian identities represent a 'for profit' self-definition, while normative identities are non-economic and can represent a variety of 'non-monetary' values. Implicit in the normative-utilitarian conceptualisation is the presence of opposing contents (ibidem, p. 109) and logics. In consequence, a range of factors – including mixed constituencies, values and objectives – are meant to shape organisational identity on the ground.

Two critical enquiries stem from the very notion that organisations can have more than one identity:

RQ1: How to manage the relationship between or among identities?

RQ2: How to assess performance in hybrid contexts, with reference to both the corporate decision makers and the general public?

Both questions have deep theoretical and practical implications. On the theory side, while a few studies have conceptualised the proactive role of managers as agents enhancing and directing identity change (Schultz, 2016, p. 101), multiple identity management is still far from being understood. In general, the dominant literature on organisational identity tends to problematize such plurality (Alvesson et al., 2008; Giustiniano & De Bernardis, 2017). On the practice side, there is no commonly accepted system for understanding, measuring, communicating and managing the performance of normative/utilitarian hybrids. A contribution in this direction would certainly be welcome in the business world.

Here we propose to address these issues by investigating multiplicity (or, more specifically, duality) in the nexus of identity and mission. In our investigation, organisational identity ("who we are" and "what we do") consists of both "the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations" (Whetten, 2006, p. 220) as well as "claims to legitimate membership in social categories" (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016, p. 318). Organisational mission is here regarded as the guiding vision of an organisation.

We draw on the empirical analysis (still in progress) of a public bicycle sharing service (BikeMi) launched by the Comune di Milano (City of Milan) in 2008. The service was contracted out to a private company called Clear Channel Italia ("CCI"), a subsidiary of a US-based global media conglomerate and lead player in Out-of-Home advertising. This research setting offers an excellent context to investigate the identity-mission nexus, given its 'dual mission' (Costanzo, Vurro, Foster, Servato, &

Perrini, 2014) to generate sustainable profits and a positive social impact. However, unlike the extant identity research that has mainly focused on implications for organisations and individuals, our interest is in the implications that derive from a dual identity-mission for management and organisational performance.

As a preliminary contribution to research, we argue that the combined presence of plural identities at the organisational level does not necessarily lead to tensions and antagonisms. Second, we maintain that identity and mission are ever-changing on the ground but unfold following dynamics that converge only partially. Enhancing and directing these distinct dynamics means that management must recognize the changing nature of the systems in which they operate.

Following, we outline the theoretical frame here applied to the empirical case. Section 3 sketches the research approach. Section 4 presents the preliminary findings of a quantitative-qualitative investigation still in progress. The final segment presents the authors' conclusions, the study's implications and the potential pay-offs for the research and practice of identity management.

2. Theoretical framework

The characteristics of the empirical setting, i.e., a private company that provides an urban public bike sharing service in a densely populated city, means adopting an analytical lens that implicitly recognizes the importance of the visible (or material) practices to organisational identity (OI). The emphasis on materiality is crucial, because that is what an organisation produces, how it encodes its values and how it delivers products and services to individuals and group recipients express the identities of that organisation (Lerpold et al., 2012; Watkiss & Glynn, 2016).

A large and diverse body of literature has elaborated many conceptualisations of the relationship between organisational identity and materiality, reflecting different theoretical orientations and interests. In general, the organisation level remains the most common in mainstream management scholarship (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 5). In the psychologically-oriented traditions OI is considered as a bundle of enduring attributes owned by a specific organisation, thereby individuating and differentiating organisations. In such cases, the materiality is studied mainly in relation to the ability that elements 'which can be read as texts' (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 21) have to transmit the identity at a micro-level. One example is organisational routines, layout, dress code or other objects.

More recent studies frame the identity within the broad institutional environments (e.g., at industry or sector levels). In an empirical article relative to 1,587 firms that reported a name change in the period 1982-87, Glynn and Abzug (2002) have demonstrated that an organisation's name instantiates OI. Further, the name – as a marker of identity – was isomorphic with cultural patterns that, in turn, increased the legitimacy of the organisations.

Watkiss and Glynn (2016) recently developed a theoretical framework that incorporates both constituent and relational insights into the matter of organisational identity. A distinctive feature of this approach is that identity

construction materiality is both a point of reference and the originator of several premises for action (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016, p. 329). The two scholars identify three interrelated elements of materiality: products, artefacts and practices. Products 'as a public form of organizational artifact' provide a key link between the internal and the key external stakeholders. This link is particularly tight when an organisation is known for offering a particular product or service. The artefacts are defined as material manifestations encoding social meanings. Thus the materiality of artefacts aids in the understanding and evaluation of both the artefact and the organisation (ibidem, p. 323). Lastly, organisational practices are bundles of organisational routines, tools and concepts used in everyday behaviour. Practices act as performative repertoires from which identities are constructed and put into practice (ibidem, p. 324).

Identity is embedded in time and is dynamically related to the three elements of materiality via three shaping mechanisms: categorisation, symbolisation, performative repertoire (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016, p. 325). Categorisation enables the external actors to frame an organisation in a precise typology (e.g., a consultancy firm) as opposed to another, and to respond to the fundamental questions: 'What does this organisation do?' 'To which sector does it belong?' 'What image does it transmit to the external environment?' Categorisation enables the organisations to claim a precise identity.

In contrast with categorisation, symbolisation has a more circumscribed orientation. In fact, it is the mechanism that allows actors outside the organisation to give a meaning to the artefacts, placing them in a spatial and temporal context. Symbolisation responds to questions such as: 'What are the key values?' 'To what extent is the product offering distinctive in reality?'

Ultimately, the mechanisms of performative repertoire allow an organisation to build visible and persistent strategies of action that 'instantiate their identity' (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016, p. 327). Such strategies include the different methods with which the internal professional groups give concreteness to the identity claims. 'What means does the organisation use to communicate with its environment?' 'In what way are the operational standards enacted?' 'How are the required devices and artefacts chosen?'

In short, Watkiss and Glynn conceptualise the instantiation of identity in and around organisations thus: i) organisational products categorise organisations; ii) organisational artefacts symbolise organisational values, character and attributes that substantiate identity claims; and iii) organisational practices afford a performative repertoire from which organisations develop strategies in the marketplace.

3. Research setting and method

The BikeMi case was selected for its unicity, in that it was the first integrated public bike-sharing system to be launched by a major Italian city. The service debuted in Milan in 2008 with 103 bike stations and 1,400 traditional bikes. By

December 2018, the bike stations numbered 283, the traditional bikes had increased to 3,650 and the fleet had gained 1,150 electric bikes (150 with child seats). The service usage percentage data informs that the number of annual, weekly and daily subscribers has grown to 50,000, 6,000 and 25,000, respectively, while the average number of bike trips per year hovers around the 3.5 million mark. Hence, in the span of ten years, and regardless of the different political leanings of the various city administrations that have taken the helm of Milan, the BikeMi urban bike-sharing service has continued to grow.

The authors use an inductive method in order to understand how BikeMi materiality impacts the organisational identity and mission of Clear Channel Italia. The study began in July 2018 and is still ongoing.

A mixed qualitative and quantitative approach was adopted, based on:

- Data collection techniques;
- Data analysis tools (statistical analysis of satisfaction responses; text mining and text analysis of open questions).

Combining different data sources as evidence of identity constructs enabled us to simultaneously triangulate the empirical findings:

- a) *Organisational artefacts*: exploring identity traces. Texts, official documents, websites and newspaper articles were analysed for explicit claims about certain attributes being part of the identity of the organisation or its core values (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). These analytical methods are consistent with an understanding of OI as resting in members' beliefs and constructed in a process of claim-making (see (Glynn, 2000). Finally, the semi-structured interviews highlighted the perceptions of key informants - who were treated as 'knowledgeable agents', "namely, people in organisations know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions" (Gioia et al., 2012, p. 17) and revealed possible *discrepancies* between narratives and organisational practices (see: Corley & Gioia, 2004).
- b) *Organisational practices*: contractual and extra-contractual activities. The analysis of the contractual texts both illustrated the nature of the obligations formally undertaken with the City of Milan and enabled us to assess the effective work of CCI in multiple, extra-contractual activities somehow related to the operation of BikeMi.
- c) *Organisational products*: BikeMi customer survey. The focus is on the service users as key audience, meant as important actors in making sense of new offerings. A longitudinal design was used to capture the importance of time and material experience as well as the novel product on audience sensemaking. Quantitative information on the use of the service was gathered by a co-author of this paper through three BikeMi user satisfaction surveys in 2014, 2016 and 2018; each user was contacted individually via email. The 2014 (1 March-31 May) questionnaire consisted of three sections for a total of 26 questions (section A: seven questions on relevant personal

data and demographic information; section B: eight questions on the level of service satisfaction; section C: eleven questions on the reason for using and actual use of the service). Sent to more than 21,000 BikeMi users, the questionnaire received 10,055 responses for a final response rate of 47.62%, but only after two reminders to complete the survey. All the answers to the level of satisfaction questions corresponded to Likert level 5 on a 1-5 scale of 'not satisfied at all' to 'very satisfied'. The 2016 and 2018 questionnaires requested the same information as the 2014 one but threw in some new questions concerning improvements to the service since then (introduction of e-bikes, child seats, etc.). The response rates from an approximate total of 25,700 registered users in both 2016 and 2018 were respectively 43.40% and 38.09%.

Overall, based on the theoretical framework proposed here, the analysis allows us to capture empirical elements useful to assess the dual nature of the organisational identity resulting from the dual nature of the mission, as we will show in the next section.

4. Findings: the evolving plurality in organisational identity and corporate mission

As stated above, several data sources were combined to produce evidence of identity constructs. In particular, organizational artefacts were investigated drawing on the qualitative analysis of official corporate documents, websites and newspaper articles; the study of organizational practices was mainly based on the contractual documents; and finally, evidence on organizational products was captured from the outcomes of the 2014 BikeMI user satisfaction survey.

4.1. Artefact analysis

The analyses of the interviews and the abovementioned documents inform that the organisation has a history and culture based on utilitarian rather than normative values. The BikeMi business model is partially dependent on the almost symbolic annual registration fee of Euro 36.00, but the mainstay of the company's revenue stream, the one that keeps the service up and running by covering operational and maintenance costs, is the sale of outdoor (or out-of-home) advertising. Moreover, as shown later, the company extends the scope of its responsibilities far beyond compliance with the contractual obligations undertaken with the Comune di Milano. The adoption of root public values confirms a significant duality of the organisational mission.

BikeMi is a traditional bike-sharing service based on a network of docking stations. In the words of Clear Channel Italia's Director of Contracts, Development & Bike Sharing (for short, the "Director of Contracts") and former public manager, the

company's organisational mission for the BikeMi service is: "To change the habits of a city, improving living standards and ensuring mobility and care for the environment". Following the success of the BikeMi service, several competitors have arrived on the scene with their own particular brand of the urban bike-sharing service, using alternative business models and new product combinations (e.g., free floating, where the bikes can be parked and picked up anywhere, flexible use and ease of access) to differentiate their offering. Despite this, Clear Channel Italia has retained its leadership position.

CCI, part of a global media and advertising group, is clearly market oriented, as can be deduced from the Italian subsidiary's official website, which lists the BikeMi project alongside its other corporate services.

4.2. Practice analysis

CCI pursues additional activities that demand the use of resources not originally included in the BikeMi contract. These include collaborations with many civic associations and citizen groups on bike sharing issues of public concern (e.g., the safeguarding and promotion of eco-friendly lifestyles). The contractor takes responsibility for each and every disservice, real or perceived (or reported in the press), that directly affects BikeMi and related services. Moreover, the company sponsors at least 30 cultural events per year. "We penetrate the life of the city. There are benefits for everyone", says the Director of Contracts, adding that "We deal more with the City of Milan councillors than we do with the ATM" (Editorial note: ATM, or Azienda Trasporti Milanese, is the municipal transportation company and the actual owner of the bike sharing contract). The fact that the elected officials rate the service as important and get involved at all is due to the high visibility of the service and the types of users it attracts.

CCI has adopted solutions (e.g., installation times, controls, bike station location choices) that are superior to the standard service levels defined in the contract. According to the Director of Contracts, "CCI invests Euro 6 million per year in operation and maintenance and employs 90 people in Milan alone. Of that Euro 6 million, €2 million comes from the fees paid by the bike sharing service users and €4 million from the sale of outdoor advertising. "The management part is the most complex: the Milan unit comprises office workers, mechanics, drivers and a fleet of 20 trucks to move the bicycles around. It's a powerful system, not just an advert". The operations, outsourced to external providers, are a driver of economic development for the city, which is also a trait of mission-identity publicness.

The staff are highly committed and highly engaged in their work, and the terms most frequently used by the respondents were: accountability, effectiveness, reliability, efficiency, and expertise. The bicycles are perceived as the common property of the citizens, who use the BikeMi call centre to report episodes of vandalism, robbery and other irregularities to CCI, which makes them feel personally involved in the service production process and its success.

4.3. Product analysis

BikeMi is well-known for being one of the most successful bike sharing systems in Italy. The overall level of satisfaction (Question: “How satisfied are you with the service in general?”) expressed by the users remained high in each of the three surveys conducted (in 2014, 16.1% of the respondents gave a maximum rating on the Likert 1 to 5 scale; in 2016, 20.4% and in 2018 16.0%). In terms of the dimensions of satisfaction, for example, those determined in Manzi and Saibene (2018), while still at high levels, the technical aspects of the service (overall quality of the bicycle and its component parts, booking and collection system, etc.) were considered less satisfying than the organisational dimension (bike station locations, customer care, etc.). In 2014, the technical dimension received an average of 49% of positive responses (Likert scale 4-5), while the organisational dimension received 74.6%. In 2016, the same dimensions obtained positive responses of, respectively, 50.6% and 76.4%. In 2018, those same ratings shrank to 39.5% and 73.1%. Since 2008, the service has acquired 46 times the original number of registered users and, despite the arrival of similar services to compete with CCI, the level of satisfaction has remained high.

CCI has taken on the task of accountability to the citizen users, attested by the fact that the latter express expectations and perceptions similar to those usually found in the transaction with public services. For example, the only open-ended response in the questionnaire saw the citizens make proposals as if they were actually responding to the City of Milan’s councillor for transport (e.g., asking for more cycle paths or new bike collection points). Moreover, it is the CCI that responds directly to the users in the event of problems or disservice.

Figure 1 - Word cloud of responses to the open question (100 most frequent words)



Source: BikeMi Survey, 2014

The open question asked in the questionnaire enabled us to carry out a confirmatory textual analysis of the results of the quantitative part, which produced some interesting facts: for example, circa 63% of the 2014 survey respondents took the time to leave a written comment. The percentage of positive comments was 88.5% (Manzi & Saibene, 2018). The web cloud in Fig. 1 highlights the most used words, which, if we exclude the terms “bici” (bikes) and “biciclette” (bicycles): “stazioni” (docking stations), “manutenzione” (maintenance) and “piste” (bike lanes), shows that the main cause of complaint is the actual functioning of the bicycles, and, more generally, that more needs to be done, for example, in terms of bicycle lanes. These comments confirm the results of that part of the survey concerning satisfaction. What we can surmise from the above is that CCI is strongly committed to the ‘publicness’ of the service, and that this has an apparent influence on both its mission and its identity.

However, it should be noted that the company’s ‘public’ commitment is limited solely to the bike sharing business, which accounts for just a minor part of CCI’s corporate portfolio. The public mission sits alongside the traditional private mission but, apart from bike sharing, the effect of the organisational identity mission is limited. Indeed, this latter appears firmly anchored to the corporate business.

5. Implications and contributions

The evidences collected so far suggest that the social involvement of a private service organisation may have a more direct and visible effect, introducing duality to its mission-identity nexus.

The analysis of artefacts, practices and products shows that the BikeMi service contributed to the hybridization of the mission and, to a certain extent, to the hybridization of the organisational identity of Clear Channel Italia. In contrast to the dominant literature, the case demonstrates that it is possible to manage competing tensions between or among identities to ‘fit in’ (Glynn & Navis, 2013) (see *RQ1*).

The hybrid mission is a core part of the CCI business model, connected directly as it is with daily action, meaning that it is more prone to shifts than the organisational identity.

The materiality of the service provides the main elements that give meaning to and instantiate the organizational identity.

The study provides several layers of support to the conceptualisation of Watkiss and Glynn (2016). First, it documents the elements of materiality that help shape the organisational identity of CCI. Second, it reveals the hybrid mission of the bike sharing service. The 2008 contract forms the core element of the publicness mission – which triggered the process of the hybridization of the identity (i.e., the mission has been increasingly transformed through regulation, i.e., by forces outside the firm’s boundaries). The privateness mission – markedly, the business of selling advertising – generates the resources needed to fund the ongoing investments in improving the efficacy and the operational efficiency of the public bike sharing

service, as well as the additional activities, including the collaborations with local associations and institutions. Third, the symbiotic relationship between the normative and the utilitarian dimensions of CCI's organisational identity is thanks to the pragmatism of top management, and its 'integrated approach to identity' (Moingeon & Soenen, 2002, p. 30). Undoubtedly, the professional experience gained as a public manager by the top executive of BikeMi has favoured the balanced alignment.

In conclusion, the Watkiss and Glynn lens enables the organisation leaders to better understand and more effectively manage the dynamics that shape the different organisational identities. For example, it can help the organisations to develop strategies of action that instantiate their identity. Nevertheless, if the decision maker is facing a predictive problem, the explanatory nature of the framework might pose limitations. Also, as acknowledged by the authors themselves (Watkiss & Glynn, 2016, p. 330), the framework is clearly a simplification of the reality in that it assumes that each of the three elements of materiality is related with identity through *one* particular mechanism, i.e., "organizational products via categorization, organizational artifacts via symbolization, and organizational practices via performative repertoires". However, in practice, it is probable that *two or more* distinct mechanisms operate simultaneously, which means that much work remains to be done to confirm this hypothesis.

In addition, further research is needed to fully explain how and why the organisational identity and the organisation mission interrelate and, in order to respond to *RQ2*, with which impacts on performance.

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