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Times are changing: The role of heritage identity on employee identification in a Danish family-owned company

Introduction

In a world with increasing global competition, organizations are preoccupied with creating a unique identity that distinguishes them from others and make employees identify with them (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). The employees are an important audience because they are expected to represent the company as ambassadors even after hours and in this way influence the identity and image of their organization (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). One way to distinguish an organization from its competitors is through the communication of a specific heritage identity. An emerging stream of research focus on the value of heritage identity from a marketing and corporate communication perspective. Here, heritage identity has been defined as “identity traits which have remained meaningful and invariant over the passage of time” (Balmer, 2011, p. 1385). In other words, heritage identity is seen as being of the past, present, and future and it is perceived as worth to be maintained, nurtured and passed on to future generations (Balmer, 2011). Traditionally, research have focused on monarchies as corporate heritage brands (Balmer, 2009), corporate brands with a heritage (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer, 2007), corporate heritage identity management and stewardship (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014, 2015), consumers perceptions of heritage brands (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Schmidt, and Wuestefeld (2011) and costumers construction of heritage images (Rindell, 2017). Researchers have also focused on how companies draw on historical references in corporate marketing (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009), and in family owned companies (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2013). Much of the aforementioned research has been conducted with a focus on an external audience. Still, Balmer (2013) recognizes the importance and value of heritage identity to an internal audience. The internal communication of an enduring and meaningful heritage identity may serve as a reference point for organizational members by linking their organization’s past, present, and future in a trustworthy and authentic way (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014). Therefore, the concept of heritage is of special value within an organization because it may strengthen the employees’ consciousness of their place in history (Balmer, 2013). As an example, Maier and Andersen (2017) studied how an international company communicated about heritage identity issues to organizational members through a storyteller timeline on the corporate intranet. Their findings illustrated that the employees were provided with identity cues including visualization of the owner family, products as symbols, and stories of the shared history of the company. These cues were meant to guide the employees in anchoring themselves in a wider context and influence their identification with the company across past, present, and future.

Nevertheless, there could be limitations related to this sender-oriented perspective. Balmer (2013) reflects on some of the downsides of heritage identity communication. He notes that a communicated heritage identity may be contested by different interpretations

by stakeholders, because its significance may vary and fluctuate in different times and contexts. Studies have also accentuated that singular identities is not something that is created, controlled and communicated to employees by management. Instead, employees are active participants that construct and reconstruct their identities and identifications through discourse (Scott, 1997; Larson and Pepper, 2003). In this respect, critical scholars, Alvesson and Willmott (2002), also warn against assuming that employees can be reduced to “passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities” (p. 621). The heritage identity of an organization can be considered as an important source of identification for employees (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015a), because employees do not only define themselves as individuals in the present context of their organization but also in relation to the past and the future of it (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015b). However, studies have shown that employees’ organizational identification is an active and complex process that may be expected to vary in different situations and contexts (Bullis and Bach, 1989; Rousseau, 1998; Larson and Pepper, 2003). From a management perspective, it could therefore be difficult to know how or whether the employees receive and interpret a specific organizational heritage identity across generations and which heritage identity traits are important to them and their organizational identification.

On this background, the employees and their interpretations of heritage identity in a Danish family-owned company will be the scope of this article. More specifically, the aim is to study how the employees interpret certain historical events and values in their efforts to make sense of which heritage identity traits have remained meaningful for them over the passage of time and what these historical events and traits mean to their identification with the company.

To explore heritage identity from an employee perspective, the present study focus on a particular type of business; namely a family-owned company. Such companies are often characterized by long-term ownership by the founding family (Anderson and Reeb, 2003). Therefore, family-owned companies provide an interesting context for the study of heritage identity because these companies usually draw on the values of the founding father, the history of the family and company alike to construct their heritage identity over time (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2013). Examples of family-controlled international companies are Wal-Mart, Ford, Wolkswagen, Maersk, and H&M.

This paper begins with a presentation of the theoretical framework with a focus on history, heritage identity, organizational identity, identification and memory. Following this, the research context, methodology and the findings of the study is presented. The paper ends by discussing the implications of the research results.

Theoretical framework

History and heritage identity

Management scholars with an interest in history has primarily drawn attention to and discussed the relevance of history as a means to understand contemporary organizations and their development. Due to an increased interest in organizational history, some researchers have even argued that a so-called “historic turn” have taken place within management and organization studies (e.g. Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Mills et al.,

2016). Traditionally, management scholars have focused on history as a rhetorical strategy used by management for strategic purposes (Suddaby, Foster, and Trank, 2010), or the link between the historic past and the present through retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995), the historic past as legitimation of implementing organizational change (Chreim, 2005; Brunninge, 2009) or history as a strategic resource when communicating with external and internal stakeholders (Nissly and Casey, 2002; Delahaye et al., 2009). According to management scholars, history is usually regarded as having a symbolic and instrumental relevance for the present or the future of the organization. This means that they often adopt a dual temporal perspective focusing on the meaning of the historic past for the present organization (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015b). However, researchers with an interest in corporate heritage identity have argued that there is a difference between whether the past is articulated in the present as history or as a heritage, which means that even though an organization has a history, only some organizations have a meaningful and valuable corporate heritage (Urde, Greyser, and Balmer, 2007; Balmer and Burghausen, 2015b). These scholars adopt an omni-temporal perspective and argue that corporate heritage connects the past, present and future of an organization in a meaningful way. In other words, it is possible to identify some key corporate heritage anchors, which have remained constant over time (Balmer, 2013). Due to this omni-temporal perspective, corporate heritage is thus defined as a broader concept than history because it is not only related to the past and present, but also to a prospective future (Balmer et al. 2006). Other important characteristics of the corporate heritage concept include generational continuity and institution trait constancy (Balmer, 2013). Generational continuity represents a continuity in ownership across generations of, for instance, a family business. Trait constancy refers to those key identity traits that are still meaningful for the organization in the present and future. However, Balmer (2011) recognizes that some traits may vary, change, or even disappear over time.

The family dimension has been acknowledged by researchers in relation to history's impact upon the corporate heritage identity. Researchers acknowledge that, in the case of family firms, "it is extremely difficult, if at all possible, to decouple the history of the firm from that of the family" because "while the company can draw upon the history of the family to construct corporate heritage, family members may also be emotionally engaged in how this is done" (Bunninge, 2017:261). This close connection is also highlighted by Burghausen and Balmer (2014) when they show how not only the family but also various artifacts or locations related to the family can influence the heritage identity of the respective firm. In connection with heritage identity, the founder and his values play a significant role because "usually heritage refers back to the founder, who set up the business, fighting against a variety of challenges and who led the ground to the corporate ethos in his (the founders are usually male) personal values" (Bunninge, 2017:269). Within the corporate heritage field, scholars have recognized the relevance of how internal and external stakeholders perceive the history of the organization (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009). In the case of family companies, this relevance is even greater because the employees are considered the most important stakeholder group because they might have been working in the company for generations (Morley, 1998; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014).

Organizational identity, identification and memory

Since Albert and Whetten (1985) presented their definition of organizational identity as the central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics of an organization, researchers have lively debated the concept. This static approach has for example been criticized for assuming that identity endurance in organizations is relatively unproblematic (Anteby and Molnár, 2012). Researchers taking an opposite view of organizational identity, namely the constructionist position, argue that organizational identity should be viewed as a social construction, or narratives, developed by different members of an organization. Through narratives about 'who we are' as an organization, organizational members actively construct and reconstruct organizational identity when they make sense of particular values, beliefs and events in a specific organizational context (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004; Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008). This means that multiple identities may be constructed and exist in the same organization at the same time. Organizational identity is closely related to organizational identification. In situations "when a person's self-concept contains the same attributes as those in the perceived organizational identity" (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994, p.239), the stronger is the possibility of organizational identification. Research on organizational identity and identification has its roots in social identity theory which ties the individual's self-concept to a collective such as organizations and teams. Tajfel (1978, p. 63) defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge or his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". According to Ashforth and Mael (1996), organizational identification can be defined as a feeling of "oneness" with an organization. When "individuals define themselves in terms of the organization, they internalize its mission, ideology, and values, and by extension, strategies and customary ways of doing things" (p. 44). According to Weick (1995), organizational identification is a social construction which is a social, retrospective and continuous process. This means that employees may not necessarily have an enduring and stable organizational identification (Scott and Stephens, 2009), but instead their identification may fluctuate and vary according to various stimuli and events in the context of the organization (Rousseau, 1998). In this light, it is also important to note, that employees may have more than one target of identification. This means that an individual may have multiple identifications such as e.g. a relational identification with other coworkers or identification with a team, workgroup or network (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008). According to Bartels, van Vuuren and Ouwerkerk (2019), these targets of identification may create a more nuanced understanding of how employees' "different attachments can become compatible, conflicting, competing, or colliding" (p. 4).

The heritage identity can be considered as one target of identification or attachment for employees. Consequently, Balmer and Burghausen (2015a) has recognized the importance of social identity theory in the heritage identity field. According to these scholars, incorporating the concepts of organizational identity and identification make it possible to reveal how organizational members identify with and perceive heritage identity traits of their work organization. As a consequence, they introduce the concepts of organizational heritage identity (heritage identity traits that are claimed to be central,

distinctive and enduring by employees), and organizational heritage identification (omni-temporal identification with the past into heritage) (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015a:376-377). Further, Balmer and Burghausen (2015b) suggest, that when employees identify with a heritage identity, it may also influence their self-defining identity, because organizational members do not define themselves only with the present context of their organization, but also with the past and future of it. Feldman and Feldman (2006) accentuate the important role of organizational memory in the process of establishing a sense of continuity and shared identity among employees. Their definition of organizational memory reads: “a collective, historically and culturally situated practice, enacted by socially constituted persons in order to establish meaning” (Feldman and Feldman, 2006, p. 880). Relating collective memory to organizational identity, Anteby and Molnár (2012) suggest that organizational members use the collective memories of identity over extended periods of time to make sense of their past, present and future. Balmer and Burghausen (2015b) also claim that organizational memory is a dynamic and collective phenomenon and focus upon how it influences organizational identity and identification. In this light, they argue that “the past needs to be remembered first before it can be valorized into heritage” (Balmer and Burghausen, 2015b, p. 403).

Research context and method

The case of Beta

This paper is based on a qualitative single case study of the Danish family-owned company Beta, which is an international supplier of automated refrigeration and heating solutions. The name of the company is fictitious as all other names used in this article in order to protect the anonymity of the company. The headquarter is located in the town of [Anonymized], on the island of [Anonymized] in Denmark. Beta was selected as a case company because it has a long-term ownership by the founding family since its foundation by Michael Jensen in 1933. Located in the farmhouse where Michael was born, the corporate museum serves as a platform to communicate the history of the company. The museum was inaugurated in 1990 and it exhibits Michael's boyhood room and first office in the attic, artefacts from his childhood, and old products, historical timelines, movies, and many other artefacts. In order to build fruitful relationships with relevant stakeholders and employees, the Historical Archives works to collect, preserve, and communicate about the history and heritage of the company. Beta can thus be characterized as an exemplifying case (Yin, 2009), because it provides a suitable context for investigating and understanding heritage identity from an employee perspective.

The history of Beta - from provincial start to global reach

Beta was founded in 1933 by Michael Jensen in his boyhood room in the attic of the farmhouse where he was born in 1905. Historical documents tell the story of Michael Jensen as being an innovative man who constantly searched for new business areas and product development and whose visions also had a great impact on the local community of the island. During the 1950s, new houses, a school, kindergarten, a large number of apartment blocks, and a shopping center were built on the island to house the many

employees who came to work for Beta from other parts of Denmark. In the 1960s, the company had become a worldwide enterprise that employed about 5,000 people. However, Michael Jensen died in 1966 in an age of 60 years. After his death, Michael's wife, Anna Jensen, became chair of the board and a new General Manager was appointed. For the next three decades, Beta experienced considerable growth on both a national and an international scale. In the 1990s, new activities such as acquisition and sale of companies; construction projects in Eastern Europe, China and Russia, market developments; and ongoing adaptations of the organization, speeded up the process of making Beta a global company. In 2008, the financial crisis also hit Beta and it was necessary to dismiss almost 2,000 employees. The same year, the son of Michael Jensen, Jens Jensen, was appointed new Chairman of the Beta A/S Board and was replaced by a new CEO, Peter Petersen. The wife of Michael, Anna Jensen, died in 2016 at the age of 103. Currently, Beta has approximately 26,000 employees all over the world of which 6000 are employed in Denmark.

Data collection

The primary empirical data consists of individual interviews with 19 employees from the Beta headquarters and four Beta units located around Denmark.

When the empirical investigation was started, two initial visits were paid to the company where the museum curator and the Visitor Relations manager were interviewed about the strategic work with the preservation of the heritage identity of the company. In this connection, a guided tour to the historical archive and the Beta museum was received with the museum curator where he presented the exhibitions and told stories about the exhibited artefacts. Finally, different types of historical material were collected such as books and movies about the founders, and other internal newsletters and documents issued by the historical archive. A thorough study of the archival material and the interviews with the museum curator and the Visitor Relations manager served as background information for the interviews with the employees. In this way, it was possible to identify overall themes for the interview protocol and develop a deeper understanding of the heritage of the organization.

For the selection of employees for the interviews, the sampling was based on a mix of participants who volunteered to participate and a snowballing technique (Saunders, 2012). Initially, a formal call for interviews was published on the Beta intranet to get in contact with a wide range of employees. In the formal call, I presented myself, the purpose with the study, and guaranteed the employees full anonymity. Several employees volunteered to participate and each of them were then asked to indicate other possible participants when the interview was completed. This made it possible to reach employees from the headquarter and four other Beta locations in Denmark that could otherwise be difficult to reach. Thus, the participants reflected the diversity of the workforce and included employees from different hierarchical layers and at different company locations in Denmark. More detailed information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

The interviews were guided by a interview protocol with primarily open-ended questions, which functioned only as a rough guideline for the interviews so that other questions and responses could emerge in the interaction with the employee. Inspired by the narrative

interview method (Søderberg, 2006), the intention was to only ask a few questions to encourage the respondents to tell about their perceptions of historical events, the values of the founders, the essence of the heritage identity, the communication of the heritage identity, and consequently examples of their experiences of organizational life in this respect. The overall focus of the interviews was thus to explore how the participants talked about and related to the historical past and heritage of the company, throwing light on their interpretations of the company's past and its influence on their organizational identification. Examples of questions were: "In your own words, how would you describe the heritage identity of Beta?", "Which values do you associate with the founders Michael and Anna Jensen?", "Which historical values do you perceive as the most important today?", "How would you describe the essence of the heritage identity of Beta?, and, "How do you perceive the communication of the heritage identity"?

The interviews with the employees were conducted during autumn 2017 and typically lasted between one and two hours. Fourteen interviews were conducted in a company conference room close to the participants' workplace and five interviews were conducted on Skype, depending on the employees' preferences. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

TAKE IN TABLE 1

Data analysis

The adopted methodology to analyze the interview transcripts is discourse analysis because it is a suitable approach for revealing textual patterns of describing and justifying organizational practices (Hardy and Phillips, 1999; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2012). It implies that by studying the vocabulary chosen by the employees it is possible to reveal how they make sense of the historical past and heritage identity. As a theoretical paradigm, discourse analysis contains several methodological viewpoints and, for the present research task, the critical perspective has been chosen due to its ability to reveal how repeated discursive strategies can (re)create a specific reality. According to critical discourse analysts, the strategic selection of discourse strategies performed by social actors is bound by context-specific characteristics and it is simultaneously a modifier of the respective context (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Fairclough, 2003, 2005 and 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2005 and 2008).

The analytical work has been based upon several readings of the interview transcripts and upon the subsequent identification of data segments that showed repeated discursive patterns related to the research topic. In order to identify and also to track possible changes in these discursive patterns in a systematic way, Van Leeuwen's sociosemantic inventory of social actors' categories (2007, 2009a and 2009b) has been employed. After identifying the social actors' categories in the collected interviews, Van Leeuwen's perspective on discourse made it possible to elaborate on how these categories of actors are included in the interviews as active participants of social practices or as beneficiaries, as individuals endowed with authority or as groups, how their actions or reactions are legitimated, and how the purposes and effects of their actions are discursively highlighted.

Based on Van Leeuwen's categories, three groups of social actors have been distinguished that are central in the social practices presented by the employees: the founder and his family, the employees themselves and the Beta community. In what follows, the main research findings related to these social actors will be presented. The presentation is structured according to these main social actors and the social actions they are involved in.

Empirical analysis

The founders – from pioneering spirit to perennial values

The social actors that have a predominant place in the discursive context of the employees' statements are the founders of the company. Michael Jensen, the founding father of Beta, is constantly identified and legitimated as the *primum movens* in the company's history. He is legitimated as a historical source of three kinds of authority: as an expert, as a person and as a role model. Michael is included in the employees' recollections as the agent that started the company due to his innovative expertise and he is appraised as "the pioneer" (E15). This pioneering spirit has not only generated a successful global company, but it has also formed generations of employees as Michael has been their role model. Several employees discursively highlight Michael as a very quality-conscious person. A value which they evaluate still exist in the company:

Michael, he was the kind of person who wanted things to be top quality and he kept on fighting until he reached the goal without a compromise [...] Something about quality and that we shall erhm ... be aware of it in our daily work and not make some inferior work, but erhm what we do must be done properly and be top quality (E4).

It kinda tells me that he wanted people to have very high standards regarding their work, and it must be high quality what they do (...). He was not a sloppy person, not at all (E12).

A narrative that has been reiterated by almost all the employees is related to Michael's legendary means of nudging his employees:

Before leaving in the evening, Michael always walked a tour around the factory. Back then, it was not so big, erhm... and then he left his walking stick if he passed something he found positive or negative... That is a funny story, but it shows a bit about the man, that he always had a finger on the pulse (...) this is certain, because I- the employees who knew him, they have carried this on. It rubbed off on the next employees (E13).

Consequently, the impact of this recurrent behavior and its underlying values still reverberate even in the employees who have not experienced this treatment because the story is repeated from one generation to the other safeguarding not only a memory but

the identity too. The impact of his exceptional personality is also discursively revealed when especially the older generation of employees remember how his death has affected not only the employees but their families and the entire community too:

I remember the day, or no actually, I am not able to remember the day Michael Jensen died, but I remember that my dad, he, erhm, (...) he came home and stood like (stutter) almost erhm (...) yes, you could see he had tears in his eyes, but he stood like he had his fingers squeezed or something, it was very unnatural for my dad to stand like that (E5).

I remember when Michael Jensen died. It was in '66 and back then I was in school in [name of island] and we were summoned in the school yard to get the information that he had passed away. And what I feared the most was that my father should loose his job. People stood all the way down the road when he was buried [...] It meant so much to [name of island] (E8).

Michael is also discursively differentiated as “atypical for his generation” (E13) because of his close work collaboration with his wife Anna Jensen who used to have a desk in his office and took part in the management processes even when he was still alive.

Anna Jensen’s discursive representation reaches mythical proportions in the interviews as she outlived her husband by many decades and reached the age of 103 interlinking generations of employees. Her influence upon the company is discursively evaluated in positive terms in all the interviews:

Anna Jensen was a very great figure...and in a unique way...a fantastic lady (E5).

Her long-standing values and their influence are continually acknowledged and evaluated in overtly positive statements by all employees:

Anna Jensen, you can clearly feel this everywhere, she was highly respected and she represented some very, very strong human values. [...] You really sense it..., erhm, ... and that of course gives you a strong sense of loyalty too (E10).

Anna, I mean, she has really shown a very, very big human value (E14).

Anna is differentiated as that representative of the management who actively involved herself in the lives of the employees, namely “she dealt with individuals, with specific situations” (E10) and “she was very, very socially engaged” (E8).

She has also had a finger on the pulse both in the social work erhm... if somebody was not feeling well, or if something happened, then she went and visited them at home (E13).

Furthermore, a great number of employees are not in doubt about the constant effects of Anna's social engagement upon the present values concerning employee caring and benefits and the company's social commitment around the world:

Anna invented social responsibility long before it existed. And that is still what Beta stands for, and also now we have expanded out in the world, then we also take care of the local area and the employees. [...] We treat our people well, we treat the area in which we operate in a reasonable way (E15).

The employee caring has been much more formalized right, but I think we have some good erhm employee benefits. Erhm, really all our erhm ... health insurances and good cheap food in the canteen. [...] I also think there has been a few times where we could buy shares (E4).

The employees – from receivers of heritage identity communication to active storytellers

Most employees are aware that their organizational identification is strengthened through the very existence of the company's museum that encapsulates the company's heritage identity in material form. Nearly all the employees discursively evaluate their visit to the company museum in positive terms. Especially, the authenticity of the museum and the founders' office with his personal belongings contribute to create an emotional attachment to Michael long after his death and help memorize him as a person:

It is actually fantastic erhm... the briefcase is actually more or less where he left it the last time and... well you almost get emotional by seeing how beautiful it is up there, right. I think they have really ... included a lot of things (stutter) I think it really adds some value and present, erhm the history and who Michael was [...] Really, it is both cosy and (stutter) erhm ... and very erhm authentic (E14).

During their free time, some of the employees from the older generation are also active participants in keeping the company's history alive through gathering and writing stories about the company's (technological) development and/or anecdotes about Michael Jensen:

I am a member of the history club (...) and I have written some history about the thick film technology, where I worked for more than 20 years (.) I gathered some of my old colleagues, erhm and in a couple of winters, we kinda described the historical development of the technology (E15).

Some of the employees with a long tenure are also discursively interwoven in a series of social actions when they tell or retell stories about the founders and the early days of the company to new employees or external stakeholders during company visits. By telling stories about the past, these employees act as a kind of identity custodians that contribute

to preserve the memory of the past and in this way keep the founder's heritage and persona alive:

Well, that thing about him sitting up in the attic and all that, is actually the typical story you tell a new employee (E3).

Just before you enter the production facility, there is a timeline you can follow (...). Well, it begins with when we started in thirty three and up to 2012 erhm both for the entire Beta and also for our factory [...] So Michael is sitting and watching us when we pass and that is great. I sometimes show visitors around and on such visits we use the timeline quite a lot to show them this is actually our history (...) and then I tell one of the funny anecdotes right and also a bit about how it is founded and ... why it is called Beta and all these things erhm. (...) Most people find that rather amusing (E6).

The Beta community – from workplace to home

The conscious engagement of Anna in the employees' lives and the employees' active involvement in keeping the company's history alive have fundamental implications upon the Beta community. The unique character of this community is given by the permanent close connections between the workplace and the employees and their families. The complex lines between workplace and home are blurred by a strong sense of continuity and belonging created first of all by the founder's family:

Moreover, the Michael Jensen family, they have meant incredible much for the entire area here (E5).

Apart from giving credit to Anna's involvement, several employees highlight how the fact that in most families several generations have worked for the company had a tremendous influence upon both their lives and organizational identification:

Yes, well, my father and both my brothers have also been employeed here [...] There are many relations between both work and private life of the people you meet here. There is always somebody, who in some way or another has something to do with the company and erhm... the original family lives in the area and such. Well, there (.) there is a very powerful bond between them (E12).

Actually, the strength of their organizational identification is legitimized by the traditional aspect of these permanent links across generations.

Erhm... well, I have known Beta since I was ... a child in some way or another erhm because my entire family has worked at Beta erhm ... then (stutter) you can say it is a kind of foundation in a way. [...] Erhm ... I just think that (stutter) I am proud of Beta in some way or another, because I have also heard so many good stories (E19).

So it is really, erhm, yes my mother and father have both been at Beta ... But really, my husband, he is also here and I have a brother in law and he was also here at the same time, then my oldest sister and her husband has also both worked here ... So it is a bit like family, yes you can call it that (E5).

However, the employees who are employed at other branches all express another kind of organizational belonging due to the physical distance between the headquarter and its new branches. These employees discursively express a feeling of isolation from the Beta community at the headquarter, because they are not part of the same generational link between family and workplace:

So I think the headquarters down in [name of town] that is perhaps more like the real Beta [...] It is kinda different up here, right. Us up here, we are a bit more isolated (E17).

Sometimes I feel we are maybe a bit forgotten in this organizational unit, as we are located far from the headquarter (...). Though we have all heard the story and read about it, but I think you just feel it and see it more when you are at the headquarter and also because people living near the headquarter has worked for the company for the past three generations, right. That is not the case here (E18).

The Beta community and beyond

All the interviewed employees also chose to highlight the inevitability of some changes that characterize the present of the company. Several employees highlight changes such as the replacement of the son of the founder by a new CEO and staff cuts due to the financial crisis in 2008-2009. The current managerial team is discursively represented as not being able to stay true to the values of the past because their actions related to considerable layoffs during the financial crisis are in direct contrast to the values of the founders. As direct consequences, a majority of the interviewed employees explicitly lament the consequences of these changes which has implicitly influenced the heritage identity and also their organizational identification.

Things sort of changed during the crisis in 07-08, erhm (.) when Jens handed over the reins to Peter (E12).

And then we laid off two thirds of all employees and it was awful to be here. It was absolutely terrible because all activities were stopped and all I had worked with was stopped (E11).

Right about the time when I was employed I think they had a round of dismissals... We had a customer service department here in Vejle where all employees were fired and then they send it off to Poland and our production also stopped here in Vejle and that was also sent to Poland (E17).

Some of the longtime employees also discursively represent the younger generation of employees as a generation that does not feel the same collective identity bond to the organization as the older generation of employees. This passive estrangement from the younger generation, or the potential conflict over the identity between the different generations, may also, in the long run, create a heritage identity loss, because the values of the past is not remembered by the younger generation:

It is not the younger generation, that...it is my generation and the older generation, who remembers it. There are not so many of the new employees who...Anna Jensen (.) who is that? [...] When Mrs. Jensen passed away, some of it disappeared, I think, and when the rest of the family is gone, then I think it is completely gone. I do not feel that the younger generation does the same as the old. I do not think they do (E12).

We have hired some employees that perhaps erhm ... are commuting from afar and they are perhaps here two-three days a week and then they work (stutter) from home the remaining days because they live far away. Erhm ... so I feel that they never really get that sense of the history (...) because it is basically just a place they go to work and then return home afterwards (E2).

Reflecting upon the present, a younger employee has also motivated the dissolution of the founding values due to the lack of generational belonging, and a more self-focused attitude:

I just think today, I mean the new generation, I do not think you are so concerned with the history of the company, but more with what career possibilities are available. You probably focus more on yourself these days (E18).

Apart from these changes, most employees also discursively highlight the fact that the company is undergoing changes in the organizational identity due to the globalization. When the employees label their perceptions of the current identity as ‘something else’, ‘business oriented’ and ‘business stuff’ they contrast the present identity (what we have become) with a past identity (what we were) that was rooted in other values:

Earlier this was a Danish company that was located in Denmark, right. And... maybe 80-90 percent of the employees were in Denmark. That has changed so now maybe there are around 30 percent of the employees in Denmark, right. The rest is abroad. So, we have become something else, we are much more present in China where we have 5000 employees, and the same in USA (E1).

I also think that Beta has become something else [...] But sometimes I cannot resist the thought that it has become much more business oriented and we must charge ahead, move forward and all that. There is a lot more of that now, of course we

must do that and that is alright [...] but they also have to remember the people. They are not just employee numbers and they really have to make sure that their managers also understand that (E5).

Really, I think we will see a lot more of this business stuff and I think it is a bit scary when they outsource our work (E8).

According to most of the employees, the changes in identity can certainly be considered inevitable due to the passing of time and globalization of the company, but they can potentially wipe out the company's main immaterial assets, namely its long-standing values:

A lot (stutter) has changed erhm ... erhm if you divide the pie in two halves and say numbers and ... results on one side and ... people on the other. The people are of course important, but numbers and results and KPIs are higher on the list, I think (E14).

Earlier they had this rule in Beta that erhm ... if both man and wife worked at Beta well then you would of course not lay off both in a round of dismissals. Erhm ... things like that are no longer taken into consideration. Now it is ... it (stutter) is a bit more tough business, I would say (E19).

Looking back, an older employee also highlights some of the consequences of the company's globalization upon the founding values and as a consequence "the Beta spirit". Due to this globalization, she experiences a higher performance pressure, which lead to a more stressed atmosphere. Consequently, the connections among the employees are looser because people now focus more on their own self-promotion and incentives than before. According to her, this situation contributes once again to an organizational heritage identity loss:

Yes, erhm (.) Well, let us say that when I started there was something called the Beta spirit (.) Erhm that ... you helped others, we helped each other, we knew each other. Erhm, that is what I have been raised with, that is what I have tried to do during my time erhm ... (.) I must kind of say that is sort of gone (...) I don't experience that any longer [...] There has been many, many changes (.) many for the better and many for worse (...) And the worse has kind of made this Beta spirit disappear. [...] You can start to feel it yourself that thing about being stressed, that there is a higher and higher level of expected performance, and then all the time, you know about the incentives (E9).

However, several employees also react to the organizational changes with a silent and rational acceptance of the need to put the survival of the company above the founding values:

Erhm... it is of course sad that (.) the production has been cut down at many sites here in Denmark (..) But there is still quite many jobs. Erhm... I don't really know (.) if it could have been done in so many other ways than what they did (E10).

No, well, I told myself at some point in time that now (stutter), now are the values completely erhm lost, right. Erhm... and any time soon they move the headquarter to (stutter) London or erhm wherever it may make most sense from a pure erhm tax-wise point of view. [...] Erhm... I had my hopes up for a bit of loyalty regarding keeping the jobs here [in Denmark]. But (stutter) again, it has been a matter of pure survival and they have had to make some difficult decisions (E19).

Since 2008, we have felt that there has been a lot of significant changes in the way it [the company] is managed, erhm... but they were also necessary, because otherwise we would probably not have been here today (E6).

Discussion and conclusion

This empirical study has revealed how the employees receive and interpret the heritage identity of their company and which heritage identity traits are important to them and their organizational identification. During the interviews, all the employees make references to the founder and his wife and their influence on the origin and development of the company. In this sense, the participants largely agree on which fundamental core values and heritage identity traits they associate with Michael and Anna Jensen. Michael is identified as an innovative and visionary man with strong values whose pioneering actions contributed to the appearance and development of the company. The stories of Michael and his way of nudging his employees form an important part of how the employees remember, evaluate, and make sense of the values of the past and how they experience the continuance of these values in their present work life. Michaels' formative reactions and behavior based on his values towards the employees have played a significant role in the construction of the organizational identity and the employees' identification. A significance that is passed on through different narratives from especially the older generation of employees to the younger generation. Anna Jensens' actions and values are equally as important. She is identified as a person with exceptional authority because of her caring support and devotion to the employees, and the entire community of the island. Annas' formative reactions towards the employees, based on soft human values, have also had a strong influence on the identity construction and organizational identification. Especially among the employees with a long tenure, who remember her and her social engagement. However, all employees across generations discursively evaluate her social commitment as a value, or heritage identity trait, that continues to live on in the present company culture as employee caring and corporate social responsibility.

The employees' affective reactions toward the founders and their longstanding values are further strengthened by historical events and communication activities such as visits to the company museum, where especially Michaels' office and personal belongings play a

significant role. Artifacts related to the family can in this respect influence the maintenance of heritage identity (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014). Especially the older generation of employees identify with the heritage identity by keeping the memory of the founder and his wife alive. Some of these employees even act as dedicated and active preservers of the heritage identity when they tell and retell stories of the founders and the early days of the company to new employees and other stakeholders.

This study supports previous research suggesting that locations may also influence the heritage identity (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014). This is seen when the employees discursively highlight their close connection to the local community of the island, where the company is strongly embedded. This is especially marked by the long-held core values of the founder and his family which have had a huge influence on the development of the entire community. Several employees show affective reactions toward the sense of belonging because their families have worked for Beta for generations, which has had a significant influence on their lives and attachment to both the community and Beta. In this sense, some of the employees may even identify with Beta before they start to work for the company because of the close connection between workplace, generations of employees, and their families. Due to repeated narratives among generations, some of the historical events that took place long before the employees were born may also play a role in this potential pre-identification with the company. These findings confirm earlier studies pointing out that “family companies invariably hold a strong position in their communities” (Morley, 1998: 271). In this light, this study suggests that the local Beta community could be considered an important target of identification for some employees because of a historical past that has linked both the company, generations of employees, and the entire community together. However, this local community is also in a process of changing due to outsourcing of work and globalization of the company, which may also weaken the relationship between the employees and their workplace.

Further, the interviews indicate that the employees from the younger generation have other targets of identification. Some of these employees express another kind of organizational belonging because they work in branches located elsewhere in Denmark. Some of the younger employees also express another view of the past because they do not have the same generational link to the Beta community as those employees whose families have worked for the company for generations. Instead of looking back, these employees have other temporal foci as they are more concerned with their own career possibilities in the present and future. Further, their experiences with the company are not acquired from generation to generation and therefore they do not have the same memories of the founders and their values. Some of the older employees also discursively represent the younger generation of employees as a generation that does not feel the same collective identity bond to the organization as the older generation. In the long run, this potential conflict over the identity between the different generations could create a heritage identity loss. However, the different generations of employees discursively highlight the inevitability of some changes that characterize the present of the company. These changes are related to a new management, layoffs, increased workload, a stressful environment, and the expansion and globalization of the company. Even though several employees react to these changes with a silent and rational acceptance of their necessity for the

company to survive, they all express a concern for the dilution of the long-standing founding values. This is especially salient among the older generation of employees. As the past values and the accompanying ways of thinking and behaving are no longer considered relevant and meaningful, these employees seem to passively accept an unavoidable future in which they can no longer characterize themselves in terms of their belonging to the company as they could in the past. In this respect, the memory by these employees of an “another time” that is closely connected to Michael and Anna Jensen and their founding values may be a hindrance for management to nurture and maintain the heritage identity in the future. At least if these employees feel that the founding values might be in dilution or no longer exist.

As earlier indicated, the younger generation of employees have other temporal foci and targets of identification, which may also challenge the maintenance of the founding values. It could be a major challenge for management to keep the heritage identity alive if this generation perceive it as something that is connected only to the past, and that it has no present and future value to them. This indicate, that even a company like Beta, with a strong founding family and position in the local community, may have challenges upholding a stable and enduring heritage identity. In other words, difficulties in maintaining the quality of a heritage identity continuity in a changing community where employees might experience a contrast between the past founding values and a modern present with a more business-oriented focus.

Implications, limitations and future research

One implication of this study is that it contributes to the existing heritage identity literature by showing how employees from different generations perceive and interpret the heritage identity of their company. The current study also adds to existing research of organizational identity and identification emphasizing that multiple identities and identifications may exist in an organization at the same time (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004; Larson and Pepper, 2003; Ashforth, Harrison and Corly, 2008). Further, the results support previous findings suggesting that organizational identification is a fleeting construct that may be influenced by various stimuli and events in the context of the organization (Rousseau, 1998; Scott and Stephens, 2009). This also appears to be the case in terms of employees’ identification with the past into present. According to Balmer (2011), the meanings attached to particular heritage identity traits may vary over the passage of time because they are context dependent. However, the findings of this study suggest that the founding values are highly under pressure from environmental changes which may challenge the sense of heritage identity continuity, especially among the older generation of employees. In this sense, it can be discussed if heritage identity can have a definitive and enduring character among different generations of employees, because it may be challenged by a dynamic and constantly changing social context and consequently shifting narratives and interpretations among employees. In other words, the question is whether it is possible for management to maintain a unique heritage identity in a constantly changing environment that may challenge the distinctiveness and indurance of a heritage identity among different generations of employees?

This article also offers managers and communication practitioners a deeper understanding of the complexity of heritage identity communication. In order to uphold and preserve a trustworthy heritage identity in the present and future, management should reveal how different generations of employees perceive and make sense of the past and how these perceptions influence and shape their present identities and identifications. Hence, it could be valuable for management to identify whether different generations of employees develop a strong or weak identification with certain heritage identity traits and whether there are competing or compatible targets of heritage identification among these generations. To avoid organizational memory loss, it could also be valuable for managers to consider how to engage employees as heritage identity ambassadors to pass on the old stories to new employees. Here, a strong or weak identification with the heritage identity will also influence the potential storytelling activities.

This findings of this study is limited to the specific context of Beta. Future research could extensively approach the same topics when interviewing employees across the national borders of a global family company. In this light, future research could adopt a comparative view to reveal how employees across two or more countries perceive and make sense of heritage identity traits and how their perceptions and identifications are influenced in times of change.

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Table I. Respondents.

Respondent	Position	Location	Tenure	Gender
E1	Manager	Beta HQ	32 years	M
E2	Management Assistant	Beta HQ	9½ years	F
E3	Management Assistant	Beta HQ	26 years	F
E4	Category Buyer	Beta HQ	21 years	F
E5	HR Assistant	Beta HQ	34 years	F
E6	Production Technician	Beta Graasten	20 years	M
E7	Lead Consultant	Beta HQ	19 years	M
E8	Secretary	Beta HQ	41 years	F
E9	Secretary	Beta HQ	38 years	F
E10	Software Specialist	Beta Graasten	25 years	M
E11	Sales Coordinator	Beta HQ	13 years	F
E12	Electrician	Beta HQ	40 years	M
E13	IT Consultant	Beta HQ	40 years	F
E14	Management Assistant	Beta HQ	28 years	F
E15	Engineer	Beta HQ	37 years	M
E16	Category Manager	Beta Kolding	11 years	M
E17	Freight Forwarder in Shipping Department	Beta Vejle	1 year	F
E18	Economic Assistant	Beta Aarhus	2½ years	F
E19	Manager	Beta HQ	10 years	M