

Organizational Identity and Strategic Choice: A Process Perspective

A THESIS

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Extended Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to suggest answers to three questions in the form of three essays. First, how does an approach involving making identity-driven strategic choices perform, in comparison to rational utility maximization approaches, in situations of varying complexity? Second, what mechanisms serve to reduce uncertainty, when an approach of making identity-driven strategic choices is invoked? Third, what tribulations ensue when a firm makes an identity-referencing strategic choice?

In the first essay, I delve into the first question. I observe that, a normative strategy advising businesses to fall back on organizational identity referents for making choices in times of profound fork-in-the-road situations has been in existence for quite some time. Organizational identity comprises shared beliefs regarding the question “who we are as an organization”. However, the principle of making identity-driven strategic choices lacks the kind of scientific appeal associated with the rational utility maximization approach grounded in mathematics and economics. Taking advantage of advances in computational simulation modeling by Kauffman’s *NK*-landscape, I demonstrate that outcomes from a normative strategy of opting for identity-driven choices are superior to outcomes from a rational utility maximization approach in moderate and high complexity, but not in low complexity. Thus, company managers are better off employing rational utility maximization approaches only under conditions of low complexity arising from sparse interdependence between elements of a strategic decision. Under conditions of moderate and high complexity— where interdependence is higher—opting to make strategic choices referring to an organization’s identity is also a superior approach for effecting a greater extent of adaptation.

The second question—*what mechanisms serve to reduce uncertainty, when an approach of making identity-driven strategic choices is invoked*—drives the inquiry in my next essay. Specifically, I ask, in the path of strategy execution, how does referencing

organizational identity allow management to settle for a particular course of action, given pulls in different directions from stakeholders? Invoking the Gioia template for comparative cross-case analysis, I study a set of five strategic events in the functioning of the *Tata Group*,¹ a large conglomerate in *India*, in the period 1992 to 2012 in order to elicit some underlying organizational identity referents. These strategic events are: development of the first fully-indigenous passenger car, the *Tata Indica*, in both petrol and diesel versions, by *Tata Motors* (earlier, *Tata Engineering and Locomotive Company*, TELCO); *Tata Tea*'s acquisition of *Tetley*, UK, and subsequent emergence as *Tata Consumer Products Ltd.*; development of the *Tata Nano*, the world's cheapest automobile, by *Tata Motors*; *Tata Steel*'s acquisition of *Corus* for \$12 billion; and *Tata Motor*'s acquisition of the premier automobile brands, *Jaguar* and *Land Rover* (JLR), from *Ford*, UK. I find that four organizational identity referents—*consistently keeping promises*, *nurturing businesses for growth*, *mastering businesses higher up in the value chain*, and *developing social infrastructure*—have strong influence on the *Tata Group*'s actions in countenancing uncertainty. At the initiation phase of a major venture, a track record of consistently keeping promises accords credibility to the sponsor, reducing uncertainty of stakeholders, helping them decide on their cooperative actions. Moreover, in the stabilization and nurturance phase of a major venture, enhancement of organizational knowledge through problem-solving, innovation in processes and management techniques, and financial investment reduces uncertainty. Further, in the growth and maturity phase of a major venture, deployment of complementary skills and expertise reduces uncertainty. Astute actions backing the interrelated nature of the organizational identity referents appear to contribute significantly to the *Tata Group*'s longevity and superior reputation as a valuable entity in the society.

¹ The *Tata Group* of *India* is a 150-year-old enterprise, having revenues of \$150 billion in 2022-23. Combined market capitalization was \$300 billion in July 2023. [Source: <https://www.tata.com/about-us>].

The third essay addresses the final question: *what tribulations ensue when a firm makes an identity-reference strategic choice?* I note that a business firm gets confronted with making an identity-defying or identity-aligned strategic choice in challenging, fork-in-the-road situations fraught with uncertainty. Such a situation may arise when the business firm initially commits to a future course of action in favor of another entity in order to obtain a benefit or privilege at present time, but realizes later that it may have overcommitted. This creates a conundrum: honoring a commitment entails costs, lapsing on honoring the commitment also entails costs. A comparative case study of an identity-aligned and an identity-defying strategic choice in the *Tata Group* suggests that a company is better off if it fashions simple contracts—that set fewer restrictions, and outline clear financial terms for agreement fulfilment and termination—and honors all contractual commitments, at the time of execution. This research enriches organizational identity theory by highlighting the positive synergy between identity-aligned strategic choices premised on consistently honoring commitments and simple contracts between companies.

In sum, this research establishes on a firm scientific basis the wisdom of the long-known management principle of making identity-driven strategic choices. It demonstrates how this principle helps companies countenance uncertainty. It illustrates a mechanism for smooth functioning of an organization undertaking identity-aligned strategic choices.

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