Building a global identity through storytelling

Florian Oosterman

Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University

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Author	: F.F. (Florian) Oosterman
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“Narrative fallacies arise inevitably from our continuous attempt to make sense of the world. The explanatory stories that people find compelling are simple; are concrete rather than abstract; assign a larger role to talent, stupidity, and intentions than to luck; and focus on a few striking events that happened rather than on the countless events that failed to happen”.

Daniel Kahneman, author of Thinking, Fast and Slow.

Abstract

This case study was performed at the Dutch organization CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV. A company that has been going through a face of rapid growth and internationalization over the past seven years. Due to the international growth the company established foreign subsidiaries in over ten different countries ranging from Argentina to Singapore. Establishing subsidiaries is one thing, integrating them within the company is another. CIS Commodity Inspection Services is facing issues in this integration process and is looking for ways to immerse the different entities in its organizational identity. How does one socialize with colleagues on the other side of the world? By means of storytelling, one can transfer a lot of emotional laden information and is able to give meaning to actions and behavior. The goal of this case study was to identify and decipher the various elements of the story (grand narrative) used by the case company to transfer the organizational identity of the company with the goal to strive as one team for the same goal. Simultaneously by deciphering the grand narrative, one is able to find out if this narrative is in line with day-to-day actions. In other words, how far away is the narrative from the actual identity shown in daily business. This is about the strategic applications of organizational storytelling in the field identity building.

The theoretical background was focused on the different elements of organizational stories and the features of organizational identity. By studying the research already performed in both fields, a clear definition of both phenomena was produced and gaps for this study were encountered. The empirical research was performed through qualitive research focusing on semi-structured interviews, observations and company documents. Interviews were performed with 12 members of CIS Commodity Inspection Services, ranging from the CEO to back office employees. All interviewed people are in daily contact with the foreign subsidiaries. Through this qualitive methodology of descriptive/exploratory nature, a rich picture of the organization and its employees was distilled. The data was processed by means of encoding principals. The conceptual framework combines Argyris' theory of action with organizational storytelling.

Applying organizational storytelling to build a global identity was found to be very challenging. Mainly due to the plurality of the many contradicting stories vis-à-vis the grand narrative, the grand narrative with its elements of the organizational identity were not embedded within the organization. The grand narrative and other stories going both in opposite directions led to failure of the strategic application of storytelling in relation to building a global identity.

Key words: organizational storytelling, organizational identity, subsidiary management, multinational organization.

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Introduction

This study focusses by means of a case study on the Dutch company CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV. A company that has its core activities in the Testing, Inspection and Certification (TIC) industry and operates globally. Although the company was founded back in 1989, it only witnessed fast growth over the last seven years. Due to this growth, the company decided to shift from foreign contracted agents to building a network of fully owned foreign subsidiaries. Integrating these new entities and familiarizing them with the way of doing business, strategy and values is something that turned out to be very challenging. As the company does not have the manpower and resources to implement an extended exchange program, they are looking into other possibilities to have the global teams work together smoothly and constructively. The issues that CIS Commodity Inspection Services is facing is a problem faced by many organizations who are establishing themselves as multinational organizations (Wang et al., 2014).

In today's global business environment customer demand is more polarized and changes faster than ever before. Consequently, product life cycles are getting shorter. The rise of internet and globalization facilitates for companies to expend their activities beyond country borders to either look for new markets or to obtain new resources and capabilities (Barlett & Ghoshal, 1990). While for a long time foreign subsidiaries played a marginal role in multinational corporations, their role is shifting towards a more pivotal one as clear strategic assets that drive the companies' competitive advantage, innovation and learning capabilities. It thus requires a different approach and mindset than the hierarchical purely headquarter-centric hub and spoke system where headquarters were trying to control and tell their network of foreign subsidiaries what to do (Birkinshaw & Ridderstrale, 1999).

Multinational corporations are shifting towards an interdependent geographically dispersed network where every entity has its unique capabilities, resources and autonomy to act in the best interest of the group (Luo, 2001). Barlett & Ghoshal (1987) explain that companies should thrive to be highly efficient, have local responsiveness and global learning capabilities. A key factor in the notion of Barlett & Ghoshal is autonomy for subsidiaries that has great influence on initiative-taking. Changing the perspective does not only need a change of approach at headquarters but also at subsidiary-level to replace the command and control attitude towards a more proactive one. It implicates for headquarters to give up control to a certain degree, which is not self-evident. The challenges that arise from reducing hierarchical control draws on the famous agency theory which implicates the notion of a negative image of human beings with conflicting interests and information asymmetry (Bebchuk & Fried, 2003).

In 2015 Royal Dutch Imtech filed for bankruptcy at the Court of Rotterdam. Once the pride of true Dutch entrepreneurship and a no-brainer for traders at the Amsterdam Stock Exchange. The rise of Imtech was a great case for students in Business Administration of growing a local company into a truly multinational corporation. A company that generated more than 5 billion euros in revenues, more than 100 million euros of net profit (rtlnieuws.nl, 2015) and provided for +20,000 employees. Nowadays it is still a great case for students in Business Administration to analyze where it all went wrong. Royal Dutch Imtech was organized with a lot of room for subsidiary initiative. While this is considered as a key driver behind the earlier success (elsevier.nl, 2015), it also drove Imtech to bankruptcy. Foreign subsidiaries within Imtech could make strategic decisions autonomously and look for interesting business opportunities themselves. Formal control mechanisms were in place for decision-making. Yet unethical subsidiary initiatives, such as risky investments without proper due diligence, were approved and initiated while not in line with the strategy outlined by the headquarters in Gouda, The Netherlands and the corporate culture.

The Imtech example clearly shows that having formal control mechanisms in place such hierarchical structures, incentives, and reporting lines does not automatically mean that subsidiary initiatives contribute to the success of the multinational corporation. Another form of control mechanism comes in the form of socialization practices, also known as informal control (Baliga & Jaeger, 1984). By boosting the organizational socialization process between headquarters and the subsidiaries, endeavors are made to transfer the company's cultural values and identity with the goal to feel unified and to transfer knowledge. This is even possible when geographically the parent company and the subsidiary are situated on different continents (Lin, 2013). Interaction between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries are complex due to today's way of communication is merely done via e-mail and there is almost no time given to interact due to the fast-moving environment. This is also referred to as "swift communication" and building "swift trust" by Barker & Gower (2010). It means that nowadays less time is available for coworkers in different geographical locations to interact and build relationships. Moreover, due to differences in context internal communication is subject to ambiguity and is therefore interpreted differently amongst different unites and individuals within the MNC (Barker & Gower, 2010).

One way to possibly overcome the issues that complicates communication and socialization amongst different entities within the MNC is through storytelling, also known as Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT). Human beings are inherently storytellers, and by telling stories one is able to make sense of what we are, where we come from and what we want to be. It is a cross-cultural communication method to establish social relationships (Soin & Scheytt, 2006). Within organizations storytelling is starting to get more recognition, as pointed out by Vaara, Scott & Boje (2016) in the field of change management, identity, entrepreneurship and knowledge sharing. It is getting more frequently applied on a strategic level and can therefore become a valuable tool in building a global identity.

Storytelling is closely linked with rhetoric as argued by Flory & Iglesias (2010) and can be used to persuade individuals or groups to act in a certain manner. Stories within organizations can come in different formats either written, oral, through artifacts and by means of visual representations. The latter becoming more important due to the internet and social media (Vaara, Scott & Boje, 2016). As storytelling is being recognized as such a powerful tool for shaping identities, sense-making and transmitting values it is of great interest to find out how storytelling is used in the headquarter-subsidiary relationship to create a global identity.

1. Research theme

1.1 Research problem

The literature study which will follow in the next section, on organizational storytelling and identity building demonstrates gaps that give room for further research. Building a global identity to work as a team striving for the same goal is a topic that is very much alive in today's business environment. Everyone agrees that working together as a team is fundamental for success but to actually build a multinational team sharing the same identity is a problem that many organizations face today. There are a lot of challenges in this field of organizational identity, many people working on a daily basis in such an environment can acknowledge to similar issues around this phenomenon.

While a lot of research has been done on organizational identity and subsidiary management, it has not been linked to storytelling. Furthermore, the potential of organizational storytelling has to be unleashed as outlined by Vaara, Scott and Boje (2016). There are many directions for feature research to shine a light on the potential of storytelling within organizations. They argue that although the interest of organizational storytelling is rising, there is still very little empirical research done. There is a lot of room for further research to unfold the dynamics and layers of organizational stories. As a starting point for this research, the following suggestions are used as found in recent literature:

"It would also be important to examine in more detail the rhetorical and discursive means through which particular organizational identities are constructed and legitimated. Not only verbal or written texts, but also visual representations and material artifacts are likely to play an important role in these processes, and their analysis remains a key challenge for future research" (Vaara et al, 2016)

"What are the consistent characteristics of an effective organizational story? The elements change based on the message, but future studies could develop a framework for helping members devise the most compelling narratives" (Barker & Gower, 2010)

1.2 Research question

These two suggestions for further research together lead to the following research question:

How is *storytelling* used by Headquarters to build *a global identity* in a Multinational Corporation?

To further structure this study the following questions will be answered:

- *What are the different elements of organizational stories?*
- *Which features encompass organizational identity?*

1.3 Research objective

The objective of this research was in the first place to identify and decipher the grand narrative constructed by the case company to build a global identity together with the foreign subsidiaries. This is done by an in-depth analysis of the grand narrative to get to the very core of the story. Furthermore, and in line with Argyris' Theory of Action, endeavors are made to verify if the grand narrative is not only active as dominant discourse but also truly lived in day-to-day business. By investigating the possible discrepancies, the case company can identify the issues they face in building a global identity and ultimately find out if storytelling is an appropriate strategic tool to build a global identity.

1.4 Thesis structure

The remainder of this study consists of a literature review of the relevant work conducted on organizational storytelling and organizational identity. The literature review tends to answer the sub-questions from a theoretical perspective. To finalize this section a conceptual framework is designed that is distilled from the literature review and challenged in the empirical study. The next section describes the methodology of the study including the validity and reliability of the chosen method, an in-depth case study. Later on, the findings of the empirical study derived via interviews, observations and company documents are analyzed. The analysis of the empirical study and the results from the literature review come together to discuss similarities and differences and finally result in the conclusion of this research. To conclude this study a list of limitations and implications for further research is given.

2. Theoretical background

This section of the study gives a profound overview of the studies conducted in the field of organizational identity and organizational storytelling. The theoretical background is divided into two separate sections to consider both sub-questions, the first part contains an overview of the studies performed in the field of organizational storytelling, with a special emphasis on the different roles of stories. The second part goes into the different elements of building a global identity. The outcome of this literature study leads to the conceptual framework.

2.1 Organizational storytelling

The definition used to describe organizational storytelling, also known as Narrative Paradigm Theory (NPT), is the one described by Vaara, Scott and Boje (2016): Stories are temporal, discursive constructions that provide means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving. Storytelling is closely linked to rhetoric and discourse. NPT implies that human beings are considered as true storytellers and that information is best communicated via stories (Cragan & Shield, 1998). Ford (1999) describes organizations as socially-constructed through conversations. In this study, the basic assumption is that organizations are socially-constructed through stories that are constantly subject to change due to interaction between different actors. Storytelling comes in different forms such as written, oral, visual, audio forms and even artifacts (Vaara, Scott and Boje, 2016), this includes social media and internet.

The Narrative Paradigm Theory identifies stories as an important way for people to express values, arguments and consequently act in accordance with those stories (Boyce, 1996). NPT looks into the messages that people try to bring across through their stories and the actions that they provoke with it. As further outlined by Barker & Gower (2010), in today's business environment there is not much time for co-workers to establish a trust relationship, this is caused by communication becoming more digitalized and less face-to-face. Co-workers have to build "swift trust" through electronic communication, the best way to succeed is by exchanging a lot of value-laden information through stories (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). It is of interest in light of this study to further investigate how this is developed within a multinational environment.

In an organizational context, the use of stories is increasingly recognized as an important tool in several fields, notably change management (Carlsen, 2006), identity and culture (Whittle et al, 2009), entrepreneurship (Gartner, 2007), strategic management (Barry & Elmes, 1997) and knowledge sharing (Patriotta, 2003). Not all fields are relevant and applicable for this study, therefore literature with regards to change management and identity & culture is studied more profoundly while the other three fields are just generally examined.

In change management, as outlined by Denning (2006), one of the biggest challenges in today's business environment is creating stakeholder support for doing things differently. Whether this is about a change in culture, strategy, business model or just performing operational tasks in a different manner. In most cases the typical command-and-control method is not effective, stories on the other hand are getting more recognized to be an effective approach. Different types of narratives are used to describe change events, of special interest is the work of Vaara (2002) where he describes four different types of discourses used in a post-merger integration environment. All four (rationalistic, cultural, role-bound and individualistic) types of discourses were used to make sense and legitimize the integration process in different ways but also to identify the integration process as a failure or success. Denning (2006) highlights the impact of negative or failure stories that have supposedly a great effect to convince people of doing things differently or to transmit values and information. Negative stories are often found much more convincing as they give an idea of the real world rather than the perfect situation. These studies show the persuasiveness of storytelling in organizations that can really shape and legitimize change events that have been taken place.

When looking into storytelling in relation to identity building and sharing cultural values, it shows that stories are a great tool to attach employees to organizations. This is outlined by Boje's landmark study on Disney as Tamara-land (1995). It shows the presence of multiple stories and interpretations being constructed within an organization, however one dominant story stands-out. The dominant story is used by employees to build identity and a unified culture, although below the surface there are several contradictory stories. Humphreys & Brown (2002) further elaborate that shared identity, which attaches people to an organization, is constructed through their shared stories. Efforts are made by management teams to precisely construct a dominant story to create synergy amongst employees and create a shared identity and culture. This can be successful as human beings have a natural tendency to identify themselves with the organizations they work for, there actions are legitimated through the dominant story. The mentioned studies show that storytelling can be used as a strategic tool for identity building and the fact that cultural values are shared and truly lived by people working in the organization.

Boje (1991) in his case study at an office supply firm distinguishes story-as-text and story-as-performance. The story-as-performance varies when told by different actors and in different contexts, or can be told only partly or differently depending on the goal of the narrator. Organizational stories are also reshaped due to different interpretations. The story-as-performance is therefore constantly subject to change even though the story-as-text behind it remains similar. By performing research on organizational storytelling one is able to identify stories narrated and stories executed and the possible gap between them. This resembles to the theory-in-action introduced by Argyris (1974), where he argues that there is a difference between what people think and tell they are doing (theory espoused) and how they behave (theory-in-action). People are often completely unconsciousness of this discrepancy. Another way to look at this is through the phenomenon of domain dependence (Taleb, 2012), human beings have much difficulty to transfer certain best practices or ideas experienced in one context to another. For example, when a theory is explained in classroom it makes perfect sense but when exposed to real world problems outside classroom many people tend to forget it and do not apply the same theory. It is of interest to further look into this discrepancy in human minds in relation to organizational stories.

To summarize, human beings in general are true storytellers through which the world is interpreted. Stories are constructed through interaction amongst different actors and can lead to sense making and sense giving. Organizational storytelling is being used in different organizational fields, notably change management and identity and culture. Dominant stories can be constructed when the narrator has a certain goal in mind, and is therefore very applicable in the relationship between headquarters and foreign subsidiaries. In accordance with Argyris' theory-in-action, it shows that below the dominant story, there is a wide spectrum of other stories created and narrated within organizations. It would be of interest, by means of an empirical study, what the key characteristics are of an effective story constructed by headquarters to build a global identity amongst the multinational network and how these stories are constructed. Furthermore, the dominant story that is put in motion by management is that also the story actually in-use or is there a discrepancy?

2.2 Organizational identity

This part of the literature review focuses on organizational identity, with a special emphasis on the determinants that construct it. To start of the literature review, a description of organizational identity is required to clearly define what this section is about. This is easier said than done, as both academics as practitioners fail to find common grounds what organizational identity is and what the different determinants are (Melewar Elif Karaosmanoglu, 2006). This shows the importance of more empirical study needed in the field, mainly from a quality perspective to gain a rich picture of the phenomenon.

Organizational identity is a strength that offers solutions for different organizational challenges (Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010), and it stimulates sense making, sense giving and explain actions at individual, organizational and social dimensions (Gioia, 2013) while being closely linked to organizational history, culture and communication. The different elements of organizational identity can be both tangible and intangible. The most widely used definition of organizational identity is given by Albert & Whetten (1985) where they describe it as a set of statements that organization members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring to their organization. It is influential to behaviors of both leaders and members in many aspects within an organization. The three elements are all necessary to form an organizational identity. As further elaborated by Whetten (2006) With the central statements, the organization has to be viewed as the protagonist and include events that happened and truly changed the history of the organization. It contains the highest values of the organization on its policies and ways of doing business. It turns the employees into so called “member-agents” that use these central statements as a guideline for actions to be taken. The statements have to be distinctive from other companies and really be unique whilst being truly embedded within the organization in order to last and endure. It encompasses attributes related to the organization that positively distinguishes them from competitors and other organizations in general. The organizational identity answers crucial questions for all members of the organizations about who they are, what they stand for, which directions they are going. It immediately highlights the importance of organizational identity because a group of people can only act as a team as long as they share the same values and have the same goal. Without these elements, a group of people is unable to combine resources and perform well.

Karaosmanoglu (2006) performed research on the different elements that construct organizational identity with the most important elements being identified as corporate communication and corporate culture. Looking at corporate communication, a distinction is made between controlled and uncontrolled communication. Controlled communication is deliberately used by management to transfer specific images to internal stakeholders of the organization and came out as very influential in identity building (e.g. Karaosmanoglu, 2007; Fiol, 2002). The studies show that narratives, when used intelligently by leaders, can strongly influence the behavior and images of their subordinates. Uncontrolled communication encompasses all actions related to the company that contribute (positively and negatively) to the organizational identity (Cornelissen, 2000). Uncontrolled communication is more closely linked to the other pillar of organizational identity: corporate culture. While corporate culture is anchored on the history of the company, its founders, mission & vision and strategy outlined it is more so constructed through interaction between internal stakeholders and company performances (Karaosmanoglu, 2006). One of the leading academics in the field of corporate culture Edgar Schein (2004) developed a model with the three layers of organizational culture namely artifacts, espoused values and assumptions. The artifacts are easy to identify but difficult to interpret for an outsider, this is also the arena where the stories are created around an organization. To understand the artifacts one must dig deeper into the organization and look at the espoused beliefs and values. However, the only way to build organizational identity is to have a fit between the espoused values and the underlying assumptions. This model gives great opportunity to descramble organizational identity and to find possible conflicting factors.

The need for building a global identity is increasingly important as the role of the foreign subsidiaries is shifting from a purely operational asset to enter new markets towards a more pivotal role as strategic assets. This idea introduced by Barlett & Ghoshal (1990) identifies a multinational corporation as an interorganizational network, in which each entity has unique resources that contribute to the success of the group. In their earlier work Barlett & Ghoshal (1987) already spoke about the importance of subsidiary initiatives to allocate their unique resources for better local responsiveness. They further elaborated that multinational corporations need to be highly efficient, have local responsiveness and global learning capabilities to be truly competitive. This can only be achieved when recognizing foreign subsidiaries as a vital part of the organization. Subsidiary initiatives can be described as entrepreneurial activities carried out by the foreign subsidiaries of multinational corporations with the goal to find new ways to use or expand its resources (Birkenshaw & Ridderstrale, 1999).

Recognizing foreign subsidiaries as strategic assets and giving them the autonomy and trust to take initiatives is a complicated process. One of the important underlying assumptions comes from the agency problem which draws on a negative image of human beings. The mistrust from the parent company towards the foreign subsidiary comes from the assumption that the agent (subsidiary) will act in its own best interest and not necessarily in the best interest of the principal (Eisenhardt, 1989). This notion together with information asymmetry can lead to problems in the relationship between the parent company and the subsidiary and ultimately harm the initiative-taking by subsidiaries (Reuer & Ragozinno, 2005). This is also investigated by Bouquet, Birkenshaw and Barsoux (2016) where they describe this “headquarters knows best” syndrome as a serious threat for global competitiveness.

When reviewing studies performed in the field of organizational identity in multinational organizations, one is able to identify a number of key drivers influencing the relationship and identity building between headquarters and subsidiaries (i.a. Koeszegi, 2004). Notably trust, self-confidence, involvement, autonomy and being able to connect not only with headquarters but also with other subsidiaries (as a true interorganizational network) lead to willingness and motivation to engage with the multinational network. Key studies in this research field show that the mentioned drivers cannot be seen individually but have to be integrated as a group. This is also elaborated in the case-study performed by Bouquet, Birkenshaw and Barsoux (2016) at the Dutch company Irdeto, due to a lack of competitiveness in Asia this company was suffering from a decrease in market share. Irdeto changed their organizational structure in a way that the Dutch headquarters were no longer the center point, but created a truly equal relationship between the regional head office in Asia and the Netherlands. As a consequence, the Asian office felt more trust, involvement and was able to operate autonomously and interact with other subsidiaries by themselves all resulting into more self-confidence and effective initiatives. This is also shown in the study performed by Johnson & Medcof (2007) where they put an emphasis on the network organization and global goal setting to align subsidiary goals with the goals of the company as a whole. They also describe socialization process such a job rotation on different locations as a way to create, amongst others, trust and involvement. Koeszegi (2004) emphasizes the importance of trust-building within a multinational environment in order to avoid conflicts and fights while boosting the interdependency between the different entities.

To summarize, the most commonly used definition of organizational identity includes the central, distinctive and enduring statements that gives the both leaders and employees attached to the organization a guideline how to act. Different scholars show that predominantly corporate communication and corporate culture are key drivers. The need to fully utilize the potential of the multinational network organization gives an incentive to further build research on organizational identity. The majority of the studies focus on socialization by sending managers or employees overseas from headquarters to subsidiaries to create involvement and trust (O’Donnell, 2000). However, many smaller companies lack the resources to send key employees abroad, so more focus should be made on distant communication tools to enact the key drivers earlier mentioned. Storytelling could be a great tool to further boost the key drivers identified to create a global identity: trust, self-confidence, involvement, autonomy and pleural lines with other subsidiaries the network.

2.3 Preliminary answer to the research question

Based on the literature reviewed in the previous two sections, a first attempt is made to answer the research question from a theoretical perspective: how is storytelling used by Headquarters to build a global identity in a Multinational Corporation?

Storytelling can be used by headquarters to build a global identity by means of communicating well-organized and constructed narratives. These narratives can be built around both heroic and failure events/persons, as long as there is a lot of social and emotional-laden information involved. For instance, headquarters can use the story of the founder and narrate in detail how he was able to build such a successful company, emphasizing on certain events that really made a difference. By using the founder as the protagonist, it makes it tangible for the foreign subsidiaries and the highlighted events can be used to transfer best practices in a more playful way. Using narratives replaces the need for the classical command and control approach and makes it possible to redirect the foreign subsidiaries in a more natural manner. Moreover, the protagonist (owner) embodies the organizational identity so building a narrative around him naturally transfers parts of the organizational identity to the foreign subsidiaries. Alternatively, the story constructed can be all about failure. By focusing on failure events, headquarters can show their weakness and the fact that they are not superior to the foreign subsidiaries. This is a great way to socialize with the subsidiaries and to come to a level of understanding that goes beyond business goals. As all humans make mistakes focusing on failures or issues has a humanizing effect which is a fundamental basis to come to mutual understanding and ultimately transfer the organizational identity of the company to its foreign subsidiaries. Highlighting events that caused errors or failures in the past is also a way to prevent foreign subsidiaries to make similar mistakes. These stories can be narrated to foreign subsidiaries in different ways, most effective once are by means of phone calls, videoconferences, social media and visits. Especially videoconferences and social media give great room to effectively transfer the identity as not only discourse can be used but also non-verbal communication such as images.

The biggest threat to the effectiveness of these well-constructed narratives are the contradicting narratives that are constructed by people working within the organization in a more natural and unconscious manner. It is very much possible that there are contradictive narratives constructed more naturally and hence more effective than those constructed by headquarters. Those other stories might give a better reflection of the actual atmosphere and identity present within the organization.

3. Conceptual framework

On the basis of the findings derived from the literature review, a conceptual framework is designed. The choice is made to focus on the key characteristics of the organizational story espoused by headquarters to build an organizational identity on a global scale and to find out if the story espoused is also observed in the day to day working relationship between the parent company and its foreign subsidiaries. In other words, endeavors are made to discover if the grand narrative in relation to identity building is truly embedded and enduring within the organization.

The core of the conceptual framework is influenced by the Theory of Action introduced by Argyris (1974) and the organizational culture model introduced by Edgar Shein (2004). The theory-in-action gives a fundamental basis to structure the plurality of organizational storytelling. The “onion-model” introduced by Shein (2004) is used as a framework to decipher the stories, its three layers can be used to analyze the contents, espoused values and assumptions of the stories related to building a global identity. To apply the structure of the onion-model created by Shein, the artefacts are replaced with stories. Artefacts is a very broad definition that includes much more than just stories/narratives.

By integrating all the previous studies and the models described, endeavors are made to identify discrepancies between the espoused story and the day-to-day actions.

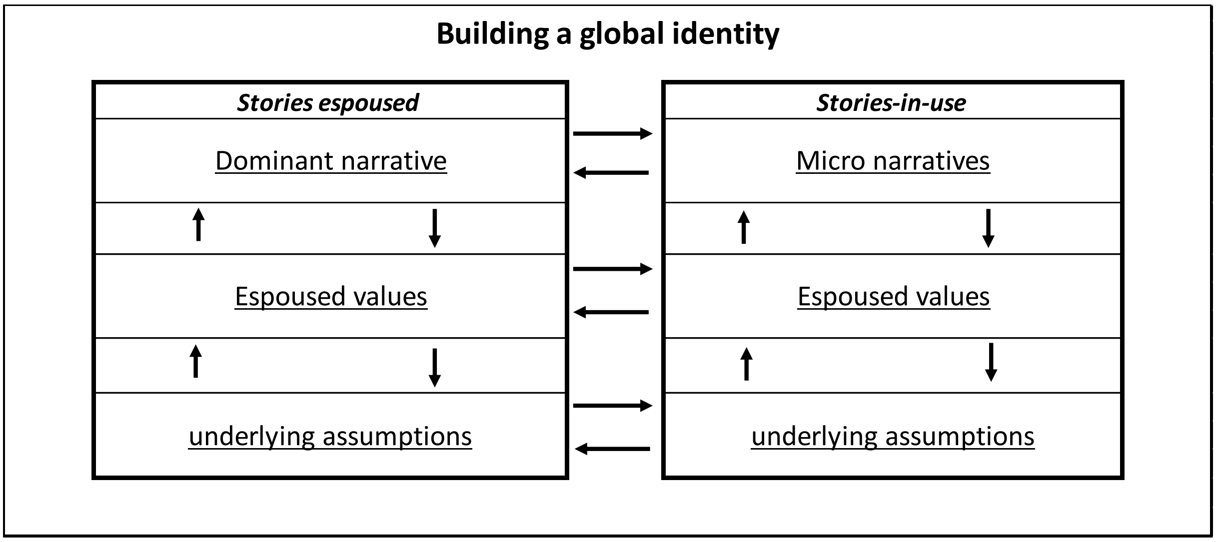

Image 1: Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

This study stance on social constructivism theory wherein objective reality and facts do not exist but is created through stories that are co-created through human dialog and communication. On the basis of these constructions people act in a certain manner. An organization is seen as a social system created through interaction of the different actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

As this study intends to look at the characteristics of organizational stories and the differences between those narrated and executed, the choice has been made to perform an in-depth case study on organizational level at the company CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV. By choosing a case study one is able to profoundly analyze the research subject and look below the surface. It made it possible to get detailed information from individuals working in the organization of choice and the way they construct their stories. Via this method of research the complexity of certain factors and the social-constructions are identified, as a result a rich picture of the research subject with its unique features is described (easterby-Smith et al. 1991). This study tends towards an exploratory and descriptive structure.

4.1 The case company

The company central in this study is a multinational corporation named CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV. The company was founded in 1989 in Rotterdam by Mr. P. Schweitzer, who is still the managing director of the company. Currently the company is based just outside Rotterdam in Berkel & Rodenrijs. From its foundation CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV has been active in the testing, inspection and certification (TIC) industry of a wide variety of cargoes, mainly commodities, being traded globally. CIS is assigned by exporters, importers, traders, NGO's and governmental organizations globally to protect their interest wherever that may be in the world. CIS Commodity Inspection Services protects the interest of the customers by monitoring the global supply chain at key areas during transport and storage of the products. This is done by inspecting cargoes and see if the quantity and quality is in strict conformity with the import regulations of the specific country and the quality parameters mentioned in the commercial contract between a buyer and a seller. CIS presents itself as the trusted-partner in global commodity chains and is able to offer several additional services such as market information, connecting supply and demand and assisting their clients with logistical challenges. About seven years ago, the decision was made to focus completely on agricultural commodities (grains, oilseeds and sugar) as this was already the big driver behind its success in terms of profit and expertise. Consequently, the company has been growing rapidly over the past seven years (2009-2016). This resulted in expansion of its head office in the Netherlands from five full-time employees to twenty full-time employees in the same period between 2009 and 2016. CIS also started to establish foreign subsidiaries, while earlier they worked solely with contracted agents. During the last seven years CIS founded subsidiaries in strategic locations such as Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, Dubai, Singapore and South-Africa. The goal behind this shift from a network of third party agents to a network of foreign subsidiaries was mainly to expand the brand CIS and to be able to develop more business by interacting regularly with local clients and retrieve information and knowledge from local markets. All foreign subsidiaries report directly to Headquarters in The Netherlands, decision-making can only be performed upon authorization from management in The Netherlands. All employees working in the different locations are citizens of the respective countries, except for Dubai where the employees are of Indian descent.

Location	Position	Established	Employees	Background
Berkel & Rodenrijs, NL	Global headquarter	1989	25	Founded by Mr. P. Schweitzer
Alexandria, Egypt	Fully owned subsidiary	2000	15	Long time partner, acquired by CIS
Dubai, UAE	Fully owned subsidiary	2016	5	Greenfield
Sao Paulo, Brazil	Fully owned subsidiary	2010	12	Long time partner, acquired by CIS
San Lorenzo, Argentina	Partly owned subsidiary	2011	8	Joint Venture with local partner under CIS Branche
Durban, South-Africa	Fully owned subsidiary	2015	6	Greenfield
Odessa, Ukraine	Fully owned subsidiary	2010	20	Greenfield
Novorossiysk, Russia	Fully owned subsidiary	2009	18	Long time partner, acquired by CIS
Montreal, Canada	Fully owned subsidiary	2014	20	Long time partner, acquired by CIS
Melbourne, Australia	Partly owned subsidiary	2013	20	Joint Venture with local partner
Singapore	Fully owned subsidiary	2015	4	Greenfield
11 Locations			**153**	**employees**

Image 2: Overview locations and employees of CIS Commodity Inspection Services BV

Currently the company is still growing year-over-year but is too much depending on the business generated by its headquarters. Endeavors are made to create more proactivity and room for initiatives at subsidiary level. It is mandatory to enact the subsidiaries in commercial activities to stay competitive and keep distinguishing themselves from the competitors. Competition is fierce as the global market is dominated by public listed multinationals with a global coverage (SGS, Bureau Veritas, Cotecna, Intertek). On the other side in every local market there are local players with good relationships with all the key customers. CIS aims to have this global coverage but maintain a proactive service-oriented approach to create customer intimacy. Management at headquarters are trying to transfer the organizational identity to the subsidiaries in order to create a global identity and enact all entities to participate in further growing the company. Currently CIS is facing difficulties and is not able to fully integrate the foreign subsidiaries in the multinational corporations. Especially between the subsidiaries that are acquired after being independent for a long time and the headquarters a certain tension and difficulty in understanding each other is very much alive. The collaboration with the greenfields on the other hand runs smoother but can also be further improved and goals should be more aligned.

The case company is chosen in the first place because it is a company that is going to a phase of fast growth and has the ambition to further establish itself as a multinational organization. The problems on its path are interesting to further investigate in relation to the literature available about Strategic Management and particularly in the field of internationalization and growth. It is also very interesting to look at the organizational identity and how this is being constructed and spread. From a convenience point of view, having access to a lot of data and knowing the key employees within the company gives great opportunity to dig deep and thoroughly investigate to create a rich picture of the organization and its identity. This is especially convenient as both the stories constructed and the organizational identity are very difficult to decipher if one is not aware of the context and comes into an organization as a true outsider. CIS is excited to cooperate in this research and gives full access to company documents, the time to interview its employees and intimate observations.

As the author of this thesis I am working within the organization since October 2016 (abt. 8 months at the time of writing). As part of the organization I have full access to all data and know whom to speak to. At the same time being reasonable new in the organization gives the opportunity to look at the case company from a relative distance and observe, while not being fully part of the narratives and organizational identity.

4.2 Data collection

Data is collected through different methods namely semi-structured interviews, observations and company documents (secondary sources). Empirical research started with conducting interviews with employees within the organization, both from management level and staff. Through these interviews and company documents a comprehensive understanding is obtained of the story espoused in relation to global identity building. The story or grand narrative is described by using the three levels of organizational culture as introduced by Edgar Shein, those three levels give good structure for description of a phenomenon. Subsequently observations and additional interviews are conducted to find out if the story-in-action matches the story espoused or if there is a mismatch. The story-in-action is described as well by means of the same model as the story espoused.

4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Through semi-structured interviews one is able to collect a great amount of data which is preferable when looking into organizational identity (Ravasi & Canato, 2013). Prior to planning the interviews with different actors, a list of themes (Appendix 1) is constructed to give a certain structure to the interviews. The first two interviews done were pilot interviews to see if the set up generated the necessary amount of information and if the themes had to be adjusted. After a slight adjustment in the themes, a meeting was arranged with the management team to discuss the set-up, build support and get a first idea of their thoughts. Subsequently, between 8 March 2017 and 4 April 2017 interviews were planned and executed with 12 people working within the case company, they work in different levels ranging from management to operations, they are in daily contact with the different foreign subsidiaries. Every interview lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. All interviews were recorded and later on fully transcribed to make sure that all data is correctly and fully recorded. The transcripts are available upon request.

Below list gives an overview of the interviews:

Overview of all interviews conducted at the office of the case company CIS				
no.	***Date***	***Time***	***Person(s)***	***Remark***
1	6-3-2017	1400-1600 hrs	Management team (3)	First meeting to create support and get a first grasp of their believes
2	8-3-2017	0930-1130 hrs	Consultant organizational change	External consultant hired to restructure the organization
3	10-3-2017	1300-1530 hrs	Chief Operations Officer (COO)	-
4	13-3-2017	1800-2000 hrs	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)	-
5	14-3-2017	0900-1045 hrs	Finance manager	-
6	16-3-2017	0830-1015 hrs	Operations manager	-
7	21-3-2017	1600-1830 hrs	Manager back office	-
8	22-3-2017	0800-1000 hrs	Back office employee	-
9	23-3-2017	1430-1640 hrs	Regional manager Asia	-
10	27-3-2017	1100-1330 hrs	Back office employee	-
11	29-3-2017	1200-1400 hrs	Accountmanager	-
12	30-3-2017	1700-1900 hrs	Accountmanager	-
13	4-4-2017	1415-1615 hrs	Operations coordinator	-

Image 3: Overview interviews

4.3 Data analysis

To make sure no data is lost, all interviews were recorded and additional notes taken, after the interview a full transcription of the interview was created. Once the first round of interviews was completed, all data was gathered in one database and coding of the data was performed. By coding the interview data one is able to identify and structure similarities and differences from the interviews done, an impression of the encoding method can be found in Appendix 2. Data obtained through observations and company documents were analyzed in a similar way by making use of coding through a database. Special attention goes to the correctness of the coding of the data in order not to manipulate data.

4.4 Validity and reliability

As described by Yin (2009) it is of great importance for case studies to look at construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability in order to be considered as academic research. Especially case studies have been under fierce criticism, so following the validity and reliability standards is vital.

Construct validity means that the correct operational measures are used to the applicable research object. This is taken care of by retrieving data from different sources using different methods, moreover different interviews were conducted with various actors. Also, additional case studies were analyzed in the same research field as a benchmark and the draft report was carefully checked by individuals familiar with this study. Internal validity is more applicable to causal and explanatory research, which is not the case here. This study focuses more on descriptive/exploratory methods. External validity looks into the generalization of the findings, which is often found to be the most challenging with case studies. To counter this issue, different theories are used as input for this study to ensure external validity is further warranted. To create a high level of reliability, which means that the study is repeatable, every process step is described carefully. This includes interview questions, people interviewed, secondary sources used. This is also taken care of by building a database with all the data and findings.

5. Results

This section elaborates on the data collected and analyzed during the empirical study which was performed through semi-structured interviews, observations and company documents. Its aim is to capture and decipher the grand narrative and other stories constructed to enact the foreign subsidiaries in the multinational network. It is important to mention that the stories described are never narrated from beginning to end but more in bits and pieces. From the data collected during the interviews and observation the stories as described are distilled.

5.1 Stories

This paragraph gives an overview of the narratives constructed by headquarters to transfer company values and create sensemaking at subsidiary level, this is referred to as the grand narrative. During the study, also other stories are observed which are contradictive to the grand narrative but do play a crucial role in (the lack of) identity building.

5.1.1 Grand narrative

This is the story of an average and modest Dutchman who build a true multinational organization just by staying down-to-earth and deliver steady services to his customers. It all started with a young student from Rotterdam in his early twenties who was enjoying everything about his student lifestyle except studying. He spent most of his days on the local tennis court in Kralingen, Rotterdam savoring the refreshments in the canteen. Until one day his father was fed up with the idleness of his son and urged him to start working for his company. His father was the director of a company called Harry A. Niessink B.V., which operated in the field of cargo inspections mainly in the harbor of Rotterdam. His father instructed him to jump on a flight to Piraeus, Greece to inspect a consignment of wheat to be loaded onboard of a seagoing vessel, he only handed over his ticket but nothing else was arranged.

"As a kid, Paul (Schweitzer) was already an artisan as he was able to craft very sophisticated wooden boxes with great precision and care, this craftsmanship and eye for detail is also the strength of CIS" (from the interview with the COO)

The young Paul Schweitzer had to survive by himself in a time without cellphones or internet (mid-eighties) and without any profound training. His father just gave him the possibility, trust and autonomy to perform the tasks he assigned to him and deliver a full report on his return to Rotterdam. This was his immersion in the Testing, Inspection and Certification (TIC) business. After some years of working for his farther and spending less time on the tennis court in Kralingen, Paul Schweitzer received the opportunity to take-over the company shares of his father. This was a little bit too expensive for a youngster not even turned thirty years old. Instead of buying the company shares, he established his own entity under the wings of Harry A. Niessink B.V. which specialized in the inspection and certification of commodities. This was in 1989 and CIS Commodity Inspection Services B.V. was born.

In the early nineties, Mr. Schweitzer decided to cut himself loose from his father's company and continued his business completely independent. He created a small office in a family-owned apartment on the Avenue Concordia in Kralingen, Rotterdam together with his sister Inge. Together they developed the purple logo which still today is the trademark of CIS and clearly stands-out from its competitors. A trademark that is synonymous for trustworthiness, flexibility and excellent service. In an industry dominated by powerful and globally operating companies CIS had to distinguish themselves by doing things differently.

"It is like David and Goliath, we can compete with the biggest competitors by playing smart." (From the interview with an Account Manager)

CIS started to develop relationships with importers of agricultural commodities in the Middle-East, especially Yemen, Saudi-Arabia and Sudan. This is a vastly different approach compared to its competitors who were mainly focusing on building relationships with the global trading companies. However, CIS believed that by building relationships with importers it would finally end up with the trading companies when contractual terms were negotiated between the trading companies and the importers. It is common practice in the trading industry that the buyer is the one selecting the inspection company to determine the quality on a commercial contract. Business was doing well for CIS and they hired their first employee, Marcel, who created a perfect fit with Paul Schweitzer who was more a modest and down-to-earth personality while Marcel was very outgoing. A typical day for them would be to sit on the balcony of their small office reading the paper, until the moment that a fax message from Yemen or Sudan came in and they started working. Upon the Sudanese trade embargo imposed in the mid-nineties by USA, CIS became the only inspection company allowed to inspect goods imported or exported out of Sudan creating very steady and increased business. Over the years to come they were able to slowly but surely increase their market share.

"Reliability, customer focus and timely response are they key-drivers behind the success." (From the interview with the Regional manager Asia)

CIS kept growing through the years and was able to convince even the big trading companies to start working with them. All this was able by keep on playing smart and obtain full trust from the clients by maintaining an obsessive client focus through flexibility and reliability. Employees work day and night to live up to the expectations of the customers around the globe, regularly they wake up in the middle of the night to answer question of Australian clients. According to these clients on the other side of the world, CIS has a faster response time than their local competitors. Endeavors are made all the time to build a personal relationship with clients. Another form of playing smart is when CIS visits conferences internationally they make sure that they have the best spot for their booth, so everyone entering the conference observes CIS first (while competitors are difficult to find).

"CIS is like a religion, we serve our clients globally 24/7 and therefore they work with us. There is no work/life balance" (From the interview with the CEO)

Just as CIS was able to build such a grand customer base on the basis of trustworthiness and customer service, these are also the key values used in the corporation with their global partners and subsidiaries. Partnerships are created on the basis of full trust, which is the most important basis for smooth collaboration. Every new partner is given full trust and autonomy to outshine in its area of expertise. The long-lasting CIS Family that has been growing over the years and already covering most continents in countries such as Dubai, Argentina, Brazil, Singapore, Ukraine, Russia, Canada and Egypt is still growing steadily. Every entity is facilitated with adequate resources by CIS headquarters while maintaining full autonomy to act in the best interest of the group. Support is given in terms of publicity on the website and social media, usage of the CIS trademarks and name, financially to invest in people and assets as well as usage of the extended business network build by CIS. The past has shown that a business relationship build on mutual trust is long lasting as the CIS Egypt branch will celebrate its 15 years' anniversary this year. The hierarchical structure for every subsidiary is the same, they are allowed to act completely independently from an operational perspective but all actions and decisions made at tactical and strategic level have to be authorized by management in The Netherlands. The tactical and strategical decisions encompass mainly investments in people and assets, pricing of services and commercial activities.

It has to be emphasized that the grand narrative as described is never communicated from beginning to end including all details. It is a narrative constructed and narrated in bits and pieces through different communication methods. It is mainly constructed by management and senior employees who are familiarized with the company and have experienced the way the company operates. Most of them even witnessed the growth and are therefore convinced of the success. The grand narrative is communicated to foreign subsidiaries through different communication methods, the most frequently used ones are email, phone calls and videoconferences. Management also makes endeavors to visit the foreign subsidiaries on a yearly basis or invites them over at headquarters. Recently the company also started to become more active on social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, via these new channels both customers and subsidiaries are being targeted to highlight aspects of the CIS identity.

5.1.2 Other stories

Besides the grand narrative as earlier described, which is the dominant discourse used in building a global identity, other stories emerge under the surface and play a role in the consistency of the grand narrative. These other stories are constructed by various actors working within the case company.

At the headquarters of the case company everyone is very much aware of the importance of good collaboration with the subsidiaries. However, they feel that they should be the ones to give clear instructions how the subsidiaries need to operate. As the headquarter has built a successful company over many years, they know best how to operate. Subsidiaries need to be trained to understand what CIS is all about, in order to act in accordance with the CIS identity.

"The foreign subsidiaries should listen to the expertise at headquarters because all the knowledge and experience is here." (from the interview with Back Office Manager)

Previously some foreign subsidiaries, especially in South-America, were building relationships with local clients to generate more business. This was observed as "stealing" clients from CIS and was said to be done only to generate more business locally but not so much for the CIS group. Normally when the Dubai-team works with local clients, the invoice is also produced locally and part of the funds will be redirected to headquarters. However sometimes management becomes suspicious if the procedure is followed. The notion that foreign subsidiaries act predominantly in their own interest and do not look at the bigger picture is very present amongst various actors working at headquarters. One of the examples is that CIS Argentina requested to join CIS HQ on a visit and conference in Geneva, Switzerland to meet clients. This was refused by HQ as it was not their region and should focus only on Argentina and South-America. In general, both management and employees working at the headquarter are very negative when talking amongst each other about the foreign subsidiaries. This is especially observed during the weekly meetings where current issues are discussed. Foreign subsidiaries are described as lazy, slow in response and very difficult to work with due to differences in mentality. Employees are urged by management to talk to foreign subsidiaries not necessarily to socialize with them and build a relationship but mainly to check if they are still working and do not forget to send the information required. This is mainly done through e-mail communication. The most difficult collaboration within CIS Commodity Inspection Services is the relationship between headquarters and the previous contracted agents turned into subsidiaries through acquisition. These former entrepreneurs are used to act completely independent and being part of CIS creates frustration about a lack of freedom. This problem is less present when it comes to foreign subsidiaries set-up as greenfields, here there is a more natural collaborative attitude. These greenfields spend significantly more time socializing and discussing business topics with headquarters both by phone, videoconferences and visits. It appears the transition from an independent local company towards a subsidiary of a multinational organizations poses major constrains in streamlining operations, strategic decision making and identity building. Greenfields on the other hand can still make significant progression in adopting the CIS identity but there are common grounds to be find more easily.

"Subsidiaries are foremost interested in their own wellbeing, not so much in that of CIS as a group." (from the interview with the operations coordinator)

Some actors at the case company are convinced that it is impossible to invoke the CIS identity at foreign subsidiaries as they are considered just too different. CIS Dubai was founded early 2016 with the goal to further develop business in Middle-East region, they started to contact clients and execute business opportunities independently. As soon as management at the case company found out about it, they immediately told Dubai office on a ferocious tone to first discuss with headquarters how to proceed before conducting business. As management was of the opinion that they know best how to do it due to their great experience. It was pointed out to Dubai office in detail that the CIS-way of doing business should apply at all times, it is "the CIS-way or the highway". Now all foreign subsidiaries have to check with headquarters first before proceeding on a new business opportunity, they can only act after approval.

5.2 Espoused values

The vision of CIS is to be recognized globally as a synonymous for excellence and trustworthiness. They like to reach this by providing best-in-class services to their clients and hold integrity as their highest value. The service provided has to be based on the expertise in the field of agricultural commodities. The ultimate goal is to become the global leader in the field of inspection services for agricultural commodities. Another key value of the case company is trust, not only to obtain trust from the clients but also building trustworthy relationships with all partners involved in the business.

Everything is set-up to outperform the expectations from the clients. Commercial employees are building relationships with clients as they frequently interact with them by phone and email, visits and at conferences. Building a trust relationship with the client is considered the first step to new business and the key to grow into a sustainable relationship with the client. This also means going the extra mile by proactively providing information that might be of value to them and assist them when disputes arise within the international trading environment. By doing this CIS positions itself as a global partner and services provider to their clients. This approach is considered as completely the opposite of the competitors who are notorious for their bureaucracy and slow decision-making. Moreover, the competitors are merely very large organizations that have issues in building personal relationships with their clients.

Next to the commercial attitude towards the clients, CIS is very much focused on an impeccable execution of the generated work. The idea is that clients will only return for more work if the execution is of solid quality. Therefore, there is a close cooperation between the commercial people and the ones on the operations side and is it considered necessary to work outside office hours and even during weekends. To make sure that the information and reports communicated to the clients do not contain any incorrect information, it is always double checked by a senior employee. Via this method all content send to the clients is minimized of erroneous and possible harmful information.

At the headquarter they see themselves as the central hub for the company that coordinates all operations around the world and on which the foreign subsidiaries are relying on. They deliberately do not share all information with the foreign subsidiaries, only enough to make sure they can do their job. The notion goes that as soon as they provide the subsidiaries with too much information, they will be able to act completely independent and shall do only what is in their best interest. The focus on control both within the headquarter as well as globally is considered necessary to ensure all work is conform the CIS-standards.

The espoused values identified at the case company are very much focused on the external situation, namely the clients. As much as there is a clear focus on the clients and living up to their expectations, there is a lack of it vis-à-vis the employees and foreign subsidiaries. This imbalance creates a situation where the employees and subsidiaries are told to be customer focused while there is little attention for their own needs and expectations. The skewness between the espoused values utilized externally and internally leads to unclarity and inconsistency.

5.3 Underlying assumptions

The deepest layer of the corporate identity are the underlying assumptions. Commonly these assumptions are unconsciously deployed by individuals and are very difficult to identify. To come to this point where one can identify them, it is necessary to have a profound understanding of the stories and espoused values within an organization. Through observations, company documents and interviews endeavors are made to reach a thorough understanding of the systems driving the organization and the people attached to it.

5.3.1 Trust vs. distrust

This is the first and most important contradiction observed between the grand narrative promoted internally and the actual underlying assumptions. Not only is it found in the stories narrated but also in the values (espoused and in-use), there is clearly no congruence with the underlying assumptions. While trust is being promoted and communicated to the foreign subsidiaries the actual assumption-in-use is the one of distrust. Within the case company the idea is promoted by management that the business is built on trust-relationships and this is the way to further grow the company. While the many stories show that in the day-to-day work the leading assumption is distrust towards the foreign subsidiaries. From the case company's perspective, it is impossible to treat the subsidiaries as equal colleagues as the notion goes that they will take advantage of it for their own good. In the first place this idea is brought up by managed and comes from certain experiences in the past. However negative expressions about foreign subsidiaries have become so common at the workplace that it becomes natural for the employees to share this view. Even the new employees at the case company are becoming familiarized with this notion from their first days in the company as it has become self-evident to talk about foreign subsidiaries in this negative prose.

5.3.2 Autonomy vs. control

Another clear discrepancy that came to the surface is the contradiction between autonomy and control. Where both the grand narrative and the company strategy are anchored around the idea of autonomy for foreign subsidiaries, they reality shows that autonomy is very limited and controlled by the headquarter. In the grand narrative, the idea is promoted that the subsidiaries are free to conduct business and build relationships with local (potential) clients in order to generate more business globally. Up to a certain degree this is being allowed by headquarters but only very limited. Again, they are afraid that the foreign subsidiaries will build business only for their own good or they will not use the high standards that are, according to the case company, only available at the headquarters. This lack of congruence is possibly one of the root causes for the global network of CIS not fully flourishing. The obsession for control by management and the centric-view of taken on the role of global coordination and knowledge center limits the development of the company as a global player with a consistent identity.

5.3.3 Involvement vs. distance

An underlying assumption that might be a distillate from the assumption mentioned earlier but nonetheless a vital point in deciphering the grand narrative used to install a global identity is about knowledge-sharing routines and information sharing. Without close involvement of the foreign subsidiaries and consequently (the lack of) sharing information, it is hard to fully engage all entities within the organizational network. The case company deliberately holds back information from the foreign subsidiaries in order to maintain a certain distance, dependence and uses the information asymmetry in their favor. The notion goes that as long as they have the contacts with the major clients and have all the information available, they can continue to tell the foreign subsidiaries how to act. It is an artificial way to maintain their importance, but in the same time it withholds them to further grow the company by optimizing the collaboration with the foreign subsidiary. This is very different from the discourse in the grand narrative where it is all about growing together and collaborating on a global scale to meet the demands of clients wherever they are located in the world. It gives the feeling that the case company only uses the foreign subsidiary when favorable but do not assume full responsibility and willingness to build a true multinational network.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this final chapter, the results from the empirical study are reviewed in accordance with the literature that has been studied previously. Similarities and differences are being marked and explained in the context of this study. The discussion outlines the limitations and possible directions for further research. Furthermore, an answer is given on the research question and the sub questions as well managerial implications.

6.1 Discussion

The effectiveness of organizational storytelling in relation to change management and identity building has not proven to be present within this case study. Especially controlled communication and artificially building a narrative to support a global identity has failed. Organizational storytelling did not prove its effectiveness in this particular case study. In accordance with the literature discussed, the empirical study shows that the grand narrative can be in contradiction with the espoused values and more importantly the underlying assumption. It is not just a contradiction but the complete opposite. It is remarkable how big the gap is between the grand narrative and the way people operate in day-to-day business. It shows that people are very good in fooling themselves through stories or to put it differently people are unaware of their actual underlying assumptions. This is also in line with the literature on storytelling where a wide-range of contradicting stories exists but only one story stands out and gives meaning to the people working within the organization. It is of interest to see that the people working for a longer period within the case company were better familiarized with the grand narrative than the people working there for a shorter period. It shows that the longer someone is exposed to the grand narrative, the more it becomes a part of them and they contribute to the construction of it. However, it doesn't mean that there underlying assumptions adjust.

It is striking to see that there is very much negativity and distrust in the relationship between the headquarter and the foreign subsidiaries. This is explicitly constructed through the many stories that exist at headquarters and that are shared amongst management and employees. All these stories are more or less in line with the agency theory, which is already been embedded in international business for a long period. Even the employees who never really had any negative experience with the foreign subsidiaries are invoked by the more senior employees and management through those negative stories. It is rather disturbing that these negative stories seem to have a larger impact on the people working within the case company than the actual positive grand narrative.

The grand narrative identified focuses only on positive points of the case company, especially on the history of the company and how it was able to prosper. It is really a heroic story that shows the incredible success of an ordinary man. According to the literature studied, especially the stories about failure have a great impact on constructing an identity. This was completely absent within the case company. It was striking to see that in a company that has been established more than 25 years ago, the grand narrative is all about the great hero (in this case the founder) and how he managed to build the company so successfully. One can presume that over a period of more than 25 years of being in business certain mistakes (big or small) must have been made that might have provoked awareness to redirect the path or strategy. More so the grand narrative is completely constructed around the business without much room for any social events. Especially stories are a good way to bring in emotions and a personal touch from the narrators' point of view, which can be very powerful in creating stronger relationships with the foreign subsidiaries. The lack of "humanizing" the grand narrative might slow down its effectiveness, not only towards the foreign subsidiaries but also when narrated to the new employees who recently started working with the company. The literature on organizational identity mentions the three elements to be crucial: central, enduring, distinguishing elements. It is clear that the case company plays a central and pivotal role (both its history and the founder), it distinguishes itself from the crowed but doesn't seem to be enduring with the majority of the employees. The grand narrative is very much embedded in the actions and behavior of management and senior employees but not so much with the newer employees. It shows that there is still room for growth before it is possible to transfer the organizational identity towards the foreign subsidiaries. The way to communicate the story to the foreign subsidiaries is still very classic through visits, phone calls and email correspondence. They started to use social media and videoconferences very recently but it has not been exploited fully. There is a lot of room and potential to develop this further, as was also found in the literature previously studied.

6.1.1 Limitations & directions for future research

This study shows that organizational storytelling failed as a strategic tool to build a global identity, therefore the key direction for future research would be to further investigate how this could be attained. It might be utopian to reach for one global identity, it might be worth investigating the differences in identity between subsidiaries and find out if some sort of overlap exists and what the main differences are. Also by reproducing this case study in a different context endeavors can be made to have a more generalized view on the usage of storytelling in relationship to identity building.

As this study focused completely on the construction of storytelling from headquarters point of view, it is yet to find out how the grand narrative is really perceived at the foreign subsidiaries. It can be a beautiful crafted story but if it is completely ineffective at the other side of the world it is not going to work. This is both a clear limitation of this research as well as an opportunity for further research.

Future research could focus both through qualitive and quantity research on the way the story is perceived by foreign subsidiaries. By means of qualitive research similar semi-structured can be conducted to look at the differences and similarities. Quantitative research could focus on surveys to find out how the story is perceived at several foreign subsidiaries and if there is a difference between subsidiaries located in geographical and cultural different locations. Also, the case company has been going through a period of extreme growth just recently and is still developing itself as a multinational network of companies. It would be interesting to see how the grand narrative is reconstructed when actively shared with the foreign subsidiaries and if over time it becomes a truly shared story. Another limitation is that this study is purely focused on only one case, it gives great opportunity to dig deep into the organization but makes it impossible to give a more general conclusion on the phenomenon. Moreover, the study focusses on a company based in The Netherlands so cannot be used to say something about companies in different geographical and cultural locations. This study could be taken as a blue print for future research to look into multiple cases and look at the similarities and differences between different companies. This can be done within the same industry or geographical location or purposely chose companies in different habitats. Finally, this study focusses on quality research which is done on purpose to retrieve a very rich picture of this specific case however it means that there is little room from generalization based on this study. Input of this study could be used as a set up for a more quantitative approach in order to work towards a generalized view on organizational storytelling in relation to identity building on a global scale.

6.2 Conclusion

In this section endeavors are made to provide an encompassing answer to the research question *How is storytelling used by headquarters to build a global identity in a multinational corporation?* All data retrieved from the literature review and the empirical study are used to conclude this thesis.

CIS Commodity Inspection Services is unsuccessful in building the global identity through storytelling. It is mainly because the three pillars of organizational identity: Central, Distinguishing and embedded statements are not altogether present. Especially the latter, embedded statements, is missing. Although endeavors are made to transfer the grand narrative to the foreign subsidiaries, the day-to-day actions are very different from this narrative. The case company is using storytelling mainly as a guide of best practices how one should act to become so successful as themselves through the years. The grand narrative overly legitimizes the importance of headquarters instead of focusing on the global group. It is built around the founder of the company, who serves as the protagonist in the grand narrative (Central statement), and events are used as a blue print to highlight good business conduct (Distinguishing statement). It is remarkable that there is not much room in the grand narrative that evokes mistakes, errors or a more humanized picture of the organization and its employees. It is all about the perfect picture and the success story which is rather one-sided. The grand narrative is predominantly narrated through phone calls, emails and videoconferences whilst social media is only moderately used. The values promoted in the grand narrative constructed and narrated are in great contrast with the way day-to-day business is conducted. One could state that the grand narrative is not yet suitable to build a global identity as one of the three key elements of organizational identity is missing, namely the enduring features of the statements. The grand narrative puts the case company central and has distinguishing features but it is not truly embedded and enduring in day-to-day business. This problem might be present due to the fast growth of CIS Commodity Inspection Services and the organizational set-up and mindset might not be ready yet to work as a multinational organization. It is especially a lack of trust that from headquarters vis-à-vis its subsidiaries that is creating the problems. Foreign subsidiaries, which previous worked as independent agents, are viewed with great skepticism and are therefore overly controlled by headquarters. It leaves the question if the case company really has the objective to give more autonomy to their subsidiaries or have them to work only on instructions of their superiors in The Netherlands.

6.3 Managerial implications

This study provides a rich picture for the management of the case company and management in general. They are nog aware of the big differences between the grand narrative that is being precisely constructed and the underlying assumptions that might completely defer from what is promoted. Consequently, the grand narrative appears to be artificial rather than natural and organic and makes it difficult for employees to truly live and act in accordance with it. The study merely functions as a reality check and might awaken a certain awareness that building a global identity through storytelling is not something that can be done overnight and should be constructed naturally by recognizing the truly underlying assumptions rather than pure marketing and promotion the greatness of itself. More boldly stated, building a global identity through storytelling hasn’t proved to be a very effective approach hence the need to look for alternatives to have the multinational organization work more like one team striving for the same goal.

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Appendix 1: Interview themes

The interview set-up has a semi-structured design, which gives just enough guidance for getting the right information but at the same time leaves a lot of room for spontaneous interaction. It also facilitates to get a deeper understanding of the people and the case company.

1. Values

After a short introduction behind the reasons of the interview, the people are asked about the values they think of in relation to the case company. The questions are purposely kept vague in the beginning to see in which direction the interviewee will answer to determine his/her interpretation. Next to the questions on which values play a central role, the enquiry is also about the person(s) who have the biggest influence on transmitting those values.

2. Identity

A dive into the interpretations of identity of the case company and how this is expressed in day to day business. Focus mainly on practical examples and stories that highlight, according to the interviewees, the identity of the case company. Special emphasis on the examples and why the interviewees relate these specific events to the identity.

3. Role of foreign subsidiaries

The interviewees are asked about the role of the foreign subsidiaries and how they contribute to the case company. Emphasis on the strategic application of the colleagues working abroad and how the case company merits from their existence as well as the negative aspects are discussed. Endeavors are made to dig deep and to get to the roots of the explanations and stories from the interviewees.

4. Relationship with foreign subsidiaries

This part of the interview is about the personal relationship of the interviewees with their colleagues working abroad both the benefits and the downside. This is the part where the socialization process is discussed and how the interviewees try to transfer the organizational identity to the foreign subsidiaries either on purpose or by accident. All possible subjects are discussed in defining the socialization practices between the geographically dispersed colleagues.

Appendix 2: Impression of data encoding

After completed the transcription of all interviews, the data was properly encoded. First step was done through "open coding" where fragments and sentences are labelled. All fragments from different interviews were collected under similar labels. Subsequently the fragments and sentences under the same labels were compared to each other and the main themes, narratives and ideas were distilled. Below images give an impression of both stages of coding. Both the interview transcripts as well as the full encoding overview are available upon request.

The following two images so an impression of the "open coding":

Vertrouwen speelt een grote rol, dit bleek ook uit een ex-werknemer die op al een discussie over contractverlenging had gehad. Niet helemaal lekker ging, op zondag werd gebeld om eea door te spreken en daar maandag op terug wilde komen. Vervolgens hoefde hij helemaal niet meer te komen
Pannekoek eten met het hele team gaat het management mee omdat het "te druk" is, hierdoor wordt de kloof nogmaals benadrukt.
Daar waar naar buiten toe richting de klant centraal staat, alles wordt gedaan om hen te pleasen is naar interne stakeholders (personeel en buitenkantoren) dit juist totaal omgekeerd en wordt er weinig aandacht besteed aan de menselijke kant en het geven van vertrouwen en autonomiteit.
Hierin zit een contradictie die ervoor zorgt dat de onderliggende assumpties niet overeenkomen met het verhaal dat vertelt wordt.
De CIS-identiteit wordt niet alleen bepaald maar ook echt geleefd door Management (Joost, Paul, Inge) en hierdoor staat als het ware een soort kloof met personeel en buitenkantoren. Er wordt wel geprobeerd op hun eigen manier om de manier van werken over te brengen maar niet met overtuiging en ook niet op een menselijke wijze.
Wordt bijvoorbeeld bij management geroepen en krijg ervan langs als er iets fout is gegaan bij een buitenkantoor terwijl ik daar verder weinig aan kan veranderen. Niet het idee dat met deze kortzichtigheid verdere groei te realiseren is. Ook richting de buitenkantoren is er sprake van veel command and control en weinig vertrouwen/autonomiteit. CIS kantoren zoals in Argentinie en Dubai worden bij teveel initiatief meteen terug geroepen terwijl helemaal niet duidelijk is waarom maar puur omdat het vertrouwen ontbreekt in handelen volgens de "cis manier".
Mijnsinziens is het vooral mogelijk om de buitenkantoren meer te betrekken door in de dagelijkse werkzaamheden veel meer de dialoog te pakken in plaats van het sturen van instructies en het discussiëren over email. Het zou ook kunnen helpen om "gewone" werknemers daarheen te sturen

FO **Florian oosterman**
Vertrouwen/Wantrouwen

FO **Florian oosterman**
Grote kloof tussen management en personeel, weinig aandacht voor het persoonlijke aspect

FO **Florian oosterman**
Command & Control van HQ vis-a-vis Subsidiaries

Image 4: Impression of open coding

Er wordt verwacht van elkaar dat men 24/7 klaar staat en dat CIS dus eigenlijk als een rode draad door het leven loopt. = RELIGIE, toewijding, klaarstaan, loyaliteit, trouw, perfectionisme, vertrouwen/wantrouwen speelt een hele belangrijke rol. Voorbeeld hierin is hoe een oud werknemer lang het vertrouwen kreeg, auto van de zaak erbij, en toen het vertrouwen eenmaal gebroken was ze via whatsapp ontslagen is.

Daarnaast valt op dat het een soort David tegen Goliath verhaal is, een jongensboek. Paul (Schweitzer, directeur/eigenaar) die tot zijn 22e verjaardag een beetje rondhing op de tennisbaan en van het leven genoot en niet echt een idee had. Die werd door zijn vader verplicht om te gaan werken voor zijn bedrijf en gaf hem een ticket om een lading te gaan inspecteren in Piraeus. Vanaf dat moment eigen bedrijf begonnen en in 25 jaar gegroeid tot een multinational met ogenzienlijke nuchterheid.

FO **Florian oosterman**
Vertrouwen/wantrouwen

FO **Florian oosterman**
Jongensboek / narrative

Image 5: Impression of open coding

The following two images show an impression of grouping the fragments from different interviews with similar labels.

Fragment	**Label**
Er heerst een sfeer "wij weten alles beter" niet alleen richting personeel maar ook richting buitenkantoren. Er is een sfeer van weinig vertrouwen waardoor er een te grote controle is en te weinig autonomie.	Vertrouwen/wantrouwen
Buitenkantoren moeten niet op eigen initiatief activiteiten gaan ontplooien omdat zij niet weten hoe ze CIS kunnen overbrengen	Vertrouwen/wantrouwen
Menselijke maat mist een beetje, de controle drang en het wantrouwen zorgen voor een gebrek aan verdere groei.	Vertrouwen/wantrouwen
Wij hebben al meer dan 25 jaar succes, dus de buitenkantoren kunnen daar veel van leren. Dan moeten ze wel luisteren	Vertrouwen/wantrouwen

Image 6: Grouping of different fragments with the same label

Paul was altijd al heel ambachtelijk en veel oog voor detail en afwerking, zoals hij ook houtenkistjes timmerde zo heeft hij ook zijn bedrijf in elkaar gezet	Jongensboek/narrative
Paul was vroeger eigenlijk met alles bezig behalve werk, een echte levensgenieter die liever biertjes dronk met vrienden in Kralingen	Jongensboek/narrative
Eigenlijk wordt er gespot met alle bedrijfskundige theorieën, gewoon door oog te hebben voor de klant en een open houding is CIS succesvol geworden. Daar is weinig strategie bij aan te pas gekomen	Jongensboek/narrative

Image 7: Grouping of different fragments with the same label