MATERIAL IDENTITY WORK AND REINFORCEMENT OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN TIMES OF LOSS

ABSTRACT

The death of a central figure, like a charismatic founder, can dilute the sense of collective identity among the various stakeholders of a local community. Maintenance of collective identity can be a difficult task, because the organization needs to then simultaneously deal with multiple identity drifts. We conducted an inductive study of Finnish company Ponsse, the founder recently passed away. The second-generation chairman took the lead to articulate the values that implicitly prevailed during the leadership of the founder. Our findings show that organizations that experience a loss can maintain and strengthen their collective identity after the passing of a charismatic leader by engaging in material identity work. Our study highlights two phases underlying the process of reinforcing the collective identity: creating the material environment and enacting material experiences. We contribute to deepen current understanding of how collective identities can be reinforced after a major loss by illuminating the material underpinnings of identity work.

KEY WORDS

Collective identity, Death of a founder, Local community, Material artefacts, Stakeholder management

INTRODUCTION

Collective identity is a reflection of "internalizations of the norms and characteristics of important reference groups and consists of cognitions about the self that are consistent with that group identification" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996: 84). Collective identities become reexamined during and after times of loss such as the loss of a community's distinctiveness (Howard-Granville, Metzger & Meyer, 2013), the decline of an industry (Raffaelli, 2018), and the decease of a central figure (such as influential organizational founders) in an organization or a local community (Bell & Taylor, 2016). The death of a central figure can dilute the sense of collective identity among the various stakeholders in the local community, depending on the level of importance and attachment to the person (Hyde & Thomas, 2003). Therefore, although it is strategically important to maintain a sense of collective profitability and wellbeing in time of loss, this can be a difficult task to accomplish, because the organization needs to simultaneously deal with multiple identity drifts.

Extant research suggests not only that loss is typically handled through grappling with the old and the emerging identities (Lamertz et al., 2016), but also that actors may reinforce a sense of collective identity when experiencing loss (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Although moments of loss can be an interesting window of opportunity for organizations to develop and even strengthen their collective identity, a comprehensive understanding of how collective identity can be reinforced after experiencing a loss is largely missing. This knowledge void is combined with the scarcity of theorization about the relational dynamics that organizations have with their stakeholders within the boundary of the "collective" (as opposed to categorization literature that deals with organizations' competing relationships outside of the boundary of "collective" in the competitive industry) (Ravasi & Clautier, forthcoming). Investigating these two intertwined knowledge voids is theoretically relevant as it can cast light on how collective identity consisting of a complex set of relationships with multiple

stakeholders can be reinforced after a loss within the boundary of the "collective". Moreover, it is timely considering the latest global trends that see the decline of some industries and the emergence of others, as well as the death of influential organizational founders or central figures in local communities, e.g. Steve Jobs, Paul G. Allen, James Le Mesurier.

To this end, we launched an inductive study of Finnish company Ponsse, established by forest machinery entrepreneur Einari Vidgrén in 1970 in his hometown, the small municipality of Vieremä, Finland. The municipality quickly developed into a modern industrial region with Ponsse's lead, today being the largest employer in the village with more than 500 local employees. Despite its internationalization started in 1994, the company has maintained a strong local embeddedness. In 2010, however, its founder Einari passed away. This loss presented a potential danger of drift of the collective identity, as he was the "embodiment" of the traditional and local values. This is when the second-generation chairman, Einari's third son, Juha, took the lead to articulate the values that implicitly prevailed during the leadership of Einari. For these reasons, we believe that our focal company represents an extreme case to answer our research question.

An interesting insight of our study relates to the role that materiality plays in reinforcing a collective identity after a loss – in our case the death of a company founder. Our findings show that organizations that experience a loss can maintain and strengthen their collective identity after the passing of a charismatic leader by engaging in material identity work – defined as "disembedding and re-embedding symbolically significant *identity* meanings associated with a central figure to material artefacts". In particular, our study brought to the fore two main phases underlying the overall process of reinforcing the collective identity, both grounded in important mechanisms: creating the material environment and enacting material experiences. Creating the material environment relied on five distinct types of material identity work – i.e., maintaining original material practices, modern re-interpretation of material practices, adapting

material practices to current norms/regulations, introducing new material practices to facilitate remembering and using technology to preserve material practices at scale. These types of material identity work facilitated the enactment of material artefacts in different ways: at a larger scale by maintaining traditional rituals for customers, at a smaller scale by adapting traditional rituals to ease their maintenance among the local community members and by evoking and communicating past values through storytelling.

Our study contributes to deepen current understanding of how collective identities can be reinforced after a major loss (Howard-Granville et al., 2013) by illuminating the material underpinnings of identity work. More precisely, we show how engaging in material identity work, i.e., dis-embedding symbolically significant meanings associated with a central figure and diffusing them through traditional, adapted or new material artefacts and experiences allows to convert a potential identity drift into an opportunity to strengthen a collective identity. Furthermore, we show how material identity work can be used differently to reinforce a sense of collective identity amongst multiple stakeholders.

REINFORCING COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN TIMES OF LOSS

Collective identity can be subject to reexamination upon major community level loss (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Raffaelli, 2018), such as decease of a central figure in a local community. Loss creates a space or a vacuum of grief, where actors suffer from meaninglessness and existential threat (Bell & Talylor, 2016), but also, loss can be liberating from obligations and provide opportunities for positive changes (Weidner & Mantere, forthcoming). The death of a central figure in a local community can dilute the sense of collective identity among the various stakeholders in the local community. Company towns are good examples of local communities where the tight relationship among the central organization, the local suppliers and customers, and other local community members

collectively reinforce the profitability and collective wellbeing in the local community, as typically company control is extended beyond formal organizational boundaries into the private lives of families (Moonesirust & Brown, 2019). In such context, for example, customers may become more prone to experience identity drift due to loss of personal ties to the organization, coupled with increasing pressure from stronger and global competitors. Local community members may be exposed to identity drift due to decreasing solidarity in the local community and choose to work for other companies. Indeed, collective identity is "inherently variable and highly dependent on contextual shifts in frames of reference" (Brewer & Gardner, 1996: 91). Therefore, a company can face multiple and simultaneous pressures of identity drift from different stakeholders and need to manage these relationships to reinforce collective identity in times of loss. Reinforcing collective identity in times of loss is, thus, a complex task because different stakeholders have varying degrees of bonds, attachments, and identification with the focal organization and its central figure, and simultaneously managing these identity drifts is demanding.

Typically, during and after loss, organizations tend to re-examine these relationships and change the collective identity. Some studies highlight the processes of rediscovering one's self-esteem, elimination of the old, and creation of the new identity. Identity is developed internally, and the validated and revised though negotiations with external constituents (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). In individual level, external validation is important to encourage the formation of new identity in the processes of "restoration orientation" in which individuals become more forward looking and prospectively attempt to reenact who they are (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Shepherd & William, 2018).

In contrast, other studies in organizational and collective levels focus on how organizational identity can be reinvented by keeping the valued past alive and emphasizing more the vision of continuity over vision of change (Venus & Stam, 2019). Similarly, at the

collective level, Lamertz et al.'s (2016) study for example, highlights the role played by remnants of the past, or "the remnants of alternative institutional orders and associated ancestral organisations" (p. 799), as the basis on which new collective identities emerge. A very good example of this is the study by Howard-Grenville et al. (2013) who studied the process of collective identity resurrection within the geographical boundary of a community. They found that for identities to resurrect there needs to be leaders who remember about the past, and followers who share experiences of the reproduction and resurrection process, which helps activating narratives and symbols and infusing them with meanings. Bell and Taylor's (2016) study put forward that organizational death is often followed by morning rituals in which the power relations are determined who and what are mourned and how the death is remembered by the successors. They adopted an example of the official memorialisation following Steve Job's death to maintain Job's embodied presence within the consumer believer communities.

These studies highlight that identities are rooted in the past, and one grapples with the old and the emerging identities in times of loss. However, although some studies hint that actors who experience loss can later experience stronger and more authentic sense of self (Bell & Taylor, 2016; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; see also Dutton, Roberts & Bednar, 2010), we know much less about how collective identity could be reinforced after a major loss, such as a central figure in the local community.

Moreover, we have a limited understanding of how the complex web of relationships with multiple stakeholders can be managed to reinforce the collective identity (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995). The boundary of "collective" is context specific, depending on the particular relationships that organizations have with their stakeholders (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Organization scholars have paid less attention to such relational dynamics within the boundary of "collective" (as opposed to e.g., the categorization literature that contrasts an

organization with its competitive dynamics in a wider industry (see Navis & Glynn, 2010; Stigliani & Elsbach, 2018)). Exception is Ravasi and Cloutier's forthcoming study in which they show how some organizations maintained a relatively consistent identity over time and other organizations showed a higher degree of change in their identity claims over time, depending on their different means-ends structure of identity claims that could be relationship based.

We argue, therefore, that moments of loss are an important window of opportunity that organizations can use to develop and even strengthen their collective identity. How organizations deal with this window of opportunity is, yet, still under-explored and under-theorized.

METHODS

Research Design

Our research was initially driven by a phenomenological interest in our case company, Ponsse Plc. The company was established by the forest machinery entrepreneur Einari Vidgrén in 1970 in his hometown, the small municipality of Vieremä, Finland. We found the case unique and interesting (Siggelkow, 2007), as the traditional and locally rooted values had guided the strategies and daily operations of the family firm for nearly 50 years. Unusual was also the atypical home base, a small village located in the countryside, for a family firm which had grown up to becoming a key player in the global market. The case became particularly revelatory for us, we could follow the construction process of the material environment, the concrete actions and the narratives surrounding the activities led by the second generation leader to reinforce the collective identity after the death of the founder over the period of ten years (2010-2020). For a timeline of events that we observed, see Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

Data Collection

The first and the second author have engaged in participant observation and conducted interviews four times during the period of 2016-2019. During the first four visits the researchers spent 16 days as guests of the company at their guesthouse and participated in eight events and occasions together with the clients, employees and local people. The key highlights of these visits were the participation in the process of hosting various customers that included factory tour, visiting the childhood home of the owning family, sightseeing the local community, taking part in the events organized by the local community, having a dinner, going to sauna, and signing karaoke until late in the night. During the four visits we also conducted 49 interviews from 47 informants, who had experience in planning, organizing or participating in the firm's material identity work or encompassed knowledge and experience of the firm's early days and local traditions. We used open semi-structured interviews to reconstruct past events and to understand the subjective experiences of our informants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We collected stories of the past traditions (Boje, 2014) and experiences from the on-going events from the owners, managers and employees of the firm as well as from the local people in the village. In addition, we collected secondary data from sources such as local history book, edited corporate history book, newspaper articles and Internet pages. Importantly, this also included eight books about about the local tradition, such as hay making, landscape, craft skills, etc., that the second-generation leader himself examined in reconstructing the material environment. The data collection is still ongoing, and another two visits are going to be organized in summer and autumn 2020 to participate in a hay making event and the firm's 50-year celebration, and to conduct further interviews. For a summary of data sources in each data collection round, see Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Data Analysis

Following prescriptions for grounded theory building, the authors entered the field with few theoretical preconceptions, besides the phenomenological interest in the firm's intention to secure their existence and continuity by strengthening the traditional values after the death of the founder. In search for symbols, narratives, and activities the first two authors open coded interview transcripts, field notes and archive materials. We relied on coding techniques from grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001), which involved selecting, categorizing, and labelling sentences or paragraphs as coding units (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We carried out the analysis independently, as they separately coded the archival and interview transcripts. As we re-visited the case company and the local community over and over, progressively we began to notice the motivations behand the material reconstruction by the second-generation leader, and the meanings behind each action. Thus, every visit illuminated us more and more the empirical phenomenon, which enabled us to develop and progressively refine our interpretation.

Through different rounds of coding, we developed a data structure (portrayed in Figure 2) articulating the main codes and categories. For the structure of the data, see Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 here

FINDINGS

Einari Vidgrén, the founder of Ponsse Plc and the Chairman of the Board of Directors, passed away suddenly at the age of 67 on 26 October 2010. The death of Einari was sad news for his family, employees and the local people. Many people were worried and wondered what would happen to

Ponsse and Vieremä, as for Einari, the connection with Vieremä had always been very strong. This, in turn, shifted the attention of Ponsse toward a new strategic priority - to ensure the continuity and further growth of the family business beyond the founding generation. While the business was running as smoothly as usual, the head of the family i.e. "the incarnation of the values", passing away spurred the sons into securing the existence and continuity of the firm by strengthening the family values.

Our findings revealed that when confronted with the death of an organization's founder, second-generation leaders can turn the potential identity drifts into an opportunity to maintain and strengthen the organization's collective identity both within the local community and with their international customer base. In particular, second generation leaders nourished the local traditions and values and reinforced the collective identity after the death of the founder through two reinforcing mechanisms our are broadly structured into two themes: creating the material environment and enacting material experiences. Creating the material environment was underpinned by five distinct types of material identity work – i.e., maintaining original material practices, modern re-interpretation of material practices, adapting material practices to current norms/regulations, introducing new material practices to facilitate remembering and using technology to preserve material practices at scale, which we will unpack one by one in the following sections. These types of identity work were enacted through the use of material artefacts at two different levels: at a larger scale by maintaining traditional rituals for the international customer base, and at a smaller scale by adapting traditional rituals to ease their maintenance within the local community members and by evoking and communicating past values through storytelling.

Creating material environment

Maintaining original material practices. Second-generation leaders not only enhanced past values, but they also 're-created' past artefacts. They re-built old houses that belonged to the family, and others in the village. For example, in order to commemorate the past values, they reconstructed Einari's childhood home to remind people of how simple and hard life was back then. Earning a living was not easy as the fields were rocky and there were no modern-day commodities. Thus, only through a diligent working attitude people were able to survive. This is the core message that they intended to transmit to the next-generation of employees and children in the village. In reconstructing the childhood home, they relied on many historical sources and contemporaries' stories in order to make the house as authentic as possible:

> *I managed to scan all the photos from the album of an elderly person in the village. He had lots of stories to tell. I could listen to his stories for two years before he passed away. Based on the photos and stories, I could re-build his (Einari's) old home in its original location.* (Interview, owner and chairman of the board)

Adapting material practices to modern norms/regulations. In 1975 Einari built a new home for the family. The house was designed with plenty of space, so that in addition to serving the needs of a growing family, it would also serve for entertaining guests, particularly clients. However, as the company kept growing over the years, so did the number of guests and in 1989 Einari and his family moved to a new house and their first family home was transformed into a full-time guest house, named "Klubi". The founder's cousin recalls that the decision was made because in the end, there were just too many guests for the family and especially for the wife to entertain:

> *They had guests every week, almost every night, and as the company got growing the number of guests increased all the time. It grew too much.* (Interview, founder's cousin)

Over the years, Klubi has gone through various renovations and extensions to serve the ever growing customer base and continuous increase of overnight visitors. After the death of the founder in 2010, the family carried out a substantial renovation and extension in order to "*fit everyone in*". While Klubi was originally a house of four bedrooms, it can now accommodate around 50 people, containing 24 rooms with two single beds in each. The originally two-story house has been transformed into a three-story house with extensions in every corner. Similarly, the kitchen and the dining room area have been expanded to serve and seat a much larger family around the dinner table. According to the informants there is not much left of the old house, except the fireplace downstairs, but the original idea and purpose of the house are still the same.

*Modern reinterpretation of material practices***.** The days at the company's guesthouse, 'Klubi', largely follow a traditional program and rhythm. After the dinner, the evening continues at sauna. Going to sauna dates back to the early years and it has always been the founder's habit of taking his guests to sauna after a hard day at work for relaxation, cleansing and sealing the deals. The original purpose to relax and seal the deals has, however, shifted more towards the relaxation and giving the foreign customers an unforgettable local experience. Moreover, as nudity residing in the sauna experience may cause discomfort for people coming from certain cultures and hierarchical contexts, and as the main objective at Klubi is for the guests to feel comfortable, the cultural differences are respected and taken into consideration and going to sauna is nowadays more of an optional activity.

Traditionally, going to sauna and having dinner have also entailed drinking alcohol. However, due to the high number of guests and some close by incidents over the years, there has been a deliberate intention to diminish the consumption of alcohol during the evening to assure the safety and well-being of the guests. For that purpose additional activities, such as

karaoke singing, have been included in the evening activities. Likewise, the founder's old habit of toasting with a particular alcoholic beverage 'lomppi' during the dinner can nowadays be carried out with a 'non-alcoholic beverage, like orange juice or milk'.

Introducing new material practices to facilitate remembering. In addition to rebuilding and renovating old material environment the family has also built new spaces and places to facilitate further remembering. These places serve the needs of a larger population but are mainly targeted to the local villagers. For example, in 2018 an outdoor exercise area and children's playground named after the father was built and opened. Later in 2019 the family built a viewing tower close to the father's childhood home for the locals and visitors to view and explore the local scenery from a different angle.

Using technology to preserve material practices at scale. According to the informants a considerable challenge in a large family firm is keeping close and immediate relations with customers. In order to portray a familial atmosphere, cherishing close relations with the people visiting the company is considered highly important. The challenge is amplified by the increasing number of customers as well as the widening customer base. While private contractors might visit the company 1-2 times a year, the visiting interval for purchasers from large global corporations is closer to every 3-4 years. As lamented by the owner:

> *If we have one hundred customer visit you remember maybe two or three guys later by name. Then you see them at exhibitions and you can say hey you were there. Or they come and talk to you: it was a good time at Ponsse Klubi. It might be that I don't even remember you were here a year ago. I don't know [laughing] but the memory is so bad. This kind of relations you should remember immediately.* (Interview, owner and chairman of the board).

In order to facilitate remembering and to portray the appearance of closeness the informants emphasized the applicability of technological devices. For example, when discussing the domicile of the customers they might use google maps and other programs where it is possible to save the information for later use. One option is also to put up a picture wall of all the visitors and visits. This way they could, upon a visit, retrieve some memories from the previous one. Other more intelligent technological solutions are also sought for as highlighted by one of the sons:

> *I mean if you are their friend it would be nice to remember their name and face… I'm waiting for Google to make these glasses that can recognize faces. They already have the technology… from the lens I can then read your name.* (Interview, owner and chairman of the board).

Enacting material experiences

Above described five types of material practices enabled the case firm's key stakeholders – in this case, the customers and local community members – experience the traditional values from the founder's time in two distinct ways, as explained below.

Maintaining traditional practices at a larger scale (reinforcing). The home-like atmosphere is corroborated with the company employees running the guest house as if it was their own. In the early days, it was usual for the founder to invite the guests to his home, where they would enjoy a family supper prepared by his wife. Today, the Klubi in run by three dedicated hostesses and two janitors. One of the janitors is responsible for all the technical issues, like fixing the domestic appliances and dealing with technical building services as well as the outdoor area. The other is in charge of heating the smoke sauna, a traditional type of sauna without a

chimney, for the guests. Heating a smoke sauna is a lengthy process taking nearly 10 hours. Traditionally people have gone to sauna every Wednesday and Friday, those being the traditional sauna days linked to the working rhythm in the countryside. Nowadays, however, the sauna is heated everyday due to the daily visitors at Klubi.

The hostesses at Klubi are referred to as 'the new mothers', who prepare and serve the breakfast, dinner, and late night snack, greet the guests upon their arrival and take care of them in all the possible ways. They immerse themselves in their role and act as any local mother would; prepare homemade meals using local ingredients such as berries and mushrooms, which they have self-picked from the nearby woods, help in laundry, assist the guests in shopping clothes and lend an ear when needed. One of the hostesses described their job:

> *Everybody always asks what we do there (at Klubi) because it's so unclear. I always answer that image if you would have a big house and you would have 30 guests every night, and then you wine and dine then, prepare sauna for them, and everything that it includes if you would organize that kind of an event at your home. You need to go to the store to buy the ingredient, prepare the meals, clean the house, and buy flowers. We do everything that one would need to do in their home, change a bulb, and wash the windows, all that belongs to us.* (Interview, hostess A)

Although, the guests are always accompanied by a Ponsse employee, the second generation sons also spend a considerable amount of time associating with the guests at Klubi, their childhood home. According to the informants the atmosphere is very relaxed and the sons behave casually and as they normally would in their own home. In a way the father of the family is also present in a portrait placed at the end of the dinner table. The portrait is situated at the head seat expressing the founders enduring presence. As explained by one of the hostesses:

Einari' painting was done for his 60th birthday. When we renovated the dinner hall (after his death) we realized immediately that this is his wall [pointing to a wall]. You can't put anything else there. It's at the end of the dinner table, he always sat on that seat and will always do so in the future. In that way he will always be the host. (Interview, hostess B)

Adapting traditional practices to ease the maintenance at a smaller scale (reinforcing). In a smaller scale the family has introduced several projects and events to maintain and keep alive some of the traditional practices and skills, such as farm work with employees and youth and cultivation with school children in the village. In addition, every summer the family organizes a traditional hay making event, where anybody can participate and work using the traditional tools such as scythes in making bales of hay. While traditional hay making is a lengthy and laborious process, these events have been shortened and made more fun for the participants. As explained by the organizer:

We try to do it easy way but still have the same experience with the good weather and having the feeling of the old haymaking time... The point is to bring the traditions but still to have nice, easy time with the friends during the haymaking (Interview, owner and chairman of the board)

The work starts in the morning and ends around four o'clock in the afternoon. For lunch the participants are served a traditional meal, a pea soup and bread with real butter. After work they go to sauna and swimming in the nearby lake and have yet a traditional meal, sausage before getting ready for the barn dance, where also the neighbors are invited. The basic idea of these events is to share these experiences and old ways of working with younger generation and show them what working in the past.

Evoking past values through the experience of traditional practices. Through experiencing above processes and practices, past values were evoked. For example, according to the founder's cousin, hospitality has always been part of the local tradition, people's way of life, although the virtue has been eroding over the last decades due to the modern, more hectic and busier lifestyle. As the kin of the founder recalls:

> *In the 50s, 60s and the 70s people used to visit each other. Einari's parents and my parents visited each other a lot, the contact between the houses and families was frequent. We just stopped by, had coffee. Since then the tradition has changed, it has decreased – everybody is just so busy on their own, doing their own things. People don't have time anymore. Before we didn't even need to call or schedule beforehand, we just went for a visit.* (Interview, founder's cousin)

One manifestation of the local hospitality is the company's way of hosting its' customers and guests. The familial atmosphere remains to be the core feature and guests are hosted as they were close friends of the family. As a member of the family stated:

> *This is the story that we tell that we get together for dinner and it's not about having visitors. It's for the friends to get together here. So we don't think about that we have a customer to take care of but we have friends coming to our home.* (Interview, Chairman of the board)

The Klubi is fully booked all around the year and the guests appreciate the homey-feeling and great hospitality. According to the informants it feels like being on a vacation with good friends. Everything is home made so for the guests, who travel a lot it offers the sensation of being at home. Another function of the house is to keep the people together:

This house (Klubi) is all about being together. Many guests say that it's good to stay here because if you are in a hotel people tend to go on their own but here we are together all the time. (Interview, Hostess B).

Communicating the old good values through story telling. Finally, the concrete experiences were supported by narratives and storytelling activities. The central character in the stories and remembrances was the founder of the company. For example, a presentation of Ponsse's story dating back to Einari's childhood is nowadays a central element in every customer and stakeholder visit as well as during employee orientations. By collecting and sharing stories from the past, the family wanted not only to acknowledge the achievements of the older generation and remind the people about the company's roots, but also to connect the core values to future generations.

For this purpose, the interior in Klubi and in Einari's childhood home is thoroughly thought trough and each item on display is carefully selected by the second generation sons. The main aim has been to convey the foundational stories of the firm and accentuate the eccentric characteristics and traditions. Thus, all the material items, ornaments and photos on display are intended to portray and cement the stories and values. There are also numerous pictures of Einari together with his sons, employees and guests in different occasions, each containing a special story or expression of a central value. As an employee explained:

The pieces on display always have a story. Sometimes when there is - not awkward - but these moments when the host runs out of topics to discuss these can help. These are really good for that, they are like hooks. The hosts can always tell the stories behind the items and these stories never run out. (Interview, hostess A).

Indeed, as the sons were not present in every customer visit to tell the family stories, they had a so called 'story-box' meaning that they had a couple of stories that everybody could tell e.g., where the values came from and how they related to the company history. Overall, such story telling facilitated the experiencing of material environment.

The outcome: reinforced sense of collective identity

During the field work, we could see that the intergenerational continuation of the family values was reinforced by the second-generation sons' material identity work. Consequently, many informants felt that not much had changed since Einari's time and that his presence was still felt at the company. As one employee commented:

> *Everything starts with the Ponsse spirit that Einari created. It has not changed. The boys have managed to keep it well. They (sons) are all top people. They are not proud; they sit together with the workmen. The company is only getting better.* (Interview, Manager A)

While all the brothers participated in the reinforcement of the family values through their own roles in the company, the impact of the second-oldest son on the persistence of the traditional values was most pervasive. Thus, a general perception among the informants was that he had taken Einari's place as a new father figure in the village.

DISCUSSION

The sudden loss of a central figure in a local community may trigger an existential identity crisis among local stakeholders, due to the fact that the most identifiable source of meaning or direction is lost (Weidner & Mantere, forthcoming). These moments of loss, thus, represent critical times for collectives and their identities. Therefore, understanding how collectives deal with these threats, and how they can turn them into opportunities to reinforce and strengthen

their collective identities is relevant to gain insights into such potential crises can be best tackled.

Our study shows that the identity drifts initially experienced by different stakeholders – in our case, customers and local community members – were dealt with and resolved through distinct processes that involved two core mechanisms: creating the material environment and enacting material experiences.

More precisely, our initial analysis highlights two distinct patterns in "enacting material artefacts": at a larger scale by maintaining traditional rituals for customers, at a smaller scale by adapting traditional rituals to ease their maintenance among the local community members. This distinction in scale is theoretically relevant, as it expands current research on how collective identities can be enhanced. Previous research has showed that the sense of collective identity can be enhanced typically by "entrenching" or "expanding" traditional rituals Dacin & Dacin's (2008). Our findings, though, show that collective identity can be reinforced both by scaling up and scaling down traditional rituals, depending on the target stakeholder.

Moreover, our preliminary analysis provides initial insights to the relationship among the five distinct types of material identity work that preceded "enacting material artefacts". On the one hand, we found that enactment of material artefacts at a larger scale (the process of dinner for customers) was preceded through the introduction of new material artefacts and technologies aiding the modern re-interpretation and adaptation of the material work. On the other hand, enactment of material artefacts at a smaller scale (the process of hay making) was preceded through the introduction of new material artefacts, technologies, and modern re-interpretation of material artefacts.

These initial insights provide theoretical ground to explain how collective identities can be reinforced after a major loss by highlighting the material underpinnings of identity work. They do so by emphasizing the distinct processes that served the two types of stakeholders. Our study

thus highlight the multiplicity in the relational component of a collective identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We may argue that the collective identity with the customers had to be reinforced through scaling up, because of its relatively distant nature, while the collective identity with the local community members had to be reinforced through scaling down, because of its closer nature.

Material identity work

Our study puts forward that moments of loss are an important window of opportunity, where fundamental structure of meaning is vacuumed (Bell & Taylor, 2016), that organizations can use to develop and even strengthen their collective identity. Our findings show how this opportunity was dealt with through material identity work in which relationality shifts from the central figure to material representation, replacing the central figure, and diffusing the power.

Extant research has showed that artifacts are integral to identity (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006). For example, past studies have already suggested that material artefacts can be used to signal and represent one's identity. Material artefacts, such as office design, organizational dress, business cards etc., can be used in workplaces to display professional identities, thus signalling one's belonging to a certain professional group (e.g., Elsback, 2004; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Pratt & Fafaeli, 1997).

Moreover, material artefacts can be used not only to "symbolise" identity meanings, but also to assert control and maintain power by a group of actors. For example, Bechy (2003) highlighted how material artefacts can do so by the embodying knowledge of a certain occupation, by representing their authority and claiming their jurisdiction against other occupations, by legitimising their occupational status, thus reinforcing occupational identity. Similarly, Huvila's (2011) illuminated how material artefacts are tools to maintain hegemonies – i.e., "a condition of attaining and holding the power of imposing a definition of how things

are discussed and understood" (2011: 2530) – in communities through forming and expressing social identities (see also Gal, Yoo, & Boland, 2004; McGivern & Dopson 2010; McGivern et al., 2018).

Material artefacts can also be used to convey, transform and create meanings by proposing alternative views (Carlile, 2002; Feldman, Khademian, Ingram, & Schneider, 2006). For example, Knight, Paroutis and Heracleous's (2018) study on the use of visuals such as power point in meaning making showed that the use of material artefacts enhances strategic visibility not just by depicting and reproducing things, but also by juxtaposing things and generating tensions. Simpson and Carroll (2008), who conceptualized identity as emerging from "interactions across the boundaries between different knowledge domains" (2008: 12), suggested that epistemic objects act as intermediary vehicle for both the reinforcement of existing identity meanings and the construction of new ones.

Overall, these studies suggest that material artefacts can be used to affirm, maintain or alter collective identities. The usefulness of the material artefact depends on how they appeal to and are interpreted by different stakeholders, and the extent to which they can alter their roles and functions as situations, people's attention, and interests change (i.e., the interpretive flexibility of the material artefact (Carlile, 2004)) (see McGivern et al., 2010; Nicolini, Mengis & Swan, 2012).

Our study builds on and expands extant research by proposing that material artefacts can be used to represent a dead central figure, to disembody him/her, and to diffuse the power that used to be embodied and concentrated in him/her. More precisely, our study explains how the individual founder's influence on the collective identity of a community is replaced with the use of artifacts soon after their death.

Current studies imply that material artifacts can outlive a founder's death. For example, Balagoev, Felten, and Kahn (2018) examined how material objects shape evolving processes

of organizational remembering by examining the history of digitalization of the British Museum's material collections. The authors suggested that materiality is not just a passive memory form, but constantly reconstruct and evoke the past in organizations and actively re-orient action in the present. Similarly, Hatch and Schultz' (2017) study examined the micro processes though which once forgotten material artefacts became re-used to authenticate new organizational trajectories. Studies on corporate museums (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Ravasi, Rindova & Stigliani, 2019) examine how "stored information from organization's history" (Nissley & Casey, 2002: 37) are structured, stored, and used to preserve companies' history, reinforce the organizational identity, and shape public option about the company's history.

However, these studies examine the role of historicized artefacts that become rediscovered and used much later after the death of the founder.

In contrast to these studies, we show the processes through which the historicized artefacts come to be created in the first place soon after the death of a central figure, and the processes before they become to hold more layers of meanings be as historicized artefacts. In other words, our findings are unique as they look at the occasion (i.e., protected and limited period of time (Ashforth, 2001)) before the material artefacts come to hold symbolic meanings, and the efforts by the descendant of the central figure in establishing the symbolic significance. This is novel because although few studies hint that taking part in constructing material environment in itself facilitates the formation of stronger and more personal identity (Elsback, 2004; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), yet, such process is less documented.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Data sources

Participant observation and interviews at the research setting

Total: Participant observations 8, interviews 49, observations 8.

Visit 1: 12-13.4.2016 (2 days)
Participant observation: Company presentation by the Owner & Chairman of the Board, visit to the restored childhood home of Einari Vidgrén

Interviews: Owner and Chairman of the Board (1 interview), Ponsse's first employee and Einari Vigdrén's childhood friend (1), Supervisor and son of the first employee (1), Municipality Manager, retired (1 interview), Shopkeeper (1)

Visit 2: 9-13.8.2016 (5 days)
Participant observation: Factory tour, event with the national Finnish volleyball team at the factory (sponsored by Ponsse), dinner with Russian customers at the restored childhood home of Einari Vidgrén, Visit to the city council, interacting with the locals in the city centre, children's playground, local restaurants, gas station and local shops, a local singing event

Interviews: Owner and Chairman of the Board (2 interviews), Ponsse's first Engineer (1), Marketing Assistant (1), HR Manager (1), Public Relations Officer (1), Factory Tour Guide (1), Partner (1), Account Manager from Russia (1), Russian customers (7), Factory Worker (1), Manager A (1), Manager B (1), Product Manager (2), Municipality Manager (1), Journalist (1), Librarian (1), At a local singing event: Local resident A (1), Local resident B (1), Local resident C (1), Local resident D, a woman who grew up in the village but lives abroad now (1), At the children's playground: Local resident E (1)

Visit 3: 28.8–1.9.2017 (5 days)
Participant observation: Dinner with Finnish customers, visit to Vidgrén's stables, visit to the local primary school, breakfast with the Swedish customers

Interviews: Owner and Chairman of the Board (2 interviews), Swedish customer A (1), Swedish customer B (1), Guests' Hostess A (1), Guests' Hostess B (1), Ponsse employees (4), Municipality Manager, retired (1), Municipality officer (1)

Visit 4: 14.-17.5.2019 (4 days)
Participant observation: Dinner with the dealers, visit to the local library,

Interviews: Owner and Chairman of the Board (2 interviews), Dealer A (1), Dealer B (1), Dealer C (1), Dealer D (1), Dealer E (1), Retired employee (1), Customer (1), Local resident F (1), Local resident G (1)

Visit 5: Forthcoming in summer 2020
Participant observation: Haymaking event
Interviews: To be decided

Visit 6: Forthcoming in autumn 2020
Participant observation: Celebration of the firm's 50th anniversary
Interviews: To be decided

Archival data

Total: 650 pages of text

Visit 1: 1 edited corporate history book (2007; 89 pages), 1 edited history book of Vieremä (1983, 522 pages)
Visit 2: 96 relevant articles from the local newspaper Miilu from 1970–2016 (78 pages).
Visit 3*:* 25 online articles about Ponsse*, 78 pages (excluding online and books):*
Visit 4*:* 8 books about the local tradition (Hay making, landscape, craft skills, etc)
Visit 5*:* forthcoming in summer 2020
Visit 6*:* forthcoming in autumn 2020

Figure 1. Timeline of events

Engaged action

Cooking with school kids

Planting with school kids   Summer work camps for youth

Hosting guests in the old family home   Dinners in the grandparents' house   Haymaking in the grandparents' fields

Narratives

Publishing traditional cook book   Publishing biography of the father

Telling the family story in customer events (ongoing)   Collecting memories from the elderly (ongoing)

Posting father's old sayings on the company website and in the office

Material and environmental infrastructure building

Replanting grandmother's berry bushes   Replanting traditional woodlands

Building a memorial playground for kids

Building a viewing tower

Renovating traditional chimneyless house   Renovating old dance pavilion

Renovating old cowshed

Refurnishing old family home   Rebuilding grandparents' old house   Extending old family home

VR tour of the village

The company's 50 years celebration

| 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |

Death of the founder

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Figure 2. Data structure

1st order codes   **2nd order themes**   **Aggregate dimensions**

- *Pea soup, bread, and real butter in the meals during hay making*
- *The same tools for hay making*
- *Transplanting grandparents' berry bushes*
- *Replanting traditional woodlands*
- *Renovating old cowshed*
- *Renovating old dance pavilion*
- *Renovating traditional chimneyless house*

→ Maintaining original material practices

- *Meanings related with 'horses' conveyed through 'machines'*
- *Singing karaoke after sauna*

→ Modern re-interpretation of material practices

- *The furniture in Klubi and sauna should be wooden although not the same piece*
- *Less alcohol drinking*
- *Modern renovations and extensions at Klubi*
- *Making sausages inside instead of outside spaces*

→ Adapting material practices to modern norms/regulations

- *Decorating old photos*
- *Celebrating birthdays*
- *Building a memorial playground for kids*
- *Building a viewing tower*

→ Introducing new material practices to facilitate remembering

- *Use of i-pad to remember customers*
- *Use of bio-tech in processing wood*
- *Virtual tour of the village*

→ Using technology to preserve material practices at scale

Creating material environment

- *The process of hosting customers after dinner*
- *Hostesses instead of mother taking care of customers*
- *Dinners in the grandparents' house*
- *More frequent use of sauna*

→ Maintaining traditional practices <u>at a larger scale (reinforcing)</u>

- *One day process of hay making (easier, lighter, more fun)*
- *Cooking with the school kids*
- *Planting with the school kids*
- *Summer work camps for youth*

→ Adapting traditional practices to ease the maintenance <u>at a smaller scale (reinforcing)</u>

- *Evoking sense of togetherness and hard work through hay making*
- *Evoking hospitality, sense of family, trust, equality, and friendship through the process of dinner hosting*

→ Evoking past values through the experience of traditional practices

- *Publishing a traditional cook book*
- *Publishing biography of the father*
- *Telling the family story in customer events*
- *Posting father's saying on the company website and in the office*
- *(Collecting memories from the elderly)*

→ Communicating the old good values through story telling

Enacting material experiences

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