Integrative rationality and overlapping identities: Evidence of the commercial value of environmental sustainability and social responsibility discourses during enterprise development

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Objectives: This presentation uses the case of *Grassroots Glamour*, a fashion sector startup, to show how social responsibility and environmental sustainability discourses can become an integral part of successful strategy practice during business development and, in so doing, provide a discursive space for negotiating a collective identity between business partners with very different relationships to the business.

Prior Work: This interpretive study extends the author's research on enterprise start-up and identity (Mills, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Mills & Winstone, 2010; Mills & Pawson, 2012) and critical interfaces (Arnaud & Mills, 2013) by using a narrative analysis to explore how *Grassroots Glamour's* business partners tapped into social responsibility and environmental sustainability discourses to create a collective identity that gave coherence and direction to their strategy practice.

Approach: The foundational narratives of the two business partners were constructed using data gathered from semi-structured interviews, blogs and other publically available digitally accounts of the business and its brand development. The accounts of the strategic practice embedded within these enterprise development narratives were then examined to determine the role of social and environmental discourses in the business design and strategy practice.

Results: The analysis revealed a highly reflexive strategy enactment process, shaped by resource scarcity and personal circumstances, that was stabilized by social responsibility (CSR) and environmental sustainability (ES) discourses. These discourses provided the platform upon which a collective identity was negotiated between partners and the local community. This collective identity was enacted in the design and production of the garments and how the business interacted with its constituencies to simultaneously satisfy its commercial, social and environmental objectives. In doing this, the discourses and the narratives in which they were embedded acted as boundary objects, stabilizing the critical interfaces between partners and the community and linking past, present and future practice.

Implications: This empirical case study reveals how ideology can create and stabilize the interfaces between people with quite different enterprise orientations and enable their practices to contribute to a powerful collective

identity. This in turn can provide considerable competitive advantage and shape a strong brand and community support. It suggests, when contemporary discourses are entangled in startup narratives in a way that satisfies stakeholders' personal objectives, narrativity becomes a powerful form of strategic practice that can be harnessed to give coherence to collective action and promote brand loyalty.

Value: This case study's value lies in the way it illustrates how popular macro environmental sustainability discourses, collective identity and strategy practice articulate can be constructively employed in the enterprise development process to stabilize stakeholder interfaces. At a theoretical level it links the concepts of boundary object and strategy tool and challenges us to define both concepts more broadly to embrace a discursive perspective of collective action.

Key words: social responsibility and sustainability discourses, collective identity, strategy practice, boundary object, narrativity

Recent publications relevant to this presentation

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