When Technology Changes the Physical Workplace: The Creation of a New Workplace Identity

Research-in-Progress

Christina Serrano
Walton College of Business
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701
cserrano@walton.uark.edu

Marie-Claude Boudreau
Terry College of Business
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia
mcboudre@uga.edu

Abstract

In recent decades, there have been many advances in digital media and technologies that have disrupted professions traditionally rooted in physical and print media as their core competency. Often, digital transformations of such professions not only change the way these professionals collectively define themselves, but also dramatically alter the physical work environment in which they have formally shaped their work roles and interactions with physical and print media (e.g., photographers increasingly work with photo editing software rather than in darkrooms, journalists increasingly work in electronic rather than print platforms, etc.). In this new digital era, how do these professionals adapt and define themselves? Drawing upon preliminary data analysis from a longitudinal case study of a group of library professionals who transitioned to an all-electronic library building (i.e., a library without physical books), we propose an emerging process model of workplace identity creation in order to address this question.

Keywords: identity creation, workplace identity, place identity theory

Introduction

Over the past few decades, there have been many advances in digital media and technologies that have disrupted professions traditionally rooted in physical media as their core competency. For example, Kodak was once a company that specialized in photographic film and print and held a dominant position in this marketplace. However, as market demand trended toward digital photography, Kodak failed to adapt and transition to this change, which resulted in severe financial losses for the company (Lucas and Goh 2009). Similarly, the profession of journalism has faced significant challenges in transitioning from print journalism to digital journalism, calling into question “who might be considered a journalist and what might be considered journalism” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 23). The United States postal industry is another work sector that has been threatened by the rise in digital media and communications, with a 23 percent decrease in physical mail volume between 2001 and 2012 and steady declining revenues (Atkinson 2013). These examples emphasize the substantial challenges faced by individuals whose professions traditionally have been defined by working with physical and print media, as the widespread diffusion of digital media and communications has fundamentally modified the core product served by these professions.

Often, digital transformations of such professions not only change the way these professionals collectively define themselves, but also dramatically alter the physical work environment in which they have formally shaped their work roles and interactions with physical media. For example, the growing popularity of digital photography has reduced the number of darkrooms used for this profession; instead,
photographers are able to mimic many darkroom processes using photo editing software and increasingly find themselves working at a computer rather than in a darkroom (Mäenpää and Seppänen 2010). Furthermore, libraries are gradually removing their collections of physical books and growing their e-book offerings. In San Antonio, Texas, for instance, a new public library called BiblioTech opened in September 2013; it offers no print collections at all. Designed to be an all-digital library, BiblioTech staffs librarians who loan Kindles and check out e-books instead (Chappell 2013). In this new digital era, in which the demotion of physical and print media has created disruptions in some professionals’ primary work roles and environments, how do these professionals adapt and define themselves?

This study aims to address the research question: “How does a group of professionals of physical and print media establish a workplace identity in a digitized workplace?” To answer this question, we study a group of professionals (librarians) who transitioned to a completely digital environment. We explore how they were able to create a new workplace identity with a special focus on the role of their physical work environment. This research allows us to better understand how the identity of the professionals as well as their workplace may be threatened, and how they respond to these threats.

In the next section, we present the relevant literature on identity, workplace identity, place identity, and the relational nature of identity. Then we discuss our case study methodology and preliminary results.

**Literature**

**Identity, Workplace Identity, and Place Identity**

Identity, as a concept, has not been leveraged in depth within the IS discipline (Gal & Kjaergaard, 2009; Nach & Lejeune, 2009; Stein, Galliers, & Markus, 2013). Most IS-identity research considers identity as an antecedent or outcome associated with a technological change or environment, such as the role that identity plays in the context of virtual worlds (e.g., Schultze and Orlikowski 2010). Predominantly, these works have focused on the role of information technology (IT) as either a threat or opportunity with respect to identity. For example, Mishra et al. (2012) put forth the concept of identity deterioration, which reflects a form of threatened identity that results from IT implementations. On the other hand, Barrett and Walsham (1999) show that IT can influence identity by providing opportunities for reskilling. The process of identity change, however, has been largely ignored, particularly as it relates to work environments that are digitally transformed. Although one study in the IS literature investigates the identity creation process of a group of professionals that had to increasingly incorporate IT into their main work roles as a result of shifting to a digitally transformed work environment (Boudreau et al. 2014), consideration of the physical work environment in the identity creation process is lacking.

Across disciplines, there are many different classifications and levels of the identity concept. The focus of this study is work-related identity, as work is an important source of self-realization and meaning in life (Dutton et al. 2010). Often, literature on work-related identities pertains to occupational, professional, or organizational characteristics. Few scholars have explored the physical work environment as a dimension of work-related identities, although this idea has been recognized by classic philosophers of ‘the self’ for some time (e.g., James, 1890; Jung, 1964; Mead, 1934).

More recently, Elsbach (2003, 2004) introduced the concept of workplace identity, defined as an individual’s central and enduring status and distinctiveness categorizations in the workplace. These categorizations may indicate status (e.g., “I’m the manager”) or distinctiveness (e.g., “I’m a teacher”). Workplace identity explicitly acknowledges the physical environment’s influence on identity by exploring how changes in the physical work environment (e.g., depersonalization of one’s work space) can threaten a worker’s sense of status and distinctiveness. Thus, Elsbach’s proposed concept of workplace identity incorporates the idea that the physical environment can directly influence an individual’s identity at work. However, this stream of literature has not addressed how the physical environment is assimilated as a core dimension of individuals’ sense of identity.

The environmental psychology literature helps to fill this gap. Proshansky (1978) coined the term “place identity” to describe the aspects of self-identity concerned with the physical environment. Place identity suggests that a sense of place needs to be recognized as a salient dimension of identity. The concept of place itself is socially constructed and refers to a wide range of physical spaces, from broad geographic regions to a specific spot within a room, such as a favorite chair (Larson and Pearson 2012). In a place
identity framework, place is a central part of one's identity and “not merely a setting or a backdrop, but an agentic player” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 466).

Few studies in information systems have leveraged the concept of place identity in their theoretical development. One notable exception is a study by D’Mello and Sahay (2007), which incorporates the concept of place in defining mobility identity, an individual-level concept that they developed within the context of studying global software developers in India. However, use of the place identity lens in organizational research is relatively sparse (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), especially with respect to studying the physical environment of workplaces, and existing theoretical frameworks have yet to capture fully the interplay between place identities and social identities (Rooney et al. 2010).

The Relation of Identity and Image

Identity is a relational concept, meaning that it is defined in part by outsiders’ perspectives; in other words, individuals make comparisons between how they see themselves (identity) and how outsiders view them (image) in defining who they are (Albert and Whetten 1985; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Dutton and Dukerich 1991). The Organizational Identity Dynamics Model developed by Hatch and Schultz (2002) aptly illustrates this relational concept as an overall process and describes two sub-processes, impressing and mirroring, by which identity and image are intertwined.

Through the impressing sub-process, a group projects an impression of its identity to others. Groups may project images to stakeholders unintentionally through everyday behaviors, gestures, appearances, etc., or intentionally through formal means such as advertising, press conferences, logos, etc. (Rindova and Fombrun 1998). This type of identity projection is a useful strategic device for managing corporate impressions (Gioia and Thomas 1996). Conversely, through the mirroring sub-process, identity is reflected back to the group via the external stakeholders’ opinions and views about the group (Hatch and Schultz 2002). For example, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) reported how the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey’s image deteriorated as homelessness became pervasive on its premises, and on how the Port Authority learned to keep an eye on its “organizational mirror” as they interpreted, reacted, and committed to organizational actions. According to these sub-processes of impressing and mirroring, when a group’s identity is not aligned with its image, the group will conduct self-examination and question its self-definition, and will eventually take actions to restore the misalignment (Hatch and Schultz 2002).

Considering the above relational lens and the need for a theoretical framework capturing the relationship between place identity and social identity, we seek to inductively develop a process model that explains how group workplace identity is created over time in a digitized workplace. This is our core contribution.

Methodology

A single, in-depth case study was employed as our methodology. Specifically, we used a single site that constituted a revelatory and unique case, which we could examine longitudinally over several years. Thus, the case study approach was deemed the most appropriate (Benbasat et al. 1987; Yin 2009).

Case selection and description

The case selected for this research is a group of library professionals who were designated to staff a new academic library building that was designed to be fully electronic, i.e., without circulating print materials. This digital library (DL) was first conceived in the late 1990s and led to the construction of a new library building that opened in 2003 at a large public university. The DL originally included over 500 computers, with Wi-Fi access across the building; it also employed 10 full-time librarians to support the building’s research mission. Over the years, there has been turnover in the DL librarian staff. Since the building opened, only one original DL librarian remains, and there are currently six full-time DL librarians. One of the researchers was a former employee of the DL, thus facilitating access to many of the current and former librarians.
Data collection and analysis

Data collection started in 2007 and is still in progress. To date, 29 interviews with 16 librarians who have staffed the DL have been collected at five different points in time: fall 2007, winter 2008-2009, winter 2009-2010, summer 2011, and summer 2013. Furthermore, 19 interviews with DL patrons have been gathered, 10 who were students as of spring 2014 and 9 who were students when the building opened in 2003. In addition to primary data, various secondary data were collected to provide a richer account of the timeline and to triangulate the insider-outsider perspectives from the primary data. The secondary data include building planning committee meeting minutes (from the late 1990’s), monthly DL library staff meeting minutes (2004-2013), press releases (1999-2011), and focus group and survey summary reports (2004-2011). All data were imported into Atlas.ti for coding.

Following a grounded, inductive approach for the data analysis, the researchers iterated between data collection, data analysis, and exploration of the relevant literature. We began with first-order analysis and developed an initial coding scheme of 58 first-order, in vivo codes (Van Maanen 1979; Strauss and Corbin 1998), which was further modified and elaborated into higher-order categories and themes as we iterated between the literature and data (see Table 1). Specifically, as the in vivo codes emerged, we considered literature on place identity (e.g., Elsbach, 2003) and identity change process (e.g., Hatch and Schultz, 2002) and combined codes into higher level categories which sometimes (but not always) fitted with theoretical concepts from these literatures.

Results

In Table 1, we summarize the initial data structure resulting from our data analysis, so far. It is organized according to a four-level hierarchy, with the first one (first order concepts, on the left side) being the closest to our raw data, the second and third (respectively called categories and themes) being at a higher level of conceptualization, and the fourth representing main identity change sub-processes (e.g., mirroring, impressing, and possibly internalizing). The events underlying the identified categories, although presented in sequence in the table, were rather iterative and often overlapping. For example, the counteracting of an identity threat on the groups’ image (i.e., category d) was instantiated on multiple occasions, and at times, occurred in parallel to the reinforcing of an identity threat on the place’s image (i.e., category g). Thus, the data as presented in this section do not assume a sequential order.

Given that we are still in the process of coding and analyzing some of our data, we only briefly summarize, in the following pages, the initial eight categories identified in Table 1 (second column). The first four categories relate to the mirroring sub-process, whereas the last four belong to the impressing sub-process. Although not discussed in our results, our data also provide initial support for a third sub-process (which we tentatively label “internalizing” and describe as the expressions of identity that are assumed or suppressed by the librarians), which appears to also play a role in creating a group workplace identity.

Mirroring

Mirroring, as previously mentioned, is the sub-process by which identity is represented in the images of others (Hatch and Schultz 2002). In other words, it describes how identity was reflected back to librarians, as a group, via the patrons’ opinions and views about the group. This sub-process allowed librarians to get a sense of how their primary customers, the students patronizing the library, perceived them, as a group, in the context of their work (categories a and c). It also allowed them to understand how patrons perceived the library, as a place (category b). All concepts and themes subsumed under mirroring represent identity threats.

Category (a): threats to the group’s distinctiveness

Despite their many announcements and press releases about the opening of the DL, the librarians were troubled when they realized that patrons did not recognize them in their professional role. As one of them commented: “they’re not aware that we are librarians!” Whereas librarians expected to be extremely busy answering patrons’ research questions (“I think some people expected it to be busy at the desk in person...”), they came to realize that patrons did not understand why they were even present in the DL.
and thus did not leverage their skills and knowledge ("...and that didn’t pan out"). Indeed, most patrons did not realize that librarians were staffing the building, and thus that reference help and research guidance were readily available. Librarians also construed that patrons could not distinguish them from the other workers within the building. More specifically, the loss of boundary between the librarians and the student workers, who had been hired to provide technical support to the patrons, further increased the threat to their distinctiveness. A librarian commented: "I think they were hard-pressed to differentiate us from the student workers, except that we were older." That is, because librarians were co-located with these student workers, librarians acknowledged the difficulty in distinguishing one group from the other.

Table 1. Data Structure Resulting from Preliminary Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st Order Concepts</th>
<th>2nd Order Categories</th>
<th>3rd Order Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Librarians not recognized as such</td>
<td>a) Threats to the group’s distinctiveness</td>
<td>Threats to distinctiveness</td>
<td>Mirroring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians not distinguished from student workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Threats to the place’s distinctiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer lab</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ubiquity of library resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Threats to the place’s distinctiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians perceived as clerks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians’ higher education not leveraged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians’ deskilling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) Threats to the group’s status</td>
<td>Threats to status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name tags</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blitzes (marketing pitches)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Counteracting identity threats on the group’s image</td>
<td>Counteracting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custom-made reference desk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile book loan service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READ posters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional signage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e) Counteracting identity threats on the place’s image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology savviness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online reference chat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology loan program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f) Reinforcing identity threats on the group’s image</td>
<td>Reinforcing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library as social place</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library as computer lab</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>g) Reinforcing identity threats on the place’s image</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-worry attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial labeling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Internalizing (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactile &amp; olfactory aspects of books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Category (b): threats to the place’s distinctiveness

The mirroring sub-process that took place to inform librarians about the patrons’ views was not only about them (i.e., as a group), but also about their physical work environment (i.e., the library). That is, place images were also reflected back to librarians, who had to incorporate these images in their group workplace identity. Specifically, the new library, hosted in a brand new building, was certainly “an attractive, comfortable environment,” as reported in a patrons’ focus group organized by the DL librarians; it included high-end furnishing, over 1,300 windows to let in natural lighting, and a coffee shop. But given the absence of books, the space itself was not recognized as a library, in the physical sense of this concept. What was present was a large number of computers and, although computers are commonly found in libraries, the librarians’ perception was that patrons considered the DL as a computer lab: “that people still don’t know [that it is a library] - that sparks a little identity crisis for us... They know it’s a computer lab because there are five hundred computers.” Moreover, the ubiquity of the library resources, in that many services could be accessed from locations other than the DL building (i.e.,
General IS Topics

anywhere with Internet access), further added to the librarians’ construed image of patrons not seeing the building as a library. A librarian argued: “[Some patrons] haven’t really got it down as to how the Web is different from the library. They overlap...especially the ones who are going from Google Scholar.”

Category (c): Threats to the group’s status

What became aggravating for the librarians was that, of the few questions they would receive from the patrons, most of these did not require them to use their library knowledge or reference skills. Indeed, many questions were directional or clerical in nature, and librarians were not only annoyed by this situation, but also felt denigrated to a lower status than one they were accustomed to. One librarian mentioned, “We weren’t getting reference questions at all. We were just getting staplers, printers, and those kinds of [questions]...When you stand back and you look at it, you’re like, ‘Is this what I’m doing with my two Master’s degrees?’ It kind of gets demoralizing.” Indeed, librarians were not busy with research endeavors, but with responding to requests to point to the nearest bathroom, to fix a jammed printer, or to perform other menial tasks. One librarian stated that “it was slightly ego-bruising,” while another explained that “it was a great deskilling of our tool set.” In essence, the demands from the patrons were such that the traditional professional status associated with the librarians’ college education (often at a graduate level) was greatly challenged.

Impressing

Because they were not pleased with the images mirrored by the patrons about their group and workplace, librarians had to respond to these. An impressing sub-process thus ensued, in which librarians sought to project a different expression of their identity to their patrons (Hatch and Schultz 2002). The librarians impressed identities relating both to themselves, as a group, and to their workplace (i.e., the library). At this point, we have emergent support to distinguish two types of impressing mechanisms: counteracting and reinforcing. Whereas counteracting implies resisting some aspects of an image, reinforcing suggests embracing the image. Again, each of these mechanisms can be associated with the librarians, as a group (categories d and f), or with the library, as a place (categories e and g).

Category (d): Counteracting identity threats on the group’s image

A first mechanism instantiated through this sub-process was one of counteracting, where librarians resisted some aspects of their group’s mirrored images by emphasizing who they were and what services they could offer. For example, name tags uniquely identifying each librarian (with his/her name and title as a librarian) were created and worn by all librarians. With such name tags, it was harder for patrons to confuse librarians with student workers. Furthermore, the name tags invited interactions between patrons and librarians. Another way by which librarians further impressed on the patrons who they were was by organizing “blitzes,” which were short presentations conducted at the beginning of classes to explain the services they could provide. These blitzes were quite effective, as reported in the minutes of a librarians’ meeting: “Staff reported that the blitzes may indeed have been successful as desk traffic has picked up and students are saying that they didn’t know reference librarians worked in the building until they came to their classes.” Roving was a third technique put forward to counteract threats to the librarians’ identity. The idea behind roving was that a librarian would walk through aisles of the computerized area of the library, indirectly observe patrons interacting with library resources, and offer help when there would be an apparent need. However, this initiative did not last very long, as librarians perceived that patrons did not appreciate this: “the trouble was people got kind of creeped out because, you know, you were creeping up behind them.”

Category (e): Counteracting identity threats on the place’s image

Counteracting also occurred to respond to identity threats on the library, as a place. In other words, librarians enacted some actions to impress on patrons that their place of work should indeed be considered as a library. One of the first things they did to promote this idea was to have a reference desk custom-built and to locate it in a high-traffic area of the building to recreate the look and feel of a traditional library space. A librarian explained, “When you walk in the door, there is a [reference] desk, and that does help to remind people that you’re in a library and you can get library help when you’re
there.” Another technique was to “bring back the books” in the library, as books were indeed considered the most symbolic artefact identifying a library. Accordingly, a book-mobile was implemented on a trial basis, where librarians would set up a table by the coffee shop (the busiest area of the building) with an assortment of books for patrons to browse and possibly borrow. Also leveraging the symbol of the book, librarians purchased and framed a series of “READ Posters,” which portrayed celebrities holding books: “We put them up because we were trying to get across that we’re a library. So we put up the READ posters and we thought they were fun...and funny. I mean, who doesn’t like to look at Denzel Washington dressed in a suit reading a book?” These actions aimed to counteract patrons’ perceptions that the DL was not a library by showcasing traditional library artifacts in the DL.

Category (f): Reinforcing identity threats on the group’s image

Another mechanism that fell under the impressing sub-process was one we referred to as reinforcing, where librarians embraced some aspects of their group’s mirrored images. Again, as librarians were often mistaken as computer support personnel, they decided to leverage this part of their image and became much more adept with technology. For example, they became very active with online chat, realizing that they needed to meet patrons where they actually were. Indeed, from an interesting experiment in the early days of the DL, online chat support became the most prevalent way for librarians to service patrons with research requests. Librarians also trained themselves to be proficient with many software packages, to better serve their patrons. A librarian explained: “We’re learning how to teach software and then how to integrate research into that software, like teaching them [the patrons] i-Movie and how to make a documentary and incorporate library resources into that sort of medium or a visual medium.” In addition, a tablet loan program (for Kindles and i-Pads) was also created, which librarians—not the computer support staff—made possible. A librarian described the sense of empowerment she felt by embracing technology: “I feel like sort of cutting edge, for lack of a better word,” while another reflected on their obligation to do so: “We have to be ahead of the curve […] I mean, we have to be looking ahead and seeing what kind of impact [technology] is going to have for us.”

Category (g): Reinforcing identity threats on the place’s image

We observed the reinforcing mechanism being enacted on another target—the place of work. Specifically, librarians also embraced some aspects of their workplace’s mirrored images. For example, many patrons viewed the new DL building as a very comfortable space where they could linger or socialize. As a librarian described: “I feel like studying in this building is more of a social studying because everyone is going to be here and there’s the good coffee shop.” Instead of counteracting this image, librarians decided to reinforce it by making the library an even more engaging place for patrons. They created an “ambiance committee” in charge of increasing the library’s appeal and attractiveness. This group investigated the addition of artworks, plants, accent walls, and the like. A librarian mentioned her initiative: “I’m working now with the art school on offering the building as a venue for student display of artwork and site-specific installation and things like that.” In the same vein, because patrons often perceived the library space as a giant computer lab, librarians decided to go along with this idea and to further provide computer-related spaces within the building, such as by creating a digital media lab. A librarian justified the idea of the media lab: “[it is] to kind of make what we do more attractive to them [patrons] and to say that we can use these spaces as a place where they can experience a workshop environment.” Another librarian further commented on why the media lab was a good idea: “if they [the patrons] are going to see us as just an electronic resource, well, then let’s do more electronic things.”

Discussion

In this study, we presented preliminary support for the process of creating a group workplace identity—specifically, in workplaces that have been digitized. We showed how it entails a complex dynamic of intertwining both group image and place image. We first emphasized how identity threats were targeted not only at librarians, but also at the place of their work (the library). Types of threats included those to the distinctiveness of the library and those to the distinctiveness and status of the librarians. In addition, we revealed how the process of creating a group workplace identity entails librarians enacting different mechanisms to counteract and reinforce both the perceived group and place images.
Given that we have additional interviews to code and analyze (mainly from the patrons, but also from some librarians), the proposed model is tentative, as we expect that additional insights will emerge as we progress with our work. For example, we cautiously propose that an internalizing sub-process, where expressions of identity are dealt with by the librarians and for the librarians (as opposed to the patrons), may also come into play (possibly with its own set of mechanisms). In addition, we have not analyzed the proposed mechanisms (e.g., counteracting, reinforcing) in terms of the types of threats they may be addressing (e.g., threats on distinctiveness or status), and we plan to closely look at this relationship as we continue our data analysis.

Contributions

Even at this early stage, we can point to some likely contributions resulting from our research. First, whereas workplace identity is a construct that has been used mostly at the individual level of analysis (e.g., Elsbach, 2003, 2004), we argue that it can be elevated to the group level, a theoretical approach called “concept traveling” (Osigweh Yg 1989). Dixon and Durrheim (2000) refer to the many formulations of place identity at the individual level as problematic; they contend that the collective nature of the relations between persons, identity and material settings should rather be explored. This is what we did in our case study, as we show how librarians, as a group, struggled with defining who they were within the context of their workplace; the threats they perceived were aimed at the group rather than any individual, and so were the responses to these threats. We contend that using the construct of workplace identity at the group level is reasonable and useful.

Second, it is clear that group workplace identity is a concept that should not only relate to a group of professionals and the work they do, but also, and possibly as notably, to the place where these professionals work. In fact, in this study, we showed that librarians were affected by how others perceived them and their workplace, and they responded to both types of threats concurrently. Essentially, librarians determined that the place in which they worked did define, to a great extent, how others perceived them and how they also saw themselves. Our case study thus addresses a limitation of existing research, which has largely ignored how places, and the identities they embody and circumscribe, are imbued with meaning (Dixon and Durrheim 2000).

Third, and as indicated above, we believe that a third sub-process, internalizing, may also be a way to incorporate threats into group’s workplace identity. Identifying the role of such a sub-process would augment our understanding of the dynamic of identity change suggested by Hatch and Schultz (2002).

Last, our study responds to recent calls for research in terms of (1) greater theorizing about time in identity research, i.e., the process by which identity changes or is created (Pratt, 2012), (2) consideration of the “place” as part of identity (Elsbach and Pratt 2007), and (3) enrichment of the identity literature in a technology context, such as in digital work environments (Elsbach and Pratt 2007; Nach and Lejeune 2009).

In terms of practical contributions, our study shows that the many advances in digital media and technologies may disrupt some professions on many fronts. Specifically, for some groups, work practices may change, and so will work environments. Both of these phenomena will impel work groups to forge new identities, especially as they sense outsiders’ perceptions of their group and workplace. Organizations should keep in mind this dual effect—group and workplace—as they help their employees embrace the new digital era and recognize that it may take time before employees fully identify with their new physical work environment.
References


Chappell, B. 2013. “Bookless public library opens in Texas,” NPR.


