Managing Organizational Identity Displays through Website Design: Insights from a Hermeneutic Study

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ABSTRACT

Organizations’ design of their presence on digital properties – their own websites, online communities, and social media sites, represent identity displays to stakeholders. While this is understood, what is less clear is how specific elements of their design – of verbal and visual displays as well as selection of properties on which to undertake those displays – communicate specific elements that contribute to a coherent identity display. In this manuscript, we employ a hermeneutic approach to studying identity displays across digital properties inhabited by four organizations – Apple, Southwest Airlines, Starbucks, and Walmart. Our research suggests that organizational identities are, in fact, revealed in design of their presence on digital properties, that organizations manifest strategies for managing inconsistent elements of their identity across digital properties and communicating identity continuity over time, but that displays on these properties also reveal cues inconsistent with their identities. Our research then considers how stakeholder audiences react to organizations’ disparate identity display strategies.
INTRODUCTION

Organizational identity is “that which is core, distinctive, and enduring about the character of an organization” (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000: 63). Creation and protection of organizational identity is essential to gaining and maintaining legitimacy, and organizations’ consequent access to essential resources (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations therefore strive to manage identity displays across different audiences (Gioia, 1986). These displays may be viewed as sense-giving processes, where organizations attempt to shape stakeholders’ perceptions of the organization (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Identity messages are projected using verbal and visual representations and propagated through artifacts such as press releases, annual reports, websites and other digital media (e.g., Glynn, 2000). Digital media are increasingly becoming a primary point of contact between organizations and their stakeholders (Esrock & Leichty, 2000).

Organizations have many digital options for presenting themselves to stakeholders – websites they control, online communities on which they collaborate with stakeholders, and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest, which are owned and controlled by other organizations that share varying levels of design control with corporate users. In addition, the breadth of social media and mobile computing based tools have made it possible for organizations’ stakeholders to modify, even hijack, organizations’ self-representations. We refer to these different locales for identity displays as “digital properties”, which we analogize to real properties over which individuals and organizations maintain varying levels of ownership and control. While we have a fair understanding of how identity displays are tied up with material properties (Derber, 2000; Harris & Brown, 1996; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2005), less is understood about identity displays on digital properties. Yet, the plethora of properties across which organizations may undertake identity displays provides both an opportunity for outreach and cooptation if
well-managed (e.g., Navis & Glynn, 2011), as well as a threat of tainted identity if managed poorly (Goffman, 1963). The question we therefore address is two-fold: First, how do organizations design their presence across the different types of digital properties so as to manage their identities? What sorts of cues do they employ? Are there differences in the identity displays undertaken across the different types of properties? Second, how do organizations’ identity displays relate to their audiences’/stakeholders’ reactions? Are there specific properties of the cues that lead to different types of audience reactions? Do displays on certain types of properties evoke different responses?

To explore organizations’ identity displays across digital properties, we draw upon hermeneutics. While perspectives on hermeneutics are diverse, we adopt the definition of hermeneutics as “a theory and method of interpreting human action and artifacts” (Jary and Jary 1991: 208). Despite wide acceptance of the hermeneutic approach in social science research (Bauman, 2010), it is rarely adopted in technology research (Sarker & Lee, 2006). The lack of hermeneutic research related to design of organizations’ digital properties threatens to leave significant gaps in our understanding of audience experiences related to the constitution and interpretation of organizational identity (Geertz, 1993; Sarker & Lee, 2006). Employing a hermeneutic approach allows us to go “beyond what the literature leads us to expect, thereby providing us the opportunity to add to the current body of knowledge” (Sarker & Lee, 2006: 130). We do so by undertaking three levels of interpretation of the digital properties of four organizations – Apple Inc., Southwest Airlines, Starbucks Corporation, and Walmart Stores. We begin by subjecting the digital properties of the four organizations studied to a grammatical interpretation, where we carefully examine the structural aspects of their verbal and visual displays. We then conduct a historically-situated interpretation, relating observations from our
grammatical interpretation to the historical – biographical and material – context of the organizations. We finally conduct a subjective interpretation, in which we bring to bear our subjective assessment of identity displays across digital properties, as well as observations of the subjective reactions of other audience members.

IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN SITE DESIGN

Organizational identity is an organization’s unique core represented within and outside the organization through use of symbols (Olins, 1989). The defining dimensions of organizational identity are a “central character, distinctiveness, and temporal continuity” (Albert & Whetten, 1985: 265). “Central characteristics” are deep-rooted attributes that make up the “soul” of an organization (Corley et al., 2006: 91). “Distinctiveness is predicated on comparison, on judgments of similarity and difference to comparable entities” (Corley et al., 2006: 92). As an organization changes, portraying temporal continuity in its identity is essential to perceived coherence of its identity (Gioia et al., 2000; Whetten & Mackey, 2002).

Identity displays are particularly salient in online impression management. Websites are an important point of contact for most organizations (Gregg & Walczak, 2008). Winter, Saunders & Hart (2003) suggested that “Websites should be considered ‘electronic storefronts’ or public work areas providing frames of symbolic representations that create impressions of their sponsoring firms.” Individuals viewing these sites make sense of the organizations they represent by interpreting symbols and attributing socially constructed meanings to them. At the individual level, members of online communities rated reviews that revealed information about the reviewers’ identity more favorably (Forman, Ghose, & Wiesenfeld, 2008). In the presence of incomplete information, individuals construct meaning by filling in gaps in understanding by activating existing mental models. For example, “when customers have incomplete information
about product quality (i.e., a lack of intrinsic cues), they make inferences about product quality based on extrinsic cues that are readily available and easily evaluated” such as those found on organizations’ websites (Wells, Valacich, & Hess, 2011). In a material setting, large, comfortable office chairs are easily evaluated cues, potentially symbolizing “professionalism”; brightly colored, patterned carpet may symbolize “fun” or a “child-friendly” atmosphere. Just as furniture and décor project meaning in the material world, website attributes (e.g., color-scheme, graphics, navigability, etc.) project meaning in the digital world (Wells et al., 2011). Prior research has noted that symbolic representations online affect user experience (Cyr, Head, Larios, & Pan, 2009; Hassanein & Head, 2007), emotional experience (Garrett, 2010), trust (Abbasi, Zhang, Zimbra, Chen, & Nunamaker Jr, 2010; Gefen & Straub, 2003), product quality attributions (Wells et al., 2011), and perceptions of “warmth” or social presence (Hassanein & Head, 2007; Yoo & Alavi, 2001).

Symbolic representations projected online are inextricably linked to identity management, but like material artifacts, digital artifacts representing organizations’ identities are not always controlled by the organization. Thus, we distinguish between cultural artifacts that are owned properties, coopted properties, collaborative properties and hijacked properties. Each type of artifact has a unique governance context and therefore affects identity transmission differently. Artifacts on owned properties are controlled by the focal organization’s rules and the organization therefore controls images projected on these properties. Those on coopted properties are jointly controlled by multiple organizations, requiring cooperating organizations to synthesize their rules and the focal organization to relinquish some control over images projected on these properties. Artifacts on collaborative properties are developed and maintained by multiple interests that come together in order to develop property governance.
rules, but these properties are ultimately controlled by the hosting organization. Finally, artifacts on *hijacked properties* resemble those originally projected by the focal organization, but have been adopted and manipulated by a third party and cannot be controlled by the focal organization. See Table 1 for category explanations of sample material and digital artifacts.

**Table 1: Governance Contexts of Different Types of Properties**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Governance Context</th>
<th>Sample Artifacts from the Material World</th>
<th>Sample Artifacts from the Digital World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owned</td>
<td>Focal organization’s rules</td>
<td>Corporate locations, physical products, print reports</td>
<td>Websites, digital products, digital reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Emergent rules</td>
<td>Research parks, urban community gardens</td>
<td>Blogs, online communities, YouTube channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coopted</td>
<td>Synthesized rules of two or more organizations</td>
<td>Campus locations, non-company stores</td>
<td>Social media sites, mobile apps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hijacked</td>
<td>Legal environment curtailing libel</td>
<td>Billboards, clothing (e.g., resembling organizations’ uniforms or nametags)</td>
<td>Private sites, social media sites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Owned Properties**

The symbols projected through owned, digital properties contain answers to questions about “who” the organization is by providing information about the organization’s identity - i.e., its products, values, unique features. Together, the explicit and symbolic information provided by websites composes an organization’s “e-image,” the electronic image presented by an organization (Gregg & Walczak, 2008). Though research suggests organizations are intentional in the way they portray the organization online (Hesketh & Selwyn, 1999), anecdotal evidence suggests organizations are not always cognizant of the potential impact of images they project online or the importance of identity management in their Web presence. Even when aware of the importance of identity management, the global nature of the Internet presents organizations with the challenge of matching relevant symbols with intended audience. Organizations can design
owned properties to project any desired image, but mismatching symbols between intended audiences can make an organization appear incompetent or uncaring (Goffman, 1959; Winter et al., 2003) and making it vulnerable to identity-undermining and legitimacy-threatening parodies.

**Collaborative Properties**

Collaborative properties provide organizations a way of engaging stakeholders online without sacrificing control of projected image. Collaborative, digital properties include social media applications internal to the organization such as corporate blogs or organization-specific online communities. Coopted social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook tend to be more popular than collaborative social media sites. This trend is likely due to the “authentic nature” of coopted sites despite their ties to organizations (Castells, 2007) and the balance between freedom and accountability that coopted sites offer (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010). Despite challenges associated with making collaborative sites feel authentic (Castells, 2007), attracting users and retaining them (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011), collaborative properties provide organizations with a platform for identity transmission wherein social advantages may be reaped without loss of projected image control.

**Coopted Properties**

The “social media movement” has changed the way organizations operate and initiated a transition toward “social business” (Deans, 2011). Social business models involve use of Web 2.0 social media applications to facilitate new ways of collaboration both internally and externally with customers, business partners and suppliers (Culnan et al., 2010). Due to the collaborative nature of the social media, organizations struggle with questions regarding how much of the information flow can and should be controlled by the organization. While owned, digital properties can be controlled completely by organizations, control of coopted, digital
properties, such as external social media sites, are jointly controlled by the focal organization, the social media organization and social media users. This dynamic requires managers to reexamine the role of outside audiences in shaping the organization. Successful transition to social business models offers competitive advantage, but only if managers are able to embrace collaboration, relinquish control, and engage in shared decision making (Deans, 2011).

**Hijacked Properties**

Any artifact that can be used by an entity to display identity, can also be used by others to contest or indict that portrayed identity (Ross, 2001). In the digital world, “social media has exploded as a category of online discourse where people create content, share, bookmark and network at a prodigious rate” (Asur & Huberman, 2010: 492). Because the Internet is now a ubiquitous part of everyday life, widespread diffusion of messages can occur rapidly with little user effort (Yetgin, Young, & Miranda, 2012). When these messages paint an organization in a bad light, the organization may suffer legitimacy losses. Kane, Majchrzak, and Ives (2010: ii) noted one “challenge presented by the corporate use of social media is in whether and how to manage the uncontrollability of a crowd in a way that avoids damage to the company’s reputation from negative publicity, yet harnesses the value that an uncontrolled crowd can bring in terms of brand loyalty and innovation.” Uncontrolled crowds can threaten organizations when they sense misalignment between the projected image of an organization and reality, and respond with a cultural backlash. When cultural backlash occurs, organizations may find themselves at the center of a campaign by loosely coupled groups of consumers, anti-brand activist, bloggers, opinion leaders, competitors or entertainment media, in which disparaging images and stories about the organization are circulated across the Web (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). These campaigns against organizations can take a variety of forms including boycotts,
demonstrations, public relations campaigns, parodies, culture jamming, satire and viral memes (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006). The cultural artifacts distributed in these campaigns often “hijack” symbolic representations put forth by the organization and manipulate the meaning of the those symbols in order to activate schemas in audiences which will encourage audiences to fill in gaps in knowledge about the organization in a specific way. The marketing literature uses the term “brand hijack” to describe the process of consumers usurping control of the evolution of a brand from marketing professionals (Wipperfürth, 2007).

Brand hijacks occur within consumer subcultures in two ways (Cova & Pace, 2006). First, consumers may unilaterally seize control of representations of the ideology underlying the brand. Second, consumers may undertake to co-create representations of ideology and evolution of that ideology. This co-creation may be invited by the focal organization or instigated by consumers.

Building on this notion of a brand hijack, we use the term “hijack” to refer to efforts made by external audiences to manipulate the symbolic meaning of projected images put forth by the organization. While these symbolic constructions may represent the focal organization either positively or negatively, our use of the term “hijack” connotes organizations’ loss of control of symbolic productions relevant to their identity.

HERMENEUTICS: THEORY AND METHOD

Hermeneutics originated in the study of theology and Biblical interpretation. The term “hermeneutics”, deriving from Hermes, the messenger who delivered the messages of the gods to mortals, implies that hermeneuticians mediate between the meanings inscribed by producers of cultural artifacts and the meanings gleaned by readers of the hermeneuticians’ accounts (Mueller-Vollmer, 2000). Hermeneutic thought varies considerably in regard to what hermeneutics entails. The first issue on which hermeneuticians vary is on the object of the
hermeneutic endeavor. Some, like Ricoeur, typically those that emphasize the linguisticality of interpretation and understanding, view the hermeneutic endeavor as pertaining solely to “the interpretation of texts” (Ricoeur, 1981: 43). Others view the domain of hermeneutic inquiry as encompassing any “cultural artifact.” Following Dilthey, who believed that the “subject” of hermeneutics is any form of human expression, Davey (2002: 437) described hermeneutics as “a universal method of understanding concerned with grasping the meaning of all cultural expressions irrespective of whether they were political, artistic or philosophical.” In addition to analyses of texts – e.g., CEO letters to shareholders (Prasad & Mir, 2002), chat messages (Dickey, Burnett, Chudoba, & Kazmer, 2007), the transcript of a GSS meeting (Lee & Dennis, 2012) – hermeneutics has been applied in the study of art (Carroll, 2008) as well as to conceptualize the design process, analogized as text (Sarker & Lee, 2006).

Early hermeneutics focused largely on methodology, concerning itself with criteria for determining “perfect understanding” (Chladenius, 2000) and delineating types of interpretations (Droysen, 2000) and sources of meaning (Boeckh, 2000). Dilthey used “hermeneutics” and “verstehen” interchangeably to refer to the method by which shared understandings between creator and interpreter are attained (Jary & Jary, 1991). Recognition of hermeneutics as theory culminated from Heidegger’s view of understanding as an “existential structure” (2000a: 215), and therefore an ontology, not just epistemology. Nonetheless, Habermas cautioned against dispensing with “the business of methodology altogether” in hermeneutic pursuits (Habermas as cited in Mueller-Vollmer, 2000: 41). Though hermeneutics is a valuable tool for understanding MIS phenomena, few hermeneutics studies have been published in top MIS journals (Lee and Dennis, 2012). This is likely due to the broad range of hermeneutic conventions, of which none is dominant. Hermeneutic inquiry has been described as “a veritable crossroads where
tendencies as diverse as phenomenology and linguistic analysis, semantics and the critique of ideologies, structuralism and conceptual analysis, Marxism and Freudianism come together’ (Madison, 1988, p. 25). See Appendix 1 for an overview of some hermeneutic conventions.

**A Hermeneutic Lens on Identity Expression in Artifact Design**

Interpretation is a function not only of interpreters’ pre-understandings (Chalmers, 2004; Sarker & Lee, 2006), but also their interest: “From the interest of the subject arises the nature of the formulation of the enquiry, the direction of the investigation, and so the hermeneutic principle applying at any given time” (Bultmann, 1955: 252). Our interest is in identity displays across digital spaces. This interest informs our preunderstandings based on the literature that we read, which, in turn provides lenses through which we identify and view focal artifacts.

Ricoeur clarified the link between hermeneutic investigation and the identity of a text’s author. He noted that the discourse underlying speech or writings is inextricably linked to the identity of the speaker/author: it “refers back to the speaker by means of a complex set of indicators, such as personal pronouns” and is therefore “self-referential”, an event at which “someone expresses himself in taking up speech” (1981: 133). Extending Ricoeur’s notion of self-referentiality of discourse underlying texts to the production of all cultural artifacts, we view all such productions as expressions of the producer’s identity.

For Heidegger, understanding was a “primordial,” existential activity, and meaning a property of “being there” (2000b: 224). In his perspective, hermeneutics is therefore both a scientific and a lay endeavor. This view suggests that artifacts appearing on non-owned properties represent agents’ interpretation – deconstruction and co-construction – of organizations’ identity. Further, Heidegger noted that “in the projecting of the understanding, entities are disclosed in their possibilities” (Heidegger, 2000b: 224). In other words, agents’
interpretation of organizations’ artifacts is revelatory not only with regard to the organizations, but of the interpreting agents themselves. This view of agents revealing themselves via their interpretations resonates with Goffman’s (1959) position that actors’ identity claims and reactions to others’ claims is a contest for control of the definition of the situation at hand. Underlying such identity contests are conflicts over interests (Glynn, 2000). Thus, in understanding identity contests, we are mindful of Chladenius’ notion of point-of-view – that one’s biographical situation shades one’s interpretation of an artifact, creating the “relativity of the account” given by the individual (Mueller-Vollmer, 2000: 7).

Heidegger informs our hermeneutic investigation of online identity displays by noting the salience of emotion: “understanding always has its mood” (Heidegger, 2000a: 215). Heidegger’s focus on affect in understanding was echoed by Ricoeur, who viewed the perlocutionary act in a discourse event as the provocation of an affective response. Two perspectives exist on the evocative nature of words. One perspective holds that while “words are central to understanding ideas,” they “are least important in understanding emotions,” which entails non-verbal cues (Barsade, 2002). The other contends that “expressing emotions through writing is neither impossible nor a tour de force” (Fayard & Metiu, 2012: 31). Consistent with Fayard and Metiu’s position, Yoo and MacInnis (2005) were able to manipulate the emotional content of advertisements through their verbiage, holding the visuals constant. Between these two perspectives is a more nuanced view of the role of words in emotional communication, derived from the computer-mediated communication literature. In this area, researchers have found online communication to dampen the communication of positive affect, but heighten the communication of negative affect (Byron, 2008).

The evocative nature of visual cues is uncontested. Websites images and colors (Rosen &
Purinton, 2004) influence their emotional appeal to users (Garrett, 2010). Images attract viewer attention (Riegelsberger, Sasse, & McCarthy, 2002); images of people, in particular, induce favorable dispositions toward the website (Riegelsberger, Sasse, & McCarthy, 2003). Site aesthetics enhance users’ trust in the website (Karvonen, 2000). Site complexity and order contribute to users’ experience of pleasantness on hedonic tasks, but complexity without order detracts from experienced pleasantness on instrumental tasks (Deng & Poole, 2010). Visual cues that contribute to the “warmth” and social presence of websites have been found to enhance users’ favorable reactions to websites (Gefen & Straub, 2003; Hassanein & Head, 2007).

The emotional content of cultural artifacts is critical to successful identity displays. Hatch and Schultz (2002: 1002) noted that “when stakeholders are in sympathy with expressions of organizational identity, their sympathy connects them with the organizational culture that is carried in the traces of identity claims.” The power of organizational symbols is therefore in their ability to invite sympathetic social constructions of the organization.

**Toward a Hermeneutic Method**

Our investigation focused on the design of digital properties of four companies – Apple Inc., Southwest Airlines, Starbucks Corporation, and Walmart Stores. We purposefully sampled these organizations based first on our own familiarity with their products and services and their online presences. We did so in order to minimize what Gadamer termed our “prejudice” emanating from the “effective history” separating the production of the artifact and researchers’ interpretation (Mueller-Vollmer, 2000: 38-39). Habermas believed that this notion of “effective history” was a core methodological principle. The issue of the “effective history” separating artifact author and artifact interpreter is also echoed in Geertz’s (1983) concern for an emic rather than etic approach to understanding cultural artifacts.
Our second selection criterion was the presence of iconic leaders. The purpose of this criterion was to gain insight into steering principles that guided the organizations. Our third criterion was organizational visibility, operationalized as presence on the Fortune 500. This ensured that we would have sufficient data to enable the development of historically-situated interpretations of the companies. Our fourth criterion was long-standing and extensive presence in the digital economy. Each of these companies’ sites earned a first place “competitive rank” (in-sector rank) on Compete.com, with the exception of Walmart, which ranked second, behind Amazon.com. Our fifth selection criterion was companies with a strong presence in both the material and digital economies, therefore excluding pure internet companies such as Amazon.com. This ensured availability of material artifacts to permit us to historically situate our analyses. Table 2 summarizes the selection criteria for the four organizations studied.

**Table 2: Information on Selection Criteria across Four Organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Attributes</th>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
<th>Starbucks</th>
<th>Walmart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iconic leader</td>
<td>Steve Jobs</td>
<td>Herb Kelleher</td>
<td>Howard Schultz</td>
<td>Sam Walton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune rank (2011/2012)</td>
<td>35/17</td>
<td>205/167</td>
<td>229/227</td>
<td>1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compete.com competitive rank</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical stores/customer fronts</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>10,787</td>
<td>4,253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also selected organizations for their differences. The four organizations represent industries and stances toward and success with online communities and social media. While Apple, Southwest, and Starbucks have online communities, Walmart surprisingly does not. Then, Walmart’s and Starbucks’ aggressive social media posture has earned them places among the nine firms on the Wired/Kapital social index (Tate, 2012). While Southwest has not experienced the success of Walmart or Starbucks, it is active across a variety of social media domains. In contrast, Apple lags considerably in its social media presence.

**Data**

We began our investigation by capturing and collating representations of the organizations’
designs of their digital properties. These empirical materials included screen shots of organizations’ official websites, social media sites, and online communities, as well as text captures of each of these sites. We also captured identity-related messages projected by sources external to the organizations, e.g., parody images, spoof videos posted to YouTube, and pictures of clothing and other products caricaturizing the focal organizations. Parody data were collected by searching for the companies’ names plus “spoof” or “parody” in the Google search engine, Google images search engine and YouTube search feature.

While our investigation concerns design of digital properties, we also gathered data on the organizations’ material properties in order to further reduce the “effective history” separating us from the producers of the digital artifacts. Cultural artifacts or material properties collected included biographical materials – books and articles – on the iconic leaders of each organization, photos of material manifestations of the organizations’ brand – on their products, equipment, uniforms, and physical sites, and organizational publications released between 2010 and 2012.

**Three Levels of Interpretation**

From Boeckh and Ricoeur, we noted that the meaning of an artifact may be considered at three levels. The first is what Ricoeur (1981), borrowing from Austin’s and Searle’s speech act theory, terms the locutionary act, i.e., the act of stringing together a specific permutation of words, and Boeckh the *grammatical interpretation* based on the “literal meaning of the words” (Boeckh, 2000: 136). Words have been found to be critical elements of organizations identity displays and branding (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983). Brickson (2005) found employees’ verbalizations to reveal individualistic, relational and collectivist identities. Identity researchers have observed that first person plural pronouns are both instrumental in developing a shared identity and represent the existence of a collective
identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cheney, 1983; Fiol, 2002).

To assist in our grammatical interpretation of words used, we employed two tools. The first is Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2006). LIWC is a program that permits researchers to glean information about the linguistic composition of texts quickly. It focuses on “function” words, i.e., those that help structure sentences or serve a grammatical “function” (and constitute about 55% of words spoken or written), to the exclusion of “content” words, i.e., those that are specific to the context of the communication (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). In addition to providing basic metrics of verbosity and linguistic complexity, LIWC is particularly useful in surfacing emotional expression (Kahn, Tobin, Massey, & Anderson, 2007) as well as identity- and identification-invoking verbiage such as “we”, “us”, and “our” (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

To then consider “content” words, we used a program to count words, enabling us to surface keywords central to each organization quickly. These content words are often labels, laden with meaning about the organization and highlighted or adopted for the purpose of gaining social control (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). For example, Polletta and Jasper noted that “East German challengers to the Honecker regime in 1989, calling themselves ‘the people’ not only inspired greater participation than if they had used some other label but prevented a regime that also associated itself with ‘the people’ from attacking them as outsiders” (2001: 294). As such, labeling is often the product of a contest rather than social construction. Such contests may entail “recasting a negative distinction into a positive one (Black is beautiful), minimizing or bolstering a negative distinction (We’re not popular because we avoid playing politics), or changing the out-group with which the in-group is compared” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 24). The effects of labeling are de-individuating and evoke a category-specific “affective tone” that reifies
attributions of the category through a selective perceptual bias and self-fulfilling prophecy and “habits of seeing” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997: 49).

Finally, organizations’ identity claims are expressed through cultural artifacts such as logos, graphics, or other images (Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Consequently, to extend our grammatical interpretation to the non-verbal, we examined non-verbal attributes of artifacts collected, e.g., fonts, colors and images.

The second level of interpretation is what Ricoeur terms the illocutionary act, i.e., what is enacted in the saying. To better understand this, we borrow from Boeckh (2000: 136) to develop a historically-situated interpretation based on the “meaning of the words in reference to the material relations and context of the work.” Data collected on organizations’ material properties and artifacts, including leaders’ biographies, enables us to situate our interpretation of the digital artifacts within their historical milieu.

The third interpretation level is the perlocutionary act, i.e., the consequences provoked by the act. At this level, we therefore undertake a subjective interpretation of the “subject itself” and of the “subjective relations which lie in the aim and direction of the work” (Boeckh, 2000: 136).

Drawing upon Droysen (2000), we conducted this subjective interpretation in three stages. First, we conduct a pragmatic interpretation that “examines the causal nature of [the actual course of events] in order to reconstruct it” (Droysen, 2000: 129). Second, we conduct a conditional interpretation to identify conditions that make possible the actual state of affairs. These conditions include space, time, and “the material and moral means which enabled the course of the event to become an actuality” (Droysen, 2000: 130). Third, we undertook a psychological interpretation that “attempts to determine the acts of will which elicited the event”, concerning itself “with the person who willed the act, the forcefulness of that person’s will, his intellect, and
the extent to which all these things had an effect on the event” (Droysen, 2000: 130). While we cannot know the consequences of the designed sites for others, as part of the designers’ intended audience, we can certainly understand the consequences provoked in ourselves. We are then able to triangulate our subjective assessments of consequences of identity displays with objective metrics of response by other audience members and their counter-displays of organizational identities on hijacked properties.

In undertaking this subjective interpretation, we were mindful of Apel’s caution that the hermeneutic task is two-fold: that it “must be concerned with the a priori conditions of all understanding together with the special hermeneutic problems of the individual disciplines…” (in Mueller-Vollmer, 2000: 44-45). Therefore, we needed to understand artifacts as cultural expressions and understand digital artifacts as a subset of cultural expressions, i.e., technological productions. Our backgrounds as users and consumers of the chosen companies’ products and services permitted us to undertake a knowledgeable interpretation of the sites as a generic cultural expression. Our backgrounds in systems design and application development as well as teachers of systems design permitted our special appreciation of the digital artifacts as technological productions. We were also mindful of Boeckh’s distinction of interpretation, i.e., understanding only with reference to the focal object, versus criticism, i.e., understanding with reference to the object’s relationships with other entities and his belief that methodical hermeneutic inquiry requires the researcher be aware of the interrelationship between the two.

Finally, because “to understand is always to understand differently” (Bernstein as cited in Lee, 1991: 349), each of us conducted separate investigations of identity presentation and contestation across the four firms. Our investigations converged at our periodic meetings, leading to iterative identification of focal artifacts, collecting data on them, and discussing our
observations, ultimately converging on the “relatively univocal discourse” that Ricoeur posited
to be the essential hermeneutic task (1981: 44).

SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

Grammatical and historical interpretations summarized in Appendices 2 and 3 represent a
portion of our data, which we subsequently integrated with data relating to audiences’ subjective
reactions to the organizations’ displays to inform our subjective interpretation. Our observations
reveal that, tendencies toward isomorphism notwithstanding, organizations undertook distinctive
identity displays across their digital properties.

We characterized Apple’s identity as “Bauhaus.” This Bauhaus ethos was displayed via its
minimalist and functionalist verbiage and visuals across the design of its digital properties. It
was also visible in where they eschewed identity displays – a website About page and social
media sites. In the Bauhaus ethos, artifacts speak for themselves without adornment. An About
page’s lack of tangible functionality would be inconsistent with this ethos. Apple would also
find it more difficult to display a Bauhaus identity on coopted properties, over which they would
have less design control. Apple’s avoidance of coopted properties is also consistent of its aura of
intellectual elitism, its operational control based on executives’ belief in the intellectual
superiority of their employees and perfection of their designs. Notably, Apple’s absence of an
official social media presence does not appear to be hurting it: It “is turning in some lousy
reputation management but succeeding wildly in every way imaginable” (Shaughnessy, 2012).

Starbuck’s identity displays centered around elite connections, i.e., of an organization that
fosters and participates in intellectually-engaged and emotionally-connected communities.
Whereas Apple’s intellectual elites reside behind the walls of glass and chrome, Starbuck’s
displays convey the impression of the company coopting a community of intellectual elites,
people capable of solving the world’s problems. A high incidence of big words and conservative colors, each of which relate to intellectual development (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Katz & Breed, 1922), reinforces the intellectual image of Starbucks and its clientele. Fiol (1989) observed that use of “we” in CEOs’ letters to shareholders marked CEOs’ identification with their organizations or with their industry. Fiol et al. (1999: 463) referred to such first-person plural pronouns as “inclusive referents”, which “include and engage followers.” They found that charismatic U.S. Presidents employed inclusive referents more frequently when trying to engineer change than did non-charismatic Presidents (Fiol et al., 1999: 452). Fiol (2002) observed that use of “inclusive referents” tended to induce identification even among non-believers. In computer-mediated communication, use of first person plural pronouns reduced psychological distance and enhanced group members’ perceptions of their groups’ communication (Witt, 2004). Clinton era U.S. Labor Secretary, Robert Reich, applied “the pronoun test” to assess employees’ identification with their organizations, noting that employees’ use of “we” and “us” was indicative of a strong attachment to their organization (narrated in Rousseau, 1998). In this tradition, Starbucks’ use of first person plural pronouns contributes to the sense of connection it seeks to develop. The strong use of emotional language across its digital properties also contributes to the sense of emotional connectedness, supporting Fayard and Metiu’s (2012) position that writing can indeed be expressive.

Southwest’s identity displays represented its maverick spirit: passionate language and bold color choices across displays reinforced this identity and foster arousal, which can spur individuals to action (Russell and Barrett, 1999), such as planning a vacation. Images of airplane wings cutting through clouds further enforce the notion that Southwest is “going places” others are not, and is inviting consumers to “come along for the ride.”
Walmart’s identity centers around **friendly savings for all**. Its “everyman” identity displays seek broader appeal. Intellectual sophistication is not claimed either within the organizations or of their customers. Research has suggested that children have greater fluency with emotional language than do adults (Salovey & Mayer, 1994) and prefer lower wavelength colors (Katz & Breed, 1922). These companies’ choices of bright colors, images of middle-class families and the highly emotional tone of their verbiage is thus consistent with their efforts to appeal to a broad, “everyman” audience. Despite some similarities in design across organizations, design differences were used to transmit distinctive elements of organizations’ identities.

*Observation 1**: Organizations are able to display distinctive identities on digital properties through linguistic and visual design choices as well as via the properties on which they choose to engage in (or withhold) those displays.

We also noted some consistent inconsistencies in identity displays across digital properties. All organizations used more emotional language on their social media sites. This may be a function of perceptions of social media as spaces for engaging socially, even on properties coopted by corporations, and the consequent symbolic isomorphism toward emotional displays in these spaces. Similarly, the effervescent color, font, and visuals choices of the Southwest and Walmart sites were muted at social media sites, particularly on Facebook, clearly a function of design constraints on coopted properties.

In other cases, display inconsistencies could not be attributed to firms’ loss of design control on coopted spaces. First, we noted an inconsistency in Southwest’s historical privileging of employees over customers and their sites’ verbiage that focused more on customers than on employees. Similarly, the apparent Walton focus on employees was not visible on the Walmart sites. While the apparent inconsistency between displays and the organizations’ history may suggest that the organizations’ have changed over time, it may also reveal an inherent disconnect in the employees-are-family and customer-as-money-saving-boss facets of the corporate identity.
This may be attributable, in part, to organizations’ playing to disparate stakeholders in their identity displays. While emphasizing their employee-centric orientations may be internally morale-building, both stockholders and customers probably prefer to see a customer focus. This maintenance of multiple concurrent identity displays, based on “different conceptualizations … regarding what is central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization” has been termed identity pluralism (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Most organizations have, in fact, multiple “selves” (Corley et al., 2006; Glynn, 2000; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). Synergies are attained when different conceptualizations do not conflict with each other, e.g., Apple’s Bauhaus ethos and concern for control, Starbucks’ focus on intellectual engagement and emotional connectedness. When they do conflict, organizations manage the disconnect by portraying different conceptualizations so as to resonate with their target audience (Scott & Stephens, 2009). This identity management strategy has been termed robust action and its success depends on the extent to which organizations are able to segregate their different audiences (Padgett & Ansell, 1993).

We observed organizations’ efforts to segregate their audiences. For example, Southwest emphasized its self-conceptualization as employee-centric when addressing employees through social media and blogs, but emphasized customers on its website and online community.

When addressing customers or employees on owned or collaborative sites, Southwest’s colorful, unconventional personality comes through in its eye-popping color scheme. It even goes so far as to include the blue, red and yellow color scheme in candid photos uploaded to social media sites. When addressing shareholders in its annual report though, Southwest uses a black and white color scheme. Southwest’s use of logos also differs depending on the audience. A heart with wings insignia is used on its annual letter to shareholders, whereas images of a plane taking off are common on its customer-facing website and images of plane noses and tails
are common on employee-centered social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Language differed across properties too. Though its company blog, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest sites emphasize employees, Southwest’s website privileges customers over employees, collectively mentioning “Customer” 19 times and “Employee” or “Our people” only 5. All references to employees/our people were on the website’s About page, where “Customer” was also referenced 5 times. Southwest emphasizes its self-conceptualization as a profit-centered airline when addressing shareholders in their annual letter, focusing primarily on profitability.

While most photo displays on the company blog, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest depict employees having fun, the website features mainly images of exotic destinations, customers having fun and employees working hard. The differences in the Southwest’s displays are so stark that an unfamiliar observer might view Southwest’s shareholder letter and website without realizing both displays were put forth by the same company.

Similarly, Walmart separates its customer-facing social media presence from its employee-facing presence, the latter being password protected. By compartmentalizing identity displays on digital properties, organizations are able to minimize audiences’ perceptions of incongruences among them. Segregated identity displays were also visible in all organizations’ higher use of collective pronouns and emotional language on social media sites, which typically attract a younger and more egalitarian demographic, than on their websites or online communities.

Observation 2: Organizations manage conflicting identity conceptualizations by segregating displays of conflicting facets across different digital (and material) properties.

Communicating identity continuity is a critical identity management task (Gioia et al., 2000). Notably, the website About pages for Southwest, Starbucks, and Walmart each have a history/heritage section; each of these organizations use their Facebook About page as well as the Facebook timeline feature to highlight their identity continuity over time. Images of the
Walton family through the years, as well as patriotic displays, promote Walmart’s image as a family business, run by individuals who are “just like you” and able to relate to the average working family. Southwest’s extensive “vintage” album on Pinterest promotes nostalgia among employees. Both Southwest and Walmart depict variations in brand symbols – names and logos – over time. The Starbucks blog has a “Brand” section that discusses their logo, its evolution over time and a message from Schultz entitled “Looking Back to Look Forward.” In contrast, consistent with Jobs’ focus on inventing tomorrow rather than revisiting yesterday, Apple does not engage in any historical displays or reminiscing on its official digital properties. This aligns with Apple’s identity: though Apple’s products are innovative at the time of release, a timeline promoting how groundbreaking now-outdated electronics used to be would not project the desired sense of innovativeness. Apple’s eschewing of archives notwithstanding, organizations communicate identity continuity over time using timelines and archives.

Observation 3: Organizations communicate identity continuity over time through identity displays such as timelines and photo archives.

“In a business environment in which many corporate leaders strictly monitor every outgoing brand message – and sometimes threaten legal action when an outsider tinkers with their image – Starbucks executives have instead successfully built their brand by generating an often more relaxed approach” (Michelli, 2007: 116-117). As a consequence, many consumers have taken it upon themselves to play the role of brand advocate and promoter. Hijacked Starbucks properties therefore reinforce and amplify Starbucks’ identity displays just as frequently as they contest the displays. StarbucksMelody.com and Melody’s Facebook page and blog herald Starbucks programs and upcoming Starbucks product offerings and celebrate Starbucks’ company policies. The Starbucks FanPop.com site posts photos, videos, polls, answers, articles and links related to Starbucks; on such sites, fans serve as brand ambassadors.
Walmart’s controlled social media stance is markedly different from Starbucks’. Its arm’s-length engagement with its customer base translates to a different form of brand hijack. Whereas we noted many positive displays of the Starbucks brand across hijacked properties, hijacks of the Walmart brand were uniformly negative. In Wipperfürth’s (2007) terms, while we observed customers’ co-creation of the Starbucks’ brand in a fashion consistent with the organization’s own identity displays, we observed only identity seizure of the Walmart brand, i.e., individuals that tinkered with the Walmart brand did so only in a negative fashion.

Observation 4: Organizations designing their digital properties to permit customers to engage with them and with each other in creating identity displays are more likely to have their displays amplified and less likely to encounter brand seizure.

We observed that the visually simple and distinctive Apple, Starbucks, and Walmart logos were easily spoofed. Figure 1 displays three examples of spoofed logos of these organizations. These spoofs become particularly salient in mobilizing consumer activism against organizations. For example, during Apple’s Foxconn conflict, both visuals and verbiage of “rotten apple” appeared frequently in the media. In contrast, the Southwest sites displayed several different, more visually complex logos. Without the SOUTHWEST name being displayed, the logos used were not particularly distinctive and were therefore not easily spoofed. In fact, spoofs of Southwest often required labels to specify which airline was being targeted.

Figure 1: Spoofed Logos

Our observations revealed that cues other than logos are also subject to hijack. Additionally, competitors and protestors sometimes hijacked digital artifacts to promote themselves or their...
causes. For example, in Figure 2, Apple competitor, Samsung, and Starbucks competitor, McDonald, promote themselves by implicitly contrasting themselves to their competitors. In both cases, the focal companies are not named, apparent only because of the competitor’s seamless use of facets of the focal companies’ identity displays in their own message – i.e., reference to Apple’s “genius” motif in Samsung’s advertisement and reference to “bucks”, evocative of “Starbucks”, “espresso”, and brown backdrop in McDonald’s advertisement. Both these advertisements are successful because they reference organizational symbols that are individually – “genius” – or collectively – “bucks”, “espresso”, and brown backdrop – distinctive to the parodied organization. Material artifacts also provide the basis for digital hijacks. When a young man protested Starbucks’ minimum wage pay and poor working conditions in a YouTube video, his green apron was distinctive enough to identify him as a Starbucks employee (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D5LUq7lEjk).

Observation 5: Simple, distinctive symbolic representations are more easily hijacked than are more nuanced or complex representations.

Figure 2: Spoofed Motifs other than Logos

Identity displays lend themselves to parody through caricature. For example, Apple’s and Jobs’ aggressive claims to minimalism and innovativeness lend themselves to YouTube videos that cast Steve Jobs as omnipotent and omniscient and cartoons in which the next iPhone is so small as to fit in one’s eye as a contact lens would. Caricatures such as the ones presented in
Figure 3, which do not challenge organizations’ identity claims, amplify them.

**Figure 3: Parodying Identity Displays through Caricature**

![Parody images](image-url)

(a) The Omnipotent, Omniscient Steve Jobs  
(b) The “EyePhone”

When the caricatured identity is reframed to represent something unattractive though, it indicts the legitimacy of the premises informing organizations’ identity displays. For example, TheOatmeal posted a cartoon strip entitled “What’s it’s like to own an Apple product.” The strip depicted an individual purchasing a new Apple product – the iPride 3G, subsequently having a yard sale to purchase the recently-released iPride 4G, only to discover very shortly thereafter that the iPride 4GS, at 0.0025% thinner had been released. This cartoon not only caricature Apple’s innovativeness, but recasts it as profligate, decreasing the attractiveness of Apple’s innovativeness identity displays. In a similar fashion, Walmart’s “low cost” identity displays have been recast as “trashy” in many parodies, most notably on the popular meme site, “People of Walmart”, where a collection of images show Walmart customers in inappropriate, inexpensive, or funny clothing or accessories. Though assailing customer, not Walmart, identities, these parodies decrease attractiveness of Walmart’s “low cost” identity displays by equating “low cost” with “trashy”.

**Observation 6:** Whereas parodies simply caricaturing organizations’ identity displays increase attractiveness of those displays, parodies also reframing the caricatures decrease attractiveness of the displays and of the organizations themselves.
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of our work was to understand the manner in which organizations managed their identity displays through the design of their different digital properties. We also wished to understand responses by organizations’ audiences to organizations’ displays. Our hermeneutic analyses enabled us to better understand how organizations display their distinctive identities in the designs of their digital properties. Our analyses revealed that organizations displayed their identities through selective use of words and visuals as well as where they enacted their identity displays. These displays communicated with audiences cognitively as well as affectively. Given the prevailing sense that digital media – especially verbal cues – restrict the display of emotion (Byron, 2008), we were particularly intrigued to discover emotional displays through both words and color. We also observed organizational actors to be skillful in segregating conflicting self-conceptualizations in designing their identity displays across material and digital properties, displaying a capability for robust action (Padgett & Ansell, 1993). Finally, organizations also designed their digital properties to display narratives of identity continuity, a key challenge in managing organizational identities (Gioia et al., 2000).

Next, we observed the two forms of brand hijack alluded to by Wipperfürth (2007) – co-creation and seizure. We found that when organizations designed their digital properties to invite co-creation, hijackers tended to co-evolve the organization’s identity displays in a fashion that was consistent with their initial displays. In contrast, organizations that attempted to assume complete control of their identity displays and exclude outsiders’ participation in those displays tended to encounter brand seizure, where stakeholders simply represented competing – most usually unfavorable – displays at non-corporate sites. When hijacks occurred, facets of organizations’ identity displays that were simple and un-nuanced were more easily hijacked by
their competitors and other stakeholders. Finally, we observed that parodied identities were based on caricatures of a core value underlying organizations’ identity displays. These caricatures sometimes served to legitimize the organization parodied. When these caricatures were coupled with a reframe of the displayed value though, they invariably served to delegitimize the focal organization.

Our research provides organizations with actionable guidance on managing identity displays across different digital properties. At a granular level, we have highlighted verbal and visual choices that contributed to – and detracted from – the identities organizations wished to communicate. At a higher level, we have identified strategies that organizations use to manage their identity across different properties, i.e., their participation on different types of properties and the level of control they seek to exercise over others’ participation. Our research also points to the consequences of different types of identity display for the possibility of identity hijack.

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## APPENDIX 1: HERMENEUTIC RESEARCH IN INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Authors</th>
<th>Theoretical Foundation</th>
<th>Conceptual Orientations</th>
<th>Suggested Directions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lee 1994, Lee and Dennis 2012</td>
<td>Ricoeur, Boland</td>
<td>Philosophical and phenomenological hermeneutics - description and interpretation in terms of distanciation, autonomization, social construction, appropriation and enactment</td>
<td>Use the integrative framework provided by Lee (1991) to “support and strengthen positivist research in its production of scholarly knowledge in the mode of erkläre” (Lee 1994: 155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler 1998, Butler and Murphy 2007</td>
<td>Gadamer, Ricoeur</td>
<td>Philosophical and phenomenological hermeneutics - “realities are constructed from multiple, intangible mental constructions that are socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent on their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions… the investigator and the object of investigation are, interactively linked so that the 'findings' are literally created as the investigation proceeds” (Butler, 1998: 294)</td>
<td>There is an imperative for researchers to understand not only the fundamental features of human Being-in-the-world, but also their own existence in their 'life-world'.” (Butler, 1998: 298)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarker and Lee 2006</td>
<td>Hirsch, Gadamer</td>
<td>Emphasize validation hermeneutics - “hermeneutic inquiry is directed toward understanding socially constructed entities, whose existence depends on people, but nonetheless have a measure of independence in that they outlive and transcend the people who are sustaining them at any point in time” (Sarker and Lee, 2006: 133). Also appreciate philosophical hermeneutics - “meaning of text emerges through the fusion of the ‘text’ (a socially constructed entity) and the interpreter’s biography and tradition” (Sarker and Lee, 2006: 133).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickey, Burnett, Chudoba and Kazmer 2007</td>
<td>Becker, Geertz</td>
<td>Cultural hermeneutics – contextual relations are examined in terms of coherence, invention, intention and reference</td>
<td>Refine hermeneutic interpretations with literature Undertake new endeavors of interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Study</td>
<td>Habermas, Boeckh</td>
<td>Philosophical hermeneutics with an appreciation for critical social theory</td>
<td>Cultural hermeneutics can be used to shed light on the meaning of communication, specifically CMC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*JAIS Theory Development Workshop, Milan, Italy December 15, 2013*
APPENDIX 2: A GRAMMATICAL INTERPRETATION

Commercial use of the internet goes back almost two decades. Table A1 summarizes the history of the online presence of the four organizations. The earliest Wayback Machine archive (http://waybackmachine.org) for websites across the four organizations was for Apple – in October 1996 – and the most recent for Walmart – in November 1999. Consequently, we anticipate a level of symbolic isomorphism in site design (Glynn & Abzug, 2002), as organizations converge on internet “best practices.” Nonetheless, “self-presentations facilitate ‘identity work’” (Alvesson, 1994: 552). Differences in self presentations are therefore able to reveal organizations’ distinctive identity displays. We note that identity displays are revealing not only in what they contain, but also where they are enacted. Table A1 notes that Apple does not have an official social media presence and Walmart does not have an online community.

Table A1: History of Organizations’ Presence in the Digital Economy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Attributes</th>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
<th>Starbucks</th>
<th>Walmart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online community first archived</td>
<td>Feb 9, 2006</td>
<td>Feb 9, 2006</td>
<td>Mar 19, 2009*</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Page could not be crawled or displayed due to robots.txt; launch date obtained from Factiva
† Wayback does not have archives of Facebook (“can’t retrieve all the files…”) and Twitter (“URL has been excluded…”)

Our analysis of verbal cues focused on organizations’ identity portrayals on their homepage, which is their primary point of contact with external stakeholders, and their About page, in which organizations provide a deliberate representation of their identity to external stakeholders. While we investigated organizations’ presence across three social media properties, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, our analysis of verbal cues is limited to their Facebook presence, the only social media site that permits a verbal representation of their organization. On Facebook, we focused exclusively on the banner section and About pages, where organizations have most
control of identity displays. Our analysis of visual cues focused on the organizations’ websites, all three social media properties, and their online communities. See Table A2 for an overview of the organizations’ visual displays on their websites.

Table A3 summarizes the LIWC metrics across organizations’ owned, coopted, and collaborative properties. Table A4 summarizes the visual attributes of the digital properties across the four organizations. Other than total word count, all metrics in Table A3 represent proportions of the different categories of function words relative to the total word count in the text. “Big words” are words exceeding 5 letters. First person plural words include pronouns referencing a first person collective. Positive emotion words are those representing emotions such as love, optimism, and pleasure. Negative emotion words are those representing emotions such as anxiety, anger, and sadness.

Our first observation is that the incidence of function words across all five texts was considerably lower than the average of 55% noted by Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010). This suggests that sites focused largely on content words, i.e., words with meaning specific to their venues. This is not surprising. As noted earlier, successful identity displays entail highlighting one’s distinctiveness. Whereas function words serve a generic structuring purpose, content words enable expression of one’s distinctiveness.

**Apple Inc.**

The linguistic construction of the Apple site is minimalist. Their homepage uses the fewest number of words of the four sites studied and the simplest words\(^1\). It also had the fewest positive emotion words and no negative emotion words, contributing to the sterile quality of the site. The website lacked an About page, describing the corporation. In service to its multiple products, the

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\(^1\) Since organization names are likely displayed frequently and “Apple” was the shortest name, we redid this analysis without any organization names. The “big word” incidence was still lowest for the Apple homepage.
### Table A2: Visual Displays on Organizations’ Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Southwest Airlines</th>
<th>Starbucks</th>
<th>Walmart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Logos</strong></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Logo" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Logo" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Logo" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Logo" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fonts</strong></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Font" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Font" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Font" /></td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Color Scheme</strong></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Color" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Color" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Color" /></td>
<td>Many Colors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Images</strong></td>
<td>Hardware Images</td>
<td>Airplane Images</td>
<td>Coffeehouse and Coffee Images</td>
<td>Seasonal Product Images</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- **LIWC 2007** indicator for the frequency of visual displays.
- **Wordle** visual representation for the emotional tone of the website.
online community site was somewhat more verbose. The community site also used bigger words, but had the lowest total incidence of emotion words. Reported to be “the world’s biggest social media holdout”, Apple does not officially participate on social media sites either (Wasserman, 2012). The most frequently-used words at the Apple site were “Apple”, “iPhone”, “iPad”, “Store”, and “Watch”, reinforcing the Apple brand, its purpose – to sell products – and create a sense of anticipation in the reader. Besides verbiage representing time (i.e., delay from last post), the Apple brand and products, the dominant words at the community site were
“Communities” and “Support”.

With stark colors and sparse graphics, visuals at the Apple website contribute to a sense of aesthetic minimalism and modernity. Its logo is small and placed directly to the left of the menu bar that runs across the top of the screen. Its online community site replicates the logo and menu from the homepage, creating a sense of consistency across the properties.

**Southwest Airlines**

The Southwest website homepage was the densest of the four studied, with the highest total word count. Its About page was less dense than those of the other organizations though. The homepage had the highest incidence of both positive and negative emotion words of the four sites studied. Emotional content of their website About page, Facebook banner and About page, while not as intense as the Walmart site, was marked. The online community site was the most verbally dense of the three communities and evinced the highest incidence of both positive and negative emotion words. The most frequently-used words at the Southwest homepage were “Southwest”, “Offers”, “Travel”, “Rewards”, and “Rapid”. In addition reinforcing the Southwest brand and business, verbiage at the Southwest site communicates movement and urgency. Their website About page emphasized “Airline”, “Customer”, “Commitment”, “LUV”, and “Southwest.” The words appearing most frequently on the online community were “Southwest”, “Travel”, “Reservation”, “Offers”, “Rewards”, “Book”, and “View”. Southwest’s Facebook banner emphasized “Southwest” and their Facebook About page “Southwest”, “Customer”, “One”, “Airlines”, and “Texas”. Each of these locales thus highlighted Southwest’s brand and business; its social media sites also communicated focus on employees and customers.

The Southwest website is a riot of color. A logo – an airplane taking off – appears at the upper left of the screen, above the menu. Its community site too replicates the logo and menu
from the homepage for a sense of consistency. However, the visuals on its social media sites
differ considerably. Notably, the Facebook and Pinterest sites are somewhat restrictive in the
fonts and colors that users may employ. The result is a more subdued ambience than the colorful
displays on the Southwest website and community. But even within the design freedoms
permitted by the social media organizations, Southwest diverges in its identity displays. In lieu
of a logo, only the nose of a plane appears on the Facebook site, while a different logo – the tail
of a Southwest plane – appears on the Twitter and Pinterest sites. The Twitter banner bears the
words “The LUV Airline!”

**Starbucks Corporation**

The homepage of the Starbucks website, while not as minimalist as the Apple site, was
relatively uncluttered, with a total of 340 words. It had the highest incidence of first person
collective pronouns and combined positive emotion words with a limited number of words
signaling negative emotion. The website About page was dense, also had a high incidence of
first person collective pronouns, and combined positive emotion words with a few signaling
negative emotion. Its online community was notable for the highest incidence of first person
plural pronouns, a moderately high incidence of positive emotion words, and the lowest
incidence of negative emotion words. Starbucks’ Facebook banner was devoid of emotional
content, but their Facebook About page contained the highest incidence of positive emotion
verbiage of the four organizations studied and no verbiage signaling negative emotion.
Dominant words at the Starbucks homepage were “Starbucks”, “Coffee”, “Card”, “Register”,
and “Careers” and at the About page were “Starbucks”, “Coffee”, “Store”, “Cup”, and “Place.”
Besides verbiage representing time (i.e., delay from last post), the dominant words at the
community site were “Idea”, “Starbucks”, “Under-review”, and “Launched”. An abbreviated
### Table A4: Visual Analyses of Digital Properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Southwest</th>
<th>Starbucks</th>
<th>Walmart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Website homepage</td>
<td>Font type</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Two sans serif fonts</td>
<td>Two sans serif fonts</td>
<td>Many sans serif fonts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Font colors</td>
<td>Black, grey</td>
<td>Black, white, red, blue</td>
<td>Green, black, white</td>
<td>Many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>Apple with a bite taken out</td>
<td>Airplane taking off</td>
<td>Stylized green/white siren</td>
<td>Stylized yellow sunburst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant image</td>
<td>Sleek hardware with a splash of color on the screen of the device shown</td>
<td>Stylized picture of airplane with Southwest colors flying through the clouds</td>
<td>Rotating photos, videos</td>
<td>Seasonal rotation of product photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community</td>
<td>Font type</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Two sans serif fonts</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Font color</td>
<td>Black, grey</td>
<td>Black, white, blue</td>
<td>Green, black, white</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>Apple with a bite taken out</td>
<td>Airplane taking off</td>
<td>Stylized green/white siren</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant image</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Coffeehouse photo</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook site</td>
<td>Font type</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Font color</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Black, blue</td>
<td>Black, blue</td>
<td>Black, blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Airplane nose</td>
<td>Stylized green/white siren</td>
<td>Stylized yellow sunburst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant image</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Rotating photos of Southwest airplanes</td>
<td>Rotating photos of products and locations</td>
<td>Seasonal rotation of product photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter site</td>
<td>Font type</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Blue clouds</td>
<td>Dark brown</td>
<td>Blue sunburst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Font color</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Black, white, orange, grey</td>
<td>White, black, grey</td>
<td>White, black, blue, grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Airplane tail with SOUTHWEST</td>
<td>Stylized green/white siren</td>
<td>Stylized yellow sunburst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant image</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Airplane body</td>
<td>Photo of paper trays of coffee beans</td>
<td>Seasonal rotation of product photos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest site</td>
<td>Font type</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
<td>Single sans serif font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>Grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Font color</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Black, grey</td>
<td>Black, grey</td>
<td>Black, grey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Airplane tail with SOUTHWEST</td>
<td>Stylized green/white siren</td>
<td>Stylized yellow sunburst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant image</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Facebook banner revealed no dominant words, but “Coffee”, “Starbucks”, “Introduced”, “First”, “People”, and “World” dominated the Facebook About page. Each of these locales thus highlighted the Starbucks brand and central product and communicated focus on innovation and engagement on a global scale.

The Starbucks website conveys an aesthetic impression that is classy and conservative. It uses subdued earth tones. Its logo appears on the upper left of the screen, above a subtle menu, and earth-toned photographs cycle across the page. The main splash of color at the site are the orange buttons that invite visitors to “See if you qualify” to become a corporate customer, to “Learn more” about their coffees and services, and to “Get started” on becoming a customer. While the look-and-feel of the Starbucks online community is similar to that of its website in fonts and colors, it departs in many significant ways. The placement of the logo is somewhat higher at the community site and, while the menu is placed at the same location, both menu design and menu options at the community site differ from those at the website. Starbucks’ social media displays are also constrained by the properties on which those displays occur. Yet, use of their distinctive logo on all sites clearly marks those sites as theirs. The impression conveyed by their Twitter site is somewhat darker than identity displays at other properties, with a two-toned dark brown background and a darkly-colored photograph of coffee beans. The Twitter banner says “Freshly brewed tweets from Paige at Starbucks.”

Walmart Stores

The Walmart website homepage, while relatively dense at 725 words, had the lowest incidence of function words of the four sites, suggesting Walmart’s word use focused even more on their distinctive context than did the other sites. Their About page was moderately detailed, with the lowest incidence of first person plural pronouns and the highest overall incidence of
both positive and negative emotion words. Walmart does not have an externally-facing online community. Its Facebook banner was detailed, simply worded and emotionally charged – with both positive and negative emotion, and not dominated by any particular words. Dominating the homepage were “Walmart”, “Card”, “Gift”, “Saving”, and “Get” and at the About page were “Walmart.com”, “Walmart”, “Customer”, “Walton”, “Prices”, and “Stores”. Their Facebook About page was also detailed, with “Walmart”, “Walton”, “First”, “Opens”, “Facebook”.

The Walmart site conveys a cheerful, cluttered impression. Its logo is positioned at the upper left of the screen, with menus along the top and at the left of the screen. Pictures of sale products are splashed across the page and represent the entire color spectrum. The text is presented in a multitude of different sans serif fonts, with dominant font colors being blue, black, orange, and white, but other colors often being used. Again, social media displays are constrained by the properties on which those displays occur, but their distinctive logo clearly marks all sites as theirs. Walmart’s Twitter site employs their characteristic bright blue for its background and the banner bears the words “Save Money. Live better.”

**APPENDIX 2: A HISTORICALLY-SITUATED INTERPRETATION**

We now situate the organizations’ identity displays in their historical contexts. Because the material world both represents history and circumscribes its evolution (Giddens, 1995), we pay particular attention to organizations’ materialized identity displays. Table 6 summarizes our observations of these displays. Below, we also consider the relevance of the biographical situations and ideologies espoused by key leaders to the organizations’ digital displays.

**Apple Inc.**

Founded by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak, and Ronald Wayne in 1976, Apple is a California-based, multinational corporation that produces consumer electronics such as Mac computers,
iPods, iPhones and iPads, and software such as OSX, iOS, iTunes and Safari and is the largest technology company in the country (Manjoo, 2010). Much of Apple’s identity as we know it today was defined by Steve Jobs, beginning with the name he chose for the company:

“Apple. It was a smart choice. The word instantly signaled friendliness and simplicity. It managed to be both slightly off-beat and as normal as a slice of pie… And the two words together – Apple Computer – provided an amusing disjunction.” (Isaacson, 2011: 63).

He aimed to make products at “the intersection of art and technology” (Kane & Fowler, 2011). Ousted in 1985 from the company he co-founded, Jobs was brought back as CEO to save the floundering in 1997. He served as CEO through 2011, when illness forced his retirement.

For Jobs, innovation and design were key: “All we are is our ideas” (Steve Jobs, quoted in Beahm, 2011: 20); “Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower” (52); “Design is the fundamental soul of a man-made creation” (37). A Zen Buddhist, he also perceived simplicity to be a virtue. This was visible in Apple products as well as Jobs’ organizational strategy. Apple’s first marketing brochure touted “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication” (Isaacson, 2012). Commenting on the design of the iPod, he observed:

“When you first start off trying to solve a problem, the first solutions you come up with are very complex, and most people stop there. But if you keep going, and live with the problem and peel more layers of the onion off, you can sometimes arrive at some very elegant and simple solutions.” (Steve Jobs, quoted in Beahm, 2011: 28).

Upon his return to Apple in 1997, one of Jobs’ first decisions was to pare down Apple’s complex product portfolio to four “great” products (Isaacson, 2011). His design aesthetic was honed while attending design conferences at the Aspen Institute, the campus of which was designed in Bauhaus style. As early as 1983, he publicly embraced this style for its functional, clean lines, devoid of frills and adornment:

“What we’re going to do is make the products high-tech, and we’re going to package them cleanly so that you know they’re high-tech. We will fit them in a small package,
and then we can make them beautiful and white, just like Braun does with its electronics… We will make them bright and pure and honest about being high-tech, rather than a heavy industrial look of black, black, black, like Sony.” (Quoted in Isaacson, 2011: 126)

For Jobs, good taste was paramount, as apparent in his ultimate indictment of Sony above and arch-competitor, Microsoft: “The only problem with Microsoft is they just have no taste” (quoted in Beahm, 2011: 67). But good taste was not to be at odds with functionality: “The main thing in our design is that we have to make things intuitively obvious” (quoted in Isaacson, 2011: 127). The emphasis on tastefulness in the Bauhaus style is clearly visible in Apple’s material artifacts. Its devices are low footprint, with clean lines, and almost invisible controls. Apple publications now use phrases like “most advanced,” “thinnest, fastest, lightest,” “sleek” and “looking forward.” Stark, black and white color schemes are prominent in all Apple publications, with the occasional splash of bold colors. Apple product advertisements often feature electronics with screensaver images of a pure, sterile nature. Even Apple’s logo, an apple with a bite taken out of it, is minimalist, sleek, and modern. Stores of glass and chrome are triaged through a “Genius Bar”, Apple’s customer service operations modeled on a mashup of a hotel concierge desk and a bar (Isaacson, 2011; Manjoo, 2010). The “Genius” label is a nod to Jobs’ belief in the intellectual horsepower of the Apple workforce, was meant to be staffed “with the smartest Mac people” (Ron Johnson, Senior Vice President for Retail Operations, quoted in Isaacson, 2011: 376), and evokes impressions of intellectually elite workers. The stores’ futuristic appearance is a metaphor for Jobs’ forward-looking philosophy – “let’s invent tomorrow rather than worrying about what happened yesterday” (quoted in Beahm, 2011: 45). Apple’s minimalism and functionalism are also visible in material productions it does not undertake – it does not produce the glossy annual report most other organizations put out; instead it provides only the 10-K report required by the Securities and Exchange Commission.
Table A6: Identity Displays in Material Artifacts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Apple</th>
<th>Southwest Airline</th>
<th>Starbucks</th>
<th>Walmart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mission Statement</td>
<td>“Apple designs Macs, the best personal computers in the world…”</td>
<td>“The mission of Southwest Airlines is dedication to the highest quality of Customer Service delivered with a sense of warmth, friendliness, individual pride, and Company Spirit”</td>
<td>“Our mission: to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time…”</td>
<td>“Our Mission: Saving people money so they can live better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products</td>
<td>▪ Electronics have sleek, modern design</td>
<td>▪ Recognizable pattern on all planes</td>
<td>▪ Textured cups made from recycled material, featuring siren logo</td>
<td>▪ Inexpensive products of all sorts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Black, white or chrome color scheme</td>
<td>▪ Blue, red and yellow color scheme</td>
<td>▪ Brown and green cups, earth-tone food and beverages</td>
<td>▪ Walmart’s name and logo are on plastic bags customers receive at checkout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ As few buttons as possible</td>
<td>▪ Complimentary nuts and non-alcoholic beverages</td>
<td>▪ “Fancy” drink names and sizes</td>
<td>▪ Bargain brands are prominently featured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Sterile scenes on screens</td>
<td>▪ Alcoholic beverages and wifi for sale</td>
<td>▪ Personalized drinks with customer’s name written on the cup</td>
<td>▪ No receipts or excuses are needed for product returns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>▪ Glass or chrome entrances feature large Apple logo</td>
<td>▪ Southwest logos prominently displayed near gate</td>
<td>▪ Earth tone décor</td>
<td>▪ Brown storefronts with white letters and logo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Symmetrical, minimalist décor</td>
<td>▪ Gate workers sometimes provide entertainment or candy for passengers waiting on flights</td>
<td>▪ Open, hipster environment with hip hop music</td>
<td>▪ Consistent internal and external layouts across stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ White color scheme</td>
<td>▪ Employees wear blue dress shirts with the Southwest logo</td>
<td>▪ Free wifi</td>
<td>▪ Employees wear blue and khaki outfits with blue vests and recognizable name tags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Employees wear solid blue shirts with a solid white Apple logo</td>
<td>▪ Employees wear blue dress shirts with the Southwest logo</td>
<td>▪ Employees called baristas wear green aprons with siren logo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Publications</td>
<td>▪ Releases a minimal annual report with no letter to shareholders, with the exception of 2011 when Jobs resigned</td>
<td>▪ Black and white color scheme</td>
<td>▪ Earth tone color scheme</td>
<td>▪ Blue and orange color scheme with lots of photos and graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Talks about financial goals</td>
<td>▪ Strong social responsibility theme</td>
<td>▪ Family-friendly and historical / legacy themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Uses business terminology, no mention of “fun”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Apple’s identity displays on its online properties – its minimal use of verbiage and avoidance of verbal emotional adornment – are entirely consistent with its aesthetic of simple, elegant, and functional design. Key to the Jobs and Apple ethos was being different. Upon Jobs’ return to Apple in 1997, the company put out this “Think Different” commercial: “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” In 2004, Jobs noted: “Apple is the most creative technology company out there” (quoted in Beahm, 2011: 87). It is therefore unsurprising that, as with the refusal to produce a glossy annual report, Apple eschews conformity in aspects of its site design. While almost every corporate website contains an About page describing the organization’s focus and history, Apple’s does not. Its lack of participation on social media also reflects Jobs’ need for control in pursuit of perfection: “Jobs hated to cede control of anything, especially when it might affect the customer experience” (Isaacson, 2011: 368). As coopted properties, social media participants necessarily cede a level of design control.

**Southwest Airline**

Southwest was founded in 1967 by Herb Kelleher and Rollin King on the then unusual premise that it would “target the automobile as its primary competitor” (Parker, 2008: 35). The airline was precluded from flying until June 18, 1971, as it fought incumbent airlines’ efforts to staunch competition through the judicial process. In the interim, Herb Kelleher, then attorney for Southwest, worked long hours without pay to win Southwest its ability to commence service. The Dallas-based passenger airline now offers service to almost 100 destinations.

Kelleher, who occupied key leadership positions at Southwest until his retirement in 2008, “believed passionately in sustaining a high-spirit, fun-loving, and iconoclastic culture full of passionate people infused with a rebellious ‘Warrior Spirit’” (Collins & Hansen, 2011: 22). The “warrior spirit” was born out of the airline’s early battles for survival as much as Kelleher’s own
tenacious personality (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998). A colorful, larger-than-life person, Kelleher has claimed: “I’m the only airline president in America that would go over to his maintenance hangar at two o’clock in the morning in a flowered hat with a feathered boa and a purple dress” (Collins & Hansen, 2011: 22). Consistent with its leader’s persona, Southwest prides itself of being a fun, employee-friendly airline. Both material and digital locales celebrate this theme:

“The walls of the company headquarters are plastered with more than ten thousand photos that include employees’ pets; Kelleher dressed like Elvis, the Easter Bunny, or in drag; flight attendants in miniskirts; and Southwest planes gnawing on competitors’ aircraft.” (Drexler, 2007: 245).

On its blog, “Nuts about Southwest,” Southwest posts pictures and stories about “welcome home” parties for veterans, in-flight amenities such as peanuts and alcohol, and special flights offered for football fans on their way to college bowl games. Southwest’s Pinterest site features images of the Southwest airplane logo as birthday cakes, a jack-o-lantern and a parade float.

Phrases like “the Southwest Experience,” “our people,” and “fun-loving flight attendants” appear frequently in Southwest publications.

In Southwest’s culture, “customers come second” to employees (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 2) because “if you treat your employees well, they’ll treat the customers well and if they treat the customers well, the customers will come back and that’s what makes your shareholders happy” (Drexler, 2007: 244). In a 1992 issue of LUV lines, an employee newsletter, then Executive Vice President Colleen Barrett said that when they received customer complaints, they would first

“…ask for reports from Employees involved, just so we can have the benefit of your first-hand insight as to the specifics of the situation. However, as long as your response shows us that you were doing what we encourage you to do – for example, you were being creative and showing your individual personality – and that you did not do anything in poor taste, we write back to the Customer supporting you 100% and tell him/her that we ENCOURAGE our Employees to be original and creative in their interaction with our Customers…” (Quoted in Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 71).
At the heart of the Southwest ethos is being different. The label “maverick” is frequently used to describe Kelleher and the airline (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998; Gibson & Blackwell, 1999). Kelleher has claimed:

“We’ve never tried to be like other airlines. From the very beginning we told our people, ‘Question it. Challenge it’.” (Quoted in Drexler, 2007: 251)

This philosophy of being different has translated in corporate practices such as encouraging “flight attendants on Southwest flights to amuse the passengers by singing the flight instructions, hiding in overhead storage compartments, joking, bantering with the passengers, or holding trivia contests” (Drexler, 2007: 245). Costume parties, not just at Halloween, have “been raised to an art form by Southwest employees” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 67). The emotional nature of the Southwest culture is immediately visible first in their ticker symbol – LUV. Emotional displays are common at Southwest, where employees “hug, kiss, cry, and say, ‘I love you’ on the job” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 3). Employees are hired for their “sense of humor”, “spirit, spunk, and enthusiasm” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 73). The airline “played its sexy, irreverent ‘Love Airline’ image to the hilt, using the word ‘love’ freely in its ads (up to eighteen times!), putting a red heart in its logo, and serving ‘Love Potions’ and ‘Love Bites’ in flight” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 37). Kelleher believed:

“The core of our success. That’s the most difficult thing for a competitor to imitate. They can buy all the physical things. The things you can’t buy are dedication, devotion, loyalty - the feeling that you are participating in a crusade (Marsh 2012).”

Behind the culture that celebrates fun though is a core that focuses on responsibility and discipline. In order to honor their primary commitment, “employees have the flexibility and willingness to step outside previously defined job categories and do whatever it takes to get a flight out on time” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 60). Southwest’s discipline is visible in staying “purpose-driven” and in its frugality (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 62), in its philosophy “to
manage in good times for bad times” (63). Whereas airlines such as People Express that began with a business model similar to Southwest’s subsequently strayed into long-haul flights and died, Southwest stayed the course and survived. As a consequence of this frugality through good times, it was able to succeed through lean times: “Southwest was the only U.S. airline to make a profit through the Gulf War and the 1990-1994 recession” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 62). Because of its discipline through good times, it was also the only major U.S. airline not to cut flights, ground airplanes, furlough employees, or cut their salaries in the days following September 11, 2001 (Parker, 2008).

While “culture generally operates beneath awareness” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002: 996), culture is foregrounded at Southwest, where Kelleher and Barrett believed it “is one of the most precious things a company has, so you must work harder at it than anything else” (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 145). The company therefore mindfully engages in cultural productions through storytelling, events, and its symbolic interactions. This is visible not only in Kelleher’s and Barrett’s initiatives and directives, but also in their reactions to those of their employees. For example, when visiting Southwest’s Oakland site, employees showed Barrett an aircraft painted jet black with the Oakland Raiders’ football team logo. Barrett expressed her admiration for the “creativity and maverick spirit” displayed in the employees’ symbolic production (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1998: 128).

Southwest’s mindfulness in identity displays is visible online too. Its embrace of the emotional is seen in the heightened incidence of emotional displays across owned, coopted, and collaborative digital properties. Its colorful, unconventional personality comes through in its eye-popping color scheme on its owned and collaborative sites. Southwest uses different sites to communicate with different audiences. While its website and online community – which are
used primarily to communicate with customers – use the logo of a plane taking off, its social media properties – which are used to communicate primarily with employees – use the airplane nose and tail logos. Southwest’s blog – which is used to communicate with shareholders and employees – features primarily the heart with wings logo and other images of hearts and the word “luv.” The blue, red and yellow color scheme from Southwest’s logo is also used consistently across digital publications. Southwest even goes so far as to include the blue, red and yellow color scheme in candid photos uploaded to social media sites. Another notable design strategy employed by Southwest is intermingling different fonts within and across publications.

In contrast to the Kelleher and Barrett ethos in which customers were second to employees, Southwest’s texts privilege customers over employees, mentioning “Customer” 19 times and “Employee” or “Our people” only 5. All references to employees/our people were on the website’s About page, where “Customer” was referenced 5 times. Photo displays at the company blog and Facebook site depict employees working hard in service of customers and the community, with captions such as “Tell ’em thanks. They’ve been working hard to get us back in action” alongside a photograph of employees shoveling snow off a tarmac. This inconsistency may represent a tendency toward isomorphism in symbolic displays, Southwest’s response to a business environment that believes customers come first. Showcasing external stakeholders is a common bias of social media properties (Miranda, Summers, & Kim, 2012). Interestingly though, employees dominated the “vintage” photographs at the Southwest Pinterest site.

**Starbucks Corporation**

Founded in 1971 by Zev Siegel, Gordon Bowker, and Jerry Baldwin, Starbucks is a Seattle-based, multinational coffee producer and coffeehouse. While not named for the character, the founders were pleased to learn that “Starbucks” was the name of the coffee-drinking first mate in
Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (Drexler, 2007). After a year of lobbying, Howard Schultz was hired to lead marketing at Starbucks in 1982, with oversight of their retail stores, and had bought the company by 1987 (Drexler, 2007). With over 10,000 U.S. stores and locations in 55 countries, Starbucks locales are distinctive across the world for their earth-toned décors and green-aproned baristas. Elevated signs bearing the Starbucks name, colors, and logo mark their presence off highways, in airports, hotels, neighborhoods, and corporate/university campuses.

While passionate about providing high quality coffee – all 7,100 U.S. Starbucks stores closed one afternoon in 2008 so baristas could practice pouring the perfect cup of espresso – Starbucks executives are quick to emphasize that the company is not just about coffee. Jim Alling, President of Starbucks U.S. Business, characterized the Starbucks ethos thus:

“We are the litter-picker-uppers… We just naturally stoop down to pick up that gum wrapper or soda can on the sidewalk as we’re talking with you about how the kids are doing and what crazy weather we’re having. It’s not a magic formula for hiring or business success; it’s just who we are” (in Michelli, 2007: vii).

The quote reveals Starbucks’s core value: community. A core belief that Schultz espouses is that “people come to Starbucks for coffee and human connection” (Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 107). The human connection in the “Starbucks Experience” “is an affordable necessity” because “we are all hungry for community” (Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 13). Starbucks’ partners refer to the stores as the “third place” (Michelli, 2007), “a social yet personal environment between one’s house and job, where people can connect with others and reconnect with themselves” (Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 13). Starbucks’ use of the term “coffee bar” is resplendent with imagery of community. It evokes reference to cultural artifacts such as the TV show Cheers, “where everybody knows your name” and Rosie Schapp’s recent memoir, Drinking with Men.

An extension of its community focus, Starbucks prides itself on being a socially responsible organization. “You have to follow the path of doing the right thing by making decisions that are
true to your mission and cause” (Schultz, quoted in Drexler, 2007: 336). Starbucks publications use phrases like “ethical sourcing,” “social conscience,” “environmental stewardship” and “community service.” In his book, Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul, Schultz expresses the company’s commitment to a set of core values related to employee rights and fair trade practices.

Starbucks codifies the following best practices for its employees – called “partners” – the Green Apron Book, its training manual²: (1) Be welcoming; (2) Be genuine; (3) Be considerate; (4) Be knowledgeable; (5) Be involved. Partners reinforce each other’s displays of these best practices by awarding them certificates and cards. Starbucks’ use of the term “partner” does indeed characterize its relationship with their employees. When Starbucks went public in 1992, its stock closed up 26.5% on the first day of trading. Schultz shared this bonanza by offering stock options to all Starbucks employees working more than 20 hours per week, where other companies might have offered them to senior executives alone (Michelli, 2007).

Starbucks’ entrée into collaborative digital engagement was prompted by a crisis. On Valentine’s Day 2007, Schultz sent a memo entitled “The Commoditization of the Starbucks Experience” to the board. The memo expressed Schultz’s dissatisfaction with the board’s complacency and chided it to “push for innovation and do the things necessary to once again differentiate Starbucks from all others” (Howard Schultz, quoted in Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 25). The memo was leaked to the public. The memo was leaked via a little-known blog called “Starbucks Gossip” (Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 30). Journalist Jim Romenesko developed the blog (www.starbucksgossip.com) because “Starbucks has a truly loyal following with strong emotional reactions to the company” (quoted in Michelli, 2007: 118). The leak created a public

² While Starbucks has recently revised its training materials, Starbucks employees note that the five best practices remain.
relations problem for Starbucks. The leak and the ensuing conversation brought realization that “Starbucks did not have the tools to participate in the online debate”, that “Starbucks had no interactive presence online” (Howard Schultz, quoted in Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 31).

Starbucks’ high-brow, yuppie image derives considerably from the vocabulary it introduced to coffee-drinking America. Instead of “small”, “medium”, and “large”, it has taught us to say “tall”, “grande”, and “venti”; we have become conversant with words such as “barista”, “chai” and “frappuccino” (Michelli, 2007). Its website’s more complex linguistic composition is consistent with this high-brow image. Language is a tool that Starbucks uses deliberately to shape both its internal and consumer culture:

“I have long believed in the power of a word or a single phrase to effectively communicate a business imperative and to inspire people. The best words are … are packed with emotion and meaning” (Schultz, quoted in Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 96).

The high-brow, intellectual image of Starbucks and their clientele is reinforced by their highest incidence of “big words” at their website homepage and their conservative colors and visuals. Their consistently high usage of collective pronouns reinforces their representation of Starbucks as a locale for communing and community development. The online community’s emphasis on “ideas” that were “under review” or had been “launched” is also consistent with Starbucks’ reputation of inviting dissenters to problem-solving discussions (Michelli, 2007). Schultz’s observation that “Starbucks’ coffee is exceptional, yes, but emotional connection is our true value proposition” (Schultz & Gordon, 2011: 117) is consistent with the relatively high verbal expressiveness of their online properties.

In line with the environmental stewardship and sustainability focus, Starbucks employs a green and brown color scheme, complemented by other earth tones. It uses ethereal, earthy images in its business publications. Sepia-toned photographs convey a retro look and evoke a
sense of nostalgia consistent with developing a sense of membership in a community. Their green-and-white siren logo invoking Starbucks’ Northwest coast roots appears consistently on material and digital properties, marking store locations and Starbucks’ products, packaging, and business publications. Schultz’s passion for coffee is reflected across Starbucks’ properties in images of coffee, coffee farmers, and the land that produces coffee.

Walmart Stores

Founded by Sam Walton in 1962, Walmart is an Arkansas-based, multinational retail corporation. Walmart prides itself on saving customers money, a heritage owed to Sam Walton:

“I was always looking for offbeat suppliers or sources… I started driving over to Tennessee to some fellows I found who would give me special buys at prices way below what Ben Franklin was charging me… I’d bring them back, price them low, and just blow that stuff out the store” (Sam Walton, quoted in Hamilton, 1999: 724).

Walton noted: “With our low costs, our low expense structures, and our low prices, we were ending an era in the heartland” (Walton, 1993: 160). Phrases like “save money live better,” “rollback savings,” and “everyday low prices” now appear frequently in Walmart publications. “Savings” and “get” verbiage also permeated the Walmart homepage and “prices” its About page. The theme is also showcased on its Twitter page banner: “Save Money. Live better.”

Walmart also portrays an image of caring about communities, families, and employees, asserting that Walmart’s dedication to low prices is based on concern for consumers rather than profitability. This too is a Sam Walton philosophy: “We’ll lower the cost of living for everyone, not just in America, but we’ll give the world an opportunity to see what it’s like to save and have a better lifestyle, a better life for all” (Sam Walton, quoted in Drexler, 2007: 432). Family and heritage themes are actively projected, often including tales of Sam Walton’s life and values.

“We thrive on a lot of the traditions of small-town America, especially parades with marching bands, cheer-leaders, drill teams, and floats. Most of us grew up with it, and
we’ve found that it can be even more fun when you’re an adult who usually spends all your time working” (Walton, 1993: 162).

Like Kelleher, Walton embraced a level of zaniness in service to morale-building (Walton, 1993). In 1984, having lost a bet with chief operating officer, David Glass, Walton slipped a grass skirt over his suit and did a hula dance on Wall Street. Rather than being a “primitive publicity stunt” as some believed, Walton noted that “this sort of stuff goes on all the time at Walmart … it’s part of our culture, and it runs through everything we do” (Walton, 1993: 159). It is also part of the Walton heritage of appreciating their “associates”, the term employed for Walmart employees, sharing profits with them, and treating them as partners (Walton, 1993). The distinctive Walmart “greeter” is emblematic of the founder’s beliefs in influence through social connections: “I learned early on that one of the secrets to campus leadership was the simplest thing of all: speak to people coming down the sidewalk before they speak to you” (Walton, 1993: 15). The Walmart logo is a simple, orange sunshine. The logo marks its stores across the country and, along with Walmart’s blue and orange color scheme, is used consistently in Walmart’s major publications. The logo also appears on the packaging of Walmart’s store brands, usually proximate to the words “Satisfaction guaranteed”.

Focus on the Walton heritage was visible in the repetitive reference to the founder at the Walmart website’s About page. Their outgoing, upbeat culture is reflected in the high level of positive emotion running through verbiage in all Walmart’s digital properties, the cheerful ambience of the sites, and the consistent display of the sunshine logo. Unexpectedly though, levels of negative emotion expressed were also high – particularly in their website’s About page. Notably absent were significant references to Walmart “employees” across their properties. This absence speaks to a fundamental Walmart identity conflict. On the one hand, the Walton heritage is one of human respect; on the other, it is one of low costs, arguably even more central
to the Walmart identity. Maintaining low costs has frequently clashed with Walmart’s employee-centric values. For example, in the mid-1960s, Walton attempted to bypass the federally-mandated minimum wage statute by breaking up the company into smaller entities not covered by the mandate. When forced by a federal court ruling to honor the minimum wage and issue checks to cover workers’ previously-unpaid earnings, Walton did so but reportedly threatened to fire any employee that cashed the check (Lichtenstein, 2010).

Being different is not a Walmart priority: “Most everything I’ve done I’ve copied from someone else” (Sam Walton, quoted in Drexler, 2007: 426). The only way in which Sam Walton wished to be distinctive was in the low prices he was able to provide customers. This focus on distinction through frugality is consistent with the homespun look-and-feel of its digital properties, relative to the more upscale look of Apple and Starbucks properties.

For Walton, the customer was of paramount importance:

“There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else” (Turner & Krizek, 2006: 115).

“Customer” was one of the dominant words employed on the company website’s About page. Yet, their customer focus has not translated into Walmart’s dialogue with customers via an online community. Instead, Walmart relies on social media for such dialogue:

“We engage with our customers and stakeholders beyond the walls of our stores: you can find us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Foursquare. This page will give you a better idea on how to engage with us in social media, what you can expect from us, and where to find more information” (http://corporate.walmart.com/social-media-guidelines).

This social-media-based discourse permits a level of two-way communication between the company and customers, but not the customer-to-customer dialogue fostered by online communities. The company’s social media rules-of-engagement direct customers to post comments, complaints, and concerns on Walmart’s Facebook Feedback tab, which displays only
the 10 most recent comments, questions, ideas, problems, and praise. The rules also state:

“Please note that any customer service posts published on a Walmart page by customers will be removed when discovered” (http://corporate.walmart.com/social-media-guidelines). Also notable was the lowest incidence of the first person plural pronoun across the Walmart website’s homepage and About page. In contrast, their Facebook property revealed the highest incidence of the first person plural pronoun use, suggesting the company displays a different identity to website versus social media visitors.