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Neva Bojovic, Valérie Sabatier, Emmanuel Coblence

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# **Becoming Through Doing: How Experimental Spaces Enable Organizational Identity Work**

Bojovic, Neva

*Assistant Professor, Kedge Business School, Bordeaux, France,  
and PhD Candidate, Université Savoie Mont Blanc, IREGÉ, Annecy-France*

[neva.bojovic@kedgebs.com](mailto:neva.bojovic@kedgebs.com)

Sabatier, Valérie

*Associate Professor, Grenoble Ecole de Management,  
Univ Grenoble Alpes ComUE, Grenoble, France*

[Valerie.sabatier@grenoble-em.com](mailto:Valerie.sabatier@grenoble-em.com)

Coblence, Emmanuel

*Associate Professor, Institut Supérieur de Gestion, Paris, France*

[Emmanuel.coblence@isg.fr](mailto:Emmanuel.coblence@isg.fr)

## **Becoming Through Doing: How Experimental Spaces Enable Organizational Identity Work**

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study of a magazine publishing incumbent shows how organizational identity work can be triggered when organizational members engage in business model experimentation within the bounded social setting of experimental space. The study adds to the understanding of the strategy-identity nexus by expanding on the view of business models as cognitive tools to business models as tools for becoming and by understanding the role of experimental spaces as holding environments for organizational identity work. We show how an experimental space engages organizational members in experimental practices (e.g., cognitive, material, and experiential). As firms experiment with “what they do”, organizational members progressively confront the existing organizational identity in the following ways: they engage in practices of organizational identity work by coping with the loss of the old identity, they play with possible organizational identities, and they allow new organizational identity aspirations to emerge. In these ways, experimental spaces act as an organizational identity work space that eventually enables organizational identity change. We identify two mechanisms (i.e., grounding and releasing) by which an organizational identity work space emerges and leads to the establishment of a renewed organizational identity.

**Keywords:** organizational identity, organizational identity work space, experimental spaces, business model, business model experimentation, media industry

## INTRODUCTION

Incumbent firms often experience difficulty when environmental changes occur in their industry; technological innovations and discontinuities can reshape industries and markets, introduce new business models, or simultaneously challenge an incumbent firm's strategy (what the company does) and its identity (who the company is). Under such circumstances, a successful change in the firm's strategy may involve transforming its organizational identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), which, as a filter, may constrain managers' perceptions of strategic opportunities (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Tripsas, 2009).

In response to environmental changes and strategic disruption, companies often engage in business model experimentation (Berends et al., 2016; Bojovic et al., 2018; Doz and Kosonen, 2010); i.e., they deliberately and purposefully prototype, develop, and test business models either in a controlled lab-like setting or a real-life environment (Berends et al., 2016; Bojovic et al., 2018; Murray and Tripsas, 2004). Business model experimentation has the following two types of roles: a learning role, which occurs as companies learn about environment changes through experimentation and then adapt their business models (Berends et al., 2016; Bojovic et al., 2018), and a symbolic role, such as legitimation (Bojovic et al., 2018; Murray and Tripsas, 2004) or collective acceptance when participative experimentation leads to easier acceptance of identity-challenging technologies (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017).

The results of previous research suggest that identity-challenging innovations (Tripsas, 2009; Anthony and Tripsas, 2016) can be stimulated by processes of participative experimentation (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017), but little is known about how experimenting with new business models can affect organizational identity. This question becomes particularly important in times of strategic change, when managing a new identity is a challenge (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

Recently, scholars have started to analyze organizational identity change as a process through the concept of identity work, which involves discursive, cognitive, and behavioral processes that organizational members engage in to promote, sustain, or change organizational identity (Kreiner and Murphy, 2016; Watson, 2016). Existing research on identity work has focused on the discursive aspects of identity formation and change processes (Kreiner et al., 2015), building on the discourses of top managers, such as interviews with the press or presentations to shareholders, discursive elements promoted by human resources or marketing and public relations departments, or the standardized speech that call-center employees mobilize when interacting with customers (Watson, 2016). Studies have also suggested that engagement in material practices of innovation (Tripsas, 2009; Anthony and Tripsas, 2016) and experimentation (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017) can trigger processes related to organizational identity. This progression points to the issue we investigate in this paper: *Can business model experimentation transform organizational identity and, if so, how?*

In this article, our empirical study of a large European magazine publishing incumbent reveals how the company experimented with business models and how the engagement in experimentation practices created background conditions likely to sustain the emergence of renewed organizational identity. We show that business model experimentation was facilitated by the formation of an experimental space (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Cartel et al., 2018), i.e., a space where envisioned business model components and value creation mechanisms can be prototyped, tested, and adapted by organizational members. We argue that such experimental spaces constitute “bounded social settings” (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 7) and organizational *loci* that allow organizational members to not only challenge existing business models but also actively engage in practices of identity work, i.e., coping with the loss of the old identity, playing with different prospective organizational identities,

and creating new identity aspirations for the organization. The results of our analysis demonstrate that the existence of experimental space and engagement in experimental practices facilitate organizational identity work; thus, experimental space becomes an organizational identity work space that eventually makes organizational identity change possible.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

### **Organizational identity change and identity work**

To understand the dynamic processes of identity change, research has recently shifted to focus on analyzing the processes of organizational identity work (Fachin and Langley, 2018; Kreiner et al., 2015; Kreiner and Murphy, 2016; Watson, 2016). Organizational identity work has been defined as “the cognitive, discursive and behavioral processes in which individuals engage to create, present, sustain, share and/or adapt organizational identity” (Kreiner et al., 2015: 985).

Researchers have analyzed the discursive dimensions of organizational identity work, such as discursive work, discursive identity work, and narrative identity work (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2015), to understand how identity is constituted through situated practices of writing and talking. Emotional processes related to identity nostalgia were also identified; one source of dialectical tensions during identity work is the clash between the past identity and the future identity. Organizational members may strive towards an ideal organizational identity, but there is often an identity gap between the current and ideal identity that must be overcome (Gustafson and Reger, 1995; Reger et al., 1994) because identity aspirations can have a higher impact on an organization’s responses than its current identity (Kodeih and Greenwood, 2014). However, identity nostalgia may help organizational members maintain a sense of continuity through shared collective experiences, thereby allowing the formation of a new identity (Ybema, 2010).

The literature also highlights that material practices might trigger identity work. Engagement in a material practice (such as identity-challenging innovation) can cause a company to re-examine its own identity (Tripsas, 2009). Furthermore, engaging in innovation can, in some cases, expand the meaning of identity; i.e., innovations can be identity stretching (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016).

Organizational responses to environmental changes may consequently induce the formation of a new organizational identity, but these processes have been largely overlooked in the literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Processes of experimentation provide a fertile ground to investigate this phenomenon, as they engage organizational members in practices that might be linked to organizational identity work. For example, Garud and Karunakaran (2017) found that participative experimentation can foster identity-challenging innovations. This process is enabled by mechanisms that integrate thinking with doing, the materialization of ideas and collective engagement; thus, there are social, material and cognitive aspects shaping how organizations foster identity-challenging innovations.

### **Business models and business model experimentation**

When times of disruption occur, such as digitalization processes for example, experimentation with and adaptation of business models are often necessary for the incumbents' survival (Cozzolino et al., 2018). Business models have been defined as “an architecture for how a firm creates and delivers value to customers and the mechanisms employed to capture a share of that value” (Teece, 2018: 40). Business models can influence organizational identity; as Baden-Fuller and Morgan (2010: 165) argued, “The specific business model a firm adopts offers a point of identification which may be essential to rally its participants, particularly if radical change in the model is planned.” Presently, the link between business models and identity has primarily been studied from the perspective of how identity affects either the ability to perceive or to be blind to business opportunities and how

identity can impede business model evolution within firms (Snihur, 2016, 2018; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000).

Recently, many studies have shifted their focus from what business models *are* to what business models *do*, suggesting that business models are performative in various ways (Garud et al., 2017), such as acting as narrative devices (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009; Perkmann and Spicer, 2010), calculative devices (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009), and tools for learning and legitimation (Bojovic et al., 2018; Perkmann and Spicer, 2010). The existing work has proven that practices of business model experimentation are important, and business model experimentation is a way to explore the market (Doganova and Eyquem-Renault, 2009), learn about the market (Berends et al., 2016, Bojovic et al., 2018), or shape the market via interactions in which a company can signal its value and intentions and convince potential partners and customers of its value through a business model (Bojovic et al., 2018; Murray and Tripsas, 2004). Experimenting with new means of value creation and capture is thus crucial for incumbent firms (Berends et al., 2016) and provides learning through doing, which is necessary in the pursuit of innovative business models (Berends et al., 2016; Sosna et al., 2010).

Business model experimentation may involve behavioral processes: “The experiments by these managers are on their own firm and involve their own behavior. For them, and for the people in the firm, their business model is not just a description of how they go on, but offers a model in the ideal sense, in depicting how they want to be in the future, a model to strive for, an ideal outcome” (Baden-Fuller and Morgan, 2010: 165). Experimenting may also refer to forms and practice of boundary work (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). For instance, Bojovic et al. (2018: 147) showed how some organizations experiment with customers, partners, experts, and other external actors and test one or more business model components in their day-to-day work. Experiments were aimed at evaluating either technology or value



creation devices for customers, new monetization processes, or even price standards (Bojovic et al., 2018).

### **Experimental spaces as bounded social settings**

Experimentation is often fostered in a bounded setting, recently labeled as an experimental space (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Cartel et al., 2018). Spaces can be defined as “bounded social settings in which interactions among actors are organized in distinctive ways” (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 595). This concept of space has attracted considerable research interest from organizational scholars. For instance, Howard-Grenville et al. (2011) showed that cultural change could occur in “liminal spaces”, such as meetings or workshops, bracketed from, yet connected to, the everyday activities in the organization. Furnari (2014) suggested the concept of “interstitial spaces”, defined as small-scale settings where individuals from different fields interact occasionally and informally around common activities, and showed how such spaces enabled individuals to temporarily break free from existing institutions and experiment collectively with new activities and ideas.

The centrality of experimentation led researchers to identify specific “experimental spaces”, which consist of “transitory social settings where field actors experiment with alternative action models” (Cartel et al., 2018: 3), and to link these experimental spaces to experimentation processes in and around organizations (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Cartel et al., 2018; Garud and Karunakaran, 2017). Some strands of this literature have noted the generative potential of spaces in creating novelty at the organizational and institutional levels (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Kellogg, 2009; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). For example, Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) observed how promoters of new harvesting practices in the forest industry constructed experimental spaces that involved protection and secrecy, allowing the promoters to envision new ways of working by “shield[ing] them from sanctions to which they would otherwise be exposed” (page 214).

In a recent article, Bucher and Langley (2016) showed how experimental spaces offer a setting where organizational actors perform routines according to new concepts and understanding. The authors demonstrated that symbolic and temporal boundaries protect interactions in experimental spaces from excessive interference with other parts of the routine or other routines. This protection is not perfect because experimental performances are nested within existing routines, but symbolic boundaries, such as labels (e.g., “test” and “pilot run”), signal that the performances are intended to be and are allowed to be different from the original routine performances (page 610). However, departing from this routine perspective, the distinctive role of experimental spaces in enabling the reorientation of strategic models and, thus, potentially facilitating the questioning of beliefs about the organization deserves further investigation.

In the identity literature, the notion of spaces is also gaining ground, with researchers investigating holding environments for individual-level identity work, such as *identity workspaces* (Petriglieri, Ashford and Wrzesniewski, 2018; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). This type of space can be physical, social, or psychological, and it refers to institutions that provide a holding environment to support processes of identity work (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). Identity work spaces at the individual level comprise the following three components: social defenses (members of organization are collectively using mechanisms to protect themselves from perceived threats), sentient communities (the experience of belonging to a certain community), and rites of passage (spaces where organizational members can discover together who they are becoming) (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). However, we know little about organizational identity work spaces and how other spaces, such as experimental spaces, might become a holding environment for organizational identity work.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Research design and setting**

Our research setting is the reaction of a large multinational company in the media industry to the emergence of the Internet. This context offers an interesting setting in which to examine the dynamics of a firm's organizational identity change, as the Internet has profoundly affected customer offerings to readers and advertisers as well as established business models (Gilbert, 2005; Lanzolla and Giudici, 2017; Cozzolino et al., 2018). Moreover, the 2008 financial crisis has further driven publishing incumbents to innovate.

We conducted a detailed longitudinal study over five years (from 2008 to 2012) of Sanoma, a European media industry incumbent. The company is a large diversified media group that provides news, information, education, and entertainment to its customers. At the time of data collection, the company was operating in 11 European countries and had an overall turnover of €2.3 billion (in 2012) and a leading position in magazine publishing in several European markets, including Finland, Russia, Hungary, and Croatia.

We aimed to understand how the identity of the firm evolved at the organizational level and how this process is connected to business model experimentation; therefore, qualitative research methods were suitable (Langley, 1999, 2007; Langley et al., 2013). We focused on the Sanoma Magazines business unit, as it was particularly affected by the Internet, which deeply changed how print media and magazines were consumed and perceived, leading to questioning of the organizational identity. We chose to focus on a five-year period. We started the analysis in 2008, when Sanoma began to experience the negative impacts of technological change and economic recession (until then, the company was still growing and achieving good financial results), which created a need for business model experimentation, and ended the analysis at the end of 2012, when we identified that a new organizational identity was streamlined.

To gain insight into the practices of business model experimentation and identity work, we collected empirical data at three organizational levels (e.g., corporate, business unit, and transformational programs) before, during, and after the launch of two large transformational programs that occurred during our observation period: (a) “Vision 2020”, a project developed by managers within the Magazines business unit in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region, whose goal, as defined by the unit’s managers, was to experiment with new business models to address the new digital business, and (b) “One Sanoma”, a project developed at the corporate level as a holistic transversal program that was intended to be implemented across all business units, aimed at the renewal of the firm’s competences, organizational culture, and mindset and the stabilization of the business model portfolio.

### **Data collection**

We used a mix of data collection strategies that are particularly suitable for understanding organizational practices: participant observation, archival data, and interviews.

Participant observation was particularly appropriate in this case because we wanted to understand the processes by which organizational members engage in business model experimentation and how organizational identity is transformed, a phenomenon that is obscured from the view of outsiders (Corbetta, 2003). Participation enables access to otherwise inaccessible dimensions of human life and experience (Jorgensen, 1989).

One researcher worked in the Magazines business unit from October 2008 to December 2013 and in a transversal program experimenting with new business models (“Vision 2020”)<sup>1</sup>. She thus observed the daily functioning of an experimental space, attended multiple meetings and workshops, shadowed many of the discussions on business model experimentation and identity work, and was present when major choices about emerging business models were made. The researcher wrote monthly reports about events, facts, and discussions and collected

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher was not purposefully employed by the company as a part of academic research but was already an employee when the research process started. The researcher kept diligent notes, which were used in the analysis.

information. Observing the day-to-day work activities at the company also deeply grounded the researcher in the context of technological discontinuities, revealed the identity of the company, and provided in-depth knowledge of the company's strategy and business models. In addition to participating in strategic and operative meetings, the researcher also engaged in many informal conversations about the transformation of the company's business model portfolio with employees and managers from different company levels and observed the practices of identity work during this turbulent period.

In addition to direct observation, we also collected secondary data produced by the company before, during, and after the transformational projects. To track the organizational identity transformation as well as the company's strategic choices, we analyzed annual reports, company presentations, website content, press releases, company videos, and minutes of strategy meetings. We looked at both the content and the annual reports' form, which could also help us to understand the identity change. We also had access to videos of internal events in which top managers spoke about strategy, business model innovation, and the search for a new identity. Finally, we also collected many internal documents that detailed Sanoma's strategy along with its corporate values from 2008 to 2013. To confirm our findings from archival data and participant observation, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with the leaders and project champions of transformational projects and the organizational members who in some way were affected by the projects; eight interviews involved managers at different levels, and two interviews included journalists and editorial staff<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were semistructured and lasted 80 minutes on average. The interview guide reflected our research questions about not only strategic change, business modeling, the search for a new identity, and processes of identity work but also a broader context of the transformation in the

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes presented in the Findings are from either participant observation or interviews.

company and how they perceived it. Table 1 presents the data sources and their use in the analysis.

*<Insert Table 1 about here>*

### **Data analysis**

We first organized all events in chronological order and created a timeline of events (see Table 2). Then, we created chronological narratives related to the evolution of the identity and business models (Langley, 1999).

*<Insert Table 2 about here>*

Returning to the raw data, we coded all the materials inductively to analyze practices of business model experimentation and organizational identity work. The coding followed recommendations for inductive theory building (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). First, we coded the data with our research question in mind and generated first-order codes and concepts. As we looked into business model experimentation, we first identified the existing business models in the company and those envisioned by the managers and participants of the Vision 2020 project. After examining the business models and specific components that were used during experimentation, we looked into how the business model experimentation process occurred and examined the types of practices in which the organizational members engaged. We found that business model experimentation was occurring within a bounded social setting of a transformational project, which led us to consult the literature on experimental spaces to understand not only what happens during business model experimentation but how, when, and where these practices occur (Bucher and Langley, 2016).

Regarding organizational identity, we investigated how organizational members from different levels and diverse transformational programs spoke about “who we are” before and after business model experimentations, what they did to construct a new identity, and how organizational identity was described in the secondary data. In the first round of coding, it was evident that the future identity of the company was unclear. Instead, we saw the

importance of experimental spaces, which created background conditions for identity work, thus serving as organizational identity work spaces. At this stage of the analysis, we turned to the literature on identity work spaces (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) and characterized it at the organizational level to examine how an experimental space created a holding environment for organizational identity work.

*<Insert Table 3 about here>*

## **FINDINGS**

In what follows, we present our findings and the grounded framework of “Becoming through Doing” that emerged from our study (see Figure 1) and the analysis of how experimental spaces and organizational work spaces are connected.

*<Insert Figure 1 about here>*

The framework consists of several parts. First, we present the initial state in the company, which is characterized by strategic ambiguity, and then we describe the resulting formalization of a renewed identity. Connecting those two states is a process of “grounding” and “releasing” in which experimental spaces (which facilitate experimental practices), become identity work spaces that enable identity work.

### **Strategic ambiguity resulting from environmental turbulence**

Sanoma was doing well towards the mid-2000s. Company profits were growing, and 2007 was a record-breaking year in terms of profitability. Sanoma Magazines' business unit was at the cornerstone of the company's growth, as the acquisition-heavy strategy resulted in an increasing and successful portfolio of strong magazine brands.

The identity of the whole magazine business unit at this time was secondary to the identity of each magazine brand. A magazine editor we interviewed illustrated in the following quote that she perceived Sanoma's identity mostly as a “portfolio of strong brands” and that, for the editorial team she was leading, much effort was placed on the brand of the

magazine:

“We had no awareness about company identity. For us, the company was just a platform where we could work on the magazine. It was really all about the magazine identity. And the company was just there to provide us conditions to work on our magazine.”

One of the leaders of the transformational program Vision 2020 confirmed that this was the state of mind of most managers at the time:

“Sanoma was very proud of its brands. They believed that the power and strength of the brands was enough for the transformation to happen. They thought that transferring the brands to other media would be sufficient to lead a successful transformation.”

The business model employed at the time clearly supported the magazine publisher identity of the company. The business unit operated with business models based on the magazine’s content and expertise, which relied mostly on a traditional print consumer magazine business model (two-sided market with readers and advertisers) and partially on online magazine presence (based on advertising). It also offered custom publishing services to different clients.

Nevertheless, a big change occurred in 2008 with the economic recession and growing threat from the digitalization of content. The company’s environment, which for years had been positively perceived, especially for magazines, suddenly appeared more uncertain. The economic recession in 2008 immediately caused a significant drop in profits, and the managers of Sanoma Magazines started to perceive the increasing digitalization of media as a major challenge that would require the company to make a substantial transformation.

In the Sanoma Magazines business unit, organizational members were convinced that print magazines could be easily transferred to digital formats but were unclear about whether and how business models needed to change. Even though the need for digital transformation had been regularly emphasized in the strategic and everyday meetings, there was ambiguity regarding online media and pure player business models. For many managers, the impact that these new business models would have on the media industry in general was not clear.



Strategic ambiguity was present across the company. A human resources manager explained in 2009:

“We had an Internet business manager employed, and we did not really know yet what we wanted from him. We just wanted our print magazines to go online. There was not a clear idea [...] Actually, there were many [different] interpretations of what the business model might be: some coming from the CEO, some from HQ and some that the Internet business manager had in mind.”

It was obvious that the magazine publishing business model and identity needed to change, but it was challenging to determine what to change or how to change it.

### **Creation of an experimental space: Vision 2020**

As a response to environmental disturbance and strategic ambiguity, the company created an experimental space, i.e., a bounded social setting in which organizational members could play with different courses of action (Cartel et al., 2018), to try and test new business models. In 2009, five of Sanoma Magazines' managers launched a large transformational project aimed at changing business models to enable the digital transformation, which was labeled “Vision 2020” and validated by the board of directors. Vision 2020 was initiated to address the following questions: “What is the essence of our business today and do we still need that in the future? How will we serve our customers’ needs in this new reality? And what are the first steps we have to take, starting tomorrow?” (Vision 2020 Whitepaper).

Vision 2020 openly promoted business model experimentation and trial-and-error learning. Their action plan was to set up a time-bounded project, lasting three to five years, to encourage the emergence of new organizational practices, to allow organizational members to learn from many small-scale experiments, and to scale up the most successful experiments, eventually turning them into business as usual.

Vision 2020 was thus designed as a space to experiment not only with new ideas and products but also with new organizational practices. The experimental space created by

Vision 2020 had fluid social and physical boundaries. Project leaders, champions and other organizational members experimented together, sometimes in the usual business environment and sometimes distant from the usual business setting. In Table 4, we present a characterization of Vision 2020 as an experimental space, which describes the type of space this was, the types of boundaries there were, and the types of practices the organizational members engaged in.

*<Insert Table 4 about here>*

The process eventually led project leaders to propose new business models based on online, mobile, events, and television formats. The underlying principles behind those business models strongly contrasted with the identity of the company; i.e., instead of relying on strong brands, they promoted going “beyond the brands” to address core customer segments. Vision 2020 managers referred to these business models as “Magazine+” in recognition of the transformative dimension of the business models. The focus on activities beyond magazines was not a completely new idea, but as Vision 2020 project leadership explained, it had always been neglected:

“This distinction was in fact made in 2008 already at Sanoma Magazines. At that time, Magazines+ was often called 360-degree publishing. But, when the board started to debate about the growth strategy, it became apparent that our focus had been mostly on growth in magazines and in digital media. This was also quite logical, as the growth in magazines was impressive pre-crisis, and digital media, being in its infancy, provided the most growth not related to our magazines. Growth beyond magazines was largely neglected. Now, we decided to make growth in Magazines+ an explicit part of our strategy not only on paper but also in actions” (Vision2020 Q&A Session).

A short description of the new business models based on the Magazine+ orientation, as well as examples of experiments for each business model, are listed in Table 5.

*<Insert Table 5 about here>*

### **Experimental practices within the experimental space**

We identified three types of engagement in experimental practices: cognitive engagement (e.g., reimagining), material engagement (e.g., testing and replicating), and

experiential engagement (e.g., participating, exchanging, and promoting).

***Cognitive engagement: Reimagining business models.*** The implementation of Vision 2020 started at the beginning of 2010, when a project leader and four project managers organized a roadshow to recruit project champions within the team, to invite people working in different departments and countries inside of the company to think differently about existing business models, to obtain new ideas for experimental projects and to engage managers in working to develop and implement them. The Vision 2020 Roadshow was promoted in the following way:

“The roadshow is inspirational and creative. We inform people who are facing Vision 2020 for the first time about the strategy and offer inspiration for everyone. [...] Let’s generate as many event concepts and ideas as possible. They don’t have to be spectacular [...], but we will also work together on big ideas for big projects, brainstorm without borders” (Vision 2020 Roadshow presentation).

One of the authors was present at a roadshow workshop and observed the following: An opening PowerPoint slide displayed the image of a butterfly, symbolizing the transformative ambition of the project. The presentation started with a video produced by Microsoft that exemplified how the future might look in 10 years and featured digital products and prototypes, such as interactive touch-screen technologies, augmented reality, smart wallets, and digital newspapers and magazines. Reactions to this video, whether positive or negative, focused on whether the anticipation was realistic and how it would affect magazine publishers. The reactions noted included “No way!” and “Yeah, maybe in the US or Japan. However, in this country, we will still be on paper!” Others were in awe or were excited about the possible future in which everything would be represented on transparent screens; with the touch of a finger, we might order, pay for and cook food, read or engage in exercise. The project leader then talked about changes happening across industries because of digitalization and the competences needed to lead the transformation in the media and publishing industry. He presented a view on the core segments Sanoma targets with its

initiatives and magazines and how these core segments (fashion, cooking, etc.) could be reached using new business models, such as developing digital products that can be extended across platforms (online, mobile, TV) or combining print, digital and other offerings. The overall idea was to let people imagine new business models at the roadshow, define them more clearly, and design experiments to test them.

Following the project leader's talk, the participants were divided into groups for brainstorming sessions, in which they tried to develop novel ideas of how to interact with the core segments in an innovative way that would include more than print magazines. Then, ideas were pushed further to see how they would be realized in practice, and some of them were selected for development and execution.

After the introductory roadshow, brainstorming and disseminating workshops were held in every country where the company operated to identify new possibilities and to create ideas and projects to be part of the Vision 2020 framework. In 2010 alone, these workshops produced 341 unique ideas, from which 78 ideas were shortlisted and 10 were approved for additional development, involving the dedication of time and resources for developing and ultimately commercializing the idea.

***Material engagement: Testing and replicating experimental business models.*** Business model experimentation was conducted inside the organization in a real-life setting; the projects involved interactions with people inside and outside of the company, similar to regular company activities. The idea was to produce many small experiments in which the emergent business model patterns would show the projected direction of the market and what the clients and readers would value in the years to come. Successful experiments would then be scaled up into more complex projects that would involve more actors across the organization and could be implemented across countries; the ultimate goal was their incorporation into routinized business practices.

An illustration of these experimentation practices was the creation and testing of *Sensa Weekends*, an idea implemented by *Sensa*, a magazine that focuses on topics of self-improvement and well-being. *Sensa Weekends* involved organizing retreats with program based on the content of the *Sensa* magazine, mostly related to well-being. The *Sensa* editorial and marketing team prepared a program for the weekend, invited keynote speakers, and promoted the event throughout the media portfolio of the company. *Sensa Weekends* were a radical departure from the traditional publishing business model. First, the events offered a new value proposition to customers by focusing on the experience of well-being beyond the sole readership of the magazine. They also provided the company another source of revenue (payment from the event's participants). The organization of value delivery required establishing partnerships with unprecedented business partners, such as hotels, restaurants, and tourist agencies (Appendix D shows pictures of one of these weekends).

At the beginning of the *Sensa Weekends* experimentation process, small-sized events were locally tested to try different alternatives to key business model components. For instance, different monetization mechanisms were tested, such as event ticket sales, event sponsorships sales, combining an event and a subscription to the magazine, or selling *Sensa*-branded products at events. Similarly, *Sensa* magazine experimented with various organizational settings for event planning, such as in-house events or events in partnerships with hotels or travel agencies. The experimentation process of the event-based business model also included testing new value propositions and new forms of sponsorship. Material engagement into setting up such a business model experiment encouraged the development of new competences inside the editorial and marketing teams of a magazine (e.g., competences in event organization) and creation of value across different types of interactions with the consumers.

Experiments such as *Sensa Weekends* were replicated many times inside the company

across different countries and divisions, and this was highly encouraged by the project leadership. There were also several interesting instances of replication in a more indirect way. For example, Vision 2020 had become a symbol for business model experimentation projects within the company to the extent that some projects that were not even part of the program became connected to it, and it was not clear at one point which projects were in the program because experimentation had become a prevalent practice in the company. This eventually led to the creation of the “inspired by Vision 2020” tagline.

When the business model of *Sensa Weekends* was developed in a sustainable way, which meant that the event was generating a stable income and had an established organization around it, the Vision 2020 Project Manager for Events proposed organizing international well-being events. Many projects followed the same model, and several digital and mobile initiatives, such as cooking and astrology portals, were replicated across countries.

***Experiential engagement: Participating in, exchanging, and promoting experimentation.***

Experiments such as *Sensa Weekends* provided an experiential engagement of organizational members. The material space of the event itself provided direct engagement through the new business model—a new way of interacting with partners and customers, as the editorial team was even physically close to their readers and engaging with them in a way that transcended magazine content—thus leading to new forms of value creation.

Each Vision 2020 division (online, mobile, events, and TV) had recruited “project champions” from inside the firm based on their expertise, their innovative ideas, and their willingness to participate in experimenting with and developing new business models. The managers involved in Vision 2020 as leaders and champions were mostly middle managers from Sanoma coming from either editorial or managerial positions. Vision 2020 also involved external actors (i.e., customers or readers) in the processes of business model

experimentation. The sense of participation was especially strong inside the project group because the managers who were involved were enthusiastic about their roles in the project (demonstrated by adding their new titles to their email signatures along with their regular functions in the company, including a link to the project website, participating in social media related to the project, etc.). Organizational members who would not usually participate in strategic meetings appreciated working on the next business models of the company, as highlighted by the Vision 2020 project manager in the following quote:

“Oh yes, in general, you can say all the people internally, within Sanoma, and especially the employees, they were fans; they liked it. And not only because they gained some creative ideas but because they got involved within the strategy of the business. Especially from the lower regions of the company, like editors, regular art directors.”

The ideas, knowledge, and results from the experiments were continuously exchanged throughout the project and were promoted outside of the project to the entire organization. At the end of 2010, a two-day internal event organized in Croatia was opened to all project champions, which allowed them to share their practices of how to experiment and scale up experimentations. Vision 2020 also hired a communications officer who regularly updated the company news and the internal website. In parallel, various blogs written by project participants were launched to share experimentations, ideas, and business model components, and “inspirational content” from outside the company was regularly updated. This provided team members a very constructive and supportive experience, as demonstrated by the following quote:

“At the time, everybody experimented, and they gave you the results of their experiments. And then you use those results, experiment yourself and come to new conclusions and share them. This project presented an amazing opportunity for people to learn new things but also to share with people who were going through the same thing (Editor of a magazine website).”

## **Emergence of an organizational identity work space**

While engaging in practices of business model experimentation, the experimental space also allowed Sanoma's managers to participate in different practices of organizational identity work. Our analysis revealed the following three practices central to organizational identity work: "coping" with the loss of the old organizational identity, "playing" with different organizational identities through business model experimentation, and eventually "aspiring" to a renewed identity.

*Coping with identity nostalgia.* The organizational members who engaged in business model experiments at Vision 2020 frequently referred to the way this experimental space raised issues of identity nostalgia and the loss of the traditional identity of Sanoma as a magazine publisher. As a local (country) CEO explained:

"I think the first challenge is to get people to stop focus[ing] on the past. Because the past has been pretty glorious for many people. It was quite nice when the business was growing until 2008. [...] It's been very challenging also for me and for my management team to create a vision of the future."

The experimentation program was often described as a collective work of "confronting" and "comforting" that would bring the company through the distress over losing its identity. As one Vision 2020 participant, a magazine journalist, noted, "I felt the company was in transition, and so was I." As more people got involved in Vision 2020 projects, the discussions of the former identity were spilling over from meetings around Vision 2020 to regular meetings and informal talks. This was particularly difficult for people working in magazine editorial teams, as the previous company identity was built on a "strong legacy" based on the power of magazine brands. The issue of "lost identity" of the magazine publisher was raised regularly during weekly and monthly team meetings, especially when people working on Vision 2020 were present. Editors often nostalgically talked about the "good old days", when magazines were "the stars", while managers had to balance these



expressions of nostalgia with explications of the vision in which “not the print magazine, but the content, is king.” This kind of conversation repeatedly emerged in meetings.

A Vision 2020 project leader explained further in the following quote how experimenting with new business models allowed organizational members to successfully experience the “grief cycle”:

“I believe that all people working in print publishing have to go through this grief cycle. So, on the one hand, that occurs naturally. On the other hand, I think the transformation program helps in this. And I think that there was denial and anger at first, like, ‘What are these digital people doing to us?!’ or ‘It’s our business, why are they ruining it?’”

Practices of business model experimentation, especially cognitive (reimagining) and experiential (participating and exchanging), contributed to organizational identity work in terms of establishing mechanisms for coping with the turbulent environment and situation where the future was perceived as uncertain.

*Playing with new identities.* Organizational identity play was also one of the identity work practices triggered by having an experimental space for business model experimentation. For instance, one magazine editor involved in this project recalls that the team was role playing as video editors and TV station presenters, and in this role play, the company temporarily became a broadcasting TV station. Another Vision 2020 project, in which the participant-observer author was involved, was an early attempt at an e-commerce business model. People in the company had no previous experience with e-commerce, but they played different roles related to this type of business model and experimented with different roles. For example, participants played the roles of call-center agents, responding to customers requesting shoe-size changes. Furthermore, a renowned magazine and fashion editor of One Sanoma magazine played the role of a bag designer for the occasion, and her performance delighted team members. A marketing manager of the magazine played the role of a big negotiator with Chinese manufacturers of clothing items. This process, although

chaotic and often very difficult, as it required development of new competences, proved to be a playful learning experience, and even though the company did not scale up this project in the end, the experiments progressively clarified for the organizational members that Sanoma was not just a magazine publisher anymore. Through the process of experimentation, organizational members could play with different ideas of what the company's future identity may be. While participants were playing new roles, each of them could better experience what the company's future identity would be. The role play was a way to match the organizational identity (who they are as a company) with the new ways of doing business (what they do). Identity work and identity change can indeed be associated with identity play (i.e., "crafting and provisional trial of yet unelaborated possible selves" [Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010: page 13]). During strategic change, identity play can be a mechanism to both explore possible future organizational identities and implement the transition (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010). This play is also a collective performance to signal to the entire organization and convince organizational members that organizational identity change is underway. Organizational identity change processes often involve many conflicts, but through organizational identity work facilitated by experimental spaces and practices, organizational members can cope with and accept the necessity of an organizational identity change in a subtle way.

*Aspiring to a renewed identity.* Our observation notes, supported by interviews, indicated that the project leadership encouraged staff to reconsider the existing identity towards not only becoming a digital media company but also a more general marketing and PR agency for the client. Many of the interviewees said that the company was experimenting with "cutting out the middle man" and adding value themselves by creating cross-media offers to add a new value proposition. Participation in these projects served as rites of passage (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) in accepting that a new company identity was emerging.

The experimental space provided the organizational members with a new sense of the future. While going through business model experimentation, new identity aspirations, substantially different from the previous identity, began to form and be expressed. The members worked to pair a business model with an appropriate company identity by developing a cross-media platform of interaction among clients, readers, and media. For example, one manager we interviewed in 2011 mentioned the “Spotify business model/digital identity” as a future business model/identity, another proposed a “one-stop shop” as a business model/identity, and several other managers mentioned “content marketing”. These aspirations caused the organizational members to recognize the company’s increasing connection to a digital community of clients and companies who were confident about the future of media and creating this future. Here, the project members’ experimentation with creating content and a business model for a new device, namely, the iPad, led to the first Cosmopolitan magazine iPad app, and a business model around it and helped establish the organization in the community of print media innovators.

### **Mechanisms by which experimental space becomes identity work space**

In the previous sections, we illustrated the practices of experimentation in experimental spaces, which created a holding environment and background conditions for organizational identity work. We next describe the two mechanisms that made the experimental space become an identity work space: grounding and releasing.

**Grounding.** The creation of the space provided “grounding” to organizational members, as the space shielded them from the environment, engaging them in a setting where they could be “safe” and try different modes of action. This setting provided a sense of security to organizational members as they were shaping and testing different actions through engagement in experimental practices. This had a twofold effect. First, together, they could confront this upsetting environment and the ways the company had been reacting to it.

Second, they could use this experimental space to experience relief. As one Vision 2020 project participant expressed:

“A lot of people were also relieved, right? Because this was in the middle of the crisis, and they were busy cost-cutting, cost-cutting, cost-cutting, and now we came along and said: ‘Hey, now we are going to do something new,’ so people were relieved about that. And on the other hand, people were relieved because we said, ‘Hey guys, this is the reality, so our media landscape is going to change.’ And they said, ‘Well, finally someone says it. We know it, but we are always tiptoeing around these issues, because our magazines are so powerful, and our editors-in-chief don’t want to hear this, etc., etc.’ So, I also saw a lot of relief within the company actually.”

The project provided a sense to organizational members that they were grounded in an organization that actively thinks about the future and intervenes to take control of the future. It provided necessary conditions for experimentation in turbulent times, as project leaders continuously encouraged organizational members to experiment and provided safety, as failures during experimentation would not be sanctioned. However, another mechanism was needed to enable this experimental space to become an organizational identity work space.

**Releasing.** The experiments were not only about the outcome, i.e., better business models, but were also valued for the process and experience in which actors gathered together (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017; Bojovic et al., 2018). Different types of collective engagement of organizational members in the experimentation provided “releasing”, a mechanism in which this engagement in practices (enabled by grounding) loosens the organizational identity of the firm and makes it fluid, enabling identity work in terms of playing with the new identity and forming new identity aspirations. Thus, against the background of doing (i.e., engaging in a set of practices), organizational members were also engaging in organizational identity work, and the experimentation space thus evolved to an organizational identity work space.

This fluid identity was also circulated by the organizational members who were involved in identity work in and across the project as well as through the circulation of new

identity aspirations and new business models and the circulation of tools, discourses and material documents. Organizational members used business models as a tool to reimagine the future for the company, its products, and its customers. Reimagining in this way and envisioning the new business models not only enabled managers to identify current customer needs and create new value propositions but also helped organizational members project themselves towards a new organizational identity through continuous interactions of participation, exchanging of ideas and knowledge, and material experimentation with primarily digital-based business models. This continuous interaction progressively created, at the organizational level, a form of social defense (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) in which members could go through the grief process and become enthusiastic about the future again; it not only grounded them but also released them towards the future. The organizational members realized that the company's old identity was not matching emerging business models, and they subsequently engaged in experimenting with new identity components.

There was complementarity between these two mechanisms of grounding and releasing. To be able to engage in identity work and make the identity fluid during times of strategy disruption, there needed to be some sort of materialization, such as having a space and engaging in action, which provided organizational members with a sense of stability. This grounding effect of space allowed organizational members to play with organizational identity, to make it fluid, to play and to construct new identity aspirations that aligned with the new ways of doing business.

### **Formalization of a new organizational identity**

This complementarity between grounding and releasing eventually stabilized identity aspirations. The emerging identity, which was partially or totally renewed and in line with a new way of doing, needed to be properly explicated and incorporated into the organization. At the end of 2011, a new top management team was appointed at the group level, and the

new CEO met with the leaders of Vision 2020. Although Vision 2020 had been a success in terms of business model experimentation and identity work at the magazine business unit level, the diffusion at the corporate level was relatively slow because, as a bottom-up project, it was relying on voluntary adoption. As a result, the top management considered transforming the identity of the whole company to be an urgent need.

The new CEO stated that the focus for Sanoma was the transformation of its strategy and identity:

“Sanoma embarked on a transformational journey to become a new kind of media company. We had noticed how the landscape had begun to change, and we knew that our successful approach of the past would not sustain us in the future. We felt a deep need to change what we do, how we do it and the kind of organization we are.”

The top management of the firm then formalized the organizational identity work space and involved the organization in intentional organizational identity work around constructing new labels and streamlining the meanings. The company made the organizational identity work space more visible and tangible around a project referred to as “One Sanoma”. All the experimental activities launched in Vision 2020 were folded into this new project, but while Vision 2020 aimed at experimenting with new business models, the focus of One Sanoma was on a creating convergence in terms of organizational identity at the corporate level. One Sanoma project description included the firms' conceptualization of who they were within their respective business environments:

“The strengths that took the company where it is today will not bring it where it wants to be tomorrow, [and] there is an urgent need for transformation, which is caused by the changes in the business environment” (Sanoma Annual Report, 2011: page 10).

Top managers also further refined emergent identity claims, which were operationalized through several channels. A new visual identity consisting of a modern design of the company logo, website, annual report and presentations, along with a new storyline for the organization, was internally and externally promoted. The 2013 annual report was an

interactive animated website with a minimalistic, modern design, photos, and videos, considered a state-of-the-art aesthetic for digital communication. The new design was used in all company presentations, and the company hired an external agency to create a company presentation about the importance of tablets as a 3D video infographic. A comparison of the company's identity in 2008 and 2013 is given in Table 5.

<Insert Table 5 about here>

In parallel, it was now clear to management that the new dominant business models would be cross-media, so they reorganized, combining all media-related businesses into one business unit: Sanoma Magazines merged with Sanoma Entertainment to become Sanoma Media. The president and CEO of Sanoma explained:

“Media are converging. Printed products, online services and television are getting closer to each other. I strongly believe that the integration will help us in responding even more effectively to the needs of consumers and advertisers.”

Experimentation with business models still existed, but now, the former experiments were part of the company's regular activities. At this point, the identity change was perceived as an appropriate turn because the new identity labels were mirroring the meanings that emerged through the engagements in business model experimentation.

## **DISCUSSION**

Through an in-depth longitudinal study of the reaction of one print media organization to the emergence of the Internet, this study shows how experimental spaces, and the experimental practices that take place within them, can create a holding environment for organizational identity work and thus transform into identity work spaces. Specifically, we show that the *intentionally* designed business model experimental space (Vision 2020) *unintentionally* contributed to opening up an organizational identity work space, which in turn was eventually recognized years later by top management, leading to the establishment of One Sanoma (a top-down initiative formalizing and streamlining the new organizational

identity). These experimental spaces invited organizational members to engage in practices of identity work by challenging their assumptions about who the company was and by aligning new business models and new organizational identities.

We documented that the business model experimental space facilitated three experimental practices: the participants' cognitive engagement (while reimagining business models), their material engagement (through testing and replicating business models), and their experiential engagement (through participating in, exchanging about, and promoting business models). Experimental space enabled not only experimental practices but also identity work. Through the mechanisms of "grounding" and "releasing", the participation of organizational members in experimental practices contributed to activating organizational identity work, thus making the experimental space evolve into an identity work space. In the experimental space/identity work space, organizational members coped with identity nostalgia, played with new identities, and eventually developed aspirations towards a renewed identity that would fit with what the company did, leading to an evolution of their organizational identity.

This research has two important implications for understanding the strategy-identity nexus. First, we show that business model experimentation can trigger organizational identity work, and second, we demonstrate that these organizational processes are enabled by experimental spaces.

### **Business models as identity-related tools**

Overall, our study has important implications for understanding the close relationship between doing (strategy) and being (identity). Previous research has shown that aspects of identity (i.e., "who we are") have impacts on strategy (i.e., "what we do") (Tripsas, 2009; Rindova et al., 2011; Garud and Karunakaran, 2017). Research has also suggested that "what we do" can potentially stretch and transform "who we are" (Anthony and Tripsas, 2016): for



instance, innovation can be identity enhancing, identity stretching, or identity challenging. However, facilitating identity-stretching or identity-challenging innovation is difficult for companies, especially under uncertainty and strategic ambiguity. Such situations usually lead to inertia and can be detrimental to organizations survival (Tripsas, 2009). We untangle this relationship by looking into how experimenting with “what the company does” (i.e., business model experimentation) can facilitate the process of “who the company is becoming”. We show that business model experimentation is not only a way to enable the adoption of identity-stretching or identity-challenging innovations (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017) but that it can also change the organizational identity itself.

Moreover, while organizational identity work and organizational identity change have been mostly analyzed as intentional processes (Gioia et al., 2013; Kreiner and Murphy, 2016; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), we unveil unintentional identity work. We show that identity change can emerge from other organizational processes, such as business model experimentation, and from the bottom of the organization before eventually becoming visible and led by top managers. In our case study, organizational identity is indirectly established through the creation of background conditions for change. When identity is ambiguous, organizational leaders have a major role in sensegiving about a future identity (Tripsas, 2009). We confirm that the role of leaders is important, especially in stabilizing new identity labels (Gioia et al., 2000); however, in our study, rather than changing the identity directly from that of a magazine to that of a media company (on the levels of labels and meanings), a favorable background in which the new identity would progressively emerge was created. The new organizational identity emerged almost as a side effect to fit with the renewal of business models.

Our research also enriches the growing business model literature by showing how business models can be tools for becoming. While previous scholars have looked into how the

adaptation of business models is occurring after disruptions brought by digitization (Cozzolino et al., 2018), we unpacked its indirect and unintended consequences. Business model experimentation entails cognitive engagement. The extant literature has shown that a business model is, as a model, a cognitive device as well as a point of identification (Baden-Fuller and Morgan, 2010; Garud et al., 2017). These are cognitive constructs that “have the potential to create distinct conceptualizations and innovative reconceptualizations of environmental situations” (Martins et al., 2015: 105). Thus, in cognitive engagement in business model experimentation, organizational members challenge their existing hypotheses about the value that the company is creating and capturing (Teece, 2010) by reconceptualization of the relationship between the environment and the organization. We expand on the view of business models as cognitive tools by showing that during experimentation, the material and experiential engagement with business models contribute to their potential as tools for becoming. Business model experimentation is thus an active process that facilitates organizational learning (Berends et al., 2016) and fosters the collective engagement of organizational members in reflection-through-action (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017). We argue that this specific dimension of experimental learning makes it possible to become a trigger for organizational identity work. Furthermore, the material dimension of experimentation signals to organizational members that something new is being created, which encourages them to progressively adapt to the change. The experiential dimension gives a sense of collective work, making it possible for organizational members at different levels and with different functions to work together in creating new mechanisms of value creation and capture. The interplay of cognitive, material and experiential dimensions of experimenting with business models as a spillover engages organizational members in questioning and redefining assumptions about the very identity of the organization, which fits with the new business models being created and tested. Our study thus complements existing

research by showing how engagement in business model experimentation alters the way in which organizational members envision the business (by creating a new business model), experience the business (by testing a new business model in a real-life setting), and experience elements of a new organizational identity. Business models differ from other strategy tools in that they connect dynamically the environment and the inner organization, and they contain identity-related elements, which can be activated during experimentation and trigger organizational identity work.

### **Experimental space and organizational identity workspace**

Previous research posited that when an organization has a process-based ideology of participative experimentation, identity-challenging innovation can be fostered (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017). In our case, as in the case of many incumbent companies facing environmental disruptions, the company did not have that kind of ideology. Instead, in reaction to environmental disruption and strategic ambiguity, managers opened an experimental space (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Cartel et al., 2017), where they cultivated experimentation and, as a side effect, changed assumptions about organizational identity. This finding has important implications for strategy because it means that creating such spaces can foster identity change and thus increase the chances of company survival in a situation characterized by disruption and ambiguity.

Our research complements prior studies on experimental spaces that were based on empirical cases in which participants are “generally supportive of change” (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 612). This was not the case at Sanoma: strategic ambiguity initially led the company’s organizational members to adopt a distant and prudent attitude towards change. Our study thus enhances the understanding of experimental spaces, as it shows that the functioning of experimental spaces may drive organizational members to progressively engage in experimental practices more favorable to change. In the same line of analysis, our

study sheds light on the possible emergence of unintentional spaces. Although existing studies on experimental spaces have mostly focused on *intentionally* created spaces (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 612), we argue that spaces may emerge, change, or dissolve unintentionally, with beneficial outcomes for the organization. In the Sanoma case, the experimental space provided a safe space to buffer uncertainty, cope with identity nostalgia, and confront the challenging environment collectively, thus becoming an organizational identity work space.

Additionally, while several scholars working on discursive approaches have identified keynote talks, plenary speaks, or corridor talks as discursive spaces with distinctive properties that may help explain change and multiplicity in institutional fields (e.g., Hardy and Maguire, 2010; Zilber, 2011), fewer studies have explored the materiality of *what* is being done in spaces designed for seeding change, with the notable exception of Bucher and Langley (2016). We argue that the design of experimental spaces as a bounded social setting where organizational members can engage in business model experimentation eventually enables them to play with and perform different identities in the interactions both inside and outside organizational boundaries.

By identifying and characterizing the mechanisms of grounding and releasing, this study contributes more broadly to the literature on spaces by providing a better understanding of how spaces can emerge and transform from one to the other and how multiple spaces “may act synergistically, interfere with each other or coevolve” (Bucher and Langley, 2016: 612). We draw attention to experimental spaces as bounded social settings where organizational members not only experiment with different modes of action leading to some sort of change (Bucher and Langley, 2016; Cartel et al., 2018) but also collectively experience (Garud and Karunakaran, 2017) and perform the change in practice. Thus, experimental spaces are not only cognitive, physical and social spaces, but most importantly, they are *experiential* spaces.

Previous studies on liminal and interstitial spaces (Howard-Greenville et al., 2011; Furnari, 2014) have suggested the potential of spaces in which organizational members are doing and experiencing change in practice and reflecting upon this experience, and we extend this knowledge by showing the impact these spaces can have on organizational becoming.

Interestingly, the participants of the experimental space mobilized practices of business model experimentation as a way to deal with all the emotions linked to organizational identity change. Kreiner and Murphy (2016) argued there is a need to investigate further into emotions and organizational identity work, in particular, how they affect each other and how they are regulated at the organizational level. We have seen in this research that space catalyzes the tensions arising when identity-challenging innovations are introduced. Business model experimentation thus provides a way to deal with emotions by grounding the organizational members in a relatively safe and controlled environment that buffers the uncertainty related to change and allows them to cope with and experience the grief cycle.

### **LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The findings of this study may be transferable to other contexts characterized by uncertainty, disruption and digitalization. This research suggests that when change is needed, clear aspirations in terms of strategy and organizational identity from the beginning of the process may not be necessary. Rather, experimentation may be a way to respond to environmental changes or overcome strategic inertia or the filter effect of organizational identity. Furthermore, some companies seem to be able to continuously experiment with business models (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Garud and Karunakaran, 2017); how such continuous experimentation actually influences organizational identity remains to be investigated. This topic would be interesting to explore not only in incumbent settings but also in entrepreneurial ventures that are characterized by continuous experimentation with

“what they do” (Ravasi and Turati, 2005; Ott et al., 2017).

The richness of this case study resulting from our methodological choices and guided by our research questions allowed us to focus on the internal perception of organizational identity. Future research could also consider external identity changes (Tripsas, 2009) and how outside audiences, such as institutional actors, customers, suppliers, or complementary producers, view the organization (Gioia et al., 2000). How spaces emerge and evolve when internal and external identities are changing (not necessarily in a consistent and coherent way) is a question that merits further exploration. We have documented here that experimental spaces can be experiential spaces, and this calls for further research on the ecology of spaces.

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## TABLES AND FIGURES

**TABLE 1**  
**Data Collection and Use in the Analysis**

<b>Type of Source</b>	<b>Data Description</b>	<b>Use in the Analysis</b>
<b>Participant Observation</b>	<p>One of the researchers was working in the company and was a part of the transformational project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The researcher kept a reflective diary of the work done regarding business modeling and identity change</li> <li>• The researcher was present in meetings and conducted informal talks and interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To gain a deep understanding of the company identity from an insider perspective</li> <li>• To understand the media business and environment changes that affected the company</li> <li>• To provide details about the process of experimentation and identity work</li> </ul>
<b>Archival Data: Corporate Documents</b>	<p>Documents produced between 2008 and 2013 and intended to present the company strategy and activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content and design of company website</li> <li>• 6 annual reports</li> <li>• 40 corporate presentations</li> <li>• 117 press releases</li> <li>• Strategic documents and presentations of transformational projects (100 pages)</li> <li>• Conference call transcripts between the CEO, analysts and investors (15 transcripts)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To understand the company history and the vision of the future</li> <li>• To identify “old” and “new” identity statements</li> <li>• To identify the strategic issues and how the company implements strategic change</li> <li>• To follow organizational changes related to identity and strategy change</li> <li>• To follow up on big events for the company during the transformational period</li> <li>• To capture visual aspects of the company identity (design of the website and design of the annual report, reflecting the changes in company identity)</li> </ul>
<b>“Live” Archival Data: Videos of Strategy Meetings</b>	<p>Videos and audios of strategy meetings held on Capital Markets Day (in 2009, 2010, and 2012) where the top management presented the strategy, environment, and transformation: 21 videos by CEOs, CFOs, chief strategy officers, chief digital officers, and CEOs of strategic business units)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To analyze top managers’ interpretations about the company’s strategy and identity</li> <li>• To observe the promotion of the new identity through the top managers’ presentations</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews</b>	<p>Ten semistructured interviews with the leaders and participants of the transformational projects (middle managers of the company) who worked in different roles (managerial and editorial, print and digital) and worked across different geographies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To track interpretations of organizational members about the company’s strategy and identity</li> <li>• To follow an insider’s perspective about identity work</li> </ul>

**TABLE 2**  
**Timeline of Important Change-related Events and Activities in the Company**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Key Events and Activities</b>
<b>2008</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changed the name to Sanoma and unified the names of the divisions.</li> <li>• New chief strategy officer (CSO) appointed, with a clear task to boost the digital transformation.</li> </ul>
<b>2009</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announced strategic change and first corporate online strategy set up, which was communicated by the CEO.</li> <li>• Magazine business unit created the position of chief digital media (CDM) officer, with a place on the management board.</li> <li>• Conceptualization of the Vision 2020 project in the magazine business unit; brainstorming workshops, interviewing people, and creating a roadmap and whitepaper.</li> </ul>
<b>2010</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implementation of Vision 2020: roadshow, recruitment of project champions, workshops, start of the first projects.</li> <li>• Launch of iPad and development of magazines for iPad: Vision 2020 team developed the first Cosmopolitan iPad app in the world.</li> <li>• Held the corporate thematic event about convergence of media on media and portable devices, organized by the CSO.</li> <li>• Established a new division inside the organizational structure of Sanoma, i.e., Sanoma Media. This division integrated Sanoma Entertainment and Sanoma Magazines.</li> <li>• The president and CEO of 10 years retired at age 60.</li> </ul>
<b>2011</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new CEO was appointed. In a new organizational structure, the media country-based units directly report to the CEO.</li> <li>• Started the One Sanoma project around strategic change with a survey to assess the values and current identity and work on the cultural roadmap.</li> <li>• Implemented the following shifts in the company portfolio: focus on consumer media and learning; divestment from movie operations, kiosk, and press distribution operations. The acquisition of TV assets in the Netherlands of Belgium was the highlight of the year and was widely discussed in all company meetings.</li> </ul>
<b>2012</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closed the Vision 2020 program and incorporated Vision 2020 projects into One Sanoma.</li> <li>• Reorganized top management teams throughout the group for organizational consolidation.</li> <li>• The role of the chief digital officer was strengthened and expanded to cover Sanoma's strategic development.</li> <li>• Initiated efforts towards diffusing a new identity, vision, and set of values.</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3**  
**Core Themes, Second-order Codes and First-order Concepts**

Theme	Second-order Codes	First-order Concepts	Data Illustration
Practices of organizational identity work	<b>Coping</b>	Collectively facing the uncertain environment  Dealing with emotions such as grief and identity nostalgia	<p>“At least I think we established a state of acceptance and, in some cases, even cooperation towards working on a new future. So, I was absolutely impressed by how not only local people but also those in the lowest levels in the organization helped and understood that something had to be done and how they transformed not only the company but also themselves” (Vision 2020 Project Leader).</p> <p>“The past has been pretty glorious for many people. It was quite nice when the business was growing up until 2008. At first, it was a total shock to everybody that, 'Oh goodness, now the business is actually decreasing,' you know, and it's like a shock, and then there is grief, and only then can you really can get people enthusiastic about what's ahead” (Local country CEO).</p>
	<b>Playing</b>	Trying out and performing different organizational identities	<p>“We were inventing as we went, acting as a TV broadcaster and doing a live stream of a red carpet in an event we organized” (Journalist involved in Vision 2020).</p>
	<b>Aspiring</b>	Matching new identity aspirations with new business models	<p>“Maybe a ‘one-stop shop’ is what you hear a lot. If you look at these media agencies who are squeezing publishers out with margins and stuff, the only thing they add is the concept around it, plus they may have more connections with different media, like, for example, what I said, the banner behind the airplane. But in the end, these things should be arrangeable for a publisher like Sanoma. I mean, a big company like Loreal has a media agency, and then a media agency buys 80% of their media from us. We can do it ourselves as well, cutting out the middle man” (Vision 2020 Project Manager).</p>
Engagement in experimental practices	<b>Cognitive: Reimagining</b>	<p>New framing of the environment</p> <p>Brainstorming about new business models</p>	<p>“In Hungary, for example, when a colleague on the first session on mobile saw a mobile application, she said, “Yes, this will definitely be a big thing in the future,” not realizing that it is already in the present. She was an editor of a parenting magazine and didn't have any idea about parenting apps. But, she changed, and in the following years, she was a digital pioneer in this segment in Hungary and launched various parenting apps” (Vision 2020 Project Leader).</p> <p>“We really made a tour through all the countries, having brainstorm sessions, coming out with the best ideas and, in the end, saying, 'Ok, now we</p>

		are going to finance these ideas, and we are going to facilitate these ideas by helping you with project management” (Vision 2020 Project Manager).
	<b>Material: Testing and Replicating</b>	<p>Testing business models in a real-life setting</p> <p>Repeating experiments inside a project, outside of the scope of the project, and replicating the project to other projects</p> <p>“When I look at the program, I think that the most innovative part was the way we wanted to establish this transformation. So, we said, we can talk a lot about it, we can present about it, we can change organizational structure etc., etc., but why don’t we just do it” (Vision 2020 Project Leader).</p> <p>“The goal of the project was to initiate transformation. The ambition of the project was not to execute the transformation from start to end but to initiate it, to plant the seed and to set the road” (Vision 2020 Project Manager).</p>
	<b>Experiential: Participating, Exchanging, and Promoting</b>	<p>Participating with others in the business model experimentation</p> <p>Dissemination of knowledge, ideas, and vision inside and outside of the space</p> <p>Acting as promoters of new business models</p> <p>“For us, it was really interesting because we were doing something completely new and exciting, and we were in it together” (Vision 2020 Project Participant).</p> <p>“Vision 2020 had a blog, where we shared our experiences and where we could speak about the things we’ve done. I loved to contribute and to read that blog and to see how other people perceived what was going on ” (Journalist involved in Vision 2020).</p> <p>“We realized that we were at some sort of a burning platform that will burn out in one moment and that, actually, we have to act as quickly and efficiently as possible to go up from this platform” (Vision 2020 Project Manager).</p>
Becoming through doing	<b>Grounding</b>	<p>Providing a safe zone in an experimental space to ground organizational members and “protect” them from a turbulent environment</p> <p>“We provide more than words. We provide support, people, money and communication. We have concrete intermediate and long-term goals, and what we ask from you is just your ideas, willingness to experiment and to do” (Vision 2020 Roadshow 2011).</p>
	<b>Releasing</b>	<p>Loosening the organizational identity by engagement in experimental practices</p> <p>“We experimented with being a TV broadcaster and video production and marketing agency” (Online editor).</p>

**TABLE 4**  
**Characterization of the experimental space**

	<b>Elements of the space</b>	<b>Boundaries of the space</b>	<b>Experimental practices</b>
<b>Transformational project as an experimental space (e.g., Vision 2020)</b>	<p><b>Physical:</b> The space is a physical setting where organizational members meet to discuss or experience something (conference room, event space)</p> <p><b>Social:</b> The space is a setting for collective engagement with different modes of action</p> <p><b>Liminal and Psychological:</b> The space is not only created in the environment where organizational members meet, but it is a psychological space that enables them to think, feel and behave differently</p>	<p><b>Tight boundaries</b></p> <p><b>Temporal:</b> It has a beginning and end (project time)</p> <p><b>Symbolic:</b> It has symbolism of change and a particular symbolic identity ('Vision 2020' name, butterfly logo)</p> <p><b>Loose boundaries</b></p> <p><b>Social:</b> Includes actors who are participating in experimentation activities, but through promoting it, transposes the social boundaries and becomes organizational</p> <p><b>Physical:</b> Some parts of the project take place in a specific setting outside of the normal activity (champion's meeting); others take place in a real-life setting close to the normal activity</p>	<p><b>Cognitive:</b> Engagement in the creation of new views of the world, such as envisioning a new business model</p> <p><b>Material:</b> Testing and experimenting with business models in a real-life business setting</p> <p><b>Experiential:</b> Related to the performative aspects of practices, going through an experience of experimentation</p>

**TABLE 5**  
**Business model experimentations in Vision 2020**

<b>Growth area: Magazine +</b>	<b>Business models</b>	<b>Examples of experiments</b>
Activities and assets that had a sustainable and (potentially) profitable character and that were related to Sanoma magazines or to Sanoma's core (magazine) segments: Women's General Interest, Fashion & Beauty, Home & Deco, Health & Wellness, Celebrities/Entertainment, Life Stages.	Online	NLCafe.hu in Hungary, eCuisine cooking vertical across countries, Parenting vertical across countries, etc.
	Mobile	Cosmopolitan Russia on iPad, Zwanger Pregnancy app on iPhone, First aid for kids on iPhone, Horoscope app on iPad, etc.
	Television	StoryTV in Hungary
	Events	Wedding Fairs in Croatia, Sensa Weekends across the Adria region, Story Concerts, etc.

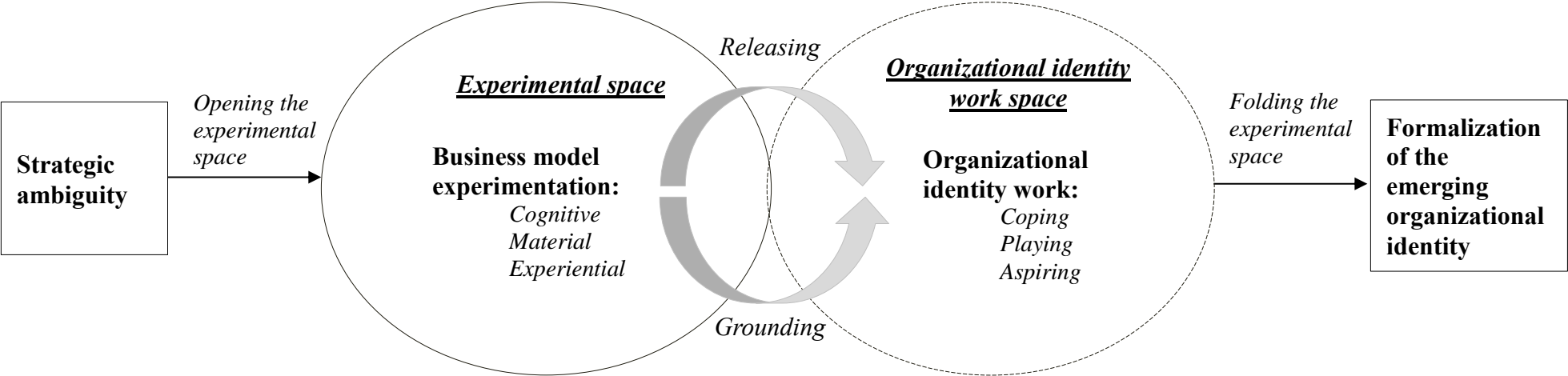
**TABLE 6**  
**Organizational identity before and after Vision 2020**

Period	Organizational identity	Organizational identity labels	Illustration from the data
<p><b>Before Vision 2020</b></p>	<p><b>“Magazine Publisher” identity, strongly rooted in the identity of strong magazine brands</b></p>	<p>Business unit name</p>	<p>Sanoma Magazines</p>
		<p>Statements about organizational identity</p>	<p>“Sanoma Magazines publishes more than 300 magazines in 13 different countries and is one of the largest consumer magazine publishers in Europe” (Press Release, 2008).</p> <p>"It is a great tradition within Sanoma Magazines to have the biggest, oldest magazine brands in our publishing houses in all our countries" (Local country CEO, 2008).</p>
		<p>Visual identity reflecting the orientation of magazine brands</p>	<div data-bbox="1126 794 1552 1353" data-label="Image"> </div> <p>Image description: Annual report Cover page in 2008 represents a stylized image of magazine brand logos.</p>



Period	Organizational identity	Organizational identity labels	Illustration from the data
<p><b>After Vision 2020</b></p>	<p><b>“Media Company” identity, rooted in the transformation from a magazine publisher to a media company</b></p>	<p>Business unit name</p>	<p>Sanoma Media</p>
		<p>Statements about organizational identity</p>	<p>“We can be a leader in multichannel content with a world-class portfolio of brands and channels. We can also be a leader in local foresight and insight, having intimate knowledge of the needs, interests and aspirations of consumers, students, teachers and advertisers. And we can continue to provide a world of inspiration, information and knowledge and be admired for our ability to innovate. This is what we mean when we say, ‘get the world’” (Sanoma CEO, 2013).</p> <p>“The world is changing rapidly, and especially advertisers. I mean, if it’s better for the customer to rent a plane and put a banner behind it, we, as a print agency, or media agency more or less, we should deal with that. We are now more than a publisher” (Vision 2020 Project Manager).</p>
		<p>Visual identity reflecting the orientation on integrated media.</p>	<div data-bbox="1122 863 1547 1166" data-label="Image"> <p>The image shows the cover of the 2012 annual report. It features a silhouette of a person standing in front of a large, brightly lit digital display. The display is filled with various product images and the Sanoma logo, which is composed of the letters 's', 'o', 'm', 'a' in a stylized, blocky font. The person appears to be interacting with the display, possibly using a handheld device. The overall theme is digital convergence and integrated media.</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1592 863 2051 1166" data-label="Text"> <p>Image description: Annual report Cover page, 2012, represents the orientation of the company towards the digital age, and the digital convergence of media content with other spheres of life for consumers (i.e., shopping).</p> </div>

**FIGURE 1**  
**Grounded framework “Becoming through doing”**



## **Biographies of authors**

Neva Bojovic is assistant professor of strategy at Kedge Business School in Bordeaux, since September 2019. She defended her PhD at Grenoble Ecole de Management and she is a PhD candidate at Université Savoie Mont Blanc, IREGÉ lab in France. Her research is focused on how organizations manage emergence of new technologies. She is interested in strategic experimentation and how it impacts processes inside and outside organizations.

Valérie Sabatier is associate professor of strategy and innovation management. Her main research interests are corporate strategy and industry evolutions. Her research particularly examines business model design, experimentation and implementation within industries facing technological and strategic discontinuities. She has been investigating both the biopharmaceutical and media industries for fifteen years. Valérie Sabatier is also the director of the Grenoble Ecole de Management Doctoral School.

Emmanuel Coblenç is associate professor in management at the Institut Supérieur de Gestion (ISG) in Paris, and also actively involved in research programs on innovation, organizational change and leadership in creative organizations at Mines ParisTech and HEC Montréal. His research focuses on organizational theories, leadership and strategic processes in creative organizations. Recent publications have addressed issues such as business model renewal in arts museums; professionalization processes of cultural workers; organizational leadership of orchestra conductors; the involvement of designers in public administration reforms; and audience participation in cultural organizations. Overall, Emmanuel Coblenç's work attempts to put organizational practices at the core of artistic innovation in cultural and creative industries.

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