

Using history for organizational identity preservation: The case of family-run Italian restaurants

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Introduction

Management and Organization Studies (MOS) have traditionally treated history as an objective and immutable fact. For example, some scholars understand that historical factors linked to the foundation of the company imprint routines, values, and processes that endure over time and restrict innovation (Stinchcombe, 1965). Ecologists argue that history may be determinant of structural inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Other scholars see history as a path dependence factor, in which past decisions affect subsequent decisions (Sydow et al., 2009). However, this "traditional" view of temporal elements as objective facts, in which time is considered in a linear sense and history is seen as taken for granted, has been changed (Brunninge, 2009).

A growing body of studies have pointed to an approach to history as a socio-cognitive phenomenon wherein the past can be socially (re)constructed and (re)interpreted (Coraiola, Suddaby, & Foster, 2017), and history is recognized as an endogenous factor to the organization, and may even be used for strategic ends (Wadhvani et al., 2018). One of the main strategic uses of history by organizations is to build identity (Suddaby, Foster and Quinn-Trank, 2010), which is commonly referred to "the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations" (Whetten, 2006, p. 220), although in this paper, we assume that organizational identity is relatively malleable rather than enduring (Gioia et al., 2013).

History can be seen as an essential element of organizational identity since an organization can only know if its identity is in accordance with its founding core values observing its history over time (Gioia et al., 2013). As a result, some strategy scholars have been addressed the specific roles history has played in the organizational identity construction (see Blombäck & Brunninge, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Zundel, Holt, & Popp, 2016; Basque & Langley, 2018; Oertel & Thommes, 2018). As suggested in this literature, organizations frequently use history when attempting to construct their identities (Zundel, Holt, & Popp, 2016).

Despite the evidence that organizations engage with history to shape their identities, little attention has been paid to the processes through which organizations apply history to preserve their identities across time (Ravasi, Rindova, & Stigliani, 2019). To address this gap, we aim to analyze how organizations use history in an attempt to preserve organizational identity. We focus on the specific case of four family-run Italian restaurants located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. These restaurants were founded by Italian immigrants' families that preserve their history, tradition, and heritage in the core of the organizational identity. According to Blombäck and Brunninge (2013, p. 341), "family identity and history represent a means to support a trustworthy and stable organizational identity," which warrants the relevance of studying the use of history to preserve organizational identity in the context of family firms.

Based on our analysis, we find that organizational identity appears to be particularly associated with family history, which is due to the hybrid identity of family firms (Whetten, 200; Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014). This characteristic provides an organizational identity strongly committed to family history and anchored in the founder's figure. Thus, to preserve identity, firms rhetorically interpret the past in favor of organizational identity preservation. They do it by making historical claims mostly based on family history, the founders' values and beliefs, and the Italian cuisine tradition. Additionally, we find that organizational actors make

identity claims about the future in the present that is related to the past, to preserve "who we are" as an organization.

Our paper is structured as follows. We begin by reviewing the relevant literature on the use of history in organizations and organizational identity in the context of family firms. We then describe the methodological procedures employed. Subsequently, we present our main findings, followed by the discussion of our results. Finally, we end by pointing to the contributions of a historical perspective in the organizational identity studies and offering suggestions for future research.

Theoretical background

The use of history in organizations

Within organization theory, history is often present; sometimes, it is explicitly treated, at other times, implicitly. Indeed, history is commonly seen as an exogenous factor, hence, beyond managers' control (Suddaby et al. 2019). This view is, at least in part, due to the positivist tradition of the mainstream organization theory, in which history often takes on an objective character (Brunninge, 2009), or even that is responsible for a relative absence of historical analyses (Kieser, 1994). On the other hand, some scholars have questioned this scientific rhetoric of mainstream studies by offering a perspective in which history is seen as a cognitive phenomenon, that is possible to be socially re(construct) and re(interpret) over time (Clark & Rowllison, 2004; Mills et al. 2016; Coraiola, Suddaby, & Foster, 2017). This renewed perspective leaves room for historiographic debates within Management and Organization Studies (MOS).

Despite being associated with the past; history is not synonymous with it. According to Wadhvani et al. (2018), the past can be understood as all of the events that occurred chronologically before the present, regardless of whether a particular event is known; history, in turn, is about mobilizing the past in the present. In other words, history can be seen as the process of making the past present.

History is also commonly linked to collective memory. However, Decker, Rowlinson, and Hassard (2020) argue that although history and memory constructs coexist in academic research, these concepts are not interchangeable. In these authors' view, history and memory represent different assumptions about the nature of the past: while collective memory can be defined as the representation of the past shared and commented on by a group; history can be understood as an effort of perception, interpretation, and sensemaking that produces accounts of the past based on sources and archives.

Thus, history can be understood as the various ways in which organizational actors (re)construct and (re)interpret the past in the present, which means that they rhetorically use history to develop experiences in the present and create expectations for the future (Coraiola, Suddaby, & Foster, 2017). This rhetorical history can be defined as "the process by which managers skillfully impose meaning on a firm's past" (Foster et al., 2011, p. 104). Through the interpretation of the past, history can be used to generate authenticity, legitimacy, and reputation to the organization (Suddaby, 2016). In our study, we draw on this assumption that organizational actors interpret the past in the present to preserve organizational identity for the future.

Strategy scholars have been discussing history as an endogenous factor that can be applied by organizations for strategic ends (Wadhvani et al. 2018). As Suddaby, Foster, and QuinnTrank, (2010) argue, the main strategic uses of history by organizations are to confer

legitimacy, build identity, and generate commitment and, change or continuity: Brunninge (2009) analyzes the use of history to legitimize and facilitate organizational change in two Swedish multinational companies. His findings show that organizational actors purposefully construct and use historical accounts to establish continuity in the strategy process. He also stresses that the use of history tends to legitimize or delegitimize specific strategic choices. In a recent study, Cappelen and Pedersen (2020) focus on a new culinary movement among restaurants in Turkey to argue for a link between strategic ambiguity and historical narratives. These authors explain that organizations strategically use historical narratives located in a vaguely defined past to support a sense of common cultural heritage. They find three forms of ambiguity applied by organizations – ambiguity of origin, ambiguity of artifacts, and ambiguity of ownership. According to them, organizational actors build ambiguous historical narratives as a means of acquiring legitimacy and authenticity to the culinary movement. Zundel, Holt, and Popp (2016) distinguish two related uses of history concerning the construction and preservation of organizational identity. As they note, history may be used to commit an organization's external audience and, as a means of creating inward commitment, connecting the organization to the employees. Basque and Langley (2018) show how the founder figure of Desjardins Group was strategically invoked to articulate, remember, and preserve organizational identity expressions.

Firms may also rely on external values and beliefs to build and preserve their own identities. For example, Foster et al. (2011) demonstrate how a Canadian company created historical and tradition-based narratives to craft its brand identity based on past practices and events linked to Canadian culture and national identity. They argue that some organizations have strategically connected their histories to broader social and cultural institutions, as a means of appropriating the legitimacy of these institutions. Oertel and Thommes (2018) focus on watchmaking firms located in a cluster in East Germany to analyze the role of history in identity construction. They show that some organizations use cluster-level histories to build their identities in a way that allows them to be recognized as part of a legitimate business, which in turn increases their reliability and accountability.

Organizational identity in the context of family firms

The concept of organizational identity (OI) first emerged at the individual level, specifically from both psychological and sociological definitions of the self and identity (Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014). Research on OI has primarily built on Albert and Whetten's (1985) early conceptualization – as those organizational attributes that are regarded by an organization's members to be central and enduring, and that distinguish the organization from other similar organizations (Whetten, 2006). Central attributes are those that represent "who we are as an organization", e.g., key values, beliefs, products, services, practices. Attributes that distinguishes the organization from other organizations are those related to whether an organization recognizes itself – and is recognized by others - as distinguished from other players, yet similar to members of the same industry. Enduring attributes are related to the notion that the identity is continuous, although, in this study, we draw on the stream of literature that sees identity as more changeable (Gioia et al., 2013).

As Gioia and Hamilton (2016) note, as organizational members interact with each other and with the outsiders, they continuously renegotiate their collective understanding of OI. Thus, identity may be seen as a dynamic phenomenon, rather than static, since it relies on shared interpretive schemes constructed by an organization over time (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). The schemes may not be completely defined, so different schemes are likely to be employed

according to different occasions or the organization's interests (Albert & Whetten, 2004). By adopting a social constructivist approach, this study highlights the sensemaking process underlying the construction and preservation of OI. Thus, we regard OI as both an attribute of an organization as well as an ongoing process (Gioia & Hamilton, 2016). By assuming a temporal perspective on organization identity (Schultz & Hernes, 2013), we were able to observe the phenomenon at a given point in time, besides, to discuss and analyze its "becoming" across time.

In the context of family firms, organizational identity is referred to as a type of hybrid identity, which is characterized by the amalgamation of more than one identity (Whetten, 2006). Thus, family firm identity combines the identity elements of the family and the company (Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014). As a consequence of their hybrid identities, in family firms, the histories of the family and the firm are naturally entwined, which means that when they tell the firm history, they inevitably tell the family history (Blombäck & Brunninge, 2013).

Because of the bond between family and organizational histories, family members generally consider the company's identity as their own. This is due to the strong sense of belonging to the organization, which makes family members see the family business as an extension of themselves (Dye & Whetten, 2006).

Family firm identity generally emerges from the founder's initial conceptions of what the company is or can be (Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014). For this reason, references to the founder's beliefs may persist along with the discourses of their successors, participating in the organizational identity preservation (Basque & Langley, 2018). In other words, even after the founders are no longer in the firm, their influence tends to persist throughout the organizational life as their values and beliefs are imprinted in the organization (Pieper et al., 2015).

According to Blombäck and Brunninge (2013), when firms have been owned by several generations of the same family, their connection to history is even stronger, as it involves longstanding traditions, rituals, and family legacy, and contributes for the conservation of organizational identity over time (Erdogan, Rondi, & De Massis, 2019).

Tradition refers to "consciously transmitted beliefs and practices expressing identification with a shared past" (Dacin, Dacin, & Kent, 2019, p. 356), that can serve as a basis for organizational identity construction. In long-established family firms, tradition is particularly important as it perpetuates identity over time through the family's beliefs, values, and practices (Erdogan, Rondi, & De Massis, 2019). Because of the high value of tradition, family businesses may not be willing to abandon their tradition; instead, they seek opportunities to take advantage of the past (De Massis, 2016).

Scholars have also been discussing the role of family legacy and heritage in perpetuating identity. Jaskiewicz, Combs, and Rau (2015) highlight particularly the role of entrepreneurial legacy, which is defined as the family's rhetorical reconstruction of past entrepreneurial achievements or difficulties. Their findings suggest that entrepreneurial legacy motivates the next generations to engage in strategic activities that nurture transgenerational entrepreneurship. Similarly, Blombäck and Brunninge (2013) discuss the relevance of historical accounts and family heritage dimension to managing organizational identity and brand. As they state, family businesses' historical accounts will likely involve a combination of aspects referring to change and aspects referring to continuity. For example, De Massis et al. (2016) analyze how family businesses use their past as a resource to innovate in the present. Although tradition-based companies are commonly related to lack of innovation, their findings suggest that these firms can be highly innovative while remaining firmly anchored to the past.

With this brief review of the literature on history in the organizational identity context, in the next section, we explicate the methodological procedures employed in this study and present our empirical setting.

Methods

Research design

To address our research question, we draw on a qualitative approach and a multiple case study strategy. A case study aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2009). In general, case studies can be used “to provide a description, test theory, and generate theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 535). The selection of a case study methodology was due to the nature of our research question that required detailed investigation into how family-run Italian restaurants engage with history in an attempt to preserve organizational identity across time. As Yin (2009) observes, the asking of “how” question is better suited to a case study. Additionally, to embrace a historical approach, our research relies on the tradition of historical organization studies (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016), focusing on both organizational and historical analysis.

Empirical setting

We conducted our study in four family-run Italian restaurants located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. As Gomes (2000) highlights, São Paulo appears as the Brazilian city that received the largest number of Italian immigrants, becoming known as the “Italian city” at the beginning of the 20th century. Entitled the World Gastronomic Capital, the city considers pizza as an Italian legacy, and is a place of several canteens and restaurants, symbols of the Italian cuisine tradition (Collaço, 2009). São Paulo, therefore, offers an ideal setting for our investigation as the city hosts a large number of long-lasting Italian restaurants. Such restaurants were founded by Italian immigrants’ families that preserve their history, tradition, and heritage in the core of the organizational identity. Therefore, these family firms represent an organizational form particularly relevant to discuss and analyze the use of history in organizational identity preservation.

To find our case sites, we initially contacted the manager of firm 1, which is one of the oldest Italian restaurants in São Paulo, and agreed to provide us with the required information to support this inquiry. Firm 1 is a traditional sexagenarian restaurant founded by Neapolitan immigrants and that is part of the gastronomic history of São Paulo.

We then used a snowball technique (Miles & Huberman, 1984), asking our initial informants to suggest other family-run restaurants that could provide us with information to develop our inquiry. Based on their suggestions, we were able to investigate three more locations – firm 2, firm 3, and firm 4. Firm 2 is a restaurant idealized by the grandson of the firm 1’s founder, who is still connected to the family restaurant and works as a chef. Firm 3 is a restaurant owned by another family that although younger remains traditional. Firm 4 is a quasi-centennial restaurant run by the third generation of the family. Table 1 provides some comparative information on our research sites.

Table 1. Summary of cases

	Firm 1	Firm 2	Firm 3	Firm 4
Founded	1958	2004	2000	1924
Incumbent owners	Third-generation family	Third-generation family	Second-generation family	Third-generation family
Number of units	2	1	3	1

Data collection

We collected data from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained from in-depth semi-structured interviews, since this type of interview allows the interviewer to look into the different angles of the dialogue at the same time that focus the conversation on the essential issues concerning the inquiry, and making better use of knowledge production (Brinkmann, 2018). The conduction of the interviews included the development of a pre-established yet flexible interview protocol focused on the research question (Gaskel, 2015). Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted one hour, on average. The interviews were all recorded with the informants' prior authorization and subsequently transcribed as a means of obtaining a better interpretation of the data.

To complement our interview data, we used multiple archival sources (see Table 2). We collected secondary data from companies' websites, social media, biographical books, press interviews, and excerpts from previous research as a means of understanding the empirical setting and, subsequently, to substantiate informants' reports, and integrate the corpus of analysis. During the restaurant visits, we also took pictures of the physical setting and historical objects displayed, that along with informal conversations with informants, helped us to refine and extend our insights.

Table 2. Summary of data sources

Data sources	Firm 1	Firm 2	Firm 3	Firm 4	Use in the analysis
Interviews: 4 in-depth semistructured interviews with 4 members of the four organizations.	One interview with the manager and chef (third-generation family). Duration: 28min56s	One interview with the founder/manager/chef (third-generation family). Duration: 44min27s	One interview with the manager (second-generation family). Duration: 47min43s	One interview with the owner/manager/chef (third-generation family). Duration: 2h13min16s	Familiarize with the history of firms and understand how they use history to preserve their identities over time.
Observations: 4 guided visits to restaurants sites	One visit with the manager	One visit with the founder/manager/chef	One visit with the manager	One visit with the owner/manager/chef	Provide a deeper understanding and corroborate interviews.
Restaurant-related archive: company biography, books, websites, social media, and other documents	Biographical book, restaurant website, social media, press interviews, excerpts from other studies	Restaurant website, social media	Restaurant website, social media, press interviews	Social media, press interviews, excerpts from other studies	Understand the empirical setting, and triangulate the data gathered from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis involved an iterative process of coding, using a list of previously defined codes based on the conceptual framework. The coding process, however, followed a flexible structure that allowed us to include emerging codes. We also followed the content analysis method described by Mayring (2000, p. 2), “as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification”. The use of a qualitative content analysis allowed us to define coding rules for each category, and determine under what circumstances a text passage can be coded with a category. Our data analysis aimed to uncover patterns in whether and how family firms used history to preserve their identities and proceeded in two main steps.

The first step involved identifying first-order codes reflecting references to the three definitional criteria of OI (i.e. centrality, distinctiveness, and continuity) and the use of history within the corpus. In this step, we examined the material of each case independently, triangulating the different sources to ensure the integrity of our data. This within-case analysis was, then, followed by a cross-case analysis to compare the findings of each case.

In the second step, we aggregated the first-order coding into a broader second-order coding to understand how OI preservation statements were linked to the use of history over time. This second-order coding enabled us to refine the existent categories and generate categories and themes from elements of the empirical setting through an iterative process of moving from data to theory and vice-versa (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Findings

Our findings show that the histories of the firms have been characterized by the histories of their founders - Italian immigrant families who settled in São Paulo in the last century. Firms often mention the founder(s) when describing their origins, detailing who they were, their backgrounds, their lives in Italy, and characteristics that made them unique, for example, their cooking skills and their entrepreneurial profile. Besides mentioning verbally, the importance of the founders, we note that firms often display photographs of the founders and their families on the walls of the hall, as a way of “telling” their histories to customers and employees.

In this sense, we find that referring to the founder figure seems to be a relevant part of an organization’s identity construction and preservation. Informant at firm 1 highlights the role of the founder when telling the firm’s history: “They left Naples at the end of 1957, they arrived here in Brazil and started working with pizza because they already had this know-how in Italy by working with bakery ... They had a wonderful hand-cooking and decided to invest in the pizzeria”. Similarly, informant at firm 4 also emphasizes the entrepreneurial characteristics of the founder: “My grandfather started in a very empirical way, doing and learning by himself ... he learned how to cook very well, there was nothing my grandfather invented or wanted to do that he couldn't create a recipe. He was a persistent man”.

The firms also frequently refer to their commitment to family history. This aspect is regarded as a value inherited from past generations, which incumbent owners feel compelled to preserve as the organizational identity in the present and future, as firm 1 states: “We were raised to respect our tradition, the history of our family, which has made us keep it with us until today ... We have carried it in our blood”. The informant at firm 2 also emphasizes that “there is not much change from what we learned from our parents, maintaining this tradition to the

costumes, the same way of serving [customers], the way we work. We have been perpetuating in the same way”.

Firms also connect their identities to the neighborhood history and even to the city history. For example, some firms highlight their origins in the neighborhoods of *Bixiga* and *Brás*, which are regions of São Paulo strongly linked to the Italian culture as they were colonies of Italians who immigrated to Brazil in the last century. Firms also commonly mention their importance to the gastronomy history of São Paulo or claim to be one of the oldest Italian restaurants in the city.

In addition to highlighting the role of history, firms point to the commitment to the Italian cuisine tradition. They do it by preserving the originality of the recipes. For example, besides having a long-standing history, most firms argue that their pizzas are still produced according to the original Italian recipes brought by the founders, as the informant at firm 1 stated:

We follow these recipes the way they were done 60 years ago ... practically, everything is manual ... It's obvious that in my father's days, they used to knead the dough by their hands, today there's a dough mixer, but this dough is stretched with hands, the recipe has been super standardized since that time. These things haven't changed, sometimes we introduce something on the seasonal menu ... But there are standard things, which we never change, like pizza, the Margherita pizza [recipe] ... that was brought by them, that has a great history in our family, because every award we won, it was thanks to that pizza ... The sausage bread that was a recipe of my grandparents, the *Pastiera [di Grano]*, that is a super typical Neapolitan dessert, was brought by them too ... So, we have some icons that we don't change at all... so as not to break the link with this traditional history.

One firm in our sample, however, mentions about “breaking an Italian rule” on making pizza: “We have maintained the pizza dough recipe, however, we use a fresh tomato sauce, we do not use canned sauce, although there are some rules of Italian pizza, and one of them is to make with Italian canned tomato, the *pomodoro*” – stated firm 3. Similarly, despite having claimed its focus on Italian cuisine, firm 2 affirms also serving typically Brazilian meals: “We maintain an identity linked to the Italian cuisine, but as we serve an everyday meal, we also have to serve rice and beans”.

For all four organizations tradition and history were characteristics regarded as *central*, *distinctive*, and *enduring* to their identities, as firm 1 describes itself: “We are very traditional, and it works like this, we sell tradition, so if it works by selling tradition, it is something that we will not change”. The informant at firm 4 even emphasizes that his business is “100%” about tradition, which is what people look for when they come to the restaurant: “I sell *Castelões* and *Margherita*, 75% of what I sell are these” - referring to the two best-selling pizzas, which are not by chance the most traditional on the menu. Firm 4 also mention that its long history is a distinctive feature:

We are 100 years old, we are almost a gastronomy history museum of São Paulo. It's the only one, if you analyze, it is the only restaurant that is placed in the same location. Is there a restaurant that has been serving the same plate for so long? It's owned by the same family, it never broke, it's the same place and it's the same menu, there is not any [other restaurants].

Moreover, we observe that firms consider organizational history as a factor for competitive advantage, as firm 2 explains: “There are several competitors around here doing the kind of service I do too. So, for me to bring the customer to my restaurant, I must have one extra thing”. However, the informant also mentioned that family businesses have the advantage

of having a “solid history”: “History gives you a competitive advantage, but if you don't keep quality, just history will not sell. You have to sell history along with quality”. He concludes his statement arguing that history is not a decisive factor, yet contributes to the competitive advantage along with delivering a high-quality service.

When asked about how they preserve their identities, the firms argue that there are constant nourishment and protection of the family history and tradition. They do it by preserving the original family recipes, operating based on the founders' values and beliefs, and being committed to the family history. Firm 3 even mentions: “[For example,] we don't believe in a franchise model ..., we would rather have control of our quality, of our history”. Note that the firm prefers to maintain itself as a family-run business. Despite having partners, there is a concern with preserving the core characteristics of the organization so that it will not lose its identity.

In some cases, firms avoid innovating as a means of preserving their identities, as in the case of firm 1 which highlights that although people generally look for novelties, some of its customers are attracted by the tradition of the restaurant:

Today, people are looking for novelties, and instead, we are regarded as a restaurant that remains traditional. Although we have a certain degree of novelty, we do not follow the [innovation] speed of other markets ... we are following the opposite path, maintaining what we have always done well.

Some people usually come to the restaurant to have a plate on the menu that they have been used to ordering for years ... We are a little afraid of changing too much and losing our identity ... [Then,] our focus is on preserving things as they were in the past, from what we inherited from 60 years ... Because if I change, I end up leaving my purpose, my purpose of tradition.

We find a similar claim in the case of firm 4: “I still have a very loyal clientele, that identifies with it, feel comfortable here. I have clients that I attend the fifth generation, so I can't change, there are some things that I can't”. And the firm 4 informant gives a further explanation:

“It's not the restaurant that loses its identity, it's me that loses mine”. Note that he related the identity of the restaurant to his own identity.

In the case of firm 3, however, innovation is deemed to be relevant for its organizational identity: “We say we work with half inspiration half tradition; we follow tradition, our principles, but we are always keeping an eye on what is innovative”. The informant states that tradition and innovation are the two core values of the firm. Besides, for the interviewee, elements such as the past, history, and tradition are essential for innovation, since through past experiences the firm can have a basis as to whether a new product will succeed. This is a way of understanding the past as a source of knowledge that can be applied as a strategic resource.

Finally, we find a type of present concern with the future, associated with the preservation of the organizational identity based on family tradition and history. The informants seem to fear that the firms' history cannot be maintained by successors, as firm 1 mentions: “We were raised to respect our tradition, the history of the family, which has made us keep it with us until today [...]”, and the informant adds: “I do not think the next generation will do the same [...] I do not know if we will be able to make the transition for the next generation [...] The generations have changed a lot”. This is clearly a concern about the future in the present that is related to the past. In the case of firm 4, however, we find an unconcern with succession, whether familiar or not. The incumbent owner seems quite pessimistic about

the future of the business: “I haven't married and have no kids, and I don't see any prospects of this [restaurant] continuing after I'm gone”.

In summary, our results show that all four cases apply history to preserve their identities across time. The firms do it in various ways, for example: by referring to the founders as they operate based on their beliefs and values; perpetuating the family history as they keep the business strongly linked to the family; and conserving the Italian cuisine tradition as they follow the original recipes.

Discussion

In this paper, we aimed to “*analyze how organizations use history in an attempt to preserve organizational identity*”. For this purpose, we looked at four cases of family-run Italian restaurants located in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Our findings show that linking the organizational identity to the family history and tradition is a central activity to identity preservation. To better understand our argument, we guide our discussion with two questions: (1) How family firms use history claims to preserve their identities? (2) What are the functions of the use of history concerning identity preservation?

To analyze how firms use history claims to preserve their identities, i.e., how firms interpret the past to conserve their members' understandings of the central, distinguishing, and enduring attributes, a first point to be observed concerns the firms' strong tie with the family history, which is clearly due to their hybrid identities (Whetten, 2006). Our findings show that the history applied by the family firms is strongly based on the histories of the family. Firms in our sample highlight their commitment to the family's long-standing tradition, values, and costumes, which are regarded to be central in their identities. In the case of firms 1, 3, and 4, the involvement with the family history is even closer, as those firms have been owned by different generations of the same family over time (Bombläck & Brunning, 2013).

Historical claims used by the family firms are commonly applied based on the first founders, particularly to highlight their Italian origins, how good cooks they were, and their entrepreneurial visions. We argue that this could be due to their attempt to remember and conserve family history, but also, to nurture family entrepreneurial legacy. Jaskiewicz, Combs, and Rau (2015), for example, show that some family firms use rhetorical history based on past entrepreneurial claims to foster transgenerational entrepreneurship. In the cases we studied, incumbent owners present concerns about the succession and future of the businesses. Therefore, referring to the founder figure and his/her past entrepreneurial efforts may inspire the next generations of the family to engage in the business, thus, conserving firm identity as a family business. These results conform to the Basque and Langley's (2018) argument that organizations invoke the founder figure as a means to preserve organizational identity.

We also find that history is regarded by family firms to be a distinguishing attribute, and they have been strategically exploring it (Wadhvani et al., 2018). They do it by using rhetorical constructions of the past to reinforce their identities as family firms with a “long”, “solid”, and “successful” history. We argue that such rhetorical interpretations of the past could be due to the family's intention to generate a “good” reputation to the firm (Suddaby, 2016), which in turn, may facilitate the organization's ability to garner commitment from its internal and external stakeholders (Zundel, Holt, & Popp, 2016).

In addition to the importance of firms' histories, firms create historical accounts linking their identities to external histories, as they skillfully connect their histories to the regional-level histories. As the literature informs, some organizations may engage with broader social

entities' histories, values, and beliefs as a means of being recognized as part of a legitimate business, which is positive in the public's eyes (Foster et al., 2011; Oertel & Thommes, 2018).

Tradition also seems to be a relevant aspect of the family firms' identities. For example, firms claim that what they sell is not just pizza, but rather a tradition. Firms commonly highlight their iconic products, and how they have following the original Italian recipes. However, we observe that firms make different tradition claims. In the case of the older firms, the attachment to the Italian cuisine tradition seems to be stronger, compared to the younger firms. Although the older firms see their market as highly competitive, and that, in general, the public is interested in novelties, they keep "following the opposite path". They prefer to remain traditional to preserve their identities linked to tradition in the eyes of their loyal customers. However, we argue that the decision to keep the tradition alive may not be only for a financial reason, but also for family purposes. We argue that this is because long-established family firms may not be interested in breaking with the tradition and history that has been built throughout generations (Erdogan, Rondi, & De Massis, 2019; De Massis, 2016).

The younger firms, instead, show more flexibility about changing, even if this affects their traditionality. Indeed, they seem more innovative, as their history claims combine tradition along with innovation. Although the tradition of Italian cuisine is considered an important aspect of their identities, these firms seem more willing to change to accommodate market changes. For example, firm 3 started to produce vegan and gluten-free pizza in response to changing eating habits. Our findings are in line with De Massis et al. (2016), as they show that being tradition-based firms does not necessarily impede family firms from strategically exploring the past, and even from innovating. These results are particularly relevant, as they show that history may be used in other ways in younger organizations than in older ones regarding identity preservation.

In response to the second question, we find that the use of history has three major functions concerning the preservation of identity:

Assure legitimacy and authenticity. Linking identity to tradition is particularly relevant to the firms in our sample, as they claim to be tradition-based family firms that compete in a highly traditional market, wherein they need to be recognized as such. Consequently, organizations construct rhetorical interpretations of the past based on Italian cuisine tradition, particularly the Neapolitan cuisine tradition to convey legitimacy and authenticity in their practices (Suddaby, 2016). Our findings are similar to those of the culinary movement in Turkey discussed by Cappelen and Pedersen (2020), as they also demonstrate that organizations deliberately use historical narratives to achieve legitimacy and authenticity. However, unlike the restaurants in Turkey, our case study shows that organizations do not craft ambiguous historical narratives; on the contrary, they build well-defined historical narratives, in which the past is specific, the origin is clearly Italian, the recipes, the ingredients, the family ownership, they are all aspects of historical narratives that are quite specific. In sum, they use different means for similar purposes. Perhaps the reason for this difference is that, while restaurants in Turkey are building a new cultural heritage, in our study, this cultural heritage (Italian cuisine) is already consolidated.

Perpetuate family history. Being a family business is regarded to be central in the identity of the firms studied. As we discussed, in long-standing family businesses, family members may be reluctant to abdicate their family firm status (Erdogan, Rondi, & De Massis, 2019; De Massis, 2016), as they feel compelled to continue forward the history built by past generations. In the cases we studied, keeping the business within the family boundary means having control over the history and reputation of the family.

Protect family identity. Our findings show that the identity of a family business is commonly created as an extension of the values and beliefs of the first founder. With the insertion of other family members into the business over time - some since their childhood -

the organizational identity becomes the family identity. For this reason, the use of history serves not only to preserve the identity of the organization but also to protect the identity of the family. (Dye & Whetten, 2006; Whetten, Foreman, & Dyer, 2014).

Final remarks

This paper explored the use of history in organizational identity preservation. Our case study of four family-owned Italian restaurants demonstrates some sameness and peculiarities among the firms. Our findings contribute to organizational identity studies in two main ways. First, we provide a deeper understanding of the content and process of the use of history to preserve identity in the context of a family firm. As our data analysis suggests, family firms make historical claims mostly based on organizational and family history, the founder's values and beliefs, and the Italian cuisine tradition. We also find that the use of history concerning identity preservation serves as a basis for assuring legitimacy and authenticity, perpetuating family history, and protecting family identity, which confirms the previous literature.

Second, our study adds to the growing body of research by applying interpretive history to organizational identity study. As previous research shows, organizations commonly use organizational history to construct, reconstruct, and preserve their identities (Suddaby, Foster, & Quinn-Trank, 2010; Blombäck & Brunninge, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Zundel, Holt, & Popp, 2016; Basque & Langley, 2018; Oertel & Thommes, 2018). In line with this literature, we demonstrate that organizational history comprises not only the objective history of immutable past events but also the organization's rhetorical interpretation of the past in favor of preserving its organizational identity.

For future research, as we investigated a traditional industry, focusing on non-traditional markets may provide additional insights into the role of history in the organizational identity. Future research could also focus on young organizations examining whether and how they use history. Such inquiry may also help deepen our understanding of the differences between old and young firms concerning the engagement with history. While our case study consisted of family firms, an inquiry of a different type of firm may be fruitful to advance in the research. As observed, family firms have a specific type of hybrid identity (Whetten, 2006), then, when investigated, these organizations' idiosyncrasies may provide particular results. Thus, studying different segments of the market and types of organizations may increase the possibilities to find new aspects involved in the phenomenon.

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