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THE COMPANY YOU KEEP: HOW AN ORGANIZATION'S HORIZONTAL PARTNERSHIPS AFFECT EMPLOYEE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

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Despite scholars' recognition of the importance of external dynamics to employee organizational identification, this factor remains underexplored in today's evermore interdependent organizations. We theorize about how organizational identification can be influenced by an employer's horizontal partnerships with entities such as sports teams or charities. Drawing on insights from the organizational identification literature and marketing literature, we explore how events concerning an organization's horizontal partner become salient to employees, how employees evaluate the implications of the partnership, and how their identification may shift as a result. Surprisingly, our model reveals that partnerships having low congruence may lead to significant positive identification shifts for some individuals, whereas partnerships that are seemingly positive for an organization may result in negative identification shifts. Our theorizing makes two important contributions. First, it introduces the potential of horizontal relationships with other organizations to shape the important work relationship of identification with the focal employing organization. Second, it outlines the processes through which horizontal partners can make a difference in work relationships and sets the stage to better understand how they can strengthen and hinder these relationships, as well as encroach on nonwork life.

Two trends are coalescing to change the ambit of organizational relationships. In a cluttered yet fragmented world, organizations are seeking new ways to reach and connect with important audiences (Cornwell, 2014). At the same time, employees are seeking more meaning (Vaccaro, 2014) and purpose (Danson, 2015) at work. Many organizations address these trends by developing partnerships with communities, causes, or sports in order to reach consumer markets, and may actively direct their partnerships to internal audiences (Farrelly, Greyser, & Rogan, 2012). Such partnerships form a potentially important basis for employee engagement and expression. The sheer scale of partnership activity offers evidence of its importance in the contemporary work environment; global spending on corporate sponsorship, the most documented of such partnerships, exceeded $62 billion in 2017 (*IEG*, 2018), and in 2015 122 U.S. companies spent more than $15 million *each* on partnerships (*IEG*, 2016).

To date, we have preliminary evidence that these horizontal partnerships influence the quality of employees' work relationships (Latteman, 2011) and that, in particular areas, such as corporate social responsibility (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Farooq, Rupp, & Farooq, 2017; Khan & Stanton, 2010) and sports (Farrelly et al., 2012; Hickman, Lawrence, & Ward, 2005), these

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partnerships can influence employee organizational identification (OI), which is the extent to which employees define themselves in terms of their organization and derive value from that self-definition (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). In light of the ubiquity and scope of organizational partnerships, it is important to gain insights into their potential to influence work relationships between employees and their employers.

Consider sports apparel giant Nike, which has long supported athletes, teams, and events that are touchpoints for its consumers and employees alike. An employee working in the Tiger Woods Center on the Nike headquarters campus would be exposed daily to memorabilia of the golfer's career and news of the athlete, negative or positive, that may resonate visually and viscerally. Or consider how employees of Canadian mining giant Teck, one of the world's largest producers of zinc, felt about their company when Teck partnered with UNICEF to deliver life-saving therapeutic zinc to millions of children in Africa and India. Employees may derive meaning and pride from these associations, potentially increasing their OI. Conversely, employees might be distressed by the partnerships and distance themselves from their employers.

We argue that horizontal partnerships can strongly influence employee OI, yet we lack systematic theorizing about this influence. Possible identification outcomes vary from case to case and individual to individual and will be sensitive not only to the partnerships but also to specific related events. For example, a Nike employee working in the Tiger Woods Center may have been disturbed in 2009 when the athlete was making headlines for accusations of marital infidelity. Even seemingly positive information, like Teck's support of indigenous youth education, could offend employees who view such support as "redwashing," or cover for corporate activities like mining near tribal lands. Understanding how employee OI shifts in response to the nature of partnerships is key to grasping the evolution of this work relationship in the contemporary organizational environment.

We theorize about how an organization's horizontal partnerships alter employee OI. We define horizontal partnerships as those in which an organization engages with another entity through a contract and communicates about this relationship to internal and external audiences in order to attain organizational goals. Recognizing that many types of partnerships have implications for employee identification, we derive our examples and theorizing specifically from horizontal marketing relationships, such as sponsorship, endorser relationships, and cobranding, because they are (1) deliberately communicated, (2) actively managed, and (3) typically reach internal and external audiences. Such forms of horizontal partnerships most transparently reveal the phenomenon we theorize about.[1] Since 70 percent of sponsor partnerships in North America are in sports, with the next largest category (10 percent) in entertainment (*IEG,* 2018), and this pattern is similar worldwide, we illustrate our theorizing using a number of sports examples. However, as the Teck example implies, our theorizing applies equally to any horizontal partnerships that take on the above characteristics, and we use additional examples of such cause-related sponsorships.

We build a model that delineates how partnership events emerge as salient to an employee's OI, and how the employee's evaluation of the personal relevance of the partner and its congruence with the employing organization shapes identification processes and outcomes. Our theorizing holds implications for rethinking the nature of OI. First, we reconceptualize identification as being naturally entwined with horizontal relationships, thus extending beyond a current focus on only the employing organization. Second, we explore how such identification dynamics wrap other aspects of employees' lives into this work relationship, with important positive and negative consequences.

THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR OI RELATIONSHIPS

OI captures the degree to which an individual includes an organization's identity in their own identity and the extent to which this is important to their self-definition (Ashforth et al., 2008; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Employees

[1] A wide array of other horizontal partnerships, such as supplier and distributor relationships, store-within-a-store relationships (e.g., Sephora inside J. C. Penney retail), strategic alliances (e.g., airline cooperation), and more formal joint ventures could potentially influence OI. Events or information about these might also become relevant to identification. For example, in 2016, following Donald Trump's election as U.S. President, consumers boycotted Trump brands and retailers that distributed Trump products.

decide about OI based on a process of social comparison (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1982), where they compare their own identity to that of the organization and other available categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). Placing value on organizational membership has long been considered essential to identification (Tajfel, 1982), but scholars have recently paid more attention to this by explicitly theorizing about how employees value their organizational membership and how this shapes identification (Brickson, 2013; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Foreman & Whetten, 2002).

Employees make two comparisons as they assess the value of organizational membership for identification purposes (Brickson, 2013; Dutton et al., 1994; Foreman & Whetten, 2002). The first comparison involves how the employee's own identity compares with the organization's current identity (the "own versus organizational identity comparison"); the employee asks, "Can I be true to myself within this organization?" (Brickson, 2013: 228). If so, the organization affords fulfillment of the employee's self-continuity motive, long recognized as underpinning identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).

The second comparison involves how an organization's current identity compares with its expected identity (the "current versus expected organizational identity comparison"), essentially capturing the degree to which an organization is acting in line with "future oriented beliefs about what is desirable" (Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, & Mullane, 1994: 574). In other words, the employee asks, "Are we living up to expectations about who we should be?" (Brickson, 2013: 228). If so, the organization affords fulfillment of the employee's self-esteem motive, again long recognized as underpinning identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Dutton et al., 1994), because employees feel "worthy and good" when they see identity attributes they value as being confirmed by their firm's actual behavior (Besharov, 2014: 1504).

Finally, each comparison reinforces the other through feedback (Brickson, 2013). For example, if an employee experiences a certain aspect of their own identity as present within the organization (e.g., charitable giving through cause sponsorship), this affords self-continuity, and they will also be attentive to their employer's cause sponsorship and assess it in a positive light, fulfilling expectations about their firm and affording self-esteem.

OI As Processual and Relational

While once regarded as a relatively stable state, identification is now also seen as processual; it may wax and wane (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006) or be subject to more radical realignment (Ashforth et al., 2008) through managerial actions (Fiol, 2002) or disruptive events (Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010; Petriglieri, 2015). Indeed, given the recent emphasis on comparison processes (Besharov, 2014; Brickson, 2013), identification may always be "in play," as employees make sense of organizational actions; as Ashforth and colleagues put it, "As the organization goes, so goes the individual" (2008: 333).

By regarding OI as processual, scholars have also directed attention to its relational qualities, showing that identification with one target may influence identification with another. For example, Sluss and Ashforth (2008) theorized that an employee's identification with a manager might facilitate broader identification with the organization. Besharov (2014) found that managers can help make OI accessible to employees with varied value commitments. These studies show that vertical relationships, nested within an organization's structure, can play a central role in explaining how OI evolves. Much less is known about how horizontal relationships—those between an organization and its external partners—contribute to shifts in OI.

A handful of studies have hinted that external organizations can be relevant to OI with a focal organization. For example, other organizations can serve as sources of comparison with regard to status (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), or as conduits through which to identify with a focal organization when members no longer deem direct identification feasible (Gutierrez et al., 2010). Marketing research also points to the potential for horizontal partners to influence employee OI. Studies of sponsorship demonstrate that some firms make considerable investments in leveraging their partnerships for employees, not just consumers (Farrelly et al., 2012), and suggest that sponsorship influences employees' perceptions of their employer (Khan & Stanton, 2010).

The potential for horizontal partners to influence employee OI is not expected to operate in the same way as vertical relationships. This is because the identity of an external partner may differ significantly from that of the employing organization, meaning that the convergence processes on which vertical relational OI relies (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008) may be neither central nor possible. In addition, an organization has limited control over its horizontal partners, especially with regard to the quantity, timing, and visibility of information about them. Thus, there is unexamined potential for understanding how shifts in OI stem from an organization's engagements with horizontal partners.

The OI Potential of Horizontal Partnerships

Prior literature offers several reasons why horizontal partnerships could influence an employee's OI with their employer. First, because OI develops with tenure and commitment (Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970), new horizontal partnerships in sports, in the arts, or with charities that employees are already committed to could strengthen their OI. Second, horizontal partnerships can afford sources of meaning that can help to fulfill employees' motive for self-continuity. Identification is enhanced when individuals are able to fill "meaning voids" at work and via fellow workers (Pratt, 2000). Horizontal relationships come with meanings (like social responsibility [Du et al., 2010]), images, and people the employee may like to associate with.

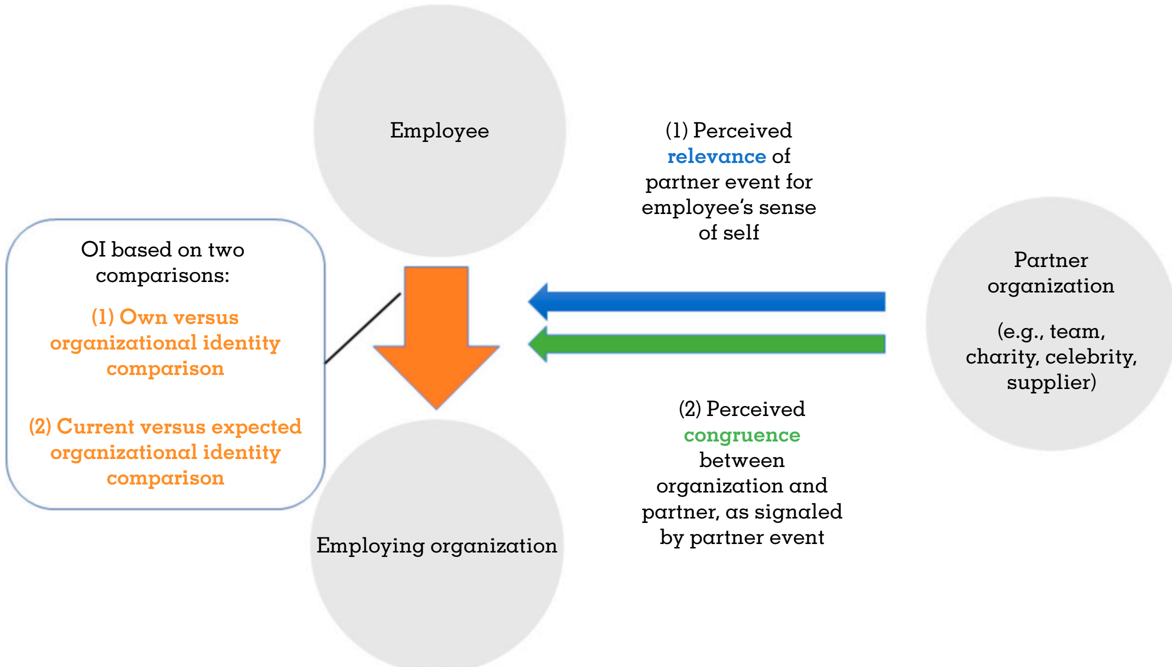
Beyond meaning, such relationships might also fulfill employees' emotional and behavioral needs. The satisfaction of helping children, or the excitement of participating in a world-class sport sanctioned by an employer, brings emotions and active participation to the fore. Identification scholars have begun to recognize the importance of affective and behavioral mechanisms in sustaining or changing identification (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008), yet the potential of horizontal partnerships to shape these is poorly understood. Hinting at the opportunity to examine the power associated with such forms of engagement with horizontal partners, recent research has shown that employees who participate in their firm's corporate social initiatives show higher levels of retention (Bode, Singh, & Rogan, 2015). Finally, employees care about what others think of their organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001), and horizontal partnerships influence outside perceptions profoundly. For example, sponsorship of the Olympics has been associated with a positive corporate image (Stipp, 1998).

Theoretically, because OI emerges through considerations of the value of organizational membership for an employee's individual identity (Brickson, 2013), anything that is perceived as enhancing an organization's identity can be an opportunity for boosting the employee's sense of self (Besharov, 2014; Brickson, 2013). Conversely, events that are perceived as threats to an organization's identity can potentially also threaten the employee's sense of self (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015). Finally, events that alter an employee's expectations about their organization's identity, and how it relates to their own, can cause them to reevaluate the value of membership and, hence, shift their identification (Brickson, 2013). Our overarching thesis is that horizontal partnerships shape the comparison processes that underpin identification in potentially new ways and, hence, influence OI processes and outcomes.

MODEL: HOW HORIZONTAL PARTNERSHIPS AFFECT OI

In this section we theorize about how the horizontal partnerships of a focal organization affect the OI of its employees. To convey the main elements of our theorizing, Figure 1 depicts three entities: the employing organization, the employee, and the partner organization. Our primary relationship of interest is the OI relationship between the employee and the employing organization, depicted as the dominant arrow between these circles. This relationship is established, monitored, and altered through two comparisons (Brickson, 2013): (1) the own versus organizational identity comparison and (2) the current versus expected organizational identity comparison. New information about the partnership—an "event" (we further define events in the next section)—can spur two evaluations depicted by the two arrows that feed into the OI relationship. The top arrow depicts how an employee's evaluation of the perceived *relevance* of a partnership event to their own sense of self feeds into OI. The bottom arrow depicts how the employee's evaluation of the perceived *congruence* between the organization and partner, as signaled by the partnership event, feeds into OI. Together, these evaluations inform the two comparisons that can alter OI. These evaluations are

FIGURE 1
Evaluative Aspects That Influence OI in the Presence of Horizontal Partnerships



the centerpiece of our theory development because they can lead employees—via their consideration of a partnership—to (re)assess the value of organizational membership for identification purposes. As we detail below, it is the employee's joint evaluation of relevance and congruence that contributes to specific identification processes and outcomes.

Through our main model (see Figure 2), we theorize about how (1) a partnership event emerges as salient to an employee's OI, (2) the perceived relevance and congruence of this salient partnership event trigger identification processes, and (3) an employee shifts their OI in response. Before explaining our model, we first explore how an employee's initial identification state affects the overall process.

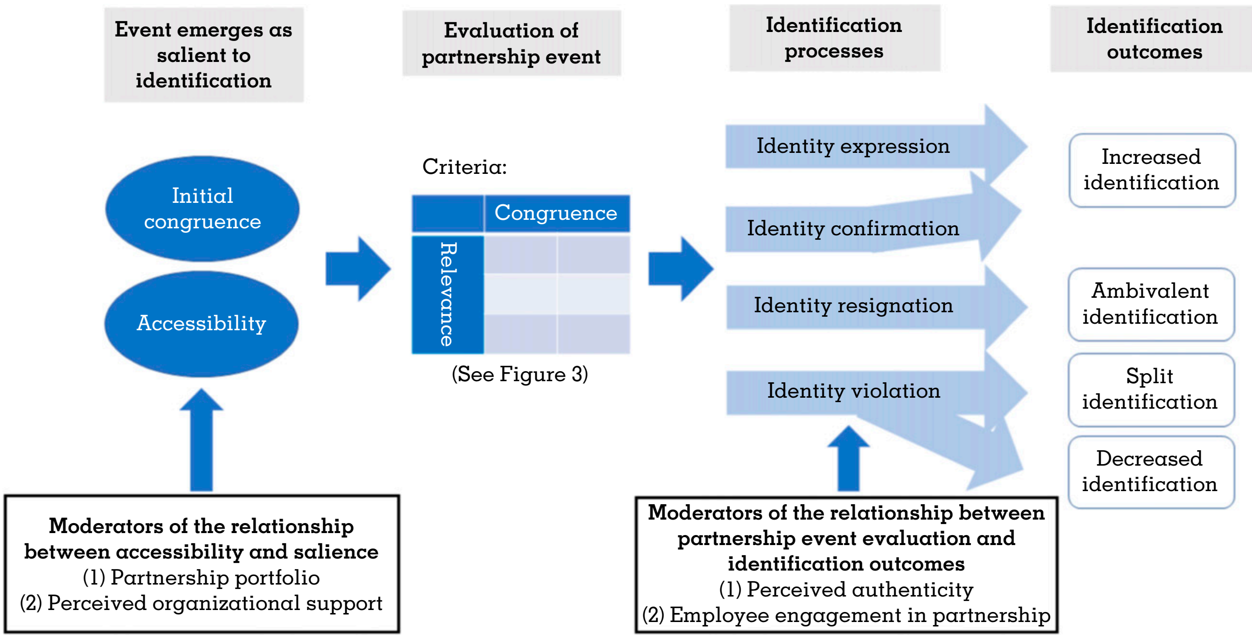
Initial Employee OI State

We posit that employees' initial identification states will influence whether they regard horizontal partnerships as potentially consequential to their OI. Initial OI states can be specified in terms of valence and intensity. Valence captures whether employees are positively, negatively, or ambiguously identified (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2000), while intensity captures how strongly employees are identified (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005). Prior literature shows that those who are more strongly positively identified, a state that represents "considerable investments of time . . . [and] energy" (Kreiner et al., 2006: 1052), are more likely to show commitment to an organization, defend it in times of crisis, and engage with it during change (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Fiol, 2002; Gutierrez et al., 2010). In addition, identification can be self-reinforcing, since those who find that an organization matches their identity will tend to see its valued characteristics as expectation fulfilling (Brickson, 2013). Thus, we assume an initial positive valence and a threshold intensity of identification, because those whose OI is negative, ambivalent, or below some positive threshold will be less likely to be invested in it and respond to factors that might alter it. We explore these assumptions in the discussion section.

How a Partnership Event Emerges As Salient to Employee OI

Shifts in identification only occur if the partnership becomes salient to the employee's

FIGURE 2
Process of How Horizontal Partnerships Affect OI



identification. Identification is contextual, and situations cue specific aspects of it (Brickson, 2013; Van Dick et al., 2005). Salience of a partnership for OI therefore cannot be assumed. Thus, our model begins with specifying how a given partnership event emerges as salient to OI.

More specifically, we delineate how *an event, information, or experience in relation to a partnership emerges as salient* to the employee's OI. *Events* are "dramatic happenings that focus sustained attention" (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010: 823). For example, news of a scandal involving a partner organization or the death of a celebrity endorser would be an event of importance regarding a partner, as would be winning a championship game. Additionally, less dramatic happenings might constitute important *information* that could cause a partnership to emerge as salient. An employee may simply receive from their organization news of a new partnership, which could suffice for it to emerge as salient, or the employee may be prompted to consider existing partnerships because of a personal *experience* (e.g., taking up cycling prompts the employee to notice that the employer sponsors a cycling team). Thus, partner events are potentially broad based and may arise internally or externally. The key question is whether such events emerge as salient to a given employee. For simplicity, we use the term *events,* but we note that this term also connotes partner-related information and experiences.

Prior literature (Turner, 1999; Van Dick et al., 2005) has shown that two criteria influence whether an event emerges as salient to an individual's identification: (1) *accessibility*, which is the extent to which the current situation or event has "prior meaning and significance for the individual" (Van Dick et al., 2005: 275) and (2) *fit*, which (based on Turner, 1999) is the "match between [social group] category specification and the stimulus reality" (Van Dick et al., 2005: 275). For our purposes, it is the employee's perception of the match between the current partner event and their understanding of their organization that might cause an event to emerge as salient. As opposed to referring to this as "fit," we use the term *congruence* to capture how an organization and its partner go together in an employee's eyes (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). We also use the more specific term *initial congruence* to capture the employee's first brief consideration of how a partner event matches their perceptions of their organization, and theorize about how it, and accessibility, shapes the emergence of salience.

Accessibility may derive from a number of sources, both personal and professional. For example, a firm's engagement with a beneficiary charity like Race for the Cure will be more accessible to those with some experience with cancer (Cornwell & Coote, 2005), since this event benefits breast cancer research. Accessibility does not presume positive meaningfulness to an employee; recall that Teck's sponsorship of indigenous youth education might be highly accessible to and yet incense a skeptical indigenous employee. Because of the highly individual nature of prior experiences and interests, accessibility is idiosyncratic to the individual, operating through the interaction of individual and situational characteristics (Van Dick et al., 2005).

With this in mind, we suggest that two moderators may influence accessibility and, thus, the emergence of partner events as salient: (1) the extent of the *current partnership portfolio* and (2) *perceived organizational support for partnerships*. The organization's partnership portfolio will moderate the influence of accessibility on the emergence of salience in part through the sheer number of such relationships. For example, the larger the organization's existing partnership portfolio, the less likely it is for an accessible partnership event to emerge as salient in such a crowded space.

The second moderator, the employee's perceived organizational support for partnerships, derives from organizational support theory, which suggests that employees may develop global beliefs that an organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). Applied to the partnership context, employees might develop global beliefs about how their firm enables them to derive meaning from or participate in partnerships. For instance, if an employee observes repeatedly that promised benefits of their organization's partnerships—volunteer opportunities, interaction with individuals from the partner organizations, or free tickets to sporting or arts events—never materialize, or are unfairly distributed, the employee will develop a global belief that that there is little organizational support for partnerships. Accordingly, the individual will be less likely to regard accessible partnerships as salient. Conversely, the reverse will occur if the employee holds a global belief that the organization usually offers employees opportunities to participate meaningfully in partnerships. Overall, we expect that accessibility will operate as a threshold effect, whereby employees must have some minimal level of knowledge, exposure, and care for an event for it to emerge as salient; these moderators will serve to increase or decrease the level of that threshold.

Returning to initial congruence, and assuming a threshold level of accessibility, we assert that partnership events will emerge as salient for employees when perceived *initial congruence is either high or low*. Thus, we theorize a U-shaped relationship between initial congruence and the emergence of a partnership event as salient. High initial congruence may be straightforward, as when a company like Dick's Sporting Goods sponsors Little League Baseball (*Business Insider,* 2017), because many employees will see such a partnership as consistent with their understanding of their organization. High initial congruence triggering salience is in line with foundational studies on salience in relation to identification (Haslam, 2001; Van Dick et al., 2005). Low initial congruence can also trigger salience, because unusual circumstances demand sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995) and may lead employees to reassess the value of their firm for identification purposes. For example, when American automaker Chevrolet signed a deal worth $600 million with U.K. soccer team Manchester United, this was highly salient to many because of the lack of a clear match with understandings of who Chevrolet is (Rechtin, 2014). The initial congruence assessment acts like a "sniff test" that occurs more or less instantaneously when an employee first learns of a partnership event. A more considered evaluation of congruence follows, as we describe next, but the evaluation of initial congruence renders an event sufficiently salient to warrant an employee's further attention. Finally, partnership events signaling moderate initial congruence will *not* become salient, for they demand attention neither in a positive nor in a negative way.

Evaluation of How a Partnership Event Influences OI

The second column in Figure 2 is the core of our model. Here we theorize about how a salient partnership event becomes regarded as consequential to an employee's self-concept and, hence, might trigger a shift in OI. We build on empirical work in marketing (e.g., Hickman et al., 2005; Koenig, 2017) that demonstrates positive shifts in OI stemming from sponsoring (Khan, Stanton, & Rahman, 2013) but does not unpack the process theoretically. We also leverage the management literature showing how positive or negative shifts in OI can arise from disruptive events (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015) and managerial actions (Besharov, 2014; Fiol, 2002). While the empirical focus in the management literature has been on threats, we recognize that many partnership events are positive and, thus, serve as opportunities for enhancing one's self-concept. As introduced earlier, two aspects of a partnership event—relevance and congruence—are central to how it triggers and shapes identification processes. The joint evaluation of relevance and congruence informs the two comparisons that shape and alter OI.

Relevance. Relevance is the personal meaning and value of a partnership event for an employee. It is related to an individual's identity, because one's identity serves as an important filter for information and is "a means of determining if there is a kinship" between the self and other entities, organizations, or actors (Brickson, 2013: 231, citing Pratt, 1998). People notice and value attributes in other entities and actors that help support their sense of self (Ashforth et al., 2008; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), because doing so enables self-continuity, self-verification, and uncertainty reduction. As Ashforth and colleagues explained, people derive deeper meaning from association with other entities, and "these deeper meanings help provide a sense of connection as well as a source for defining, refining, and committing to deeply held values." (2008: 336). The marketing literature captures how individuals derive meaning from partnership events through participation (Cornwell & Coote 2005) and through image transfer from events to sponsors (Gwinner, 1997), and how the media transfer meaning from participants such as athletes (Darnell & Sparks, 2007) to the world. Accordingly, we assert that employees will respond to partnership events in ways that reflect their evaluation of the event or partner's personal meaning to them, which we capture in the construct of relevance.

We distinguish between three employee evaluations of a partnership event's relevance: positive, neutral, and negative. Employees will perceive positive relevance if a partner event and its attributes have personal positive meaning for them and so are affirming to their sense of self. Neutral relevance will be assessed if employees find that the partner event neither affirms nor violates their sense of self; as we will show, however, such situations can still alter OI if low or high congruence calls into question the organization's role in employees' understandings of their sense of self. Finally, a partner event will have negative relevance if it has personal negative meaning for employees and, hence, threatens or violates their sense of self.

Congruence. Employees evaluate congruence by assessing the match between attributes of the partner and those of the employing organization, as signaled by the partnership event. Recall that *initial congruence* contributes to an event's emergence as salient and acts as an initial sniff test about the match between the partnership event and the organization. By contrast, *congruence* captures the more deliberate process of employees' consideration of what the event signals about this match and how this reflects on the employing organization—and, by extension, their association with it. The marketing literature asserts that individuals can perceive a firm and its partner to be congruent based on "mission, products, markets, technologies, attributes, brand concepts, or any other key association" (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006: 155). Congruence is used extensively in this literature to capture how partnerships are perceived and what this reflects about the sponsoring organization (Cornwell et al., 2005).

When congruence is either high or low, this can trigger employees to evaluate their sense of self in relation to the employing organization. High congruence can affirm while low congruence can raise questions about employees' understandings of who their organization is, and/or about those understandings as refracted through the perceptions of external audiences (Brickson, 2013; Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Dutton et al., 1994). Congruence is an independent assessment from that of relevance. Whereas an assessment of relevance raises the question of "Who am I in relation to this partner event?" an assessment of congruence raises the question of "How do I understand my firm in relation to this partner event?"

High congruence arises when a partner event reveals a strong match between at least some attributes of the partner and those of the employing organization, leading employees to affirm that their organization is acting in line with who they think it is. Low congruence arises when a partner event reveals a poor match between attributes of the partner and those of the employing organization, and could cause employees to conclude that the employing organization is not who they thought it was, a significant trigger for reassessment of identification (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015). Alternatively, low congruence might suggest that an organization intends to develop attributes more similar to those of a partner, which, if attractive, holds promise for employees who value those attributes. In sum, low congruence need not be automatically associated with lower levels of interest and engagement by employees.

Joint evaluation of relevance and congruence. An employee's joint evaluation of relevance and congruence yields conditions that can be evaluated against—but are not equivalent to—the two identity comparisons that strengthen or weaken identification (Brickson, 2013). Recall that identification may shift when an employee makes an own versus organizational identity comparison—asking, "Can I be true to myself within this organization?"—and/or makes a current versus expected organizational identity comparison—asking, "Are we living up to expectations about who we should be?" (Brickson, 2013: 228). The joint evaluation of relevance and congruence in relation to a partner event (see 3 × 2 matrix at the center of Figure 2, and detail in Figure 3) leads employees to revisit these OI comparisons with the third entity involved. The partner event adds complexity to the comparisons and the conclusions drawn from them. For example, regarding a partnership event as suggesting that the organization is *not* living up to expectations about who it should be—that is, that it has *low* congruence—*could* signal one of several things: that expectations are about to be exceeded (if the partner holds positive relevance), that they are cast in doubt (if neutral relevance), or that they have been strongly violated (if negative relevance). As a result of these nuanced outcomes arising from the presence of a horizontal partner, enhanced or weakened identification may emerge out of surprising combinations of relevance and congruence. We must therefore theorize about identification processes for each combination of relevance and congruence. We adapt some identification processes from prior work (e.g., Besharov, 2014) and introduce others.

Box 1: Strong Identity Confirmation

When an employee evaluates a partner event as having *positive* relevance and *high* congruence, this supports OI affirmation, through both the own versus organizational identity comparison and the current versus expected organizational identity comparison. High relevance and high congruence mean the partner event signals and upholds "in a decisive way" core identity attributes that the employee values about the organization, leading to *strong identity confirmation* for the employee (Besharov, 2014: 1499). Identity confirmation supports continued identification because it assures the employee that their organization is acting in line with identity attributes

FIGURE 3
Employee Evaluation of How Partnerships Affect OI

Criteria		**Perceived *congruence* of organization and partner as signaled by event**	
		High	Low
***Relevance* of partner event for employee's sense of self**	Positive	Box 1: *Strong identity confirmation* Conducive to increased identification	Box 2: *Identity expression* Conducive to strongly increased identification
	Neutral	Box 3: *Moderate identity confirmation* Conducive to increased identification	Box 4: *Identity resignation* Conducive to ambivalent identification
	Negative	Box 5: *Partial identity violation* Conducive to split identification	Box 6: *Complete identity violation* Conducive to decreased identification

they value. For example, many employees of Canadian Pacific Railway likely experienced identity confirmation when the firm sponsored the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games since this affirmed the personal meaning they vested in the Olympic Games and demonstrated their firm's commitment to being an active community partner (Churly, 2007).

Box 2: Identity Expression

When an employee evaluates the partner event as having *positive* relevance yet *low* congruence, the current versus expected organizational identity comparison gives rise to ambiguity, because the partnership event triggers *either* (1) altered understandings about the employee's organization's current identity ("*Is* my organization more in line with what I want it to be?") *or* (2) heightened expectations for what the organization's identity might become ("*Could* my organization be more in line with what I wish it to be?"). In the first case, an employee may come to regard their organization as more supportive of their own identity than they previously understood—that is, finding support for OI in the own versus organizational identity comparison, meaning the employee will see that the organization allows them to more fully *express* who they are at work. In the second case, an employee may be excited that a positively relevant partner event signals that the organization is evolving to generate identity attributes they value—that is, that their own versus organizational identity comparison will prompt strengthened identification as a result of the partnership event. This will also enable the employee to more fully *express* who they are at work.

Consider Toyota's 2016 sponsorship of the Special Olympics, a low-congruence event because the car manufacturer and the sporting event for athletes with intellectual disabilities may appear to have little in common. However, for an employee personally committed to inclusion, the Special Olympics has positive relevance, so this partnership could signal (1) that the firm *is* more inclusive than the employee previously understood or (2) that the firm *intends to become* more inclusive. In either case, the employee may experience *identity expression*.

The process of identity expression affords opportunities for identity play, where employees explore, experiment with, and connect to new elements from which they craft a new version of themselves (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Such a process enables integration of employees' identities with that of their employing organization, increases the value they place on organizational membership, and, hence, is conducive to increasing identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Besharov, 2014). This leads to the somewhat surprising possibility that partnerships that are low in congruence may actually have a *greater positive* influence on employee identification than those that are high in congruence. Of course, low congruence will *not* always signal a positive opportunity to express one's sense of self. Low congruence, even with a positively relevant event, might lead to negative impacts on identification under certain conditions—an outcome we return to when discussing moderators.

Box 3: Moderate Identity Confirmation

When an employee evaluates the partner event as having *neutral* relevance and *high* congruence, the employee's current versus expected organizational identity comparison takes precedence over their own versus organizational identity comparison. Because congruence is high, signaling a strong match between the organization and partner, the employee concludes that the organization *is* acting in line with its identity, although the attributes it expresses are not personally relevant. As Brickson (2013) pointed out, an organization that acts in line with expectations is supportive of identification, so this evaluation can lead to *moderate identity confirmation*.

This occurs with less intensity than in Box 1, since the employee only perceives the partner event as having neutral personal relevance. For example, an employee on the marketing team of a company that begins sponsoring NASCAR, which the employee personally considers of no relevance, may nonetheless regard the partnership as high in congruence because NASCAR fans are a key demographic for the firm. Hence, the employee might value their company's consistent behavior, bolstering their confidence that it is acting in line with who they believe it is and supporting continued identification.

Box 4: Identity Resignation

When an employee evaluates the partner event as having *neutral* relevance and *low* congruence, each of the two identification comparisons may trigger doubt about the employee's understanding of their organization (Pratt, 2000). Low congruence implies that the partner event is a poor match for the organization, and, given neutral personal relevance to the employee, they might question whether their organization is who they thought it was (own versus organizational identity comparison), and/or they might question whether it will live up to their expectations in the future (current versus expected organizational identity comparison). The employee might ponder, "So this is who my organization is?" as a result of the partnership event and experience *identity resignation*. Identity resignation arises when the partner event leads the employee to accept contradictory organizational attributes that do not strongly affect them (Pratt, 2000). This situation usually ushers in a sense of ambivalent identification as the employee now experiences "contradictory thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Pratt, 2000: 479).

For example, an employee who identified with Standard Chartered bank because of its high status in Asia may have experienced identity resignation when the bank announced its sponsorship of the British Jersey Marathon (see https://www.jersey-marathon.com/home). While this event might not have directly challenged the employee's self-concept, it might have elicited confusion because the event was in the British Channel Islands, which are seen as being a tax haven and located in a region that would not have been central to the employee's understanding of the bank.

Box 5: Partial Identity Violation

When an employee evaluates the partner event as having *negative* relevance and *high* congruence, the two identification comparisons give rise to conflicted feelings. On the one hand, the event upholds the employee's expectations about the organization to some degree (current versus expected organizational identity comparison), but, on the other hand, the organization is expressing identity attributes that the employee personally deplores (own versus organizational identity comparison). This reveals another conflicting situation, as in Box 4, but instead of resignation, the employee will experience *identity violation*. This arises when acts contradict an employee's values (Besharov, 2014). As the partner event challenges the employee's sense of self, they experience an identity threat and need to reassess their relationship with the organization (Brickson, 2013; Petriglieri, 2015). Because congruence is high, however, they may experience partial identity violation, conducive to splitting identification, which involves separating those aspects of the employer they continue to identify with from those they disavow (Gutierrez et al., 2010).

In such cases there may be value to the brand, technology, or some other aspect of the organization that is derived from the partnership, which an employee may accept, despite violation of their sense of self in terms of relevance. For example, many employees of a snack foods company that had sponsored action sports for years but then shifted to a football sponsorship to gain more "mainstream" exposure[2] were put off because they personally valued their firm's "cool" ethos and its countercultural quirkiness (personal communication). However, *some* evaluated the sponsorship somewhat positively because they recognized that it was consistent with aspects of the firm's identity, such as its long-standing association with sports. For these employees identity violation led them to split identification.

Box 6: Complete Identity Violation

Finally, when an employee evaluates the partner event as having *negative* relevance and *low* congruence, the two identification comparisons lead to negative evaluations. Low congruence in combination with negative relevance confronts the employee with organizational identity attributes that are both personally offensive (in the own versus organizational identity comparison) and out of line with their expectations for the organization (in the current versus expected organizational identity comparison). In such extreme situations the employee is likely to feel a sense of complete identity violation. In contrast to Box 5, where expectations about the organization are at least to some degree upheld, in this case they are not. As Rousseau and Parks (1993) explained, when an employee's perceptions of implicit organizational promises are violated, it is as if a psychological contract is broken. The most

[2] This example is based on a real case we became aware of through personal communication with the organization. We have omitted and changed some details in order to effectively anonymize the organization.

likely response to this violation of expectations would be to decrease OI. For example, academics at Florida Atlantic University reacted negatively when their university partnered with the private prison provider Geo Group. If this relationship had persisted (it was dropped), they likely would have experienced identity violation as the firm's poor record of prisoner treatment violated their own sense of self, while the association of their employer with an ill-fitting (and disreputable) organization defied their expectations about their organization (Bishop, 2013).

Moderators of Identification Shifts

The identification processes captured in the 3×2 matrix are conducive to the indicated identification shifts, shown by the arrows flowing from the matrix in Figure 2, but do not determine them. Two moderators can alter the final outcome. First is the perception of audiences regarding the authenticity of the partnership based on judgments of whether the organization has a genuine motive for it (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Second are managerial actions (Besharov, 2014; Pratt, 2000) that support employee behaviors surrounding the partner event.

Moderator: Authenticity. Organizational scholars and marketing scholars have theorized about how audiences evaluate the authenticity of organizational actions and partnerships (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Cornwell & Charlton, 2016). We define authenticity as an audience's evaluation of whether the organization's motive for the partnership is genuine, in line with "moral authenticity" in organization studies and "partnership authenticity" in marketing (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Cornwell & Charlton, 2016; Morhart, Malär, Guevremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015). Thus, audiences, such as consumers and the media, denote a partnership event as authentic when they perceive the organization to be sincere and credible in its motivation. In turn, they regard a partnership event as inauthentic when they regard its motivation to be devoid of these important features, such as when they believe that an organization is only using a partner in a calculative way to improve its own image or to enhance sales without having a sincere motive (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2017). Judgments of (in) authenticity can have important consequences. For example, partnerships perceived as egoistic can result in a loss of brand clarity for the sponsored entity (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014) and, thus, a loss of meaningfulness for the sponsor.

When key audiences judge an organization's partnership as authentic, this can amplify employees' positive identification consequences or temper negative consequences. For example, the partnership between the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) and the charity Save the Children has provided 1.3 million children around the world with medical help. As a result, it was voted "most admired partnership" by respondents to the 2017 NGO Partnerships Barometer (Weakley, 2017). With key audiences deeming this partnership authentic, fully 96 percent of surveyed GSK employees reported that the partnership makes them feel proud to work at GSK (*Business in the Community,* 2016). It is likely that GSK employees experience even stronger identification as a result of the partnership, given that external audiences deem it authentic.

When key audiences judge that an organization's partnership is *inauthentic*, however, this can amplify negative consequences, dampen positive consequences, or even lead to a "flipping" of the effect so that employees may change from increasing to decreasing their identification. For example, the 2010 Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) sponsorship of the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure was widely criticized as an "unholy alliance" (Pirello, 2011). Many audiences found it opportunistic and devoid of sincere intentions that a company offering fried food should be sponsoring a group devoted to breast cancer research, resulting in the relationship's termination and reputational damage. At an extreme, a perception that a partnership is inauthentic could lead employees to flip the valence of their identification. In Box 1, for example, employees who regard a partnership event as positively relevant and signaling high congruence would normally experience identity confirmation and increased identification. However, if the public response to a partnership alerted employees to its inauthenticity—as in the above-mentioned case of KFC's sponsorship of the Race for the Cure—they might become so disillusioned with their employer they will decrease their identification, even becoming deidentified because of the event.

Employees' shifts in identification may be heavily influenced by the authenticity judgments of certain external audiences, including consumers, the general public, the media, or watchdog groups (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). These audiences can be particularly persuasive, since they are independent, consequential for an organization's legitimacy, and, thus, especially valuable evaluators of the organization's motives and intentions. Additionally, authenticity judgments from credible internal stakeholders, particularly with respect to judgments of inauthenticity, can be consequential for employees' identification outcomes. For example, if a manager were to admit that the firm was engaged with a partner primarily to "wash" its image, this could lead to feelings that the partnership is inauthentic and result in a flip in identification.

Moderator: Employee engagement in partnership. Employees' shifts in identification can also be influenced by the opportunities that the organization provides for engaging with the partnership. Unlike other events that may shape OI (e.g., a scandal or disaster; Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015), horizontal partnerships typically involve careful communications and engagement opportunities that play out over a long period of time. Managerial and organizational communications serve the purpose of "sensemaking, which serves to reduce knowledge gaps, [or] sensebreaking [which] accentuates them" (Ashforth et al., 2008: 324), in order to manage employee identification. Accordingly, managerial communications and actions play a critical role in guiding employees' shifts in identification. In addition, identification shifts ensue when employees enact aspects of the organizational identity—that is, they personally "act it out," rather than only being aware of identity attributes abstractly (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Weick, Staw, & Salancik, 1977). For example, in the context of corporate social responsibility, employee engagement has been shown to increase organizational pride and OI (Edwards, 2016).

Thus, we propose that high levels of engagement—through managerial communications or actions and opportunities for identity enactment—are likely to *amplify* employees' *positive* identification shifts in the final stage of our model. Conversely, low levels of engagement are likely to *dampen* any *positive* identification shifts. At one end of the spectrum, managers may provide employees with extensive exposure to a partnership by frequently sending news about the partnership, organizing joint events such as teamwork training by members of a sports team, creating volunteer opportunities, or scheduling regular visits to the partner's sites. Such engagements can have profound consequences for employees. For example, the Lloyds Bank sponsorship of the 2012 Olympic Games in London had as a stated objective to "significantly impact internal pride and motivation." Employees were specifically viewed as an audience of the sponsorship and an integral component of its delivery (Scot Smythe, personal communication), and they were given opportunities as staff ambassadors to meet Olympians and Paralympians. In contrast, when organizations expose employees minimally to a partner, perhaps by only communicating its presence, identification shifts may be limited.

Employee engagement need not only be generated from top-down actions, as in the Lloyds Bank example, but may be generated or amplified when employees have opportunities to be involved in partnership decision making and activities. For example, when partnership budgets are decentralized and, as is the case with grocer Whole Foods (see http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/mission-values/caring-communities/community-giving), employees can engage in partnership decisions, they may feel particularly strong engagement, supporting identification. Further, a national partnership that executives instigate top down may influence employees in locations across the country differently, depending on the extent of local engagement. For example, the beverage company Anheuser-Busch holds the National Football League (NFL) "official beer" designation. Anheuser-Busch also holds thirty-two team sponsorships. For Anheuser-Busch (and for the NFL), these relationships differentially impact employees, depending on whether there is a local team partnership that offers employees opportunities for engagement.

Importantly, as with the previous moderator, high employee engagement might have surprising negative consequences. Mandatory or disingenuous engagement with a partner could push employees who experience identity violation or even identity resignation to further decrease their identification with the organization. For example, some organizations run internal competitions to incentivize staff in different workgroups to contribute personally to a sponsored charity, and employees for whom the charity has neutral or negative relevance might be increasingly put off by frequent reminders to "beat the accounting department" in volunteering.

DISCUSSION

The increasing ubiquity of horizontal partnerships—which are as diverse as mining companies working with global health organizations, banks partnering with yacht racing events, or even private prison operators sponsoring universities—reflects a changing organizational context. The visibility of such partnerships, the potential they hold for generating strong responses from employees, and the possibility they will afford employees new sources of meaning at work suggest that they may powerfully influence an important work relationship—that of employees' identification with their employing organization.

Despite the potential influence an organization's horizontal partnerships may have on employees' OI, the dynamics that govern this have not been examined. To address this issue, we have theorized about how employees come to perceive partnership events as salient, how they evaluate them, and how this evaluation influences OI. The evaluative process at the heart of our model centers on an employee's joint evaluation of the perceived relevance of the partner and its congruence with the employing organization, which leads an employee to reassess the value of organizational membership for identification purposes, ultimately leading to diverse identification processes and outcomes.

A particularly important and surprising aspect of our model is that those partners that employees perceive as having low congruence with their organization are potentially conducive to strong increases in OI because they afford identity expression. Many partnerships offer employees new, meaningful, or exciting opportunities to go beyond their work roles, so the upside potential to encourage playful exploration of who they are and who they might be in relation to their organization is vast (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). The emergence of positive identification outcomes surrounding partnerships demands further consideration and can complement prior literature that has empirically focused on identification repair following disruptive events (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2015).

Our theorizing has two broad implications and opens a number of pathways for future research on employee identification in the contemporary work environment.

Relational Influences on OI

Our model suggests a broad reorientation of the nature of OI, one that complements the current focus on how OI is influenced by the organization itself as it crafts and conveys its identity to employees and is filtered by employees as they assess others' evaluations of the organization's image (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Besharov, 2014; Pratt, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). The earliest work on OI posited that it resulted from social comparison processes, in which employees evaluate their own identity in light of that of the organization and other available categories (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). Since then, studies have suggested that employees consider the perceptions that other organizations, audiences, and acquaintances have of their organization when engaging in these comparison processes that influence their OI and sense of self (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2015; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). However, in little work to date have scholars explicitly theorized about what role external organizations can play and what direct influence on the OI relationship they can have. How do they provide points of comparison but also other sources of meaning and value that might enhance or detract from the value an employee derives from membership in an employing organization?

By drawing attention to how OI is shaped by horizontal partnerships, our model moves beyond conceptualizing external organizations and actors primarily as prisms through which employees view their organization (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Petriglieri, 2015). Instead, our theorizing moves toward regarding external relationships, particularly horizontal partners, as conveying or shaping the commitments, meanings, and associations that employees perceive as central to their OI. Indeed, one might begin to think of OI as occurring within an ecosystem of organizations, of which the employing organization is but one (albeit important) part.

Such a perspective on the relational nature of OI differs from and extends prior work that draws attention to vertical, nested relationships within an organization (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, & Ashforth, 2012). In these cases the focus has been largely on how identification dynamics can be self-reinforcing, leading to the convergence of identification across multiple relationships (e.g., employee to supervisor, to workgroup, and to organization). Recent studies also show that relationships between members can lead to divergent dynamics, thus challenging identification rather than reinforcing it (Besharov, 2014; Gutierrez et al., 2010). By focusing on horizontal relationships, we open up opportunities to explore how OI shifts through diverse influences, which bring new opportunities, commitments, and meanings to the fore. By linking itself to a partner who can be very different, an employing organization is able to accentuate, suppress, or even potentially radically change aspects of its organizational self that can fuel varying identification dynamics for its members.

Further, an expanded relational perspective on OI that takes into account horizontal relationships sheds new light on how identification is monitored and altered in relation to the core comparisons that drive it (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2008; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Brickson (2013) asserted that the own versus organizational identity comparison—whereby an employee asks, "Can I be true to myself within this organization?"—affords fulfillment of an employee's self-continuity motive, while the current versus expected organizational identity comparison—whereby an employee asks, "Are we living up to expectations about who we should be?"—affords fulfillment of an employee's self-esteem motive. The presence of an external third party, from which an employee might derive personal meaning (relevance) and whose congruence with the employer also matters, complicates the mapping of these comparisons directly onto self-continuity or self-esteem. For example, if a partnership event suggests that the employing organization is *not* living up to expectations, this can influence more than an employee's self-esteem. This is because the joint evaluation of partner relevance and congruence can also raise opportunities and challenges for an employee's self-continuity. Recall how Florida Atlantic University employees felt about the university's partnership with a prison management company that had a bad reputation. Employees felt not only that the partner challenged their esteem but also that it was counter to key aspects of who they were, thus threatening their self-continuity. In sum, our investigation of horizontal partners and their influence on OI suggests additional ways self-continuity and self-esteem motives for identification interact (Brickson, 2013) and may mutually reinforce each other, or may work at cross purposes.

The relational nature of OI is particularly acute and interesting when a focal organization has many horizontal partners and even orchestrates their interaction. The horizontal marketing relationships that we focus on are often part of diverse portfolios of partnerships that organizations seek to leverage in interesting ways. Given the importance of relationships found in a sponsor's portfolio (Cornwell, 2008) and the sponsored property's roster of sponsors (Ruth & Simonin, 2003), horizontal partners are increasingly regarded as networked (Ryan & Fahy, 2012). For instance, the NFL sponsors Play 60, a charity that challenges youth to exercise. Any organization partnering with NFL is de facto partnering with Play 60, potentially affording different angles of relevance and engagement for different employees (e.g., football fans versus those concerned with childhood obesity). Given the potentially diverse array of attributes they present to employees, networked partnerships might interact—or compete—in important ways to shape OI, a topic that deserves further study.

Beyond this, the nature and active orchestration of relationships within a partner network lend further potential for considering how firms influence employee OI. Some companies seek to connect disparate partners, as when Teck tied sponsorship of the Women's World Cup soccer event held in Vancouver to its ongoing zinc health initiative, benefiting maternal and child health. Rather than treating these as two separate sponsorships, Teck sought to connect them through the common theme of empowering women. As an organization develops its partnership network and articulates overarching themes, employees may come to embrace new interests, suggesting that partner relevance and congruence may evolve over time in response to events and organizational actions.

How Expanding OI Reconfigures Work Relationships

Our theorizing has provocative implications for the sway OI has over employees and the expanding foundation on which this is based. Our model explores the potential of horizontal partners to affirm OI and even to extend the domains of OI. In this way it also expands on related research that explores how employees experience boundaries between their work and home life (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009). Strategic selection of partners that reinforce corporate values can provide opportunities that enrich workplace identity (Farrelly et al., 2012). These partnerships also afford the opportunity for employees to build relationships with other organizations—often nonprofits—that, in the broadest sense, help to support community and social cohesion. Employees may find it invigorating to share with colleagues their passion for cherished causes. Further, engagement in partnership events may enable some employees to discover or develop aspects of themselves that allow for greater integration with their workplace. Such outcomes may lead to increased employee citizenship behaviors (Coote & Cornwell, 2004; Edwards, 2016) and higher commitment (Hickman et al., 2005).

Horizontal partnerships can also become a conduit for the expansion of OI to new domains. Specifically, in partnering, organizations form relationships with organizations in unrelated domains, such as the voluntary sector, sports, and the arts, which were previously the preserve of the employee's nonwork social life. While employees used to volunteer for a charity or support a sports team on their own, employers are increasingly encouraging them to engage in these activities through their horizontal partners. By integrating these social domains into employees' work relationships, employees' OI can become based on broader aspects of their life—a process we have called identity expression.

The use of horizontal partners as sources of meaning and as conduits for OI can be a double-edged sword for organizations. It can have positive consequences when employees experience it as enabling them to express important nonwork aspects of themselves in the work setting and to integrate the two. Conversely, it can have negative implications. Specifically, when workgroups or particular work roles are asked to take on organizationally mandated interests in service of a partnership, such as volunteering time with a charity or serving as the face of a sports sponsorship in a customer service role, this can be alienating for those employees for whom such partnerships have no (or negative) relevance. Horizontal partnerships that do not fit with their sense of self can prompt employees to segment their work and home lives, thus actually distancing them from the organization (Kreiner et al., 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Even those partnerships that employees regard as personally relevant and potentially OI boosting can have negative consequences if they impede employees' quests for some respite from work and if they demand overidentification (Kreiner et al., 2006). As employees confront and negotiate these tensions posed by horizontal partnerships, a range of outcomes, including ambivalent, decreased, or split identification, may result.

Finally, horizontal partnerships often span considerable periods of time via contracts that can last for decades. As a result, some employees gain insights, understandings, and allegiances that transcend a particular organization. For example, employees may move readily between their focal organization and sponsored organizations, such as a charity or a sports team. Thus, over time they may primarily identify with the cause or sport itself and, in extreme cases, with the sponsored organization, as opposed to their employing organization. Indeed, one employee told us that she would likely leave the firm if its key partnership ended (personal communication). Thus, while horizontal partnerships may increase OI, in some extreme cases they might also lead to turnover if the identification target shifts away from the employing organization.

As this discussion highlights, it may be important for horizontal partnerships to carefully build on and link to work-related OI characteristics (e.g., connecting volunteering to the firm's engineering focus or connecting attributes of sports, like yacht racing, to an attribute of the work environment, like teamwork) in order for these partnerships to strengthen OI and core work relationships for a large number of employees. Conversely, if organizations use partnerships in a diffuse manner that cannot be related to employees' work with their employing organization, this can create confusion, alienation, negative identification consequences (cf. Ashforth et al., 2000), or even employee churn. Future empirical work on the nuanced OI outcomes in relation to horizontal partners can contribute to the literature on OI, work-life integration, and internal marketing.

Opportunities for Future Research

Our model suggests additional avenues for future research. First, we would encourage direct testing of the relationships of our model, as well as its boundary conditions. It would be important to identify which factors within and beyond our model influence how horizontal relationships shape OI and to what degree they do so. An intriguing aspect of this would be to explore the prevalence and triggers of cases where partner organizations do not only mediate OI but themselves become identification targets for employees. We encourage researchers to investigate when this may occur and how this may influence OI.

Second, we focus in our model on how horizontal partner events affect the large number of employees who are positively identified with their organization. It would also be interesting to explore how partner events affect the OI of individuals who have different—and more extreme—starting states of identification, such as strongly positive identification, disidentification, or ambivalent identification. It would be interesting to explore how partner events gain salience among individuals with these starting states of identification and how they differently adjust their identification in response.

Third, employees, particularly those who are public facing, often live out horizontal partnerships through their relations with employees of the partnering organizations or audience members for the partnership. Are the implications for OI positive, as when Lloyds Bank found that two-thirds of its staff felt their 2012 London Olympic Games sponsorship helped them build better relationships with the communities they served? Or does being the face of a partnership contribute to frustration or fatigue, leading to negative shifts in identification? A study of the ending of a cultural partnership found that those who worked with the sponsored organization were so emotionally distraught they fought management to keep the partnership (Ryan & Blois, 2010). Future research could explore how identification shifts unfold in relation to employees' external-facing roles and how manager communications and actions influence these.

Fourth, scholars could also investigate how vertical and horizontal relationships may interact in influencing OI. Studies have shown that vertical relationships that are nested within the organization (e.g., with workgroup or supervisor) can strongly influence OI (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Sluss et al., 2012). It would be interesting to explore how OI shifts if an employee experiences supporting or opposing evaluations based on horizontal and vertical relationships. Scholars could explore when and how each relationship type dominates in influencing OI.

Fifth, when horizontal partnerships take the form of sponsorships, employees in the *sponsored* organization (e.g., charity, sports team, arts organization) may experience distinct identification dynamics owing to the unequal power dynamics between them and their sponsors. While sponsors have great freedom in choosing suitable sponsored entities, sponsored organizations usually have less power and choice. Because sponsorship finances their operations, these organizations may have to cede some control to the sponsor. A clear example here would be when Reebok's sponsorship of mixed martial arts (MMA) drew a barrage of criticism from MMA players and fans who disliked the implied corporate control. Alternatively, even when providing needed financial support, a sponsor may be viewed as a valued partner rather than an overlord. When the CFO of a professional sports team was asked how he felt about the organization's sponsors, he noted that local sponsors were relevant to him and that he felt good when shopping at a grocery store that sponsored them. It would be interesting to explore how the unequal power dynamics of partnerships affect the OI of employees of sponsored organizations under different scenarios.

Conclusion

As individuals increasingly look for meaning at work and as organizations become ever more interconnected, employees are more thoroughly scrutinizing their employers' partners. We have explored the implications of these important trends by systematically theorizing about how an organization's horizontal partnerships affect employee OI. The consequential—and often surprising—dynamics that our article offers generate further insight into the pivotal and increasingly permeable work relationship of OI.

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