Identity formation and maintenance in a large hospital construction project

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ABSTRACT

Earlier research has demonstrated that in a project organization, project identity is a central leadership vehicle that offers a useful means for examining and developing shared interests and goals among project participants. However, little research has focused on project identity formation and identity maintenance.

We focused on the case of a large hospital construction project and used a qualitative research method to create propositions describing the essential identity formation activities that the program management office (PMO), the project director, and together with the project management team need to intentionally undertake in the early phases of a hospital construction project and corresponding identity maintenance during the project implementation period.

The findings indicate that identity creation and formation is initiated from the first meetings at the project front end and naturally evolves, but significant intentional actions need to be organized and controlled at the front end. Identity maintenance as a deliberate managerial action should take place during project implementation to keep identity alive as a positive resource, not resulting in the identity fading away to something else.

1. Introduction

Projects have been identified as key drivers and vehicles for business success in the contemporary technological environment (Cha et al., 2018). However, projects quite often fail in the quest to achieve their objectives (Whitty and Maylor, 2009; Vidal et al., 2011; Han et al., 2009; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Eriksson et al., 2017). In practically, construction projects have been blamed for poor productivity and low levels of innovativeness (Hietarjarvi et al., 2017). In an attempt to resolve some of the challenges leading to project failures and delays, a focus on people has been mentioned as one of the critical success factors for project execution (Tam et al., 2020). One way to focus on people is to develop leadership and managerial methods and tools such as organizational identity that either directly or indirectly enable people to be led in the right direction to achieve the project objectives and vision. According to Dale and Walker (2004) a significant driver of managing project successfully is an effective and intelligent leadership communicated through an inspiring vision of what the project is meant to achieve and how it can make a significant positive impact. Despite an extensive amount of literature, the focus on people in projects has not been sufficiently described in the literature (Liker and Morgan, 2006).

Research has demonstrated that project identity is critical of focus on the project participants to achieve project success (Nyameke et al., 2020; Hietarjarvi and Aaltonen, 2018; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015). Project identity is both a managerial concept and a strategic tool that forms the fundamentals of a project organization. It reveals the perceptions of the project participants and the concepts and strategies used to structure the project organization’s definition of “who we are,” “what we stand for,” “what lies in our future,” and “what makes us distinctive” (Gioia et al., 2010, 2013; Rutitis et al., 2012). The project identity concept provides a clear meaning and a deeper understanding of a project organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010, 2013; Hietarjarvi and Aaltonen, 2018). Since the front end of the project is the preliminary emergence phase of the project (Morris, 2011; Edkins et al., 2013), project identity formation in the front end of the project is vital, such that it helps development and articulation of project objectives and vision (Sergeeva and Winch, 2021; Christenson and Walker, 2004). It serves as a lens through which project participants interpret activities occurring within the project organization. It also serves as a guideline for project participants and influences decision-making and sense-making processes. Project identity plays an important role in developing project participants’ relationships and portrays how project participants organize and envision the project (Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015).

Large projects also typically have a long duration, and identity...
maintenance is also required. Irrespective of the importance of project identity formation in the front end of the project, identity maintenance during project implementation may be even more important (Ponroy et al., 2019; Anteby and Molnár, 2012). Having formed the project identity at the project’s front end, all participants need to utilize the identity and maintain it during the project implementation period to avoid identity being fading. Unfortunately, research about identity maintenance is lacking, except for Ponroy et al. (2019), who investigated identity maintenance in family businesses. While some research about the formation of project identity and project identity exists (Nyameke et al., 2020; Hietajaarvi and Aaltonen, 2018; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015), we have not found research on project identity formation and maintenance in large projects.

Our research objective was therefore to enhance the understanding of project identity formation and project identity maintenance in the delivery of a large project by investigating how project organizations create project identity and maintain identity when executing large projects. Our research question was as follows: How is identity formed and maintained in a large project? We used the Oulu University Hospital Construction Project (OYS 2030) as a case study to conduct our qualitative research. The project is aimed to build a new technologically advanced hospital and renewing the existing hospital operations to meet the future challenges of specialized healthcare. The project utilized project alliance (a relational contract model) as the project contract and delivery method. The project is owned by Northern Ostrobothnia Hospital District (NOHD), situated in Oulu, Finland. The renewal program is led by (NOHD) through its Program Management Office (PMO). By which the alliance team oversees the project related operations with internal expertise and resource at their disposer, while the PMO oversees directing, managing the integration, and standardization.

For the research we first review literature of organizational identity, discussion related to identity maintenance, some basic setting of projects as temporary organizations and PMO to outline the foundation for our empirical analysis, and Project identity formation and identity maintenance. Secondly, we explore the Oulu university hospital construction project (OYS 2030) as case study to our qualitative research. We used interviews as our main data collection method and primary research material and as a secondary material we also utilize project organization documents and public materials. From which we generated short narratives and compressed propositions describing the essential identity formation activities that the PMO, the project director, and together with the project management team need to intentionally undertake in the early phases of a hospital construction project. Further we analyze how these elements are maintained during the project implementation period.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organizational identity elements and formation

Organizational identity has been extensively researched and consists of a huge body of literature (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Schultz et al., 2012; Gioia et al., 2010, 2013; Gonzales-Miranda, 2020; Oertel and Thommes, 2018). Although the concept has gained greater recognition among researchers and practitioners, more research is needed on the elements that constitute the formation of organizational identity. According to Thommes and Oertel (2017), questions regarding certain elements that constitute organizational identity have still not been answered to a large extent.

Thommes and Oertel’s (2017) main objective were to examine the elements of organizational identity, and they found that history is one of the most crucial elements organizations use to form their identity. The construction and interpretation of the historical background of an organization is a vital factor in forming identity, since past events in the organization cause organizational change and affect its identity (Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Oertel and Thommes, 2018; Saddaby et al., 2016).

2.2. Organizational identity maintenance

Most scholarly work on organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010, 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Gonzales-Miranda, 2020) is about organizational identity formation and change rather than what it takes for organizational identity to be maintained (Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Ponroy et al., 2019). Organizational identity maintenance has been underexplored by scholars and practitioners.

Albert and Whetten (1985) seminal work, which formed the basis of organizational identity research, states that organizational identity is a shared belief of organizational members about what is central and enduring and the distinct characteristics of the organization (Leitch and Harrison, 2016; Gioia and Hamilton, 2017). Albert and Whetten (1985) established centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness as the central foundations of organizational identity (Felix, 2020), as Gioia et al. (2013) refer to as the three putative pillars of identity. The organizational identity characteristic of endurance that defines how an organization maintains or sustains its identity is not well academically developed (Ponroy et al., 2019). According to Anteby and Molnár (2012), identity maintenance among organizational members remains problematic; therefore, more research is needed to deepen understanding of how members of organizations maintain organizational identity.

Irrespective of how important the role of forming an organizational identity helps organizations to deeply understand their shared beliefs about “what they are as an organization.” and “what they do as an organization” (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010, 2012, 2013; Gonzales-Miranda, 2020; Oertel and Thommes, 2018), it is equally important for organizations to put in place what it takes to maintain their shared meaning about “who they are” and “what they do” as an organization (Dawn and Lynn, 1992; Ponroy et al., 2019; Anteby and Molnár, 2012).

2.3. Projects is as temporary organization

The field of organization and management studies have over the years gain much attention (Argote and Greve, 2007), and has been more established (Mitrović et al., 2017). Temporary organization and Permanent organization have gain prominence under this research area. These two theories became the mainstream research areas after Cyert and March (1963) published their book “A Behavioral Theory of the Firm” which dealt more on the structures of permanent organization and Lundin and Saterholm (1995) publication on “Theory of the temporary organization” which also dealt with temporary organization structures.

Project management before was ignored by scholars in the field of organization and management studies (Sydow and Braun, 2018). With the mindset that, project management should be seen as theoretical area on its own. This basically put project management theory underdeveloped. Though, there was general understanding of temporary systems
pointing towards the degree of understanding of projects as a form of organization in existence (Bakker, 2010); the first scholarly work to gesture projects as a temporary organization was Lundin and Soderholm (1995).

Turner and Muller (2003) viewed projects as a temporary organization, based on principle of organization theory. Project have been defined by many scholars by which all definition point to one meaning (Arto and Kujala, 2008; van Berkel et al., 2016). However, the definition of project that says project is combining human and non-human resource to form a temporary organization to achieve a specific goal, defines project as temporary organization (Turner and Muller, 2003). Sydow and Braun (2018) after a critical look of projects as temporary organization concluded; projects are really a vital form of temporary organization. However, the authors understanding also aligned with the proposed definition of project by Turner and Muller (2003). Thus, “Project is a temporary organization by which resources are allocated to execute a unique, novel and limited time endeavor in managing the associated uncertainty and the call for integration to achieve advantageous objectives of change”.

As management of projects advances over the years (Sydow and Braun, 2018), a call for central center organizational project knowledge, tools and techniques, and project management standards have been identified by most organizations to enhance coordination and excellency for delivering projects (Letavec, 2006; Hapsari and Firman, 2022). According to Letavec (2006) Program management office (PMO) is said to be the answer to improved coordination, standardization, optimization, and management of the practice of project management. PMO is the organizational business unit established to enhance the organizations’ ability in delivering projects and standardizes the project governance process (Tjahjana et al., 2009). However, PMO is the management structure responsible for sharing project related resources, tools and techniques, and methodologies needed for delivering projects (Darling and Whitty, 2016; Hapsari and Firman, 2022). Irrespective of the name, whether PMO or project office its center of knowledge and expertise play vital role in organizations conduction projects (Letavec, 2006; Hapsari and Firman, 2022).

2.4. Project identity formation and identity maintenance

Project identity formation and identity maintenance have a limited theoretical and empirical data compared to organizational identity formation (Nyameke et al., 2020; Hietajarvi and Aaltonen, 2018). Research conducted under this discipline has been mainly concentrated on the organizational identity context and characteristics as well as its influential elements and change of identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010, 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Gonzales-Miranda, 2020). However, Walker and Lloyd-Walker (2015), and Hietajarvi and Aaltonen (2018) research work express how the formation of project identity is considered fundamental for project success. Thus, the formation of project identity aims at getting participants to be committed and attract the best talent to execute the projects successfully.

According to Hietajarvi and Aaltonen (2018) project identity formation is the process by which project organizations constituting and constructing structures for executing projects. Project identity formation occurs at the project front end (Morris, 2011; Edkins et al., 2013; Sergueeva and Winch, 2021), when project activities, vision, schemes, and planning are discussed to strategize the project before the project execution. Thus, at the early phases of the project life cycle (Nyameke et al., 2020), such as the project initiation and planning phases which is the preliminary emergence phase of the project (Morris, 2011; Edkins et al., 2013), Whereas identity maintenance occurs during the project execution and closure period of the project life cycle (Aantebry and Molnár, 2012; Ponroy et al., 2019). Thus, to avoid deflections to original fundamental meanings during the project execution period (Dawn and Lynn, 1992).

Several studies have outlined the elements for creating organizational identity, including Gonzales-Miranda (2020). It is evident that identity will also emerge spontaneously, but based on the literature, it is better for the results that project management intentionally acts for identity formation (Nyameke et al., 2021; Hietajarvi and Aaltonen, 2018). No flower flourishes without watering, and the same applies to team spirit and identity. Putting identity into a large project context, it is evident that we need intentional managerial acts on identity formation in the project front end, and identity maintenance at the project execution period of the project life cycle.

3. Research methodology

The purpose of this research was to enhance the understanding of the processes involved in the formation of project identity at the project front end and the identity maintenance during project implementation. Given the lack of previous research on project identity formation and maintenance in particular, an inductive case study approach coupled with a qualitative research method was employed. Our research methodology focused on the interpretation of project identity formation and maintenance (Holme and Solvang, 1997; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Pekuri et al., 2015). We opted to collect qualitative data, as such data can generate a rich and holistic understanding of research phenomena.

In our efforts to comprehend project identity formation and identity maintenance in large projects, we relied on Gioia et al.’s (2010) paper “Forging an Identity,” which was about prospective processes for creating organizational identity, work conducted by Hietajarvi and Aaltonen (2018) on “The Formation of a Collaborative Project Identity in an Infrastructure Alliance Project,” and Ponroy et al.’s (2019) work on family firm identity maintenance, which served as an inspiration for and a cognitive frame of reference for our analysis.

We selected a new hospital construction project for our case study. This project was chosen because it aligned well with the scope of our study and offered an excellent opportunity to deepen our understanding of forming and maintaining project identity in large projects. The project involves a complex interplay between project participants and stakeholders and has permitted us to gain in-depth access to a variety of materials and information sources, thereby enabling material triangulation.

3.1. Project identity formation and maintenance

3.1.1. The empirical context: The Future Hospital Project (OYS 2030)

The Future Hospital Project (OYS 2030) consists of building a new hospital facility and renewing the existing hospital operations to meet the future challenges of specialized medical care in Oulu, Finland. The current hospital has been in operation for 60 years and is no longer responding optimally to modern healthcare technology requirements and functions. The project intends to utilize the most advanced healthcare technologies and provide personalized and effective healthcare services, also providing business opportunities for health technology companies.

OYS 2030 was launched in 2018 by the client organization, Northern Ostrobotnia Hospital District (NOHD), and construction started in 2019 with estimated duration of 5 years. The total estimated budget for the project is about 600 million Euros, and the building is approximately 115,000 square meters and meets very high-quality standards. The project delivery method used for OYS 2030 is a project alliance. A project alliance is a relational collaborative project delivery method that utilizes an alliance of people, systems, business structures, and practices in a process that harnesses the talents and insights of all participants to optimize project results, increase value to the owner, reduce waste, and maximize efficiency through all the phases of the design, fabrication, and construction.

At the development phase of the project, over 200 people such as end-users (medical practitioners and non-medical practitioners), architects, and engineers were employed to develop and ensuring
requirements for the facilities, equipment, and systems of end-users are well defined. However, in the implementation period over 600 project workers were employed to work hand in hand at both project site and project office. The program is led by the NOHD through its PMO. However, the alliance team oversees the project related operations by which internal expertise and resource are in their disposer, while the PMO is directing, managing the integration, and standardization. NOHD PMO is in line with Letavec (2006), thus, PMO is a guide to satisfying the need for improved coordination, standardization, optimization, and management of the practice of project management.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Not only did we used interviews for our data collection, even though the interviews served as our primary source of data, but we also utilize documents, materials, workshop materials and project websites of the project (cf. Martinsuo and Huemann, 2021). Before the interviews, we utilized project documentation (project plans, reports, contracts, and meeting minutes) to develop a profound background understanding. The project documentation was utilized twofold: first, to depict our case and the signs of the project’s identity and image, and second, to triangulate information and draw a more objective understanding of the phenomenon. Table 1 provides an overview of the case project and interview details. The interviews took place in March and April of 2021, with an average duration of 45 min. We interviewed 10 project executives and project managers at the forefront of executing the case project. The interview questions covered general themes related to large projects, project identity, project identity formation, and identity maintenance. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), using interviews as a means of collecting primary data is important because they serve as an effective tool for dialoguing cases that have not been observed. Interviewing the participants directly regarding a particular matter provided us with a thorough understanding of their views and knowledge related to our research topic.

The analysis method was qualitative content analysis (Duriau and RegerPfarrer, 2007). From the content analysis, we depicted our findings as propositions describing the essential identity formation activities that the program management office (PMO), the project director, and together with the project management team need to intentionally undertake in the early phases of a hospital construction project. After describing the propositions, we analyzed the project documentation and interviews to find evidence of maintenance acts for project identity.

The interviews were conducted remotely through Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Some participants had 10 years’ experience in large projects, while others had worked for 30 years on various large construction projects. The participants’ extensive experience and involvement in large project management provided a great opportunity for the researchers to acquire the necessary information to answer the study’s research question. Every interviewee was free to answer a given question based on their respective experience and knowledge of and competence in project identity and identity maintenance in large projects.

The interviews were held in English and were recorded digitally and transcribed, and the interviewer took notes during the interviews as a backup method. The tapes and notes transcribed was about 20 pages and that facilitated the analysis of the researchers’ gathered qualitative data. In addition to the interviews, we utilized more than 30 pages of a combination of organizational documents, project materials, workshop materials, and project website information to assist in our analysis.

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the official start of the project to gather ideas from individuals and organizations who had been in the project business for decades, were well resourced, and had great expertise. This was done to enable public and practitioner involvement in co-designing the project objectives and goals.

To make the project vision feasible, change management plays an important role. The overall goal of the project evolved over the period. The project’s goal and scope kept changing in the beginning, which made identity difficult to manage. The antidote for the change in the project scope was the project delivery method selected for the project execution. As interviewee (E) stated, this project has undergone a lot of changes in the beginning due to the expectations and requirements of the client. However, if we were using a traditional fixed project delivery method instead of a project alliance, we would have not gotten to this stage. A project alliance has been presented as a model for collaborating project parties to build a sense of joint belonging and a culture of cooperation that integrates the diverse skills, knowledge, and expertise of the project parties. A project alliance entails a culture of commitment among the project parties to act in good faith and equally share the project’s rewards and losses, thereby encouraging all parties to focus on the project vision and objectives irrespective of any challenges they may face. In view of the above, we offer proposition 1.

**Proposition 1.** A clear and feasible project vision (the main project objectives) needs to be set out at the front end of the project to direct and positively impact the project. During the early phase of the project, it is important to construe the client’s permanent organization’s future state of the project to something achievable, and the client must communicate their objectives clearly to the PMO, the project director, and the project management team who are responsible for all project-related activities and staff, no matter what their permanent background organization is.

4.1.2. Engage the right expert stakeholders

The interviewees expressed their views about how important engaging the right expected resource in the initial stage of the project was in the project development process, putting them in a good place to deliver the project. They established a team from a pool of researchers, consultants, medical doctors, hospital executives, project management experts and experts in national and international hospital construction projects to plan a world-class hospital construction idea that fits the vision of the OYS 2030 project. The need for such a team is a key feature in delivering such a large project. Interviewee (A) expressed how this key aspect of the project was established during the early phase of the project: There was a broad consultation among project experts as to how such a magnificent project can be achieved. Several seminars were held to gather enough resources and ideas to execute the project. Those seminars and workshops facilitated engaging the right project experts with the competence and capability to execute an ultramodern state-of-the-art hospital project, although systematic stakeholder identification and analysis could probably have been smoother and more organized than the process OYS 2030 experienced.

Due to the project’s magnitude and complexity, with the aim of being the smartest hospital in the world in its time, it requires experienced people with a good understanding of how to execute such a project. The initial plan was to engage experienced project management experts and project parties that could draw on their previous challenges and make this project work. Interviewee (J) stated, the long-time experience of the project parties has played a great role in the success of this project. Some have been doing this for over 25 years, both internationally and within the country, and they brought on board good ideas that probably were problems in their previous project to help execute this successfully. Building the identity for OYS 2030 was facilitated during the workshops and seminars, where leading industry experts factored in the frustrations and confrontational setups they faced in previous large projects and how to make the identify work successfully and uniquely for OYS 2030. Considering the above, we offer proposition 2.

**Proposition 2.** Engaging individuals and organizations (i.e., stakeholders with critical knowledge and understanding of the project) is important when developing the project. Engaging experts on the project to enact their potential enhances the project development process, procedure, and best practices for the success of the project.

4.1.3. Enable communication and information network connectivity

Communication and the means of communication play an essential role in forming a project identity. Adequate communication plays a vital role in delivering large projects and has assumed a prominent position in project management research. The success of a project is strongly attached to the communication enablement and network connectivity of the project-based organization. This key feature was well considered in the early phase of the OYS 2030 project.

The project parties not only anticipated the challenges of the means of communication among the parties in the initial stage of the project but also paid attention to the understanding of information provided throughout the whole project execution process. Interviewee (H) observed, Over the years, one of the problems realized in projects is that people lack the understanding of what they are supposed to do and even of the responsible persons or team for some activities. That was what we tried to avoid this time by building a clear project organizational structure that defines who does what. The project parties tried to avoid misunderstandings of information that mostly lead to non-productivity in large project delivery. Measures were put in place to enable the project parties to understand their responsibilities. Extensive expectations and an especially long project duration increase the importance of communication because stakeholders with extensive expectations also require systematic information on the project progress in relation to their expectations.

In addition to making sure that information is clearly communicated to the project parties, another aspect that facilitates adequate and effective communication is the easy accessibility of information. This was important for the OYS 2030 project, which has made communication media available to project members as much as possible. Interviewee (I) stated one key thing that is moving us on is easy accessibility of information. We’re using a well-structured information system to pass information as quickly as possible to all the project parties whom the specific information is for. When the project parties are aware of information and have easy access, it avoids defects and mayhem that may have occurred due to delayed and difficult accessibility of the information. We therefore offer proposition 3.

**Proposition 3.** At the front end of the project, the PMO conjunction project director must establish communication and information network connectivity to provide easily accessible information and a clear understanding of the project participants’ activities.

4.1.4. Establish collaborative values for delivering large projects

Collaborative competence among project parties facilitates successful large project management. However, collaboration is a challenge in executing projects due to limited time, more so if the project parties have no prior experience of working together on a project. It takes time for project parties to build the commitment of working together to create value through mutual trust and understanding. At the early stage of the OYS 2030 project, the establishment of collaborative values for delivering large projects was thought through and considered one key feature that needed to be addressed. This is what interviewee (G) had to say: We understood that if we want to be successful in this project, then we need to strengthen our collaborative values. And I may say the effective collaboration among the project teams has been a key success factor in delivering this project. We have well-coordinated project teams. The OYS 2030 project strives to utilize modern collaborative practices and develop a project team collaborative identity, which has been one of the key features that makes this project different. This has been partially achieved by using fewer tools and methods while selecting those that support collaboration or even require collaborative input.
In the quest to establish collaborative values for delivering the OYS 2030 project, the “big room” concept has been instrumental. It is a physical and virtual space that brings the key project members from all the project parties into one working space to enable collaboration. This concept enables the project parties to have one mindset that encourages a commitment to collaborating, working for the same goal and vision with transparency, and focusing on advancing the project. Naturally, there is a collaborative commercial contract that also drives in that direction. The big room embodies processes and tools such as last planner and visual management, weekly meetings and workshops, management of ideas and innovation, and continuous training that facilitates successful collaborative project delivery. According to interviewee (F), the big room concept of the project alliance delivery method has been very instrumental; at the least it gives you a broader ideal of all the project activities in one working space. It enhances our collaborative values because we are all working in the same physical or virtual working space with one identity. We don’t see any other permanent organizational colors but the OYS 2030 project signs. The big room has played an important role in establishing collaborative values for OYS 2030 by bringing on board all the key project stakeholders in the decision-making process. It aims to eliminate non-value-added project activities that may negatively impact the project. The collaborative values are also visible on the big room walls. In view of the above, we offer proposition 4.

Proposition 4. The PMO conjunction with the project director needs to initiate and secure the use of collaborative tools that ensure collaborative values among the project participants to improve their capability of listening and evolving together, which can lead them to be more innovative and have efficient processes that facilitate successful project delivery.

4.1.5. Build one image and attain distinctiveness

The often-fragmented identities of project participants do not facilitate successful project delivery. In the early phase of OYS 2030, building a single image and signs for the project was well thought through. Thus, irrespective of the project party’s affiliation with their own organizational image, building a single project image supported the building of the project’s own identity. As interviewee (E) noted, even though we are from different organizations, on site and in all project-related activities, we only exhibit the image of the project through our presentations template, letterhead, etc., and that makes us feel we are in this together and well united. The project parties do not exhibit images from their permanent organizations but rather portray the image of the OYS 2030 temporary project organization, thereby creating and shaping the positive image of OYS 2030 by marketing and promoting the project in seminars and other public events to build the project’s own identity.

The project participants’ commitment to the project and the project organization’s uniqueness among other projects is key. There is a need to show distinctiveness through the project’s own signs and symbols to enhance the project identity. The project participants are proud to identify themselves with the project because the project is one of its kind, and they therefore look for new ways to make it happen. According to interviewee (D), “Getting the understanding of the uniqueness of this project has been one good thing. We try to make things different. We try to avoid cut and paste from other projects, as we understand this project is one of its kind now. Therefore, any development needs to be thought through to fit the vision and goals of OYS 2030. The project participants need to distinguish themselves with a design process and tools that will best fit the OYS 2030 project delivery process. Regarding the above, we offer proposition 5.

Proposition 5. Fragmented identity impedes the project delivery progress, and the PMO and the project director need to avoid it by ensuring oneness among project participants through project signs and symbols and a distinct working practice for the project organization.

4.1.6. Ensure cohesion among the project parties

The project parties’ sense of belonging was acknowledged as a potential feature of project identity in project delivery. The project parties felt that their contribution toward project success had been meaningfully recognized. Interviewee (F) said, “Being fully involved and recognized gives a good feeling of belonging, and that energizes you to put in your very best. That has been one of the good practices here. You have the feeling that your own certain ideas are noted and valued within the project. The parties have a warm and conducive environment that welcomes constructive ideas for successful project delivery.

Having a sense of belonging enhances the project participants’ commitment to the project organization and trust in the project leadership. As interviewee (J) stated, “The bases of this kind of project delivery method are trust and commitment; therefore, these are some key fundamentals we worked on in the beginning, and it is keeping us on. My commitment to the project keeps increasing because as the project progresses, I am getting more involved in the processes. A project party’s commitment is directly related to its involvement in the project activities and processes. In view of the above, we offer proposition 6.

Proposition 6. When project participants feel a sense of belonging to the project, it motivates them to give their very best for the success of the project. The PMO and the project director need to provide a platform that ensures project participants’ involvement to boost their commitment to the project.

4.2. Identity maintenance in the case hospital project

Since the front end of the project is the preliminary emergence phase of the project, it is important to focus on identity creation and formation during the front end of the project, which happens in a surprisingly small window of opportunity. The project identity should be maintained during the project execution period. Project identity maintenance refers to the preservation of the project’s distinctiveness and key features that facilitate successful project delivery, in turn radiating outward for the entire project duration. Visions and goals need to be clearly communicated to avoid vanishing and drifting toward something else. Consciously keeping the vision afloat need to be the project director and the project management team responsibility. The OYS 2030 project understands that creating the project identity without maintaining it would be meaningless. Therefore, identity maintenance has been thought through to preserve the project’s key features throughout the project execution period.

To maintain the OYS 2030 project’s identity, the project’s vision and goal is being communicated clearly throughout the entire project execution period, making sure that all project participants have the same target. An interviewee (J) explained: “At any stage of the project the goals and vision are reviewed to make sure we are all on the same page and keep forces.” Since OYS 2030 is intended to be the best hospital in the world, it involves the constant introduction of new technologies. It would be easy for the project vision to evolve or develop a life of its own if it was not maintained and communicated. The project vision might gradually vanish and be replaced by something else if the vision is not controlled or managed.

In a large project, the number of stakeholders can be extensive, and their importance (salience) varies between the stakeholders and during the project’s progress. It is critical that the key stakeholders are recognized and engaged in the project at the front end. Their contribution in the front end is critical; however, their main deliverable might take place later. Large projects are long-lasting, and technological progress also occurs during the project, emphasizing that a stakeholder’s ability to contribute to the project needs to be noted when planning the ways of supporting engagement. Therefore, it is important to maintain engagement as a continuous activity, not only in the front end.

In preserving the OYS 2030 project identity, there are different levels of communication models, including program, project, individual, and operational communication models to enable the flow of information, which is one of the distinctive features of the project. Large projects typically serve the interests of all stakeholders and the public and not
only the key stakeholders. It is important that communication is effective and transparent at every level. It is vital to inform people about the project progress and maintain a positive image of the project. These communication models are designed to address and circulate the information needed at each level. They also serve as a common platform for sharing information documentation regarding the project for the assigned project members within a specific level. In large projects like OYS 2030, a specific communication group has a communication plan.

Knowing that collaborative values for delivering large projects help build the project identity, meaningful measures must be used to maintain this feature, ensuring that project members feel invested in achieving the project vision and goals together and have the will to support each other. To maintain collaborative values among the OYS 2030 project members, social events are organized for project members to have the opportunity to keep bonding with each other. Such social events also provide avenues for discussing other project matters, which may not be possible in organized project meetings among project members.

OYS 2030 project organization maintains its image of identity using a uniform setup for colors, images, etc. with the same project organization logo for all project participants. To preserve cohesion among the project participants, transparency, equality, honesty, and honor to the project participants are prioritized. Thus, honesty with the project participants and honoring their commitment to the project is always ensured.

Creating a project identity seems to happen in a relatively short period of time at the project front end. It is sensitive to first impressions; stakeholders with negative attitudes may cause serious harm for the identity and turning that to a positive later may require much work. Conversely, a positive attitude may enable a foundation for innovative and productive identity. The project director and the project management team have a great responsibility and opportunity to set up and guide the project identity on the right track and then utilize identity as an intentional managerial act for better project success. According to the case project representatives, all propositions require initiation in the project front end even when resulting in a full-scale identity later.

Identity maintenance activities take place over a long period of time, especially in large projects. In maintenance, it is very easy to reach a comfortable zone and retain the identity created. The identity itself may not vanish totally but ignoring the maintenance of the propositions may lead to the identity fading and drifting toward something else. That in turn may result in losing the identity as a managerial means to steer the project stakeholders toward the best possible outcome.

Fig. 1 shows the six propositions for identity formation in the front end of the project and the corresponding identity maintenance during the project implementation. The PMO is much more involved in creating the project identity at the project front end (the initial and planning phases). Especially at the initial phase where PMO need to define the scope and the related contracts for the project. The identity maintenance which is supposedly occur in the implementation period (execution and monitoring, and closure phases) is the responsibility of the project director and the project management team.

4.3. Discussion and implications

This research enhances the understanding of project identity formation and maintenance for large project delivery (cf. Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Hietajärvi and Aaltonen, 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019) and the understanding of organizational identity formation (Gioia et al., 2010, 2013) and contributes to broader research on large project delivery, project identity and maintenance, and mainstream organizational identity research. Our findings illuminate the processes of project identity formation and maintenance of delivering large project. The findings illustrate our propositions describing the essential identity formation activities that the (PMO), the project director, and together with the project management team need to intentionally undertake in the early phases of delivering large project and the corresponding identity maintenance during the project implementation.
The concept of identity is an essential phenomenon for project organization members, as it helps them make sense of who they are as a project organization. The formation of project identity plays a vital role in project organization, while maintaining the created identity during the project execution period is equally important for project success (Ponroy et al., 2019).

A limited amount of research deals with project identity formation and maintenance in the context of large project delivery. We found only fragmented references and anecdotal evidence on project identity formation in the literature and little especially on identity maintenance (Gioia et al., 2010; Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015; Hietajärvi and Aaltonen, 2018; Ponroy et al., 2019).

Therefore, our study provides early accounts of an emergent and novel research theme that could be of both theoretical and practical interest to project management practitioners and researchers. First, we identified six project identity formation activities for large hospital projects. Second, we identified how project organizations maintain project identity by communicating the project vision and goals clearly throughout the entire project execution period, which may be a long time in large projects. Our findings are in line with Extent with Gioia et al.'s (2010) work on the identity formation of a new university in the USA and Hietajärvi and Aaltonen's (2018) study of the formation of collaborative identity in a railway project. Nevertheless, our findings provide a deeper understanding about the formation of project identity and identity maintenance in the delivery of a large project.

We fund that, irrespective of the project, the key fundamental processes for forming project identity are somewhat similar. However, due to the project delivery method, there may be slight differences. In the OYS 2030 project, articulating the project vision has been a key role in forming the project identity. This supports the work of Gioia et al. (2010) and Hietajärvi and Aaltonen (2018). Thus, the first consideration in project identity formation is that the project organization articulates the vision of the project to the key project stakeholders for better understanding of the project. When project vision is well articulated to project participants, it enhances the project success (Christenson and Walker, 2004).

Our second finding, engaging the right expert resources, indicates that building the OYS 2030 project vision called for engaging diverse experts within the healthcare fraternity and the construction industry to discuss how best the client’s needs and intentions could be made feasible. Engaging the key project stakeholders in formulating the project vision and how best it could be executed took a long time in the project development process, however, it was one of the building blocks that has shaped the OYS 2030 project to be successful. This finding is in line with Merrick (2008). Thus, getting the right mix of expert opinion on a given subject enhances the success of decision-making in an organization.

Our third finding identified communication enablement and network connectivity as one of the key factors that facilitates the formation of project identity in the delivery of a large project. The OYS 2030 project recognizes that adequate communication plays a vital role in delivering large projects and has taken a prominent position among project management practitioners over the years. This finding supports the work of Carvalhal (2013) in identifying barriers to communication and utilizing modern communication technology to address issues and enable the project’s success. This finding shows the practical solutions the OYS 2030 project has used to succeed by being strongly committed to the communication enablement and network connectivity of the project parties.

Our findings also reveal how establishing collaborative values for delivering large projects has played a vital role in the OYS 2030 identity formation. Compared to the literature regarding collaborative project management (Lahdenpera, 2012; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2015; Engebo et al., 2020), our finding attests to the fact that collaborative competence among project parties facilitates successful large project delivery. Thus, the success factor of a large project, such as the OYS 2030 project, has been the establishment of collaboration values and tools for managing large projects. This finding unveiled some collaborative tools and values of the OYS 2030 project organization that can be utilized by project-based organizations.

The distinctiveness of a project organization is one of the key features in forming project identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). This finding shows how OYS 2030 has taken a cue from this pillar for forming project identity, thus building one image, and attaining distinctiveness. Our findings reveal how this has played an important role in forming the OYS 2030 project identity. Acknowledging the value of being different among other project organizations and developing unique ways of working has been key to the project organization. This finding is in line with Haans (2018) and Goldenstein et al. (2019) and indicates the process by which project organizations build one image and attain distinctiveness when executing large projects.

A sense of belonging is significant in predicting psychological distress among project participants (Shakespeare-Finch and Daley, 2017). Our findings on establishing a sense of belonging among project parties indicate that when project participants feel a sense of belonging, it enables them to give their very best in the process of executing the project. However, when they feel that they do not belong to the project and that their views and opinions are not considered, it puts them in psychological distress, thereby de-motivating them from giving their very best for the project. Our findings reveal that establishing a sense of belonging among project parties is an important feature to consider in forming project identity in a large project. Our finding resonates with Shakespeare-Finch and Daley (2017) in their study of workplace belongingness, distress, and resilience in emergency service workers.

Our final finding provides project organizations the understanding of how project identity is maintained, thus, how the project organization needs to preserve the project key features during the project execution period. Identity maintenance is as important as the identity formation (Ponroy et al., 2019). Often, organizational identity research focuses on the aspect of forming identity and overlooks the need for organization identity maintenance. Our finding goes beyond the process of forming project identity in large project delivery; it reveals how the OYS 2030 project identity has been maintained during the project execution period. Finally, our findings reveal how project identity maintenance is warranted by the project participants who perceive the project organization positively.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to deepen and enhance the understanding of the formation process of project identity and especially identity maintenance in large hospital construction projects. A modern hospital construction project, applying collaborative contracts, was used as a case study to conduct qualitative research. Integration among distinctive and fragmented project participants with different and conflicting organizational goals is said to be a challenge, and it impedes project success. This study provides a model for project organizations to form identity at the front end of the project and shows how, project participants maintain project identity during project execution. Our findings provide six propositions of identity formation activities that the (PMO), the project director, and together with the project management team need to intentionally undertake at the front-end of delivering large project and how to maintain identity during the relatively long implementation phase of the project.

The research findings describe how project organizations utilize these activities in the project front end, particularly during the project execution period. Our view is that our findings could guide and support the development and management of high-performing, project organizations to execute large projects successfully. Moreover, our findings may allow project organizations to better commit their staff to delivering successful projects. We believe that project identity can and should be an intentional management act or even a method or tool. Thus, it will
define the fundamentals of the project organization by using the questions “who are we?” and “what do we do?” to provide a framework for integrating projects.

Our data and findings are limited to one case project, and different projects could demonstrate some differences in findings. As established in project management research, projects differ from each other and may entail different identities. Therefore, we recommend further research on large projects to compare whether these could provide more understanding to generalize our findings. However, with this research we only focused on the construction project, therefore we intend to do further research with the focus on project team identity for the organizational change process.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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