

Maintaining an Imprint Beyond the Founding Phase: The Role of Organizational Members

This study explores the role of organizational members in new venture imprinting. More specifically, we extend existing theorizing about what holds an imprint in place as a venture grows by focusing on the role of organizational members in the maintenance of the imprint. We do this through an ethnographic study of a social venture where the entrepreneurs left soon after founding. Our model shows how an imprint is maintained through an ongoing, two-way interaction between individual members and the organization. We find that the initial imprint of the venture attracts people with specific social identities who then actively work to maintain the imprint that attracted them to the organization in the first place. We analyse how the resulting bottom-up involvement of organizational members impacts on the imprint through three processes: *projecting*, *sharing* and *contextualizing*.

Keywords: Imprinting, organizational identification, social identity, social ventures, ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

Imprinting theory seeks to explain the stamp that founders leave on the new organizations they create (Boeker, 1989; Siggelkow, 2001; Stinchcombe, 1965). According to this theory, the initial formation of an imprint is driven by the actions of founders in interaction with the founding context (Johnson, 2007). The founders act as carriers, bringing elements of the founding context into new ventures and making important decisions about which distinctive characteristics new ventures adopt from their environment (Ellis, Aharonson, Drori and Shapira, 2017; Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). For instance, founders choose organizational forms and make key strategic decisions that shape new ventures early on (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Perkmann and Spicer, 2014). In addition, by selecting and combining existing environmental elements at founding, founders construct a venture's identity (Gioia, Price, Hamilton and Thomas, 2010), its organizational values, routines, structures (Johnson, 2007; Powell and Sandholtz, 2012), and the organizational scripts which ultimately lead to legitimacy building (Drori, Honig and Sheaffer, 2009).

While existing theory explains both the role and importance of founder-led imprinting in new venture formation, and while scholars have shown that founders' initial imprints have lasting effects on new ventures, what is not as well understood are the mechanisms underlying the *second phase* of imprinting: that is, how a venture's initial imprint is transmitted and maintained over time (Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). Scholars have offered several explanations for the "stickiness" of an imprint including inertial forces and path dependency (Ellis et al., 2017; Simsek, Fox and Heavey, 2015), yet while these perspectives provide important insights into the persistence of organizational imprints, they say little about the mechanisms underlying this process. In particular, they say little about the role of organizational members in maintaining the imprint (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013), despite the intuitive appeal of the argument that organizational members must play an important role in the maintenance of an imprint as the organization grows larger. This is an important omission as focusing on organizational members has the potential to enrich our understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the continued effect of an initial imprint over an organization's life cycle (Simsek et al.,

2015). In this study, we therefore ask: *What is the role of organizational members in transmitting an organizational imprint over time?*

Our findings are based on an ethnographic study of a social venture founded in 2010 in a major European city. We chose this research setting because it was a transparent case of imprinting that revealed the role of organizational members in a venture's early imprinting and its maintenance over time (Eisenhardt, 1989). We found that our venture followed a familiar pattern. First, the founders established a strong initial imprint at founding which determined the venture's character as a purpose-driven organization whose primary objective went beyond operating profitably (Hollensbe, Wookey, Hickey, and George, 2014). The initial imprint incorporated commercial objectives of generating money to be self-sustainable, and simultaneously the objective of a movement to contribute to social and environmental causes (King, 2008). This determined the venture's unique character as a purpose-driven "social" venture, and attracted individuals who shared the same views and interests to join. Consequently, organizational members held strong opinions about the venture's organizational objectives, its strategy and identity, and exerted a continued effect on the imprint so that it would keep reflecting the purpose of the venture. Second, the founders left the venture early on which resulted in limited ongoing managerial influence on the imprinting process. Taken together, the particularities of the venture allowed us to develop significant new insights into how organizational members exert a bottom-up effect on the maintenance and transmission of the initial imprint.

In analysing our data, we focused on the activities of organizational members and how these activities lead to the transmission of the venture's imprint beyond the founder-led phase. Our analysis shows how the initial imprint is maintained through a two-way interaction between the collective, organizational level and the organizational members' actions at an individual level. More specifically, we find that the founders create the first imprint by determining the venture's boundaries, objectives and its early form, which attracts organizational members based on a perceived congruence between their own social identities and the venture's imprint. As such, the process model presented here outlines how the identification of organizational members and their social identities are the mechanisms that provide an analytical link between the early imprint of the venture and the role of

members in its subsequent persistence. Our model explains how the self-selection of organizational members results in their individual identities being translated to the collective organizational level through three processes which we term *projecting*, *sharing*, and *contextualizing*. In addition, we identify how endogenous and exogenous sources of friction affect the bottom-up processes leading to the transmission of the initial imprint, and how these frictions are mitigated and overcome by organizational members.

In developing our arguments, our study makes three contributions to the literature on imprinting. First, our study adds to the imprinting literature by unpacking the second phase of the imprinting process, i.e. how an imprint is held in place beyond the founding phase. In contrast to existing literature that has taken a passive approach to explaining the enduring effect of early imprints, we outline how bottom-up forces are fundamental in transmitting and maintaining the initial organizational imprint. In doing so, we connect the literature on imprinting with the literature on individual identity and organizational identification. We highlight the role of social identity and social identification as key mechanisms in explaining the stickiness of an organizational imprint over time. While studies have shown how founders' social identities influence key strategic decisions (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Powell and Baker, 2014), we show how organizational members, in addition to the founders, impact an organization through actions shaped by their social identities. More specifically, our findings shed light on how social identification, resulting from a perceived congruence between one's social identity and the venture's initial imprint, leads to a continued reinforcement of the initial imprint as set by the founding team.

Second, we extend the imprinting literature by bridging the organizational and individual levels of analysis and by taking a dynamic perspective to the imprinting process. Our analysis suggests how the maintenance of the founders' imprint results from a cyclical, two-way interaction between the organization and the individual. Hence, in contrast to the first phase of imprinting which occurs during a specific time-frame, the second phase of imprinting unfolds as an iterative process that continues over time. As such, we show the importance of taking time into account for studying

ventures, and hence we respond to calls for studying entrepreneurship and the ventures that result from it as a journey that transpires over time (McMullen and Dimov, 2013).

Finally, we advance the literature on imprinting by focusing on a social venture with multiple organizational objectives. Due to the ongoing balancing act between social, environmental and commercial objectives, and the lack of institutional environment for social ventures (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Dimitriadis, Lee, Ramarajan and Battilana, 2017), our findings reveal that there are two sources of friction which hamper the continued persistence of the initial imprint. We further find how these frictions are subsequently resolved by the organizational members, and how it is important to take the difference between imprinted identity and structural components into account.

THEORY

Imprinting theory offers a potential explanation for the puzzle of how the founding context influences organizations throughout subsequent stages in their life cycle. Stinchcombe (1965) first drew attention to this notion of imprinting in order to explain how new organizations are imprinted with the characteristics of their environment at founding. Imprinting research identified that technological, social and economic conditions such as initial resource constraints shape initial organizational practices, capabilities and inter organizational networks (Carroll and Hannan, 1989; Marquis, 2003), and that nascent organizations draw upon existing organizational templates (Johnson, 2007) and incorporate social and political arrangements into their organizational design (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013).

While the imprinting effect of the environment has been the initial focus of most imprinting studies, some of the most compelling evidence of imprinting concerns the fundamental effect of founders on the future trajectory of organizations. Founders select and imprint organizations with distinctive elements from the environment (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990; Ellis et al., 2017; Johnson, 2007) and the organizational blueprints, patterns and structures set by founders have a lasting effect, even long after founders are gone (Baron, Hannan and Burton, 1999; Siggelkow, 2001; Tzabbar and Margolis, 2017). Studies have shown that in imprinting new organizations and ventures, founders rely

on their previous experiences (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Perkmann and Spicer, 2014), their professional affiliations (Glynn, 2000), and their personal goals, identities and preferences (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

The various organizational dimensions on which founders and founding teams have an imprinting effect has been the subject of considerable research in the organizational and entrepreneurship literatures (Simsek et al., 2015). Founders imprint an organization's culture by shaping its core norms, identity and legitimacy (Drori et al., 2014; Goia et al., 2010) and impact on cognitions by influencing the content and range of strategic choices (Ellis et al., 2017; Fauchart and Gruber, 2011). In addition, founders are known to have a determining effect on initial organizational forms and structures (Johnson, 2007; Perkmann and Spicer, 2014), for instance by selecting and recombining existing environmental elements into new organizations (Bryant, 2012; Powell and Sandholtz, 2012).

Yet, while a central tenet of imprinting theory is that new organizations are stamped by the founding context and the founding team, an equally important aspect of the imprinting hypothesis pertains to how initial characteristics of organizations shaped during founding have an enduring and persistent effect within organizations (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Stinchcombe, 1965). The idea of imprinting thus combines two phases: first, the phase during which founders and founding conditions shape an imprint for a new organization in the founding process; and second, the phase during which this initial imprint is reproduced beyond the formation of the imprint during the founding process (Hannan, Burton and Baron, 1996; Johnson, 2007).

In terms of how an imprint is maintained beyond founding, scholars have offered several explanations for the "stickiness" and enduring influence of initial imprints (Boeker, 1989). Stinchcombe (1965) originally proposed three mechanisms that explain the persistence of an imprint: lack of competing alternatives; continuing efficiency of imprinted elements; and vested interests and institutionalization. The majority of subsequent studies on the longevity of an organizational imprint has focused specifically on inertia and path dependency as mechanisms that explain the lasting effect of an initial imprint.

First, research on inertial forces has shown how, over time, embedded routines, norms and structures become difficult to change (Hannan and Freeman, 1984), and how organizational imprints persist because they become taken for granted and infused with value (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Marquis, 2003). Inertial forces can stem from the development of sets of shared beliefs or collective cognitive frames which become institutionalized and resistant to change. Managers' collective cognitive frames are also difficult to change because they represent the underlying *raison d'être* of an organization (Kogut and Zander, 1992) and are embedded in the organization's incentive structures, business model and routines (Henderson and Clark, 1990; Kaplan and Henderson, 2005; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000).

Second, studies on path-dependency have suggested that organizational attributes, structures and behaviour are self-reinforced over time (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2003). Scholars in this tradition have demonstrated that founders' initial organizational blueprints have a long-lasting effect on a firm's managerial and administrative intensity over time (Baron et al., 1999) and that human capital endowments of founders influence the organizational paths chosen (Gruber, 2010). According to Marquis (2003), initial founding conditions even have an effect beyond the organization, in that inter-organizational network structures, imprinted at founding, persist over time through self-reinforcement and emulation.

While these perspectives thus provide insight into why an initial imprint persists over time, the suggested mechanisms of inertia and path dependency offer a passive explanation for the longevity of an imprint. Imprints stay in place based on various organizational mechanisms that work without intentional effort of actors. In other words, these perspectives share an apparent presumption that, in understanding the longevity of an initial imprint, it is unnecessary to pay much attention to the role of individual and collective agency (Ellis et al., 2017; Simsek et al., 2015). Hence, whereas we know that the founder-agent is central to the first phase of imprinting, it remains unclear how agency affects the second phase of the imprinting process (Johnson, 2007; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013). With the exception of a few studies that adopt an agency-based perspective to look at the imprinting process (Ellis et al., 2017; Johnson, 2007), we still lack an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms by

which an organizational imprint is actively maintained over time by the purposeful actions of agents (Simsek et al., 2015). The objective of this study therefore, is to adopt an agency-based framework to expand insights into the mechanisms through which an imprint established at founding is transmitted and maintained beyond the founding phase and beyond the founders' influence.

METHODS

Our exploration of the imprinting process is based on an ethnographic study of True Planet Supermarket (TPS), a pseudonym for a social venture and alternative supermarket in a major European city. We chose a qualitative study as our goal was to construct insights into a phenomenon not well explained by existing literature – in this case, the role of organizational members in maintaining an organizational imprint beyond the initial founding phase. The choice of an ethnographic study was motivated by the fact that we recognized that close involvement with the research setting was necessary in order to explore the phenomenon and that relying solely on traditional qualitative methods such as interviews or survey data would have led to meagre results (Watson, 2011). Ethnography draws upon the writer's close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting (Van Maanen, 2011). The ethnographic approach thus enabled us to relate our insights from observations and interviews about the involvement of individual members to the cultural framework of the organization within which they occurred.

Research Setting

TPS is a for-profit food cooperative that engages with the local community and provides locally sourced food. Its vision is to create a commercially sustainable social venture that achieves its growth and profitability targets while operating within values based on community development and cohesion. The key concept is to offer an alternative food buying network, by connecting an urban community with the local farming community. TPS first opened its doors to the public in May 2010. Since then, TPS has managed to survive in the market as a hybrid social business; one that delivers a product and a service, but also addresses the social needs of local communities. TPS provides a unique example of an organization using an alternative model that is not primarily based on economic

profitability, yet is able to survive independently in an aggressive, competitive retail environment in an urban setting.

The choice for this research setting was motivated by the fact that TPS represents a unique case of imprinting (Siggelkow, 2007). This is useful, since the dynamics we are interested in theorizing about are more apparent than they would be in other settings (Eisenhardt, 1989) and this enabled us to investigate how the venture's imprint was transmitted over time and the role organizational members played in this. There are two reasons why we believe TPS is a "transparent example" of imprinting.

First, the founders established the venture's basic imprint as a purpose-driven "social venture". The TV documentary that described the founding process was broadcasted on television, and resulted in widespread publicity about this venture and its organizational objectives. As a social venture, the aim was to solve environmental and societal issues by combining non-profit principles and practices with classic, profit-oriented business methods (Mair and Marti, 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). TPS's first imprint thus included values of economic profitability with values of social and environmental sustainability. This is important as the social and environmental values that underpin purpose-driven social ventures are instrumental as non-pecuniary incentives to mobilize and motivate people (Doherty, Haugh and Lyon, 2014; Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern, 2006). The values and social goals that formed its unique character as a purpose-driven "social" venture were thus incentivizing factors for organizational members to join. As a result, the people who joined had strong beliefs about how these social, environmental and economic values were supposed to be reflected in the venture's imprint. Hence, the organizational members exerted a continued, bottom-up influence on the venture's imprint that made their role in the maintenance of the imprint easier to study.

Second, since the three founders who set up TPS left early on in the venture's life, there was only limited influence of the founders on the imprint of the venture beyond the founding phase. The initial imprint they established included - among others - that TPS functioned as a cooperative, and that there was a flat hierarchical structure, providing equal decision-making rights and ownership to each of the organization's members. As a result, there was not much top-down influence during, but especially after, the founding phase on the development of the venture's imprint. Hence, the role of bottom-up

forces in the further maintenance of the venture's imprint could be more easily isolated. Taken together, these factors made TPS an excellent setting to study how agency played a role in the maintenance of the early imprint beyond the influence of the founding team.

Data Collection

We collected data on an individual as well as an organizational level and used several techniques appropriate for an ethnographic study in order to get deeply involved in the research setting (Van Maanen, 2011): (1) participant observation, (2) semi-structured one-on-one interviews and (3) archival documentation. We relied on the field notes and semi-structured interviews as the main source of data to inform us about the organizational imprint at the moment of studying the venture, with the archival documentation serving as the main source of data to inform us about how the initial organizational imprint was established. In addition to that, the archival data also allowed us to triangulate and provided a supplementary source for understanding actions and representations to various constituencies, both internally and externally. An overview of data sources can be found in the Table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Participant Observation. One of the authors participated in TPS for 12 months. She started to work as a volunteer and on average spent about two days a week there, normally for about 4 hours a day. During this period, she was a traditional participant observer. She spent time in different parts of the organization, carrying out different tasks and roles. She attended meetings that were organized for organizational members, as well as management meetings. The study was conducted openly, with the organizational members and the management aware of the nature and purpose of the research. During her participation, she kept a diary of events in which she recorded her thoughts about the operations of the organization, details of informal conversations with organizational members, and other general observations. Hence, she took detailed field notes that not only captured those items that were relevant for the research question, but also acquired useful information which helped to understand the culture and structure of the social venture and the individuals participating in it. In 2015, she even took over

the role of Head of Membership, and was involved for 6 months in organizing and leading meetings for volunteers.

Semi-structured Interviews. In addition to the observational data, the principal investigator conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with key informants including volunteers, organizational members, founders, and the management team. The interviews usually lasted between one hour and one hour and a half, and were tape recorded and transcribed. This process produced 260 double-spaced pages of interview transcriptions.

Archival Data. We supplemented the observational data and interview data with archival data on TPS' history, policies, strategy, mission and values. We collected electronic, paper, and video representations and descriptions of the organization to insiders and outsiders. Some of this information was publicly available, such as the newsletter sent out to members, while some other documentation such as internal reports and communications was provided by the manager. Another important source of information was a book, published in 2012, written by one of the founders in which he described the start-up process of TPS and the challenges they encountered in the early days. Other valuable sources of data were company presentations by the founders and the TV documentary mentioned above detailing the start-up phase of the venture in four episodes.

Data Analysis

We analysed the data as we collected it and iterated back and forth between the data, emerging arguments, and theory. During the analysis, we followed a grounded theory staged approach consisting of three different steps (Gioia et al., 2010; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

In step one, we aimed to come to an understanding of the ambiguous data we had collected and to discover patterns in the data collected. In order to avoid premature analytical bias, we looked at the broader set of data to immerse ourselves into the reality of the organization and its history. Based on field notes, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and the book, we constructed an event history database and developed an understanding of the setting, the strategic issues the venture had been facing and the perceptions and motivations of people within the organization.

In the second step, we used open coding or in-vivo coding to explore patterns in the data and identify the issues that were relevant to how individual members perceived the venture (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Our analysis of the interviews, conversations, and insights from the field revealed the organizational features that played a crucial role for individuals. We identified that, after the founding team had left, members actively contributed to maintaining the imprint of these features.

We then shifted our focus to a dialogue between data and theory. While existing literature points to the importance of founders, their previous experiences (Johnson, 2007; Perkmann and Spicer, 2014) and the institutional context (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013) in the imprinting process of an emerging venture, there is little insight into how the features that are stamped onto new ventures are maintained over time. Since, in the case under study, the founders had all left after one year, other forces could clearly be seen that functioned to maintain the initial imprint. We identified that individual (social) identity elements of organizational members played a crucial role in the imprinting of the venture beyond its founding phase. As such, we went back to the literature describing the influence of individual's identities and connected with individual identity theory. The existing management literature describes how founders influence ventures through their individual role and social identities (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Powell and Baker, 2014). In line with, and adding to this research stream, we found how organizational members – other than the three founders – impacted on the second phase of the imprinting process through their specific social identities.

In the third step, we used second order or axial coding to look for relationships between the initial codes to convert them into higher order categories. We identified the different steps through which the organizational members played a role in the imprinting process of the venture after the founding team had left. We coded relations between the different first order themes and as such developed a model describing the imprinting process of the venture. The themes “goals and vision of founders” and “referencing to peer organizations” provide the basis for the initial imprint of the social venture as it is formed by the founding team. The conceptual themes “identify with imprinted features” and “interpret organizational objectives” describe how organizational members socially identified with the venture, based upon their individual social identity, and projected these onto the organization. Our analysis of

the data also shows how individuals then started to share these individual projections. TPS was perceived to be a “platform for advocacy” and a “platform for social interaction”. Moreover, the venture was characterized by providing a “flexible context for resource allocation”. These three conceptual themes describe how the organizational members connected individual projections of their own social identity elements to shared understandings of the venture. Doing so, individual members attempted to lock others in proposed roles and solutions and to decide on courses of action. Finally, by “involving organizational members in crafting policy and strategy” and letting them “co-construct the organizational image”, organizational characteristics and features became attributed and imprinted onto the organization as it was. The themes projecting, sharing and contextualizing occurred in stages. Yet despite this cyclical process, friction emerged from endogenous and exogenous sources. These frictions impacted on the bottom-up reinforcement of the organizational imprint. Figure 1 below represents the data structure.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

FINDINGS

First, we confirm that the imprinting of the venture happened in two phases. The first phase occurred during founding, when the founders imprinted the venture with elements from the environment over a delimited period of time. The second phase was an ongoing process that evolved and developed over time and that we believe continues indefinitely following the founding phase. Second, we find that bottom-up forces played a crucial role in this second phase of the imprinting process. From our data, it is clear that organizational members impacted on how TPS’ imprint was maintained beyond the founding phase. Figure 2 represents the conceptual model of the ongoing interaction between the imprint of the venture on an organizational level, and the individual organizational members.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

In the following sections, we unpack how this two-way interaction between the imprint on the organizational level and the identity of organizational members played out. The model in Figure 3

represents the cyclical process whereby the initial imprint that was inspired by the founders was maintained by the organizational members over time.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Initial Imprint

The three founders of TPS initially developed an imprint for the social venture that combined elements of a traditional for-profit supermarket, a cooperative, and a social movement. The first imprint of TPS was based on the goals and vision of three founders. TPS was set up as a “social venture”, but the concept was not clearly defined and the specificities of being a social venture were vague. Through referencing peer organizations, the boundaries of the venture were delineated in order to structure people’s mind-sets, expectations and perceptions of TPS.

Goals and Vision of Founders. TPS was launched by a team of three founders who didn’t know each other before, but who joined forces to launch the venture. The primary purpose of the founding team of TPS was “to be different and alternative”. They wanted to make a statement in an urban society and get a movement going against the main supermarket chains that dominate and control the market (King, 2008). Yet each of the founders emphasized different aspects of the venture in terms of its constituting social, environmental and economic aspects:

“We all had the same dream, but we all had different facets of that dream and different ways of seeing that dream. For David it was about the political sphere, this will change politics and community-social stuff. For Arthur it was about bringing healthy food into a community and for me this was a statement that you can open a commercial enterprise on a high street and be successful. We all saw it slightly differently, but it all worked together.” (Interview with one of the founders)

Despite these different individual motivations however, they had an overall, common vision to create a sustainable and alternative social supermarket. Hence, TPS was the embodiment of a utopian idea of an alternative supermarket in the form of a social venture. The social surplus argument and the

cooperative model were the spine of the organization. The focus was on the ethic, the creation of something novel, alternative and non-conventional and on engaging a community of people around it, as expressed by one of the founders:

“We were interested in making statements as opposed to actually creating utility. If we were interested in shop keeping for 25 years we would have started in a council estate in Brixton. As much as it would be more financially viable to take out a corner shop somewhere in Brixton it was not necessarily going to generate the ideological return as well as any kind of momentum. In the first instance, we were interested in putting an idea out there. We were more interested in getting an ethic going, not so much in running a business. It was more a massively intense experience of getting this ethic right.”

Despite the focus being on the “ethic”, the commercial and operational aspects of the venture were equally important. TPS was above all also a shop that had rates, rent, staff and suppliers to pay and hence needed skills and resources to turn it into a viable and self-sustainable business. The three founders complemented each other as a team in reconciling these various objectives into one organization, as one of the founders explained how “Arthur was the sort of guardian of the ethos, Kate was the guardian of the nuts and bolts operations of running a shop, the basic stuff of the operations, I was kind of more of a context guy and initial external finance.”

Nonetheless, the notion of TPS being a “social venture” was broadly defined without clearly delineated boundaries. The social component of TPS incorporated a variety of concepts and ideas. This first imprint of the venture appealed to a variety of people who were interested in a wide array of social and environmental causes such as food sustainability, waste management, alternative ways of running a business, and urban development through the engagement of local communities. By referencing peer organizations, differences and similarities were highlighted, and it became clearer what TPS was about, and what it was not.

Referencing to Peer Organizations. The idea behind TPS was initially inspired in part by the Park Slope Food Cooperative in Brooklyn, New York – a very successful members-only store that had been founded in 1973 and had contributed significantly to the economic and social development of the neighbourhood. However, the model was adapted as one of the founders explained:

“[We] took Park Slope Food coop as an example, but adapted the model. Because we were based in England and in England they are very worried about social inclusion, we had to do things differently in order to attract grants. We didn’t want to exclude anyone and took a different approach by making the supermarket open to everyone. So the model was: local shop, open to anyone, and as a member you were privileged.”

In addition to positive referencing to peer organizations to point out similarities, the founders shaped the unique character of TPS by explicitly pointing out the differences with other stores. Hence negative referencing to traditional supermarket chains and retail stores was used to differentiate and highlight the unique character of TPS as the following extract exemplifies:

“At TPS we think of ourselves as a convenience store with a difference: a retail outlet whose business is ethics and whose customers are members of a community” (Publication, 2012).

Although the founders each stressed different aspects of the social character of the venture, the common narrative was that “in ordinary stores shopping had become a sort of industrial experience that is little customized. Our motivation was to give customers a unique relationship with a grocery store, a unique shopping experience” (interview with one of the founders).

The initial imprint of TPS was thus based on the founding team’s vision, and the boundaries of the venture and its imprint were clarified through referencing to peer organizations. In identifying the several components which constituted this organizational imprint, we distinguished between identity components, which referred to “who we are”, and structural components, which referred to “how we do things”. Figure 4 depicts the main components of this initial imprint.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

However, the three founders all left within one year after start-up and hence, their influence on developing and maintaining the imprinted identity and structural components necessarily ended after their exit from the organization. By this point, the founders intended the venture to be independent and self-sustaining. It was set up to have its own life, as one of the founders described:

“TPS was set up to run by its community, it wasn’t set up to be Kate’s supermarket. It started to take a different life and I started to get internal conflict. And it is wrong for me to say this has gone wrong of right, it just went different, whatever different is. That was the whole enjoyment...It was the right time for me to leave, because I knew there were people who would take it to the next level.”

One of the other founders explained how for him it was about creating new combinations of things and people, rather than running a supermarket as such:

“The thing had its own life and seemed to be moderately sustainable and the pleasure and joy, my involvement in any of those enterprises is to shape it, help design it, make it happen, get the right people together to make it happen. For it all kind of fly. Once it’s flying it will become more sustainable if the people who are running it can make it work. They don’t really need me. I’m not interested in running a chain of supermarkets. I’m interested in making new combinations of things and people and new life experiences happen for people and for economies.”

This implied that after the founders had left, the venture and its imprint were handed over to the organizational members. Studying this venture thus enabled us to focus specifically on how the second phase of the imprinting process unfolded. In other words, the process through which the imprint was maintained beyond the founding phase became apparent because of the early absence of the founding team. We found that a central aspect of this process was that people joined the venture because they socially identified with the venture and the imprint it portrayed based on a perceived

overlap between this imprint and their own social identity. Therefore, we connected back to *social identity theory* which allows for an assessment of one's self and defines a social identity as the construction of one's self-concept based on personal relations with others, or groups and organizations they belong to (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Foreman and Whetten, 2002). Social identity theory proved to be of importance in studying TPS because it explains how social identification leads individuals to act in ways that confirm their identity (Hogg and Terry, 2000). We found that people joined the venture for a variety of reasons, and that the organizational members differed in their perception of how the imprint of the venture was supposed to reflect its "social" character. In the following paragraphs, we unpack the process by which the imprint was maintained beyond the founding phase, through bottom-up involvement of organizational members. The process through which this happened consisted of three steps: projecting, sharing and contextualizing.

Projecting

The social and environmental aspects of the venture were crucial factors that drew people's attention, and the image TPS portrayed appealed to individuals with specific interests and self-concepts. The venture was seen as a platform to project individual motivations and interests onto, and these were used as a perceptual lens to interpret the organization's objectives as a social venture. TPS attracted people with a certain identity orientation, who were not necessarily driven by self-interest, but were interested in creating benefits for others, the community or society as a whole. Our analysis shows that the people who joined thus had a strong sense of *social identity*, defining their self-concept based on personal relations with the local community, the venture, or society at large. Hence, rather than the specific role they could take on within the venture, it was the confirmation of their social identity derived from belonging to TPS that often incentivized individuals to become a member of the organization and mobilize their effort. However, depending on individual social motivations - which partly constitute people's social identity - the organizational members differed in which social and environmental aspects they identified with, and expected to see reflected on an organizational level. One of the early employees described how "it was a broad church. There were many people here with their own agendas." The individual social self-conception of people thus formed the basis for the

specific aspects of the initial imprint organizational members focused on, and for how they maintained the imprint of TPS after the founding team had left the venture.

Identify with Imprinted Features. The widespread publicity about this organization, and particularly the TV documentary about the venture's founding process, resulted in a large number of people wanting to join the organization. The social, environmental and non-conventional aspects that were emphasized in the initial imprint attracted individuals who were driven by a wide variety of social motives. Depending on their individual social motivations, people identified with different features of the venture's imprint. We categorized the social motivations that formed the basis for people's social identification into three groups: *communitarian motivation*, *political activism* and *environmental motivation*. These categories are non-exclusive and the social motivations of most organizational members could be attributed to more than one category.

First, people driven by a communitarian motivation identified with features referring to (1) the creation of a community around TPS as an organization or (2) the contribution to and engagement with the local community, thereby referring to the street, the area or even London.

“She (refers to one of founders) said we’re going to open a supermarket for the people. And instantly I was interested because that’s something I am very passionate about, local communities and doing something within the community.”
(Interview with member)

Second, those driven by political activism were interested in the cooperative model, giving equal decision rights and ownership to all of its members.

“There were many people here with their own agendas. I’m here more because of a political conviction, because I’m interested in the community and the cooperative. These were the strong points. If we can do something for the environment I have sympathy for that but it’s not why I was attracted.” *(Interview with member)*

Finally, people driven by the environmental cause, stressed the importance of features referring to food sustainability, the engagement with local farmers and waste management.

“What attracted me was the idea that it was battling food waste. I think the best thing we did was chefs making meals out of stuff that was beyond its selling point. I liked the idea we were paying attention to food miles and that one of our principles was to do no food that had air-miles, and the idea that the food has to be local.” (Interview with chairman)

As a result of the organizational members identifying with certain imprinted features, they used their personal social motivations as a perceptual lens to define the overall objectives of the venture.

Interpret Organizational Objectives. Based on their social motivations – which formed part of their social identity – the organizational members decided on the relative importance of TPS’s constituting social, environmental and economic aspects, values and objectives. A central part of the initial imprint was the openness for people to act according to what they believed to be in line with what fit the definition of a social venture, as one of the founders recalls: “In the beginning people could do whatever they wanted, it was totally chaotic, but it was great and it was fun.”

For instance, people used their individual motivations as a perceptual lens to decide which products fit the venture’s nature, and which market segments it should ideally serve. In the interviews conducted, people referred to constant debates on whether, for instance, selling cigarettes fit the organization’s identity as a social venture:

“Ethically we did not want to be an organization that sold things that cause cancer. But the reality is that if you want to run a convenience store with cash to be sustainable, sometimes you need to compromise and be pragmatic. That is one of the difficulties. There were some great aims to start with but pragmatism meant if you want to keep this thing going, bring in tobacco and alcohol. It is still sad but yes. As a commercial organization, it was always struggling.”

As such, the organizational members projected their individual social motivations onto the venture. The projecting of these individual motivations happened on a cognitive and intra-subjective level, i.e. within the self. The organizational members used their social identity and motivation as a lens to interpret the venture's imprint. Based on this, people focused on certain facets of the organizational imprint so that it would align with their individual social identity and motivations, and carried this forward. In a second phase, this intra-subjective projecting converted in an inter-subjective understanding among the organizational members. Ideally, this *sharing* phase set in once there would be sufficient overlap between intra-subjective projections and the organizational imprint. Before elaborating on how the sharing phase succeeded the projecting phase, we outline below how there were endogenous sources of friction that affected the transition from projecting to sharing.

Endogenous Sources of Friction. On some occasions, there was a mismatch between the organizational imprint and the projections of individual members. In order for the sharing phase to commence, these endogenous sources of frictions needed to be resolved first. This happened through recurrent referencing to the initial imprint, specifically to the imprinted identity components. Since TPS was a social venture, there was an ongoing balancing act between the business, social, and environmental sides of the imprint. While the initial imprint incorporated business, social and environmental elements, there were members who joined with a single focus, emphasizing either the business, social, or environmental aspect. Moreover, depending on their own social identity, people varied in the weight they attached to the political component of the venture, the environmental mission it represented, or its community aspects. This led to ongoing discussions about the venture's focus and its objectives. As one of the interviewees described:

“they started to talk about the fact they didn't know who they were. They couldn't make a decision because they lost focus, lost direction...I went into a place that was a cooperative that had no common goal, a common focus, a shared vision. We all come in with different agenda's, but the common values were not reiterated enough...several people had very disparate ideas about the whole purpose and why they were there.”

While the multiplicity of the venture was part of its initial imprint, sometimes people's projections would diverge too far from the original imprint. This usually led to resistance among other organizational members. The following quote exemplifies how, according to some organizational members, the treasurer focused too much on the business side of the venture, and how others were reluctant to this:

“TPS is a business and numbers don't have emotions. In my understanding, the number 1 principle was member involvement. But how do you measure member participation? I said ok if this is core to TPS then we should be able to measure it to see if it really works. People were reluctant to this, they didn't want it to be measured.” (interview with treasurer)

Another organizational member in turn explained how the treasurer came in with a background in finance and accounting. While she admitted that this was necessary for the supermarket to run and be self-sustainable, she also told how this clashed with other organizational members, especially those who had been there from the start when the initial imprint was installed by the founding team:

“He tries to bring everything down to numbers and is very financially focused. This is needed because otherwise TPS would probably not be running anymore. However, he tries to control everything. He is very opinionated and pushes his view through in everything. This leads to conflict and friction among the other members and employees, especially the ones who have been there from scratch.”

These kinds of disagreements were commonplace and show how the organizational members who had been there from the start carried forward and maintained the initial imprint. We find that these endogenous frictions were resolved through a reinforcement of the original organizational imprint as set out by the founders. More specifically, organizational members would refer back to the identity components of the initial imprint for an agreement to be reached. This included the fact that TPS was a convenience store with a difference - “for the people and by the people”. In addition, the imprinted identity components also comprised the idea of an alternative food buying network, links with

independent food suppliers, and an organizational form which combined both for-profit and non-profit elements.

For instance, on one occasion one of the members showed the principal ethnographer a new list of rules and procedures she needed to follow when working in the kitchen on site. She told how she refused to sign this off because “TPS is for the people, by the people”. When the ethnographer asked whether these rules wouldn’t help to avoid chaos and control costs, the member replied that “before, there was no chaos. I knew exactly what I was doing. They are the ones who don’t understand, so it is their problem. The rules are not to be invented and set by one guy only here in TPS.” This exemplifies how organizational members reacted against what was not in line with the venture’s imprinted features, and how they referred back to the initial identity components imprinted on TPS. Specifically, in this example, the member explicitly recalls how the venture was meant to be *by the people*, an imprinted identity component as shown in figure 4. In some occasions however, if no agreement would be reached, individuals would leave the venture because of a continued mismatch between their own projections and the venture’s imprint. During the study of this venture, the ethnographer noted down several occasions on which people would quit their involvement with TPS because their projections wouldn’t match the overall imprint of the venture anymore.

In the face of sufficient congruence between individuals’ own identity and the venture’s imprint however, the second phase of the bottom-up imprinting process set in.

Sharing

The organizational members’ actions and interactions enabled a shared understanding of the venture’s imprint to emerge. Through sharing mechanisms, the intra-subjective and cognitive understanding of the venture was converted into an intersubjective and shared understanding among the organizational members. Sharing happened on a cognitive as well as on an action level and occurred through three mechanisms. The perception of TPS as a platform for advocacy and for social interaction contributed to the development of a shared understanding and development of the venture’s characterizing attributes which together constituted its imprint. In addition, a flexible context was created for

resource allocation, meaning that the organizational members were involved in the choice of inputs and outputs. Since the organizational members were allowed to co-allocate resources and devote their own time based their individual social motivations, they were able to share their perception and understanding of the imprint based on their own social motivations.

TPS as Platform for Advocacy. The organizational members used the venture as a platform to convince or influence others in their opinions and activities, based on their own social identities and social convictions. A context was created wherein there was space for individual members to voice opinions, share with others, and lock others into proposed roles and solutions. Members met on a monthly basis to discuss organizational issues, and there were debates to decide on the core organizational values. The quote below exemplifies how TPS was seen by its organizational members as a platform to advocate about personal beliefs and motivations:

“I’m passionate about things like food waste, about how do I involve the community because that gives me a chance to think about how do I bring people in. It gives me a chance to think of how do I then move on from these things to healthy eating...In my case, it is more about how can I help people or can I share what I see about things with others and can those people make it a bigger circle so that more people will come to know about it and come to do it. That is the way I see it... in other words, more and more people will subscribe to it. More people will start thinking about food waste and be serious about it, about shopping locally, about helping the community to survive.” (Interview with member)

TPS as Platform for Social Interaction. In addition to the fact that the venture was seen as a platform for advocacy, one of the core pillars of TPS was that it was “for the people, by the people”. It was a place for interaction that brought a variety of people together from different backgrounds, ages and with different interests. The venture was perceived to be a place where you could interact with people who you would not normally meet, as one of the organizational members explains:

“Last week I went in and the green party leader was doing her shift. I said what are you doing here? So we were stacking shelves and talking about politics, and I thought wow this is great, how else would I get to meet her and have this experience.”

The sense of community that followed from the interaction between organizational members and customers led to a strong sense of identification with the venture. One of the organizational members described how “being part of TPS feels like being part of a big family, a community of shared values”. This enabled the venture to leverage on its human resources, as people would go beyond their organizational responsibilities and contribute to the success and survival of TPS by investing time, and even money, in the organization:

“From time to time we had a crisis, and then we would mobilize people. We got the legacy of people. For instance, there was this woman who gave 20.000 pound that she inherited from her mother to TPS because she loved it so much.”

(Interview with one of the founders)

The emphasis on the interaction aspect of the venture and on the perception of TPS as a platform for advocacy led organizational members to convert their intra-subjective understanding into a shared understanding on a cognitive level.

Create Flexible Context for Resource Allocation. As well as the sharing mechanisms that occurred on a cognitive level, we identified that sharing also took place at an action level. This happened through the involvement of organizational members in the choice for resources, the allocation of resources, and the types of products and services offered. For instance, the organizational members had the ability and flexibility to creatively use the resources and physical space provided. In addition, people were encouraged to make suggestions about the products offered to the customer and the ambience and set-up of the store. As such, the physical space of the shop and the offering became malleable and depended on the individuals which were around, as one of the employees explained:

“There is community service that is that if customers want something, it is in the interest of the supermarket to give it to them without the direct reason of profit. As the fruit and veg person, if somebody wants something that is obscure and not necessarily will make money, there is a sort of a perception that we should give it to them anyway because that is what we do. It is not just about us and the money. That is not necessarily how it will be. If someone wants Jeruzalem artichokes and nobody wants them I won’t get them in, but then when staff talks about it and thinks I should get them I will get them in, maybe not because they are thinking about the profit. That in itself says something.”

The focus on the human element, the advocacy, interaction and strategic involvement of the organizational members and other stakeholders was enforced by an organizational culture and context in which the community aspect and co-creation were core:

“True Planet Supermarket is a ‘community’. Like all forms of human association, communities have their own personality, strengths, weaknesses, eccentricities and determinations. But because True Planet Supermarket is a co-operative a core value has to be that the organization is as open, responsive and interactive as possible – and with everybody and everything that it engages with.” (Publication, 2012)

Hence, the organizational members who socially identified with the (initial) imprint of the venture converted their intra-subjective perceptions and understanding of the venture and its imprint into an inter-subjective understanding. Through the above-described mechanisms, the members of the venture came to a shared understanding of which for-profit and non-profit organizational elements were combined on an organizational level to constitute the venture’s imprint. This eventually led to the imprinted features becoming reinforced over time as they were continuously reinstated as part of the venture’s context and its day-to-day activities. Before elaborating on how the contextualizing phase

succeeded the sharing phase, we outline below how there were exogenous sources of frictions which affected the transition from sharing to contextualizing.

Exogenous Sources of Friction. The difficulty for TPS was that there was a mismatch between the organizational imprint and institutional realities. The organizational form of a “social venture” was novel and little institutionalized. Due to regulatory, legal and tax requirements, there was an ongoing push to fit into existing categories: either the one of a mainstream, for-profit supermarket, or the one of a pure non-profit organization. This represented a challenge to TPS and its imprint, which effectively incorporated business, social and environmental elements at the same time. One of the founders explained how there was no place for them as a social enterprise within existing legal forms of organization. They weren’t fitting in the boxes, as she describes:

“It was uncomfortable to use the term social enterprise because you soon realize it doesn’t mean anything. One of the problems we had, is that there was no place for us on legal forms. They only offered options as start-up, limited company, a CIC, a trader, but no box for social enterprise or for cooperative. We were a wholly owned cooperative, but there was no box for it. How does that work? We exist, we are real, but we are outside of the box. And therefore, to have a definition that everybody accepts, that has a framework, makes it a lot easier. And that’s why I found it difficult to use because by using it you still sit outside of the boxes.” (interview with one of the founders)

In addition, in terms of taxes and rent, they had to pay the standard rates. The shop manager explained how, despite being different, they had to compete with normal for-profit supermarkets:

“The rent for the premises is 8000 pounds per month. Adding to that is the council corporate tax of 4000 pounds per month. This adds up to 12.000 pounds fixed costs a month. This is a huge fixed cost and they barely have enough revenue to pay for this. A problem of TPS is that, despite being different, they need to

compete with normal supermarkets such as Tesco and Waitrose. They are subject to same high rents, and same council taxes.” (Interview with the shop manager)

Finally, health and safety regulations also pushed TPS to conform to the norms and regulations imposed on mainstream supermarkets. This again didn't match with what the venture originally stood for, as one of the authors observed on one occasion. During one of the ethnographer's shifts, she noticed how the shop manager seemed stressed. The reason was that they had had a Health and Safety inspector over the week before. The inspector had stayed in the shop for four hours and had criticised many things which needed to change including the use of fruit and vegetable waste in the kitchen on site, and the offering of expired food products for organizational members downstairs in the fridge. Upon a comment from the principal ethnographer that dealing with food waste was the whole concept of TPS, the shop manager responded:

“There are many things that we don't agree on, but we cannot fight this until we change some things that we are indeed doing wrong. Before, we used to have the same guy inspecting us, and he had no problems with our way of working. But this lady seemed to be more difficult and they are extremely strict on this.”

The quote exemplifies how their “way of working” did not match with the institutional reality of Health and Safety regulations, and how they were forced to change some things. One of the things they subsequently changed due to Health and Safety pressures was the serving of hot food. Despite this being a core characteristic of the venture and a large source of revenue, the shop manager reported on the following during one of the weekly management meetings:

“TPS has had a thorough inspection for Health and Safety a couple of weeks ago. Different issues were raised that needed to be changed. One of the issues was the serving of hot food. We are only allowed to serve food directly from the hob or oven above a certain temperature, or cold in the fridge below a certain temperature. Selling food between these temperature ranges turns out to be

illegal. Therefore, I worked out a solution to cook food in the kitchen, cool it downstairs in the chiller, and then put it in the fridges for sale.”

Hence, the lack of institutional environment for a venture whose core combined business, social and environmental aspects led to tensions and difficulties. Yet despite this push towards conforming to norms, rules and regulations for existing market categories, the organizational members kept engaging in the bottom-up maintenance of the organizational imprint. When exogenous sources of frictions emerged, discussions on how to resolve or mitigate this centred on the structural components of the initial imprint, without questioning the imprinted identity components. Exogenous sources of friction were resolved by adapting some structural aspects of the venture, while keeping the core of the initial imprint unchanged. This included the fact that profits needed to be reinvested in the community or in the shop, the alternative governance model, and the flat organizational structure. In other words, in response to institutional pressures pushing for conformity, they altered some of their operations, procedures and rules, but the boundaries of the imprinted structural components remained the same. Hence, in contrast to how endogenous sources of frictions led to a reinforcement of imprinted identity components, exogenous sources of frictions pushed for discussions focusing on the imprinted structural elements and on how to maintain these structures as set out by the founders.

Once these exogenous sources of frictions were resolved, the contextualizing phase took place.

Contextualizing

The last step through which organizational members maintained the venture's imprint involved moving from an interpersonal understanding between people on a cognitive level to a contextualization on a collective level. Certain characteristics became attributed to the venture as they came to be intrinsic to the organizational context and day-to-day activities. This happened through involving the organizational members in strategic and policy decisions, and organizational actions, and through the co-construction of the organizational image.

Involving Organizational Members in Crafting Policy and Strategy. The organization was characterized by a lack of top-down governance and few rules were imposed top-down. Members'

opinions were incorporated in policies and strategies through formal decision-making procedures. Because it was set up as a cooperative, members had a vote in deciding on issues such as which partnerships to set up to secure a competitive market position. There were weekly management meetings that were open for everyone to join and raise issues. As such, personal beliefs and motivations were, once commonly agreed upon, executed and contextualized and hence translated to an organizational level. The extract of one of the interviews below exemplifies how initiatives were proposed by organizational members based on their personal interest and were consequently executed by a team of organizational members of TPS:

“One of the members turned up and said fair trade week is coming up and I would like to organize a series of events. So for a week we did film shows in the basement, sold fair trade products, had a member of the green party do a talk, in the weekend we did a big weekend event. We had a leaflet produced, designed in house by someone who discovered was equally passionate about fair trade... They just wanted the space, not only the physical space, but the overall space to do it and the support... We also had a beer committee and they went off sampling beer from the local breweries in London. They presented me a business case, people who had never done a business case in their lives. One of things TPS gave to people is the confidence. People who would have never dreamed of ringing up beer companies, they could now say I am from TPS, we’re selling beer. It was tremendous. There were a number of initiatives that were taking place all the time.” (Interview with one of the founders)

Co-construct Organizational Image. Organizational members were encouraged to co-design the visual identity of the organization and contribute to narrative and identity building, as one of the organizational members explains:

“When I was doing the induction, you go in very enthusiastic and do this and that, and people come and say this is really great. I was constructing this identity of the

supermarket as a friendly place which is fun to be in. You create this idea in people's mind which you hope will then self-sustain."

The visual artefacts on the shop floor were created by members and one of the interviewees described how, for instance, window dressing was done by the organizational members and how "a lot of these young people did graphic design, and they would come up with all sorts of stuff on what to display. They would draw on the pavement, with all our names under it, they would do all kinds of fantastic stuff." In addition, the website and social media content were member-driven. Moreover, this member involvement was communicated and stimulated through internal and external reporting, and became in itself an intrinsic characteristic of TPS:

"It is the experience of being there and doing it and interacting with the other people from all these groups which is part of what the supermarket is. So that is part of the co-construction. Even going in as a customer, like when I have friends and family visiting we go in and say ah hey Nigel, chatchatchat, and other people in the queue hear you. I am aware of the fact that other people in the queue will hear that there is something different going on that is different from Tesco's."
(Interview with member)

Through these three processes of projecting, sharing and contextualizing, we show how individuals imprinted their own social identity and social motivations on the social venture. The process model in figure 3 shows how the initial imprint that was inspired by the founders was maintained by the organizational members over time.

DISCUSSION

A Process Model for Organizational Imprinting beyond the Founding Phase

Our study examines the critical but under addressed role of agency-based mechanisms in maintaining an organizational imprint over time. Prior theorizing has focused on how founders act as central agents in developing organizational imprints (Ellis et al., 2017; Johnson, 2007), but less attention has

been paid to the way in which other agents such as organizational members are involved in maintaining this imprint over time (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013).

Our findings suggest that the process during which the initial organizational imprint is reproduced beyond the founding phase is an ongoing two-way interaction between the organizational and the individual level. We find that, once the organizational members socially identify with the organizational imprint, their individual social identities function as a mechanism that provides the link between the early imprint of a venture and its subsequent maintenance. Hence, our study highlights yet another outcome of organizational identification. While studies on the outcomes of organizational identification show that when individuals identify with firms – i.e. when they perceive their own identity to be congruent with the identity of the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) – this leads to organizational citizenship behaviour and organizational commitment (Besharov, 2014; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Scott and Lane, 2000), we find that the process of social identification with an initial imprint guarantees the continuation of this imprint over time. Social identification is thus the crucial step which initiates the bottom-up reinforcement of the organizational imprint. By highlighting how organizational members convert their intra-subjective, cognitive understanding of the venture and its imprint into a shared and inter-subjective understanding, and how endogenous and exogenous frictions affect the bottom-up reinforcement of the imprint, our study makes several theoretical contributions.

Contributions to Theory

The findings and the process model we present contribute to theory in three ways. First, we add to imprinting theory by unpacking the second phase of the imprinting process and developing an agency-based framework for the transmission of the initial organizational imprint. Previous research on imprinting has shown how founders play a fundamental role as agents in the first phase of imprinting (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Goia et al., 2010; Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Perkmann and Spicer, 2014). Yet the literature on the second phase of imprinting has fallen short in explaining the agency-based mechanisms through which early imprints persist throughout the organizational life cycle (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013; Simsek et al., 2015). Our study expands imprinting research by showing

how bottom-up imprinting affects the maintenance of a venture's initial imprint beyond the founding phase. Building on an empirically grounded model based on an ethnographic study of a social venture, our findings show how the way in which an imprint is sustained isn't as much about the founders, but about the follow-up organizational members. Doing so, we add another agency-based perspective to more passive approaches including inertia and path dependency which previously have been applied to explain why imprints have a lasting effect (Ellis et al., 2017).

We show how individual identity and social identification are key mechanisms that explain the continued effect – or stickiness - of an early imprint. Based on our finding that organizational members' social identity leads to their identification with the venture's imprint, we connect with previous literature on the influence of individual identity on organizations. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in how founders influence new ventures through their identities (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Powell and Baker, 2014). Individual-level identities of founders and other powerful individuals are known to have great potential to influence the thinking and actions of others and have a strong impact on ventures (Drori et al., 2009; Ashforth, Rogers and Corley, 2011).

The majority of work in this area draws on role identity theory but more recently some studies have begun to use social identity theory. According to social identity theory, self-definition is derived from categories or groups to which individuals belong, together with the emotional and value significance of that group membership (Stets and Burke, 2000; Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007). Empirical studies that have investigated the effect of founders' social identities show how social identities explain the variety in strategic choices made in adversity (Powell and Baker, 2104) and how social identities impact on choices about the market segments served, the customer needs addressed and capabilities and resources deployed (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011).

Despite an increasing interest in the impact of individual identity on ventures and organizations, few studies have gone beyond the influence of the founder(s), and the role of other organizational members' identities has received little attention so far. Our findings show that the social identity of organizational members is fundamental, as it is the analytical link between an early imprint and its maintenance over time. Our model shows how, through projecting, sharing and contextualizing, the

social identities of organizational members are converted onto the organizational level, and how this leads to the maintenance of the initial organizational imprint. As a result, this study contributes to our understanding of the imprinting process in an important way by highlighting the role of individual identity and identification as mechanisms and dynamics that come into play beyond the founding phase.

Second, our study advances imprinting theory by bridging the individual and organizational levels of analysis, and by shedding light on the time-frame during which the imprinting process unfolds. While many scholars have looked at the profound effect of initial imprints on organizations at a later point in time (Barron et al., 1999; Boeker, 1989; Gruber, 2010), most of these studies have left the process that occurs in between under-addressed. Our study makes a first attempt to address this shortcoming by unpacking the black box of what happens in between the founders' creation of an imprint and its continued effect. We find that, while the first phase of imprinting is constraint in time during the so-called "sensitive period", i.e. the founding period (Marquis and Tilcsik, 2013), the second phase of the imprinting process iterates over time. It is a two-way cyclical interaction between the individual and the organizational level that happens over an organization's life cycle as people join and leave the organization. Our analysis suggests that there are bottom-up forces which are important in explaining how the legacy and initial imprints of founders are carried forward. By showing how this iterative process unfolds time and again, our paper adds to the imprinting literature by taking a dynamic perspective as opposed to a static one. In addition, by showing that it is important to look at the timing of the imprinting process, our study also responds to calls for studying entrepreneurship and the ventures that result from it as a journey that transpires over time (McMullen and Dimov, 2013).

Third, by looking at the imprinting process of a social venture which combines multiple commercial, social and environmental objectives, our study extends theory by bridging the literature on social ventures and the literature on imprinting. More specifically, we advance theory by shedding light on two different sources of friction that impact on the maintenance of the organizational imprint. Additionally, depending on the type of friction, we find how organizational members react by emphasizing either the identity or the structural components of the organizational imprint.

The literature on social ventures has mostly focused on conceptual and definitional debates about what constitutes a social venture with multiple objectives (Choi and Majumbar, 2013; Mair and Marti, 2006), but more recently, few studies have begun to explore how organizational members play a role in such organizations (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Besharov, 2014). The venture of our study was founded on a social and environmental mission and our model shows how the bottom-up engagement of organizational members using their own social identity orientations was important in developing the meaning of the venture. However, due to the contested nature of a social venture and the subsequent balancing act between social, commercial and environmental objectives (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Besharov and Smith, 2014; Smith, Gonin and Besharov, 2013), we find how endogenous and exogenous sources of friction emerged. Our analysis suggests how mismatches between the imprint and individual projections on one hand, and mismatches between the imprint and institutional realities on the other, impeded the continued persistence of the organizational imprint.

Our findings further suggest how the organizational members reacted against these frictions by reinforcing imprinted identity components in case of the former, and by reinforcing imprinted structural components in case of the latter. Hence, this study illuminates how organizational members tend to emphasize the *raison d'être*, or “who we are”, in the case of internal threats to the persistence of the founders’ legacy. In contrast, we find how organizational members shift attention to emphasizing “the way we do things”, in case of an institutional or external threat to the continuation of the organizational imprint. These findings thus demonstrate that it is important to differentiate between identity and structural components when looking at the imprinting process. They further shed light on how, in the case of organizations with multiple objectives, the continued persistence of the founders’ imprint is challenged because of internal and external factors.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study is based on a social venture, with social ventures being an important subset of so-called “organizations with purpose”, whose primary purpose goes beyond operating profitably (Hollensbe et al., 2014). While this study centres on a social venture which combines social and environmental

objectives with economic objectives, we argue that our findings also hold for other types of purposeful organizations, with purpose being defined as the reason for which the organization is created, its meaning and direction (Hollensbe et al., 2014). For instance, a strong sense of purpose can also be derived from the goal to advance and commercialize a new technology or platform.

As a result, we believe that the boundary conditions of our findings extend beyond organizations with social or environmental goals to more traditional companies. While the special characteristics of this organization make the dynamics of imprinting more easily observable, we do not think that they are a special case but rather a transparent example of the rather general question of how an imprint is maintained over time in any organization with a strong imprint.

Similarly, while the exit of all of the founders so early in the history of the venture may be a relatively rare, it is not unique and again we believe that this simply served to highlight dynamics that happen in all organizations as they grow. While the founders' activities are overwhelmingly important at the beginning of any new venture, they become less important as an organization grows and, conversely, the activities of the members become more important. This, of course, requires further investigation but we believe it is arguable that this is the case and so we believe our theoretical framework applies widely.

As with any qualitative research based on a single case study this research has other limitations which suggest areas for further investigation. First, the venture we study here is relatively young and the dynamics we identified might be different in a more mature venture. One area for future research thus concerns how organizational members impact on the overall organizational imprint in a venture that is older and where the imprint is likely to have taken on a more fixed shape and form. Second, as we mentioned when discussing boundary conditions, the venture we studied was characterized the departure of the founding team. Although this particular characteristic enabled us to more clearly address our research question, a potential area for future research concerns how individual members play a role in the development of an imprint in the ongoing presence of a founding team. Scholars could, for instance, look at how social identities of organizational members play out in the imprinting of a venture when the founding team remains to have a determining influence throughout the

venture's life cycle. Third, this study enhances our understanding of a *social* venture acting in an institutionally complex environment, combining for-profit and non-profit elements. One potential area for further investigation would be to look at other types of ventures that draw from multiple institutional logics, other than the for-profit and non-profit logics.

CONCLUSION

Imprinting has been suggested as a way to understand how a founding context and founders influence new organizations. Our study sheds light on the specificities of the imprinting process of a social venture beyond the founding phase, and on the bottom-up involvement of organizational members in this. The model we present here unpacks how organizational members socially identify with an organizational imprint and how this leads to the maintenance of the initial imprint over time. While much remains to be explored about imprinting, we hope to have provided building blocks for further theory development with this study.

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Table 1: Overview of Data Sources

Data inventory			
Type	Description	Quantity	Use in the analysis
Interviews with key informants	Formal and informal interviews with founders and organizational members in 2014 and 2015	24, 260 pages (double-spaced)	Analysis for this study
Participant observation	Principal investigator's notes from participating in the venture from January 2014 to December 2014 and from attending staff and member meetings from April 2014 to June 2015	120 pages of notes (single spaced)	Analysis for this study, familiarize with the organizational context, gain trust of informants
Public communication	(1) <i>Secret Sauce</i> : publication about the start-up process of the supermarket (2) Press releases (3) Company presentations (4) TV documentary describing the start-up process of TPS	110 pages + 4 episodes of 1 hour video material	Analysis for this study, familiarize with the organizational context
Internal communication	E-mails and monthly newsletters to members from 2011 to 2013	168 pages	Familiarize with the organizational context and history, triangulate
Board meetings	Notes of board meetings in 2012	Reports of 7 board meetings	Familiarize with the organizational context and history, triangulate

Figure 1: Data Structure

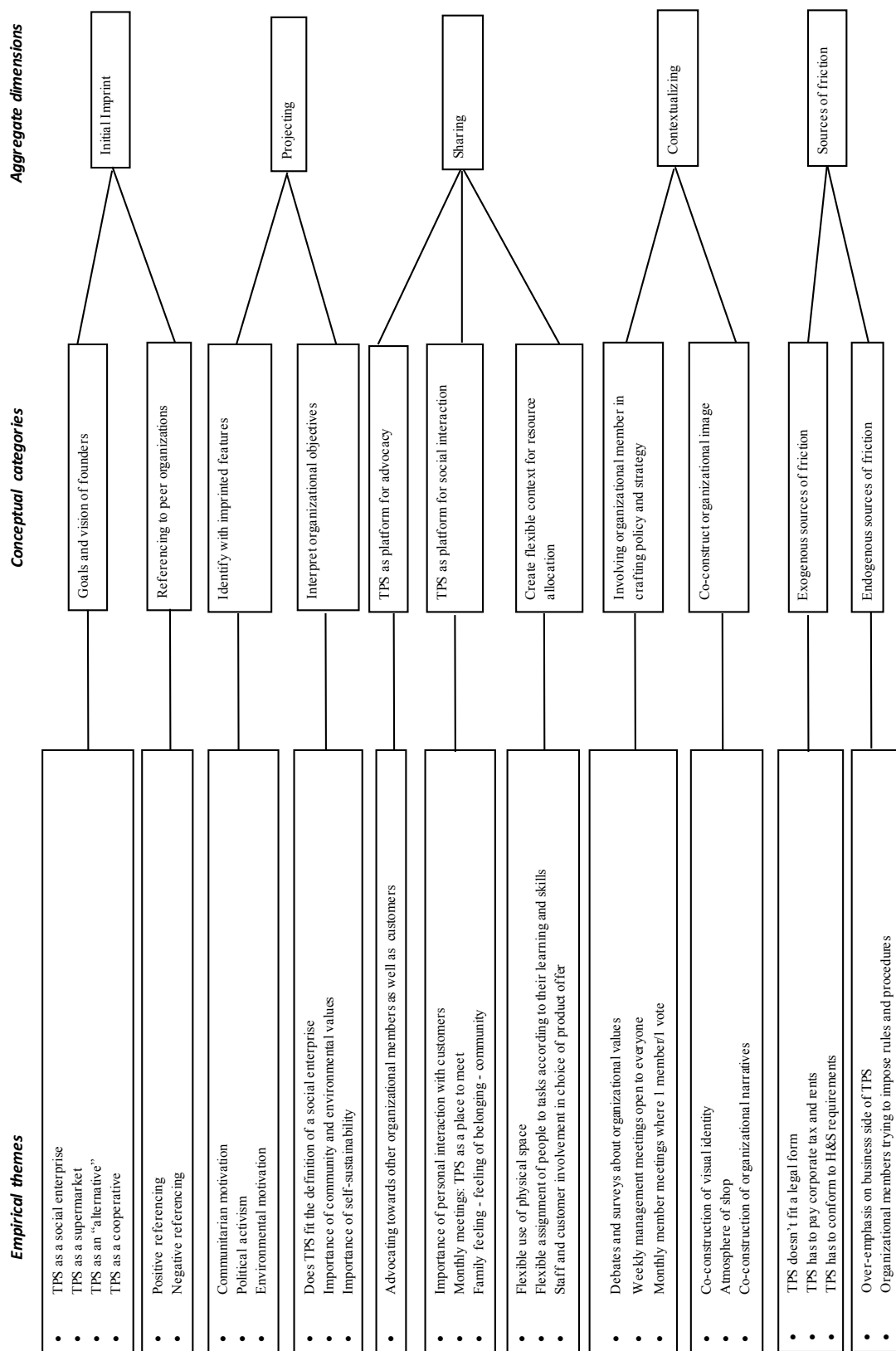


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Bottom-up Imprinting Forces

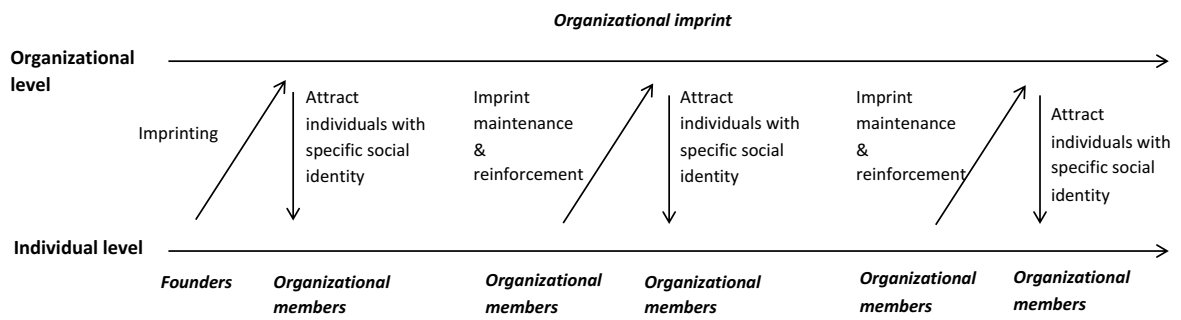


Figure 3: A Process Model for Organizational Imprinting beyond the Founding Phase

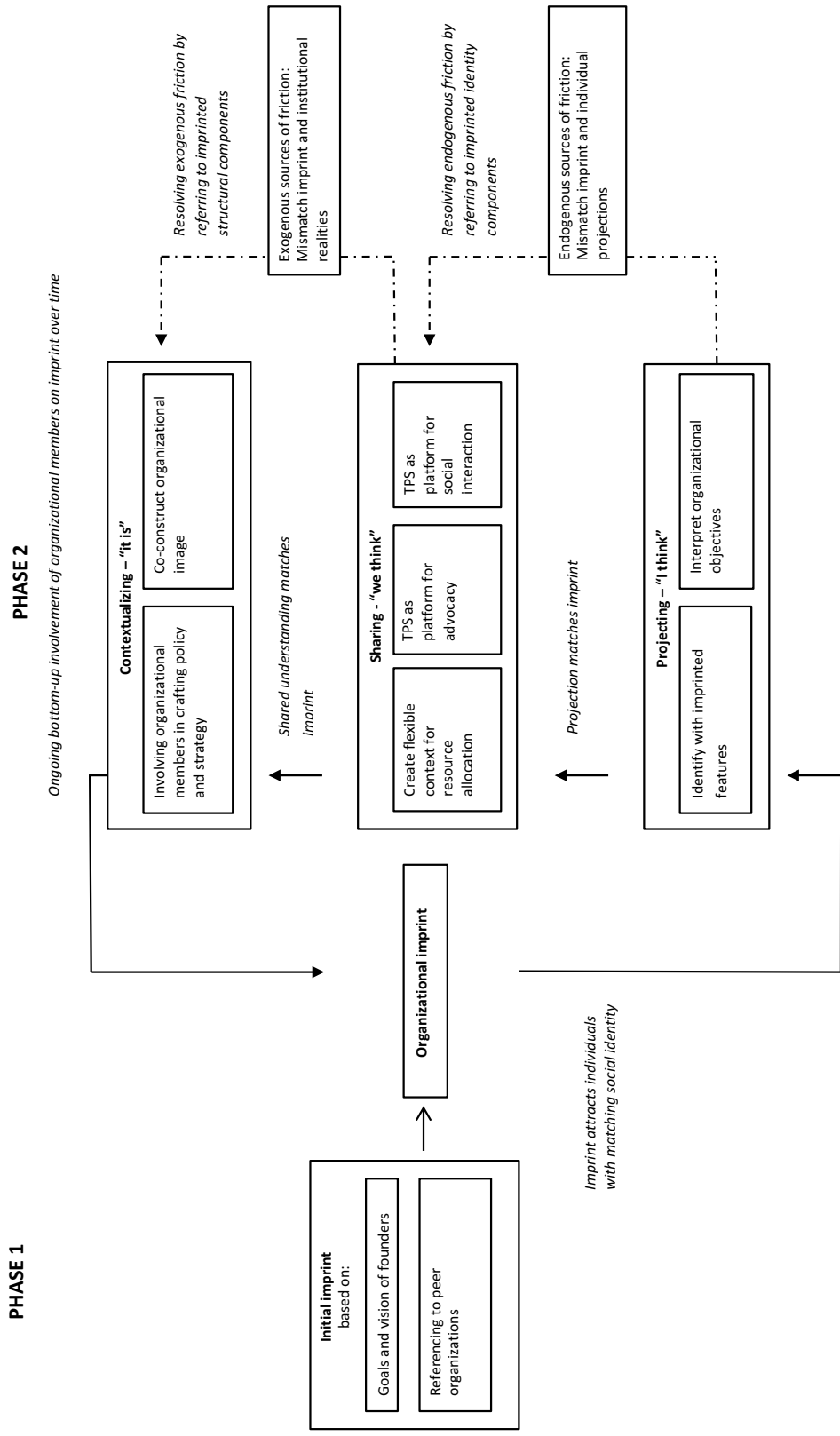


Figure 4: Imprinted Structural and Identity Components

