

Neo-normative control behind the scenes

An autoethnographic story about the implications to a newcomer to participate in a company that changed from a local idealistic startup into an international company that uses neo-normative control.



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17th August 2016

Abstract

This research is an autoethnographic story that presents the emergence and implications of neo-normative control in the context of the transition from local startup into international company. Neo-normative is an emerging form of normative control that stimulates employees to express their true self by breaking the traditional work/non-work boundary. Having 'fun' and being 'playful' is stimulated at work due to the assumption that these aspects are associated with conformity and organisational loyalty. This autoethnographic research reveals the unspoken and puts meaningful participative observations, interviews with employees and analysis of organisational symbols in a more critical perspective. My personal experiences as marketing intern and researcher simultaneously, represent the downside of neo-normative control from an insider's perspective. The aim is to bring a counterbalance against the ruling optimistic and positive status quo and to make issues discussable.

This research shows how a revolutionary period of change is connected with a period of rapid growth, focus on efficiency and changes in leadership and power. After the management buy-out (MBO) of the founders, changes in the strategy are reported such as intensified formal controls and management accounting techniques to communicate managerial philosophies. Whereas the culture first was an expression of people's shared values, the now formalised company values determine the way employees should behave. The best employees are the ones who have internalised the company values and natural behave within these values. Although individuality is seen as an important aspect of neo-normative control, uniformity and cohesion are shown ascendant and in conflict with individuality. While uniformity creates an efficient and effective culture, there is counter-productivity reported on innovation and initiative in fast changing markets.

Preface

This research is part of finishing my masters Organisations, Changes and Management. It has been a really intense but enriching time and I feel really grateful for all the experiences and knowledge I have gained in these six months.

I would like to thank all the people that have somehow contributed to my research and some people in particular. To start with I would like to say thank you to the Dutch team. Thank you for adopting me in the team and thank you for being such a great company. I really enjoyed working with you all and feel inspired by your entrepreneurship. I learned a lot from being involved in such a small team as marketing intern and researcher at the same time. Then I would like to say thank you to all the employees that I have interviewed. Thank you so much for sparing your time to have an interview with me and teaching me more about the company.

Someone else who was always there if I needed help was my professor Maikel Waardenburg. Thank you so much for asking the right questions and giving me just enough signs to facilitate my grow as a researcher and therefore bringing my research to a higher level. Thank you especially for keeping me sharp at the moment that I was almost too incorporated to stay perceptive and critical. I believe this was the critical call that woke me up and motivated me to show my personal experiences that make this research special.

Last but not least I would like to say thank you to my family and friends who have motivated and support me but also distracted me from my research when needed. In particular I would like to say thank you to my boyfriend Josh Cotton, who has read all my papers multiple times to correct me if I used 'bad English'.

Lisa Kersbergen
Amsterdam, 17th August 2016

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1. Introduction

This thesis is a presentation of my journey in a company with a very strong and special corporate culture, controlled by neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). No rules, but values, fun and cohesion to get the best out of employees. The researched company was founded 17 years ago, by three friends with an idealistic vision. They shared the dream to do business in a way that it would contribute to a better world instead of only striving for profit. Whereas the shared values of the founders and first people were once unspoken, there was a point where they felt the need to reflect on what their values were to introduce new people to the company and to tell the story to people from outside the company. The shared values turned into the company values that represented the culture and set the direction for the future. The five values: natural, entrepreneurial, responsible, commercial and generous were of great importance since that point to maintain the culture. Employees described a transition of the company around 2009/2010, the same time that the founders got bought out by a big multinational.

Management buy-outs (MBOs) are known to go together with a reconsideration of the company strategy and its associated control system (Bruining, Bonnet & Wright, 2004). The focus of the company shifts to growth and efficiency, while control systems get intensified (Bruining et al., 2004, p. 162-168). Symbols of the company values are currently visible in different forms (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 196): stories, metaphors, rituals and architecture represent the company values and frame the 'good and the bad'. Even when I sat down on the toilet I had to face the pedantic messages in front of my eyes. Since I entered the company I was intrigued by the culture, because I had never experienced a culture that felt so different. I wanted to learn more about neo-normative control and the emergence of it. The identity of the company will stay secret, since I decided to shift over to a critical approach that shows unspoken issues of the company. My research will provide an answer to the question below:

What are the implications to a newcomer to participate in a company that changed from a local idealistic startup into an international company that uses neo-normative control?

The reason I chose to research this company, was because I admired the way of organising. I read about the attention for ethics while having a fun and a friendly environment. I expected this organisation to be the prime example of how to run a business in an ethical way. My mission was to learn from this company and discover how this approach worked out in practice. Although I blamed myself at the start for not performing optimally, I discovered that my feelings of individual failure represented insufficient commitment to the corporate norm (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2). By reflecting on my personal experiences, I discovered that they represented the unspoken downside of neo-normative control. Although neo-normative control is meant to stimulate people to express their true selves at work, I discovered how little freedom and space there was for individuality. I felt under pressure, suppressed and experienced how it feels to be indoctrinated by an artificial way of sensemaking. I also experienced how this way of sensemaking inside the organisation differs from the reality outside the company and how this uniformity goes against individuality. With my research I hope to offer a counterbalance and show neo-normative in a new light. I used a critical

perspective that seemed to be a taboo within the organisation and goes against the ruling culture. With my research I hope to reveal tension and suppression while making it discussable.

I have had the honour to participate in the culture as a marketing intern and researcher simultaneously, which enriched my research with in depth experiences. I realised that there was only a small amount of literature about neo-normative available and even less literature that is written from an insider's perspective. This is why I decided to give these insider's experiences a leading role in my research by executing an autoethnographic research (Ellis, Adams & Bockner, 2011, p. 273). It gave me the opportunity to research and write systematically about these personal experiences in order to understand the culture. I will lead you through my journey by presenting my story and describe how neo-normative control influenced my true feelings. I will show how these experiences represent tensions and suppressions that are connected with neo-normative control. During my research I have constantly moved between practice and theory, to create understanding for my experiences and to discover new appearances. Although it sometimes felt 'wrong' to write in such a critical way that goes against the euphemistically (Vickers, M.H., 2002, p. 107) framed reality of the company, I knew it was the most valuable approach to represent my findings that differ from the uniform way of sensemaking within the company. I combined this critical approach with an interpretative approach, to gain understanding before reflecting in a critical way. I spent forty hours a week for more than six months in the Dutch office of the company, which enormously contributed to my understanding of this particular company culture. With this research I wanted to gain understanding of the culture and see occurrences in the specific circumstances. I believe that the way people make sense to 'reality' is connected with the way they behave. In this qualitative research, my personal experiences are used as the main research method. In contrast to positivistic research where everything has to be 'objective', this research shows people's subjectivity including my own subjectivity as a researcher. By allowing and revealing this subjectivity, my research can be seen in the right context which contributes to the trustworthiness of my research.

2. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I discuss the sensitising concepts that are used to support and modify my research. Although I believe every researcher is biased by knowledge and experiences, I started my research without specifying any concepts to reduce my bias as a researcher. I picked the following theoretical concepts while I was participating in the company, because they helped me to understand my experiences and sightings. Vice versa the concepts also helped me to see my data in a new perspective and notice occurring aspects I was not aware of. This constant moving back and forward between practice and theory facilitated depth in my research. The first two concepts 'critical theory' and 'organisational culture' [2.1, 2.2] can be seen as perspectives I have used, while 'corporate culture', 'strategy formation as a process of transformation' and 'management buy-outs' [2.3, 2.4, 2.5] can be seen as theoretical concepts of the studied issues. I attempted to compound the overarching themes culture, growth and control to learn more about the interconnections.

2.1 Critical theory

In management studies, researchers generally search for managerial improvements and functioning of organisations (Alvesson & Willmott, 1999, p. 1). The research questions are mainly connected with efficiency and effectiveness, while social relations and structures are seen as rational technical structures. Critical theory (CT) has attention for how science and technology have broadened their influence in society and reduces the scope for debates about political and ethical issues. CT scientists see management aspects as social political phenomena and have the aim to liberate suppression. While traditional social scientists present themselves as objective, CT proceeds from a 'non-objectivist' understanding of ontology and epistemology (Burrell & Morgan according to Alvesson & Willmott, 1999, p. 11-12). The next quote clarifies CT:

“Critical Theory, it is suggested, provides a (not the!) critical constructive intellectual counterpoint to mainstream management studies. For CT has the strength of being sufficiently broad to serve as a source of critical reflection on a large number of central issues in management studies: epistemological issues, notions of rationality and progress, technocracy and social engineering, autonomy and control, communicative action, power and ideology. (Alvesson & Willmott, 1999, p. 9)”

CT questions the status quo assumptions that shelter current social reality. By questioning these assumptions, contradictions and power relations emerge. An important way of researching this is by studying the language people use. The communication between people can bring powerful discourses to the front that are integrated in the language. Researching the language people use, can be done by observing meaningful symbols such as names, metaphors, jargons, jokes and stories that will be discussed in the next category. Beside these symbols in language CT also has attention for actions and objects that symbolise hidden power relations.

2.2 Organisational culture

Bolman & Deal (2008, p. 269) distinguish two different perspectives on organisational culture. The first one is a functionalistic vision, whereby the culture is seen as something the organisation 'has'. From this perspective culture is seen as one of the aspects of the total organisation, like the structure, size and technology for example. This fits to Schein's (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 197) definition of organisational culture: *'A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group [social units of all sizes] learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems'*. This description fits to the functionalistic perspective on organisational cultures, because of the mentioned 'function of problem solving' concerning external adaption and internal cohesion. This prescriptive approach stems from the management guru's around 1980 and is also called corporate culture (Kunda, 2006, p. 8-9), which I discuss later [5.3]. The deeper cultural layers Schein describes are (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 197):

1. Visible or tangible 'artifacts'.
2. The shared values of employees within the organisation.
3. Basic assumptions that are integrated in the organisation and do not get discussed anymore.

The second perspective Bolman & Deal (2008, p. 269) describe, is that organisations 'are' cultures. This is the perspective that is used within this research. I chose this perspective because it admits ambiguity and allows me to focus on subjective aspects rather than so-called objective or business aspects where it is mainly about effectiveness and efficiency. The aim of this research is to understand the changed organisation by studying the organisational culture and reflecting on suppression. The organisations 'are' culture perspective allows me to focus on the more human and subjective aspects. From this perspective organisations are seen as a social communities with shared values that keep the members together (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009, p. 279). This perspective builds on approaches of ethnographer Geertz (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 197). Table 1 shows the origin of the distinguished paradigms that describe 'culture' (Smircich, 1989, p. 350):

TABLE 1
Theoretical Features of Organizational Culture Paradigms*

Organizational Paradigm	Key Theoretical Features	Locus of Culture
1. Comparative management	Grounded in functionalism (Malinowski 1961) and classical management theory (Barnard 1938)	Exogenous, independent variable
2. Contingency management	Grounded in structural functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown 1952) and contingency theory (Thompson 1967)	Endogenous, independent variable
3. Organizational cognition	Grounded in ethnoscience (Goodenough 1971) and cognitive organization theory (Weick 1979)	Culture as metaphor for organizational knowledge systems
4. Organizational symbolism	Grounded in symbolic anthropology (Geertz 1973) and symbolic organization theory (Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce 1980)	Culture as metaphor for shared symbols and meanings
5. Structural/psychodynamic perspective	Grounded in structuralism (Levi-Strauss 1963) and transformational organizational theory (Turner 1983)	Culture as metaphor for unconscious mind

*Adapted from Smircich (1983a)

In the first two paradigms in Table 1, culture is seen as a 'variable', while in the other three paradigms culture is used as a 'metaphor' for the organisation itself. Culture as a variable corresponds to the first discussed perspective that organisations 'have' culture and stems from functionalistic approaches. Culture as a metaphor for organisations fits to the second discussed perspective on culture, which is the organisation's 'are' culture approach and stems from anthropological and organisational approaches.

Organisational culture can be studied by looking at symbols, which can be distinguished in language, actions and objects. These symbols can be seen as representation of social agreement by people that represent their common sensemaking (Yanow, 1996, p. 10). *"Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances."* (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409)

2.2.1 Culture and language

Culture expresses itself in language like in names, metaphors, jargons, jokes and stories (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 196). From this perspective language can be seen as a reflection of the culture. There are three different explanations for the use of vague language that creates ambiguity towards employees (Yanow, 1996, p. 129). The language people use within organisations is often vague, whereby the language expressions are multi interpretable (Yanow, 1996, p. 129). The first explanation is that people deliberately use vague language, to prevent opposition of people. The second explanation is that policy is communicated in different ways. People interpret policy different by giving a meaning to it that depends on their context and thus communicate the message in a different way. The last reason is the subjectivity of language, which makes it impossible to use one objective meaning. Language depends on time, place and context and can be understood differently by each person (Yanow, 1996, p. 130).

Beside the approach that language 'shows' culture, it also 'creates' it by using metaphors and stories that 'frame' the organisation's reality (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 199). The reality can be framed more positive by using euphemism, which is using a word or sentence that frames the reality nicer and friendlier than it actually is. One of the manifestations of language is storytelling. Storytelling can be seen as a method to shape organisational culture, to facilitate transitions and emotional processing of occurrences by creating new realities (Boonstra & Caluwé, 2006, p. 61-62). These kind of stories often symbolise the history of the organisation that represents stories of success and setbacks with heroes and villain. The entertaining stories have an underlying message that teaches the norms and values of the company. People are agitated to fantasise about their desires for the future, which is framed by the story.

2.2.2 Symbolic actions

Symbolic actions are all the routines that are determinative for an organisation and distinguish the organisation from others (Yanow, 1996, p. 188). Examples of symbolic actions are organisational rituals, myths, prohibited goals and silences in policy discourse.

Nonverbal communication also falls within this category of symbolic acts: choice of dress, posture, gesture, tone of voice etc. (Yanow, 1996, p. 188). People take actions based on values and subsequently give meaning to these actions again (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 198). Just like language, actions are expressions of culture and create culture at the same time. Studying organisational actions can therefore help to understand the culture and the way people try to compose the culture and therefore create new meanings (Yanow, 1996, p. 10). The symbolic perspective is based on a number of assumptions:

- Most important is not what happens, but what it means.
- Activities and sensemaking are two separate components: people interpret events and actions on multiple ways.
- By seeing insecurity and ambiguity, people create symbols to solve confusion.
- Events and processes are rather important for what they express than what they produce.

What the assumptions above make clear, is that the intended symbolism and interpreted symbolism of actions are really important. They are separate from the actions itself and represent people's sense-making.

2.2.3 Symbolic objects

"Symbolic objects are physical artifacts such as agency buildings, office decor, uniform modes of dressing, award plaques and pins and the like, agency programs, and so on - are on such form" (Yanow, 1996, p. 156).

Policy and organisational meanings can be communicated both internally and externally by objects that are a symbolic representation. While objects represent culture, they can also shape the culture. Built spaces can act on their users - through for example their mass, interior proportions and shape, use of light - to produce behavioural, cognitive, or affective responses (Yanow, 1996, p. 156-157). Games in a playful canteen where also the coffee corner is build, could encourage informal interaction for example. Especially if the policy language and goals are ambiguous and vague, objects may be significant. Analysing built spaces is one aspect of Burke's (according to Yanow, 1996, p. 157) dramaturgical analysis, which is later taken up by Edelman's methods of social geography. Burk distinguishes five elements in analyzing interaction:

1. Agent (the actor and the role of the actor)
2. Agency (the means of acting)
3. Purpose
4. Scene
5. Setting

The sixth implied element is the audience. This concerns the focus on the settings of policy and agency acts. As mentioned before, objects communicate both internally and externally. Objects evoke an emotional response externally, while internally enacted responses depend on the user entering the building and interacting with the interior spaces, furnishings, and decor. This may be accomplished through the materials of building design and decor like office location, the quantity and quality of furniture and decorations, colours, plant materials, distances of office and parking space from the building's entrance etc. These aspects represent social status within the organisation. They are used to situate the individual with respect to superiors, peers, and subordinates for purposes of establishing and maintaining individual identity and evoking appropriate behaviours (Yanow, 1996, p. 158).

2.2.4 Culture and power

To get a better understanding of cultural structures and processes, it is important to acknowledge the relation between culture and power. Within organisations there are power relations and conflicts of interests, which automatically influences the way people deal with the shared culture (Tennekes, 2003, p. 33). An unequal balance of power, provides individual people or groups of people to make their way of interpreting dominant and enforce other people to act in accordance with their definition of truth. Powerful people can enforce less powerful people to take certain ideas and opinions more serious than others and are often able to prohibit access to other definitions of truth. By doing so, they support their own position and interest, while the plausibility of other definitions of truth get undermined and dispirited. Culture is therefore a product of power to a certain extent (Tennekes, 2003, p. 36). A typified culture that uses the organisational culture to 'control' employees is corporate culture and will be discussed in the next section.

2.3 Corporate culture

"The art of creating strong corporate cultures by 'shaping norms,' 'instilling beliefs,' 'inculcating values,' 'generating emotions.' 'Strong cultures' are based on intense emotional attachment and the internalization of 'clearly enunciated company values' that often replace formal structures. Moreover, individualism is preserved; for employees, the companies 'provide the opportunity to stick out, yet combine it with a philosophy and system of beliefs... that provide the transcending meaning - a wonderful combination' (p.81). The ideal employees are those who have internalized organization's goals and values - its culture - into their cognitive and affective make-up, and therefore no longer require strict and rigid external control. Instead, productive work is the result of a combination of self-direction, initiative, and emotional attachment, and ultimately combines the organizational interest in productivity with the employee's personal interest in growth and maturity.' (Kunda, 2006, p. 10)

This definition describes the concept corporate culture and explains that corporate culture replaces formal structures. Instead of company rules for example, the culture shapes the things that are socially accepted or not accepted. The underlying approach of strong cultures is a prescriptive and homogeneous culture that is thence efficient and effective because it is in the heads and hearts of the employees (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 198). In practice this culture management leads to manipulation of culture in different forms: the stories, metaphors, rituals and architecture. Employees get trained or socialised by created symbolic forms of the dominant sense-making of the organisation (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 195). This unity thinking approach is limited, because it does not have space for individual variation of sense-making which depends on the social and administrative context of people. Culture studies see culture as fragmented overarching groups and individuals which creates inconsistency within organisations. A toolkit gets used to give direction and shape the culture in a desired direction by manipulated symbols, while multi-interpretation of situations by employees is actually 'natural' (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 200). In the next section a way corporate culture can expresses itself will be discussed.

2.3.1 (neo-) normative control

A 'normative control' surge is reported in the 1980s and 1990s (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 4). Normative control assumes dedication of employees and is funded in shared values that distinguish what is 'good'. It operates internally by moulding common attitudes, beliefs and values among employees (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2).

The emerging 'neo' form of normative control stimulates employees to express their true self by breaking the traditional work/non-work boundary. Having 'fun' and being 'playful' is stimulated at work due to the assumption that these aspects are associated with conformity and organisational loyalty. The workplace should be the 'best place to work'. Being playful expresses itself for example in celebrations at work, to foster diversity and provide social support for being yourself and believing that you matter. It also generates a sense of belonging, shared camaraderie and loyalty (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 9). Individuality is encouraged, whereby in particular the fun side of people's personalities. The neo-normative culture is based on the belief that people are more productive and give more of themselves if they can be their authentic self. Diversity and incongruence with organisational norms get encouraged and are associated with 'best places to work' and 'best practice'. The difference between normative control and neo-normative control is that employees are encouraged to be themselves rather than normatively conform an externally engineered and homogeneous organisational identity. Failing of employee's performance is seen as individual failure, rather than insufficient commitment to the corporate norm (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2).

2.3.2 Wish for uniformity and consistency versus individuality

There are different opinions concerning homogeneity and diversity within organisations. Unitary values and extreme loyalty are seem to be opposed to individualism, entrepreneurial risk-taking and self-reliance. There are clear limits to individuality that organisations tolerate, which is unsurprising, since there are few social domains where the value freedom is unlimited (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 10-11). While uniformity can create an efficient culture, there is counter-productivity reported on innovation and initiative in fast changing markets due to desired uniformity (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 4). Organisations with a 'strong' organisational culture often try to promote uniformity and consistency to make the culture 'manageable'. This is a dominant management vision that assumes that organisational cultures are manageable and manufacturable (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 198). This vision fits to the earlier discussed functional vision on culture and is in some respects inadequate because of the following two reasons. First, cultures are not manufacturable. This has to do with the recalcitrance and inertia of the deeper layers of culture. The second reason of the impossibility to take advantage of organisational cultures, has to do with the ambiguity of organisational symbols and the differentiation of meanings within organisations that automatically come up (Yanow, 1996, p. 13).

2.4 Strategy formation as a process of transformation

If an organization adopts states of being, the strategy making becomes a process of leaping from one state to another (Mintzberg et al., 2009, p. 318).

The quote above describes how organisations can transform due to configuration. Relative stability of strategy within given states, get interrupted furthermore by occasional and rather

dramatic leaps to new ones. These dramatic transformations are also called 'turnaround' or 'revitalisation' processes. Revolutionary periods of change are connected with changes in leadership and power. Change may be set out by strategy making, but the resulting strategies at the same time stabilize that direction (Mintzberg et al., 2009, p. 318).

Organizations may bide their time until they figure out where they have to go, and then, when a strategic window opens, they leap (Mintzberg et al., 2009, p. 333).

The quote above describes how organisations leap as soon as they know where to go.

Mintzberg et al. (2009, p. 336) describes four stages in life cycles of organisations:

- *“ First was the initial acquisition of resources of plant, equipment, and people, or else of the purchase and consolidation of smaller firms that had already done this (as in the origins of General Motors). Marketing and distribution channels were built and control was obtained over suppliers (which came to be known as vertical integration).*
- *Second, the executives turned to the more efficient use of these resources, with the establishment of functional structures (production, sales etc.) to coordinate the throughput.*
- *Third, there followed another period of growth, as limits were met in the initial markets: the firms diversified into new markets of new lines of business related to the existing ones.*
- *Fourth, that required a second shift in structure too. This came to be known as the divisionalized form, pioneered by Dupont, so that each business could be managed by a particular unit, reporting for overall financial control to a central headquarters.“*

Lewis & Churchill (1983, p. 30) distinguish five different stages of small business growth that have similarities but differ somewhat from the previous described stages:

“These stages are:

- *(1) existence--concerned with garnering customers and delivering the product or service contracted for;*
- *(2) survival--firms have demonstrated that they are workable business entities, but the key question becomes whether there is enough money for the firm to break even and stay in business;*
- *(3) success--here the decision facing owners is whether to exploit the company's accomplishments and expand or keep the company stable and profitable, providing a base for alternative owner activities;*
- *(4) take-off--concerned with how to make the firm grow rapidly and how to finance this growth; and*
- *(5) resource maturity--companies have the advantages of size, financial resources, and managerial talent and will be a formidable force in the market if they retain their entrepreneurial spirit.“*

The described stages of different writers have the 'growth' stage in common. Mintzberg et al. (2009) describe in the third stage as 'period of growth', which is described as the period where companies access new markets due to the limits of the initial markets. Lewis & Churchill (1983) describe the period as 'take-off' and explain this period as a concern about how to make the firm grow rapidly and finance this growth. The next stage is what Lewis & Churchill (1983) call the 'maturity stage' where the company has the advantages of size, financial resources and managerial talent but the challenge of retaining the entrepreneurial

spirit to become a 'formidable force'. This will be discussed in 'vision communication and growth' [2.4.2]. Mintzberg et al. (2009) described subsequently that a new structure is recruited to control the new units that still report to the headquarter and suggest the divisionalised form. Remarkable is that they both describe a certain challenge of 'control' to retain the entrepreneurial spirit and new units. By growing international, a challenge of globalisation is reported, which will be discussed in the next category.

2.4.1 Globalisation culture

"Globalization culture is defined as an 'international mindset' (Graber, 1996, p. 487) and a 'global readiness' (Roberts and Senturia, 1996, p. 495) on the part of managers and employees to deal effectively with the complexities and opportunities that result from different national cultures (customers, personnel), geographic dispersion of markets and participants, building trust and cooperation among dispersed affiliates, and cross-locational/cultural idea generation and resource utilization (Boutellier et al., 1998; Gilmont, 1995; Grant, 1996; Leonard and Sensiper, 1998)." (Brentani & Kleinschmidt, 2004, p. 313) Incorporating a globalisation perspective as part of the culture is essential when companies internationalise. This globalisation perspective means being open to world market opportunities, diverse customer needs and preferences, and different national cultures and competitive scenarios (Brentani & Kleinschmidt, 2004, p. 212). Achieving a level of openness and entrepreneurship that helps to pull together ideas and individuals in the firm to work in a more holistic and risk-oriented manner, becomes even more important when company efforts and competencies are spread across different geographical regions and national cultures (Brentani & Kleinschmidt, 2004, p. 313).

2.4.2 Vision communication and venture growth

"House and Shamir (1993) defined vision as an ideal that represents or reflects the shared values to which the organization should aspire. Similar definitions are found throughout the charismatic leadership literature. For example, Bennis and Nanus (1985) defined it as the projected mental image of the products, services, and organization that a business leader wants to achieve; and Kouzes and Posner (1987) defined it as 'an ideal and unique image of the future' (p. 85)." (Baum, Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1998, p. 44)

The quote above shows a definition of 'vision'. Baum et al (1998) show in their research that having a vision and communicate a vision, has positive effects upon organisational-level as opposed to unit-level or individual-level performances. This corresponds to what Lewis & Churchill (1983) described as the challenge of retaining the entrepreneurial spirit.

2.5 Management buy-outs

In the life cycle of companies, management buy-outs (MBOs) represent an important threshold of creating a juncture at which to reconsider the strategy of a firm and its associated management control system (Bruining, Bonnet, Wright, 2004, p. 155). Reported changes by management buy-outs are improvements in the quality of information, intensified formal controls, more disaggregated feedback and the use of management accounting techniques to communicate managerial philosophies. The actions seem to be strongly dominated to enhance efficiency and protect the firm against downside risks.

2.5.1 Increasing control systems

As mentioned before, there are changes reported in control systems due to MBOs. The control systems are likely to increase after MBOs. A different system - or lever - controls a different construct. Five different levers that can change during MBOs will be discussed (Bruining et al., 2004, p. 162-168): 1.) *Company strategy*. This lever of control represents how the firm competes and positions itself against its competitors in the market. A successful implementation of the strategy of the firm depends on the understanding of the constructs. This shows that organisations are created for a purpose and interaction among participants is needed to keep the organisation's purpose clear and in harmony with the environment. 2.) *Belief systems* provide basic values, purpose and direction of the organisations. They are used to inspire and direct the search for new opportunities. To become an enthusiastic participant, managers need to understand the beliefs of the organisation. Beliefs can be used for articulating and communicating missions, credos and goals of organisation in an active way that support managers to transform vague beliefs into focused activity. 3.) *Boundary systems* set limits on opportunity-seeking behaviour. They select acceptable opportunities in order to delineate an acceptable domain. 4.) *Diagnostic control systems* aim to control the implementation and formulation of the business strategy. They are used to monitor, motivate and reward achievement of specified goals. 5.) *Interactive control systems* also aim to control the implementation and formulation of the business strategy, but are used to stimulate organisational learning and the emergence of new ideas and strategies.

2.6 Key insights of different concepts

Although the themes culture, control and growth might sound like three self-contained themes, I discovered how inseparable they are due to the flux of interconnections. Whereas meaningful symbolic language, actions and objects gain insight in the culture of the organisation, they also symbolise power relations. Organisations with a 'strong' organisational culture often try to promote uniformity and consistency to make the culture 'manageable'. A distinguished culture that uses the organisational culture as control mechanism is corporate culture. Through (neo-) normative control consisting of artificial symbols, the top management determines employees' way of sensemaking. A fun and playful environment is meant to encourage the best version of employees' true selves. The employees who have internalised the company values, are seen as exemplary employees. While uniformity is inherent with efficiency, it also causes counter-productivity on innovation and initiative in fast changing markets. This represents a tension between uniformity and individuality.

The need for control often arises after the organisational life cycle stage of 'rapid growth', with a focus on growth and efficiency. After this period of growth, companies often come in a new stage where they have the challenge of retaining the entrepreneurial spirit in a way that the particular units fit the new entered (international) markets. Management buy-outs are often linked to a change in strategy. Reported changes are intensified formal controls, improvements in the quality of information, more disaggregated feedback and the use of management accounting techniques to communicate managerial philosophies.

3. Methodology

In this chapter I will discuss and justify the choices I have made during the execution of my research. I will discuss the strategy and design I used, with the supporting methods. The used strategy is autoethnography, which I will describe in the next paragraph. The research design is based on a qualitative approach, which determined the direction of my research. In the last paragraph I will describe the methods I have used to gain data.

3.1 Research strategy

The strategy is based on what is needed to answer the formulated research questions as good as possible. To find an answer to the research question: *“What are the implications to a newcomer to participate in a company that changed from a local idealistic startup into an international company that uses neo-normative control?”*, it was important to gain insight in neo-normative control while paying attention to the current context of the organisation and myself as researcher. An autoethnographic research strategy allowed me to include my experiences as an insider to research the organisational culture. Autoethnographic research can be explained as (Ellis, Adams & Bockner, 2011, p. 273): *“An approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.”*

As mentioned before, I have been participating in the organisation for over six months. During these six months I have tried to understand the culture and used participative observation, interviews with employees and organisational symbols as data. I have reflected on my possible researcher bias by holding a logbook and writing my preconceptions down. This, to try to become aware of the influence of personal experiences and knowledge. For this research I also have done 15 interviews in a formal setting, which is called research provoked data that is different than data gathered in a natural setting (Silverman, 1998, p. 9-10). Usually in an autoethnographic research, a natural setting is desirable to reduce the researcher bias. The advantage of researching in a natural setting is that there is a low bias, because the setting gets rarely influenced. Besides the interviews in formal setting, the remaining part of my research took place under natural circumstances. Only the employees who were aware of me participating as a researcher, are possibly influenced. However, this was just a small amount of people who were not aware that I researched the phenomenon neo-normative control. During my research I have mainly been participating in the Dutch office of the company, whereas my research was also about the people in the headquarter in London. While not being able to spend the same amount of time in London as I did in the Netherlands, I tried to have as much contact with the people in London as possible. In addition London employees also visited the Dutch office on regular basis and vice versa. This gave me the opportunity to still learn about the culture from an insider's perspective, but was not participating daily in the headquarter. However, I am aware that there are culture differences between countries and differences in sensemaking between the Dutch office and the headquarter in London. The biggest difference I mentioned was the intensity of neo-

normative control, which was more present in London. The group of research subjects were the 200 employees of the headquarter of the company based in London, together with my 6 direct colleagues at the Dutch office.

3.2 Research design

In this research I have been researching neo-normative control in the context of the transition of the company from startup to international company. To investigate how the company values have changed into neo-normative control, I have dived into the culture to create understanding and to be able to reflect in a critical way. Since this research is about understanding and reflecting culture, a standardised way of questioning would not have fit. I chose for a qualitative research, because it gave me the opportunity to get deeper into the topic and pay attention for the context of the findings. It also allowed me to adapt my research questions to different situations and people which made it possible to be more flexible with the scope of my research. My research started with trying to find out the value of sustainability by studying employees' sensemaking by handling a positive approach (appreciative inquiry). However, I have shifted to the emergence of neo-normative control in the context of the transition of the organisation by handling a more critical perspective (Alvesson & Willmot, 1999, p. 9). I decided to shift, because I noticed this would bring me to more interesting results because it offers an innovative perspective on the case. A critical perspective offered a balance to the positive approach of the company. I have realised that using a positive approach while researching might be a better fit for companies in a critical or negative context. In these cases the appreciative inquiry theory could offer a counterbalance. I wrote the following note when I came to this realisation: *"10-04-2016 I know what I should do to increase the quality of my research, which is using my subjective experiences as a marketing intern. Until now I feel like my personal and more critical experiences gain so much more information than my actual interviews. Beside that, there is so many artefacts in the building that I would like to use in my research."*

My qualitative research is not only about 'in what way' or 'how' the transition of the company took place, but also about 'how' and 'why' employees make sense to it in a certain way. The other reason for choosing a qualitative approach has to do with my personal interest, combined with my study background and gained experiences. The 'why' question is probably one of my favourite ones. This question excites me, because it goes so much further than describing a situation. It is a question that searches for processes and relations that are incredibly complex. I like to see things as complex as they are, without trying to simplify them. I believe that simplifying would make me blind for the unknown and I would like to continue learning.

3.3 Methods

To ensure that my interpretation matches with the interpretation of the research subjects, I combined different methods, which is called data triangulation. By using different methods, I have gained a clearer view of the culture and the changes over the past years. The different methods I have used, will now be discussed more in detail.

3.3.1 Participative observation

Many studies report that it is the verbal and nonverbal communication together that explains what people actually tell (Mehrabian, A., 1981). This is the reason that I have observed people as well in a natural setting (Silverman, 2011, p. 7), while employees did not realise I was actually observing. As mentioned before, I have used my personal experiences as a marketing intern, to gain insights from an insider's perspective. Using these experiences I have gained the most depth in my research, because I could experience the way I was influenced myself as a marketing intern. I heard the way people talked about cultural related topics in an informal way and experienced the way the company acted, which can be seen as a symbol that represents the company's policy and values (Yanow, 1996). The disadvantage of participative observation is that participating made me less observant, because things became 'normal'. Although I was aware this could happen to me, it regrettably did. I needed the help of other people from University and the literature to become observant again by discussing the results with them. The other thing I did to stay observant about my experiences and participative role, was reflecting on these experiences by using a logbook. This will be described in a later section (6.4.1 Reflexivity).

3.3.2 Analysis of symbols

Another source I have used is natural occurring data. I have been using different sources that represent the company culture. These sources are language, objects and actions as discussed in the theoretical framework. I used several books of the company about the culture and brand (meant for employees), intern presentations, information on the company's website and texts about the culture in the London building. I took a lot of pictures of the building to make it possible to include them in the analysis. I have noticed that people often referred to texts on the wall, which made me realise the messages on the wall represented and influenced employees way of sensemaking.

3.3.3 Interviews

Interviews gave me the opportunity to ask different people, different questions to determine their way of sensemaking in the right context. I started the first interviews with only a topic list, to orientate on an interesting and relevant scope of my research. I created the topic list, based on my first impressions and conversations with employees. Whilst analysing the interviews, the language people used was really important and brought me to a deeper truth (Yanow, 1996). The focus was on employees based in London, together with my direct colleagues in the Dutch office. The employees in London are part of the head office, where policy is made and where the neo-normative control seemed to be present the most. The other reason for this focus is because of practical and time reasons. Trips to London were already planned and it would not have been so practical and sustainable to travel to all the other offices in different countries for interviews. The disadvantage of the interviews, was that they were in a formal setting that gains a researcher bias. Since I started my research with a focus on the changed role of sustainability, the employees were not aware of my final focus on neo-normative control. This switch is made in a later state, when I realised the changed role of sustainability represented a bigger transition of the organisation. This made the interviews less biased, since neo-normative control naturally came up without explicitly and directly naming it.

Since the scope of my research was neo-normative control, I could pick every employee in the organisation. For this reason I tried to select a varied group of people, which resulted in employees from different departments and employees that worked both for a longer and shorter time at the company. I have selected them together with my manager, the sustainability manager and the personal assistant of two board members. They helped me with picking and getting me in touch after I asked them to pick employees with a variety of characteristics such as age, work role and work experience. While my manager chose my very first few interviews, I was free to decide who I wanted to interview after these first interviews. I realised that it was important to choose my own respondents in the context of the trustworthiness of my research. At the start my manager and sustainability manager asked me to involve the different countries in my research, but I rejected this due to the focus I wanted to gain and the required independence as researcher. Something that is remarkable, is the percentage of woman that I have interviewed. The reason is that I invited a few more woman and received more responses on my e-mails from women than I did from men. During the interviews I did not notice significant differences between men and women, which makes me think the unequal percentage did not matter.

3.4 Criteria of quality

This chapter describes the elements that facilitate that my research is trustworthy and useful for scientific purposes and the researched company. Since my research is about understanding of culture, the goal is to understand sources of ambiguities instead of model testing and erasing of ambiguities. This is the reason that the question to ensure quality pursues a different reasoning, it seeks to inquire into the logic and explanatory coherence of the analysis instead of the “goodness” of the model (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 144):

“How would you know if there were something else afoot in this situation that might be a better explanation of the puzzle you are seeking to explain?”

Since this research is an autoethnography, the way of writing requires other criteria than ordinary (positivistic) researchers. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) define it the following way: *“An autobiography should be aesthetic and evocative, engage readers, and use conventions of storytelling such as character, scene, and plot development, and/or chronological or fragmented story progression (Didion, 2005; Frank, 1995).”* The results of this research will be presented as a chronological story that presents my research journey, which represents characteristics of the organisational culture.

3.5 Trustworthiness

To address this question above, an interpretative researcher points to three different components to ensure the trustworthiness (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 141):

1) *The consistency of evidence from different sources (the intertextuality of the analysis).*

See methods (6.3, p. 9).

2) *The ways in which conflicting interpretations have been engaged.*

3) *The logic with which the argument has been developed.*

As mentioned, I used different research methods to get a proper view and see occurrences in the right context. I tried to reach a high level of trustworthiness by reflecting on my

personal experiences as researcher and by being open about conflicting interpretations. I made choices and personal preferences visible, which I will be describing in more detail in reflexivity [3.5.1]. I also have combined different sources of data to contribute to the trustworthiness, which I showed in the section methods [3.3].

3.5.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to a researcher's active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and the particular circumstances might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 134).

Reflexivity is significant because of two reasons (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 135). First of all, it allows researchers to find out the ways in which very specific instances of personality affect the research and the knowledge claimed on the basis of those accounts. Secondly, a critical reflexivity calls on researchers to reflect on the ways in which their own research communities are historically constituted, such that particular socio-political context shape, in previously unarticulated or unrecognised ways.

As an interpretative researcher - trying to understand interpretations - I admit that my subjective experiences and judgements are connected with this research. I believe that the choices of a research topic, research design and research subject are not just based on objective arguments. Choices can be based on personal interests, knowledge, experiences, feelings, intuitive processes and many more variables that are not so visible in researches with a positivistic approach. This subjectivity is even more relevant for my research, because I chose for a critical approach combined with an interpretative perspective, which is about interpreting interpretations, also called hermeneutics.

Instead of ignoring or hiding my subjectivity as a researcher, I tried to get insight by reflecting on these subjective experiences. I am open about my human subjectivity in my writings by taking people with me on the journey of my research. This makes readers able to understand the reasons why I made certain decisions and shows the foundations of my interpretations. By doing this, my research can be seen in context. It allows people to see sources of differences between me and other researchers and can be used to account for the generation of knowledge claims (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 128).

To gain reflexivity, I have been holding a logbook the entire time of my research. I used this mainly as a diary for subjective experiences, beliefs and judgements to find patterns and relate it to personal factors and particular circumstances. Another way I have gained insights in my subjectivity as a researcher, was concretising my judgements by writing them down and reflect on the reasons of my judgements in the context of my knowledge, personal experiences and other aspects of my background. I think this has gained a state of self-consciousness, which made me able to see my subjectivity as a researcher and my direct environment next to the actual knowledge claims.

3.5.2 Positionality

As mentioned before I have combined two different roles within the company, one as researcher and one as marketing intern. Where I first found it a bit difficult to combine the

two, I now see it as an advantage and have realised that my role as intern enriched insights for my research. By reading Wright Mills' (1959) article: "The sociological imagination", I have realised how experiences in both roles can enrich each other. As a marketing intern participating in the organisation, I experienced the culture while being part of it. It allowed me to feel how it is to be part of it and kept me updated about developments. The disadvantage of participating in the company while researching, is that it made me less observant at times. I realised this when I discussed topics with friends and professors from University. They were very surprised by my stories, while these stories to me felt 'normal'. Halfway into my research there was a period where I was almost too incorporated into the company to be observant and critical. I thought the way the company influenced me to think and it was hard to judge things with my personal values. The company was very good in motivating the way it was acting and always gave a positive twist to issues. During the time I was incorporated, the things people would say in the company felt like the only truth. People in my environment, together with the critical way of researching and my logbook really have helped me to see things in a different perspective.

3.5.3 Use for research proposes

The transition from startup into international company together with the emergence of neo-normative control could be useful for other research purposes and organisations. In particular for organisations who are entering new markets and go through a period of growth or have just passed this phase and try to maintain the entrepreneurial spirit. This research contributes to the discussion about the suitability of neo-normative control, which can be useful both for organisational and research proposes. Neo-normative control is a new and emergent phenomenon and therefore just a small amount of literature is available. Furthermore this research presents neo-normative control from an insider's perspective, which is even rarer in the literature. I have woven my personal experiences in this research, because I realised that they give more context to my research and show deeper feelings that are normally hard to reach during research. This research also shows how autoethnographic research can help by understanding cultures of organisations.

4. Results

This chapter tells the story about my personal experiences of participating in a company that has gone through a massive transition while growing international. My story illustrates the way a company with an idealistic vision can turn into a neo-normative control system to determine people's behaviour. At the same time my personal story represents what it does to a newcomer to participate in a company where you get controlled by the culture. No rules, but values and fun to get the best out of people is the underlying meaning. I used myself as a research method and compared my personal experiences with the discussed experiences of employees and observed symbols to give a reliable view. I use the metaphor of a 'first love experience' to represent my personal experiences and the way I have felt.

Love at first sight

The moment I got told about this company, I could not believe an organisation like this existed. A company where employees are encouraged to have fun at work and become friends with each other while the purpose of the organisation is to create a better world. I remember this as the moment that I fell in love with the company. I really felt connected, because I believe in companies that have an idealistic vision and see money as a tool rather than the overall aim. I was instantly in love and thought this company was a perfect fit with my personal values. The same day I wrote a large email to ask if I could execute my master research at the company in the context of fulfilling my masters. They e-mailed me that I could apply for a marketing internship, which would be a combined role with my research. I decided to apply for the role, because I saw it as such a big opportunity to participate in the company and experience the culture as an insider. After I applied for the internship, I was a bit confused. The impression I had of the company by reading the website, was different than the first impression the two interviewers gave me during the interview. I noticed that my passion for sustainability and social enterprises did not matter as much as I expected. I also found it interesting that the two interviewers used to work in industries that sounded very commercial and unethical to me. At the end of the interview the interviewers told me explicitly that the company does all these 'good' things, but that I had to realise that it is also a commercial company that sells a product. This made me reconsider my idealistic idea about the organisation, but I realised that the interviewers had commercial functions within the company. This explained to me why they were focused on commercial aspects. During the interview the focus was mainly about the internship itself and my potential research, without talking about anything that related to ethics or sustainability. What I also noticed, was that they tried to figure out my personality. Several employees explained to me why recruiting people with a certain profile is very important for the company.

"Billy: And to be honest I don't see much of the time when people, you know. There is nothing awful that I've seen so. But like I've say that's because we're recruit to have those values anyway so we bring them to work."

The quote shows that the company tries to recruit people that already fit within the company values. It also shows that employees believe that new employees - because of this reason -

will naturally behave in line with these value. This phenomenon is called corporate culture and is based on the idea that intense emotional attachment and internalisation of the company values replace formal structures (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 198). Jo described what this strict recruitment creates.

"Jo: you have to really live them but then because of the recruitment it is hard or strict when you get everybody in who lives quite those. You also feel as if you are part of something, you, there is no discord. There is not a difference. People are there working together for the same things and they are motivated by the same things. So that makes a huge difference to me."

Jo explained that the recruitment facilitates that there is 'no discord' and makes employees experience that they are part of something and are motivated by the same things. This phenomenon can be described as homogeneity and is another characteristic of corporate culture. The underlying approach is that homogeneity gains efficiency and effectiveness caused by unity thinking (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 197).

The way the interviewers tried to figure out my personality was by asking me to describe myself, what kind of person I was in a group, and how I would react in certain situations. I felt like I had to prove my commercial skills and act like a very social, funny and extravert person. I think this feeling had to do with the impression the interviewers gave me. I felt uncertain, but did not reconsider the job for one second. I still really wanted to believe in the things I read on the internet and really wanted to get to know the company better.

Butterflies

The first week I started working for the company, I felt so happy and blessed to work for my favourite company. It was more of an introduction week than actually executing tasks, which gave me the opportunity to get to know the team and the company. There was a lot of attention for my introduction process, which corresponds to what Sam told me, who has worked for the company from the very start:

"Sam: So we had a very good induction process when we started back then. Which was kind of a week-long with different people, different sessions in the business so a session with me, a session with someone to talk about marketing basics. Commercial basics. Operations. How the office works. How the culture works. So after a week you kind of had this intense, like seminars of different parts of the business. Which really helps I think."

The described attention for the induction, shows the importance of the introduction process for new employees. Employees get told how the business works, why it works the way it works and how they are supposed to behave. I really noticed that I saw and heard the company values (natural, entrepreneurial, responsible, commercial and generous) everywhere. In the building, in the books, on the website etcetera, which made me think they were very important to the company. These symbols of the values can be seen as a way to socialise and train employees with the aim to gain a common way of sensemaking and

therefore 'control' the culture (Vermeulen & Koster, p. 198). Sam and Bobbie told me more about the origin of the values:

“Sam: We started as a group of friends and we all understood each other, we all had the same values. But you don't discuss that, you don't do that with your friends. But after employing 100 people you have to start thinking about how do you explain to people why this place exists. Why the company is what it is.

[...]

Lisa: Do you think the values shape the organisation or do you think the organisation shapes the values?

Sam: Hmmm. God. That's a good question. I think it is partly back to that point of the people shape the values as in the beginning. I don't think we were smart enough at the beginning to know what our values were. I mean we are kind of.

Lisa: So since when are they actually like written down?

Sam: Probably after we had been a business for five years. ”

Sam explained that the company values are a result of the values the first people within the company shared. The values were not discussed, until the company grew up to a 100 employees after five year and they felt like they had to explain them to make people understand them and get them involved. Bobbie said something similar when we talked about the connection between the first people and the values:

“Bobbie: You can feel the brand is like a reflection of their personality. And a reflection of the people who started the business as well. So also the first twenty people who worked here.”

Bobbie sees the values as a reflection of the founders and the first people within the company. The quotes together show the origin of the values and that they can be seen as a representation of the vision the founders and their friends shared.

During my first week participating in the company, everyone was really friendly and I received an inbox full with e-mails to wish me a warm welcome. This made me feel really welcome and excited to meet everyone. My manager asked me to read the brand book and a book about the story of the company, which is written in 2009. The story somehow makes people love the company, which is what happened to me as well. The good intentions of the founders together with the funny stories about how the company struggled at the start to become successful created a lot of sympathy for the company and the founders. Jo told me about a similar experience:

“Jo: So I resigned and read the book about the company and on that base I was like I just have to get a job at this company. So I didn't have a job, moved back in with my mum and I was like right I just know that this is making me happy. And it wasn't a good financial decision to leave but uhm. So I read the book and I realised how much I identified with it and just the plain speaking, the everything about it made me feel excited. So that translate ultimately down to the values.”

Jo described how everything about the story determined an intense feeling of excitement. Jo really wanted to get a job at the company after reading and strongly identified with everything about it. Charlie had the same, but then by having a conversation in real life with the founders:

“Charlie: Yeah I think if you talk to them, they left their jobs because they wanted to run a company differently you know. So actually you can wear whatever you want cause that's not really important. What we are really interested in is what you can add to the company. What your quality of thoughts is. They also talked about I guess people being on the bus for the journey and contributing rather than just being on the bus for a ride. And I think they had a vision about where they wanted to grow the company so they had the. They were just guys full of energy. If you compare that to the corporate world where I was in, that was really really different.”

The story of the company shows what the founders believe and why they believe what they believe. Storytelling can be seen as an entertaining way of creating reality with the aim to frame employee's' way of sense-making by teaching people implicit about the norms and values of the company (Boonstra & Caluwé, 2006, p. 61-62). The story basically explains the vision of the founders. It says they believe in businesses that make the world a better place. They wanted the company to act differently than the regular companies in the corporate world. They wanted to contribute somehow and not just 'being on the bus'. This shows that they had an ethical motivational reason for being. The tone of the story is very informal, comprehensible and fun to read. Employees get encouraged to dress informal, which can be seen as a characteristic of neo-normative control with the underlying assumption that these aspects are associated with conformity and organisational loyalty (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 9). The underlying message of the company story however is more serious and pedantic, which is not directly obvious at the surface. When I searched for the aim of the book, it became clear to me that it sends 'framing' messages that influence the way employees think about what is 'good or bad'. Topics that get discussed are mainly about behaviour in a prescriptive way and descriptions about what a good employee is. My direct Dutch colleagues sometimes call it 'brainwashing' in a jokey way with a certain sincerity. The book about the company story gives the following reason why the values exist:

“They set out a course about how to play the game, they keep under control your behaviour. In other words: decent values prevent that companies behave themselves as dicks when they strive for profit. We use the values as filter if we hire staff (if people do not feel personal attracted to the values, they will not gain the best for the company and we will not get the best out of them, so we do not hire them.”

The quote out the book explains that the values are meant to control people's behaviour and make sure they behave in an idealistic way instead of striving for profit in an unethical way. The quote also shows that the values can be used as 'filter' during the recruiting process, to make sure only 'good' people get hired, which are people that fit within the values. When I read the book I already understood that it tried to influence my way of thinking. Although I knew this, I still loved the story because I could only agree with the pedantic but positive messages because they sounded as nothing but fair, open and good to me. I thought they would only influence me in a positive way, which would contribute to my personal development as employee. As mentioned before, the values are exposed everywhere. Even when I sat down on the toilet I had to face them. In the next example it becomes clear how important the values are for employees and what effect they have.

"Jo: It's little things that is really in my head of you know don't be lame. When you go to the Lou, the toilets in the building you would see you've got the values in each one beneath them is things like don't be lame put the toilet roll on. And wash up or be generous make cups of tea. Generous with your feedback. Be natural, be yourself."

The example shows how the values are inculcate in employees' minds and therewith frames their way of thinking. They get reminded about the values all the time, which frames their way of thinking and therewith behaving. This shows the prescriptive character of the values, which is in line with what Ali said.

"Ali: They have been there the whole time and have been imbedded in like things like recruitment has always been there as a like sense check for every one making the right decision. You know, if you are not sure if your decision is the right one you might wanna look at the values and say does it feel like these things? Does it feel natural, does it feel responsible what I am doing and is this decision quite well. So but actually now they are so in brand that. What do I mean. They are not really talked about that much, because they are just kind of there. And I see them happening all the time."

The quote shows how the values function as a sense check of what can be seen as 'good' or 'bad'. What also becomes clear, is that the values are really integrated in the culture and therefore in people's behaviour. Although there are not many strict rules, the values seem to replace them and get maintained by the employees itself. I felt strongly motivated to do a good job for the company, which I never experienced in that extent before. This feeling of loyalty and sense of belonging can be seen as a result of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 9). I truly believed in the values, felt connected and really wanted to behave in a way that was in line with the values because that felt like the 'right' thing to do. Jo explained a similar feeling:

"Jo: So to bring it back to the values. They really are. I can't overstate how important they are to me. Because the fact that they are important because, to succeed here you have to naturally live though."

The quote shows how important Jo thinks the values are. Jo even thinks that they are conditions to succeed as an employee, which indirectly means people fail if they do not live the values naturally. Because I noticed how important the values are for the company, I wanted to include the values in my research somehow, but did not directly know how. I decided to use a positive method of researching (appreciative inquiry theory), because I thought it would fit to the culture of the company. This was really important to me, since I felt strongly motivated to deliver a research that could support the company. This was even more important to me by the time than my individual interests connected with my research. I basically felt like the company's interests had preference and forgot the actual aim of my research, which was developing myself as a researcher and producing a good research to graduate. I was obsessed by the company.

In my third week I had the honour to fly to London and have my first interviews. My Dutch colleagues already told me that I could experience the strong culture really well by being in the headquarter of the company. Everyone I spoke to in London was really interesting, inspiring and passionate about the company. I loved the way they talked about their jobs and noticed how proud they were to work for the company. I felt really impressed, excited and even more blessed to work for the company after hearing this. It felt butterflies in my tummy and was proud to be part of such an amazing company. Even when I was in bed the impressions repeated in my head. The company had all my attention and I noticed that I even dreamed about things that were related to the company and my research. Something else I noticed during interviews, was that the positive approach did not bring me to the core. It gave a really positive perspective on everything, which felt like a one-sided view. I only heard a lot of praise about the company as a result of the positive way of questioning combined with the positive culture of the company. Everything was amazing, everyone was doing great and ethical topics like sustainability were really important for everyone. Since I am a big advocate of sustainability, I was a bit more critical about the things employees said about this topic and sometimes felt like people gave socially desirable answers rather than truly honest answers. Everyone gave very similar answers to my questions, which was in line with the different sources of the communication of the company, like the books and messages on the walls in the buildings. This can be seen as an example of how symbols that communicate framing messages to employees really do affect the way people make sense to reality on a uniform way (Yanow, 1996, p. 156-157). This goes against what the book about the story of the company says about 'being natural'.

"We want people to be their natural selves at work so they bring their own personality to the business and their own personal values when making business decisions."

The quote of the books shows that people are encouraged to be their natural selves, but in practice the uniform company identity seems to be more dominant. On the day of the goodbye party of one of the directors, I discussed this topic with him while walking to the office in London. He told me how he thinks being natural means something different for everyone since we all have different backgrounds. He felt like he could not always act natural, because people in London did not appreciate it. In contrast to the ruling organisation culture he was more critical and not scared to give his opinion straight to the point, which he also did during his end speech. He asked people to please be open for other cultures and understand that being natural can mean something different for different people. After the

speech the whole room was quiet and later I heard that employees said they were not used to get feedback on such a direct way. This example represents how little space there is for individuality, while the communication about the policy says that employees are encouraged to be their true selves. During interviews with other employees I also noticed the ruling optimistic and positive approach. My questions - based on approached of the appreciative inquiry theory - only provoked a positivity perspective and instinctively I started asking more critical questions during the interviews. Maybe it is good to add that my research started with a focus on sustainability out of personal interest and due to current sustainability developments within the company that attracted my attention. When I noticed that the findings of sustainability actually showed characteristics of something bigger - the company culture - I decided to change my focus.

Already at the very start that I participated in the company, I mentioned the ambition of the company to grow internationally. Since the start of the company the ambition existed, but the past years the focus seemed to be shifted to commercial goals like growth and efficiency. Commercial and sustainable goals seem to go right against each other and decisions that have been made were often more commercial than sustainable. A topic that arose quite often was the trade-off between sustainability and the commercial side of the company. This tension came up in a lot of interviews. The next quote shows how the values are in conflict with each other.

“Lisa: Is there also a value that is sometimes like in the way or a value that is hard to deal with?”

Ali: I think that we have a. Two values that sometimes conflict with each other a little bit.

Lisa: Which ones?

Ali: Which is eh being commercial and being responsible.

Lisa: Okay yeah.

Ali: And quite often to get the biggest commercial win, that doesn't mean being responsible. And you don't want that. You have to kind of make a trade-off between the two of like how we are gonna decide this and how we are gonna make show that we feel comfortable with what we are doing. But also the business is growing, we are not compromising on the fact that we wanna be number one and it's not. The two are sometimes not the best friends. Those two values and that can be. That's difficult to manage I think.”

Ali described that there is a trade-off between being commercial and responsible, due to a conflict between the two values and mentions that the trade-off is shown in 'decision making'. The company wants to be the number one brand in the category, which apparently does not always go together with sustainability goals. Ali said: “we are not compromising on the fact that we wanna be number one”, which also shows that the commercial goals have had preference. The next quote shows that Jo gave a similar answer:

“Lisa: And is there one of the values that is sometimes in your way or one that you don't like that much?”

Jo: [...] But I think looking to the future that will be a bit more of a challenge. And the other one I think is commercial. Because commercial is, there is always a trade-off with sustainability. And you know. The values, if they are 20% each, for five of them. You know a sort of ebb and flow depending on decisions. Sometimes you've got to make a decision, which is less sustainable but commercially it is the right thing to do. Because you've got to take the business in a good, really great direction, win more business and then ultimately maybe you can make it more sustainable. But if you make too many decisions which are based on commercial over sustainability then you are eroding the foundation of what the business is. And that is the trade-off there you know. Being responsible and commercial together.”

The quote shows that Jo spoke about the trade-off as if it was common sense. Jo describes that the trade-off comes up in decision making. Jo spoke about “take the business in a really great direction” and also said “ultimately maybe you can make it more sustainable”. This sounds like the commercial direction is ‘the great direction’ and later on there is ‘maybe’ a possibility to make it more sustainable. This represents the ratio of the importance between commercial and sustainable. The other thing Jo said is that if commercial decisions are made over sustainability too often, the foundation of what the business is erodes. This means that the business can go against the own values if people make too many decisions that are more commercial than sustainable. Brett told me more about how the focus of the business has changed in the past years.

“Brett: I think now there is maybe some confusions about you know. Oh this makes more profit, it might be a bad sustainability decision but it is a good profit decision. I think many people now would make the profit choose.”

Lisa: Is it like a trade-off between those two?

Brett: Yeah and I think people need to know what so that they can be more open, so that they can discuss those trade-offs. Maybe they would still make the profit choice. But I don't think at the moment that it's discussable as it should be.”

Brett described that the trade-off can be confusing for people who make decisions and that most of the people would make the profit choice rather than the more sustainable one. The employee realises the trade-offs need to be discussed more, which indirectly means it is not discussed much. The previous three examples together show that employees experience a trade-off between the sustainable and commercial side of the company. They mainly relate it to decisions that people make and employees mentioned that the attention has been more on the commercial side, rather than the sustainable side. It seems like the trade-off does not get discussed often and people within the organisation see the commercial decision more as ‘the right one’ than the more sustainable one. What I have experienced as an employee, is

that people within the business always spoke about market share, profit, sales and so on and rarely about ethical topics like sustainability. I realised this company just acted as other corporate business, while I actually expected more discussion about the ethics. The only people who discussed sustainability, seemed to be the sustainability team itself. I believe that there are people within the company with a sustainability passion, but I have rarely experienced this. People were more focused on other things, like growth and innovation which Hayden explains in the following quote.

"Hayden: I think we've just been growing really fast and we've got a lot to do. And we have focused on growing the business while still making good choices but we haven't therefore been able to kind of make resource and investment decisions that ever allowed us to over invest in sustainability. We have done the right amount of stuff rather than more and know we've kind of chosen to do it more."

Hayden explained that the focus was on other things, like growth. Also, the choice to say that: "the company has not been able to over invest" in sustainability is interesting. 'Over invest' suggests 'investing more than needed', which assumes Hayden thinks it is not necessary for the company to invest more in sustainability. Jesse described a similar change in focus:

"Lisa: Why do you think they are doing that? Trying to talk more about it? And why didn't they do it before?"

Jesse: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So we used to, back in, when we first started we used to really care about sustainability. We used to make a lot of initiatives like recycling packaging and as we have gone through a massive transition of getting bigger. I think sustainability is fallen off the way a bit.

Lisa: Because they were focused on business?

Jesse: So yeah, they were like we need to make money and we also need to support the foundation and we need to innovate, making new products. So it's just like a lot going on. Whereas now, they have realised that they have gone off."

Jesse described how the company did really care about sustainability in the past, which has weakened because of focusing on other things like growth and making money by going through a massive transition. The word transition implies that the company went over from one stage to another one.

To understand better what caused the changes of the last years, I asked the employees what exactly changed. It might be good to explain that the company has been taken over by a very large company seven years ago. Employees told me that the company could stay the same and hardly anything had to change. But what I also heard informally, is that the big company pushed the company to get bigger and to enter new markets. Once I heard people talking about a particular country where the company actually did not wanted to be active,

but they 'had to' start the business there because 'the big company pushed'. I discovered this link after I asked employees about the biggest changes, like in the next conversation with Ali.

“Lisa: Do you think the company has changed a lot? From when you started and now?”

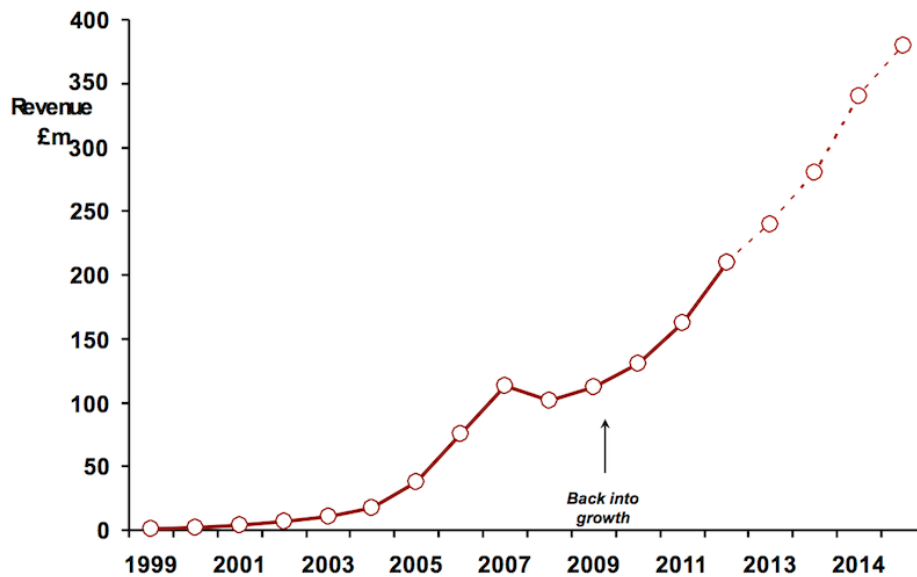
Ali: It has changed a bit. Surprisingly I don't think that the big company hasn't hardly changed it at all. It's just the same as it was before, where we were before. As a structure it's the biggest difference, like how structured we are. And it's more processes than 8 years ago. There is more like budgets and more like kind of descriptions and little controls in a place because when you are like a 100 people, you kind of know everybody and you can. Your founders can kind of keep an eye on what is happening. But when you start. When you are with 350 people and 4 different regions, there does need to be some kind of like boundaries in a place. So it's more structured now.

Lisa: And is that better you think?

Ali: Hmm, we are more professional now. I think we know more what we are doing. Like, we are more educated now and have more expertise now and I think we have more confidence now and actually I think the time where it was very unstructured and entrepreneurial, it is quite big for that. You know in 2007, it was quite entrepreneurial and unstructured and that was also when the economy was booming and actually we were riding on a bit of a wave of like consumers who were trying more things and were happy to spend 2,50£ on a product and stuff and in 2009 the business needed to change, we just needed to be a little bit more clever about what we were doing. So we had to adapt, but I think it's right that you become more professional as a business. We've kind of grown up and then we talked about like 2009 being a teenager and now it's a graduate you know. Now we're knowing what we are doing a bit more.”

Ali started by saying that the organisation has not changed at all. Directly after that, Ali started talking about the changes in 2009. It is very interesting that the company has been taken over by a big multinational in 2009 and 2010. This is exactly the same time as Ali described the changes. Management buy-outs (MBOs) are often connected with a reconsider of the company strategy and its associated management control system (Bruining, Bonnet, Wright, 2004, p. 155). Ali said that there was not much of a structure until 2009/2010. Before, the company had more of a startup structure. Ali described that it was 'necessary' to get descriptions and little controls in place to make sure people keep doing things the way the founders wanted it. Ali thinks the company had to adapt because the economy was not booming anymore: things 'needed to change'. I think this is what the company used as an argument against the employees to justify why things were going to change and to create support. Ali described the transition from startup to a more professional business as 'grown up' and uses the metaphors from 'teenager' to 'graduate' to describe the change. I have heard more employees using the metaphor from 'teenager to graduate', which I think frames the change on an understanding and positive way. The described process of transformation is also called leaping from one state to another

(Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009, p. 318). I looked into the company's revenue to see if this transition was visible.



Graphic 1 (CTM file, 2014)

It is very interesting to see that the company indeed got back into growth around 2009/2010 and almost quadrupled the revenue in a period of 5 years. This correlates to the story of Ali. When I asked Ali if it was better to be big, the answer was that 'it is more professional now', which does not necessarily mean that it is better. It was more something that 'had' to happen by getting bigger, the employee described. The next quote shows how Jesse also describes how the business got more 'business savvy'.

"Lisa: Do you feel like it has changed from the start till now?"

Jesse: There is more people and we've gone. When I first joined the company one of the founders was still here. So there has been quite a lot of transition if it comes to leadership. But I think fundamentally it's the same. Like the kind of culture. But I think as we get bigger, we just get more kind of business savvy. Don't know if that makes sense but in terms of the actual culture I would say it's pretty simple. The kind of people that we hire are quite similar what means that it kind of has a consistence feel."

In the previous example Jesse mentions the 'leadership transitions' and that 'there is more people' when I asked about changes, although the people that are hired are similar. The fact that Jesse thought about the leadership transitions first when I asked about change, already shows that the employee directly connects the word 'change' with the 'leadership transition'. Jesse describes how the company gets more 'business savvy', but says at the same time that the culture is fundamentally the same. The employee describes that this is because the kind of people that are hired are quite similar. In the next example Bobbie describes how the company has changed in the last ten years from startup to multinational.

"Lisa: And do you think when the company gets older and older, do you think it's easy to

let it stay the same? The same values?

Bobbie: My experience is that, I've been here a long time. 10 years is quite a long time and in many ways it feels very different the business. Because it's more. It's bigger, it's a bit more corporate. When I joined it was almost a startup but actually the heart of it is still exactly the same. The values are so strong, which is great and I've seen so many come and go that the people I work with now are almost completely different to the people I worked with at the beginning. And yeah. It does feel. It feels the same. Which is really nice. So I hope if it gets bigger that it would stay the same. I think it does rely on everyone in the business and the people at the top just making sure that they are really checking in on the values and making sure that people are living up to them. But it feels like people live it. Not because they told to but because they believe in it and they want to.

In the previous quote Bobbie explains that the company has become bigger and therefore more corporate. In contrast to what Jesse said, Bobbie describes first that 'the business feels very different' and later that 'it feels the same', which is contradictory. Bobbie explains how 'strong' the values are, and thinks that it's very important to keep checking on the values and making sure people live them up and believe in them. This shows how important the employee thinks the values and the culture are. It also shows that Bobbie wants the values to stay the same. The examples together show that the company has gone through a transition from startup to a more 'corporate business'. They described that the company is now bigger, more structured and more corporate. The 'leadership transitions' are directly mentioned when I asked about changes, together with the company takeover. This illustrates that people connect changes directly with these leadership transitions. The founders who created the values left the company and the biggest part of the company share is now owned by a big and powerful multinational. The values have always stayed the same, but it seems like the shared vision of the first people within the company turned into a corporate culture to impose people to keep acting within these values.

Lovesickness

When I was back from London, I tried to apply more focus on my research. I was so impressed by the company, that I wanted to research in a way that was in line with the positive and optimistic company culture. When people gave presentations they presented very persuasively and highlighted how good the company and all the employees were doing. I really noticed that the words they used to frame topics were really positive. They would always say 'challenge' instead of 'problem' or 'issue' for example. This phenomenon is called euphemism and is used to recloak the bad as being good. Things are not what they seem, but what the sender wants us to see (Vickers, M.H., 2002, p. 107). The interior of the offices are very informal. In the big communal area you can play games, cook food in the big fully equipped kitchen and relax. These objects can be seen as symbols for being playful and having fun, which are characteristics of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 9). Also the many events that get organised for employees symbolise how a fun environment is encouraged. In the building there are many party pictures of employees on the wall, to show the fun memories of working for the company and to symbolise that 'having fun is good'. On the website they write about: "What is life like at this company?"

31-07-2016: *"We want to create a business we can be proud of. So to make this happen, we need brilliant people who inspire and deliver change all around them. That's why we're always looking for talented, ambitious and altruistic folks to come and join us. We think it's a great place to work and are lucky enough to have been nominated for a few awards to that effect."*

The copy of the website shows the positive approach. The choice for words like 'brilliant, talented, ambitious people' and 'a great place to work' illustrate this. Also, when the board gave presentations they kept repeating what a 'great job' everyone was doing and how 'proud we should be'. By hearing this I actually did feel very proud and blessed. To understand better if other people within the company also feel 'happy', I discussed the topic with different employees.

"Lisa: So is it true that everyone is always so happy?"

Andy: I think so. I think it's quite a challenge the environment because it's very busy and often everyone feels like they are doing more than one job. Cause there is a lot going on. But actually that creates a really good vibe. A good atmosphere because everyone is thriving and you know. Because of the way that the company recruits, you end up with a lot of people that are quite similar. Have similar interests, similar passions and we all believe in the company so actually you sometimes feel a bit like you're at school but in a good way because you've got lots of people who are like you and people you just really enjoy working with or sitting with or you know. And that's just. That's just because of what the company has created so I think it's a very engaged team and all of the fun stuff that we do means that people get to know each other better and feel like they are working with their friends. So there is a good balance but there is a real like hard working up here. And that's not something I've ever seen before. We have that balance of lots of fun and really hard working. So it's nice to see."

In the quote Andy explains that the kind of people that get hired are similar and that they all believe in the company, which facilitates cohesion between employees. Andy explains that the result is that employees feel connected with each other and have 'fun' with each other. This feeling of propinquity and connectedness is something more employees mentioned in previous quotes. The effect of this positive approach could sometimes make me feel really happy as well. If I already felt happy, the feeling got strengthened somehow. During days I was not as happy, I felt like I still had to act happy and positive, in order to comply with expectations. I remember that I did not dare to be critical during meetings, while now I have realised that my opinion actually could have contributed. Someone who was not hesitate to be critical, was my manager. During meetings he would ask critical questions and would start discussions. Although I thought a discussion was good, it also got him in trouble and people did not appreciate his words. Going back to the point about trying to act happy, this was something Sydney came up with as well. I did not record it, but made a note in my notebook directly after the interview:

24-02-2016 Sydney told me that everyone in the organisation works really hard while being positive and happy. Also, after coming home from work, Sydney sometimes feels

really exhausted and unsociable because it is very tiring to always be funny and happy. Being home feels like a 'recharge' from work. Sydney said: "Sometimes you just don't really feel that happy, but it feels like the right way to act happy."

My note shows the way Sydney felt the pressure to act happy and funny which results in feeling exhausted and unsociable when coming home from work. This shows that the employee has to behave in a way that does not always match with the authentic self. This goes against the approach of the company that employees are encouraged to be their 'true selves' and 'act natural'. It is interesting to see that being happy and having fun can have such a 'negative' impact due to a forced way of acting. This is similar to what Ali describes.

"Ali: There is such a high standard of really smart, friendly, entrepreneurial people who really get their jobs and actually really want to do it and bring a positive attitude to work."

Ali spoke about how there is a 'high standard' and explained that people get expected to 'bring a positive attitude to work'. Now I have realised that this could be a distorted view and employees sometimes act to meet expectations. By then, I was overwhelmed by this positive mind setting and felt like I had to use a similar approach for my research. Not long after, I woke up in the middle of the night with the idea to create a sustainability tree of wishes from employees, to use as data and to gain input for interviews. My (marketing) manager really wanted me to gain marketing insights as well and the sustainability manager actually wanted me to get away from topics around sustainability policy. The reason for this, was that the sustainability manager was developing a new sustainability strategy and did not want to create confusion for employees. The tree would also give too much confusion and gain expectations. This is why the sustainability manager asked me to focus more on international differences instead of topics that were connected with sustainability policy. I even got asked to cancel my planned interviews. After I heard this, I felt like there were too many interests to satisfy and I felt very frustrated. I was also thinking about the scientific relevance of my research that did not seem to go together as well with the requirements of the company as I hoped. From that moment I noticed a lack of trust, because my manager told me that they forbid me to do my research my way because I am still a student and not a professional consultant. My manager explained that I now experienced the political side of the company by executing my research. I tried to make it clear that I was really prepared to do what I could do considering the scope of my masters. It was not that I did not want to listen to the expectations of the company. I only wanted some understanding for the fact that it was very important for the reliability of my research to stay independent as a researcher. My manager said that I am just not an independent researcher, since I work for the company and get paid to execute my research. After I heard this, I went to the toilet to cry and to get rid of that horrible feeling in my throat from trying not to cry. I felt underappreciated, not understood and feared for the reliability of my research. I slept bad and the following weeks I felt uncomfortable during my internship, because I felt like I had to perform and prove myself but could not. I felt like I had to choose between a potential career at the company or a valuable research. As feedback on my research proposal my manager wrote me the following e-mail (translated from Dutch to English):

“As discussed, it is essential that the sustainability manager is on board with your plan. I advise you to write a management summary that consists of a few sentences that explains your goals, plan and methods. If the sustainability manager again advises you strongly to focus on international differences and similarities, then that is a must.”

This example shows how compulsory people could be if I did not listen to them. It also shows that there was a lack of space for my personal desires. I really felt suppressed at that moment, because there was no freedom to execute my research, while they said at the start to me that I was free to research whatever I wanted. I kept feeling uncomfortable at my work because of the pressure and felt like I disappointed people. This caused a feeling of disappointment in myself. This experience of individual failure can be seen as another characteristic of neo-normative control due to incongruence with the company expectations (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2). Why can I not just execute a research? The metaphor for first love counts here as well, since that feeling of insecurity can be very similar. I loved but hated the company at the same time. I loved the company itself, but hated the way it affected my feelings. Maybe I was more disappointed in myself than in the company, because I could not deal with a little bit of politics. This was also the moment that I decided to update people less about my research, to prevent interference and to stay independent as a researcher. Whereas I first prioritised the organisation, I fully choose for myself and my research. Before I blamed myself, but I came to the realisation that the company had such a negative influence on my mood. My intentions were good and I worked hard but apparently that did not matter. After realising this I did what I had to do as a marketing intern, but was silently more an undercover researcher than an employee. I think this was for me the only way to deal with the situation and it helped, because it gave me a lot more rest. I did not care as much anymore about people’s opinion within the organisation and listened more to people from outside the organisation.

Assimilation

After some setbacks I started to enjoy working and researching again more and more. I did a better job within my internship, the collaboration went smoother and I felt like I really started to understand the way things went more and more. My performance improved considerably, which really motivated me. My manager stopped interfering with my research and I silently continued without involving other employees. This is also the period where I was not as observant anymore, because ‘the love made me blind’. The culture became ‘normal’ to me and I knew how to behave and act. This phenomenon can be seen as a certain form of indoctrination due to the neo-normative control that framed my perspective on reality (Kunda, 2006, p.223). I knew what people expected me to do and my self-confidence returned. I could not think about any values that were better than the values of this company. I thought my research was not interesting at all, because people were already aware of the current ‘challenges’ and were working on this by developing a new strategy. When I discussed my results with my professor, he made me realise how relevant my personal experiences were and how special the culture of the company is. The updates I gave about the process of researching were actually more interesting than my original research topic: “employees’ sensemaking of sustainability”. During the ‘lovesickness’ time, the notes in my logbook described the downside of participating in the company, which felt too scary to include in my thesis. I realised that this critical approach had a lot of potential to discuss an

unspoken topic from an insider's perspective. I also came to the realisation that I was incorporated too much in the company as an intern and researcher to see the authenticity of the culture. It took me a lot of effort to swap back to a more critical approach, because it felt wrong. The critical approach felt like doing something that was not allowed, which also kind of excited me due to the rebellious side of my character. It felt uncomfortable at the same time, because I was scared. Scared for what other people within the company would think. I knew that it did not fit within the culture of the company to talk about things in such a critical way. While I was writing I thought about employee's reactions and that scared me. Since every employee always praised the company so much, I also realised that a more critical approach could be even more interesting and valuable. With the aid of the literature, I started looking at my data in a different way. This is when I started seeing things in a different perspective - independent of the organisation - and started to value the company in a different way.

The break up

When the end date came closer, I noticed that the love slowly faded away. I got shut out of meetings and I noticed that people were more apprehensive with sharing information. At a certain point there was a special weekend where all the employees of the company came together, but I was not invited. I already knew that the weekend was not meant for 'interns', but it was still painful to see messages and pictures coming in on my phone while I sat home, working on my research. My research had full priority again, while my care for what other people within the company would think 'faded away'. Since I knew I would leave the company soon, it became easier for me to write in a critical way. Whereas it first felt as 'wrong' to write critical because it would go against the culture, I realised that it was actually more than fair to do. I felt disconnected from the company and really experienced a certain distance. While it might sound sad, I really felt a weight off my shoulders. This liberation gained the last bit of courage I needed to write my research as an independent researcher. It felt like I could fully be myself again and realised I should not blame myself for the feeling of discord. The organisation I experienced just did not match with my expectations.

Summary

This story represented how a company can change by growing international and the effect of having the founders bought out. The intentions of the founders seem to be nothing but good, but the way these idealistic ideas about the business gets maintained changed. The idealistic vision nowadays gets maintained by neo-normative control, which basically means that the culture creates unspoken rules that get socially maintained. At the surface it seems like the company gives employees a lot of freedom and encourages individuality, but it rather feels like you are caught up in a business where everyone behaves very similar. It shows the influence it can have on the way employees feel, which might seem only positive at the surface but can actually gain a lot of negative feelings that are unspoken because employees are encouraged to be 'happy employees' at a 'great place to work'. In the communication of the company to employees and its consumers it sounds like the company still cares greatly about ethics like sustainability, but in practice there seems to be a focus on commercial goals like growth at the expense of sustainability. Since the company erodes its

own values by doing this, it is a sensitive topic that employees rather avoid than discuss. Everyone is expected to think and act in uniformity and discussion seems to be missing.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the results together with literature that helped me understand and rediscover my data. I will show how my data can be seen in the light of theoretical approaches and I will discuss existing contradictions. As explained in the methodology chapter, the analysis will be from a combined interpretative and critical approach. The interpretative perspective helped me to get insight in the culture, while the critical perspective supported me by reflecting on the culture. I will start with a discussion about the transition from local startup into international organisation and how this transition is connected with the emergence of neo-normative control. Furthermore I will discuss the concept of corporate culture itself with the neo-normative form of control. I will show how the characteristics are visible in my data and how they differ. Subsequently, I will discuss the tension between individuality versus uniformity and will finalise with a summary.

Organisational transition & management buy-out

Organisations go through different life cycle stages that are alternately stable and changeable (Mintzberg et al., 2009, p. 333). In the transition phase from local startup into international company a period of rapid growth is reported with a focus on efficiency and commercial purposes. The company once began as local startup with three ambitious founders who had an idealistic vision. House and Shamir (1993) defined vision as “*an ideal that represents or reflects the shared values to which the organization should aspire*” (Baum, Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1998, p. 44). Whereas first the company values were unconscious shared values of a friend group, the company entered a stage that they had to explain the story to the new people and therefore reflect on these shared values. They created ‘the five values’ to give direction to the strategy and the culture of the company. The company entered the organisational life cycle phase of rapid growth with a focus on growth and efficiency. This stage of rapid growth is a stage organisations enter when the initial markets become limited and so have to enter new (international) markets. Although the company is entering the maturity phase now, actions still seem to be dominated to enhance efficiency at the expense of their own company values. After the phase of rapid growth, organisations usually enter the so called ‘maturity stage’ with new challenges like ‘controlling’ and maintaining the entrepreneurial spirit and globalisation Lewis & Churchill (1983, p. 30). In the literature the change is described as transition from one state to another one, which is also called ‘leaping’ and is connected with changes in leadership and power (Mintzberg et al., 2009, p. 318). A change in leadership is also the case in this company, since the company got taken-over by a big multinational around 2009/2010. People within the organisation always tell me in interviews that the multinational hardly changed anything, but described at the same time the changes during the time that the company got taken over. They described the changes as: “more structured, more descriptions, more controls, more boundaries, more business savvy and more corporate”. This is called an increasing controlling system and is connected with management buy-outs (Bruining et al., 2004, p. 162-168). In the literature the effects of management buy-out are reported as improvements in the quality of information, intensified formal controls, more disaggregated feedback and the use of management accounting techniques to communicate managerial philosophies. In other words, the vision

of the founders has turned into a neo-normative control system which will be discussed in the next category.

Corporate culture & neo-normative control

Corporate culture can be explained as: *“The art of creating strong corporate cultures by ‘shaping norms,’ ‘instilling beliefs,’ ‘inculcating values,’ ‘generating emotions.’ ‘Strong cultures’ are based on intense emotional attachment and the internalisation of ‘clearly enunciated company values’ that often replace formal structures.”* (Kunda, 2006, p. 10). By created symbolic forms of the desired dominant sense-making of the organisation, the employees are trained or socialised to act within the culture (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 198). In a corporate culture employees basically get controlled by normative control, which is a collective cultural identity that frames what is ‘good or bad’ by moulding common attitudes, beliefs and values among employees (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 2). From the start that I entered the company, it was clear to me that the culture was ‘strong’ and that the values were really important within the organisation. The values serve as a ‘filter’ for the recruitment and after the recruitment, the introduction process for new employees starts. Employees get ‘trained’ and ‘socialised’ to become part of the uniform identity of the company and therefore behave within the organisational culture. The introduction process teaches the ‘good and bad’ and therefore frames the way employees make sense to the world (Vermeulen & Koster, 2011, p. 195). There are also physical symbols of the values visible in the building to remind people and create this uniform way of sense-making. Even in the toilet the values were in front of my eyes when I sat down, so that I could not miss them. Another method that is used to shape the culture, is the entertaining book about the story of the organisation. This is called storytelling and creates new realities to facilitate transitions and emotional processing of occurrences (Boonstra & Caluwé, 2006, p. 61-62). Employees feel really connected with the values and say that they are integrated in the culture. Employees ‘live the values’ is what employees say or even ‘are’ the values. Employees told me that the values in the early days have set out the direction of the company and the culture. Now employees see the values as a representation of the culture. The culture is all about ‘being natural’ and ‘having fun’ and they called the office a ‘great place to work’, which would enable employees to be the best version of themselves. The description of this form of normative control is almost identical to what I just described. Neo-normative control is described an emergent approach to managing employees which emphasises ‘being yourself’ through the expression of fun, individuality and difference (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 1). The underlying approach is that this leads to loyalty and conformity of employees in favour of the organisation. Employees within the research organisation could wear what they wanted and the norm was rather ‘informal’ than ‘formal’. In the literature a tension is mentioned between uniformity & loyalty against individualism, entrepreneurial risk-taking and self-reliance (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 10-11). I have seen this tension in practice and will discuss this in the next category.

Individuality versus uniformity

While the original form of normative control attempts to create a uniform identity and loyalty by manipulated symbols, the neo-normative form stimulates individuality by encouraging employees to express their true selves at work. An observed form of manipulation is euphemism and is used to recloak the bad as being good. The sender frames the way

employees are meant to see things in the company in a more positive way (Vickers, M.H., 2002, p. 107). The underlying approach of the original form of normative control is limited, since it does not have space for natural individual variation depending on employees' contexts. This lack of space for individual variation is something that I have experienced in the organisation. I could not execute my research the way I wanted to do it and it was an eye-opener for me when the leaving director told me that people did not appreciate his way of being natural. In other words, he could not express his authentic self and had to change his behaviour to fit in the culture. While uniform values create efficiency and extreme loyalty, this uniformity is contrary to individualism, entrepreneurial risk-taking and self-reliance (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 10-11). Uniformity can create counter-productivity on innovation and initiative in fast changing markets because the reality outside the organisation differs from the uniform way of sensemaking within the organisation (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 4). It also creates a lack of discussion, since employees are encouraged to think the same. Although the company has a lot of similarities with the neo-normative form of control, the desire for uniformity is more in line with the original form of normative control.

Beside the downsides of uniformity, there are also limits reported to the toleration of individuality (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, p. 10-11). Since organisations are social alliances consisting of people that have to represent one whole, the value freedom is not unlimited. In the 'organisational transition & management buy-out' is explained that the next phase after a rapid period of growth is retaining the entrepreneurial spirit while creating a holistic globalisation culture. There seems to be a tension between retaining the entrepreneurial spirit and creating a holistic globalisation culture due to the associated opposing needs for uniformity and individuality.

6. Conclusion

In this research, I studied the phenomenon neo-normative control by using my personal experiences during my time as marketing intern. I researched the emergence of neo-normative control and the consequences of 'controlling' the organisational culture by stimulating fun and individuality. I have combined my personal experiences with interviews and the study of symbols to understand and reflect on the transformed organisation in a critical way. My research gives an answer to the research question:

“What are the implications to a newcomer to participate in a company that changed from a local idealistic startup into an international company that uses neo-normative control?”

This research reveals the unspoken experiences of participating in a company that has gone through a transition from local startup into international company. The focus has been on neo-normative control that is meant to 'control' the culture by stimulating people to be their authentic selves and creating a playful environment that is meant to create conformity and organisational loyalty. I discovered the emergence of neo-normative control by studying the life cycle stages the company has gone through. Employees mentioned a revolutionary change around the buy-out of the founders, when the company was taken over by a big multinational. A period of rapid growth continued, together with a focus on efficiency. These changes in strategy are a known phenomenon after management buy-outs. The period of growth is also a known phenomenon in the life cycle of companies, when they enter new markets due to the limits of the initial markets. The next phase usually starts when companies have reached the advantages of size, financial resources and managerial talent. The new challenges of the organisation are globalisation and maintaining the entrepreneurial spirit. Control systems get intensified and new techniques are required to communicate the managerial philosophies. Employees experienced that the company became more corporate and controlled while the focus on growth and efficiency continued.

In practice neo-normative control leads to manipulation of the culture in different forms: stories, metaphors, rituals and architecture create one dominant way of sensemaking. Euphemism is used to frame 'bad' things in a more positive way. Neo-normative as a way to 'control' the company might sound attractive due to the advantages of efficiency, cohesion and organisational loyalty. During my research I have experienced the downside and contradictions. Whereas the intention is that people can be their true selves at work, I noticed how little space there is for individuality and input from newcomers. Employee's behaviour always has to fit within the artificial uniform corporate identity which they describe as 'high expectations' or 'pressure'. By the recruitment only the people get hired who are a match with this uniform identity and after the recruitment there is an extensive introduction process that socialises and trains employees to 'live the company values'. The manipulated symbols remind people daily of what is 'good or bad' and gain indoctrination by imposing one uniform way of sensemaking. This uniform way of sensemaking causes no space for individual variation depending on people's context. It facilitates a lack of discussion, because people are not able to see things from a different perspective different than this uniform way of sensemaking. This artificial unilateral perspective can be dangerous for innovation and initiative in fast changing markets due to the different reality outside the organisation in

comparison to the perspective within the organisation. With these insights I hope to contribute to the discussion about the suitability of neo-normative control and the discussion concerning individuality versus uniformity within organisations.

Reflecting on the research strategy, I can conclude that a positive approach did not help me researching the organisation. Since the organisation already framed everything in such a positive way, it gave a biased view. While participating in the company I started seeing things through the imposed uniform way of sensemaking. With the help of people from outside the organisation and the literature I liberated myself from the organisation. A more critical approach offered a counterbalance against the ruling optimistic and positive status quo and supported this reflection. I now believe in the advantage of researching by using a perspective that goes against the status quo, so that the problem can be seen in a different perspective which can create new insights.

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