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Factors Affecting Group Identity of Cluster Structures

Abstract:

The paper provides a new approach to cluster analysis, basing on a sociologically rooted concept of identity. The authors state that identity in cluster structures is formed by two main groups of factors – uncontrollable or slightly controllable factors (identity mix) and factors that can be fully controlled by a cluster initiative (corporate identity mix). It means that the cluster coordinator is able to consciously build the identity of a cluster structure and reinforce the identification of individuals with one another and with the group as a whole. Thus, effective management of a cluster initiative can highly strengthen its identity whereas strong identity interacts back (in a positive way) with the efficiency and stability of a group. By contrast, poor management of an initiative tends to weaken group identity and, in the long term, it can lead to disintegration of the whole cluster initiative. The methods of the study are systemic and logic analysis. More advanced studies are needed to test the concept of identity for cluster structures and confirm the working hypothesis.

Key words:

clusters, cluster initiative, group identity, corporate identity, identification, identity mix

Introduction

Both economic and managerial sciences rarely refer to the category of identity, particularly in relation with organizations at higher levels of aggregation that include cluster structures. Moreover, many theoretical and empirical papers on cluster structures are focused only on strictly economic factors, which are not sufficiently diagnostic in study of cluster phenomena. However, it appears that applying the sociologically rooted concept of identity to analyze the functioning companies or groups of companies (in a form of a cluster or a cluster initiative) may support the processes of understanding of cluster phenomena.

The term "cluster structure" cited in this paper is meant to refer to two group forms, namely to clusters, which derive from Porter's concept (Porter, 1990, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2008), and cluster initiatives – introduced to the science literature by the authors of *The Cluster Initiative Greenbook,* i.e. Sölvell, Lindqvist and Ketels (Sölvell et al., 2003).

Porter employs a wider meaning of clusters, including institutions as part of clusters. According to his definition, clusters are "geographic concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, firms in related industries, and associated institutions in particular fields that compete but also cooperate" (Porter, 2008, p. 213). Such a broad approach in defining the clusters is applied also by other scientists (i.a. Feser, 1998; Van Dijk, Sverisson, 2003; Gorynia, Jankowska, 2008; OECD, 2002).

As far as the authors of the article are concerned, they define clusters in a narrowed way (Lis, Lis, 2014) – the designatum they apply is a sectoral and geographical concentration of enterprises that are related with one another by means of commercial and non-commercial relationships and which, at the same time, interact and compete by means of the synergy effect (the advocates of such a narrow approach are also Cooke, 2002; Enright, 1992; Enrigh, 1996; Maskell, Kebir, 2005; Padmore, Gibson, 1998; Rabelotti, 1995; Roelandt, Den Hertog, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1997; Swann, Prevezer, 1996).

Cluster initiative is a type of "working cluster" (according to the classification of Rosenfeld) (Rosenfeld, 1997) and refers to "organized efforts to increase the growth and competitiveness of clusters within a region, involving cluster firms, government and/or the research community" (Sölvell et al., 2003, p. 9). Additionally, the activities involve such different parties of the triple helix as, for instance, enterprises, academic institutions, bridging institutions (intermediaries between business and science) and public authorities.

"Incorporating" such diverse groups of entities into one "organism" provokes reflections on the possibilities of developing a coherent and stable identity for such a group. On the one hand, the main attributes of a cluster structure (i.e. co-location, branch affiliation, ties based on trust and shared developmental trajectory) are likely to indicate a strong identification of its members with one another and with the group as a whole. On the other hand, the fluid geographical and branch boundaries, the lack of formal cooperation contracts and the lack of capital connections in a cluster as well as a rather "fragile" structure of a cluster initiative (variable group composition, loose connections among the members or their involvement in other business activities) may significantly impair the discussed identification.

The main aim of the study is to apply the concept of "identity" into the theory of clusters, and to determine the factors affecting the identity of cluster structures.

The objectives of the study are following:

- Firstly, the authors systematize the broad knowledge concerning group identity in management studies, and provide their own approach to define the term of group identity in relation to cluster structures.
- On this basis, the authors identify components of group identity of cluster structures, and – among them – they distinguish between two main categories: factors beyond control of an organization (the identity mix) and factors that can be consciously implemented in an organization to form and develop corporate identity mix.

The working hypothesis of the study is that identity can be consciously built in a cluster initiative, because "internal organization" and "communication and symbolism" have been identified in the created identity concept for cluster structures as crucial components that affect a sense of unity in such groups (both are classified to the category "corporate identity mix"). Thus, effective management of a cluster initiative can highly strengthen its identity, and consequently stability of the whole group, whereas poor management tends to weaken group identity and – in the long term – to disintegration of the cluster initiative.

The methods of the study are systemic and logic analysis.

Group identity in management studies

The literature studies on the issues of identity in management studies conducted by the authors indicate a significant confusion in the subject matter terminology due to the ample approaches and their disciplinary. The studies oriented on business identity may be divided into three main streams: corporate identity (Balmer, 1998), organizational identity (Whetten, Godfrey, 1998) and visual identity (Chajet, Shachtman, 1998). As far as the science literature is concerned, it is rich in terms relating to identity, some of which are as follows: corporate personality (Olins, 1978), corporate image (Grunig, 1993), corporate reputation (Fombrun, Van Riel, 1997), corporate communications (Van Riel, 1995), total corporate communications (Balmer, Gray, 1999) and corporate brand (Macrae, 1999; Balmer, 2012; Blombäck, Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012). Review of concepts related to the business identity can be found in: Abratt, 1989; Abratt, Kleyn, 2012; Balmer, 2001; Fombrun, van Riel, 1997; Grunig, 1993; Melewar, Jenkins, 2002; Otubanjo, Melewar, 2007.

However, the literature lacks consensus on the accurate meaning of identity, its related terms and a precise distinction among them (Abratt, 1989; Van Riel, Balmer, 1997; Balmer, 2001; Cornelissen, Elving, 2003). Such

a conceptual confusion is emphasized by Balmer, who using a metaphor of fog to describe the level of the study of business identity, points out that it is the confusing use of terminology that has contributed to the creation of this fog more than any other factor (Balmer, 2001).

In regard to both the definition and the components of corporate identity (the authors refer primarily to this concept of business identity), there are various approaches and classifications (recent literature provides a description of the development of the theory of corporate identity: Cornelissen et al., 2012; Balmer, 2008; He, 2012; He, Balmer, 2013; Leitch, Davenport, 2011). Corporate identity is described as the aggregate of elements, which makes a company unique, this includes corporate culture (philosophy, values, mission, history), corporate vision, corporate communication, corporate design (symbolism), corporate strategy, corporate behavior, corporate structure, industry identity (Balmer, Soenen, 1999; Balmer, 2001; Schmidt, 1995; Steidl, Emory, 1997; Melewar, Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Urde, 2003). Moreover, some scientists suggest a distinction between the elements comprising a business identity and the elements to be considered in managing a business identity. Balmer and Soenen were among the first who made such a distinction and introduced two categories of elements in business identity. The first category – the business identity mix – embraces three main components, termed metaphorically: the soul (culture), the mind (strategy, structure) and the voice (communications), while the second category – the business identity management mix – includes additional combination of elements: environment, stakeholders and reputations (Balmer, Soenen, 1999). In turn, Cornelissen proposed a conceptual framework for the study of corporate identity management, distinguishing four factors: environmental characteristics (political/legal, market/economic, technological, industry sector, global, cultural), organizational characteristics (corporate strategy, culture, structure), management processes (positioning strategy, codes of conduct, communication programs), and dimensions of corporate identity (media: sym-

bolism, communication, behavior, massages: consistent corporate image) (Cornelissen, Elving, 2003).

Additional attention is drawn to the insufficient theoretical elaborations as well as empirical scientific research that concern group identity (some references to the group/collective identity can be found in: Balmer, 2008; Berson. et al., 2004; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Podnar et al., 2011). This concerns especially the organization at higher levels of aggregation. The literature mostly focuses on the analyses of holding or parent company identity, whereas there are few studies on the identity of subsidiaries, the identity of alliances and consortia, and more broadly – industrial identity (Balmer, 2001).

Remarkably unsatisfactory are the studies that relate to cluster identity and cluster initiatives. Although the literature on clustering is noticeably rich, symptomatic of the whole problem is that in the developed definitions of "cluster" and "cluster initiative" there are no, with the exception of those introduced by Altenburg and Meyer-Stamer, direct references to the issues of identity. According to the authors, the most essential determinants of the cluster structure comprise "a sociocultural identity made up of common values and the embeddedness of local actors in a local milieu which facilitates trust" (Altenburg, Meyer-Stamer, 1999).

The issue of identity in clusters is discussed by: Zamparini A., Lurati F. (2012), Staber U. (2010), Sammarra A., Biggiero L. (2001), Kasabov E. (2010). Moreover, on the basis of the literature review the authors have identified few references to the regional identity (Mettepenningen et al., 2010; Simon et al., 1995), regional industrial identity (Romanelli, Khessina, 2005), as well as network identity (Öberg et al., 2011; Simões, Mason, 2012; Peteraf, Shanley, 1997).

In reality, the key to explain the mechanisms of creation and development of cluster structures is understanding the fact that these are principally social groups made up of non-individual entities (e.g. in a form of corporations and institutions), which consist of acting human beings who

certain individual identities can be assigned to. Identifying a man with any creature of non-individual character tends to result in building a group identity in him/her, therefore both for individual companies as well as cluster structures (being their aggregate) the category of "group identity" should apply. Regardless of the level of aggregation of an organization, group identity should be perceived as "intersubjectively agreeable, relatively homogeneous concept of organization present in the identifications of individuals that constitute this structure" (Lis, Lis, 2013).

It is worth noting that for groups whose aim is a long duration (this category includes cluster structures), which is particularly important is to develop mechanisms extracting a particular group and its members from the reality ("distinctiveness") and building internal cohesion and a sense of commitment of the participants to one another and the structure as a whole ("sameness") (Lis, Lis, 2013). This issue is also raised by Znaniecki, who claims that "a group exists mainly by the fact that its members consider it as existing in isolation from the rest of the world; each member belongs to it mainly due to the fact that others refer to him/her and he himself/she herself to others as members of the same group, unlike the non-members" (Znaniecki, 1973, pp. 40–41).

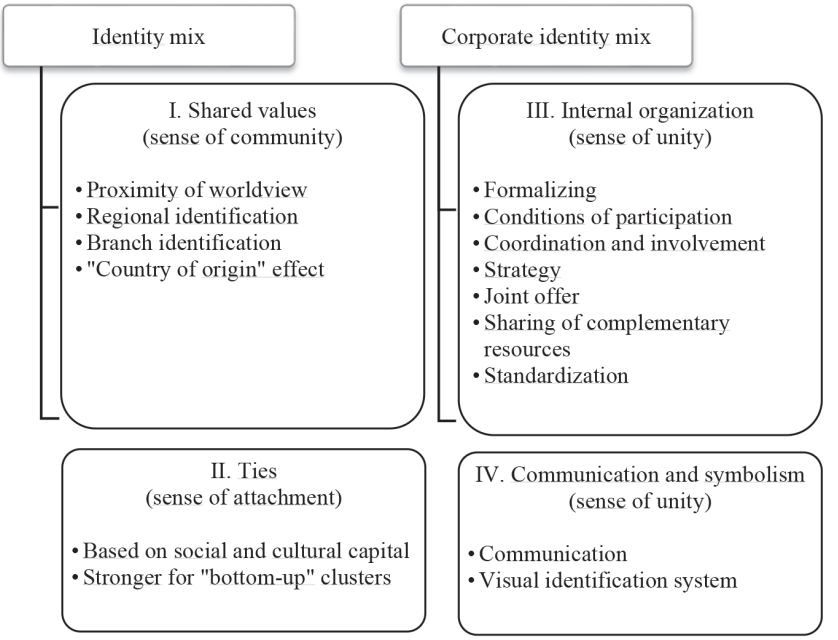
The concept of identity in cluster structures

The process of forming group identity in cluster structures (as in any other organization at a higher level of aggregation) is not only long-drawn and complex but also influenced by many different interrelated and reinforcing variables[1]. As far as clusters and cluster initiatives are concerned, the authors suggest two sets of factors affecting group identity of cluster structures: the identity mix, which includes

1. First reflections of the authors on the identity in cluster structures are described in: Lis, Lis, 2013.

a commonly shared values and ties, and corporate identity mix – comprising internal organization, communication and symbolism. The applied division enables to distinguish aspects that are beyond an organization's (a cluster structure) affect (or the effect is little) from those that can be consciously implemented in the organization to form and develop a collective group identity at the level of cluster initiative (such actions are complicated in the case of a cluster, which is discussed in the subsequent part of this article) and to strengthen the identification of its members with one another and with the group as a whole. The following diagram presents various components of identity mix and corporate identity mix.

Figure 1. The concept of identity in cluster structures: Identity mix and Corporate identity mix



Source: own study.

Shared values

Shared values, when referred to a cluster structure, mainly refer to the similarities of members that co-create it – it may be stated that a similarity of values joins members, allowing them to take action of a non-individual character (Lis, Lis 2013). Shared values in a cluster and a cluster initiative include primarily a similar worldview approach of the members, which is noticeable via, for instance, analogous internalized social norms, ethical values or formal and informal shared ideologies, and strongly shaped by an affiliation with a branch and a common location in a particular geographical longitude.

A cluster (by its very definition) is a specific community of entrepreneurs belonging to the same (or related) branch, facing similar opportunities and threats, connected with one another due to similar problems and a common trajectory of development (branch identification), coming from or residing the same territory, and so closely related with the history, traditions, customs, language and cultural norms that are characteristic of a certain place (regional identification). Branch affiliation together with "placement" in a specific environment introduce specific operating conditions for the companies involved in a cluster structure, including branch-specific and location law, administrative practices, know-how, markets, raw material markets and the labor market. Not without significance is also the "effect of origin", i.e. the national culture that gives rise to companies and which determines, inter alia, behavior, style of work, rules of conduct and social norms. Such an imposed framework (the branch and location ones) provides content to everyday reality of a cluster or a cluster initiative, thus, in fact, the core of a structure's group identity (Lis, Lis, 2013).

Ties

Among the most important determinants of a cluster structure (apart from geographical and sectoral concentration) that are usually listed, one should mention strong and enduring ties among its members – it can be noticed that within a cluster they appear stronger than with external entities (outside a cluster). Ties within a group take the form of coopetition (Brandenburger, Nalebuff, 1996; Walley, 2007; Dagnino et al., 2008; Cygler, 2009), which means that its constituent entities not only cooperate (cooperative ties), but also compete with one another (confrontational ties). Each cluster (and a cluster initiative) features a different potential to create this type of ties; ties of each cluster also vary from one other in terms of intensity and durability. Such an ability to create effective networks of ties within an organization (here in the structure of a cluster) refers to the category of social capital, whose high level indicates that a cluster (and its members) maintains a certain number of ties with other entities (both internal and external), being, in consequence, able to use their knowledge, skills, experience and opportunities to act, which enhances synergy that results from the cooperation.

Another form of capital that is worth considering in the context of ties in a cluster structure is cultural capital, understood as an aspect of knowledge, skills and competencies possessed by an entity of social life, which enables him/her to operate in different areas of a particular social reality. As far as cluster structures are concerned, the resources within cultural capital may include knowledge and experience of the entrepreneurs (and their employees) involved in a cluster structure, the strategy (at the level of an individual company and the cluster one), introduced technologies, common products, cultural norms, trust, solidarity, reciprocity and loyalty[2]. The greater resources of cultural capital a cluster structure is provided with, the

2. Mentioned most frequently in the literature on social capital.

more successful it will pursue its goals through the cooperation of all the engaged members. Location proximity greatly facilitates the increase of cultural capital resources in a cluster – small distances among the individual members of a cluster allow for a rapid flow of knowledge, in particular the "tacit" and "sticky" one, which, unlike massive and codified information, is not only hardly precise but also difficult to transfer, and therefore requires a "handshake" – repeated personal contacts and meetings (Lawson, Lorenz, 1999). Enterprises within a cluster have access to collective knowledge that is unknowingly passed among them by means of the demonstration effect (Rogers, 1995), learning-by-doing and learning-by-using (Malerba, 1992). Thus, from the point of view of stability and efficiency of a cluster structure, it is not only the very resources of each capital that are crucial, but also, above all, a conversion of one form of capital into another one (social capital into cultural one and vice versa).

Social and cultural capital are thus very important determinants in shaping and strengthening ties among a cluster structure members. Such a strong sense of attachment with other group participants may translate into a greater identification with the whole group (a cluster or a cluster initiative), especially if it takes place spontaneously (which is common for bottom-up clusters) and not by means of imposed measures (as it often occurs in top-down clusters). Clusters that are formed bottom-up are usually characterized by associational ties („więź zrzeszeniowa") (Rybicki, 1979, p. 676) and their entities, united voluntarily, establish relationships with their copartners due to the perceived shared values or a shared interest. Therefore, formalizing cooperation in bottom-up clusters (in the form of a cluster initiative) means constituting the existing relationships by giving them a specific legal framework rather than building these relationships from scratch and inducing artificially cooperation mechanisms, as it is the case in top-down clusters. Externally imposed ties („więź stanowiona") (Rybicki, 1979, p. 676), typical of top-down clusters, is not a good basis for develop-

ing a collective identity, which explains why bottom-up clusters appear to be formations of a much more solid structure and a stronger group identity that can be implemented to human beings in the form of identification with a given cluster structure.

Internal organization

The two key components of identity – a sense of community and attachment may be (intentionally or unintentionally) reinforced by taking specific actions in an organization. With regard to a cluster structure, conscious influencing the form and content of identity can be only considered when working clusters are concerned (Rosenfeld, 1997), i.e. such clusters that are self-aware and able to develop their full potential as well as achieve synergy effects. These cluster structures usually formalize their cooperation in the form of cluster initiatives.

Focusing on the issue of identity, it is such a self-conscious and constituted cluster, namely a cluster initiative rather than a potential cluster (Rosenfeld, 1997), that is much more likely to build a consistent and permanent group identity. There are the same attributes reinforcing identification as the ones that characterize a group (e.g. strong connections within a branch, location proximity, common cultural and social capital), thus eliminating partly those factors that weaken the process of shaping a collective identity in a cluster (i.e. the fluid geographical and branch boundaries, low barriers to entry and exit, the lack of formal cooperation agreements, the lack of any organizational structure and the lack of capital ties). In contrast to clusters, a cluster initiative introduces clear rules of membership and the entities joining it (appropriately chosen on the basis of certain characteristics of similarity) consciously decide to belong to the group, taking on certain rights and responsibilities, agreeing to perform under a collective name with the other participants, which is likely to evoke a sense of

belonging and community. In view of the above, further issues on internal organization include a reference only to a self-conscious and constituted cluster, namely a cluster initiative.

Cluster structure formalization plays a different role in the identity processes of top-down and bottom-up cluster origins. In top-down clusters formalization appears the only way of emphasizing the fact of a new entity, whereas in bottom-up clusters formalization is applied to already existing relationships and developing group identity, strengthening both these factors, and thus strengthening the solidity of the grounds which a given cluster structure is based on. Having constituted a cluster structure makes it the biggest objectively approved whole (so far it was a single company) and allows for taking specific actions aimed at a further development of a collective identity (based on such objectively confirmed determinants of identity as the name, logo, legal form, statute and strategy).

The first essential step towards achieving corporate identity mix in an initiative is its appropriate "design" and allowing for its impact on the individual components of the identity (such as, for instance, branch and regional identification, similar worldviews and ties) by including all these factors in the mechanisms of selection and a selective choice of the cluster initiative members. In all cluster initiatives, since their origin, it is expected to make some relevant assumptions about their size (the number and geographical scope) and its basic dimensions (such as diversity[3], width[4], depth[5]) coherent with the profile of admitting members, on the basis of which a list of "entry/exit" criteria could be created[6].

3. An institutional form, e.g. an enterprise, an R&D institution, a bridging institution.

4. A sectoral scope: basic and related branches.

5. The number of levels in a value chain.

6. In the criteria for members selection, apart from factors underlying shared values and ties among the members (similarities), there may be requirements for a competitive position, innovation potential, existing relations with the other participants of the initiative, reputation, declared willingness of intensive involvement in the initiative issues.

The prepared codified conditions of participation in a cluster initiative enable to achieve, and in a subsequent period of time to maintain, an adequate number of its members. Although a cluster initiative should unite all groups interested in the development of a cluster, it emerges that the more numerous and diverse a group, the more complicated it is to build a sense of attachment, all the more a collective identity. An uncontrolled growth of a cluster initiative entails a drop in its efficiency (the larger the groups, the less they are successful; Olson M., 1971, p. 28), limits the involvement of the participants in the activities for the whole, impedes communication and the flow of knowledge and information. Moreover, in a large group one may notice significant discrepancies among the members of an initiative (e.g. in motivation while joining the initiative, potential, branch, size), resulting in a lack of consensus on common values and its goals, which in turn negatively affects the process of identity formation of a group.

Thus the framework imposed on an initiative introduces a possibility of assembling entities with common features, which significantly improves the likelihood of developing a bond among them, and, in the long term, ties with one another and the cluster initiative as a whole. Nevertheless, (associational) ties remain primary to a structure, and not vice versa (a structure evolves on elements already linked by ties). It indicates that durable and strong ties among initiative constituents (the members) are predominant to determine the quality and durability of a group identity in cluster initiatives and the identification with an initiative as an entity of a higher level.

In addition to formalization, the second key stage in the process of forming and maintaining the identity of a cluster initiative is to appoint the leading body in the structure (according to the degree of involvement and identification with the initiative) and formally designate them as coordinator. In practice, it is usually the founder (or the co-founder) of an initiative, who identifies with the group the most owing to their involvement in establishing the group.

Coordination of cooperation in an initiative is indispensable since it allows for directing the members' activities, who still remain separate entities focused on a daily basis on the implementation of their business, to common goals. The coordinator acts as "the pack leader": leads the whole group, sets out a strategy for development (with the other members' approval), initiates joint activities, is an intermediary and a mediator (helps in reaching a common position, eases conflicts, creates an atmosphere of mutual trust). Finally, due to their superior or central position within an initiative, a coordinator has a major influence on a group identity formation:

- as the founder (or the co-founder) of an initiative, they have the opportunity to influence the creation of various components of a group identity, "design" a model for a future identity of the initiative, and, above all, co-create shared values (that are the core of a proper cluster structure);
- as "the pack leader" they become a guardian that watches over a proper direction of the cluster initiative development which has been previously agreed on.

The latter scope, namely leadership, also concerns involving all the participants in actions for the initiative, regardless of their level: a strategic, tactical or operational one. Individual group members should not only take advantage of the profits arising from the participation in the initiative, but also make their own contribution to the development of the initiative through implementing joint projects (division of labor, work groups formation), creating a joint offer or participating in the joint costs (membership fees). Thus the requirement of commitment to initiative issues (by means of one's own time, effort, resources) becomes a natural mechanism of further selection of partners. On the one hand, it will result in excluding from the group of partners all those who are not interested in cooperation and fulfillment of common objectives; on the other hand, it will increase involvement of other participants of the initiative, strengthening their identification with the group.

From the point of view of the dissertation on group identity, there are also four other very important components of "internal organization", namely strategy, joint offerings, shared resources (sharing technical infrastructure, providing complementary resources) and standardization of activities. A common strategy indicates that all the constituent entities joint into one unit (in the framework of a cluster) face the same direction, identify with the same mission and similar goals. One of such goals may be creating common market offerings, a common brand of products (or services), and going a step further – creating a common brand for the initiative. Co-branding should oblige all the participants to act according to certain patterns of behavior so as not to expose the whole group (and each participant separately) to a risk of losing a positive image among key stakeholders. A good practice in an initiative (also in any other organization at a higher level of aggregation) should therefore implement common standards (particularly in the area of quality) developed for each main group of entities that co-create an initiative (these could be particular branch standards or the ones imposed by the group).

As mentioned earlier, the elements discussed above are the basic attributes of a "common" organization and important components of a group identity. Having introduced the items to the initiative level, on the one hand, makes the constituent entities realize that they collectively form one "organism", on the other hand, creates a consistent message to external stakeholders about the unity of the organization and corporate identity mix.

Communication and symbolism

The significance of the role of the coordinator in constituted cluster structures and the leading actors in informal structures is particularly evident at the final level featuring the components of a group identity, namely the efficient network of communication among the members of a given structure.

In both formal and informal clusters it is the leading body (the coordinator) that acts as the central link of the communication structure in a cluster, generating as well as receiving the biggest amount of information. Their role is far from mere passive monitoring a situation in the group; by contrast, it means an active influence on the strategy and current activities. Moreover, the coordinator provides a neutral platform for knowledge and information exchange in a group; they may also initiate and promote regular contacts (formal and informal) among the individuals representing constituent entities of initiatives in a form of business meetings, conferences, training and integration trips, which not only improves the formal flow of information in a cluster structure, but also translates into bridging gaps and strengthening ties among the members. In addition, the coordinator is responsible for corporate communication, i.e. the actions taken to establish contacts with entities outside the cluster structure. Internal communication (among the members of a cluster or an initiative) and external (between a cluster or an initiative as a whole and external stakeholders) is the simplest, yet most important action entities can take on at any level of aggregation, also in terms of identity. Improper functioning of communication in a cluster (or a cluster initiative) is likely to interfere with the flow of information within intersubjective identifications of individuals, and thus distort the image of group identity.

Very tangible evidence of belonging to an organization is visual identification system, which consists of symbols[7] and rules applied in organizations to communicate their identity and gain a clear and consistent market identification. In literature, symbolism has always been recognized as a crucial component of a group identity. It is regarded as the source of corporate identity – originally, the notion of identity in organizational nomenclature was synonymous with the logo and visual identity (Van Riel, Balmer, 1997).

7. The symbols applied by companies by means of the Visual Identification System can be classified into five main categories: organization name, slogan, its symbol (a sign and a logotype), colors and typography.

Visual identification is a component of corporate communication of any organization (regardless of the level of aggregation), which by particular symbolism, thus some external, visual attributes of group identity, tries to issue a proper message to the other participants of the social life on its identity so as to be perceived as well-known and recognizable. By reference to such external manifestations, visual identification emphasizes the specificity and diversity of the existence of a group when compared with other groups of a similar type. Owing to visual identification, an organization is able to build positive relationships with external stakeholders (based on loyalty and trust), creating and consolidating the desired image on the market.

With regard to cluster structures, visual identification concerns the most basic and the same for all participants symbols of organization (such as a unique name, unique logo, an advertising slogan), which is the focus for a sense of identity of group members as well as external stakeholders. The use of visual identification in cluster structures, similarly to other organizations, allows for a clear distinction between entities belonging to a grouping and other market entities, emphasizing, in the same time, the common identity. Bearing in mind the cohesion of group identity formation, it is advised that visual identification adopted by the members of a cluster structure correspond to the branch specificity in which a particular structure operates as well as to the tradition and history of the region in which it develops.

Conclusions

Cluster initiatives are becoming more and more prevalent socio-economic structures in many countries. They constitute a part of (sometimes the whole of) a broader cluster structure (cluster) located in an area and highlighting its "assets" (the synergy effect for companies, the increase of competitiveness for the region), and cutting off from their "defects" (an undefined scope of a cluster, problems with managing such an imprecisely defined aggregate).

However, in addition to purely economic terms for a cluster initiative operation, one should identify a number of factors that affect it. Proper management of these factors – apart from right decisions of the economic nature – will certainly translate into success of a cluster initiative and achieve its goals. One of the key factors is corporate identity mix, which largely determines not only the effectiveness of cooperation among the partners, but – in a much wider context – stability of the whole structure. Some of the components of identity are formed quite independently of any actions undertaken by an organization (regional/branch identification), some others are minimally influenced by the organization (ties). However, there is also a (relatively large) group of elements that can be consciously implied in the group to strengthen its identity. Since it means that an organization can partly affect identity, the coordinator is expected to build consciously the identity of a cluster and reinforce the identification of its individual entities with one another and with the group as a whole.

The issues raised in the article concern topics hitherto neglected both in the scientific literature and cluster practice. The authors, however, take the view that the theoretical and empirical development (based on extensive research, including a variety of cluster initiatives) of the concept of cluster structures identity proposed above will significantly contribute to an increase in scientists' and experts' knowledge of clustering as well as strengthen the actual mechanisms of action and functioning of clusters and cluster initiatives. The issue of identity of cluster initiatives should be perceived as an interesting and open platform for discussion and exchange of experience whereas the conclusions drawn from the article – as only the beginning of a scientific study on the discussed matter.

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