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Cover Page Footnote

Katharine E. Miller is currently an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. This piece was written when she was as a graduate student at Purdue University, where she completed her doctoral studies and recently graduated in August 2019. Katharine would like to thank Dr. Josh Boyd for offering valuable feedback and recommendations through the early drafts of this manuscript.

Ideographic Identity: A Rhetorical Analysis of the YMCA's Organizational Identity Rhetoric

Katharine E. Miller

This paper presents an ideographic, rhetorical analysis of the identity rhetoric presented by the nation's largest nonprofit organization, the YMCA—an area understudied in organizational communication and qualitative research. This analysis explores the rhetorical approaches taken by nonprofit organizations, and the YMCA specifically, in attempting to build and communicate identity to communities in which they belong. Specifically, I analyze the organization's identity-building rhetoric through the use of both textual and visual ideographs in a variety of artifacts to determine whether or not these strategies are effective.

Keywords: ideographs, organizational rhetoric, organizational identity, nonprofits, YMCA

As a 68-year-old retiree and recent survivor of an aggressive case of breast cancer, Marla was in desperate need of activity and purpose in her life. Never being a fitness buff, she often strayed away from gyms or any form of physical activity. Then when her doctor encouraged her to find a program to help her cope with the lingering effects of chemotherapy and cancer treatment, there were no apparent options. Still on Tamoxifen, a drug to help prevent the cancer's return, Marla felt the effects of leg pain and whole-body achiness daily, only prolonging her avoidance of anything remotely physical. Then, she heard about LIVESTRONG—a free, three-month program offered by the local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) for cancer survivors promoting the importance of physical health post-cancer diagnosis. After 12 weeks of conquering her fear of the organization's exercise machines, embarrassment from not being in top physical shape, and frustration associated with the pain, Marla “graduated” from LIVESTRONG and has since changed her entire physical and mental health routine. Now an active participant in a number of group fitness classes, she volunteers at her YMCA to help other cancer survivors on both an emotional and physical level.

When we think of the YMCA, we most likely picture a fitness and lifestyle center and may know about the different activities and initiatives these places offer. We may even know a Marla, who reaped the physical benefits of a disease-centered program, like this LIVESTRONG program

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offered by a local YMCA. But for the past 160 years since its inception, this particular organization has become *so much more*. The organization has continued to strategically evolve, increasing its symbolic importance in people's lives. As one of the most iconic and successful Non-Government Organizations (NGO) in the country, the YMCA "has shown remarkable ability to adapt itself to differing community needs and to expand its membership base to groups previously outside of its purview" (Zald & Denton, 1963, p. 215). Originally set to serve men of the Christian faith, the organization has grown from engaging one million members in 1930 to nearly nine million youths and 13 million adults nation-wide today. Like all organizations, and nonprofits worldwide, the YMCA fills a particular niche and place in the nearly 10,000 communities it serves ("YMCA: About Us," 2017).

Most often, organizational identity rhetoric has focused on large, for-profit conglomerates. While literature encourages the consideration of nonprofits in analyzing influence and place in society (Dempsey, 2011; 2012), there is room for rhetorical work in understanding and analyzing nonprofit organizational identity. Broadly put, nonprofits or NGOs are "non revenue-generating organizations guided by social missions" (Dempsey, 2011, p. 445). The following critical analysis uses the YMCA as a case study to explore the rhetorical approaches taken by nonprofit organizations attempting to build and communicate identity. Specifically, I analyze the organization's identity-building rhetoric through the use of ideographs in a variety of texts. The YMCA particularly uses a variety of ideographs in its rhetoric to engage with publics and affirm its identity as an organization. Through this analysis, I present and explicate the historical use of ideographs by the YMCA as an effort to build identity and identification with relevant stakeholders, including employees, community members and partners, and benefactors. To do this, I first present relevant literature on the topics of organizational legitimacy, organizational identity and rhetoric, and the rhetorical element of ideographs situated in nonprofit contexts. I then present my analysis of four texts created and presented by the YMCA's national office and one local YMCA branch. Finally, I offer broader implications and contributions of this work.

Review of Literature

In this section, I present and explain relevant literature related to organizational legitimacy and identity in the context of ideographic rhetoric specific to nonprofit organizations.

Nonprofits and Organizational Legitimacy

Not-for-profit organizations are uniquely situated in organizational communication literature and continue to garner attention as these bodies are experiencing increasing legitimization pressures leading, ironically,

to a focus on financial outcomes for growth and long-term sustainability (McDonald, 2007). As Dempsey (2012) argued, “amidst enormous economic uncertainty, rising levels of inequality, and steady declines in state funding for social services, nonprofit organizations provide increasingly critical social, political, and economic goods and services” (p. 147). Due to the increase of these pressures in societal contexts, nonprofits are urged to seek competitive advantage through innovation (McDonald, 2007) and legitimization. While scholarship has long occupied work on the centrality of nonprofits to the collective well-being of society, there is more opportunity for understanding how these organizations negotiate such crucial responsibilities through the communication of identity rhetorically. This project aligns with recent scholarship that carefully considers the relationship between organizations and society, especially as NGO influence on economies grows (Stohl & Ganesh, 2014).

With the distinction of a not-for-profit entity comes the challenge for legitimacy. Hearit (1995) presented a set of criteria organizations must fulfill to both achieve and maintain legitimacy within the communities to which they belong or serve. Particularly important for the communication of identity are the concepts of community, or social sanction, and competence.

Corporations, and all organizations to that end, are dependent upon their surrounding environments and therefore, “can only survive to the extent that they can convince their social environment that their use of exchange power is ‘rightful and proper’” (p. 2). While nonprofit organizations may not hold these larger power dynamics, they must still persuade community members that their services are needed or important to society at large. As Dempsey (2011), argued, while NGOs tend to “be thought of as providing a counterbalancing force to the power wielded by corporations, they are not exempt from their own problems related to accountability” (p. 445). Connected to Hearit’s (1995) idea of “community” or “social sanction” (p. 2), these organizations must be explicit in how their policies affect the larger system.

Additionally, organizations, in general, must present a certain level of competence (Hearit, 1995). Competence equates to effectiveness by the organization, “the ability of a corporation to ‘deliver the goods’” (p. 2). This is especially pertinent to nonprofits, whose missions are often to achieve some larger goal or create social change, such as the YMCA. Nonprofits function in ever-changing environments; they are held to higher standards than their for-profit neighbors and are almost entirely dependent on surrounding publics (Sisco, 2012). Additionally, they “are also organizations shaped by the wants and needs of their external environments” (Sisco, 2012, p. 4; Hafsi & Thomas, 2005). In conjunction with obtaining and maintaining organizational legitimacy, nonprofits are then charged with distinguishing their identity—one that communicates that the organization is a unique, important and, above all else, indispensable benefactor to the societies in which they function or even serve.

Organizational Identity

In this section, I provide an overview of the concept of organizational identity, primarily from a rhetorical perspective and situated in a nonprofit context. Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organizational identity as “what is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization,” often answering fundamental questions of “Who are we?” “What kind of business are we in?” or “What do we want to be?” (p. 265). Important to understanding identity is the perspective that identity is not static, but rather is constructed through communication (Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2014; Koschmann, 2013; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In short, identity is how organizations answer the question of why they do things, emphasizing the *uniqueness* of their existence. Thus, it is vital for organizations to communicate their overall identity through external rhetoric in order to appeal to and relate to members (Cheney et al., 2014). This communicative-centered approach highlights the central role that rhetoric occupies for organizations in trying to build and maintain their identities and, in the case of the YMCA, generate financial support and recruit potential members.

Organizational Identity of the YMCA. The YMCA is a cause-driven organization and the nation’s largest nonprofit community service organization. For over 160 years, the YMCA, most commonly referred to today as “the Y,” has been striving to meet the health and social needs of individuals in communities throughout the United States. As a nonprofit organization, it is crucial for the YMCA to maintain a central character; claim distinctiveness from other organizations; and maintain the consistency of values, mission, and characteristic elements over time. Starting as a faith-based, evangelical lay organization targeting men, the YMCA has gone through a significant shift in identity since its inception over a century and a half ago (Zald & Denton, 1963).

In response to “environmental pressures and change,” the YMCA transformed from “an evangelistic social movement to a general service organization;” shifting its emphasis to character development as the organization slowly became the operation it is today (Zald & Denton, 1963, p. 216). The nonprofit became more secularized, as membership criteria were broadened to include both men and women, people of all religions, and all ages. This is clear in the YMCA’s current mission of strengthening communities as a whole, and statements on its national website that the organization is “a powerful association of men, women, and children committed to bringing about personal and social change... the Y enables youth, adults, families, and communities to be healthy, confident, connected, and secure” (“YMCA: About Us,” 2017). Today, the YMCA has become a character-development based and life-changing welfare organization seen in almost every city across the United States (Zald & Denton, 1963).

By acknowledging this transformation, the concept of organizational identity enables scholars to explore and examine how nonprofit organizations “sometimes struggle to restructure or ‘reinvent’ to survive and prosper in a changing environment” (Young, 2001, p. 142). As Young (2001) argued, choosing an identity is equivalent to “an organization’s defining of a ‘north star’ by which to navigate its course of action and shape strategy for the future” (p. 155). With the redefining or reinvention of identity comes the creation of certain organizational rhetoric and, particularly in the case of nonprofits, the rhetorical issue management strategy of ideographs.

Organizational Rhetoric

Organizations are rhetorical entities. In his classic piece on rhetoric, identity, and organizations, Cheney (1991) argues for this rhetorical foundation and thus the consideration that organizations are forced to adopt or adjust to/for their surrounding environments, particularly in terms of messaging. For Cheney, the public living alongside organizations must be able to examine the corporate voice that is all around us, “which speaks so loudly and so frequently in contemporary society” (p. 21). From this perspective, the organization, its identity, and its rhetoric are interrelated—as the nature of the organization (i.e., its values, policies, structure) reveal features of its persuasive, rhetorical strategies. As Cheney (1991) put it, “the rhetoric of organizational life is conceived in terms of how identity is managed on the individual and collective levels” (p. 22), and the organization’s audience members are responsible for interpreting these messages.

In connecting the concept of organizational identity to rhetoric, primarily in a nonprofit context, organizations are forced to determine who they are and what their vision for the future is (Young, 2001). Nonprofits are particularly interesting and unique to study, as they can range from the smallest, hardly reputable volunteer group to multimillion-dollar corporate enterprises, and their missions can range among countless social concerns. These organizations are pressed with the constant need to communicate identity and legitimacy in order to make successful choices regarding strategy and structure while maintaining flexibility in their ability to choose among several possible identities. Furthermore, Cheney and Christensen (2001) argue that one salient question regarding organizational identity is how an organization’s messages

...are integrated for the organization to communicate or at least somewhat consistently to its many different audiences. Without such consistency, the organization of today will have difficulties sustaining and confirming a coherent sense of “self” necessary to maintain credibility and legitimacy in and outside the organization. (p. 232)

Nonprofit organizations, particularly the YMCA, engage in a combination of various rhetorical techniques when attempting to appeal to internal and

external stakeholders and gain favorability. Specifically, the collective use of ideographs allows the YMCA to identify with various individuals who may share common values and fundamental social beliefs, and therefore buy into the mission and vision of the organization. In the subsequent paragraphs, I provide a brief overview of this specific strategy and will later identify and critique its use in my analysis.

Ideographs. Ideographs are powerful rhetorical tools for avoiding or settling debates and bringing audiences together. Boyd (2018) argued that rhetors often invoke certain words into organizational messages knowing the publics who receive them will face difficulty in rejecting the message because of the value-laden nature of ideographs. Examples of appealing ideographs may be <freedom> or <liberty>—widely accepted values that are almost impossible to oppose. Additionally, the meanings of these words go beyond their single definitions and can be made more meaningful in certain contexts and associations with other words. While much scholarship has situated ideographs in political and social contexts (i.e., Boyd, 2018; McGee, 1980), these “magic” words are commonly used for broader organizational purposes. From a rhetorical standpoint, an ideograph is a “tool employed by activist organizations or political parties attempting to ‘speak’ with a single voice” (Boyd, 2018, p. 144). This rhetorical definition aligns well with how nonprofits may use this strategy to appeal to a wider audience as a collective.

Put simply, from a corporate perspective, an ideograph encapsulates a certain ideology (i.e., buzzword) with the intended purpose of generating stakeholder buy-in to an ideal put forth by the organization (Boyd, 2018). As McGee (1980) presented, ideographs are “the building blocks of ideology” and therefore, “signify and contain a unique ideological commitment” (p. 7). Therefore, ideographs that are deemed favorable and positive by audiences will be defended and supported, while those seen in a negative light will be resisted. Ideographs are appropriate to study in a nonprofit context, as these organizations often seek community favorability and support—and undoubtedly do so through rhetoric. Additionally, I expect to see these slogan-like words linked closely to value appeals, as ideographs can provide a link between an audience’s individual beliefs and organizational values through the ties to existing abstract values and ideologies ideographs invoke (McGee, 1980). As McGee (1980) argues, “we make a rhetoric of war to persuade us of war’s necessity but then forget that it is a rhetoric” (p. 6). Nonprofits certainly do the same, allowing audiences to consider the necessary value of these organizations and also notice relationships between terms encapsulating ideologies, eventually taking the organization’s identity as given, rather than constructed. The subsequent section introduces and details the analysis and findings of this rhetorical study with an emphasis on how one specific nonprofit organization utilizes ideographs.

Method

For the purpose of exploring how identity is communicated at various levels and time points, I chose to analyze three texts posted by the organization's national site and one from a small, local YMCA whose marketing efforts are created and communicated separately from its overarching branch. Specifically, I analyzed the national YMCA's website, its publicly available strategic plan for 2014-2017 ("Delivering our Cause"), a recent video campaigning the organization's mission, and finally, a local branch's letter from the CEO from 2017. While differing in angles, motivations, and emphases, these texts were each created and/or updated throughout 2017 and are all connected to identity. Through my initial analysis, I found ideographs to be most present as a rhetorical tool. As tools used to communicate the YMCA's identity and find common ground and support from audience members, they also reflect ideologies held by the YMCA. Ideographic analysis thus seeks to trace the strategic deployment of ideologies inherent in the organizational artifacts.

Analysis

In order to examine the presence and use of ideographs, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of four texts created by the YMCA and publicly available on the organization's websites. I present the findings in correspondence with the general use of three groups of related ideographs: organizational values and mission-focused ideographs, Christian-focused ideographs, and community and cause-focused ideographs. In this analysis, I highlight how these words and themes were used in each of the four texts. I conclude by providing general commentary on the organization's recent rebranding efforts, seen in recent communication messages as noted below, and how these contribute to organizational identity rhetoric.

Organizational Values and Mission-Focused Ideographs

According to a press release on the YMCA's national website, the organization recently unveiled a "more forward-looking" logo in 2010, replacing the former that had been used since 1967, becoming the seventh logo the organization has used. According to the YMCA, this new logo "reflects the vibrancy and diversity of the organization, and a framework that focuses on its three core areas: youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility" ("A Brand New Day," 2010, para. 2). Here we find the first use of ideographs, as these three phrases include "buzzwords" that could be easily identifiable to audience members. The third listed (social responsibility), in particular, stands out given growing attention to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and responsible business practice in today's corporate environment as a way to increase positive reputation and legitimacy (Fyke, Feldner, & May, 2016). Responsibility, much like sustainability, is a

frequently heard buzzword that has come to light, particularly over the past several years. These core areas are evident in much of the YMCA's identity rhetoric through the organization's various branding and communication efforts.

Previously, and now largely missing from any branding or marketing efforts, the organization promoted four core value areas: honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring ("Mission, history & values," 2017). The term "values" is especially relevant here, as these rather ambiguous principles are incorporated into the organization's mission and vision statements. In fact, these words are still present on the gym walls of the Sturgeon Bay, WI Y branch in Door County, but are rarely used in any promotional messages. The incorporation of strategic ambiguity "fosters the existence of *multiple* viewpoints in organizations" and "commonly found in organizational missions, goals, and plans" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Values are often expressed in this ambiguous way as ideographs, allowing for multiple interpretations by received publics while simultaneously promoting unity. As Eisenberg (1984) argues, it is not the case that people are necessarily moved to hold the same views, but "rather that ambiguous statement of core values allows them to maintain individual interpretations while at the same time believing they are in agreement" (p. 231). Therefore, while there is a shift to more specific and explicitly stated core values (e.g., *youth* development, *healthy* living, *social* responsibility), they are still ideographic and ambiguous in nature—failing to specify exactly what the organization values in relation to these ideals.

While ambiguous and ideographic in the organization's communication of core values, the "Delivering our Cause" (2014) plan details the Y's specific actions that will be taken to accomplish organizational goals. Titled "frames for action" (p. 6), each of the three core values (i.e., youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility) are expanded on in terms of tangible actions and desired outcomes. Outlining a holistic approach, the remainder of the strategic plan expands on the many buzzwords that often grace the Y's marketing efforts, along with testimonies and quotes from organizational leaders. Additionally, the plan explicitly connects the organization's mission, cause (i.e., core values), objectives, and goals for the three-year period. While only briefly utilized, the strategic plan includes historical ties to the organization's original, religious ties. I explicate this ideograph in the subsequent section.

Christian-Focused Ideographs

The YMCA of the USA is the national resource office for the entire nation's YMCA branches. Available on this office's official website, under its "organizational profile", is the organization's strategic plan document for 2014 through 2017, titled "Delivering Our Cause" (2014). Evident in the first few sections of the 25-page document are the organization's three

core values (i.e., cause), new logo, and plan foundations. The latter includes the Y's one-sentence mission statement, "to put *Christian* principles into practice, through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all" (p. 1). Still incorporating its original identity, the organization forwards <Christian> as a value many audience members may buy into, particularly those of the Christian faith. However, I argue this ideographic term to be rather ambiguous, as the Y does not expand on these particular values in-depth or refer to its religious-based history.

While only briefly mentioned in this national plan, these explicit ties to the organization's religious roots are relatively rare in recent rhetoric produced by local branches. However, echoing the strategic plans, this singular mission statement is included on many individual branch websites. For example, on the Door County YMCA's site, the mission is as follows, "To put ***Christian Principles*** into practice through programs that build healthy ***spirit, mind and body*** for all," with several ideographic terms being bolded and italicized. This communicates a possible connection between promoting <Christian principles> and serving individuals in terms of <spirit>, <mind>, and <body>. However, as previously stated, these terms are not broadly used in much of the organization's identity rhetoric, focusing more specifically on core values and areas of focus not explicitly connected to religious ties. Rather, vision statements, as well as other identity-focused messages, are driven by the organization's community and cause-focused mission.

Community and Cause-Focused Ideographs

Ideographs associated with the organization's campaigns, activities, and overall goals are scattered throughout the national branch's strategic plan. Most notably, the idea of the organization as a <cause> and a <movement> seems to be the Y's new branding move. The Y-USA Board of Directors clarifies that the purpose of this official plan

is to define what we want to achieve as a Movement in each of the Y's three areas of focus...it also points us toward 2018 and the beginning of the next 10-year planning cycle, when our Movement will be to make a commitment to the nation... Now it is a matter of working together as a Movement to realize the promise of our mission and cause. (2014, p. 2)

Evident here is the organization's framing of its mission and very existence as a Movement, with a capital M, signifying a proper noun. Movement, then, appears to go hand-in-hand with cause in a metaphoric way, but it remains ambiguous and ideographic in communicating what this <movement> as an organization truly means, what it hopes to specifically accomplish, and how. Connecting to core values, the Y appeals to a wide range of audiences by implying that these individuals are a part of something larger, as a collective.

Additionally, in this analysis I include visual rhetoric by examining a one-minute video posted on the YMCA's national page promoting the organization's many efforts and societal impact. As Boyd (2018) reviewed, ideograph scholarship has examined the use of these terms in visual domains (Moore, 1993, 1997; Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Palczewski, 2005; Johnson, 2007). Specifically, this video is included under the "About Us" menu as "The Y. For a better us" ("YMCA: About Us," 2017). This trademarked statement has become the new slogan for the organization's latest campaign launched just over a year ago.

Throughout this very short video, titled, "The Y: Places" ("YMCA: About Us," 2017), many powerful images are included. To start, an overview shot of a seemingly abandoned, low-income neighborhood is shown. A few seconds in, a male narrator, perhaps a member of this specific community, says,

I'm here. Can you see me? Cause I feel like I'm invisible.

Like this whole place is invisible. If it weren't for the nightly news, no one would even think of this place. But down here, things are a little different. Down here, our spirits are bright and our dreams are vivid. If given a chance, that's what the world would see.

As the narrator finishes, seven words appear, reading, "When communities are forgotten, the Y remembers." Throughout the video, the Y visually communicates a commitment to diversity. We see a young woman, appearing to be an employee, comforting a teenager in a stairwell with the "Y" logo on the background wall. The next image is an individual diving into a pool, an image often associated with the YMCA as a fitness and aquatic center. The new and improved organizational logo then appears in the center of the screen, with the following phrases listed below, "For safe spaces. For opportunity. For child care. For education.... For a better us" ("YMCA: About Us," 2017). While none of these ideographic messages and appeals to societal values are necessarily the organization's specific core values, they communicate a certain identity for the Y—both physically as a safe haven, and non-physically in the way this organization specifically attempts to make a real impact, particularly in less fortunate or thriving communities.

This video provides no hints to audience members of the organization behind this rhetoric until the very end, as this message is rather different from the Y's traditional advertising. While most often focused on families, youth, and communities, this visual message is focused on a very specific kind of neighborhood and society—one that appears to be in desperate need of a community safe-haven. Even visually, ideographs are the primary rhetorical strategy present, presenting implicit messages of <community>, <diversity>, and <progress>.

In contrast to the YMCA of the USA's rhetoric, individual branches of the organization do not necessarily speak to a larger, national audience. Such is the case of one particular branch, located in Sturgeon Bay (i.e.,

Door County), Wisconsin. These smaller locations attempt to reach and connect to surrounding community members and neighboring businesses. The Sturgeon Bay Y's website ("Door County YMCA: From our CEO," 2017) contains a letter to this particular audience from the office's CEO Tom Beerntsen. The letter starts by highlighting the Sturgeon Bay's sister branch in Northern Door County and its recent \$2.5 million expansion. For this, Beerntsen states, "As we opened the doors to this wonderful new space, I was reminded that our work is not about bricks and mortar or gyms and pools; our business is in fact about changing lives" (para. 1). Continuing, he explains,

The unique genius of the YMCA is that each community decides what programs and facilities are needed and are only limited by the creativity and generosity of local leaders. For thirty years, the YMCA in Door County has provided activities and services which have helped to instill values in children so they would make better decisions tomorrow. The Y has focused on character development and leadership training. The importance of healthy living has always been top of mind. And Y programs have helped people of all ages lift their sense of self-esteem so that their tomorrows would be brighter. And the way the Y does this is by putting heroes in the lives of people of all ages in every program we offer, in every venue in which we work. (para. 2)

What is first evident here is the metaphorical idea that the YMCA is more than a bricks-and-mortar organization, and more than just a fitness center with gyms and pools; it, instead, makes a far greater impact in the community. In fact, this "business" is one that changes lives. Using the term "business" assumes a for-profit element when, apparently, the Y is a nonprofit organization living on the support of community members. Additionally, while first acknowledging the physical nature of the center's expansion, the CEO tries to promote the larger impact and goals of the organization as one *for* the community: driven by community needs and committed to the longevity of the collective. By again appealing to widely accepted ideals such as <healthy living> and <instilling values in children>, the YMCA attempts to gain the support of audience members. Similarly, ideographs are incorporated, such as <heroes>, <leadership>, and <character>, to communicate that the organization is once again much more than a lifestyle and fitness center, but one that can create change and build brighter tomorrows for its community. By rhetorically framing the Y as more than a brick-and-mortar fitness center, the organization asserts its legitimacy as a social organization that does important work for the community and thus intensifying its legitimacy. A for-profit company can provide fitness services, but a community organization, especially one with Christian roots, cannot be easily dispensed.

Beernsten continues by highlighting both economic downfalls and achievements that the Sturgeon Bay community has recently faced, and thus, so has the YMCA alongside it. While the Door County region is perhaps one of the state's poorest, luckily the Y is here for everyone and an organization that "works each day to insure we are a welcoming place" (para. 3). Subsequently, the CEO emphasizes specific programs that the organization has available, as he first states, "We care for the smallest of our children in our childcare to the oldest of our seniors in a variety of specialized programs. I sometimes fear that there is not an awareness of the impact that the Y has on our area. For example, did you know..." (para. 4).

Finally, the letter concludes with the following:

We hope you share our pride in the YMCA programs which have been developed over the past thirty years. Children who joined the Y in the early years of our history are now bringing their children to the Y and enjoying the wonderful facilities and programs offered. We look forward to continuing that legacy of service for future generations to enjoy. (para. 6)

Here, the CEO and organization are making explicit appeals to the values, including those familial-focused, held by potential audience members while simultaneously discussing and advocating for its charitable activities. The YMCA adds to its identity through association (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Once again highlighting its goal of longevity, the organization uses the terms <legacy> and <future> as ideographs to emphasize that this particular branch is a crucial member of its community.

Identity Re-Branding Efforts

Finally, after analyzing the various ideographs included in the YMCA's rhetoric, I present one of the organization's recent branding efforts as another strategy for communicating identity in addition to changes and alterations to its core values, logo, and communication about its mission. According to a press release posted on the national YMCA's site in 2010, the organization revealed a new, trademarked "nickname"—the first change of its name in over 40 years—to better "increase understanding of the impact the nonprofit makes in communities" (para. 1). A branding change connected to the organization's identity was an alteration to the entity's historic name—shifting from the YMCA to simply "the Y." While commonly referred to as "the Y" by its members and local citizens, myself included, the organization decided to change it officially, and this formal press release assures that all "Y's" across the country will fully transition to this "new brand" within the next five years (para. 2).

As previously stated, over the last 160 years the Young Men's Christian Association has gone through various identity-based changes, including those centering around membership demographics to campaign activities to

promoted values. According to the organization's senior vice president and chief marketing officer, the Y is "changing how we talk about ourselves so that people better understand the benefits of engaging" with us ("A Brand New Day," 2010). The end of the "unveiling" press release includes an editor's note stating that the new name "should be used whenever referring to the collective organization" (para. 11), showing the organization's attempt to instill this new change among various internal and external audiences. However, as evident in the other texts and on other branch websites, this rebranding has not yet become fully part of the organizational identity. These changes and the current values-based campaigns attempt to enhance legitimacy, primarily drawing on the rhetorical strength of ideographs, illustrating the ways in which they are "both stable and flexible" (Boyd, 2018, p. 150).

Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, I have examined the ways by which the nation's largest nonprofit organizations engages in identity-building rhetoric. Notable findings reveal that "the Y" has taken several communicative measures in presenting its identity transformation through the use of the rhetorical strategy of ideographs. I argue the YMCA is unique in its appeals to what can be assumed as widely accepted societal values in an attempt to communicate its mission. While perhaps a rhetorical win, these strategies only add to the organization's use of strategic ambiguity. Specific to organizational values, ambiguity aids in the development of these messages for both internal and external audiences (Eisenberg, 1984). Additionally, strategic ambiguity allows organizations to adapt to changes in identity, services, as well as any internal and external environmental pressures over time.

In terms of practice, ideographs are effective rhetorically persuasive tools. As Boyd (2018) argues, these terms are often ideologies wrapped up in a single word "with positive meaning due to its historical development and its connection to related concepts" (p. 11). This is especially true in nonprofit contexts, as these ideals are often implicitly connected to the organization's mission and/or history and are widely accepted by audiences who believe these entities are crucial to the community, like in the case of the YMCA. As an ambiguous concept, ideographs are inherently flexible. They can be altered and advanced through time—perhaps through times of re-branding as an organization attempts to communicate a new or shifting identity. We witnessed this over several decades as the YMCA has tweaked its identity rhetoric through times of change and organizational growth and development. This work contributes to the theoretical conversation around ideographs by further understanding how and why organizations create them, particularly in a non-profit context in which organizations rely on identity and identification (Boyd, 2018) by various audiences and stakeholder groups.

Additionally, we see that images and visual rhetorical messages, such as the Y's video, can act as and present ideographs—per Boyd's (2018)

questioning of how logos may serve as ideographs as well. The task for rhetors, however, is the critique these visuals and corresponding narrations may face. While ideographs are inherently ambiguous, videos like these may, in fact, be visually-enthymematic, leading audiences to solidify the connection between ideographs and certain images and meanings. This explicit visual identification presents a rich site of inquiry for critics to grapple with ideographs as both flexible and charged with meaning. As Clair and Anderson (2013) explore, nonprofits provide conceptualizations of the goals they hold, such as those surrounding <health> or <poverty> for example. The challenge then becomes how those stakeholders or groups served by the organization are portrayed and presented visually, thus communicating a particular ideology. As nonprofits are increasingly looked at to be transparent and accountable, these organizations must also be explicit and unambiguous in their promotional and identity communication—both visually and not.

Organizational identity answers the question “what is the organization?” (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The YMCA is one of the most recognizable, historic, and well-known nonprofit brands around the world, and they reinforce this through various rhetorical pieces centered on its various initiatives. The YMCA continues to promote its dedication to serving the community through healthy living, programs, fundraisers, donations, and local partnerships to emphasize the identity of being a crucial, vital, and positive member of society. Any organization, for-profit and nonprofit alike, uses rhetoric to either create or reinforce and maintain a certain organizational identity. This rhetoric is of great consequence, as it is then used as the starting point from which all other rhetoric, including that which addresses issues, risk, crisis, and visions, will proceed (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Historically, the YMCA has used ideographs as a primary tool for enhancing its identity and fostering a sense of identification for vital stakeholders—from benefactors to community members—and serves as a unique case study for exploring and understanding rhetorical constructions of organizational identity.

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