

Organizational Scent

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Abstract. Scent permeates all organizations and multiple dimensions of organizational life—yet it has been largely neglected in organization studies. This is unfortunate as scent is both a constitutive component of social reality and a distinct semiotic mode of constructing and conveying cultural meaning. It impacts, among many other things, the identity and image of organizations as well as institutionalized practices on the individual, organizational and field level. In order to firmly establish scent on our research agenda, this article introduces three novel concepts and, subsequently, highlights fertile areas for future research: institutional scent repertoire, organizational scent identity and scent literacy.

Keywords: organization, scent, semiotic mode, multimodality

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AN OVERLOOKED PHENOMENON

Scent has been largely neglected in research on organizations (Corbett, 2006). While it is hardly possible not to come across scent (or smell) in our everyday practices in organizational settings, it is at the same time commonly absorbed only subconsciously. We can, to a certain degree, control what to see, hear, touch or taste, but we can hardly do so with our sense of smell. Scent is ephemeral and mobile, permeates organizations and crosses their boundaries and yet its psychological and social significance for organizations, their members and various stakeholders in an organization's environment has not received much attention in our field of scholarly inquiry. To us, this comes as quite a surprise given that: more 'ancient' organizations such as the Catholic church have been using scent purposefully in places of worship; we take for granted the distinct smell of, for instance, hospitals; or that 'scent artists' and 'scent designers' have specialized in the smell of modern spaces or products, making use of the specific affordances of scent. In fact, in a recent IKEA report (Magnusson, 2016), smell was found to be the sense most associated with the idea of 'home'.

TAKING SCENT SERIOUSLY IN ORGANIZATION RESEARCH

Scent is a social phenomenon (Classen, Howes & Synnott, 1994) and a constitutive component of socially constructed organizations and institutions—with performative characteristics. Few scholars have so far examined the role of scent for organizations (e.g. Gümüşay, 2012; Islam, Endrissat & Noppeney, 2016; Riach & Warren, 2015), despite its pervasive impact in evoking expectations and assigning cultural meaning to our social reality, whether through the ascription of scent to a type of organization, a profession, place or ritual. Scent is, as Riach and Warren

(2015) emphasize, often fortuitously applied at workplaces, although, as they argue, “no smell” in offices is neither value nor scent free. While scent has been explored for city, brand and product marketing (e.g. Davies, Kooijman & Ward, 2003; Henshaw, 2014; Lindström, 2010; Morrin, 2009)—insights that we should transfer into the field of organization studies—the focus of extant research has been mainly on customer experiences, not on organizational identities or institutionalized practices. To put it more boldly: while organizations frequently pay millions for architectural grandeur or skilfully designed logos, scent and scent arrangements are commonly subject to the (non-)selection of cleaning products.

SENSE OF SMELL: SCENT AS A SEMIOTIC MODE

Similar to verbal language and visual representations, scent can be regarded as a semiotic mode, that is, a cultural resource for meaning construction with distinct affordances and “grammar” (Kress, 2010). Scent impacts, for instance, both the identity and the image of an organization. In a similar vein, scent selection, variation, diversity and temporality are essential to build olfactory receptive social structures and meaning that affect productivity, contentment and identification, among other things.

Importantly, scent should not only be examined on its own, but contextualized and tied to specific social situations (e.g. Hockey, 2009) and regarded as one semiotic mode in the presence of others. Scholars have, in recent times, deeply engaged with the visual dimension of organizing both in terms of theoretical understanding and methodological capture (e.g. Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary & Leeuwen, 2013), and our methodological toolkit has been significantly expanded (e.g. LeBaron, Jarzabkowski, Pratt & Fetzer, 2018; Rose, 2016) in order to improve visual data collection, analysis and theory development. We are convinced that a focus on scent will complement such work and that a multimodal approach to study organizations (e.g. Höllerer, Daudigeos & Jancsary, 2017; Höllerer, van Leeuwen, Jancsary, Meyer, Andersen & Vaara, 2018) is particularly conducive for our endeavour, as organizations display verbal, visual, material, audio and olfactory dimensions that constantly interact with each other and collectively shape the organization.

SCENT AND ORGANIZATION: TOWARDS A NOVEL RESEARCH AGENDA

In the following, we briefly present three novel concepts that emerge from introducing scent to organizational theorizing and that show the potential for inspiring future research in the field of management and organization studies. They are: institutional scent repertoire, organizational scent identity and scent literacy.

Institutional scent repertoire. Scent can serve as an institutional repertoire that shapes personal work experience, intersubjective meaning construction and collective memory. It is an essential element when it comes to defining and typifying work spaces, organizational practices and field-level norms. As institutional repertoire, scent is being employed both purposefully and coincidentally. We regard the notion of an ‘institutional scent repertoire’ as a means to form and transform social structures and behaviours. As such, it offers a wide field and fertile ground for research investigating how a socially shared ‘vocabulary’ of scent emerges and impacts on, for instance, performance, productivity, time and space, power, control and influence, values, emotions, legitimacy or stigma, taboo and

ethics. It allows us to address a wide variety of questions around how specific 'aesthetics of scent' establish and change categories of positively connoted perfume and negatively connoted malodour, or how a Foucauldian 'gaze through the nose' characterizes professions and establishes distinct forms of expertise and social status.

Organizational scent identity. Scent is a key ingredient of organizational experience, identification and boundaries and therefore a key component for identity construction (Gümüşay, 2012). We propose the concept of 'organizational scent identity' in order to zoom in on a 'company logo for the nose', whereby scent is conceived as an integral part of organizational identity and may act as a signifier for a focal organization. Associating logos, architecture, sound and visuals with certain organizations, we expect the same to hold true for scent, particularly as there are increasingly attempts to capture and apply it in a conscious manner. This opens up for research around the role of scent for conformity versus optimal distinctiveness, scent copyright and diffusion or scent selection and use in order to construct and sustain organizational boundaries and identities.

Scent literacy. At the moment, both practitioners and scholars in management and organization lack what we call 'scent literacy': the ability to discern and describe smell and a detailed understanding of how scent impacts individual and social meaning construction. We also regard scent literacy as strategic concept, in the sense that it can be purposefully developed and applied. It assists to analyse situations and spaces, social structures and behaviours, and describes the level of understanding for scent cues—much akin to visual or verbal cues. As an area of study, it offers an approach to describe and examine the level of competency with, and strategic use of, scent. More radically, it may also support novel means to transmit research insights. It is important to hold then that also we as scholars need to develop scent literacy and that the phenomenology of scent requires novel sensory research methodology as well as skills (Mason & Davies, 2009) and potentially research team composition (Gümüşay & Amis, 2018).

In summary, it seems crucial for us to bring to fore the considerable potential and consequentiality that lie in taking scent seriously as an omnipresent feature of and in organizational life; to point to novel analytical concepts that enable the study of these phenomena; and to raise awareness for the need for innovative methodologies that help us to collect and depict scent in promising empirical settings.

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