

ORGANISATIONAL SYMBOLS: REFLECTIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE?

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to discuss the role(s) of organisational symbols in representing organisational identity. To what extent do the so-called organisational symbols have significant impact on the employees in an organisation in identifying themselves with the organisational identity? Is it due to the top-down approach imposed by the top management? This paper is based on a six month ethnographic study conducted in selected Information Communication Technology (ICT) based corporations in one of the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) cities. From the findings, there are three main organisational symbols which are related to organisational identity: identity cards, black sofa, and office cubicles. The paper concludes that the construction of organisational symbols is a mix of a controlled culture (top-down) and to a certain degree is the participative activity of the employees. Nevertheless, the organisational symbols are embraced by the employees due to the need to be identified with an organisation.

Keywords: *Organisational symbols; ethnography; and organisational culture.*

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membincangkan peranan simbol organisasi yang berkaitan dengan identiti organisasi. Sejauh manakah simbol organisasi mempunyai impak terhadap identiti organisasi dalam kalangan pekerja dalam organisasi yang dikaji. Adakah ia disebabkan faktor tekanan dari pihak atasan? Artikel ini adalah berdasarkan kajian etnografi selama enam bulan yang telah dijalankan di organisasi-organisasi terpilih di salah sebuah bandar pintar yang berteraskan prinsip Koridor Raya Multimedia. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan terdapat tiga simbol organisasi yang berkaitan dengan identiti organisasi: kad pintar, sofa berwarna hitam dan ofis bercorak kubus. Artikel ini juga menyimpulkan bahawa penghasilan simbol organisasi adalah gabungan daripada budaya kawalan dan partisipasi daripada para pekerja. Walau bagaimanapun, simbol-

simbol organisasi telah diterapkan oleh para pekerja disebabkan keperluan untuk dikaitkan dengan identiti organisasi.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the roles of organisational symbols in selected companies in *Techwira*¹, one of the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) cities. Inspired by the need to create “intelligent cities” as hubs for ICT companies, *Techwira* is constructed to be the central city of the MSC project. This city was transformed from acres of oil palm jungle into modern buildings and roads. “This land [the site of *Techwira*] was previously used to grow oil palm and rubber; and tin mining, symbols of the old economy” (Azizah, 2005). For Azizah, this transformation has symbolic implications as the development of *Techwira* symbolises the Malaysian government’s attempts to transform the old economy (agricultural and primary production-based economy) to a new economy (a knowledge-based economy).

CORPORATION BACKGROUND

The three companies selected for this study are ICT based. They are involved in different specialisations in ICT areas. Company *Net* is a Japanese-based telecommunication corporation. It is one of the pioneers in establishing ICT-based companies in the city. Company *Laz* is a British-based company involved in the banking industry. It is a data centre for Asia-Pacific region. Finally, Company *Kaz* is an active local ICT-based company which focuses on educational training materials for international and local clients.

METHODS

This study specifically attempted to look at the roles of organisational symbols drawing upon a six-month ethnographic fieldwork which was conducted in two phases, in the ICT based corporations in the city. The first phase was from October 2004 to December 2004; the second phase from July 2005 to September 2005.

Using the multi-method, namely, observation, ethnographic interviewing, structured interviewing, and official documentation, the

researcher attempted to understand the microscopic details of the live world of the office workers in the selected corporations.

Ethnography is an open enterprise which provides flexibility in terms of methods used to investigate ongoing phenomena (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). It is an intensive research methodology where a researcher is deeply involved in the subject matter (i.e., place and its inhabitants) in terms of the length of time spent in the field and the strategies used to understand the culture of the inhabitants. These strategies may include ethnographic interviews, observations, pictures, and field notes. It is a methodology which emphasises knowing the culture of the researched by following the natural process of fieldwork experiences and not by setting out a hypothesis to test a specific social phenomenon (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Spradley, 1979). It involves exploring and interpreting rather than testing.

Furthermore, ethnography is usually concerned with ordinary things, ordinary patterns, mundane activities, everyday banal matter, but it tries to understand and come to terms with their mundanity and ordinariness. This is what was attempted by this research in employing ethnography as a research methodology: to embrace and analyse the hidden value of ordinariness.

I stayed in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia where I rented a room. The decision to stay in Kuala Lumpur was motivated by the lower rental rates available in Kuala Lumpur compared to *Techwira*. I drove from Kuala Lumpur to *Techwira* every day, which normally took about 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the traffic. A typical week started early in the morning, Mondays to Fridays. In the earlier stage of the fieldwork I experienced accessibility problems to the corporations due to the presence of the gatekeepers, people's busy schedules, and empty social spaces. I used my personal network to get in touch with the Information Technology (IT) professionals in the field. I also searched through companies by asking human resource managers. Despite numerous attempts to gain access to various sites, I only managed to get three key informants from three different companies. Nevertheless they were helpful in introducing and assisting me to gain more informants in the fieldwork. I will discuss the following methods which I have used in this study: observation, ethnographic interviewing, structured interviewing and official documentation.

Participant Observation

In conducting observations, I drew my first encounter with the live world of office workers in the selected companies by adopting Spradley's (1980) approach of observing, which is to understand and to know how the others (the office workers) acts in the space. The concept of engaging with the others is not something unusual in ethnography. It is in fact an important method in capturing the underlying meanings of the researched life world (Clifford & George, 1986; Marcus & Fischer, 1999). Spradley (1980) elaborated on how observation is done and why it is done in ethnography. He insisted that the ethnographer should start with observation because it is one key to understand how people (the other) live their everyday lives. As a stranger to the space, I observed how people dressed, talked, and behaved in the companies. It was my opportunity to adapt to the culture (way of life) of the office workers. I had to dress up like an office worker. I wore an office suit during my fieldwork and spoke English most of time as it was the most common language used there.

Taking on the role of an ordinary participant on a site contributes to an ethnographer's understanding of the ongoing practices of its inhabitants. For an ethnographer, entering the field is not just about "engaging in activities appropriate to the situation but also observing the activities, people and physical aspects of the situation" (Spradley, 1980, p.54). An ethnographer does more than an ordinary participant does, observes with an analytical and focused mind. Taking detailed notes on the subjects the research is interested in and using observations to guide the research are crucial elements in the observant participation method. In contrast, ordinary observers are less concerned with activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation (routine activities, other beings, and situational context) because for them those elements are routine or normal and are parts of their everyday life. In this sense, a researcher plays an active role in understanding how things are done and why people react in certain ways. It is about uncovering the routines with a critical eye. It is an attempt to understand the culture behind the routine practices.

I was new in *Techwira* even though I am Malaysian. I spent hours being 'furniture' in *Techwira*. I made myself visible to the people in *Techwira*. During my observations, I started to make contact by talking to the

office cleaners, security guards, visitors, and office workers. I built up relationships with several of them (office cleaners, security guards, and office workers), who were willing to spend time with me and share their experiences about life experiences in *Techwira*. After the first two months of my fieldwork, my role had shifted from a non-participant observer to a passive participant in certain contexts and locations, such as in the lobbies of organisations while waiting for interviews, as mentioned in literature:

The ethnographer engaged in passive participation is present at the scene of action but does not participate or interact with other people to any great extent. About all you need to do is find an "observation post" from which to observe and record what goes on. If the passive participant occupies any role in the social situation, it will only be that of "bystander," "spectator", or "loiterer" (Spradley, 1980, p.59).

My changing roles as a researcher depended on the context and on my closeness to office workers. I could be sometimes a non-participant observer, for example, when I was driving along the roads in *Techwira* and stopped under the bridge to take notes. On the other hand, I had to adopt the role of passive observer when I located myself in an office lobby and observed others. In addition, I also became a quasi-participant when I helped office workers with social activities. As a researcher using participant observation method, I learned to look for and deduce the value of everyday life activities, in order to bring them into a systematic social pattern.

Agar (1996) suggested that observation supplements ethnographic interviews. In my research context, observation carries similar weight to the interview. In my case, observation and to a certain extent moderate participation more than complemented interviews (ethnographic and structured interviews) because I spent most of my time observing how organisational symbols are practised in organisations. I kept recording events which meant taking detailed notes about events and drawing sketches of the organisations where I had been. Thus, in my study, I used both observation and participation to help me to understand and interpret the ordinariness of the organisational symbols into a systematic and analytical comprehension of the organisations' cultures.

INTERVIEWS

In this study, there were 31 informants who were involved in both ethnographic and structured interviewing (please refer to Appendix A for details). In each corporation, I spent at least two hours per day for the period of six months of my fieldwork. Approximately, I spent about 360 hours in those corporations. The term personal communication which I use to illustrate my finding is mainly derived from interviews (ethnographic and structured interviews).

Ethnographic Interviewing

Ethnographic interviewing involves semi-structured, in-depth interviews which enable the researcher to modify the direction of the interview as it flows. It is one of the more practical interviewing methods for an ethnographer who wishes to gauge the understanding of the subjects by paying attention to the context of the interview which includes openness to the interviewees, sensitivity of the interview questions, and to the cultural context involved. Conducting ethnographic interviews is much more complex than formal interviewing because it involves patience and continuous rapport to get the informants involved to share their point of view with the researcher. Heyl (2001) explained this idea in her definition of ethnographic interviewing:

It (ethnographic interviewing) is where the researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds. (p.371)

Ethnographic interviewing has the characteristics of a non-institutional, informal relationship between a researcher and the informants, and to a certain extent involves a mutual moral obligation as a human being in social interaction. Of course, the informants are not obliged by any official or formal procedure to respond to the ethnographer's questions and curiosity. Nonetheless, they are governed by their moral obligations to keep on informing, describing, and sharing their lived experiences with the researcher as they are somehow 'tied' to the social contract of being the beacons of hope for the ethnographer. Culturally embedded, this method incorporates the issues of losing and protecting faces rather

than politics. It usually involves interpersonal communication where face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the research subjects occurs and the aim is to build a long-term relationship for the purpose of knowing and understanding the informants' life world.

Whilst ethnographic interviewing assisted me in developing a deeper understanding of the life stories of inhabitants in the corporations, I used structured interviewing to learn about the top managements' viewpoints on organisational culture.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWING

Structured interviewing is more straight-forward in comparison to ethnographic interviewing. It usually involves a standardised set of interview questions which allow little flexibility for the researcher to adapt the direction of the interview (Fontana & Fred, 2000). During the fieldwork, most of these institutions requested interview outlines prior to the interviews so that the officers would allocate their time to talk about and discuss how organisational culture in conceptualised and realised in their respective companies.

From the first day of doing my fieldwork, I realised that structured interviewing was not a simple task even though it was prepared in advance. There are many factors to be taken into account when a researcher is going to conduct an interview with high status people. In this case, I had to anticipate time constraints and to consider the ethics and the art of interviewing.

In my case, doing structured interviews with powerful people was very different from interviewing the typical 'man in the street'. The environment was formal. The time was short and I was subjected to the interviewees' responses about my research questions. I did feel the power struggle between the officers and myself in interview sessions when sometimes I found that he or she was controlling the direction of the interview. For example, in one of the interview sessions, the interviewees ignored my questions and instead chose to talk about their views about other issues which were more interesting from their own personal point of view. There were others who were more interested in promoting their organisations rather than answering or responding to my interview questions. However, after several meetings, I sensed that the office workers were open and free to talk about my research interest.

If ethnographic interviewing deals with inter-personal morality, structured interviewing concerns public-embedded morality. The officers felt responsible for opening up and discussing my research interest in order to show the good will of their corporations. It could be seen as corporate responsibility duty or obligation for the interested public.

Official Documentation

The ethnographic approach in my study also relies on official documentation. During my visits to the companies, I collected company brochures when I went to meet my informants in their organisations and when I attended the national IT fair about the IT companies in the MSC project. These documents represent how the IT companies want their image to be read by others.

Organisational Symbol

Why does an organisation need a symbol? Is it to make sense of the live world of the organisation? Let us seek the meaning of a symbol in organisations. Perhaps the most appropriate definition can be derived from an anthropologist standpoint, where usually the focus of a study is to scrutinise the micro perspective of a subject matter.

Symbols are objects, acts, relationships, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel men to action.
(Cohen, 1974, p. 23)

Drawing on the interpretation of symbols from Cohen (1974) in organisational studies, symbols also encompass various forms: physical objects, behaviour, networking, leaders, and language (Alvesson, 1993; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Gagliardi 1992; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Turner, 1990). Some examples are myths, stories, office architecture, organisational dressing and organisational charts used by the employees and the management in the organisations to provide meaning to the identity of the organisations (Gagliardi, 1992; Elsbach, 2003; Turner, 1990). Studies in organisational symbols investigate various aspects of physical and visual symbols in organisations. Using distinctive approaches such as dramaturgical, semiotics, and ethnography, the researchers analyse the symbols which may bring impact to the organisational culture (Kunda, 1992; Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). For instance, Scheiberg (1990)

used a dramaturgical approach as suggested by Goffman (1959) in analysing the staff initiative in decorating their personal office space as a way to control their emotion. Her findings suggested that the interaction with the decorated items in the office space creates positive impact on staff emotional development. Another example is the use of semiotics in studying Saturn slogan (Aaker, 1994). In that study, it was concluded that the slogan had positive impact in enhancing the organisational identity, i.e. increasing the image of the organisation. In addition, ethnography is also being used in studying symbols in organisations, such as Van Mannen (1978) in a study of policing and labelling, Kunda (1992) on a company's slogan, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, and Mackie-Lewis, (1997) on organisational dressing, and Cheng (1998) on uniform change.

In this paper, I will discuss three prominent symbols which emerged from my ethnographic engagement with the organisational setting: (1) black sofa, (2) staff identity card and (3) cubicle office. My findings are attempts to contribute to the organisational symbol studies as this study is an ethnographic study of ICT based companies in a Malaysian context and is associated with embracing controlled culture.

The first is the colour black, chosen by the management as the colour of the sofa sets in the office lobbies.

Black Sofa: Symbol of Formality

Most large companies chose black for the sofas, which may indicate that life in the corporations is geared toward the priority of work over socialisation. Black usually signifies solemnity and authority (Sassoon, 1992). Tracing back the origin and the influence of black in history, especially in anthropological studies, black is one of the sacred colours associated with tribal ritual practices (Turner, 1967). Even though black is usually closely associated with the symbol of death (Sassoon, 1992), it also indicates authority and formality especially in community rituals, such as wearing black suits when attending a court proceeding, a funeral, or a wedding in Western culture. Reflecting on the business or corporate setting, black tends to embrace a new identity which indicates formality without negative ideas associated with the colour. It indicates solemnity and the power of the top management. It is the colour of authority and is used to reflect the image of lobbies as restricted social places where only recognised business-oriented visitors are entertained. This is further supported by the historical background of colour in Western and Eastern cultures. As Gage (1999) argued:

In some European and Oriental cultures, moreover, a disdain for colour has been seen as a mark of refinement and distinction. The taste for black clothing, for example, was a prerogative of wealth and nobility in the Renaissance, but in succeeding centuries it spread in Europe to all levels of society and black still forms part of our dress code for some occasion. (p.31)

In his argument, Gage (1999) suggested black is a colour of the elite, and Izutsu (1977) and Harvey (1995) interpreted the colour as the symbol of the upper class. Although black is often associated with death and tragic events (Feisner, 2001; Sassoon, 1992), the positive element of black indicates "sophistication, prestige and being in credit for business" (Feisner, 2001, p. 118). These positive attributes of black may be extended into the context of the office lobbies in the city, which seek to associate their companies with power and success.

In terms of the interior arrangement of the lobby, the sets of sofas were frequently arranged in a square form. For example, in the lobby at *Net*, which is a large corporation, the distance between one set of sofas and another was about three to four feet. This setting indirectly discourages private talk among visitors and imposes the image of the lobby as a site of business where no private talk is encouraged. However, at *Kaz*, which is a smaller company than *Net*, the setting is more visitor-friendly. The sets of sofa were located near to the office rooms and next to the kitchen and the reading area of the company. The proximity of the setting was perhaps due to the smaller size of the office building but it also suggested an attempt to be more visitor-friendly as it gave the impression that private talk was tolerated in this company. In addition, in these companies, the lobbies represent business spaces rather than social spaces. From my observation, they are the most common places used by employees to talk to their visitors or as places to wait for an employee before the visitor or guest would be ushered or invited into the other areas in the company.

In the lobby, there was a receptionist and she would ask me about the purpose of my visit to the company. I often had to repeat myself and explain my purpose for being there and who I wanted to meet. The receptionist would phone my informant to confirm whether he or she knew me, and only after the confirmation would she ask me to wait in the lobby for the person. During this waiting period, I was able to observe the lobby and investigate its functions and usage.

In seeking to illustrate the organisational lobbies, I draw on Kracauer's (1999) description of the hotel lobby.

In both places (church and hotel lobby), people appear there as guests. But whereas the house of God is dedicated to the service of the one whom people have gone there to encounter, the hotel lobby accommodates all who go there to meet no one. It is the setting for those who neither seek nor find the one who is always sought, and who are therefore guests in space as such – a space that encompasses them and has no function other than to encompass them. (p.290)

There are two important aspects of a hotel lobby from Kracauer's standpoint. Firstly, the lobby is a social place where people act as guests in the place. Secondly, because of the impersonal characteristics of the lobby in comparison to the house of God, the lobby becomes a place with reduced sociality.

Building on these arguments, I will attempt to discuss the characteristics of the company lobbies in this city. In contrast to the hotel lobby where visitors and guests treat the lobby as a place of loitering in a fashionable way – a social space – the company lobbies do not function as a total social space but more as a liminal (transitional) space. The lobbies are not a social space until the visitor's presence is affirmed by the office workers and they come down from their office rooms either to pick their visitor up or talk to them. If not, within that period of waiting, the lobbies remain as a contained space or a liminal space. As Turner (1982) pointed out

in liminality, profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down. (p.27)

In the light of liminality as a training ground where a member of a tribe is subjected to live in a controlled and contained space as discussed by Turner (1982), in the context of the office lobbies, they act as a liminal space to quarantine visitors before they meet the office workers. Only those who are recognised by the office workers would be allowed or permitted to penetrate further into the company spaces, but for those who are not known or not accepted by the office workers or the management, the lobby would be the only place they are allowed to enter.

The lobbies were heavily monitored by receptionists and security guards. To sit in the lobby while waiting for my informant made me feel like I was under the watchful eyes of the police, almost as if I was going to commit a crime in the vicinity. Once my informant had come down from his or her office and then started to greet me and talk with me about my research interest, I felt more at ease.

In addition, the lobbies were spotlessly clean. This may be another manifestation of the extension of space of control or a controlled space. Cleanliness is a part of the corporate culture through its representation in the lobbies. There were office cleaners wiping the glass tables and sofas in the lobbies. Visitors waited in the lobbies to meet office workers in the companies. In this space, they sat and looked around while waiting for their contacts to arrive. While waiting, they talked on their mobiles, read the company brochures which were available in the lobbies, checked their files and read their documents. Some of the office workers met their visitors in the lobbies. They talked and discussed in this place. Most of the time, the lobbies were used by the office workers to meet their visitors and business associates.

As I have mentioned before, the lobbies represent spaces of business rather than social spaces in the organisations. This is because the purpose of being in the lobby had to be strictly for the benefit of the company. No office worker would entertain any visitor for non-business purposes. According to Miss Sharmila, an IT professional, she seldom saw any employees entertaining a visitor other than for business purposes. When we compare the office lobbies in the city with the hotel lobby as described by Kracauer (1999), both are lacking in sociality. The office lobbies had rather restricted rules about who should occupy the space and usually only visitors who were identified and perhaps useful for the company would be entertained. In the case of the hotel lobby, even though it is a social place it does not encourage nor discourage sociality. As Kracauer (1999) described it is a place "to meet no one" (p.290). He contrasted the idea of going to the house of God, where people go to meet God and a crowd of believers, with the situation where people go to the hotel lobby with no particular intention to meet a crowd or to serve any socialisation agenda. Any person according to him could go to the hotel lobby and just consume the space without having to socialise with other people. In a nutshell, I suggest that the hotel lobby and the office lobby share the characteristic of lack of sociality.

Some company lobbies displayed their brochures on the racks next to sofas, some arranged them on the table, and some were available at the

receptionist's desk. This phenomenon communicates that organisational images and identities were there to be recognised by the visitors and employees through portrayals in brochures, company logos, strict surveillance, guards' uniforms, visitor tags, staff identify cards, and spatial constructs. These physical artefacts form symbols which are part of the image presented by the management. However, there are some voices in the organisational field which argued that these symbols are a creation of organisational culture which comes from the people rather than from the management (Alvesson, 1993; Schein, 1985). To what extent is this claim significant? Is the culture of an organisation a creation from the top down or the bottom up? I will deal with these issues later in this paper.

The Card Culture: The Symbol of Privilege

It is common knowledge in the organisations in the city that only staff are permitted to have access to the privileged spaces – the computer labs and data processing offices. How would they gain access to such places? This is achieved with their staff cards. These cards are given to those who work in the organisation. They symbolised the power of access and the privilege associated with the power, i.e. being a member of the organisation. They are trusted as the chosen ones who had privilege and access to almost all the facilities and spaces in the organisation. The cards enables the employees to extend their territory from the lobbies, the refectories, and the inner socialisation spaces – the gymnasiums, the play rooms, the kitchens, the praying rooms, and the rest areas – to the most highly exclusive spaces which were the privileged working spaces. The cards mark the identity of the members of the organisation and indirectly differentiate them from others, i.e. the non-members. A staff identity card or tag in this particular organisational setting represents a symbol of the organisation. The staff card is the second symbol in the organisation after the black sofas at the office lobbies – the object which from my observations and interview findings had a prominent role in understanding the culture of organisations in the city. In this context, I will attempt to illustrate the link between symbol and control: control in terms of loss of privilege if a member of staff lost the card. According to Miss Diana, a computer programmer who worked in a local telecommunication company, a staff card meant that you were a member of the company. If she happened to forget or lose her staff card, she had to wear a temporary visitor's pass, which would make life difficult because staff cards were required to gain access to some facilities in the company. For example, an office worker needed to use her staff card to open doors and use lifts in the office buildings.

The presence of a card indicates the implicit order of the company's rules and regulations. This is because the card is given to an individual because he or she is an employee of the organisation. The management personalises the card by giving it a personal touch: name, photo, position, and staff number. It is a licence to enter the organisation and to use the designated privileges associated with the card. As explained by Mr. Adam, a vice-president of a data centre corporation:

It is more than just an identity card for the employee. In this company, for example, we use the staff card as a parking permit. We are working in a very tight security and that's why for us, it is important for the staff to take care of their staff cards. Those who lose or left the cards at home will be given temporary staff cards but their access have to be checked by the security guards to ensure they are the real employees. This ruling is vital to be observed as in this company, client data such as their bank account information is confidential. Those who breach the trust such as misusing the staff cards will be given due penalty (personal communication, September 16, 2005) (see number 30 in Appendix A).

During my fieldwork, I witnessed these office workers wearing their staff cards even during their lunch time when they were moving through public places in the city. Perhaps they were afraid of losing the cards or perhaps they wanted to be identified and recognised as office workers in the city. This circumstance reflects the idea of belonging to the exclusive world of *Techwira* city or, to be identified with a much deeper and stronger label, as belonging to the professional class. Here is an observation of Mrs Ana, a restaurateur:

Usually I am able to identify the *Techwirans* citizens – the office workers – through their dressing and their staff cards which they usually wear when they come to my place for meals. It is quite obvious if you are a stranger in this place as you do not wear the company's tag and you appear not in rush when you are having your lunch in the restaurant (personal communication, September 17, 2005) (see number 24 in Appendix A).

The concept of belonging to a specific profession perhaps explains the constant wearing of corporation identity tags among the office workers in the city. Being attached to or employed by a big corporation such as

the multinational corporations does make one proud of being a part of the company. Miss Sharmila discussed this issue;

Yes, it is hard to get into the big companies. To be recruited means you are either smart or you have a strong network with the insiders. But, for a professional job, the management needs people with outstanding academic qualification and working experiences. They choose only the best minds. I think that's why employees in the corporations feel privilege to be a part of the company (personal communication, August 20, 2004) (see number 18 in Appendix A).

The association of the symbol, i.e. the identity card does not just symbolise the membership status of an employee of the companies but also distinguishes them from visitors and guests. It also comes with physical rewards – higher salaries and more fringe benefits for individuals who work in large corporations in this city. Those who work in smaller companies usually have smaller salary perks and privileges. Nonetheless, in both cases, whether one works in a large or small company in this city, one possesses an identity card which separates oneself from a visitor. For a purposeful stranger like me to be permitted to enter an organisation, I needed to identify myself in order to be given a visitor's pass. This identification would transform a visitor into a legitimate person in a company.

Without the cards, strangers to the organisations were prevented from being given access to the privileged places. These places, which were guarded with high-technology gadgets and human guards, represented a further controlled space in the organisations. In comparison to other organisational spaces, which were more accessible despite being controlled, these privileged spaces were not open to non-members. With the possible exception of emergency cases such as fire, health problems, or machine breakdown, non-members would never be allowed to enter the vicinity. An important exception would be if there were visits from auditors, affluent politicians, or invited guests, in which case they would be allowed to enter.

However, there were offices to which a stranger like me was able to gain access. This different treatment can be attributed to several reasons. Firstly, it may depend on the nature of the business of the organisation. For example, a company which performed data processing

or research-based activities would not allow its operations and activities to be interrupted. According to the management, this was due to the confidential nature of the data involved, i.e. data of business transactions or research properties. Thus, the work spaces to which I could gain access in the organisations did not usually deal with data processing or research-based programmes. Secondly, in order to gain access to the work spaces, I needed to have trusted informants who were usually the managers of the divisions or departments in the organisations. Thirdly, I built a good rapport with the office workers who had invited me to visit their offices for our interview sessions.

OFFICE CUBICLES

In my research, I discovered two types of office space. Firstly, there were offices I could not enter due to security reasons. These sites were computer labs and data processing offices. These spaces represent the inner rooms of the privileged – spaces where only privileged members had right of access. The second type of office space was accessible – marketing, accounting, human resources, and management offices.

Referring to the concept of privileged office spaces within organisations, there are several points I would like to present to explain why such work spaces are considered and treated as exclusive. Firstly, they were heavily monitored by technology and human-affiliated surveillance. Secondly, there was a common symbol (the identity card) adopted by the office workers in the space. Thirdly, outsiders were not allowed to enter the spaces unless it was in an emergency.

Considering the fact that spaces in organisations in this city are generally heavily controlled on the basis of protecting their physical and intelligent properties, it is not beyond our imagination that management would promote the concept of privileged space. Technology-driven surveillance with the support of human surveillance was ubiquitous in these organisations. These surveillance mechanisms helped to police and guard every movement and activity surrounding the organisations' territories. The spaces were well guarded and these types of surveillance indicated the level of privilege of those who were members of the organisations who were free to roam around these spaces, compared to others who were strangers and who were regarded with suspicion each time they entered the space. It was awkward to be in the space and to be recognised as a stranger in these organisations. You were being watched by guards, office workers, and receptionists.

On the other hand, as I have mentioned before, there were office spaces which were open for me to walk into and make my observations that had some similar characteristics. Most of the workers worked in open spaces while the managers had their own rooms. For staff who worked in cubicles, they marked their cubicles with their own identities. This phenomenon indicates the symbol of territoriality or ownership of the office space – the cubicle area. Doxtater (1992) suggested:

When we consider the media of status signs used to establish territoriality – carpet thickness, size of office, finishes, artwork, presence of personal secretary, presence of couch, etc. – we find that even more extensive are the symbolic vehicles which will contribute to the much more developed, largely subconscious, thematic meanings. (p.117)

Even though I agree with Doxtater's (1992) idea that physical objects (i.e., the organisational symbols) mark the territoriality of the office space, I differ from Doxtater in the context of doing it subconsciously. This is due to my observations in the office spaces where employees deliberately marked their working space. On the cubicle boards, there were calendars, stickers of the company, memos of appointments, and 'things to do', and photographs of their vacations with friends and family. On the desks, there were personal computers, trays with documents, mugs, pens, and paper clips. These physical symbols reflect the desire to identify the working space as individualised territory. In comparison to the offices of most managers and directors, which were closed-office design, the staff efforts to mark their open office space such as their cubicles can be linked to an attempt to enhance personal identity. It is interesting to note that in a study by Elsbach (2003), physical artefacts were used to affirm personal identity in a hot desking office environment. She further noted that most commonly used artefacts were "photos, mementos, equipment, and furniture" (p.648). In an open office design such as the cubicle office space in the companies, the presence of physical artefacts, such as family photos, birthday cards, plaques of achievements and personalised calendars – with smiley stickers and colorful stickers of previously attended workshops pasted onto the pages of the calendar – mark the personalised attempt of the office workers to claim the given office space. In addition, office workers used their cubicles for working and socialising purposes such as chatting with the colleagues next to them and phoning their clients. Some of those who were working on the same project were close to one another.

On the other hand, the rooms for the top management were spacious. In one of the director's rooms, the office was furnished with a sofa, carpet, vase, family photos, racks of files, and documents. On the wall of most offices, there were slogans or statements of the visions of the company. The meeting rooms were set up to be formal places. With rows of chairs lined up on either side of the table, the rooms seemed small. The rooms were clean and all the chairs were neatly arranged. Most of the meeting rooms had glass walls which meant that other office workers could see who was inside. The office workers who occupied cubicles tended to spend most of their time in these meeting rooms rather than in their cubicles especially those who were involved in a project. Mr. Johari, a senior officer, explained this:

Usually for those who are involved in a project basis such as organizing a workshop, we will have people from various departments work under the one team. The most used space would be the meeting room as we have the facilities – whiteboards, projectors, audio visual equipments and the kitchen is just round the corner. (Personal communication, August 15, 2004) (see number 11 in Appendix A).

Studies in organisation, psychology, and architecture suggested that spatial arrangement can have an effect on the job motivation of employees (Nathan & Doyle, 2002; Rashid & Zimring, 2003; Sundstrom, Burt, & Kamp 1980). In relation to the spatial arrangement of the office spaces in the organisations, managers appeared to be happier as they had their own individual rooms while the office workers who occupied cubicles tended to spend most of their time in the meeting rooms rather than in their cubicles. They used the rooms for their project work, where they spread out their work documents, exchanged views with colleagues, and wrote points of the discussion on the whiteboards. The arrangement of the cubicles in open spaces and the setting and usage of the meeting rooms reveal the attempt of the management to control the movement and activities of their employees.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: CONTROLLED CULTURE?

Organisational culture is most frequently associated as a stable or harmonious element in an organisation. This paradigm, which is labelled as a functionalism approach, has been dominating the

management studies and usually projects the image of organisational culture as positive, harmonious, and supportive in relations to the work performance and job satisfaction of the employees in organisations (Boyd, 2002; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Gagliardi, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Ogbor, 2001; Parker, 2000; Turner, 1990; Weick, 1995). However, is it possible to generalise this paradigm to all organisations?

From a functionalist perspective, one of the significant definitions of organisational culture could be drawn from Schein (1985), where he defined culture as:

the simplest way to think about the culture of any group or social unit is to think of it as the total of the collective or shared learning of that unit as it develops its capacity to survive in its external environment and to manage its own internal affairs. Culture is the solution to external and internal problems that has worked consistently for a group and that is therefore taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think about and feel in relation to those problems (pp. 19-20).

The key problem with this definition is the term “shared”, which implicitly underpins the principle that organisational culture is a process of creating, cultivating, and sharing cultural meanings – values, symbols, languages and stories – through the interaction and socialisation of employees and management. This definition is embedded in the functionalism approach, where the culture of an organisation is viewed as a stable part of the organisation life cycle (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). Critics have argued that most previous studies in organisations had been conducted under this functionalism paradigm which considered organisational culture as a harmonious element in the organisations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Gagliardi, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Parker, 2000; Turner, 1990; Weick, 1995). Difficulties arise, however, when an attempt is made to understand the phenomenon of organisational culture which does not follow this functionalism tradition. For example, the cultural practices of office workers in companies in *Techwira* city have given a different twist to the “harmonious” concept of organisational culture. In these companies, the culture is management oriented – engineered for the members of the organisations, i.e. the staff – to follow and adapt. The presence of prominent organisational symbols, such as the black sofa, staff card, and to a certain extent personalised office space, are evidence that the cultures practised here are controlled cultures.

Organisational symbols in these selected organisations are embraced by the employees in these organisations. For example, black sofas and staff identity cards are symbols which are dictated by the top management to the employees. As stated by Miss Chenam, an IT professional:

As you might have known, our company is very serious in dealing with potential or existing clients. Black sofa for example illustrates the management seriousness in dealing professionally with the clients who come to the company. It somehow reflects our business identity in dealing with the customers. Of course, this space is mainly meant for professional dealings rather than social visits! (personal communication, September 21, 2005) (see number 19 in Appendix A).

On the view of staff identity cards, Mr. John argued

The staff card position in the ICT based companies in this city is rather unique compared to other workplaces. It is a card with multi-purpose functions. It defines who you are to the organizations, provides some privileges for its members and able to differentiate between an insider and an outsider (personal communication, September 17, 2005) (see number 10 in Appendix A).

The employees seem to accept the organisational symbols because to them these symbols do not represent any conflicting element with their personal or professional identities. In fact these symbols strengthen the professional identities of the employees as workers in these organisations, especially the staff identity cards where the card implicitly differentiates strangers from card holders who associate themselves as people who work in the city. Nonetheless, the issue of personalised space is another interesting issue to be addressed as it reflects resistance toward top-down approach of imposing a standard organisational identity. The efforts to decorate and personalise office spaces indicate the need to be individualistic rather than embracing the generic idea of the top management conception of the organisational identity of the office spaces.

It is not uncommon however, that culture is used as a mechanism of control: this is suggested by Detert, Roger, and Mauriel, (2000) from their

review of studies on total quality management and organisational culture in organisations where there are “formalised rules and procedures set by a few, which are intended to guide the behaviour of the majority” (p.857). An interesting ethnographic study in Tech by Kunda (1992) also illustrated the phenomenon of culture and control whereby the employees – the techies – were being educated and exposed to the management’s understanding of organisational culture through the company’s mission, slogans, workshops, motivational talks, internal booklets, and emails. Reflecting on the companies in this city, I argue that based on observing people (visitors and office workers, and the office environment), talking to the office workers and interviewing the top management, the roles of organisational symbols are results of a controlled culture, i.e. engineered from the top downwards for the employees to abide by and practice. An exception is the personalised office spaces in the corporations which rather reflect the resistance to the forced culture.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to argue the role of organisational symbols in selected organisations. Employing ethnographic approach, the study revealed three main organisational symbols which are black sofas, staff cards, and cubicle offices space. These symbols are closely associated with controlled culture which is rather alien in ICT based corporations where people are supposed to be creative and independent in their working environment. For example, studies on work culture of IT professionals in technology parks such as Silicon Valley indicate that these individuals value personal freedom in creating programs and software for the corporations (Castells & Hall, 1994; Rosenberg, 2001; Saxenien, 2006). Coming back to the findings, it can be concluded that these organisational symbols have a significant impact on organisational identity. Even though the controlled cultures are exercised and practised in the organisations, the employees embrace the symbols and identified themselves with the symbols due to its practicality and corporate image of the corporations. Only decorated cubicle office space indicates partial resistance toward the controlled culture. Future research needs to address the issue of resistance of employees in relation to organisational identity, which will give a more constructive understanding of the real life of people in organisations.

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END NOTES

1. Pseudonym name(s) were used for the purpose of confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects and the corporations.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

No	Name	Position	Types of Interview	Date and Duration of Time	Location(s)
1	Mrs Salmah	Cleaner	Ethnographic Interview	Oct 6, 2004 until Sep 30 2005 (including Aug 23, 2005) 2 hours (each session)	Street Mall and Perhentian Cyberjaya
2	Miss Ang	Company Secretary	Ethnographic Interview	Oct 11, 2004 2 ½ hours	ICT company
3	Mr Abu	Security Personnel	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	Oct 13, 2004 Structured Interview: 2 hours Ethnographic Interview: 4 hours	Telecommunication company in Cyberjaya
4	Miss Liza	Assistant Manager in the Information Accounting Department	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	Oct 14, 2004 until Sep 30, 2005 (including Sep 16, 2005) Structured Interview: 2 hours Ethnographic Interview: 1 ½ hours (each session)	Telecommunication company in Cyberjaya
5	Miss Zura	IT Officer	Ethnographic Interview	Oct 14, 2004 until Sep 30, 2005 (including Aug 18, 2005) 1 ½ hours each session	Her office in Cyberjaya
6	Miss Tina	Office Worker	Structured Interview	Oct 14, 2004 2 ½ hours	ICT company
7	Miss Ainol	Assistant Manager	Structured Interview	Oct 14, 2004 2 hours	ICT company
8	Mrs Jannah	MDeC Officer	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	Oct 15, 2004 until Dec 31, 2004 Structured Interview: 1 ½ hours Ethnographic Interview: 3 hours (each meeting)	MDeC & her home in Shah Alam
9	Mr Siva	Marketing Manager	Structured Interview	Oct 15, 2004 2 hours	Telecommunication company in Cyberjaya

Appendix A (continued)

No	Name	Position	Types of Interview	Date and Duration of Time	Location(s)
10	John	IT Professional	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	Oct 15, 2004 (including July 27, 2005) until Sep 30, 2005 Structured Interview: 2 ½ hours (4 sessions) & Ethnographic Interview: 3 hours (each meeting)	ICT company
11	Mr Johari	Senior Officer in IT Department	Structured Interview	Aug 15, 2004 2 hours	Telecommunication company
12	Miss Shalam	Manager	Structured Interview	Oct 16, 2004 2 ½ hours	Telecommunication company
13	Miss Khulde	Senior Human Resource Officer	Structured Interview	Oct 17, 2004 Lasted for 10 minutes (rather aggressive interviewee)	High-tech company in Cyberjaya
14	Mr K	Business Computing Manager	Structured Interview	Oct 19, 2004 2 ½ hours	Telecommunication office building
15	Miss Diana	Computer Programmer	Structured Interview	Oct 19, 2004 2 hours	ICT company
16	Mr Alif	Security Guard	Ethnographic Interview	Sep 17, 2005 until Sep 30, 2005 2 ½ hours (each session)	Street Mall and Perhentian Cyberjaya
17	Mr Adlin	Maintenance Worker	Ethnographic Interview	Nov 11, 2004 until Aug 28, 2005	Street Mall & Perhentian Cyberjaya
18	Miss Sharmila	IT Professional	Ethnographic Interview	Aug 20, 2004 until Sep 30, 2005 (including Oct 21, 2004) 2 hours (each session)	ICT company (her office) and Street Mall
19	Miss Chenam	IT Officer	Ethnographic Interview	Dec 20, 2004 until Aug 30, 2005 1 ½ hours (each session)	Her office in Cyberjaya and Kuala Lumpur

Appendix A (continued)

No	Name	Position	Types of Interview	Date and Duration of Time	Location(s)
20	Mr Yodam	Service Engineer	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	Dec 30, 2004 until Aug 30, 2005 Structured Interview: 1 ½ hours (3 sessions) Ethnographic Interview 2 hours (each meeting)	His office in Cyberjaya and at the Street Mall
21	Miss Tang	IT Manager	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	July 14, 2005 until Sep 30, 2005 (including Aug 23, 2005) Structured Interview: 2 hours Ethnographic Interview: 2 ½ hours (every meeting)	ICT company
22	Mr Raju	IT Engineer	Structured Interview	July 14, 2005 3 hours	ICT Company
23	Miss Chan	IT Manager	Structured Interview and Ethnographic Interview	July 14, 2005 until Sep 30, 2005 Structured Interview: 1 ½ hours Ethnographic Interview: 2 ½ hours (every meeting)	ICT Company
24	Mrs Ana	Restaurateur	Ethnographic Interview	July 27, 2005 until Sep 30, 2005 (including Sep 17, 2005) 1 ½ hour (every session)	Street Mall
25	Mr Salim	T Manager	Structured Interview	Sep 8, 2005 2 hours	MDeC Fair, Penang
26	Miss Devi	IT officer	Structured Interview	Sep 9, 2005 2 hours	MDeC Fair, Penang
27	Mr Subra	Human Resource Manager	Structured Interview	Sep 9, 2005 2 hours	MDec Fair, Penang

Appendix A (continued)

No	Name	Position	Types of Interview	Date and Duration of Time	Location(s)
28	Mr Ali	Vice President	Structured Interview	Sep 15, 2005 2 hours	Data centre company
29	Miss J	Senior Officer of the MDeC	Structured interview	Sep 16, 2005 & Sep 19, 2005 2 hours (each session)	The MDeC office building
30	Mr Adam	Vice President	Structured Interview	Sep 16, 2005 2 ½ hours	ICT company (Data centre company)
31	Mr Chin	Maintenance Officer	Structured Interview	Aug 25, 2005 2 hours	Data centre company