



Revisiting a classic case study

Anita Roddick and the Body Shop International

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classic case
study

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Abstract

Purpose – On 10 September 2007 the world was stunned by the news that Anita Roddick – the founder of The Body Shop – was dead at the age of 64. Everyone recognizes the success of The Body Shop, but it is not easily explained using traditional strategic thinking. This paper aims to shed new light on Anita Roddick's entrepreneurial and managerial flair, as well as on her legacy to the field of management.

Design/methodology/approach – Configuration as a quality is an intriguing and intuitively appealing new idea. The main innovation is the premise that organizational elements form common gestalts such that each can be best understood in relation to the other elements in the configuration. This paper probed the conceptual notion of configuration as a quality in an empirical sense by revisiting one of the classic Harvard Business School (HBS) case studies: *The Body Shop International*.

Findings – The paper shows The Body Shop as a good example of a comprehensive configuration that allows immediate intuitive apprehension of the new idea of configuration as a quality.

Research limitations/implications – The main issue is the limited depth of analysis that has been achieved through the single HBS case as the main source of evidence. As such, although the propositions put forward seem highly plausible, the supplementary explanation still remains incomplete, opening opportunities for further research.

Originality/value – Re-visiting classic case studies such as the HBS *Body Shop International* can stimulate the debate and fuel the process of theory building through the amalgamation of diversified old and new perspectives of the same phenomenon.

Keywords Configuration management, Entrepreneurialism, Organizational culture

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Although the study of the quality of organizational configurations is still embryonic, the idea of configuration itself has been with us for quite a while. It has moved from its traditional settings such as astronomy, physics and geography to branch into the field of management sciences in the 1970s. Most business schools' graduates would undoubtedly remember Henry Mintzberg's conceptual typology of five structural configurations: the simple structure; the machine bureaucracy; the professional bureaucracy; the divisionalized form; and the adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979, 1989). The basic idea is deceptively simple: configurations are composed of tightly knit mutually supportive elements put together into a thematic synergic whole.

Configuration as a quality is an intriguing and intuitively appealing new idea. It focuses our attention not only on the attributes that combine into a limited number of



archetypes but also on the links that tie the supportive elements together. Here configuration is defined as the simplicity of the relationship between the core organization's elements that are orchestrated and connected by a single theme. Miller introduced this intriguing and intuitively appealing idea for the first time in his 1996 paper reflecting on his award-winning *Strategic Management Journal* paper "Configurations of strategy and structure: towards a synthesis". One of the main contentions of Miller (1996, 1999; Miller and Whitney, 1999; Miller and LeBreton-Miller, 2005) is that what is often missing in the configurational literature is the search for configuration itself: for complex systems of interdependency brought about by their orchestrating themes. The primary aim of this paper is to take up that challenge. Everyone recognizes the success of The Body Shop, but it is not easily explained using traditional strategic thinking. The paper sets out to shed new light on Anita Roddick's entrepreneurial and managerial flair as well as on her legacy to the field of management and her success through the application of the configurational approach. Anyone who has read the case would remember some of her heretical statements such as:

The world of business has taught me nothing ... I honestly believe I would not have succeeded if I had been taught about business ... Most businesses focus all the time on profits. I have to say I think that is deeply boring.

The next section reviews the literature and summarizes clearly the debate between the proponents and the opponents of configuration theory. Then the methodology is presented before the case is analysed and the conclusion is drawn.

The literature on configuration

The configurational approach takes its departure from the Harvard structural contingency theory research inspired by Chandler's work looking at strategy and structure particularly in the United States and Western Europe (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998). Whereas contingency theory looks for patterns of association between dimensions of organizational structure and contextual variables the main innovation in the configurational way of thinking is the premise that organizational elements form common gestalts such that "each can be best understood in relation to the other elements in the configuration" (Miller, 1986, p. 235).

As Lamothe and Dufour (2007) pointed out the literature on configuration is already over 35-years-old yet it still is underdeveloped, and therefore "there is a great deal of work to be done" (Miller, 1999, p. 28). According to one of its most prominent advocates, Henry Mintzberg, the idea originated in the early 1970s in Joseph Khandwalla's – one of his colleagues – dissertation submitted at Carnegie-Mellon concluding that the success of businesses could not be explained by any single attribute but by the various interrelationships between the various attributes: "Getting it all together proved more important than any one best way" (Mintzberg, 1989, p. 95). The search for configuration was then initiated and the case for configuration argued (Miller and Mintzberg, 1984) on the basis of three fundamental interrelated conceptual arguments. The premise is that organizations act, and by definition, not randomly (Maguire, 1997). The first argument states that as suggested by the proponents of population ecology and social Darwinism the environment would select only a limited number of common successful

organizational forms; all the others would be doomed to failure and, therefore, will become instinct. Second, in order to succeed, organizations would be driven toward common patterns to achieve internal harmony around a central theme that marshals and orders all the various individual elements. As Mintzberg (1989, p. 261) pointed out, “remove harmony and fit, and configuration becomes dysfunctional”. Third, organizations adhere to their form for fairly long periods of time and change only when necessary or extremely advantageous (Miller and Friesen, 1980, Miller and Friesen (1984)). These three arguments would add up to support the idea that organizational elements often coalesce into a limited number of relatively stable common types or configurations that could describe a large proportion of high-performing organizations (Miller, 1987).

The obvious interest and enthusiasm in academia for the idea of configuration is most noticeable not only by Mintzberg’s distinguished international status and reputation but also by Miller winning the prestigious *SMJ*-Wiley best paper prize for a paper on the issue. As Bettis (1995), the Associate Editor of *SMJ*, pointed out in announcing the award:

... the paper has had a remarkable impact on scholarship and teaching in the field since its publication and has become an essential reading for doctoral students (Bettis, 1995, p. 503).

Despite such enthusiasm the development of knowledge on configuration has so far been limited to a rather small group of people who are sometimes referred to as “McGillomaniacs” (Miller, 1996, p. 505; Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998, p. 344) for their link with McGill University and academics.

As Mintzberg (1989, 2. 263) pointed out, “for classification, for comprehension, for diagnosis, and for prescription, configuration is most convenient”. Therefore, and perhaps not surprisingly, the literature on configurations has been dominated by the search for the “pure forms” of effective organizations that could help us not only to understand but also to improve, manage, and change them as well. In this sense configuration becomes synonymous with “basic patterns” (Van de Ven and Drazin (1994)), “gestalts” (Miller, 1981), types (Mintzberg, 1989), and archetypes (Miller and Friesen, 1978; Greenwood and Hinnings, 1993). Unfortunately, the academic research on configurations has tended to limit its insight by favoring categorizing over analyzing. That search for configuration has mainly been conducted on two fronts: theoretical and empirical. The former and most common gave birth to typologies while the latter resulted in various taxonomies of organizations. As Miller (1996) and Miller and LeBreton-Miller (2005, p. 506) indicated with a few exceptions most typologies “appear thin and arbitrary. Either they attend to too few components or they fail to make any serious attempt to show how and why these components interrelate”. They are not tested empirically, rarely informed by theory, do not facilitate empirical progress and do not show how the elements or variables cohere in thematic ways. Taxonomies tend to be more firmly based on facts than typologies (Miller, 1996, 1999; Lamothe and Dufour, 2007). However, they are not without major shortcomings:

... many taxonomies have justly been criticized for their lack of theoretical significance (Barney and Hoskisson, 1990; McGee and Thomas, 1986), their arbitrary and narrow selection of variables (Fiegenbaum and Thomas, 1990; Reger and Huff, 1993; Ketchen *et al.*, 1993), and their unreliable or unstable results (Hatten and Hatten, 1987; Miller, 1996, p. 509).

As a result, they do not derive consequential or replicable groupings. Furthermore, they picture a world that is essentially static, generate categories that are rarely informed by theories, and clusters that are too precarious, and that are often lacking robustness and stability. Lex Donaldson (1996) leads the charge against configuration theory. He argues that all three arguments used by the main proponents of the configuration theory are disputable:

Configuration theory has no unique support from population-ecology theory and the existence of just four viable strategy-structure niches is undemonstrated; reciprocal causation, propelling organizations into the extreme polarities of the configuration is empirically unsupported; likewise, quantum change is not typical of several major contingency-structure relationships. Organizational change in structure is predominantly incremental (Donaldson, 1996, p. 122).

There is little doubt that more empirical research is needed to support the contentions of configuration theory. As Pettigrew and Fenton (2000, p. 19) indicated:

What has been lacking in the configurational perspective is any dedicated empirical work to support its arguments. Ten years after Miller's (1986) seminal article on configurations of strategy and structure he wrote in the *Strategic Management Journal*: "For all its promise, the literature on configuration remains underdeveloped".

In fact, as Lamothe and Dufour (2007) pointed out, Donaldson's criticism is misdirected. He is not denying that some constellations of dimensions around core themes are viable while others are not – or at least, are less – viable. Furthermore, he is not arguing that the idea of "fit" between organizational configuration and the environment enhances effectiveness is flawed. Therefore, his quarrel is not with configuration theory *per se*, but with the organizational typology and taxonomy movements that overwhelmed the first stage of its development. That is clear in the conclusion of his book:

The typologizing of configuration theory is empirically false and theoretically naïve. It illustrates the problem of reifying constructs – that is, of constructing a few ideal-types as points of contrast, giving the ideal-types names, and then making the error of thinking that these ideal-types exist and compose the whole world... They are the equivalent of the flat Earth model in astronomy, a simple, understandable model which people find attractive but which precluded true understanding of reality (Donaldson, 1996, p. 163).

Donaldson's attack is clearly targeted at Mintzberg's influential taxonomy of five ideal forms or structural configurations initially introduced in his seminal book *The Structuring of Organizations* (Mintzberg, 1979). The criticism overlooks the fact that Mintzberg's most significant contribution does not lie in any of the few structural configuration developed in his book. It lies in opening a truly powerful way of thinking about organizational form: the Configurational School – "a more extensive and integrative literature and practice ... a school that integrates the claims of the other schools" (Mintzberg and Lampel, 1999, p. 28). As Lamothe and Dufour (2007) indicated what Donaldson overlooks is that Mintzberg's essential contribution would survive even if all five nodes of his original structural configuration pentagon were to mutate, change or disappear entirely to make space for more and/or totally brand new ones. What makes Mintzberg's pentagon of ideal types so remarkable and exciting is not the equivalent of the flat Earth model in astronomy as argued by Donaldson but of

Mendeleev's classification of known elements in chemistry: the origin of the celebrated and internationally acclaimed periodic table. Both authors – Mintzberg and Mendeleev – built upon the work of others in arranging the elements so that people could immediately see the relationships between them. On the basis of that relationship, other elements and configurations, as yet undiscovered, could be predicted. It must be kept in mind at all times that ideal-type configurations are an outcome and that if either the processes and/or the contexts of managing organizations change significantly, the ideal types of organizations should change as well. Nevertheless, the way of thinking about them should remain fundamentally the same.

In sum, Donaldson charges the authors of the organizational typology movement for their crude or simplistic reductionism; a critical assessment that is already readily and entirely shared by the main advocates of configuration theory. As Mintzberg *et al.* (1998, p. 345) indicated:

Donaldson's criticism is based on the one criterion of accuracy, as if theories are true or false. But all theories are false: they are just words or pictures on pieces of paper. Reality is always more complex (The world may not be flat, for example, but neither it is round. It is bulges at equator, and has all kinds of bumps, called mountains). So usefulness becomes a key criterion, especially for practicing managers (The flat earth theory is particularly useful for building airport runways in Holland). This does not negate Donaldson's criticism – the world seen as configurations is flawed too - but it does raise at least equally important questions about his preferred alternative, which is in the spirit of the contingency theory. In other words, managers have to choose from among flawed theories.

Reduced to its core yet most simple argument, the study of configuration rests on focusing on certain key dimensions that together offer an understanding of how an organization functions. To make further progress towards understanding configurations and in answering his detractors, Miller (1996, 1999) exhorted researchers to eschew the typological or taxonomical approach in the future, and focus instead on the notion of "quality" and "unifying themes":

In the abstract, configurations may be defined as constellations of organizational elements that are pulled together by a unifying theme, such as unequalled service or pioneering invention. The first constellation is called the core; it consists of the mission, the means and the market (Miller and Whitney, 1999, p. 6).

One of the key ideas lying at the very heart of heart of configuration since its inception is that of stable central orchestrating themes. Nevertheless, for more than 35 years and with the exceptions of Miller and Whitney (1999), Miller and LeBreton-Miller (2005), Lamothe and Dufour (2007) and indirectly Miller (1993) and Miller and Chen (1996), no researcher has set the task to investigate those central themes that orchestrate the parts to produce the driving character of the firm.

Methodology

Although the idea of configuration as a quality sounds rather straightforward and simple – almost banal – at first sight it is not an easy concept to grapple with, without the benefit of a good example. Unfortunately, very few examples are readily available and the main one provided by Miller and Whitney (1999) – Marshall Industries, a West Coast distributor of electronic components – does not feature a well-known company and therefore cannot be easily understood by a wide audience without a lengthy

description. To Miller and Whitney's credit their paper uses numerous other interesting classic examples such as Microsoft, IBM, Rolls-Royce Aviation, IKEA, GE, Honda that have made their way to most business schools' classrooms as well as to a large number of internationally powerful boardrooms of companies. These various examples are brought in by the two authors to illustrate some of the indicators of configuration or to give an idea of the meaning of their thematic synergic whole. Although the tactic clearly helps the readers to gain insight into the world of configuration the end result remains unfortunately disconnected and anecdotic. More recent attempts still suffer from the same limitations. As Miller and LeBreton-Miller (2005) pointed out:

Finally, a recent book by Miller and LeBreton-Miller (2005) has, at least implicitly, embraced the broader view of configuration . . . Unfortunately, that is an anecdotal study intended for management practitioners. There are no hypotheses, no operationalization of constructs, and no systematic data or analyses.

To make further progress towards understanding configuration this paper probed the conceptual notion of configuration as a quality in an empirical sense by revisiting one of the classic HBS case studies: *The Body Shop International* (HBS, 1991). Indeed, the case was not written with that in mind but in order to illustrate the processes and problems of internationalisation. It still ranks half way through on the most recent HBS Publishing's 400 cases bestsellers' list (HBS, 49522). Such methodology has become more and more popular in the field of strategic management in the last two decades. For instance, Eisenhardt and Sull (2001) re-visited two cases – Yahoo! (HBS 6-97-052) and Intel (Stanford SM-65, 1999) – in their search for the new meaning of the concept of strategy as simple rules. Re-visiting classic cases such as those can stimulate the debate and fuel the process of theory building through the amalgamation of diversified perspectives of the same phenomenon.

Case analysis

As Miller and Whitney (1999, p. 5) pointed out: “for the great firms, configuration, not strategy alone, is the most powerful source of competitive advantage”. Synergy (Miller, 1993), clarity of direction and coordination, sustainability of competitive advantages, commitment (Ghemawat, 1991), speed and economies are all potential benefits of a good configuration. Threats would include concentration on too narrow a range of competitive activities (Miller and Chen, 1996), reduction in incentive to search for new ways of doing things (Miller, 1990), ignorance of competitive alternatives and loss of resilience and relevance (Miller, 1993) – “there is too much consensus, too little reflexion and questioning, and an inadequate capacity to recognize and respond to the need for change” (Miller, 1999, p. 30).

Interestingly enough, Body Shop fits perfectly any single one of the three configurations – the Pioneer, the Salesman, and the Craftsman – of the taxonomy re-visited by Miller and Whitney (1999) in their recent paper as well as the fourth one – the Builder – developed earlier by Miller (1990) in his book *The Icarus Paradox*. Unfortunately, the reader is left puzzled as to why the fourth configuration of Miller's original taxonomy has not been re-visited whereas the first three were. Because the Body Shop could be described simultaneously as a “Pioneer” – creating state-of-the-art products, a “Salesman” – attracting and serving customers better than anyone else, a “Craftsman” – ensuring the highest possible levels of quality, and a “Builder” –

locating and capitalizing on business opportunities better and faster than their competitors – it shows rather well that the existence of common configurations such as these does not imply that these are discrete entities but that they can significantly overlap in real world organizations. It also suggests that some configurations would be much more widely based than others and therefore that various levels of configurations of different quality and comprehensiveness would exist.

The unconventional ideas and business practices of The Body Shop are well summed up in the title of the cogent book by its founder, Anita Roddick (2001), *Business as Unusual*. That provides us with the key central orchestrating theme. The Body Shop unorthodox way of doing business is legendary:

Body Shop . . . with its promotion of “green” cosmetic and beauty products – the manufacture of which would be next to impossible for larger traditional health and beauty products suppliers who would have to change everything from their “unnatural” ingredients, to their “polluting” suppliers, to their “unethical” testing methods, to their “excessive” packaging, and to their “sexist” advertising – was able to carve out a significant niche for itself in what was a rather stable and mature market (Maguire, 1997, p. 69).

A book titled *Body and Soul – Profits with Principles* (Roddick, 1992) is also informative. Other books she recently associated her name with such as *Getting to the Better Future* (Renesch and Roddick, 2000); *The No-nonsense to Fair Trade* (Ranson, 2001) and *Take it Personally – How to Make Conscious Choices to Change the World* (Roddick, 2001) all point in the same direction.

Our analysis shows that there are three reinforcing themes (Figure 1) lying at the core of the Body Shop configuration. They are to:

- (1) be the instigator of change;
- (2) avoid traditional channels; and
- (3) appeal to a loyal clientele of environmentally-conscious female consumers who demand a relaxed, honest, exiting and fun shopping environment.

These three related core themes, respectively labelled by Miller and Whitney (1999) as mission, means and market, help in building up the critical mass for the effective



Figure 1. The Body Shop's orchestrating themes

configuration to blossom. Numerous re-editions of the three core themes could be found throughout the case study. The first theme, to be the instigator of change, finds meaning in decisions and actions such as making a difference; returning something to society; going against the tide of the industry's established practices; creating a new business paradigm. The second theme, to avoid traditional distribution channels, also takes various forms such as not resorting to advertising and structuring, spending as little as possible on packaging, using product labels to describe ingredients rather than making miraculous claims, franchising, etc. Finally, the third theme, to appeal to a loyal clientele, mutates into various facsimiles such as developing products based on all-natural ingredients, selling in refillable recyclable containers and the like. In short, a clear and shared mission added to focusing on the primary means for achieving the goals combined with a valuable target market that values the outputs created, build up the core of The Body Shop configuration. As the authors of the case themselves pointed out "from product development to human resource management, The Body Shop had been described as innovative, daring, and even radical. But there was no question it was successful" (HBS, 1991, p. 61). The core themes highlighted by The Body Shop example are summarized and shown in Figure 2.

For all their power the core themes are not enough to secure on their own an effective configuration. A comprehensive organizational support system (Figure 3) also needs to be put into place around the core to make it happen.

Miller and Whitney (1999, p. 7) use the metaphor of ballet to explain their view:

Ballets are inspired by music and dramatic plot, but choreographed by plans and practice routines. In a similar fashion, organizational configurations are inspired by a core theme but implemented by plans, routines, and systems.

Information systems, structure, plans, reward practices, monitoring activities are also needed for the seeds of configuration to take root. The Body Shop's Information

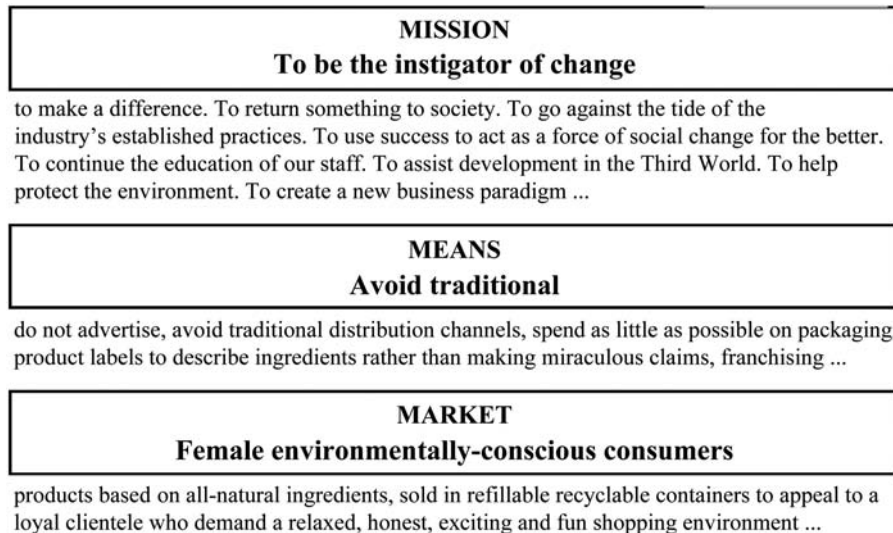


Figure 2.
Themes and core
orchestrating themes



Figure 3.
Some of the Body Shop's support systems

systems that find out about skin and hair care practices of women all over the world, its Department of Damned Good Ideas as well as its Department of Surprises and its significant commitment of resources to community activities are all part of the configuration too. Its family feeling but perhaps most importantly the Head Office's strict controls over the franchising process are further elements of The Body Shop's comprehensive organizational support system.

Conclusion

To make further progress towards understanding configuration this paper probed the conceptual notion of configuration as a quality in an empirical sense by revisiting one of the classic HBS case studies: *The Body Shop International*. An important empirical contribution of this paper has been to provide an example of a comprehensive configuration that allows immediate intuitive apprehension of the idea of configuration as a quality without need for a lengthy description. Unlike Marshall Industries (Miller and Whitney, 1999) the Body Shop is of household familiarity. Configuration as a quality is an intriguing and intuitively appealing new idea that is shredding new light on Anita Roddick's entrepreneurial and managerial flair as well as on her legacy to the field of management.

Everyone recognizes the success of The Body Shop, but unlike Yahoo! and Intel (Eisenhardt and Sull, 2001) it is not easily explained using traditional thinking about strategy. It cannot be attributed to an attractive industry structure nor is it possible to attribute its success to unique and valuable resources. As for its strategic plans anyone who is familiar with the Body Shop's exceptional story would agree that The Body Shop ever had a formal one. As Eisenhardt and Sull (2001, p. 108) pointed out "companies that do not match the traditional thinking are often accused of lacking strategies altogether". That could not be further from the truth. The secret of the success and distress of The Body Shop is in the quality of its configuration. The leading proponents and advocates of the Configurational School (Mintzberg and

Lampel, 1999; Miller and Whitney, 1999; Mintzberg, 1989) have invited scholars, managers and consultants alike to look beyond the traditional American strategic management framework and its conventional aphorisms – structure follows strategy and systems support structure that Western senior managers rely on for most of the second part of the twentieth century. Our analysis of the Body Shop indicates that configuration could extend far beyond the traditional 3Ss – strategy-structure-systems – to get into the realms of the new post-modern 3Ps – purpose-people-processes (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1994; Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1995). The former framework attempts to create a management system that minimizes the idiosyncrasies of employees' behaviour whereas the later emphasis is on building a rich, engaging corporate purpose and developing employees' capabilities while broadening their perspectives. As Miller and Whitney (1999, p. 5) pointed out: "the object of a good configuration is always to develop a committed, enthusiastic cadre of people who collaborate seamlessly to get and keep customers who value their services". If there is a point of major convergence it is that ethics and humanism should be the features of the twenty-first century firm. The Body Shop offers a convincing example of such an organization that does not lack profound driving character but features ethics and humanism as well as a powerful unifying focus that gives it uniqueness, spirit and direction.

Our paper is one of the very few that looks at central orchestrating themes using configurational theory. Our analysis allowed us to capture the configuration of the Body Shop as a whole. Furthermore, it summarizes clearly the debate between the proponents and the opponents of configuration theory as well as clearly reply to Donaldson's charge against its contentions providing an opportunity for others to engage in the raging debate. Our analysis has been simple and interpretive. Therefore, our findings and conclusions can be viewed as indicative. Nonetheless, we believe that we have made an important contribution by demonstrating empirically that thematic focus does exist and by identifying some of the elements that serve that focus and potentially reinforce each other. Further research about how the themes are blended and orchestrated to form harmonious and robust configurations is needed. For instance, measuring the quality of the configuration, that is to say the degree to which the elements are orchestrated and connected by their recurring core theme, is still an entirely uncharted territory. Another one is the relationship between the quality of the configuration and the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations. A comprehensive organizational support system might also be needed around the core themes to make it work. That is yet again another great opportunity for further research.

Limitations

The depth of our analysis is indeed limited by our methodological choice. It must be stressed that our analysis relied primarily on a single HBR case study and that the case relates solely to events up to 1991 when it was written by Bartlett and Elderkin. Here, the main issue is the limited depth of analysis that has been achieved though that single HBR case as the main source of evidence. As such, although the propositions put forward seem highly plausible, yet the supplementary explanation still remains incomplete. As a consequence, the analysis tends to be limited to identifying the core orchestrating themes, and some of the elements of the organizational support system. The more recent events that could inform a number of key related issues such as

excessive configuration, the architecture of simplicity (Miller, 1993) and the idea and processes of reconfiguration are not described in the case study. Such data would provide supporting explanation that would thicken and enrich our findings. This offers an opportunity for further research and re-analysis of more up to date cases of the Body Shop and to explore the organisational support mechanisms in more depth and hence to seek to understand how each contributes to the configurations.

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