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A CULTURAL QUEST: A STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL USE OF NEW CULTURAL RESOURCES IN STRATEGY FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

Our study was motivated by the growing influence in cultural sociology and organizational research of the view of culture as a "toolkit", from which individuals draw resources flexibly to develop strategies of action that address different circumstances. To investigate if and how organizations can also use new and diverse cultural resources, we undertook a historical case study of the incorporation of new cultural resources in an organization's cultural repertoire. In-depth analysis of four rounds of incorporation of new cultural resources led to the development of a robust theoretical model that identifies cultural repertoire enrichment and organizational identity redefinition as two core mechanisms that facilitate the use of new cultural resources for the development of unconventional strategies and strategic versatility. Our model contributes to organizational research novel theoretical understanding regarding the use of cultural resources in strategy formation and change.

Early research in cultural sociology conceptualized culture as taken-for-granted values, norms, beliefs, and symbols acquired through socialization (Wrong 1961), which shape action in predictable, culture-reproducing directions (see Peterson 1979, p. 161). A more recent perspective conceives of culture as a flexible toolkit of cultural resources that are used by individuals to develop different strategies of action and to achieve different goals. The view of culture as a toolkit from which individuals draw cultural resources "in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems (Swidler 1986, p. 273)" has become increasingly influential in the sociology of culture (DiMaggio 1997) and has spurred a vibrant body of work. Individuals use cultural resources flexibly in political settings to change ideas and practices (Berezin 1997), in social movements to frame the direction of change and its implementation (Weber et al. 2008), and in a variety of contexts to establish social boundaries and identities (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Swidler 2001).

How individuals use cultural resources depends on their cultural repertoires (Swidler 2001). Cultural repertoires consist of those resources that individuals have selected from the broader societal cultural toolkits "of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews (Swidler 1986, p. 273) and have learned to use. From the societal cultural toolkits, individuals tend to select resources that resonate with their identity, enable them "to be a certain kind of person (Swidler 2001, p. 72)" and identify them as members of a social group (e.g. Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Furthermore, how individuals use cultural resources in their repertoire depends on life experiences and circumstances. In stable life situations, for example, cultural resources tend to "harden into formulas (Swidler 2001, p. 55)" and lead to standard strategies of actions.

A central insight that has emerged from this research is that: individuals' cultural repertoires enable them to conceive diverse strategies of actions to address different situations. Thus, although in a path-dependent and identity-constrained manner, culture provides individuals with a toolkit from which they can select resources to take strategic actions and effect change. This view of culture as a toolkit holds considerable promise for understanding strategic action and change at the organizational level of analysis.

Indeed, a recent stream of organizational research has begun to explore how organizations use cultural toolkits (Ocasio and Joseph 2005; Osterman 2006; Weber 2005; Zilber 2006). Whereas Swidler (1986) referred to different forms of cultural resources, including stories, concepts, symbols, and myths,

organizational research has studied organizational cultural repertoires primarily in terms of the concepts used to guide organizational practices.[1] This research suggests that organizations tend to select and use cultural resources from within the registers of their industries (Weber 2005). Industry registers consist of the entirety of concepts produced by and available to members of a collectivity to interpret situations and develop strategies of action (Weber 2005). Registers therefore comprise a set of cultural resources that are understood and accepted as appropriate and relevant for the industry (Porac et al. 1989). From their industry registers, competing organizations select a subset of resources that inform their specific practices and become their cultural repertoires. For example, Weber (2005) finds that pharmaceutical companies assemble their repertoires from concepts available in the industry register and use them to formulate competitive strategies and to establish different terms for human resource management. Similarly, Ocasio and Joseph (2005) show that organizations change the corporate governance concepts in their repertories to mirror changes in their surrounding institutional context, and Zilber (2006) shows that high-tech Israeli companies use concepts from the Israeli political system in recruitment communications. Together, these studies highlight the importance of understanding how organizations use cultural resources and stress that organizational cultural repertoires are largely derived from the subset of cultural resources legitimated within their industry registers or institutional contexts.

A different stream of organizational research has investigated the consequences of the use of cultural resources from outside an organization's industry register. This research emphasizes that the use of such resources is difficult, and potentially detrimental to organizations. Oakes, Townley, and Cooper (1998), for instance, document the tensions arising from the forced introduction of business concepts in the provincial museums and heritage sites of Alberta. Similarly, arts organizations that try to incorporate business concepts into their repertoire to become more commercially focused have been found to experience internal tensions (Fine 1992; Glynn 2000) due to the conflict between commercial considerations and the expressive function of arts (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007; Hirsch 1972). This research similarly suggests that organizations tend to use primarily cultural resources from their industry registers, and that doing otherwise is difficult and costly.

[1] Concepts are culturally situated, extra-subjective frames for understanding social reality (Munir and Phillips 2005) that organize knowledge in a particular domain and provide relatively shared schemas guiding actions in a collectivity.

As a result, whether and how organizations can expand their cultural repertoires with new cultural resources from outside their industry registers and the resulting consequences for their strategies remains poorly understood.

To address these questions, we undertook a study of the evolution of the cultural repertoire of Alessi, an Italian producer of household goods, between 1970 and 2006. During this period, Alessi transformed itself from a national producer of cold-pressed steel serving tools (e.g. trays, baskets, and teapots) into an internationally renowned producer of a wide range of high-end kitchenware, tableware, and bathroom products. Today, its products are recognized for their aesthetic and artistic quality and are exhibited in prestigious modern art museums around the world (Gabra-Liddell 1998; Sweet 1998). We combined the methods of longitudinal case analysis (Yin 1994) and grounded theory building (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to analyze the specific cultural resources that Alessi incorporated in its repertoire and the related changes in its practices and strategies. These analyses enabled us to trace four successive rounds of incorporation of new cultural resources in Alessi's repertoire, and to develop a robust theoretical model that relates a process of cultural repertoire enrichment coupled with identity redefinition to the formation of unconventional and versatile new strategies of action. Our model contributes to organizational research a novel theoretical understanding of the use of cultural resources in strategy formation and change.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Setting

Strategic change at Alessi. Our study is an inductive inquiry (Glaser and Strauss 1967) carried out through an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of a revelatory case (Yin 1994) that provided an excellent research setting as it engaged in a clearly demarcated strategic change process. In the late 1960s, Alessi was the technological and market leader in the tableware segment of the Italian metal household industry, due to its advanced skills in cold-pressed steel production. In 1970, Alberto Alessi, the founder's grandson, joined the organization and, despite its positive economic performance, he steered it in a radically different direction – using industrial production methods to make art objects in steel. The first attempt in that direction failed, but

in the following years, Alessi developed innovative practices in product design, production, and marketing based on concepts from the art register. In the subsequent years, it proceeded to incorporate concepts from the registers of the crafts and of the anthropology. During the 1990s Alessi incorporated concepts from the psychoanalysis register and during the 2000s it leveraged these developments in an increasing array of partnerships and licensing agreements. Our analysis examines the effects of these new and different cultural resources in its strategies.

Contextual conditions. Several geographical, socio-cultural, and organizational conditions need to be highlighted in order to properly situate the processes we observed. First, Alessi is a medium-sized family firm located in Crusinallo, Northern Italy, in a metalworking industrial district. This is an environment rich in century-old crafts traditions. Second, its proximity to Milan embeds it in a network of relationships with a thriving design community, and amidst an aesthetically-minded and wealthy market (Crane and Bovone 2006). These cultural environments might have inspired the direction and facilitated the changes we describe.

While these contextual conditions may have facilitated some aspects of the change, we note that Alessi in many ways led the formation of close connections between design and industry in the region (Verganti 2006). In the 1970s, industrial design in Italy was not "an activity tied to economics and market rules, but an operation of cultural and artistic content (De Fusco 2002, p. 268)."[2] The Italian metal household industry, in which Alessi operated, had made some use of industrial designers but had done so with a commercial orientation. In this context, Alessi became one of the first *industrial* manufacturers producing steel objects to incorporate art-related concepts in its repertoire. Its pioneering role in this regard is widely recognized; *The New York Times* writes*:* "The dawn of the latest wave [after the artistic movements of the past centuries] began in 1979, when Alessi invited 11 architects to design silver tea and coffee services (Brown 1988)." Therefore, the processes and outcomes we observe are not the result of imitation of available local or industry practices, but a distinct process of strategic change enabled by Alessi's cultural quest.

Data Collection

[2] The furniture industry was the first to employ industrial design while preserving its art-oriented principles (Branzi 2004; De Fusco 2002). In 1972 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York recognized the art-oriented nature of industrial design in the Italian furniture industry through an exhibition called "Italy: The new domestic landscape."

We used three main sources of data to trace the content, the process, and the consequences of the enrichment of Alessi's cultural repertoire: 1) corporate archives written by the organizational leader, consultants, and collaborators; 2) interviews with informants who lived through the process; and 3) external experts' publications from three different communities. Table 1 presents details on each of these sources and their use in our data analysis.

----------*Insert Table 1 about here*----------

Data Analysis

Our data analysis combines established methodologies for longitudinal case analysis, grounded theory building, and content analysis. It involved travelling back and forth between the data and the emerging structure of theoretical arguments (Locke 2001) in an iterative fashion. For the sake of clarity, however, we present our analysis in five broad sequential steps.

Step 1. Following prescriptions for case-based research (Yin 1994), we first created a case archive and a chronological description (97 pages) of Alessi's history, from its founding in 1921 to late 2006. Through this analysis we established a timeline of the main changes in Alessi's strategy and the historical, social, and organizational contexts within which the changes took place. In this step, we identified 1970 as the initial point of the change process.

Step 2. Following recent suggestions for the analysis of cultural repertoires (Weber 2005), we mapped the changes in the content of Alessi's repertoire between 1970 and 2006. We used the content of corporate texts (books, book chapters, and transcripts of speeches) written by, or reporting the statements of, Alberto Alessi and his collaborators.[3] The purpose of this analysis was not to map the entire repertoire of Alessi at a given point in time but to analyze the addition of new concepts. Following prior research (Corley and Gioia 2004; Weber 2005), we used sentences or paragraphs as coding units. We labelled each textual expression with either in-vivo codes, that is, the language used in the text, or with simple descriptive phrases. Multiple specific textual expressions were then grouped into first-order codes. Two researchers conducted this open-

[3] Specifically, this subset of the database consisted of four books authored by organizational members, three books about Alessi authored by external actors, 24 chapters from other books published by Alessi, four catalogues, and three internal documents, for a total of more than 300 pages of text.

coding process independently and generated the first-order codes, resolving occasional differences through discussion. We established links among first-order codes (Locke 2001) in the next round of axial coding. All three researchers evaluated similarities in first-order codes and suggested theoretical labels in relation to the evidence contained in the historical case and interviews. To illustrate, we grouped the first-order codes, "product form as expression of artistic language" and "formal innovation," under the more general second-order code (concept) "value of form." These second-order codes represented our "working hypotheses," which we then tested against all available data using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Unprompted use of concepts by our informants during the interviews reassured us that these were not simply the ideas of the organizational dominant coalition but instead served as cultural resources for organizational members. Finally, we linked second-order codes (concepts) into four clusters, associated to four registers: arts, crafts, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. In a fifth cluster, we grouped the concepts that our informants used to characterize the register of Alessi's industry – the household industry. We inferred an association between concepts and clusters based on informant statements and theoretical work regarding these registers.

Step 3. Having traced the incorporation of new concepts into Alessi's repertoire, we then analyzed their effects on organizational practices. In a separate round of coding, we traced the changes in organizational practices using three broad categories – product development, manufacturing, and marketing and distribution – and analyzed the relationships between concepts and practices.

Step 4. We examined the effects of the new practices on Alessi's product-market strategies. We observed that the changing practices of product development, production, marketing, and distribution enabled Alessi to compete in the marketplace through strategies of action that were new not only for Alessi but also to the industry. This analysis led to the identification of unconventional strategies and strategic versatility as strategic outcomes.

Step 5. We conducted a round of selective coding to combine observations and insights generated in the analyses of four rounds of incorporation of new cultural resources at Alessi. The four rounds served as embedded units of analysis, across which observations were compared and emerging theoretical insights

verified. The robust theoretical model we develop is based on observed relationships across the four rounds. We present the data structure derived from this analysis in Figure 1.

----------*Insert Figure 1 about here*----------

Follow-up meetings with key informants verified the correspondence between our theoretical insights and their experiences, and enhanced the internal and external validity of the theoretical model. We revised the model multiple times based on suggestions by informants from Alessi and academic colleagues.

HOW ALESSI USED NEW CULTURAL RESOURCES IN STRATEGY FORMATION

In this section, we report our findings by presenting our empirical observations and the theoretical insights they led to (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Figure 2 presents the theoretical model. The model consists of four core blocks. The first block, "Incorporation of Cultural Resources from Different Registers," represents repeated observations (over four rounds) of how the addition of new cultural resources led to new practices in product development, production and marketing. These new practices increased uncertainty about the commercial success of products and revealed contradictions among concepts. Two processes represented in the two blocks labeled "Cultural Repertoire Enrichment" and "Identity Redefinition" mitigated these challenges. Together, these processes led to two beneficial outcomes, represented in the fourth block: "Unconventional Strategies" and "Strategic Versatility." Below, we discuss the evidence and theoretical insights associated with each block.

----------*Insert Figure 2 about here*----------

Incorporation of Cultural Resources from Different Registers

This section describes the process of incorporating new cultural resources in an organizational repertoire through a) the addition of new concepts, b) changes in organizational practices, and c) the resulting challenges. Evidence about the relations between new concepts and practices is summarized in Table 2.

----------*Insert Table 2 about here*----------

Blending Steel and Arts: Incorporating Arts Concepts. Prior to 1970, Alessi was a manufacturer of traditional household products in metal for the catering trade and the consumer market. Our data revealed

that Alessi's "historical" cultural repertoire emphasized PRODUCTS AS FUNCTIONAL TOOLS, TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, PRODUCT QUALITY, CONFORMITY TO INDUSTRY STANDARDS, EFFICIENCY, and COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL. For example, the importance of being at the forefront of technological innovation was exemplified in its corporate motto: "If Alessi can't do it, then it can't be made in steel (ID22)."

When Alberto Alessi joined the firm in 1970, he steered the firm in a new direction that an informant summarized as "art applied to industry." In 1972 he invited famous European sculptors, such as Giò Pomodoro and Salvador Dalì, to design small sculptures that could be produced industrially. The project was a dramatic failure that jeopardized the survival of the organization. Despite the failure, in the following years Alberto Alessi sought alternative routes for combining art and steel. He commissioned product design from graphic designers and architects, whose designs used the principles of applied arts. These developments were associated with new conceptualizations of products and customers using concepts from the arts register (PRODUCTS AS ART WORKS, VALUE OF FORM, and AUTHORSHIP).

The concept of PRODUCTS AS ART WORKS emphasized that product design is an artistic activity—in the words of Alberto Alessi, "a Global Creative Discipline […], and not one of the many tools at the service of marketing and technology to produce and sell better (1993, CA9)." This concept suggested that designers are free to break formal conventions (Crane 1999) and produce objects with artistic content (Gaut 2007), including being able to express an artist's point of view (in our data, discussed as "capacity of blending different languages into a distinctive one"), being intellectually challenging and formally complex (in our data, referred to as "design that makes objects ambiguous," "design difficult to understand"), and having a strong visual impact through product form (in our data, referred to as "high-visual impact" or "resolute image"). This concept was associated with the concept of AUTHORSHIP, which recognized the additional value conferred by the "signature" of a renowned architect or designer. The concept of VALUE OF FORM related these two concepts with the idea that Alessi can create value through product form.

The addition of concepts from the art register led to significant changes in product development and marketing and distribution. Previously, Alessi's in-house designers, working in the technical office, had

designed its products. To implement arts-register concepts, Alessi began extensive *collaborations with recognized artists.*[4] The technical office not only lost its authority over product design but was now required to "translate" artistic sketches into precise manufacturable specifications. An informant from the technical office described the task as being "between the anvil and the hammer (ID9)." The ample freedom granted to designers to design forms with little concern for product usability required expensive prototyping and manufacturing. These practices frustrated cost-conscious senior technicians, who subscribed to the concept of EFFICIENCY (that had been central to Alessi's repertoire until the 1970s). One of them recalled:

> I worked with the most important designers and sometimes we had some difficulties, so I would walk up to Alberto, his father, or his uncle, and tell them: 'Let's not do it. Not unless the architect decides to modify it. Not that much, but at least this part here: it makes our costs double!' But usually Alberto would win (ID21).

Artistic considerations frequently clashed with, and often overrode, FUNCTIONAL and COMMERCIAL considerations – sometimes with positive, sometimes with negative results. For example, the concepts of AUTHORSHIP and VALUE OF FORM conflicted with the concept of CONFORMITY TO INDUSTRY STANDARDS which were consistent with customer needs. Alessi's core customer segment in the 1970s -- hotels and restaurants-- relied on the industry standards to be able to mix and match products from different producers. The concepts of VALUE OF FORM and AUTHORSHIP also clashed with the concept of PRODUCT AS FUNCTIONAL TOOL, as they justified putting in production objects of limited functionality that were judged to be "highly artistic." The emphasis on VALUE OF FORM increased the market uncertainty even for well-functioning products, as evidenced by the three kettles designed by Michael Graves, Aldo Rossi, and Richard Sapper that Alessi put in production in the second half of the 1980s. Despite comparable functional performance, these kettles exhibited different formal properties and generated different market outcomes – two "best-sellers" and one "fiasco" (in Alessi's terms).

To summarize, following a failed effort to produce art objects made of steel, Alessi incorporated in its repertoire throughout the 1970s concepts from the art register. It used these concepts to reshape its practices of product development, production, and marketing and distribution (see Table 2). Many of the

[4] Text in italics refers to specific practices about which we provide more details in Table 2.

choices it made were both costly and uncertain in terms of their economic pay-offs. However, they were necessary for implementing the new cultural resources in the core organizational activities.

Arts Needing Crafts: Incorporating Crafts Concepts. The implementation of concepts from the arts register led Alessi to seek the help of crafts workshops, as its own production methods often proved inadequate to execute the complex forms created by artists-designers (1983, CA29). Initial *collaborations with crafts workshops* were born out of necessity but over time intensified and began to influence Alessi's cultural repertoire. By the early 1980s, the concept of CRAFTS VIRTUOSITY appeared in corporate texts discussing current projects. Skill virtuosity – defined as the mastery of techniques and materials – has been articulated as one of the distinguishing characteristics of crafts (Becker 1978, p. 864). Alessi introduced this concept as complementing the concept of VALUE OF FORM because the collaboration between a designer and craftsman was seen as "a circular process, in which the creative skills of designers, the nature of materials, the mastery of techniques, and the manual character of making realize in a unitary […] way a quality product (1989, CA25)."

The concepts from the crafts register, however, generated clashes with the industrial production methods and increased production costs. For example, the production of Richard Sapper's kettle underwent a year-long search for a craft shop that could produce "a whistle that would release a pure melody, more precisely E and B (1989, CA25)" (which was Sapper's explicit specification). In response to such challenges, Alessi changed its production practices to include *small-scale productions, which* were used for products considered of high cultural and artistic value but of limited commercial potential. Although small-scale productions increased Alessi's production flexibility and ability to synchronize its market projections and production plans, they frustrated technicians who had to develop new machinery to manufacture a small number of objects. An informant described the experience as follows:

When I saw that square aluminum pot I said: 'I'd rather go home than work on that thing. Do you want to make a museum piece? Go ahead and make a museum piece. We can make ten of them without having to build the machines. We make them by hand and put one in the museum in New York, one in Milano […] but I am not building the equipment and all that stuff (ID 21).

Alessi associated crafts production with the concept of EXPLORATION because it saw crafts as "a productive sphere that, with its characteristics of flexibility and the absence of big technical constraints, could become a fertile experimental terrain […] for industry (1989, CA25)." To deepen its knowledge of crafts

methods, at the end of the 1980s Alessi acquired two crafts workshops with which it had collaborated for a decade. In summary, because its production methods could not support the new product development practices inspired by concepts from the arts register, Alessi began working with crafts workshops. As these collaborations intensified over time, it incorporated crafts concepts that helped Alessi implement arts concepts by developing more flexible production methods.

Discovering Rituals and Culture: Incorporating Anthropology Concepts. As a part of its involvement with craftsmen, in the early 1980s Alessi undertook a research project to develop a Neapolitan coffee maker. For the project, an old Neapolitan tin-craftsman crafted more than a hundred prototypes. These prototypes differed drastically from prototypes developed by artist-designers and, in the words of Alberto Alessi — "shook [Alessi's] industrial confidence (1989, CA25)." Although the project was a commercial failure, it led Alessi to reflect on the relationship between household products and social traditions, and to incorporate concepts from the register of cultural anthropology. The concept of CONSUMPTION RITUALS addressed how household products are included in daily routines and serve ritual functions that preserve collective taken-for-granted beliefs about the meanings of objects over decades or centuries. The concept led Alessi to launch a special *seminar* involving artists and scholars charged to investigate the topic of "food, its rites, and its tools (1982, CA4)" and inform product design about ritual uses of products.

Another concept from the anthropology register, PRODUCT ARCHETYPES, referred to the idea that household products carry archetypal forms from the collective memory (Fariello 2004). This concept influenced subsequent product development efforts. For example, whereas in the 1980s Alessi had entered the cooking pots segment with an effort to develop "the most functional pot on the market (1989, CA25)," in the mid-1990s, it launched a new development effort to discover "archetypal pot forms," resulting in the commercially successful Mami series. The project designer Giovannoni explained:

> With Mami, instead of designing a new form, I have tried to rediscover the pot that everybody has in their memory and in their imagery. Mami is granny's pot. It is the archetype pot. […] It derives from the search of those traits that in the collective memory correspond to the idea of pot (ID24).

The incorporation of concepts from anthropology led to the *founding of Centro Studi Alessi,* an internal research center that institutionalized the practice of conducting *seminars and collaborations with social scientists*

from anthropology, history, and semiotics, and young designers. The Center published theoretical papers on socio-cultural issues and developed projects applying these ideas to product design. Thus, in summary, Alessi's collaborations with craftsmen drew its attention to taken-for-granted, collectively-held meanings of household objects and led to the incorporation of concepts from anthropology in its repertoire. These concepts led to new research-focused activities and changes in product development. The research activities brought Alessi in contact with a diverse set of social scientists and designers, eventually leading to the incorporation of concepts from the register of psychoanalysis.

Tapping into the Unconscious: Incorporating Psychoanalysis Concepts. Collaboration with designers, such as Castiglioni and Starck, whose work was at times "humorous or unsettling (CA27)," combined with ongoing research on the meaning of objects, led Alessi to inquire into the subconscious and emotional responses triggered by objects. Answers found in the theories of the English psychoanalyst Winnicott (e.g. 1971/1999) and the Italian psychoanalyst Fornari (1979) led to the addition of concepts from psychoanalysis in Alessi's repertoire. Fornari's (1979) theory of affective codes led to the use of the concept of EMOTIVE INVOLVEMENT, which captures the idea that different product shapes and materials elicit different subconscious emotional reactions by activating innate affective codes. The theories of Winnicott who argued that adults need "transitional objects" that remind them of the security and happiness of childhood (1971/1999) led to the concepts of PRODUCTS AS TOYS (and later, as VEHICLES FOR FANTASY) and the development of new product lines of colorful, plastic tableware conceived as "ludic tools, telling little tales, giving captivating twists to everyday uses, [providing] a bridge to the fantastical (1998, CA11)."

The new conceptualization of products generated through these concepts led to several changes in Alessi's practices. In product development, Alessi expanded its circle of *collaborations with young designers*, including cartoonists and animators. In production, it started using *plastics*, a new material requiring different production technologies with which Alessi had no prior experience. In distribution, to support these products, Alessi made a costly investment in *new flagship stores* specifically designed to "handle Alessi objects as if they were fairy-tale characters, each with its own story and traits, and [with] a desire to transmit joy and

aesthetic energy […] to transmit to the customer a sense of adventure in design and the homescape (2003, CA13)." Finally, in 2006, it created a *new catalogue* for these product lines – "A di Alessi."

The concepts from the psychoanalysis register generated a new set of contradictions. These concepts and practices conflicted with the concept of PRODUCTS AS ART WORKS and the associated practices for creating highly expressive and conceptually challenging products. Informants reported that designers, critics, and even some consumers found the little animated objects, incongruent with Alessi's existing artistic line. Internally too, the proliferation of playful plastic products – "little gadgets," as a senior manager called them – raised concerns about Alessi's new course of action. In sum, Alessi's involvement in research on the meaning of objects led to the incorporation of concepts from psychoanalysis. These concepts supplemented those from anthropology, as they enabled Alessi to look at products and consumer needs from the perspective of the subconscious and emotional responses to product forms. They also led however to further changes in product development, production, and distribution and gave rise to new contradictions.

The Challenges of Incorporating New Cultural Resources. Taken together, our observations suggest that the process of incorporation of new cultural resources in an organization's repertoire is fraught with challenges. Across the four rounds of incorporation of cultural resources from four different registers, we observed that each new set of cultural resources required Alessi to implement pervasive changes, cope with sustained uncertainty, and handle contradictions among diverse cultural resources.

First, each set of concepts called for pervasive changes in the ways in which Alessi designed, produced, and commercialized products. Many of these changes required costly investments and adjustments throughout the entire organization, as the practices used previously were reconfigured and replaced by new ones. New practices in turn had to be adapted to accommodate the concepts added from each new register. The repeated changes in organizational practices involved not only financial, but also human and organizational costs, as employees had to learn new tasks and fit into new roles.

Second, the organization had to bear uncertainty arising from the unknown and untested consequences of applying new cultural resources drawn from a different register to Alessi's task environment. Each new set of cultural resources incorporated in Alessi's repertoire introduced new ways of thinking about

the attitudes and practices of consumers, about the nature of household products in general and about Alessi's products in particular. While these new conceptualizations enabled the formation of unconventional strategies (discussed later), they led to sustained uncertainty. Uncertainty arose because it could not be determined *ex ante* whether the new practices and strategies would fit the actual requirements of Alessi's task environment, and therefore, whether they opened up economically profitable opportunities.

Finally, contradictions among concepts that were already in Alessi's repertoire and newly added ones emerged. Whereas such contradictions may not be inherent in the concepts themselves, organizational members experienced them as such when their implementation implied, or imposed, divergent demands on actions. For example, the diversity of cultural resources in the organizational repertoire put a strain on the organization, as product development was influenced by multiple ways of thinking about its products, production saw increasing product-line complexity, and marketing and distribution struggled to communicate coherently about a diverse product portfolio. These observations about the challenges of incorporating new cultural resources confirm arguments in existing research that the use of diverse cultural resources is fraught with risks (Weber 2005) and tensions (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007; Glynn 2000). At Alessi, however, these challenges were managed, in part, through the process of cultural repertoire enrichment.

Cultural Repertoire Enrichment

The foregoing discussion describes how Alessi incorporated in its repertoire new cultural resources from four different registers. This iterative process is depicted in multiple overlapping boxes in the first block of Figure 1. In essence, this process changed "how much culture" Alessi used in developing its strategies. This is an important features of cultural repertoire, as Swidler notes that individuals vary "greatly in *how much* culture they apply to their own lives (2001, p. 46, *italics in the original*)." At the organizational level, we too observe that an organization can change how much culture it applies to its strategy. In so doing, it also changes how proactively it brings culture to bear on its choices and actions. At Alessi, when initial efforts to make art in steel failed, the organization proactively adopted concepts from the arts register in order to reframe and rethink its products and activities in terms appropriate for the art world (Becker 1982). Similarly, later on, when it encountered challenges with implementing art concepts in its task environment, it again

expanded its cultural repertoire – this time, with concepts from the crafts register – in order to rethink again its products and practices. As discussed in the previous section, similar dynamics led to the incorporation of cultural resources from the registers of anthropology and psychoanalysis. In other words, we observe that the incorporation of new cultural resources becomes a primary vehicle for envisioning new strategic opportunities and refining the organizational approaches to using them.

Further, new cultural resources did not replace previously added ones; instead, concepts from all registers co-existed and were used throughout the period of observation. Over time Alessi's cultural repertoire included not only "more culture," but also more diverse culture. Alessi managed this increasing diversity by simultaneously developing practices that preserved the distinctive logics of each set of resources drawn from a specific register, and created novel combinations among these resources to resolve contradictions among them. For example, to preserve the distinctive logics associated with each set, Alessi engaged in collaborations with different types of designers. Concepts from the art register led to collaborations with renowned urbanist architects, whereas concepts from psychoanalysis led it to reaching out to cartoonists and animators.

At the same time, by using these diverse cultural resources simultaneously, Alessi was able to surface and manage both the contradictions and complementarities among them. Many practices were undertaken to combine concepts from different registers and strengthen potential complementarities among them (see Table 2 for details where integrative practices are identified with "*"). For example, Alessi engaged in *collaborations with crafts workshops* and retrained its own production workers in craft techniques to enable production of artistic product forms. It also launched experimental product development efforts combining concepts from different registers. For example, Sapper's award-winning and widely popular 9090 coffee maker combined functional innovation (PRODUCTS AS FUNCTIONAL TOOLS) with an original form (VALUE OF FORM). Giovannoni's Mami, the most commercially successful pot set developed by Alessi, combined the archetypal "potness" (PRODUCT ARCHETYPE) and "the maternal code" (EMOTIVE INVOLVEMENT). Further, designers, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts were all involved in *seminars* investigating different aspects of how people relate to objects (e.g. CULTURAL RELEVANCE, EMOTIVE

INVOLVEMENT). In the early 1990s Alessi developed a *new tool for product development* evaluating prototypes and products using dimensions that reflected the cultural resources from three different registers. The "Communication-Language" dimension required product evaluation in terms of the concepts from the art register; the "Sensoriality-Memory-Imagination" included criteria based on concepts from anthropology and psychoanalysis; "Price" and "Functionality" reflected concepts from the household industry register.

These observations attest to a more complex process than the earlier description of repeated rounds of incorporation of new cultural resources may have implied. Through this process Alessi changed: a) how much and how proactively it applied culture to its strategy; b) how diverse the cultural resources it used were; and c) how they were combined in integrative practices to resolve contradictions and strengthen complementarities. The process ensured that as more and more diverse cultural resources became available for the organization to use, they were "put to work" rather than allowing them to sediment (Clegg 1981). We term this process of proactive expansion of an organization's cultural toolkit with diverse resources that are increasingly used in an integrative and flexible manner "cultural repertoire enrichment."

Cultural repertoire enrichment involves a pattern of using cultural resources that differs from Swidler's (2001) observations about how individuals use diverse cultural resources. Individuals use diverse cultural resources by holding them "in reserve" and activating them on "as needed" basis to address specific situations. Some evidence exists that organizations may do the same when they engage in cultural bricolage. Cultural bricolage refers to the *ad hoc* use of available cultural resources to address specific problems and opportunities in the environment (Baker and Nelson 2005; Rao et al. 2005; Zilber 2006). The process we observed differs from such occasional or temporary uses because it involves a) deliberate incorporation of new and diverse cultural resources into the organization's repertoire, and b) their proactive and integrative use to effect long-term changes in organizational patterns of thought and action. Organizational bricolage has also been described in terms of making do with resources at hand, that is, using concepts, resources, or routines that already exist within an organization or that are readily available in its exchange network. For example, Rao and colleagues (2005) described how French chefs' engaged in cultural bricolage by "tinkering" with categories available in the existing culinary rhetoric. In contrast, cultural repertoire enrichment involves

both proactive inclusion of new cultural resources to develop new conceptualizations, and sustained effort to overcome contradictions among them through new practices and incorporation of additional cultural resources. Finally, unlike the pattern of holding resource in reserve described by Swidler (2001) at the individual level of analysis, cultural repertoire enrichment involves simultaneous use of diverse resources, while preserving their autonomous logic. A key enabler of this distinctive pattern of resource use is the process of "Identity Redefinition" discussed next.

Identity Redefinition

Observed Redefinitions of Organizational Identity. An unexpected observation that emerged in our analysis of the changes in Alessi's repertoire is that each round of incorporation of cultural resources from a new register was *consistently* accompanied by self-categorizations of what type of an organization Alessi was. Research on organizational identity refers to such self-categorizations as identity claims (Glynn 2000). At Alessi, we observed that four identity claims accompanied the incorporation of concepts from the four registers: PUBLISHER/ARTISTIC MEDIATOR, CRAFTS WORKSHOP, RESEARCH LABORATORY IN THE FIELD OF APPLIED ARTS, and DREAM FACTORY. Additional evidence of the use of these identity claims is available as Table 1 in the on-line supplement.

The early rounds of addition of new cultural resources from the arts and the crafts registers were accompanied by identity claims using categories referring to typical organizations in those fields: a publisher (art mediator) and a workshop, respectively. The claim of being like a PUBLISHER was introduced in the 1970s when Alessi began incorporating concepts from the arts register:

Once it has found the design philosophy of an author interesting, Alessi trusts him completely, and, just like a publisher, it does not usually interfere in the work of one of its authors (1979, CA19).

By the end of the 1980s, the concept of PUBLISHER was generalized to the broader concept of ARTISTIC MEDIATOR. In the arts, ARTISTIC MEDIATOR refers to the role played by arts galleries, merchants, and museums that facilitate the production, evaluation, and diffusion of art works for and among the public (Becker 1982). Alessi, similarly compared its role explicitly to that of a "modern art dealer, museum director, or film-maker (ID01)," thereby giving sense to its arts-related practices. With the incorporation of concepts from the crafts register in the 1980s, Alessi began to refer to itself also as a CRAFTS WORKSHOP

("Officina" in Italian), emphasizing its own heritage in metal crafts between 1921 and World War II. In the crafts register, "workshop" is used to refer both to the organizing of crafts activities (Becker 1978) and to the location of crafts production. Alessi used this claim to give sense to the concepts and practices it adopted from the crafts register.

As Alessi's repertoire enrichment progressed, it began using identity claims that combined elements of several categories. In the early 1990s, following its incorporation of anthropological and psychoanalytical concepts, Alessi categorized itself also as a RESEARCH LABORATORY IN THE FIELD OF APPLIED ARTS. At that time, according to Alberto Alessi, the perceived contradiction between the new toy-like plastic products and the highly expressive ones inspired by art concepts had elicited "strong reactions from people saying that by moving into plastic we were […] losing our identity (A. Alessi quoted in Sweet 1998, p. 7)." By describing itself as "a research laboratory in the field of the applied arts (1992, CA8)," Alessi combined elements of "research" and "art" into one identity claim and emphasized the significance of both artistic and research-oriented concepts and practices. It attempted to relate partially diverging sets of concepts and demands for actions suggesting how old and new product conceptualizations can co-exist. This identity claim was later qualified further adding "*industrial*" to "research laboratory" to acknowledge that it was not a research laboratory *per se* but an industrial manufacturer with extensive research involvement in design.

By the mid-1990s, Alessi began to refer to itself also as a DREAM FACTORY, reflecting further integration of diverse concepts and practices that did not fit readily into available categories. This claim integrated further potentially incongruous elements through metaphorical means. Metaphor was used to reconcile the industrial nature of the company (factory) with its ongoing engagement with human imagination (dream). This claim connected the industrial base of the organization, the recently engaged resources from psychoanalysis, and the earlier claims of artistic mediation "between the highest international design creativity expression and […] the public's dreams (ID1)." This claim also addressed some of the outstanding contradictions between arts, anthropology, and psychoanalysis concepts, as the term "dream" was related both to the imaginative designs of artists and to the imaginative utilities that consumers derive from these

designs (2006, CA14). The claim also resolved the contradiction between Alessi's identity as an industrial organization (a factory) and its quest into other cultural registers.

These observations suggest that a) new identity claims consistently accompanied the incorporation of new cultural resources and b) an overall process of redefinition of the organization's identity supported the incorporation and use of new cultural resources for the development of new strategies of action. The tight coupling between identity and cultural resources has been recognized at both the individual (Cerulo 1997; Swidler 2001) and organizational level of analysis (Glynn 2000). However, prior work has tended to take identity as a given – a current constraint (Glynn 2000; Swidler 2001) or an aspiration for the future (Swidler 2001). In contrast, we observed a process of periodic redefinition of the organizational identity that addressed challenges arising from the use of new cultural resources and their deployment into new practices and strategies of action. In particular, Alessi used identity claims that were consistent with specific combinations of new cultural resources that had been incorporated into the organizational cultural repertoire at a given point in time to legitimate the associated practices and strategies of action. Furthermore, as the organizational repertoire became increasingly enriched with diverse cultural resources, new types of claims were forged to express and emphasize the growing distinctiveness of the organizational strategies. We discuss each of these aspects of the process of identity redefinition below.

Evolving Claims. Past research has theorized that social categories provide organizations with the basis for making identity claims that enable both internal and external audiences to make sense of their organizational structures, practices, and strategies (King and Whetten 2008). We observe, however, that Alessi used different *types* of categories (and not only different categories) in the making of identity claims. In the early rounds of incorporation of new cultural resources, Alessi used what we termed "register-consistent" claims. These claims were based on categories referring to established and legitimated organizational forms in the registers from which Alessi was incorporating cultural resources enabling it to claim similarity to such forms. Indeed, social categories provide institutionalized frameworks that capture collective understandings regarding the typical "capabilities, products, and attributes" of member-organizations (Porac et al. 1999, p. 112), and features and imperatives of action to which organizations are expected to conform (Pólos et al.

2002; Zuckerman 1999). Accordingly, an organization can claim legitimacy for strategies of action that, while dissimilar from those conventionally followed by members of its industry, bear similarities with those of members of other categories (e.g. publishers, crafts workshops).

As new cultural resources were added and the overall diversity of Alessi's repertoire increased, the nature of its identity claims changed. The identity claims it used throughout the 1990s and 2000s combined elements of several existing categories, and became what we term "syncretic claims." The use of syncretic claims reflected both the growing diversity of cultural resources in its repertoire and its enrichment associated with flexible and simultaneous use of these diverse resources.

Syncretic claims blend elements of different social categories and augment the typical meanings associated with a given organizational form. The enrichment of the organizational cultural repertoire and the associated practices based on concepts from multiple registers, sometimes recombined in novel ways, made it difficult for Alessi to find readily available legitimate categories for comparison. It used syncretic claim to combine elements from multiple legitimate categories, thereby making the organizational activities understandable in some familiar terms, but not necessarily comparable to members of a particular category. Syncretic claims therefore can stimulate more complex sense-making and more distinctive conceptualizations of the organization than register-consistent claims do.

The idea that Alessi developed syncretic claims in order to account for its increasingly diverse and unique (as they were based on its enriched cultural repertoire) practices resonates with prior research that has argued that new categories are created in order to reflect unique strategies (Rosa et al. 1999). This research, however, has emphasized the role of institutional intermediaries, such as the media (e.g. Lounsbury and Rao 2004), in the creation and legitimation of new categories. In contrast, we observe that organizational identity claims are related to the cultural resources an organization incorporates in its repertoire. Further, we observe that the enrichment of repertoire with diverse and increasingly integrated resources may require it to syncretise categories to account for practices that do not fit readily in available categories.

Multiplicity of Identity Claims. Further, similar to the accumulation and simultaneous use of diverse cultural resources, identity claims also accumulated and were used concurrently. By claiming to be similar to

more than one type of organization, Alessi supplied audiences with multiple categories for interpreting its diverse concepts and practices. Just as it sought to simultaneously preserve the autonomous logic of diverse sets of cultural resources *and* integrate them in specific practices, in the same way it used multiple identity claims to highlight distinct practices associated with a particular set of resources, and syncretic claims to point to ways of combining them.

By simultaneously using multiple identity claims, Alessi may have succeeded in detaching itself from the expectations associated with organizations in its own industry, as well as from those associated with the other types of organizations it claimed to be (somewhat) like. Describing Alessi as a publisher or a workshop did not suggest a radical change in *what* the organization did (producing household products in metal), but encouraged a more refined understanding of *how* it did it. The fact that most of the claims were used somewhat figuratively, rather than literally, enabled Alessi to transfer meanings associated with different forms without having to conform precisely to the templates and procedures that constituted them (Pólos et al. 2002). The multiplicity of identity claims may have provided it with a latitude based on less fixed audience expectations to implement the multiplicity of new strategies that its enriched cultural repertoire enabled. We discuss these new strategies next.

Unconventional Strategies

Swidler (1986) defines strategies of action as assemblages of actions influenced by actors' cultural repertoires. Strategy research views strategies as coordinated sets of activities that determine the attributes of products and the nature of resources and technologies deployed in their production. Together, the two definitions suggest that changes in strategies of action would be associated with changes in either product-market scope, or resources used, or both.

Our analysis shows that as a result of the enrichment of its repertoire, Alessi indeed began to develop new and more varied products that could serve new customer segments. The design of PRODUCTS AS ART WORKS, such as tea and coffee serving tools designed as "small architectures" with questionable functionality and highly original forms, enabled Alessi to discover a consumer segment willing to forgo functionality in favor of originality, and to pay a substantial premium for it. For example, for its original,

authored kettles and coffee pots, Alessi could charge a price that was up to four to five times higher than that of standard products in these categories. Alessi reinforced this effect by introducing the notion of "signed household product," reflecting the concept of AUTHORSHIP. In addition, these products had attracted the attention of arts and cultural institutions who acquired and exhibited them. As a result, Alessi found a new market among arts and design collectors. Throughout the 1980s, as Alessi intensified its use of concepts from the arts and the crafts, it produced highly experimental products targeted at collectors and connoisseurs (referred to at Alessi as "design lovers," "design aficionados," and "elective Alessi audience"). In addition, products based on incorporation of concepts from the arts register, characterized by enhanced aesthetic properties and contemporary style, were targeted at the upper home segment (referred to as "the affluent Alessi audience"). The incorporation of concepts from psychoanalysis in the early 1990s, led to the development of playful, colorful products in plastic targeted at a broader and younger audience in the middle home segment. A design historian summarized these changes in Alessi's strategies of action as follows:

> Alessi […] owes its fortune in the last few decades to the fact that it […] was the first [producer] to modify the DNA of its own product by changing it from a functional instrument into an emotional, symbolic exchange among people (ID26).

To summarize, the enrichment of cultural repertoire enabled Alessi to develop new actionable understandings of consumer needs and motives that went beyond the taken-for-granted properties of functionality, quality, and conformity to industry standards specified by the industry register. The new cultural resources and practices it used enabled it to make products with distinctive formal properties that served new and different needs, thereby opening up new customer segments. Many of these segments afforded the company higher price premia than those associated with conventional, albeit high-quality, household goods. Thus, cultural repertoire enrichment led to the development of new strategies that were both unconventional *and* appropriate and appealing. Furthermore, it led to the development of a multiplicity of new strategies that Alessi was able to execute simultaneously. We discuss this outcome next.

Strategic Versatility

The enrichment of Alessi's repertoire led to a multiplicity in conceptualizations of the nature of its products and their uses. This multiplicity enabled it to pursue a slew of new opportunities. Furthermore,

because it could use diverse resources flexibly, it was able to execute multiple strategies in different task environments simultaneously. In 1970, the beginning of our period of study, Alessi was the acknowledged technological and market leader in the serving tools segment of the household industry, where hotels and catering organizations were its main customers. In 2006, at the end of the study period, Alessi simultaneously served the upper catering segment, the upper and middle home segments, as well as individual and institutional collectors and design connoisseurs. These segments were served through three product lines organized in three catalogues ("Alessi," "Officina Alessi," and "A di Alessi"). However, the products in all three lines were designed using the same product development process with their placement in one of the three catalogues being determined only in the final stages of product development. Alberto Alessi explicitly explained to the organization and its retailers that the three lines do not have "independent identities, but rather reflect three different expressions of the same corporate identity and of the Engine of Design that is Alessi (2006, CA3)." Indeed, products from all three lines have been acquired for the permanent collections of arts and design museums around the world, and have proved to be revenue and profit leaders.

We term this ability to execute strategies of action that serve multiple and diverse segments simultaneously through integrated practices of product development, production, and marketing "strategic versatility." An important aspect of Alessi's strategic versatility is that over time it was also able to increase the diversity of resources it leveraged in its strategies. For example, according to an informant it deliberately increased the diversity of designers with whom it collaborated to be "as open as possible to different languages, in order to reach diverse markets (ID14)." In fact, the use of concepts from different registers called for collaborations with designers with different type of expertise. Designers with classical industrial design experience, such as Richard Sapper and Ettore Sottsass, designed more functionally oriented products, revamping the existing products for the hotel and restaurant segments by combining concepts from the industry register (PRODUCTS AS FUNCTIONAL TOOLS) with distinctive formal properties (VALUE OF FORM). Concepts from the arts register were associated with collaborations with architects of international renown, such as Michael Graves, Aldo Rossi, and Frank Gehry in the 1980s, and Massimiliano Fuksas and Toyo Ito in the 2000s. The implementation of concepts from anthropology and psychoanalysis led to

collaborations with young designers from all over the world, as well as animators and cartoonists. However, while seeking to take advantage of their diverse skills, Alessi did not assign designers to a specific product line. Thus, while some have designed objects included only in one of the three catalogs (e.g. Gehry), others have designed objects included in two (e.g. Sottsass) or three (e.g. Giovannoni, Graves, Starck) lines, bringing integration to Alessi's diverse strategies.

Similar to the expanding range of designers used in design, Alessi's new strategies of action involved an expanding range of materials and production technologies. At the beginning of the study, Alessi made products only from cold-pressed steel in large volumes, but starting in the early 1980s with the implementation of concepts from the arts and crafts, it began making products in silver, wood, and porcelain. New technologies and materials, such as plastic, were perceived as necessary to implement new concepts, such as EMOTIVE INVOLVEMENT – a concept that suggested the need to "discover other materials in order better to explore the world of colors and sensoriality in objects (1991, CA27)." Overall, Alessi's new strategies of action exhibited increasing diversity in design and technology resources as well, revealing its growing ability to implement a multiplicity of different strategies simultaneously. These observations suggest that Alessi's repertoire enrichment enabled it to simultaneously execute multiple and diverse strategies of action addressing new task environments in terms of the customer segments it served, and the technologies and resources it used. By gaining flexibility in using a broad set of diverse cultural resources (as discussed in our discussion of cultural repertoire enrichment), Alessi was able to pursue multiple unconventional strategies that were in part supported by common pools of human and technological resources, and in part by distinctive practices associated with a specific subset of cultural resources.

DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Our research was motivated by the observation that, whereas research in sociology has increasingly emphasized that culture provides individuals with a toolkit from which they can draw resources to develop strategies of action appropriate to different circumstances, research on organizational use of cultural resources to develop strategies of action remains scant. Further, to the degree that organizational use of

cultural resources has been investigated, researchers have stressed the strains and challenges that such attempts pose (Eikhof and Haunschild 2007; Glynn 2000; Weber 2005). The theoretical model that emerged from our data articulates a set of relationships that explain how organizations can incorporate new cultural resources from outside their industry registers to devise new strategies of action, to effect strategic change, and gain beneficial strategic outcomes. It extends Swidler's (1986; 2001) ideas about the flexible use of cultural resources from the individual to the organizational level of analysis, highlighting processes that are distinctive to organizations. Specifically, our model makes three main conceptual contributions.

First, consistent with prior research (Glynn 2000; Weber 2005), it shows that the use of cultural resources from outside the industry register is costly, uncertain, and contradiction-ridden. Yet, it extends this research by articulating how a process of cultural repertoire enrichment, involving proactive expansion of an organization's cultural toolkit with diverse resources that are increasingly used in an integrative manner, enables an organization to use new cultural resources to develop new strategies of action. Second, it extends extant research regarding the use of cultural resources by relating the process of cultural repertoire enrichment to the development of unconventional strategies and strategic versatility, thereby directing future research to explore more systematically the role of cultural resources in strategy formation. Third, it extends extant research on the intersection of strategy, culture, and identity by showing the tight coupling between incorporation of new cultural resources and identity management. In departure from past research, which has emphasized identity as a constraint (Glynn 2000), our model shows how a process of organizational identity redefinition may facilitate the incorporation of new cultural resources.

These insights both confirm and extend extant understandings about the role of cultural resources in strategy formation and the capacity of organizations to use cultural resources from outside their industry registers. Given that this is one of the first studies to explore the question of how organizations use diverse cultural resources, the ideas we articulate should be subjected to systematic future research. Below we discuss some directions for future research in the three broad areas outlined above.

Strategic Use of Cultural Resources. A fundamental insight of our study is that the enrichment of cultural repertoire enables an organization to break away from industry conventions by enabling re-conceptualization

of various elements of the task environment and developing distinctive practices to act on these new understandings. This insight directs organizational research in an important new direction because much research has emphasized how regular interactions and exchanges among competitors create industry conventions that lead to the reproduction of competitive environments (Porac et al. 1989). Less research has addressed the ways in which organizations devise non-conventional strategies. Our model suggests that the incorporation of new cultural resources may be one of the bases of strategic innovation in a given industry. Future research should examine what type of cultural resources help organizations change their strategies, and with what consequences for their competitive position.

Further, our examination of Alessi's efforts to incorporate new cultural resources in its repertoire suggests that using broadly-available cultural resources in an organization's strategy is fundamentally different from using resources from the industry register. The action implications of cultural resources from the industry are generally well-understood and legitimate. Using such cultural resources is likely to lead to actions that are appropriate to the organizations' task environment but also similar to those of competitors. In contrast, by engaging cultural resources from outside their industry register, organizations may take actions that challenge industry conventions and differ from competitors.

However, when brought to bear on a particular organization's strategy, broadly available-cultural resources generate outcomes that are difficult to predict. Some of their applications may be negatively sanctioned by the environment (as predicted by current theory). Our study also suggests that some of their applications may also reveal that environmental and institutional constraints are more malleable than competitors in the industry believe. If short-term failure does not deplete an organization's resources, the sustained application of new (to the organization and the industry) cultural resources may enable the discovery of new strategies, that are both different from peers, and acceptable to audiences.

These ideas resonate with some recent work showing that cultural resources can be used to create new markets. For example, Weber and colleagues (2008) showed that entrepreneurs in the grass-fed segment of the cattle industry exploited opposition in existing cultural codes to create new demand. Our observations too point to the use of cultural resources to create new demand by changing the *organizational*

conceptualizations of consumers and needs. In contrast to oppositional cultural codes that can be used to provide consumers with frames for choosing among available alternatives (Weber et al. 2008), the enrichment of an organization's repertoire with new cultural resources enables it to expand the range of alternatives available to consumers. In both cases, however, contradictions among cultural resources appear to play an important role in breaking up prevailing industry conventions and stimulating new growth. Therefore, future research should examine more systematically the use of different cultural resources for developing, framing, and presenting competing product or technological alternatives.

Future research seeking to understand the relationship between the use of new cultural resources and strategic innovation should also consider more systematically the role of different contextual variables, such as the relative strength of resource-holders' consensus around norms and market categories (Rosa et al. 2005), or the presence and influence of acknowledged gatekeepers (Durand et al. 2007; Zuckerman et al. 2003) that affect audience evaluations of organizations and their strategies. Institutional gatekeepers, such as financial analysts or certifiers (Durand et al. 2007) may sanction (Zuckerman 1999) or glamorize (Rindova et al. 2006) unconventional strategies. The insight from our study that identity redefinition may influence how audiences (and gatekeepers) see and relate to an organization's unconventional strategies can guide future studies of the relationship between strategic innovation and audience evaluations.

Cultural Repertoire Enrichment as a Strategy. If new cultural resources can become the basis for new and advantageous organizational strategies of action, an important question for future research is to systematically investigate how organizations can assimilate new cultural resources from broadly-available cultural toolkits. This is an important direction for future research because our study suggests that, although potentially valuable, broadly-available cultural resources are unlikely to be directly applicable to an organization's task environment. Instead, as they are transferred from one context to another, their meanings and practical implications need to be adapted to local circumstances (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996). While broadly-available cultural resources enable organizations to take actions that differ from those of competitors, they also increase the risk that these actions may be inappropriate and/or ineffective. This trade-off appears to be at the heart of the organizational dilemma regarding the use of new cultural resources in strategy formation.

Our study suggests a potential resolution of this dilemma by suggesting cultural repertoire enrichment as a mechanism through which organizations can make broadly-available cultural resources *useful and usable* in their strategies. Our observations suggest that new cultural resources require wide-ranging changes in practices spanning the entire value chain, as well as active efforts to manage and reconcile contradictions among them. Further, contradictions among cultural resources call for incorporation of additional cultural resources that facilitate the application, modification, and adaptation to the organization's task environment. As the breadth and diversity of cultural resources an organization applies grows, so does its ability to use them integratively resulting in an enriched cultural repertoire.

A fundamental insight emerging from our study is that this process of cultural repertoire enrichment is a distinct pattern of using cultural resources that differ from cultural bricolage (Rao et al. 2005; Zilber 2006) and holding cultural resources in reserve (Swidler 2001). Cultural repertoire enrichment therefore generates distinct pattern for using cultural resources. Acknowledging the diversity in the ways in which organizations use cultural resources implies that additional research is needed to understand when and how organizations use diverse cultural resources "ad hoc," and when and how they engage new cultural resources to affect broader strategic outcomes. In this regard, it will be important for future research to explore systematically the differences between rhetorical use of cultural resources for the purposes of strategic self-presentations, as reported in Zilber (2006), and their substantive use, as productive means to develop new strategies of action, as observed in our study.

Our model also relates repertoire enrichment with new-to-the-industry cultural resources to an organization's ability to generate strategies of action that are appropriate, effective, *and* different from competitors. Our argument that repertoire enrichment is necessary for organizations to use broadly-available cultural resources effectively also implies that cultural repertoire enrichment is likely to generate strategies of action that withstand competitive imitation. This conjecture is supported by the observation that Alessi's strategies were imitated only to a limited extent and with limited success. Whereas some imitation efforts were observed (e.g. hiring famous architects, including those that had collaborated with Alessi), these imitation efforts did not enable competitors to implement the diverse and highly successful strategies we observed at

Alessi. Therefore, future research is needed on the imitability of the strategies generated through cultural repertoire enrichment relative to those generated through employment of specialists possessing high levels of the relevant cultural resources. We expect that the complexity and ambiguity inherent in the process protect the competitive strategies based on it and justify this otherwise costly undertaking. The specific conditions of our case, however, suggest also the need for future research regarding the organizational and environmental factors that affect the costs and advantages of cultural repertoire enrichment. For example, the Italian context, in which our focal firm operates, has been described as distinct because "ideals of elegance and beauty are widely shared among different social classes (Crane and Bovone 2006, p. 324)." Future research should strive to better understand how specific socio-cultural contexts might affect both the availability of cultural resources and the acceptability of the strategies they inspire.

That said, we would like to caution a potential interpretation of our finding as "a strategy for the few" due to the challenges associated with the incorporation of new cultural resources. We wish to emphasize that our insights are derived from an extreme case of an organization that set out to use cultural resources that are *very different* from those of its own industry register. We believe that to better understand the strategic value of cultural repertoire enrichment, it is essential for future research to study the incorporation of new cultural resources that are more similar to, or compatible with, those of the organizations' own industry. For example, an airline company incorporating cultural resources from the register of the hospitality industry, or an R&D-intensive company incorporating cultural resources from the register of academia may serve as settings for assessing the costs of the process in less extreme conditions than those present in our case.

The Interplay Between Cultural Resources and Organizational Identity. Consistent with prior research, our study highlights the interrelatedness between cultural resources and identity. Specifically, we observe a process of redefinition of organizational identity through the introduction of new identity claims to accompany each round of incorporation of cultural resources. As identity claims accumulated and their nature evolved, Alessi created a complex palette of identity definitions. This palette was available to internal and external audiences to make sense of and to justify diverse and occasional contradictory concepts, practices,

and strategies. These observations suggest several interesting directions for future research on the intersection of organizational identity, strategy, and cultural resources.

First, identity research has discussed how organizational identities are constructed by claims of both similarity and distinctiveness (Whetten 2006), but it has not examined how these claims may vary over time in order to address different strategic needs of the organization. Recent conceptualizations of organizational identity have begun to consider how organizations redefine themselves over time in a process of self-construal (Pratt and Kraatz 2009). Our study provides an important basis for understanding this process by highlighting the dynamic interplay in the use of existing categories to claim similarity, and newly created ones to claim distinctiveness. It will be valuable to develop better understanding of the internal processes through which such categories are selected or created, and the extent to which they reflect strategies that are already formulated, or provide templates for elaborating and modifying organizational strategies.

Our model suggests that organizations change the categories they use in their self-definitions in conjunction with their changing strategies. They do so to influence the understandings of both internal and external audiences about their new strategies of action. In doing so, however, they also seek to influence the very categories that are available for their definition (Rindova et al. 2007; Rosa et al. 1999; Zuckerman 1999). Whereas extant research on market categories emphasizes their constraining effects (Pólos et al. 2002; Zuckerman 1999; Zuckerman et al. 2003), our model underscores the organizational agency in asserting a distinctive identity by using categories from different registers and combining them in claims of distinctiveness. Our model therefore suggests identity redefinition as an important mechanism through which organizations may manage the "categorical imperative (Zuckerman 1999)."

Second, extant identity research has articulated that organizations use multiple identity claims to address the expectations of multiple audiences (Pratt and Foreman 2000). However, it has not examined how a multiplicity of claims relates to diversity in strategies and practices, and how aggregation and syncretisation of identity claims may increase an organization's strategic latitude. Future research should consider how organizations foster the acceptability of syncretic identity claims by influencing the expectations of both internal and external audiences. In particular, research should consider how underlying practices, categories

used, and evolution of the organization's identity definitions all combine to affect whether audiences accept or resist these claims.

In conclusion, we would like to note that to some, the strategic change at Alessi may appear to be the result of one big shift – from an industrial manufacturer to a producer of luxury goods. While such a view would be consistent with *one* of the positions of Alessi in the market by the end of our study period, it could not explain how a conventional manufacturer of steel household products came to be perceived as a producer of artful objects that are collected by museums and design enthusiasts around the world. Further, extant theory would predict that Alessi's historical cultural repertoire and technological resources would make such a transition extremely difficult. Our systematic analysis of the gradual incorporation of new cultural resources and their implementation in new practices and strategies of action represents a novel view of such strategic transformations. It suggests that the direction and path of radical strategic shifts may arise from little-understood cultural quests for new understandings.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Details on Data Collection*

Source of data	Type of data	Use in the analysis
Corporate Archive*	**Books** Published by Alessi between 1979 and 2006 in four categories: 1) Official corporate autobiographies (4); 2) Books on specific product development projects (16); 3) Books on designers (4); 4) Reports from workshops organized by Alessi (4).	Track changes in the cultural repertoire of the organization at different points in time, as organizational texts document the evolution of a repertoire without retrospective bias (Weber 2005).
	Catalogues 70 commercial catalogues published between 1960 and 2007.	Gather detailed information regarding interpretation of product features and environment.
Interviews*	**First round** *Spring 2006-Fall 2007*. 12 interviews with 10 members of the company, including then CEO Alberto Alessi, his closest collaborators, and junior and senior managers across functions. Interviews lasted between one and four hours. All recorded and transcribed for a total of 159 pages.	Gather data regarding the organizational strategy, structures, and practices, their origins and evolution.
	Second round *Spring 2008*. 11 interviews with: a) 5 members of the company, including 2 retired managers; b) 2 designers. *Fall 2008*. 3 interviews with external design experts All recorded and transcribed for a total of 150 pages.	Verify the timeline of the incorporation of different concepts in Alessi cultural repertoire, refine our emerging theoretical insights, contextualize the observed processes in terms of industry and design history.
	Video-taped archival interviews Four open-ended interviews recorded by Alessi Museum in 1999 and 2001 with informants no longer available for in-person interviews: Carlo Alessi (Alberto's father and former CEO), Ettore Alessi (Alberto's uncle and former technical manager), and architects Carlo Mazzeri (first external designer to collaborate with Alessi) and Franco Sargiani (designer of logo and packaging in the early 1970s).	Triangulate facts and observations, gain additional understanding of the organization and the strategy prior to the change process and of the early years of the change.
Other archival sources	1) Scholarly publications on Alessi written by art critics (e.g. Casciani 1996), business historians (e.g. Sweet 1998), and design (Verganti 2006) and management scholars (e.g. Salvato 2009), as well as scholarly publications on design history in general (e.g. Branzi 2004; De Fusco 2002); 2) Industry reports on the household industry; 3) Specialized media, such as architecture and design magazines (*Domus*, 1965-; *Ottagono*, 1965-; *Casabella*, 1970-; *Modo*, 1984-; *Abitare*, 1970-1979), the oldest household industry magazine (*Articoli casalinghi e Piccoli Elettrodomestici*, 1969-1980), and various Italian and American household magazines (various issues in the 1980s and 1990s).	Triangulate facts and observations, enhance validity of insights, contextualise observed process in terms of industry and design history.

* References in the paper to sources from the Corporate Archive and the Interview Database are noted as CA# and ID# respectively. More detailed references are available from the authors upon request

Table 2: Cultural Repertoire Enrichment: Addition of New Concepts and Changes in Practices (1970-2006)*

Concepts	Practices
INDUSTRY REGISTER *(Alessi's repertoire prior to 1970)*	New products were developed internally by the technical office. Designers had been invited occasionally to develop non-core objects in the product portfolio. Emphasis was on technological process innovation and cost control (INDUSTRY). Large scale, industrial production of steel tableware; other metals (brass, etc.) as well as crafts productions had been discontinued in the 1950s. Emphasis was on high quality of manufacturing (INDUSTRY). Direct sales to large customers. Home products were sold through a network of more than 6,000 small shops. Catalogues were structured by product type, with a short technical description (INDUSTRY).
ARTS REGISTER **Products as Art Works** **Authorship** **Value of Form**	*Collaboration with recognized artists (1972):* Responsibility for product design shifts from the technical office to industrial designers, graphic designers, and architects (ARTS). *Efforts to implement designers' ideas (1972-):* Technicians are expected to make an extra effort to preserve designers' original forms—however bold and complex to produce—even at the expense of functionality or efficiency (ARTS). *Segmentation of retail network (1975-):* Sales of sophisticated art-like objects are restricted to a small number of high-end retailers (ARTS). *New catalogue content (1975-):* Some products are associated with commentaries written by prominent Italian art critics and, later, by Alberto Alessi personally (ARTS). *Engagement in relationships with arts and cultural institutions (1979-)*: A communication office is set up to promote exhibitions in arts and cultural institutions; this task will be later carried out by the Alessi Museum (ARTS). **New production technologies: silver, wood, and ceramics (1983-):* New materials and production technologies are used to expand the expressive means available to artists (ARTS+CRAFTS). **Small-scale production (1983-):* Development of new machinery allows industrial production on a limited scale for projects of high cultural and artistic value, even if they are expected to sell limited amounts (ARTS+CRAFTS). **New catalogues: Officina Alessi (1983-):* A new catalogue collects and showcases the most experimental and artful production of the company (ARTS+CRAFTS). *Education of sales force and retailers (1985):* Bi-annual meetings and, later, visits to the Alessi Museum are set up to explain the author's philosophy and the ideas behind new products (ARTS). **New tools for product development (1990-):* The symbolic and affective dimensions of product form are considered more important than functionality and price for the success of Alessi's products. These dimensions are reflected in a tool used to evaluate new products at different stages in the development process (ARTS+ANTHROPOLOGY+PSYCHOANALYSIS).
CRAFTS REGISTER **Crafts Virtuosity** **Exploration**	*Re-introduction of crafts techniques (early 1980s-):* Crafts techniques are reintroduced in the factory to perform specific steps of the production process (CRAFTS). **Collaboration with crafts workshops (1981-):* Collaboration with crafts workshops for the production of objects in wood and ceramic, and of parts in metal; a specific unit is set up to supervise outsourcing (CRAFTS+ARTS). **Small-scale production (1983):* Small-scale production enables Alessi to explore new product concepts and languages (ARTS+ CRAFTS).

	**New catalogues: Officina Alessi (1983-):* A new catalogue collects and showcases the most experimental production of the company (ARTS+CRAFTS). *New catalogues: Twergi (1989) and Tendentse (1990-1999):* Two new catalogues for productions in wood and ceramics; each catalogue contains detailed explanations of the underlying crafts methods and philosophy (CRAFTS).
ANTHROPOLOGY REGISTER **Consumption Rituals** **Cultural Relevance** **Product Archetypes**	**Seminars and collaboration with social scientists (1981-1993):* Anthropologists, historians, and semioticians are invited to share their reflections on the cultural significance of objects (ANTHROPOLOGY+PSYCHOANALYSIS). *Foundation of Centro Studi Alessi (1990-):* Development of conceptual papers on the role of objects in society in order to inform design. These activities are coordinated by a new position in the organizational hierarchy (ANTHROPOLOGY). **New tool for product development (1990-):* The symbolic and affective dimensions of product forms are considered more important than functionality and price for the success of Alessi's products. These dimensions are reflected in a tool used to evaluate new products at different stages of the development process (ARTS+ANTHROPOLOGY+PSYCHOANALYSIS).
PSYCHOANALYSIS REGISTER **Emotive Involvement** **Products as Vehicles for Imagination** **Products as Toys**	*Collaboration with young designers (1990-):* Collaboration is extended to younger designers and graphic illustrators, who explore less artistic and more popular and playful product languages (PSYCHOANALYSIS). **New tool for product development (1990-):* The symbolic and affective dimensions of product forms are considered more important than functionality and price for the success of Alessi's products. These dimensions are reflected in a tool used to evaluate new products at different stages of the development process (ARTS+ANTHROPOLOGY+PSYCHOANALYSIS). **Seminars and collaboration with social scientists (1991-1993):* Semioticians and historians share with designers and employees involved in design-related activities psychoanalytical theories about the effect of objects form on individuals (ANTHROPOLOGY+ PSYCHOANALYSIS). *New technology: Plastics (1993-*): Because of their tactile properties and the possibility of using color, production in plastics is initiated to enhance the affective quality of products (PSYCHOANALYSIS). *New flagship stores (2000-):* Starting in 2000, a range of new flagship stores of Alessi are conceived as "wonder shops," emphasizing the playful and animated character of the most recent Alessi production (PSYCHOANALYSIS). *New catalogues: A di Alessi (2006):* In 2006, a new sub-brand and a new catalogue are created, including the more playful products inspired by the application of psychoanalysis theories. The new catalogue has in itself a more playful visual style, without the text and the product critiques that characterize the other catalogues (PSYCHOANALYSIS)

* Following each practice in brackets we indicate registers from which the practice implements concepts. We use the "*" symbol to highlight practices that integrate concepts across registers. The table provides evidence regarding cultural repertoire enrichment showing both practices implemented to preserve the distinctive logics of different sets of cultural resources and efforts to integrate them.

Figure 1: Data Structure

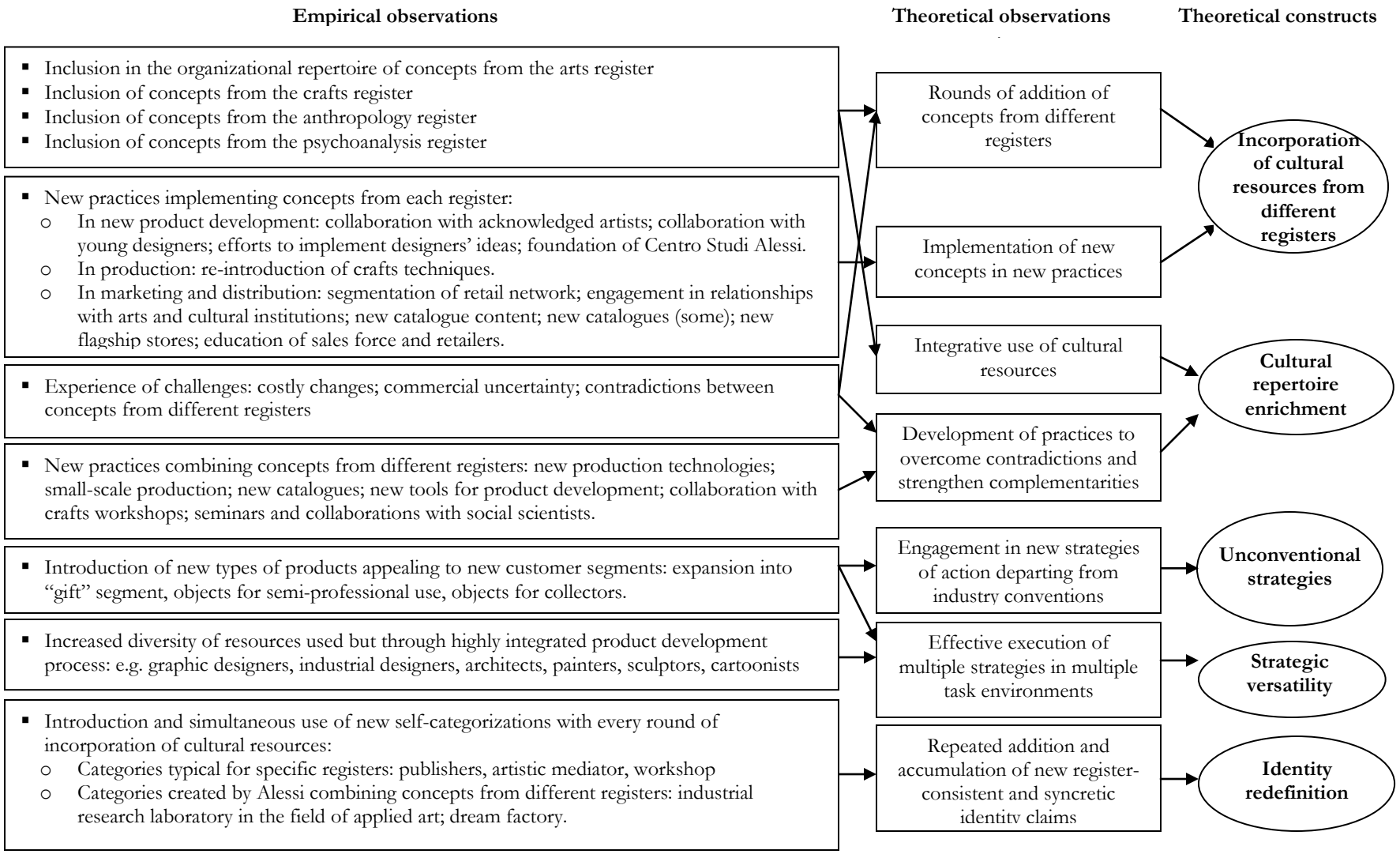
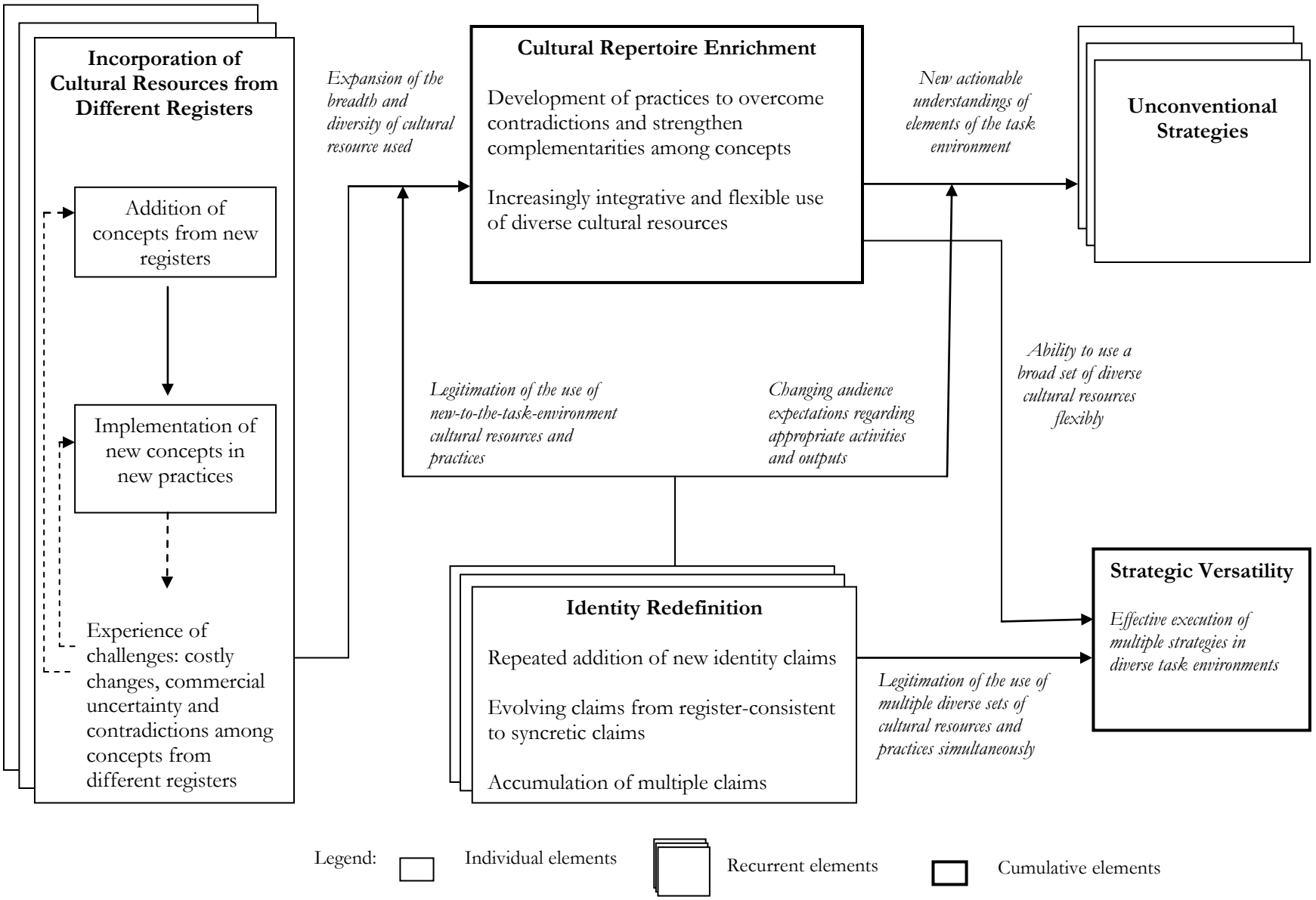


Figure 2: A Grounded Model of the Use of Cultural Resources from Different Registers in Strategy Formation



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