

Co-operative identity interpretations and their correspondence with the original cooperative mission. An ethnographic study.

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## **Abstract**

What is co-operative's purpose? The contemporary literature tells us how a co-operative works as a membership owned organized form of collaboration based on widely accepted international co-operative values and principles forming the core of co-operative identity covering multiple sectors. Our paper explores whether this is enough and how well it is understood by those leading co-operatives. At first we reflect on the literature concerning co-operative purpose, identity and performance in the context of what we claim to be a crisis of capitalism. In the empirical qualitative study we explore how co-operative identity is interpreted by 27 co-op senior managers and board members and if the interpretations demonstrate consistencies that are collective or largely fragmented and purely personal. Based on the analysis we conclude that the interpretations regarding co-operative identity, its central, distinctive and enduring features, were interpreted very collectively. The theoretical material in our paper suggests that this contemporary understanding reflects at least in part Co-operations historically accepted contested 'visions' of social transformation at the macro level. The question our paper raises is the co-operative brand speaking to the crisis effectively and communicating a relevant identity. The domination by platform capitalism of the global Knowledge Economy together with these platforms hugely politically and culturally significant social media suggests that a much stronger transformational co-operative ideology be promoted. This radical some argue 'utopian' vision although in practice marginalized remains visible to this day. Our paper suggests there is a profound paradox facing modern co-operation. Just as capitalism, itself in deep crisis from failure of wealth distribution, climate catastrophe getting closer, and with different contending political models, some with serious consequences for human rights, operating the same or largely similar private enterprise system, so co-operations voice becomes increasingly marginalized and in mainstream cultural communications today almost silent.

**Keywords:** Co-operative Identity, Co-operative Ideology, Co-operative Management, Co-operative Purpose, Co-operative Brand Development.