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# A Reflection on the Domain and Management of Corporate Identity

## Abstract

To face increasingly dynamic environments and competition, organisations often resort to corporate level instruments and strategies in order to generate competitive advantage. Companies use instruments and/or corporate abilities such as corporate messages, corporate Identity (CI), corporate branding and corporate associations. CI is one possible route for establishing a corporate image among audiences. The management of CI is an instrument that facilitates corporate differentiation by establishing the unique features and singularity of an organisation. This paper focuses on the specification of the foundations of the Corporate Identity (CI) concept. Grounded on an *interdisciplinary perspective*, it further discusses aspects related to the management of CI. In particular, the study derives from the literature main dimensions that corporate identity may entail and dissects some of its managerial facets.

Keywords: Corporate Marketing; Corporate Identity; Corporate Identity Management; Interdisciplinary Research.

## Introduction

To face increasingly dynamic environments and competition, organisations often resort to corporate level instruments and strategies in order to generate competitive advantage. Companies utilise instruments and/or corporate abilities such as Corporate Identity (CI), Corporate Branding and Corporate Associations (Brown and Dacin 1997; Simões *et al.* 2005). Organisations have longer longevity than products; consequently competitive strategies grounded at the corporate level are more prone to succeed on a long term basis. This paper focuses on the specification of the foundations of Corporate Identity. The management of CI is an instrument that facilitates corporate differentiation by establishing the unique features

and singularity of an organisation. The CI conveys the company's image to internal and external stakeholders.

Corporate Identity has been uncovered by various threads of literature such as sociology, marketing communications and public relations. In particular, four key insights related to the study of CI are highlighted in this paper: *graphic design*, *marketing*, *organisational studies* and *interdisciplinary* approaches. The *graphic design* view is concerned with all forms of visual presentation of the company and management of corporate symbols (van Riel and Balmer, 1997). The *marketing* approach builds on work relating to brand management and integrated communications (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Duncan and Everett, 1993). *Organisational studies* analyse the concept of organisational identity and are mainly concerned with the feelings of members towards their organisation (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Finally, an eclectic perspective is supported in *interdisciplinary* studies that acknowledge overlap in various areas of knowledge (Balmer, 1996; van Riel and Balmer, 1997).

This multiplicity of insights has originated distinct languages across fields. As Brown *et al.* (2006: 100) note "It is difficult to follow a threaded conversation within, and especially across, disciplinary sectors". Although there has been considerable research in the area of corporate marketing, associations and identity, the scope and domains of CI still need further theoretical and managerial insights. Hence, in the light of an interdisciplinary approach, this research draws on literature to derive preliminary insights into a better understanding of the notion of CI and analyses dimensions that corporate identity management may entail.

## **Background**

Corporate identity portrays a notion of identity transposed to organisations. Such concept conveys an abstract idea suggesting that every organisation has its own personality, singularity and individuality (Bernstein, 1984) – that is, its own character. Nonetheless, there is not a clear consensus on a definition of corporate identity and its domain. In fact, notions such as corporate image, identity, brand, personality, reputation and others are often used as related without a clear specification of their realm.

Early works in the field emphasise terms such as image and personality. For instance, Clevenger *et al.* (1965) refer to corporate image and its measurement. Martineau (1958: 47) contends that store personality or image is “the way in which the store is defined in the shopper’s mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes”. Bolger (1959) refers to the notion of personality of a company and proposes image measurement through the use of personality traits, arguing that image is gauged through a technique called ‘company image profile’. Spector (1961) uses the term corporate image, as constituting the perceptions people hold about the personality characteristics of the corporation. Similarly, Nelson 1962 refers to the image as the attitudes people have towards a product. Sethi (1979) says that corporate image advertising intends to establish a positive image of a given corporate personality in the minds of chosen audiences. Margulies (1977: 66) distinguishes the notions of identity and image in the following way: “(...) **identity** means the sum of all the ways a company chooses to identify itself to all *its* publics – the community, customers, employees, the press, present and potential stockholders, security analysts, and investment bankers. Image, on the other hand, is the perception of the company by these publics”. Another related concept is reputation. *Corporate reputation* represents *image* endowed with a judgement. *Reputation* is underpinned by an entity’s willingness and ability to consistently undergo an activity or action (Herbig and Milewicz, 1994).

As may be seen there are interlinked terms such as image, personality, identity and reputation. This paper takes the view that corporate identity entails the dimensions that a company uses to identify, distinguish and position itself among its audiences (Kotler, 1997). As Balmer (1995: 25) explains: “[c]orporate **identity**: this is what the organisation ‘is’, e.g., its innate character. Everything and organisation says, does and makes impacts upon an organisation’s identity e.g. products and services, formal and informal communications, company policies, the behaviour of personnel, etc.” In this line of thought, identity refers to what the company transmits about itself. Image, on the other hand, is the way the company is perceived and understood by its publics; corporate image is the overall perception audiences hold about an organisation (Hatch and Schultz 1997; Kotler 1997, Dibb *et al.* 2001; Bernstein 1984; Barich and Kotler 1991; Kotler 1997; Gray and Balmer 1997)

As referred earlier, this investigation sets out to review the realm of *corporate identity* and to display some of its managerial dimensions. In order to gain a deeper insight into the conceptual basis of the construct the next section briefly presents previously identified

theoretical perspectives addressing the notion of corporate identity: *graphic design, organisational studies, marketing, and interdisciplinary* approaches.

### *Graphic design insights*

Early references to corporate identity relate to the visual/graphic identification and identity of organisations. From this perspective, organisational nomenclature, logos, company house style and visual identity systems are emphasised. All parts of a corporation that may be seen or heard are of relevance (e.g., advertisements, uniforms, letterheads, business cards, buildings, signage, and logos) (Margulies, 1977; Carter, 1982; Olins, 1991; Pilditch, 1970). Attention centres on the management of corporate symbols that express and transmit the strategic visual dimensions of corporate identity to various audiences (van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Balmer, 1997).

### *Organisation studies insights*

The organisational literature centres on internal aspects of identity and member identification. Organisations need to internalise a cognitive structure of what the organisation stands for and where the organisation intends to go – that is, create the essence of the organisation's identity. The organisational identity perspective brings meaning, emotion and human aspects to the fore (Albert et al., 2000). A frequently used definition of organisational identity suggests it is what is central (i.e., the character), enduring and distinctive about an organisation (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Identity may be mirrored in aspects such as shared values and beliefs, mission and the organisational climate. This identity needs to be shared among an organisation's members. The higher the consistency and coherence of the organisation's character (solid culture), the greater the internalisation. In this line of thought, social identity theory suggests psychological links between organisational and social identities with the ultimate objective of making employees identify with the organisation. Organisational identification, it is argued, is one form of social identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). From this viewpoint, employees' connection with the organisation is linked to the meaning they and others attribute to the

organisation. When the resulting images are favourable, distinct and enduring, organisational identification occurs, strengthening attachment with the organisation (Dutton et al., 1994).

### *Marketing insights*

Overall, the marketing literature has not conventionally approached the field and notion of corporate identity. Consequently, insights from the literature on branding and the integrated communication perspective help understanding how the marketing indirectly addresses the notion of corporate identity (Simões et al. 2005).

The concepts of **brand** (identity) and corporate identity can be seen to interconnect. Aaker (1996: 68) defines brand identity as “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organisation members”. The identity structure is formed by core and extended identities. The former embodies the timeless essence of the brand – the soul, brand values and beliefs, organisational competencies and organisational mission. The extended identity represents a more detailed layer and encompasses dimensions that complete and give texture to the brand (e.g., visible associations with the brand). In many situations, identity may be universal and applied across all markets. In other situations, however, brand identity may need to be adapted to distinct products or markets. In this case, multiple brand identities may arise through a common set of associations that should be maintained across all brands (op. cit.). This branding concept can be applied at the corporate level (Ind, 1997; Aaker, 1996). Corporate branding becomes the strategic direction for an organisation’s activities, providing consistency through the connection between positioning, communication and staff working style or behaviour (Chernatony, 1999). There is general agreement in the literature about the need to embed the ‘brand spirit’ in all company activities being an integrated business process (Rubinstein, 1996). Staff and employees are now major players in conveying the brand message, that is, they have become part of the ‘brand reality’. It is clear that the brand concept should not only take into account consumer needs but also match macro-environmental change and important stakeholder claims (Weber et al., 1986).

The **integrated communications** perspective was initiated with graphic designers and marketers acknowledging that there should be overall consistency in formal corporate communications (van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Bernstein, 1984; Keller, 1993). This perspective

links communication and marketing theory. Duncan and Everett (1993: 33) define integrated marketing communications as “the strategic co-ordination of all messages and media used by an organisation to influence its perceived brand value”. Companies may have a higher or lower degree of integrated marketing communications. By integrating their communication strategies, they create synergies among their different forms of communication. In this context, internal communications should be stressed. As such, the need for communication integration and consistency ought to be stressed and sought throughout the entire organisation (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998). In this vein, corporate communication is relevant. It is essential that companies harmonise internal and external communications to facilitate the generation of favourable images of the company for target audiences. It is important that all sources transmit a consistent image to audiences or stakeholders. Therefore, communication integration upholds consistency and coherence in communications when approaching different stakeholders in the environment (van Riel, 1995).

### *Interdisciplinary insights*

Overlap in various areas of knowledge relating to corporate identity has been recognised in the literature. Although viewed through different lenses, the same spirit underlies different definitions of corporate identity. The various approaches have proved to be more complementary than contradictory. Increasingly, organisations face the blurring of internal and external boundaries, stressing the knowledge exchange between areas such as marketing and organisation studies (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). This interdisciplinary viewpoint has been increasingly defended by academics (e.g., Simões et al. 2005, Brown et al. 2006.). As van Riel and Balmer (1997: 341) maintain,

“(…) academics acknowledge that corporate identity refers to an organisation’s unique characteristics which are rooted in the behaviour of members of the organisation. Many of the (...) scholars conclude that the management of an organisation’s identity is of strategic importance and requires a multidisciplinary approach.”

The interdisciplinary approach draws on diverse areas: marketing, human resources, strategic management, graphic design, public relations and communication studies (op. cit.). The main point worth noting from this interdisciplinary perspective is that corporate identity represents

an overarching concept that needs insights from various areas of knowledge. Therefore, corporate identity is eclectic and grounding its analysis in one field provides only a partial view. As Brown et al. 2006: 10 explain “A comprehensive understanding of such a broad topic such as corporate associations and corporate identity is more likely if it is informed by insights from multiple academics disciplines”.

### **Managing Corporate Identity**

Overall, this research takes the view that Corporate Identity ought to transmit a consistent, enduring behaviour. Identity can be viewed as the vehicle that expresses an organisation’s character to different audiences. The notion that firms are concerned with managing identity is plausible because their image is linked to benefits that are deemed important to the firm. The relevance of corporate identity for managers suggests that managers ought to handle corporate identity features. From the above discussion, it seems reasonable to contend that also there are characteristics of identity that are possible control and manage. The fact that the management of corporate identity has controllable dimensions has been suggested in the literature (e.g., Zinkhan et al. 2001; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Simões *et al.* 2005). Additionally, organisations differ in the extent to which they plan and manage their corporate identity. Such rationale suggests there is a degree for the management of corporate identity being some organisations more pro-active than others.

An important matter when addressing the management of corporate identity consists in determining which unit and/or level of analysis to take. In fact the complexity of identity magnifies the necessity to understand the various echelons at which it may function. When addressing the problems with the terminology in identity and related concepts, Brown et al. (2006) identified 4 viewpoints of the organization translated in the following questions: “who are we as an organisation”; “what does the organisation want others to think about the organisation?”; “what does the organisation believe others think of the organisation”; “what do stakeholders actually think of the organization?” (p. 100). Concurrently the authors refer to two levels of analysis: organisation level and individual level. Similarly, when referring to matters related to identity and identification Ravasi and van Rekom (2003) specify several levels of analysis: individual, group, organisation, industry and society.



Indeed, organizations may have multiple identities (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) and forms of identity and identification. In fact, multiple identities may co-exist inside an organisation, leading to sub-units of specific identities. Several layers of identity may emerge, for example, within an organization in the form of functional identity, departmental identity, or division identity. In a multinational context, the existence of different identities is even more acute due to the global context in which companies operate. Overall, it seems that when tackling corporate themes, a general thread that may be recognised in the literature is that there is: “a company or organisation as a focal object, typically seen through the eyes of individual members of stakeholder groups” (Dacin and Brown 2006: 95).

Discussion in the literature about the components of CI and its management is much dispersed. Although there is general agreement on the enlargement of the concept from a mainly graphical and design perspective to a wider approach including other aspects (e.g., mission, values, beliefs, culture), the borders are still imprecise. A corporate identity mix that encompasses symbols (visual identity and design aspects such as corporate name and house style), communication (all forms of internal and external corporate communications), and behaviour (how the corporation behaves involving aspects of corporate climate) has been suggested (van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Balmer and Soenen (1999) refer to the corporate identity mix as being constituted by: soul (e.g., values, culture), voice (e.g., communication) and mind (e.g., vision and philosophy). Such views stress corporate identity as a multi-dimensional construct with no single measure capturing its breadth.

Consequently, existing studies directly or indirectly approaching the management of CI take account of specific aspects. Kennedy (1977) pioneered empirical research into the importance of personnel in image formation. Perceptions and experiences of a company depend considerably on personal contact with employees. The author’s findings showed that a positive corporate image development goes beyond formal communications having personnel as a touchstone. Consistency between the image top management wishes to convey and the image employees transmit is very important in services and industry. As Kennedy (1977: 123) notes,

“realising that every employee is a potential salesman for the company, and that the company is selling much more than its conventional product range, brings employee into the centre of the image formation process.”

Melewar and Saunders (1998) brought corporate systems to the fore as an essential element of a business projected image in a global context. Research proves the relevance of standardising visual identity systems for multinationals as a vehicle for projecting the company identity. A study of managers in British companies and their Malaysian subsidiaries revealed significant relationships between the perceived effectiveness of identity projection and the degree of standardisation of buildings (interior and exterior), stationery, publications, vehicles, signs forms, advertising and promotion, packaging, give-aways and products (Melewar and Saunders, 2000). Interestingly, a non-significant relationship was established between the perceived effectiveness of identity projection and clothing. This may be explained by the fact that only 25 per cent of the sample companies were from the service industry. Clothing is likely to be more important as a visual feature for service businesses than industrial companies as employees are in direct contact with consumers.

Stuart (1998) widened the area under study by considering generic visual aspects and image development. She measured the corporate identity/image interface by assessing companies' images from the point of view of stakeholders and the company.

Simões *et al.* (2005) specified dimensions of CI that ought to be managed internally, in particular, at the business unit level. As they explain, the management of corporate identity embraces “(1) the endorsement of consistent behaviour through the diffusion of a company's mission, values, and goals; (2) the expression and pursuit of brand and image consistency in the organization's symbols and forms of communication; and (3) the implementation, support, and maintenance of visual systems.” (Simões, Dibb and Fisk 2005: 153). The authors reached a three-dimensional scale that measures levels of internal corporate identity management: i) mission and values dissemination; ii) consistent image implementation; and, iii) visual identity implementation. The *mission and values dissemination* dimension underlines the internal diffusion of the company's mission and values i.e., the overall sense of purpose and singularity of the company. The *consistent image implementation* facet embodies the articulation and coherence of communications and brand dimensions. The third feature, *visual identity implementation*, concerns the visual aspects of identity and their consistency.

## **Final notes**

The review presented in this paper portrays the importance and interest that the field of corporate identity may represent to academics and practitioners. Consequently, theoretical and empirical research is of importance to various audiences. Some reflections on the conceptual and empirical foundations of corporate identity and its management are now drawn.

Identity refers to the inner ‘being’ of people or things. The rationale behind such concept is that identity entails the differentiation pillars that distinguish a person or an object from others. By transposing such consideration to corporations, the notion of corporate identity embraces the idea that corporations are distinct ‘beings’ in the marketplace having unique features. When properly managed, such uniqueness allows attaining differentiation. Thus, corporate identity may be used as a managerial instrument grounding competitive advantage. Indeed, when filtered by stakeholders, the perception of identity forms the corporate image, i.e., corporate identity may be a route for developing the corporate image.

Overall, it seems that corporate identity should be examined under a holistic angle. Therefore, an interdisciplinary view ought to be considered when approaching the corporate identity concept. Based on previous research, this paper highlighted strands that may give relevant insights into the notion of CI: the graphic design, marketing, organisational behaviour. This list is not closed. Other perspectives ought to be added.

CI and its features still warrant further enlightenment. Discussion in the literature about the components of CI and its management is dispersed. Although there is general agreement on the enlargement of the concept from a mainly graphical and design perspective to a wider approach including other aspects (e.g., mission, values, beliefs, culture), the borders are still imprecise. It has been, however, established that CI management involves articulating physical and tangible elements that establish and convey corporate image. These elements should include organisational symbols that ought to be transmitted and understood by internal audiences and properly perceived by external stakeholders. Moreover, CI needs to embody a consistent message. Thus, it is paramount to account for all possible forms of communication that aim to convey an image. It searches for integrated communications and goes beyond marketing communications to include harmonised and coherent internal and external forms of communication.

CI management also implies the definition and acknowledgement of a company's sense of purpose and core values. What is intrinsic and unique to the organisation? This information should be shared and felt in the bosom of the organisation by its internal audiences. It is management's role to convey and stress such information, together with consistent behaviours. Through clear articulation of the company's philosophy and mission, organisational values and norms are unified and shared by all employees and managers, thus determining consistent behaviour throughout the organisation.

This over-arching effect that CI may have in companies' existence and motion opens a wide range of research avenues. CI's amplitude and complexity compel investigation to draw on specific perspectives and parts of its management. There is a vast quantity of literature devoted to outlining the increasing importance of corporate identity and related concepts for companies. However, further empirical studies are necessary. Although existing research adds understanding to the field, there are additional streams to cover. Future investigations ought to contribute to a better knowledge of this field. In particular research on the underlying process of CI formulation and its evolution over time is warranted.

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