

## **Marwa Tourky**

Doctoral Researcher  
Hull University business School  
The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, HU6 7RX, Hull, UK  
Tele: +44 7507469467  
Email: m.e.tourky@2007.hull.ac.uk

## **Philip Kitchen**

Dean, Faculty of Business and Professor of Marketing  
Brock University, Faculty of Business,  
Niagara Region, 500 Glenridge Ave., St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1  
Tele: 905 688 5550 x4006,  
Email: pkitchen@brocku.ca

## **Dianne Dean**

Lecturer, Marketing and Business Strategy  
Hull University business School  
The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, HU6 7RX, Hull, UK  
Tele: +44 (0) 1482 463340  
Email: d.m.dean@hull.ac.uk

## **Ahmed Shaalan**

Doctoral Researcher  
Hull University business School  
The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, HU6 7RX, Hull, UK  
Tele: +44 7507469466  
Email: a.s.shaalaa@2007.hull.ac.uk

# **Determining Corporate Identity in UK Organisations:**

## **An Empirical Analysis of Antecedents, Influences and Evaluation**

### **Abstract**

This research investigates the nature and meaning of corporate identity and identifies its key elements from a multidisciplinary perspective based on empirical research with practitioners from UK-based multinational companies (MNC). The originality of this study lies in the findings which suggest corporate social responsibility (CSR) to be a facet of corporate behaviour. Furthermore, the findings show the association of CSR with corporate identity elements, i.e. corporate values, culture and founder of the organization which form the foundation of corporate social involvement, in addition to communications which are the manifestation of both CSR and corporate identity. Thus, the study affords a new important perspective on the area which is argued to be a distinct, if not important, strand of inquiry (Balmer *et al.* 2007; Gray and Balmer 2001).

**Keywords:** corporate identity, visual identity, corporate communications, marketing communications, organizational culture, corporate behaviour, corporate image.

### **Introduction**

As organizations moved toward globalization in the 21st century, there has been a shift in marketing emphasis from product brands to corporate branding (Keller 2000). This is generally credited to the difficulties of maintaining product differentiation in the face of imitation and homogenization of products and services, as well as the fragmentation of traditional market segments that occur as customers become more sophisticated and markets become more complex (Hatch and Schultz 2003). Yet, differentiation requires positioning the whole corporation, not just the products (Hatch and Schultz 2003).

Accordingly, Interest in corporate identity has increased in both academic and business circles in recent years. Corporate identity has been widely recognized as an effective strategic instrument and as a means to achieve competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer 2006). It can be used to gain competitive advantage as customers can identify with all aspects of a business, including its products and services as well as social and cultural policies. Furthermore, when making purchase and investment decisions and evaluating employment opportunities, many stakeholders are increasingly concerned with corporate image and reputation, which is based on the stakeholders' elaboration of corporate identity over time (Melewar *et al.* 2005).

Although there has been great interest in the meaning of corporate identity (Balmer 2001b; Balmer and Wilson 1998), most of the studies tend to focus on theoretical perceptions of the

concept (Balmer 1995a; Cornelissen and Harris 2001; He and Balmer 2007; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997; van Riel and Balmer 1997) and so far the concept is characterized by 'diffuse interpretations' and 'dubious denotation' (Cornelissen and Elving 2003). Moreover, an agreed upon definition of corporate identity does not exist (Balmer 2001b; Cornelissen and Elving 2003; Motion and Leitch 2002). Consequently, this has caused lack of consensus on the elements of corporate identity construct (Atakan and Eker 2007), and surprisingly, to date, few research studies have empirically investigated the elements of corporate identity construct (Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Simoes *et al.* 2005). This lack of clarity in the academic world is also reflected in the business world. Although corporate identity is considered a major concern of CEOs (Fukukawa *et al.* 2007), many executives confessed to having little knowledge of how to manage, control or even explicitly define the concept (Melewar *et al.* 2005).

Hence, this study aims to demystify and pinpoint issues that constitute the meaning of corporate identity and provide a precise insight into practitioner conceptualisations of the concept and identify the key determinants of corporate identity and their sub-elements through examining the experiences and perceptions of managers in multinational organizations in the UK, as well as reviewing the literature on the topic, thus, developing a better understanding of the meaning of the corporate identity concept.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Definition and Meaning of corporate identity***

Over the past 30 years, research has provided a wide variety of definitions of corporate identity which results in divergent views within the literature as to what is meant by the term (van Riel and Balmer 1997). Originally, research was directed toward definitions that mainly looked at visual cues indicating the corporate visual identity (Melewar and Jenkins 2002). For example, Abratt (1989:414) defined corporate identity as:

*“an assembly of visual cues - physical and behavioural by which an audience could recognize the company and distinguish it from others”*

Balmer (1998) argued that corporate identity did not just involve the visible outward presentation of a company, as the meaning of corporate identity has been significantly extended to incorporate the set of intrinsic characteristics that gives the company its coherence. Balmer defined corporate identity as "*what an organization is*" referring to the corporate inherent character which is underpinned by the corporate personality and

experienced through everything an organization says makes or does (i.e., total corporate communications) (Balmer, 1995a, 1998).

Similarly, Gray and Balmer (1998:696) defined corporate identity as *'the unique characteristics of an organization'*. They proposed its principle components to be the company strategy, philosophy, organizational design and culture.

Hatch and Schultz (1997:357), from an organizational behaviour perspective, also acknowledged the organizational culture within which local meaning and organizational symbols are embedded. They referred to organizational identity as:

*"what [organizational] members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics"*.

In contrast, van Rekom (1997:411), from a marketing and communication perspective, referred to the concept of corporate identity in relation to its external audiences and regards corporate identity as being central to the communications process in the organization. He defined corporate identity as:

*"the set of meanings by which an object allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it"*.

In the same vein, van Riel acknowledged the role of communications as well as behaviour and symbolism as means by which the company makes itself known to the world. van Riel (1997:290) defined corporate identity as:

*'the self-presentation of an organization; it consists of the cues which an organization offers about itself via the behaviour, communication, and symbolism which are its forms of expression'*.

Cornelissen and Elving (2003) asserted that the concept of corporate identity is considerably broad in scope to include symbolism (logos, house style) and representational forms of behaviour (i.e. behaviour of store employees, sales representatives, receptionists) together with planned forms of publicity and advertising communications.

In line with the above, Melewar (2003) demonstrated that corporate identity involved a company's verbal and visual presentation as well as marketplace positioning and competitive differentiation at the corporate, business unit and product levels. Hence, it is closely linked to the way an organization does its business and the strategies it adopts. In support, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006:864) defined corporate identity as:

*"Corporate identity is the presentation of corporate identity to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organization unique and it incorporates the organization's*

*communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry identity, and strategy. It is thus intrinsically related to both personality and image”.*

Accordingly, corporate identity has been acknowledged as a broad, multidisciplinary concept which incorporates different elements (Melewar *et al.* 2006). It is considered the sum of all the factors that define and project ‘what the organization is’, ‘what it stands for’, ‘what it does’, ‘how it does it’ and ‘where it is going’ (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006) .

Thus, the meaning of corporate identity has evolved from partial views of the concept (i.e. visual design) into an interdisciplinary approach (i.e. visual design, organizational behaviour, marketing and communications) (Hatch and Schultz 1997; van Riel and Bahner 1997). Yet, the literature reveals four main theoretical perspectives: graphic design, marketing, organisational studies, and an interdisciplinary approach (Simoes *et al.* 2005), which reflects the degree of dispersion of work in the field (Balmer 1998), and indicates the holistic nature of the concept. The following discussion grounds the argument on the elements of corporate identity construct.

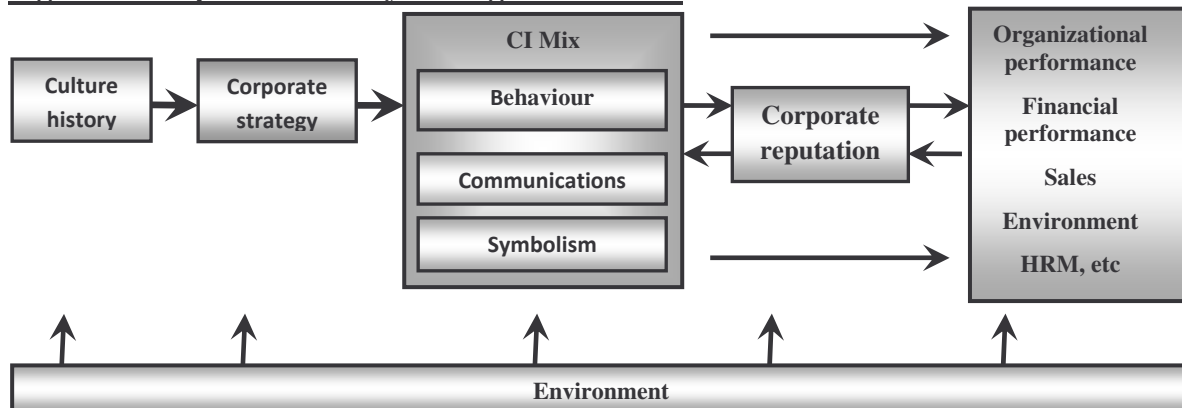
### ***Corporate Identity Models***

Bernstein (1986) asserted that every organization has a corporate identity, either planned or unplanned. And in order to plan and manage corporate identity, the corporate identity mix should first be identified. Recent definitions of corporate identity are argued to be broad and encompass different elements i.e. corporate design, communications, culture, behaviour, and others (Melewar *et al.* 2006), thus, in the literature there is little agreement as to what constitutes the corporate identity mix (Atakan and Ekel 2007).

van Riel and Balmer (1997:341) defined the corporate identity mix as ‘*the way in which an organization’s identity is revealed through behaviour [and] communications, as well as through symbolism to internal and external audiences*’. Yet, emphasising on marketing perspective which is based on collective insights from the branding and integrated communications literature (Simoes *et al.* 2005) and concerned with how corporate identity is transmitted to the organisation's publics (Hatch and Schultz 1997).

On time van Riel and Balmer (1997) developed their model; symbolism, communication and behaviour were accurate description of corporate identity elements and have been suggested by other scholars, i.e. Balmer (1995b) and van Rekom (1997). However, the understanding of corporate identity has gradually broadened to include other elements, i.e. culture, history, corporate strategy, organizational structure.

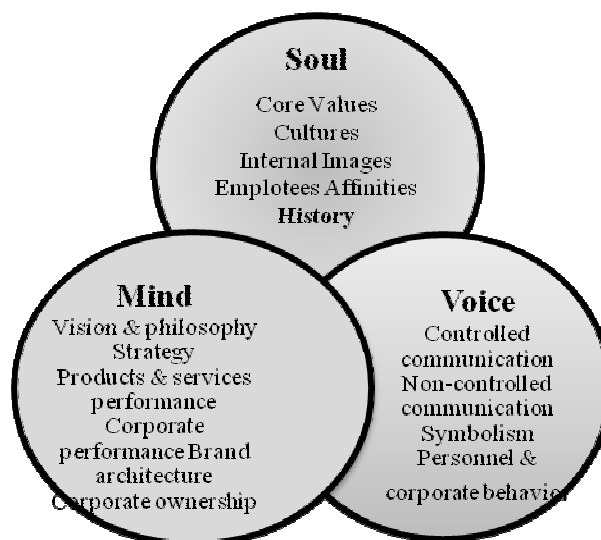
**Figure 1: Corporate Identity Management Model**



Source: van Reil and Balmer (1997:342).

Balmer and Soenen (1997) presented a departure from the previous classifications of behaviour, communications, and symbols. They proposed that corporate identity mix is composed of ‘mind’, ‘soul’, and ‘voice’. The ‘mind’ consists of managerial vision, corporate philosophy, strategy, performance, brand architecture, nature of corporate ownership, and organizational history (Balmer and Soenen 1999). While the ‘soul’ consists of the subjective elements including the distinct values, mix of sub-cultures, employee affinities, and internal images (Balmer and Soenen 1999). Finally, the ‘voice’ is the total corporate communication and consists of its uncontrolled communication, controllable communication, symbolism, employee and corporate behaviour, and indirect (external/ third party) communication (Balmer and Soenen 1999).

**Figure 2: Balmer and Soenen’s (1997) Corporate Identity Mix**



Source: Balmer and Soenen (1999:80)

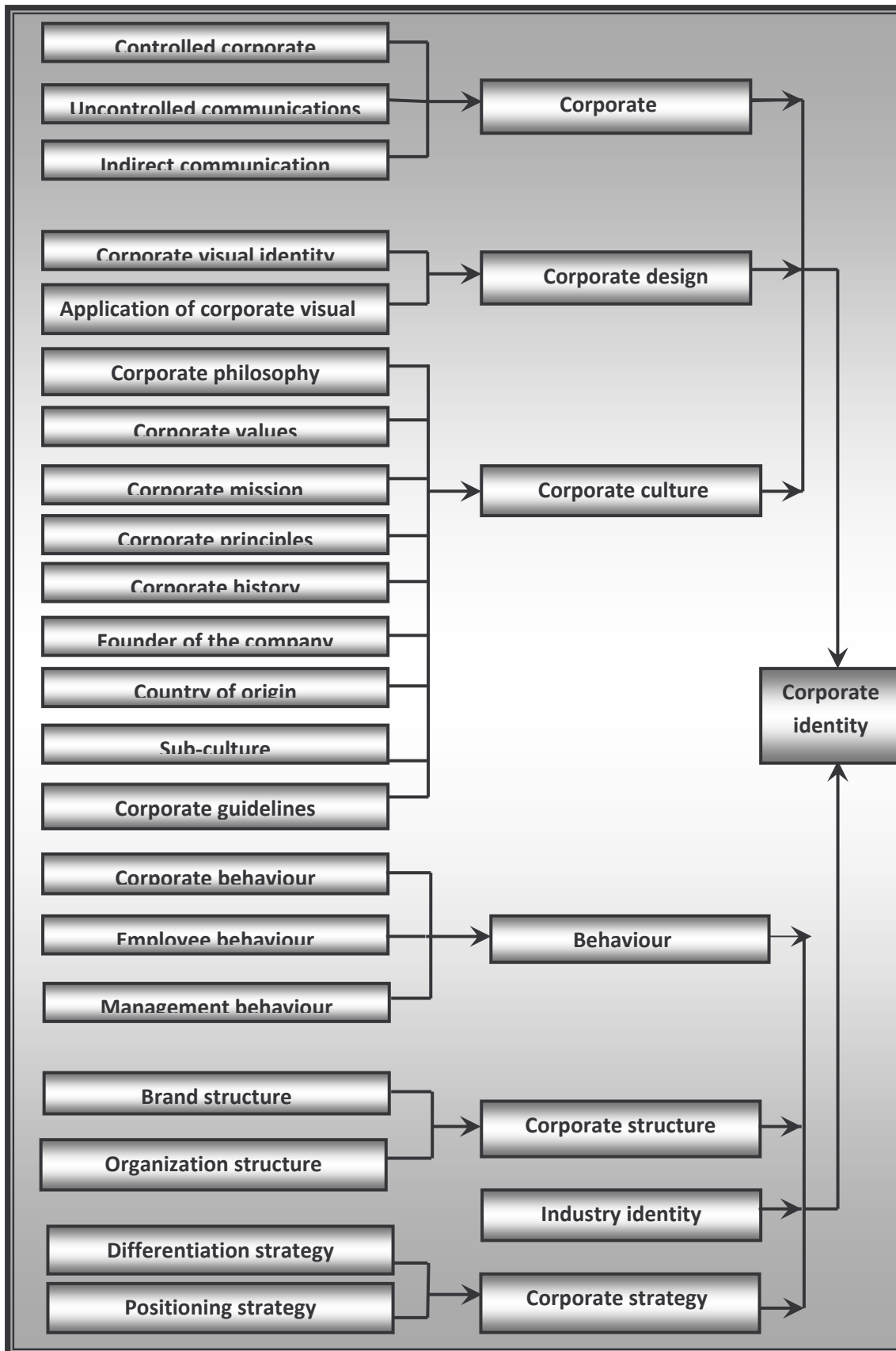
Yet, an interdisciplinary perspective which draws on organizational studies pertains to the internal aspects of identity that can be reflected in the organizational climate and mission and in the values and beliefs shared among the firm's members. Melewar and Jenkins (2002) pointed out that the most significant contribution of Balmer and Soenen s' (1997) identity mix is the re-classification of symbols with communication.

Although, Balmer and Soenen s' (1997) classification of corporate identity takes on a much wider meaning by referring to verbal, non-verbal, explicit and implicit elements of communication, however, their categorization presented a loose construct of corporate identity since each element, subjectively encompasses different sub elements, thus, the Mind, Soul and Voice could be interpreted differently not dependent on actual communication and behaviour. In addition, history, which is argued by Balmer and Soenen to be a sub-element of Soul, should better present the intersection part between all elements of corporate identity. Although organizational history 'narrative' is assumed an element of corporate culture (Maclagan 1996), however, it is considered the foundation of organisational activities, i.e. behaviour, communication and strategy (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

Melewar and Saunders (2000) extended Balmer and Soenen s' mix by including the 'body' as an element of corporate identity that emphasizes the physical, tangible aspects of identity, i.e. type of building and location of the company which from their point of view are considered relevant elements of corporate identity. From a practitioner point of view, Melewar and Jenkins (2002) argued that corporate identity requires the presentation of the organization as a whole and consists of several components, referred to as sub-constructs or dimensions, each of which contains different items. Their proposed sub-constructs are: 'communication/visual identity', 'behaviour', 'corporate culture' and 'market conditions', thus, dominating a multidisciplinary approach to corporate identity. Yet, it is claimed that categorizing the elements of corporate identity is considered one of the most challenging tasks in the field (Melewar and Jenkins 2002).

Melewar and Jenkins's identity model (2002) has been empirically tested in the context of higher education sector by Melewar and Akel (2005) who contend that corporate identity is a mixture of several elements, with one single element being more important than the others. Also, Melwer and Jenkins's corporate identity mix has been revised by Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) to include the following components: corporate communications, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity and corporate strategy, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Melewar and Karaosmanoglu's (2006) Corporate Identity Taxonomy**



Source: Melewar and Karaosmanoglu's (2006:198)



Melewar and Karaosmanoglu s' (2006) model is argued to assume different views of corporate identity since it is based on a multidisciplinary approach that unites the psychological, graphic design, marketing and public relations paradigms of corporate identity (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

Yet, an examination of various studies stresses corporate identity as a multi-dimensional construct with no single measure capable of capturing its breadth (Simoes *et al.* 2005). Also, it indicates different emphases and disagreements on the elements that are proposed as determinants of the concept (Melewar 2003), in addition to the prevailing conceptual frameworks which lack empirical validation. Consequently, Melewar *et al.* (2005) argue that research in corporate identity management area is a formidable task (Melewar *et al.* 2005) especially in relation to determining the parameters of the research concept in guiding scholarly investigations (Balmer and Greyser 2003; Cornelissen and Elving 2003). Hence, it is essential that corporate identity be further explored and defined to determine what specific elements are most salient to the concept and thus identify areas of focus (Melewar and Karaosmanohlu 2006).

Thus, this study is concerned with filling this gap by exploring the nature and elements of corporate identity from practitioners view and ascertaining the key elements of the concept, as a first stage. Based on the findings, measures for each of the key elements of corporate identity will be developed and empirically tested in a subsequent study.

## **Research Methodology**

This study is a part of a larger study aims to expand the understanding of the meaning of corporate identity and determine its underpinning and elements, as well as to gain thorough insight into the nature of corporate social responsibility and explore its relationship with corporate identity within UK corporations.

Since the meaning of corporate identity and relationship to related concepts remain vague (Melewar *et al.*, 2005), thus the study employed a qualitative approach to be able to uncover and explore aspects of corporate identity and CSR using semi-structure in-depth interviews with 24 individuals from fourteen multinational companies in the UK as well as 3 public relations (PR) agencies.

Interviews were targeted at senior managers responsible for corporate identity mix (van Riel and Balmer 1997; Melewar 2001) and CSR. This included 3 interviewees holding a position

in the field of marketing, 9 from communications, 9 in the domain of CSR, one general manager, and 3 directors in public relations (PR) agencies. Yet, the interviewees covered a wide range of management knowledge and appropriate experience.

The companies included in the study came from a broad spectrum of industries as displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2: industrial Sectors**

Nature of Business	Number of Companies
Automotive	1
Bank	1
Broadcasting	1
Food and Beverage	5
Food & Drug	3
Healthcare	1
IT-Hardware, Software & Services	1
Telecommunications	1
Tobacco	1
PR Consultancies	3

This diverse set of companies enabled investigating whether there were relationships between the importance of certain elements of corporate identity and company size and the nature of the industry.

Companies were selected on the following criteria:

1. Have global reach (Melewar et al., 2005; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006) in order to have established corporate identity and communications functions/departments responsible for managing it.
2. Have UK headquarters in order to facilitate face-to-face interviewing process.
3. Be among market leaders within their respective industry and rank high in reputation surveys (*Global Fortune 500*, *manager magazin*, *TIME*); since areas of reputation and responsibility are overlapping and elements of CR have been closely linked to Corporate Reputation (Fombrun 2005) and viewed as key drivers of reputation (Hillenbrand and Money 2007).
4. Show CSR initiatives; companies were members of ‘Business in the Community’ (BITC) which is considered one of the oldest and largest national business-led coalitions dedicated to corporate responsibility that inspires, engages, supports and challenges companies to make a positive impact in the community, workplace, marketplace and environment.

Interview sample was chosen purposively, enabling the use of judgement to select cases that were relevant to the research and allowing for heterogeneous sampling which helped in describing and explaining the key themes observed as well as identifying patterns and making inferences in terms of industry sector and corporate size, which were of particular interest and value to this study.

An interview schedule was designed and followed to guide the interviews and gain insights about the following topics and their relevance:

- Meaning of corporate identity.
- Corporate identity elements.
- Nature of CSR
- Relationship between corporate identity and CSR

Semi-structured interviews presented the flexibility to explore the phenomenon in-depth (Carson *et al.* 2002) due to the open-ended nature of questions posed which enabled respondents to respond more freely without restrictions imposed from a limited set of alternatives (Maxwell 2005). Also, it allowed for considering other areas of examination which had not been thought of when designing the interview schedule (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). The interviews lasted 45 minutes, on average, and were recorded.

This study utilized Nvivo8, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), in analysing the data which facilitated organizing the data into patterns, categories and basic units, thus making the coding as well as the retrieval of data more efficient than doing it manually, besides, eliminating human error (Bryman and Bell 2007).

To ensure the validity or trustworthiness of research results, several techniques were used (Riege, 2003); i.e. member checking in which the researcher restated or summarized some of the information received from respondents and then reported back the preliminary findings (Atkinson and Coffey 2003). Also, using NVivo software in data analysis is argued to add rigour to qualitative research (Richards and Richards 1991). Moreover, triangulation, in which the research will be employing data from both semi web sites of organizations under investigation, as well as surveys which might lead to a more consistent and objective picture of reality (Cho and Trent 2006).

## Findings

### *Meaning of corporate identity*

To elicit the nature of corporate identity from the view of practitioners in MNCs in the UK, interviewees were asked: *what was the meaning of the term corporate identity and corporate identity management in their respective organizations.*

Generally, there was a consensus among managers and consultants about the importance of corporate identity nowadays. A director of a PR company explained that:

*“Corporate identity of companies today is a significant part of marketing program, and if you get the corporate identity right in the first place then the atonal messages and marketing support will run from there”.*

Interviewees considered corporate identity from two different perspectives. On one hand, an external perspective concerned with the external manifestation of the organization to its various stakeholders, mainly customer, as one manager from a PR company expressed: *“that is pretty much consumer facing”*. In respect, there was a general agreement amongst interviewees that corporate identity is the output manifestation of the organization which is a broad term that includes mainly corporate logo, as well as other elements i.e. colour, architecture, furniture, uniform, and other specific elements that fit with the nature of the business. This sentiment is reflected by one manager from an automotive company who explained that:

*“The ultimate representation of corporate identity is what we call the blue oval, the oval name in the script that is if you want to summarize it in one thing. I know there are many sub-elements which come on to talk about, that is the core of our corporate identity”.*

Though, a director from a PR company highlighted the potential risk of stressing/magnifying the importance of the logo and other visual expressions by stating that:

*“I think there is a danger that people talk about corporate identity and all what they actually think about is what the logo will look like, what the picture will look like. It is important but it is only one aspect, the visual aspect”.*

Some interviewees who viewed corporate identity from an external perspective interpreted corporate identity as the image perceived by internal as well as external stakeholders, as expressed in the following quote by a manager from a health care company: *“Our corporate identity is the overall perception that any of our stakeholders have, our patients, or surgeons, government body, etc”*, while others referred to corporate identity as corporate reputation, for

example a manager in a broadcasting company stated: “ *it means our overall reputation and brand in the market*”.

However, some of interviewees considered the external manifestation of the company to be a part of the corporate identity which also included an internal perspective concerning corporate values, culture, and behaviour. An interviewee from IT Company reported that:

*“Corporate identity is obviously having a consistent approach to the market, not just necessarily our visual identity but in terms of how we talk about things, how we behave in generally, how we present our selves ..... and really the marketing side of it, in terms of the visual identity and the brand, it is really just kind of the visualization and demonstration of that identity that communicates the culture that lives far deep rooted that any picture can”.*

This view was also reflected by a manager from a multinational bank defined corporate identity as:

*[corporate identity] is the combination of our values and our culture that define the way this organizations makes decisions and position itself”.*

This group of interviewees, though considered internal aspects when defining the identity of their organizations, had also pointed out the importance of the visual expressions and communications as vehicles used in conveying their corporate identity which in turn impact stakeholders’ perceptions, corporate image, as well as corporate reputation.

In this respect, more than one interviewee introduced a holistic meaning of corporate identity which made each organization unique and differentiated from others. An interviewee from IT company described corporate identity as: “The way of doing things” and “what the organization is”. Another interviewee from the same company asserted that: “*Corporate identity is really about the soul of the organization, it is just more than just about marketing, it is about everybody within it*”.

Interestingly, corporate identity, through morals and ethical values, could be a source of distinctive advantage which might differentiate the organization, as one manager from Food & Beverage Company explained:

*“Corporate identity is what you believe the company to be, a company may mean quality, or a company may be good at social ethical values”*

For such companies, corporate identity reveals who is the organization and/or what it stands for, and line up different aspects of the organization in order to develop a consistent approach throughout the business. One interviewee from a Food & Beverage company emphasized this opinion about corporate identity: “*it is about the clarity about what the business stands for*”.

Hence, the findings revealed both partial views of the concept of corporate identity, i.e. corporate logo and other forms of symbolism used by the organization; corporate image; corporate reputation; and/or corporate values, to a more comprehensive and broader view of the concept signposting what is the organization/what it stands for, thus, reflecting a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing internal and external orientation of a wide array of elements which represent the identity of the organization.

### ***Elements of corporate identity***

This section presents a detailed discussion on the findings of key elements and sub elements of corporate identity from the view point of practitioners supported by individual quotes from managers. As pointed out previously in the literature review, there are a number of elements which are argued to be important in shaping the identity of organizations. Thus, based on the literature interviewees were asked: *what was the importance of corporate visual expressions, behaviour; communications; corporate culture; industry identity and corporate structure in managing their corporate identity*, as well as other elements which were revealed from piloting the interviews.

#### **▪ Visual expressions**

There was a general agreement among interviewees on the importance of visual expressions as a means of communicating corporate values and conveying corporate identity. Interviewees reflected a great awareness of the importance of visual expressions in conveying corporate identity and expressed a broad range of external marketplace, sub-elements of visual expressions, as stated by an interviewee from IT Company:

*“I think it is a number of things, to start, you obviously got the company’s logo, all to do is like positioning of how about company logo is used, it application, I think this is one element of it. it is possibly have to do with visual elements, so it is to do with typeface, font size, how they are laid out, is there a particular style to them, that kind of thing.”*

Although the priority of the components of visual expressions differed from one company to another, the logo seemed to be the principle element of the visual expressions where all interviewees stressed its importance and reflected a great conscious when dealing with the logo in which the way it is used is uncompromised and strictly controlled due to its significance role in conveying who the organization is in terms of values and culture. This was reflected by an interviewee from a multinational bank who stated that:

*Well, it [logo] is the physical manifestation of our identity; it drives customer recall through our values and our culture. It drives some core messages about our brand in terms of quality and distinction and our links with history, e.g. ego.*

In respect to architecture and location, interviewees agreed on their impact on corporate identity, as emphasized by an interviewee from Food & Beverage Company:

*Yes, I think it [Architecture] does definitely, having worked in number of different organizations, I think the architecture sort of big volume for the company as well.*

However, an interviewee from other Food & Beverage Company pointed out that in respect to the small size and the decentralized nature of the company, architecture and location seemed to be irrelevant elements to the identity of his organization.

In addition, the findings revealed the importance of consistency where interviewees were aiming for as well as simplicity so that people can easily identify with the logo, particularly global companies dealing with different dealerships in each country. From interviewees' view, consistency tells something about the brand, yet, becomes trusting. Thus, companies are striving towards a consistent look and style in everything they do, the look of their products, facilities, advert, etc. This opinion is expressed by an interviewee from a Tobacco Company stating that:

*As being a true multinational, so we operate an intranet, and so wherever you are in the world one of the sections of our intranet is the corporate identity guidelines from which people can download logos, tripe faces, pontoon references, suggested approach to signage even to sort of furniture and poster and things like that... We try to have a relatively a uniform approach to how we present our selves whenever we are in the world.*

#### ▪ **Communications**

Interviewees agreed that different communication means directed towards various stakeholders were considered important in developing a brand to its full potential through disseminating corporate values, mission, and core messages using internal and external communications. An interviewee from PR company stated that:

*I think there is obviously a range of PR and communications tools in use, all the kinds of external marketing and internal communications and increasingly there is a range of on line tools.*

Interviewees revealed a wide range of marketing communications tools which differed according to their target markets, audiences and nature of business. For example, an interviewee from a B2B company specialized in software and hardware stated that:

*From an external perspective, the tools that we use essentially, with business to business organizations, direct marketing, PR, we do lots also around PR because of the huge soft elements that are attached to that and that is vital to our industry.*

In addition, interviewees highlighted the importance of the actual content of what companies are trying to communicate and the underpinning messages which reflect the inherent values of the organizations encompassing sustainability and social responsibility that organizations intend to push out in the market place in order to influence customer perceptions. This view is reflected by an interviewee from IT Company:

*..... the fact that we have innovation, expertise and sustainability, our three brand values, and certainly in terms of anything we are trying to do, we try to make sure that one, two or if not three about those messages are coming out.*

Also, another interviewee from telecommunications company explained that there is a whole set of corporate social responsibility elements that needs to be attached to every piece of marketing communications and this is something constantly communicated on the internet, by email, in addition to a separate campaign about social and corporate responsibility which communication managers place it very much top of mind when they communicate in regular basis.

Interviewees pointed to other communications tools, i.e. ‘company products’, in which an interviewee from automotive industry expressed its importance in respect to the nature of his business:

*Fundamentally is our product. What our products conveying about, are they safe, are they environmentally friendly, in the way they are produced, the manufacturing, are they low with footprint, are they sporty. ....in the car industry, I think it is the personification of the company is in its product.*

Also, ‘people’ seemed to be an important communications tool for companies in healthcare industry, as mentioned by a manager:

*People, our people are the most representatives of the group identity. So how do they interact, behave, and communicate help the surgeons and technicians to choose our products.....the most important element.*

Internally, most interviewees concurred on the importance of management communications directed towards internal stakeholders, employees, believing that an informed workforce is generally a better motivated and highly productive workforce. Particularly, huge organizations employing a large number of employees consider management communications to be a part in part of business development in order to make sure that the company is moving forward and is socially responsible to its workforce, yet, they try to encourage the outlines to



inform their workforce in every step taken. This view is expressed by an interviewee in IT Company:

*So your internal brand and internal marketing is absolutely is just as important as what you do externally, in case they are essentially the mouth piece of the organization, so you make sure that you have got employees that are engaged in a cause of it.*

Based on the perceived importance of employees, who are considered ‘the biggest ambassadors of any brand’ as stated by an interviewee from healthcare company, companies use different internal communications means to communicate with their employees, i.e. emails, internal meetings, intranet, internal magazines, documents and progress reporting, corporate responsibility review, all in an accessible and approachable way yet, communicating missions and values and circulating successful stories as well as cascading messages down from top management to employees to comment and blog around, yet encouraging and creating open communications across the company. This is reflected by a manager in a food & Beverage company:

*“We are a communication and story led culture and that what people connect with”.*

In terms of uncontrolled communications, interviewees were asked about their perception on the importance of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in shaping the identity of their organizations. Interviewees generally agreed that WOM, whether stands from the experience of clients or employees, was extremely important nowadays with the growth of digital media and blogs which helps spread messages about the company, thus allowing stakeholders and special interest groups to get the information quite faster and flexible. This agreement was reflected by an interviewee from a food & Beverage company:

*And in terms of WOM in the public space, on line, being the most obvious, and WOM in a more private space, I think both have really quite profound on how company’s identity.*

An interviewee from a Food & Drug company commented that the only way to control that is consistency of behaviour and message from top to bottom through the organization.

*“It is arguably that the most important and difficult to control. I think the only way you could control that is consistency of behaviour and message from top to bottom through the organization”.*

Similar to visual expressions, interviewees stressed the importance of consistency among different communications tools employed, as stated by a manager from Automotive Company:

*So whether it is external advertising, above the line TV, print, or below the line, online or social media and so on, we have a book, a Look and Style Book, which lays out all the ways in which our corporate identity can be presented.*

▪ **Behaviour**

There was a general consensus among interviewees on the importance of behaviour as an element which shapes the identity of their organization since it is only through behaviours that people can trust the brand, and have a true relationship with the brand and what it represent. This was reflected by an interviewee from Food & Drug Company:

*Absolutely the way that we behave, the way that our tune and voice, how we treat people is absolutely inherent in our corporate identity...we firmly believe that 'actions speak louder than words*

Another interviewee from Food & Drug Company stressed the importance of corporate social behaviour which reflects the personality of the organization and shapes the corporate identity, because the CSR activity is the actions of the company which comes to life as the business engages in social activities, i.e. work with charities:

*The CSR activity represents really the personality of the brand, because the things that we do in our CSR world underpins and supports the portrayal of the brand.*

The majority of interviewees agreed on the importance of behaving in a responsible way towards the people within the organization, the consumers, the community in which the organization operates in, the world at large, and acting and maintaining the values and ethics and morals in the organization. Hence, corporate social behaviour showed to be an influential factor which has a long term impact of corporate behaviour as well as the overall identity of corporations, as interviewees described corporate social responsibility (CSR) to be a facet of corporate behaviour. This was reflected by an interviewee from Food & Beverage Company:

*... definitely, it [CSR] is part of the DNA for the company which is set up hundred years ago and very much in the process of developing of the business”.*

In this respect, interviewees strongly believed in corporate culture and values direct the behaviour of the organization towards CSR, yet, impacting the corporate identity. This sentiment id reflected by an interviewee from a Food & Beverage company:

*.. I think the organization which does not base how it behaves in society against the values, then it does not come across things authentic. It has to be authentic. Certainly, the company have its CSR definitely in line with its core values”.*

Also, interviewees pointed to the importance of employees behaving in a manner pursuit with corporate values, core identity, yet, creating a trustful organization, especially for organizations with direct contact with customers where the only person that the company can

see is the service provider. An interviewee from IT Company reflected on the importance of employee behaviour:

*...Your best champions are your employees. It might be one of the first battles that you have within an organization is that you need to get people on board in terms of believing what the organization is about and believing what the objectives are all about, where it is headed, and how it is going to get there.*

A key for employees to behave appropriately is to have a key model, i.e. managers, believing in corporate values, behaving and interacting accordingly, as well as being accessible in a devolve manner. In this way people understand what is or isn't acceptable behaviour. In contrast, if organization senior management don't believe in corporate values and execute them in their behaviour, internally and externally, on a day to day basis, then employees won't believe it either. Thus, it is a matter of having consistent behaviour throughout, as reflected by an interviewee from Automotive Company:

*You have to have that code of conduct that people can know what you company stand for then it has to be real to the managers and employees, live, in their daily interaction with each other. And a lot of that comes down to people looking at our senior manager behaviour, people looking at middle manager behaviour, and kicking out what is or isn't acceptable.*

Yet, leadership revealed to be an important element shaping the behaviour of the organization and creating consistency throughout the organization which helps convey the identity of the organization. This view is expressed by an interviewee from Tobacco Company:

*I do believe that organizations take their lead from the senior executives in each of the locations in which they operate.*

- **Culture**

Generally, there was as agreement on the importance of corporate culture in defining the way of doing things in organizations, yet shaping corporate identity. As revealed by interviewees, corporate culture reflects actually what is going inside the organization which is more about the place/environment where people work, the kind of mindset and the people working in the company, the way of engaging with each other which are all gathered around the corporate values that differs from one company to another. This view is reflected by an interviewee from Food & Beverage Company:

*It [corporate culture] is about the 'DNA', it is about how different business with different cultures and it is linked I guess to the corporate identity as well...In terms of the behaviour and the principles that an organization is operating, we have our principles...Principle in terms of the way we operate. What happens is that the culture builds and develops that then breath within itself.*

Interviewees described their corporate cultures and reflected on their rewarding culture and the inherent nature of CSR in their organizations, as expressed by an interviewee from Automotive Company who explained that, in respect to his organization, people are very much encouraged to engage in the community in which they live by getting certain number of hours a year, in agreement with their line managers, and to give something back to the local community which he claimed to be part of the company's values:

*Again, [CSR] really embedded in the company, this attitude of encouragement of community involvement objectives*

On agreement, another interviewee from Food & Drug Company stated:

*“It [CSR] is central to our values, we operate in a range of communities, we drive our profitability from those communities, so it is important that we can contribute to those communities in a way that is consistent with our values and consistent with the priorities of those communities”.*

Interviewees referred to different elements in shaping their corporate culture, as discussed below:

### **Mission statement**

A stream of interviewees showed great awareness of the importance of mission statement in enforcing organizational culture by embracing corporate aims/purpose as well as principles and values, thus becoming a point of reference which keeps the organization on track and align everybody behind it. This opinion is expressed by an interviewee from Food & Beverage Company:

*... more and more across the whole company, our mission statement is important, I think a key in making sure that what it says is actually reflected indeed.... It is quite very much part of developing our corporate identity.*

Though referring to corporate principles and purpose, some companies didn't use the term mission statement, for example, an interviewee from a Food & Beverage company stated:

*We have something which is called principles and actions, so basically everything we do, we try to do things in three ways, to impact performance, impact the planet and impact people. Mars*

The interviewee was referring to notion that CSR as part of the organization positioning and mission, as the company is trying to make sure that its performance has a positive impact on the planet, and people, therefore trying to make a triple win because the company needs to make money, so the performance bases the money. However, what matters is the manner in which the organization makes money and positive impact on the planet, at least neutral, and the manner which the organization can have a positive impact on peoples' lives. Therefore,

thinking about CSR means thinking about doing the right thing. Thus, acting in a sustainable and socially responsible was obviously something the organization is used to do along the years but didn't publicize.

### **Corporate history**

History was agreed by most of interviewees to be an element which impacts corporate culture by creating a sense of belonging and shared values, which in turn shapes corporate identity. This agreement was expressed by an interviewee from Automotive Company:

*... I do think that our history has shaped us and continues to shape us, but it is not something that we particularly think about in the everyday behaviours. It is just thing that is behind you, underpinning your behaviour.*

More than one interviewee associated history with corporate reputation since positive history creates trust which is a key in reputation development and organizational success especially for businesses operating in the healthcare industry, as reflected by an interviewee from Food & Drug Company:

*You can't open [company name] in Germany and it will have the same trading pattern as it does in Britain, because you have that history, because in Germany, [company name] is not a high street name and there is not the trust that has been built up over 160 years. And I think the issue is trust and reputation in the brand is a key for health and beauty products.*

A director from PR Agency asserted the importance of history particularly in case of rebranding, explaining that past history and reputation were always elements of enquiry in order to identify positives that might be forgotten, as well as negatives, and recognize the balance of how certain elements have been prioritized which might be wrongly, and accordingly make recommendations about how to manage the present and future reputation.

Also, history is considered heritage which created pride and makes employees identify with the organization especially for companies operating for a long time, for example, an interviewee from Automotive Company mentioned:

*.. definitely for employees because there is a lot of pride in the heritage whether that is the feelings from [founder of organization] in the beginning that we put the world on wheels, or whether it can be very local in a market like Britain there is a huge pride having been market leaders for so long.*

### **Founder of the organization**

The importance of the founder of the company showed to be subject of the nature of the business, as expressed by PR director:

*Entirely depends on the type of business and the personality of the founder. Inevitably, that personality rubs off on the culture of the business. You would not have focus on a long standing family or heritage if you are in the technology sector, where if you are in the food or drink sector, provident, inherits and family values are very useful sometimes. Because people want back safety and security of that kind of image.*

This view was affirmed by interviewees from different companies operating in various industries. For example an interviewee from Telecommunications Company expressed the insignificance role of the founder while reflected the role of CEO:

*There are a couple of characters who lead the management, and I think shape the reputation of the company.*

However, an interviewee from Food & Beverage Company expressed the importance of the founder in setting organizational values and principles, which shaped the culture and impacted corporate identity, stating that ‘*Very much, the founder of the company is sort of mentioned on fairly regular bases*’. Other interviewee from Food & Drug Company asserted that:

*I think it is absolutely incredibly important and as I said, [company name] is for 160 years ago, what was important to our founders is what is relevant today.*

Based on what have been set up by organization successors, interviewees agreed that currently, key figures, i.e. CEOs are taking the lead and driving the organization further.

Importantly, interviewees pointed to the role of Founder in setting organizational values, especially ethical values, and directing the organizational social behaviour, thus, developing an ethical and social responsible corporate culture. A very illustrative example was demonstrated by an interviewee from Automotive Company that is characterized by family type organization, with long history and highly developed reputation, known for its pioneer leadership in CSR and business ethics.

*..... [founder of the company] had a number of ideas and values, which went either from the product, he was one of the first people who, hundred years ago, identified way to get weight out of the product, he also brought in the ethics, and mass production about doing things in a very lean manner, at the same time he had a big emphasis on social improvement, so he was one of the people who built worker housing, had worker education, and very much encouraged people to believe that they should improve themselves from the point of view of education.*

## **Country of origin**

There are mixing views about the influential role of country of origin (COO) on corporate culture. Advocates of COO believe it has an impact on corporate image and stakeholders perceptions, as pointed out by an interviewee from broadcasting company:

*... around the world we are known for our news output, and I think that perception is that we are British and can be quite stuffy and dry and BBC world would compete globally. It is a challenge we would like to lose this impression that we kind of dry British.*

Though agreeing on this view, an interviewee from Automotive Company suggested that things change by time and due to competition as well as globalization which set the standards for operations, COC might become irrelevant:

*Generally speaking, the country of origin in the car industry is no longer so relevant....there are some historically and reputation ones that are very hard to shift....But things change....there is a brute industry and you have to have high quality standards to survive. We recognize that and we act in accordingly to improve the quality of our car products.*

The findings revealed some factors playing role in diminishing the impact of COO on culture, such as merger and acquisition, where companies are going for globalization and internationalization which makes the culture a mix of different nationalities as employees in such companies are subject to rotation from one country to another. This view is reflected by an interviewee from Food & Drug Company:

*The [company name] side is a British company and the [company name] side is a Germany company. But we don't consider ourselves to be one of the other at all. You will find that across our business we are extremely international. I think the nature of which countries they were is relevant.*

## **Subculture**

Most interviewees pointed to the existence of subcultures due to the large size and multinational nature of their organizations. This view is reflected by an interviewee from Healthcare Company:

*... within any organization of our size you would have smaller groups with slightly different cultures within different departments and different divisions.*

Particularly subcultures showed to be associated with merger and acquisition, as mentioned by an interviewee from Tobacco Company:

*This [subcultures] is partly because we have grown through acquisition; we have parts of the business which still maintain part of their previous identity..... But*

*then there is some important values for example like focusing on returns and delivery which overlay those Subcultures.*

Yet, subcultures were not considered a threat on the overriding culture and corporate identity due to the overarching values and objectives of the organization, strong leadership, as well as policies, principles and code of conduct which direct the behaviour of all employees. Moreover, some interviewees referred to the competencies and added value of having subcultures, as noted by an interviewee from Tobacco Company:

*I think, it is over time, as we moved away from UK focused company, it has brought enrichment to the culture and it reflects that kind of devolve and freedom and that there are pockets of doing things differently.*

Though, few interviewees mentioned that subcultures weren't found in their organizations.

### ▪ **Industry identity**

Industry identity is considered 'one of the biggest factors that has that influence' on corporate identity, as stated by a PR director who explained that organizations within different industries deal with various types of audiences and face different environmental, political challenges.

Most companies agreed on the role of competition in shaping the identity of their organizations. For example an interviewee from Tobacco Company, when asked about whether industry identity influences her corporate identity, mentioned that:

*Yes, we are in an industry which has a lot of issues and is under a lot of scrutiny and there is a lot of technical expertise and in house knowledge.*

Also, an interviewee from Telecommunications Company operating in IT industry pointed to environmental and competitive forces:

*... hugely competitors and environment and knowing other companies are doing which is important to the success of our company.*

On agreement, another interviewee from Automotive Company expressed that operating in an environmentally driven industry had shaped the attitudes of the corporation and reflected on more environmentally friendly products/cars:

*Our industry does shape us, because we are constantly being compared with our competitors....In our industry also, people's reaction to cars, particularly large cars, it is acceptable driving 3-tone vehicle just to go to school, so our industry and environment shapes us, our attitudes towards that issue shape us.*

Previously, this interviewee had noted that operating in the automotive industry had impacted corporate values, which were translated into research and development, and the use of



technology, thus, considering quality and safety to be paramount in car designing, as well as the impact on advertising which is very controlled in terms of what to advertise, i.e. no emphasis on speed, thus reflecting the overall impact of industry identity on corporate identity. Though, few interviewees believe that their companies adapt to the industry rather than considering the industry identity to be an influential element of corporate identity.

#### ▪ **Corporate structure**

Corporate structure discusses the role of organizational structure (centralized vs. decentralized) as well as brand structure (monolithic, endorsed and branded) in shaping corporate identity.

#### **Brand Structure**

Interviewees expressed different views in respect to the impact of brand structure on corporate identity. For example, an interviewee from Tobacco Company operating under a branded structure, when asked about whether brand structure influences his corporate identity, expressed that the manufacturer identity is not important, as consumers recognize only the brand name, however, it might be important for other stakeholder groups, i.e. investors.

*.....From a consumer point of view the answer is no. I really believe that from the consumer perspective, it is the brand is the consideration....From an internal point of view, whether from the investment community from that degree to the external world, through to other stakeholders, whether those stakeholders could be governments, authorities, whether they could be a whole number of others, yes I think this is very valuable*

Another case with Food & Beverage Company which have endorsed brand structure reflected on the need for making the brand more visible since the company's brand is visible across a range of products, while other products not, which causes debates in the company. The interviewee explained that the company as a brand has a name for quality among consumers, which have great impact corporate identity in a couple of ways:

*If people know it is a [company name] product they will be more likely to buy it. Because it will be a quality product, that the company is known among its consumers.*

#### **Organization Structure**

The findings revealed mixed results regarding their organizational structure and its influence on corporate identity. Though, organizational structure seemed to be related to brand structure. For example, and interviewee from Automotive Company operating with monolithic brand structure reflected on the importance of being centralized:

*We do believe that it is significant to have a centralized approach, trying to make sure that wherever you go in the market and particularly on the internet which is not defined by any physical borders, that was consumers see the same face of [company name]... that help to again bring the consistency.*

However, another interviewee from Food & Beverage Company with small company size and endorsed brand structure expressed that:

*I think decentralized works for us, and I find it very easy, it empowers people to be responsible, they are not waiting for someone telling them what to do....I found it very powerful, we all move quickly and to operate within a relatively free framework.*

## **Discussion**

Interviewees showed great awareness about the importance of corporate identity management, although each company reflected a unique understanding of the meaning of the term, i.e. corporate logo and other visual expressions, image, reputation, culture and values, and/or referring to holistic understating which encompasses external and internal aspects that express who is the organization and what it stands for.

Also, there was a general consensus among interviewees on the importance of visual expressions, communications, behaviour, and their sub elements, in shaping corporate identity through expressing corporate purpose, values and ethos which shape stakeholders perceptions. Culture deemed to be an influential element with general agreement on values, mission statement, history and founder of the organization to be key sub-elements, although companies which passed through merger and acquisitions didn't consider history and founder of the organizations to be relevant. Currently, interviewees recognize the role of CEO and other key figures in shaping their corporate identity. Interviewees revealed mixing views regarding the importance of country of origin, as things change due to changing economic conditions in the dynamic environment. Though interviewees affirmed the existence of sub-cultures, due to large size and geographic dispersion of MNC, they didn't consider it an influencing factor due to overarching values and clear objectives of their organizations.

Another important element of corporate identity is industry identity, where interviewees assured the impact of environmental and competitive forces on their corporate identity. Also, brand structure showed to be linked to organizational structure, as monolithic branded companies deemed to have centralized organizational structure, with key functions, i.e. marketing and communications, are controlled at the centre.

Interestingly, CSR seemed to be a common theme along the findings in which interviewees associated it with corporate identity elements. Most interviewees from various industries revealed that CSR is central to organizational values where sustainability as well as ethics i.e. honest and trust are pillars of organizational values which are embedded in cultures. Thus, organizations are seeking to develop a source of competitive advantage through their rewarding cultures which are characterized by a general attitude of encouragement towards community involvement. Also, the findings showed that CSR initiatives are aligned to overall mission/aim of corporations, and are embraced through corporate communications which reflect the inherent values of organizations encompassing sustainability and social responsibility that underpin the delivered messages.

Importantly, interviewees referred to CSR activities as a facet of corporate behaviour, and demonstrated that corporate behaviour, particularly social behaviour, as well as managers behaviour and employees behaviour; their interaction with each other and with the public, to be important elements in shaping corporate identity and representing the personality of the brand that underpins and supports the portrayal of the brand. In this respect, the majority of interviewees referred to the role of leadership in creating consistency throughout the organization which helps conveying the identity of the organization

## **Limitations and Further Research**

In terms of generalization, this study is based on qualitative interviews with 24 managers, thus further research should consider developing measures for each of the key elements and sub elements of corporate identity which could help businesses measure and manage their corporate identity. Melewar and Jenkins (2002) claimed that a definitive construct of the corporate identity and its measurements does not yet exist. Although there have been ‘much anecdotal literature’ and many case studies surrounding this area of study, to date surprisingly few research studies have empirically investigated the elements of corporate identity construct (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Simoes et al., 2005). Thus, developing an empirically tested corporate identity model could help senior managers formulate the appropriate corporate identity strategy for their companies.

In addition, more research could be directed to explore the relationship between corporate identity and CSR, and the way business ethics interfuses with corporate identity and CSR –

how corporate identity elements affect business commitment to ethical practices/ how elements of corporate identity interact with and contribute to business ethics.

In this respect, several authors argue that behaviour is integral to corporate identity (Balmer and Soenen 1999; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006; Melewar *et al.* 2005; van Riel and Balmer 1997). Corporate behaviour stems from corporate actions in their entirety (Hatch and Schultz 1997; Kiriakidou and Millward 2000), both those that are planned and congruent with corporate culture and those that occur spontaneously. Also it is argued that the concept of corporate identity can be seen as a ‘manifestation’ of ethical behaviour (Cornelius *et al.* 2007:132) since the firm’s ethical behaviours and stance are a part of an organization’s reality and uniqueness (Berrone *et al.* 2007). However, research on corporate identity has largely ignored the ethical dimensions of corporate identity (Fukukawa *et al.* 2007) which is believed to be a new, as well as highly salient, field of inquiry for scholarship in ethics and corporate social responsibility (Balmer *et al.* 2007).

## **Managerial Implications**

This study has reviewed and interrogated relevant literature in corporate identity in order to provide a systematic perspective on the topic and develop a conceptual framework of key elements of corporate identity. This has been verified through responses given by managers in MNC from various industries where managers can potentially gain greater insight into how to better manage corporate identity in practice, by considering all the important elements and its sub-components, which could have significant impact on improving customer loyalty and retention, attracting new investments, as well as motivation employees (Melewar and Karaosmaoglu, 2006)

Since corporate identity is transmitted to company stakeholders, who can then shape certain images that form the foundations of the company’s reputation, which is crucial for developing competitive advantage, thus, the development of a comprehensive corporate identity model whose elements are tested empirically would be helpful for managers in that respect since it covers all the elements of corporate identity.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to clarify the meaning of corporate identity and identify its key elements and sub-elements based on theory as well as practitioners’ experiences in UK multinationals, thus, develop a better understanding of the meaning of the corporate identity concept which

may become the basis upon which theory development in other related concepts can advance, i.e. corporate branding, corporate communications, corporate image and corporate reputation (Cornelissen and Elving 2003).

On agreement with the literature, the findings reflected corporate identity as a multidisciplinary concept with visual identity, communications, behaviour, culture (values, mission statement, history, founder of the organization) and industry identity as key elements, while showed mixed views on the importance of country of origin and corporate structure. Moreover, subcultures deemed to be insignificant in shaping corporate identity which contradicts with Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006). The findings could be a foundation for developing operational measures for each element of corporate identity that should be empirically examined as well as the relationships between the elements, which is considered important to researchers and managers who regard identity formation as critical to corporate success.

In addition, the findings revealed CSR to be a facet of corporate behaviour which shapes corporate identity and reflects who the organization is and what it stands for. This highlights the importance of investigating the relationship between corporate identity and CSR that affords a new important perspective on the area which is argued to be a distinct, if not important, strand of inquiry (Balmer *et al.* 2007; Gray and Balmer 2001).

Conceptualizing the relationship between CSR and corporate identity will enable organisations to engage more actively in CSR and ethics programmes to ensure that not only do they comply with regulations but also that their corporate identity is one which is favourable to its stakeholders and commercial environment (Cornelius *et al.* 2007).

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