



Conceptualizing corporate identity in a dynamic environment

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Abstract

Purpose – The study revisits the meaning of Corporate Identity (CI) in practice to identify its key dimensions and the interrelationships between them, and to provide insights on how to operationalize the construct.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on a comprehensive literature review and qualitative research consisting of 22 semi-structured interviews with senior managers from 11 UK-leading companies, and three in-depth interviews with corporate brand consultants who worked closely with these firms in cognate areas.

Findings – The study identifies six key dimensions of CI in UK industry: communication, visual identity, behavior, organizational culture, stakeholder management, and founder value-based leadership.

Research limitations/implications – The focus on UK leading companies limits the generalizability of the results. Further studies should be conducted in other sectors and country settings to examine the relationships identified in the current study.

Originality/value – This study identifies the salient dimensions of CI and, for the first time, the role of founder transformational leadership, employee identification and top management behavioral leadership as key dimensions and sub-dimensions of CI. The study also provides novel insights about the measurements for these dimensions. Additionally, this study introduces a model for the interrelationships between CI dimensions and their influence on corporate image, based on rigorous theoretical underpinnings, which lays the foundation for future empirical testing.

Keywords Corporate identity; Communication; Visual identity; Management behavior, Employee identification; Leadership

Introduction

Given the competitive intensity of today's business climate, superior performance is increasingly predicated on a firm's ability to manage critical intangible assets, including its corporate identity (CI) (Gambetti *et al.*, 2017). CI values, such as emotions, personality, behavior and communication, have become key elements of differentiation strategies which consequently impact the image and reputation, as well as the financial performance, of a company. Accordingly, CI has been widely recognized as an effective strategic instrument and as a means to achieve competitive advantage (Balmer, 2017).

Various conceptual research studies have addressed the theoretical foundation of CI, resulting in different taxonomies and schools of thought (e.g., Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Balmer, 1995, 2012; He and Balmer, 2007; He, 2012; Survatjjs and De Chernatony, 2016; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Although these taxonomies help structure CI, they also overlap obfuscating its boundaries. In addition, some frameworks are too dispersed and broad (i.e., Balmer, 1995; 2012) or lack theoretical rigor (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012; Kitchen *et al.*, 2013). Practically, these ambiguities make the operationalization of the CI construct a challenge, and lead to a lack of valid, reliable, and parsimonious corporate identity scales that could empirically reveal the construct's dimensions and its relationship to other concepts (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012).

The lack of consensus on what constitutes the construct of corporate identity is reflected also in the business world. While corporate identity is considered of major importance to CEOs (Balmer, 2017), many executives admit to having little knowledge of how to manage, control or even explicitly define the concept (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Melewar *et al.*, 2005). Given these problems, CI will remain underdeveloped until its key dimensions have been identified and operationalized. It is no longer sufficient to advise practitioners or researchers that the key to successful corporate brand distinctiveness is through corporate identity without providing information on what key dimensions actually constitute corporate identity; hence the rationale for this research. Specifically, we assess: (1) how UK organizational managers perceive corporate identity; (2) what are the key dimensions of corporate identity and their conceptualization; and (3) the nature of the relationship between corporate identity dimensions. Based on research outcomes, we then identify directions and challenges for management and research.

This study makes two contributions. It addresses a call to investigate further the concept of CI (Balmer, 2017) by exploring it from a managerial perspective, clarifying its salient dimensions and providing new conceptualization of them, which is important especially as most CI models are too abstract to be operationalized without clearer theoretical underpinning (Abratt and Mingione, 2017; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012). It also develops a model of the relationships between the key dimensions of CI.

First, for example, the findings refine previous corporate identity frameworks and taxonomies in six ways. 1) The visual identity dimension is categorized as corporate visual identity system (CVIS), CVIS applications and consistency of visual identity, where the latter has not been included in previous frameworks, though it is important. 2) Controlled communications is categorized as internal or external, which challenges previous studies that divide communications into corporate or marketing and management, since the latter division is not being used in companies. 3) The role of culture is explained as a dimension of corporate identity and values are highlighted as the only key sub-dimension, thus challenging previous studies (e.g., Melewar, 2003; Melewar *et al.*, 2018) which consider mission, philosophy, founder, country of origin, and history to be sub-dimensions of culture. 4) Mission statement, founder, history, and country of origin (COO) are identified as dimensions in their own right while history and COO are no longer considered to be key dimensions of CI for some companies. 5) The representational role of top management leadership behavior is addressed by focusing on the way managers act and speak as spokespersons and take part in public relations activities while addressing employee behavior in terms of employee identification, thus untangling the internal and external aspects of the organization, while providing another theoretical contribution on how to measure this sub-dimension and practical implications for managers on how to manage this sub-dimension. 6) The continuing role of founding principles and approach in solving complex problems is highlighted, which provides vision for employees. These provide a theoretical contribution and a means of measuring the founder dimension of the corporate identity construct using transformational leadership.

Second, drawing on an interdisciplinary and dynamic approach, a consolidated model is presented for understanding the relationship between the key dimensions of CI, underpinned by theories of corporate communication, leadership, organizational identification, organizational culture, and stakeholder management.

Literature Review

The concept of CI

During the past three decades, various corporate identity definitions have emerged, resulting in diverse views as to its meaning (Kitchen *et al.*, 2013). Originally, research focused upon definitions that considered visual cues indicating corporate visual identity (CVI). For example, Abratt (1989, p. 414) defines corporate identity as: *'an assembly of visual cues - physical and behavioral by which an audience could recognize the company and distinguish it from others'*. However, Balmer (2017) argues that corporate identity does not only involve these visible outward representations, as the meaning of CI needs to be extended to incorporate the set of intrinsic characteristics that give the company coherence. Balmer (2001, p. 248), for example, defines corporate identity as *'what an organization is'* referring to the inherent character underpinned by the corporate personality and experienced through everything an organization says, makes or does (i.e., total corporate communications). Similarly, Gray and Balmer (1998, p. 696) define CI as *'the unique characteristics of an organization'*, proposing its principle components to be company strategy, philosophy, organizational design, and culture. Hatch and Schultz (1997), from an organizational behavior perspective, also acknowledge organizational culture within which local meaning and organizational symbols are embedded. They refer 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'* (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, p. 357).

Other scholars such as Van Rekom (1997, p. 411), albeit from a marketing and communication perspective, refer to CI in relation to external audiences and regard this as central to the communications process in an organization. He adroitly defines CI 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 and Balmer (1997) acknowledge the roles of communication, behavior and symbolism as the means by which the company makes itself known to the world (Schmeltz, 2014).

Previous studies (Melewar, 2003; Melewar *et al.*, 2005; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006) broaden the meaning of CI to include a mix of elements that make an organization unique. Using a multidisciplinary approach, they conceptualize CI as a hierarchical construct. The

original specification of an organization's CI by Melewar (2003) includes all means of communication, culture, business mission, goals, strategies, organizational structure, degree of centralization of control, products or services, markets and industries served, offices and retail outlets. Recently, Nguyen *et al.* (2016) explored the concept of CI in the Chinese context, employing Melewar and Karaosmanoglu's (2006) taxonomy. They identified new elements pertaining to name, status, organizational culture, self-expression, affiliation/network, innovation, strategy and visual design, which are all considered relevant to companies operating in China. Melewar's (2003) taxonomy is considered one of the most comprehensive CI models and the closest attempt to operationalize CI as it provides clear, concise and unambiguous guidance for defining the construct, specifying its domain and laying the foundation for subsequent scaling (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003).

Similarly, from a multidisciplinary approach, Simões *et al.* (2005) developed a CI scale that considered only the internally controlled perspective of CI and measured three internal elements of CI - consistent image implementation, mission dissemination and visual identity implementation. Recently, a stream of work in CI focused on the umbrella notion of corporate marketing and considered related concepts, including corporate strategy (He and Balmer, 2013), corporate brand identity (Coleman *et al.*, 2015), corporate heritage (Burghausen and Balmer, 2015), corporate reputation (Harvey *et al.*, 2017), with a call for more research to explore the relationship between CI and other corporate marketing concepts (Balmer, 2017; He and Balmer, 2013).

The issue about the CI definitions is that they overlap with corporate image and corporate brand. Corporate identity is what the organization 'is', for example, its intrinsic characteristics or 'traits' (e.g. strategy, culture, core competencies) that give the organization its specificity, stability and coherence (Cornelissen and Elving, 2003: 115), albeit transmitted through formal and informal communication channels and visual cues by which an audience can recognize the company and distinguish it from others (Kitchen *et al.*, 2013). CI takes an internal/corporate perspective in that it represents what is provided by a company, while image has an external perspective since it refers to the way in which publics perceive an organization (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, 2002).

Image can thus be considered as 'perceived identity', while reputation is regarded as the overall image developed as stakeholders receive more information over time about a

Research Methods

The use of qualitative methods is appropriate for studying complex processes (Eisenhardt, 1989). Using secondary data and multiple interviews also helps develop rich insights and provides the basis for greater transferability of the findings to other contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989). Due to the vague definition of CI and its uncertain linkage to related concepts, we adopt a qualitative and inductive approach and employ semi-structured interviews as the main sources of data for the present study, because asking open-ended questions is appropriate for eliciting opinion and attitude data from informants (He, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

To achieve the study's research objective, the authors conducted 20 interviews with a focus on marketing and communication managers; members of the corporate brand team responsible for CI management; corporate affairs; CSR managers, since CSR is believed to be a manifestation of CI; and general managers, since CI issues are viewed as sources of competitive advantage. Thus, CI should be a focus of senior management and positioned at the center of an organization's strategy formation (Balmer, 2017; He and Balmer, 2013). Also, three in-depth interviews were conducted with corporate brand consultants who worked closely with these firms in cognate areas (Table 1). These data offer a new empirical insight into the topic which assisted the researchers to develop a deeper understanding and helped "the research (Palmer and Gallagher, 2007; Yin, 1984), uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of issues and to secure vivid, accurate inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience" (Foroudi *et al.*, 2017, p. 233). Two interviewees from each company were selected, based on the logic of purposeful sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and interviewed for between 60 and 90 minutes while being recorded

<<<Insert Table 1>>>

A broad cross-section of companies was chosen for this research (Table 1), in line with Melewar and Karaosmanoglu's (2006, p. 850) suggestion, because part of the investigation aimed to analyze whether the choice of components and identity were related to the industry in which the company operates or any other company-specific influence. Selected companies were identified based on the following criteria (i) have global reach in order to have established CI and communication functions/departments responsible for managing it since large companies as first-adopters and trendsetters when it comes to corporate communication

(Arvidsson, 2010); (ii) have UK headquarters in order to facilitate the face-to-face interviewing process; and (iii) are among market leaders in their respective industries and have high repute corporate brands, e.g., rank high in reputation surveys (Global Fortune 500, Manager Magazine, TIME, 2018).

Questions focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature and definition of CI, elements of CI mix, and supportive factors in the management of the CI. The interview protocol was based on the research objectives and main theme of the research (explore the meaning of CI, identify the key dimensions and sub-dimensions of CI, and relationships between the dimensions). The interview questions were pilot-tested with four participants including two academics (expert in the field of CI, and corporate branding), one marketing manager and one PR consultant in order to assess the suitability and the appropriateness of the interview questions (Maxwell, 2005).

Based on the pilot test some modifications were made to the interview questions (e.g. some questions were deleted and others were added) to produce the final version of the interview protocol (See Appendix B). The interviews started with broad 'grand tour' questions that enabled informants to present responses in their own terms. Questions were interspersed with prompts to gain greater insight into specifics, i.e. details of particular programs and topics and questions were adjusted as needed. Following the interviews, further information provided by the informants or sourced by the authors was examined. Drawing on secondary data (such as corporate aims, vision, mission, values, etc.) and conducting more than one interview with each company helped develop rich insights and provided the basis for greater transferability of the findings to other contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The process of the data analysis/synthesis was iterative and corroborative in nature (Foroudi *et al.*, 2017). We compared data, emerging theory, and relevant literature to develop a deeper understanding of the key elements of CI and the dynamics of the relationship between them. Our initial approach was a first-order analysis (Van Maanen, 1979) involving a thorough coding of the interview and meeting transcripts (Van Maanen, 1979). We used Nvivo 9, a computer-based qualitative software (CAQDAS) for data administration, data storage, and retrieval. NVivo is designed to aid in coding and analyzing text throughout the entire process. The first-order concepts helped unveil key elements of the informants' meaning systems but not the deeper patterns or relationships in the data. To discern themes that might constitute

the basis for developing the relationships between the elements of CI, we used a more structured second-order analysis to view the data at a higher level of theoretical abstraction (Clark *et al.*, 2010) (Table 2).

We used constant comparison techniques and the software program to assist in discerning second-order themes that subsumed the first-order concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In addition, the second-order themes were assembled into aggregate dimensions. This process involved the relatively straightforward task of examining the relationships among first-order concepts and second-order themes that could be distilled into a set of more simplified, complementary groupings. Ultimately, themes were consolidated into more general dimensions of analysis that captured the overarching concepts relevant to CI and the relationships between its dimensions. Lastly, we conducted 'member checks' with our informants to gain confidence that the emergent analytical framework was sensible to, and was affirmed by, those living the so-called 'successful CI management'.

<<<Insert Table 2>>>

Also, several methods were incorporated to improve research quality (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In particular, the researchers independently provided interpretations of the findings and, following multiple interviews, respondents had the opportunity to provide feedback on initial findings, all of which reinforced outcome reliability. In addition, only one researcher conducted all the interviews, which reduced the potential for bias.

Findings and discussions

Definition of corporate identity

The findings revealed three different perspectives related to the meaning of CI, which appear to result from variations in the operations and industries of companies involved in the research, as reported by PR, corporate brand and strategy consultants in follow-up interviews. Firstly, an *external* perspective, where many interviewees acknowledged CI as the external representation of the organization to its various stakeholders, mainly customers. This included visual expression through corporate logos, as well as other elements such as use of

color, staff uniforms, etc. This view is reflected by a marketing communication director 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 is used if you want to summarize it [organization] in one thing... that is the core of our CI.

Also, from the same perspective, a few interviewees associated CI with corporate image, while others associated it with reputation as stated by a creative services manager from a healthcare company: *'Our corporate identity is the overall perception that any of our stakeholders have, our patients, or surgeons, government body, etc.'* Although the importance of corporate visual expressions, and their impact on image formation has been acknowledged, this view was critiqued by Balmer and Greyser (2003) who showed that some practitioners focused on the visual aspects of identity to the neglect of other factors related to organizational intrinsic value. Secondly, some interviewees perceived CI from an *internal* perspective considering corporate values, culture, and behavior when defining organizational identity.

[CI] is the combination of our values and culture that defines the way this organization makes decisions and positions itself. (Head of Mass Market, Multinational Bank).

Thirdly, a few interviewees offered a more *holistic* meaning for CI, for example: *'The way of doing things'* (Marketing Communication Manager, IT company), and *'it [CI] is about the clarity about what the business stands for'* (General Manager, Food and Beverage company). In this sense, interviewees pointed to internal aspects of the organization as well as the visual expressions and communications used to convey their CI, which all made their organization (in their view) unique and differentiated from others. Another interviewee reported:

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 general, and how we present ourselves. (Marketing Communication Manager, IT company)

Thus, CI should be incorporated into internal and external organizational elements, whether visible or not visible to stakeholders, based on academic and management perspectives (Survatjris and De Chernatony, 2016). Based on this viewpoint, and academic perspective, CI

needs to be integrated with different aspects of the organization; whether tangible or intangible (Lambert, 1989; Melewar et al., 2005; Survatjis and De Chernatony, 2016). Accordingly, CI could be depicted as an ‘iceberg’ with two equal levels, above and below the surface (Lambert, 1989), which reflects current scholarly opinion and, more importantly, supports the multidisciplinary perspective applied in this study.

Dimensions of CI

The following section discusses emergent dimensions which practitioners noted when developing and/or managing their organizations’ corporate identity and their constituent themes, while acknowledging their interactivity. Generally, there was an agreement among almost all managers on the salience of six key dimensions which, from their perspective, constituted the construct. These dimensions were: communication (including internal, external and consistency of message), VI (including CVIS, CVIS applications, and consistency of VI), behavior (including top management behavioral leadership, employee identification, and corporate social behavior), culture (including organizational values as a core sub-dimension), stakeholder management (including mission statement), and founder (including transformational leadership). Other dimensions, which were noted by only a few interviewees, were history, COO, and brand structure (See Table 2).

Communication

A strong consensus existed among the interviewees that corporate communication directed towards different stakeholders was an important CI dimension. Almost all the interviewees divided communication functions and activities into internal (mainly directed to employees) and external (mainly directed to customers, the public and government).

In terms of external communication, interviewees used phrases such as “walk the talk” and “actions speak louder than words” to describe expectations that corporate behavior should match communications. That is, the interviewees generally acknowledged that firms should develop accurate advertising, annual financial statements, and so forth. Thus, managers should be conscious of any differences between the content of communication intended for employees and directed to customers and the actual behavior of the company (Tran *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, today, misrepresentation can be met with harsh criticism, extensive publicity, and sometimes even legal penalties (Karaosmanoglu *et al.*, 2016).

signage, even to the sort of furniture and posters. We try to have a relatively uniform approach to how we present ourselves whenever we are in the world. (Corporate Communication Manager, Tobacco company)

Behavior

Three behavioral factors appeared to be key elements of CI: top managers' behavior via their representation and symbolic leadership, employee behavior via their identification with organization values, and corporate social behavior towards different stakeholders including the environment and community. Interviewees emphasized the importance of senior management leadership by defining corporate values and communicating goals and vision, which in turn may motivate employees and influence their attitudes and behavior.

I do believe that organizations take their lead from the senior executives in each of the locations in which they operate. And, therefore, if the tonality of executives' behavior or style is one which is relatively congruent to our values, then I believe it is very quickly spread out in the organization. (Corporate Communication Manager, Tobacco company)

Thus, top management could create an environment in which employees can identify with their organizations and exemplify values through behavior. For example, the findings revealed the importance of senior management in enacting the strategic organizational core and emphasizing corporate social activities; these are crucial to company survival and growth.

We have a CSR statement in which the CEO said that we have got a double project which is both economic - so making a profitable business - and also social - having a sustainable business and behaving responsibly towards our people, towards our environment, towards our community in which we are operating. (CSR Manager, Food and Beverage company)

In this statement, the word 'said' signs the importance of the use of language by managers to justify organization engagement in CSR. It shows that top management attempt to engage regularly in symbolic representational leadership in through actions and words (Balmer, 2017; Schmeltz, 2014), which influences employee identification and how they interpret and respond to corporate social initiatives (Sharma, 2000) – as shown in Figure 1 reflecting the relationship between top management behavioral leadership and employee identification.

objectives (Balmer, 2017; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017). This is shown in Figure 1, as reflected in the relationship between employee identification and corporate social behavior.

Another salient element of CI was corporate social behavior (towards employees, consumers, communities in which organizations operate, the world at large) which is considered a facet of corporate behavior. Corporate responsible behavior and operations were believed to reinforce CI and reflect the personality of the corporation.

The behavior is incredibly important because it is only through behaviors that people can trust the company, have a true relationship with it and what it represents.... the way that we behave and how we treat people is absolutely inherent in our corporate identity. (Citizenship Manager, Food and Beverage company)

This CSR associations were important for influencing consumers' opinion of a company and thus may impact corporate image (Brown and Dacin, 1997), as shown in Figure 1.

Culture

In general, interviewees agreed on the relevance of culture to CI. Interviewees described culture as organizationally shared values, beliefs, and behavior that stem from CI and shape how firms conduct their business. In this sense, culture was considered fundamental and distinctive in relation to organizational character (De Roeck *et al.*, 2013; De Roeck and Maon, 2016; Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Most interviewees were able to define the characteristics of their specific corporate culture. For example, a corporate communication manager from a Tobacco company stated what the culture represented: *"I would say: inherent work hard, play hard culture. There is a lot of autonomy and independence"*. This is an important finding as it reflects that every organization has a uniform culture with universal belief and values (Martin, 2002). Accordingly, corporate culture could give personnel a structure for their responses to the context and therefore culture may be seen as offering a guide to behavior (Sørensen, 2002). This also provides support to the integration paradigm, as explained below. Almost all interviewees claimed the existence of dominant cultures in their organizations and indicated that employees shared a common set of assumptions, values, and beliefs which presented them with a cognitive 'schema' or 'logic' that aids responsiveness in modalities consistent with organizational values (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Sørensen, 2002).

For long-established companies, the findings indicated that corporate culture has become ‘an odyssey’ in the organization’s history and origins. That is, the views, ideas, and values of the founder tend to be embedded in corporate culture and lived by employees even decades later as testified below:

[Founder name] had a number of ideas and values; he was one of the first people who, a hundred years ago, emphasized social improvement, he built worker housing, and very much encouraged people to believe that they should improve themselves from the point of view of education.... I think it is reflected in the culture of the organization today. (Sustainability Manager, Automotive company)

In this example, the founder of the company, through his value-based leadership and role as a ‘cultural architect’ (Hillestad *et al.*, 2010), influenced and formed a culture emphasizing social responsibility in general, and environmental awareness in particular, by taking a leading position in the development of environmentally friendly cars in the automotive industry, (of course the term ‘environmentally friendly’ has to be seen in what was acceptable at that time). This position supports our claim that the founder has a direct influence on corporate social behavior and indirect impact through cultural values, as shown in Figure 1. This also reinforces the role of leaders as crucial moral inculcators, particularly due to their main impact on corporate culture (Kakabadse *et al.*, 2005).

The findings also reveal that the unique characteristics of value-based founders, who symbolize messages that contain numerous references to moral justifications, provide meaning and stimulate followers, thereby helping them identify with corporate goals, including socially responsible outcomes (Christensen *et al.*, 2014; Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2017). This is show in Figure 1 representing the impact of founder on employee identification.

History

For the majority of companies (7 out of 10), interviewees did not acknowledge history as a key element of culture. One reason was due to mergers and acquisitions (M&A) which had reduced the impact of history on overall CI.

[Company name] has grown through a series of mergers and acquisitions of businesses in different countries. So, it does not have the same sense of a shared identity and a shared history and a shared culture. (Marketing Communication Manager, IT company)

Further, an interviewee (General Manager, Food and Beverage company) denied the importance of history to CI, since the connection between the characteristics of CI and history could run the risk of stagnation. For few interviewees, CI was tightly connected to corporate history, particularly those companies characterized by longevity and living up to their values and promises over time, that viewed history from both retrospective and forward-looking perspectives. Such companies regarded history as a differentiating attribute and heritage which helped make the company relevant to the present, and prospectively, the future. Besides, these interviewees considered their corporate history a source of pride which created a sense of belonging and shared values. This in turn affected employees' behavior (commitment, loyalty and identification), and built trust, favorable image and strong reputation over time. This view was expressed by an interviewee from a Food and Drug Company:

[Company name] is for 160 years and that is very much part of its heritage. That heritage is an important thing because we are a health and beauty company which gets passed on from mother to daughter. That longevity helps to shape how people feel about the brand. So there is much more a sense of belonging to [company name]. (Corporate, PR and Communications Director, Food and Drug company)

This is evidence of the fact that stakeholders' perceptions of organizations are formed over long periods of time, so the history of organizational activities (reflected in products, communication, behavior, and others) is the key to the foundation of identity, which affects image and has a lasting impact on reputation (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009, 2013). This also supports, in Figure 1, the impact of history on image. For such companies, history was also related to another element of CI, the founder of the company, as explained earlier.

Country of Origin

A few interviewees explained that customers are more likely to evaluate positively the products that originate from, or are produced in, nations that have a favorable image. Also, consumers attached stereotypes and reputation to products of specific countries. For example,

Generally, the visual organization reflects the choice of brand structure with monolithic ones displaying a consistent visual style and with the name identifying the whole organization. Visual design makes an important contribution to the image of an organization; thus design should become an integral part of its CI management, playing a particular role in the configuration of the interface between the organization and its public (Van den Bosch et al., 2006a, b; Vilar, 2018). This supports the relationship between VI, brand structure and corporate image, as shown in Figure 1. It also demands an effort to implement a coherent visual identity system that has real meaning for its internal and external publics – although it is fundamentally important for the organization to be identified by its symbols, it is also crucial for it to be recognizable in them (Vilar, 2018).

Other interviewees, representing companies with endorsed and branded structure, felt it was not important for CI, since consumers were unaware of the manufacturing company behind the brands and that brand identity was the main focus of consumers.

[Company name] brand is so strong, it has been now for 160 years. The fact that we are a part of [mother company name] group is, I think, much more significant for a limited number of stakeholders such as perhaps investors, analysts, people in government, as opposed to our customers. (Corporate, PR and Communications Director, Food and Drug company)

This comment typically reflects the characteristics of endorsed CI structure, where the parent company remains visible, though the subsidiary company is a strong brand that keeps its own style (Ind, 1997). Similarly, an interviewee from a tobacco company with a brand structure indicated the insignificance of brand structure.

For us, we are like Unilever or P&G in the sense that we sell brands as a manufacturer. We are [company name], and so our logos always appear in the right-hand side in the top of every one of our packs, the [company name] logo, which is simply a way we enforce our identity externally. But, I don't expect most of our consumers would notice that, even though the logo is on there. (Corporate Communication Manager, Tobacco company)

Figure 1 summarizes the interrelationship between CI dimensions and their components.

<<<Insert Figure 1>>>

As shown in Figure 1, organizational symbolism, such as the logo and corporate name, emphasize specific identity attributes and have the potential to help organizations express their characteristics and communicate the embodiment of a corporation, including its values, standards and distinctiveness to different stakeholders which influences corporate image (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014; 2017). Collectively, the corporate logo, name, typeface, architecture, and other elements noted by some interviewees (e.g. employees' uniform) were typically considered components of the firm's visual identity, over the long term, and with the consistent presence, the firm's visual identity is argued to affect the public's perception of the firm (Melewar *et al.*, 2018). External communication is considered of particular importance as it forms the nexus between an organization's CI and the desirable strategic objective of acquiring a favorable corporate image (Balmer and Gray, 2000).

Also, internal communication is considered to be as important as external communication as it is used to create an understanding of corporate goals and values, and to motivate employee identification, which can lead to organizational adoption of CSR by encouraging employees to participate in volunteer activities and other CSR programmes (Uusi-Rauva and Nurkka, 2010). Besides, top management representational behavioral leadership could foster a sense of identity and commitment to corporate goals and aspirations, which drives employee identification, and in turn influences employee volunteering engagement in corporate social behavior (Kitchen *et al.*, 2013). Relatedly, corporate social behavior is driven by the mission statement which encompasses corporate values and principle, offers guidance, and assists organizational members to make decisions and take actions – particularly about corporate social behavior (Atakan and Eker, 2007). Culture also may have a more profound effect on behavior, as it offers a guide to behavior, and values have a key role to play in the formation of culture and are considered significant as they influence an organization's ability to demonstrate social responsibility and deal effectively with stakeholders (Linnenluecke and Griffiths, 2010). Over time, this becomes associated with history, which has a significant influence on corporate image. Another element which affects organizational culture is employee identification and corporate social behavior of the founder. For many companies, the founders are referred to as value-based leaders who set the organizational vision and shape CI through their continuing impact on organizational culture, influence the value

systems and aspirations of the individual members of the organization, thereby helping them identify with corporate goals, including social initiatives (Hillestad *et al.*, 2010).

Whilst the interrelationships between CI dimensions highlight how dimensions synergistically 'feed' off one other, it is important that managing CI should consider the adverse effect of correlated dimensions. The reason being a neglected CI dimension could act as a millstone and burden other dimensions.

Conclusion and Implications

The main contribution of this study lies in its exploration of the CI concept and explication of the interrelationship between its dimensions. First, we contribute to the CI literature by identifying its key dimensions and their components from the practitioners' perspective supported by a comprehensive review of scholars' views. The findings of this study advance knowledge on the conceptualization of CI elements, an as yet underemphasized area (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012). Based on the findings, this study develops a framework for the interrelationship between CI dimensions and offers suggestions to measure the main concepts of the framework, which will allow subsequent examination of the relationships between CI and other corporate marketing concepts. The framework also highlights potential linkages to acknowledged areas/theories (i.e. corporate communication, leadership, organization identification, organizational culture and stakeholder management), which invites CI researchers to expand the scope of existing CI dimensions to additional disciplines and to adapt their operationalization to account for this broader scope. This study extends the contribution of previous studies (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Melewar, 2003; Melewar *et al.*, 2018; etc.) that recommend academics to understand the significance of corporate identity and how it can build corporate image and reputation.

In particular, this study reinforces the idea that communication should be considered a key dimension of CI (Balmer, 2017; Gambetti *et al.*, 2017), and suggests that it includes internal, external, WOM communication and consistency among media and messages. The findings also challenge previous studies which divide communication into marketing, management and organizational (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Melewar *et al.*, 2018). By considering internal communication, and its role in enhancing employees' identification and engagement in social behavior, this study answers the call from the literature for viewing

employee communication through a stakeholder lens (Bravo *et al.*, 2012; Du *et al.*, 2015). Informed by the findings and discussion, this study conceptualizes communication in terms of its breadth and consistency among media and messages, and the extent to which the company manages WOM communication.

Second, this study contends that VI is one of the key dimensions of CI which provides an organization with visibility and recognizability, symbolizes an organization for external stakeholders, and hence contributes to its image and reputation (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014; Bravo *et al.*, 2016, 2017). Based on the findings, VI includes CVIS, applications of CVIS and consistency among visual representations. This extends current CI frameworks and taxonomies (e.g., Melewar, 2003; Melewar *et al.*, 2018) by including consistency as a sub-dimension of VI. Also, the findings provide insights on how to measure this dimension by conceptualizing VI from both the design and operational levels, where the former emphasizes the functionality and effectiveness of specific elements of visual identity, considering such visual expressions as a means to an end. Elements of CVI design include (1) CVIS (e.g. logo/symbol, name, slogan, color, typography) (Melewar and Saunders, 2000; Foroudi *et al.*, 2014) and (2) applications of the CVIS, such as corporate aesthetics (e.g. stationery, promotional literature) and exterior and interior design of company buildings (e.g., headquarters, plants, retail stores, offices) (Van den Boshe *et al.*, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). From the operational level, CVI focuses on translating a desired CI into a consistent visual self-presentation (Melewar and Saunders, 2000; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006b, p. 873). This is based on the development of CVI guidelines and the way guidelines are applied, resulting in a more or less consistent visual expression of the organization.

Third, this study demonstrates that corporate social behavior, top management behavioral leadership and employee identification are components of behavior, which is a key dimension of CI. Further, we extend the CI literature on management behavior by documenting the significant representational role of CEOs and top managers which conveys CI. Through interview analysis, for the first time, this study advances the measurement of management behavior sub-dimension by identifying links to the behavioral school of leadership (Stogdill, 1963) which emphasizes the degree to which managers (as leaders) act as the spokespersons for the organization; they speak as representatives of the organization; they represent the organization at meetings and/or publicize its activities (Abdul Hamid *et al.*, 2012; Stogdill, 1963). Thus, the salience of this representational leadership sub-dimension spans the CI and

0 leadership literature. Also, we seek to bridge the schism between the organizational identity
1 and CI literature. We argue that employee identification with an organization constitutes a
2 strong conceptual foundation and measure for employee behavior (Kitchen *et al.*, 2013; Van
3 Riel and Fombrun, 2007). This study suggests that future researchers should use our model
4 and item measurement to test and validate their data. The findings also explains the impact of
5 employee behavior, as an element of CI, on extra-role behavior, e.g. voluntary and social
6 behavior (Balmer, 2017; Johnson and Ashforth, 2008; Newman *et al.*, 2016). This position
7 reinforces the view that corporate social initiatives can be largely understood from employee
8 perspectives (De Roeck and Maon, 2016; Piehler *et al.*, 2016).

9 Fourth, the findings reveal that culture is a main dimension of CI, importantly, organizational
0 values are the main component of culture, where companies have overarching values and
1 predominant cultures. This challenges current studies (e.g., Melewar, 2003; Melewar and
2 Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Melewar *et al.*, 2018) which consider mission, philosophy, founder,
3 country of origin, and history as sub-dimensions of culture, yet hindering the measurement of
4 the CI construct. Based on the findings, this study suggests future research to focus on item
5 measurement using the Competing Values Framework (CVF) (Cameron, 2008; Deshpandé
6 and Farley, 1999, 2004), given that values are considered central to understanding an
7 organization's culture and seen as a reliable and assessable representation of organizational
8 culture (Schmeltz, 2014; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 2015).

9 Further, we argue that stakeholder management via mission dissemination among employees
0 is an important dimension of CI in its own right, since it may contribute to the reinforcement
1 of consistent behavior (Kitchen *et al.*, 2013), internally diffuse a sense of purpose and
2 singularity of the company and motivate employees' identification and commitment to
3 organizational goals (Atakan and Eker, 2007; Linnenluecke and Griffiths, 2010). The
4 founder is another dimension of CI which is cited in CI models (Melewar and
5 Karaosmanoglu, 2006), and has an influence on corporate behavior through organizational
6 culture and employee identification with organizational values (Schmeltz, 2014; Vlachos *et*
7 *al.*, 2013). However, the extant literature has paid insufficient attention to conceptualize this
8 element. The findings of this study, for the first time, advance CI literature by emphasizing
9 the continuing role of a value-based founder and proposing transformational leadership
0 (Bass, 1990; Christensen *et al.*, 2014) as a potential measure for this dimension.

literature of marketing communications and branding, visual/graphic design, employee identification and leadership.

Managerial Implications

This research will help managers in developing and managing CI. Based on our findings, the nature of CI suggests that CI should, in formal terms, be accorded a higher profile in terms of an organization's strategic deliberations and confirms its central role in the creation of corporate image. Also, the nature of the relationship between CI dimensions would suggest that the CI should be considered, managed, and monitored in more explicit and on-going terms than it is within many contemporary organizations.

Prior to developing and managing CI, managers must be aware of the dimensions required to measure the construct. This study offers a clear guidance as to what comprises CI. The dimensionality of the framework (Figure 1) gives managers the conceptual mechanism to depict CI, while the findings, based on best practices, offer them particular activities to construct and manage their initial ideas concerning each dimension. Although many components considered in the CI framework may already be managed by a business, this research stresses the need for their integration and consistency. For example, managers need to consider the way the font, logo and other visual identity tools are applied, and the consistency and overall visual presentation in their business. A deeper view of visual aspects should also be adopted. Indeed, visual aspects need to be assigned a meaning. In addition, symbols need to 'personify' the company's values.

CI has been considered to be synonymous with visual identity alone but we have shown that this is an oversimplification. Managers need to consider several issues, such as whether they use adequate channels of communication (including internal, external and WOM) to their full potential. In fact, CI already exists, whether or not there is an active and deliberate effort to develop it. However, in order to gain a competitive advantage, corporations should have clear guidelines about the corporate image they desire to project and how it can be achieved. Identity emerges from a company's capacity to understand and manage internal and external reality. It would be false to assume that there is a one-way linear link between CI and corporate image. Also, it is necessary to integrate uncontrolled communications, particularly WOM, in the CI construct. This helps understand the receiver perspective which is important

in order to reveal how organizational cues are gathered and interpreted. Also, it allows the company to respond accordingly.

Managers need to know whether they are focusing adequately on their employees' behavior, the level of employee identification they wish to achieve, and what human resource initiatives they have in place to enhance employee identification and support their desired CI. Guided by the research framework, it is crucial that CI and marketing managers build cross functional ties and strong working relationships with their human resource colleagues to build initiatives that encourage employees to have a strong sense of belong to their organization, feel strong ties, and are glad to be part of their companies.

CI must be cohesive and employees, who are important players in the CI manifestation, should be aware of relevant organizational values (norms about what is important, how to behave and appropriate attitudes), and agree on the mission. This could be achieved by companies having a well-defined mission, and senior managers regularly communicating and sharing the mission and discussing the values with employees. They need to achieve general agreement on the mission, identification with values and commitment to achieve organizational goals, including corporate social initiatives towards the society and different stakeholder groups. Also, organizational values should be conveyed to attain consistent behaviors among employees, accordingly managers should be aware of the type of organization culture in place to support their CI. Top managers and CEOs should be mindful of the behavioral leadership which affects employees' identification and external image, by acting as spokespersons, publicizing the activities of the organization and representing the organization in internal and external meetings.

It is important that managers acknowledge, in the context of driving corporate image, that each dimension makes a significant contribution to making CI manifest. This implies more informed CI managers will adopt a holistic approach due to the concept's synergistic properties, which needs to carefully orchestrate all dimensions to drive corporate image. This calls for managers to plan for the sum and not just the parts when building CI. This should become the intended routine in every organization. In so doing a strong internal and external image is developed. Furthermore, consistent behaviors among employees are likely to occur, aligning with the company's mission and values.

Limitations and Future study

Despite its relevance for advancing understanding of the meaning and elements of CI, we acknowledge that our research is not without limitations. Although qualitative, inductive research offers the potential to generate rich theoretical insights, it depends heavily on judgment and interpretation. In developing our framework, we emphasized that mission statement was considered a key element of CI which is critical in stakeholder management and legitimizing corporate social initiatives in corporate culture and providing a point of reference for decision-making which governs corporate and employees' behavior. An alternative possibility is that mission statement was primarily an image management tool used to influence stakeholders.

Also, the data of the present study came from only large and reputable companies, which have a unique CI. Although the findings can be transferred to other contexts with similar features, caution should be taken when generalizing the findings. Further, there are limitations for face-to-face interviews to elicit informants' attitudes and evaluations, especially when they are asked evaluative questions on fundamental and strategic organizational issues, such as identity. This opens promising avenues for future research.

This study suggest that managers should try to understand the company's CI as a key theoretical construct which is mainly understood as a set of managerial tools since companies are not only influenced by the actions of the management but are shaped also by surrounding social and cultural environment. This is highly relevant especially in the contemporary world, with the presence of social media which, while it can be influenced by corporate communications, is ultimately out of the organization's control. Future study could further our understanding of the concept of 'word of mouth' and 'interpersonal uncontrolled corporate communication in relation to corporate identity management. This study can be used as a guideline for communication, brand, and identity managers to develop and/or re-develop favorable CI and corporate image.

Further research is needed to test the framework, and empirically examine the proposed relationships between CI elements. Despite the considerable theoretical support found for each individual proposition, the proposed relationships have not been tested in the same study. Thus, further research is necessary to inform whether these theories together provide a more complete explanation for CI than either theory does on its own. Also, doing so would

reveal the construct's dimensionality and help assess the construct's influence on other corporate-marketing concepts, for example reputation and financial performance.

Qualitative Market Research

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Table 1: Job Titles of Interviewees and Industrial Sectors

Job Title	Nature of Business	Number of Interviewees	Interview approx. length
Creative Services (Brand Identity) Manager for Sales and Marketing Team for Europe, Middle East, Africa and India	Healthcare	1	90min.
Marketing Communications Manager/Director	IT	1	60mins.
	Automotive	1	60mins.
Corporate, PR & Communications Director	Food & Drug	1	60mins.
Corporate Communications Manager	Tobacco	1	60mins.
	Food & Drug	1	70mins.
Head of Communications, Digital Media and Strategy	Broadcasting	1	45mins.
General Manager	Food & Beverage	1	60mins.
Head of Mass Market	Bank	1	60mins.
Group Corporate Relations Manager and Commercial Integrity	Tobacco	1	70mins.
Director of Corporate Affairs	Broadcasting	1	60mins.
Senior Public Affairs Manager	Food & Beverage	1	90mins.
Group Head CSR Communication Manager	Food & Drug	1	60mins.
Head of CSR/ CSR Director/ CSR Manager	Healthcare	1	60mins.
	Food & Beverage	1	60mins.
	IT	1	60mins.
Associate Director, Sustainability	Bank	1	60mins.
Sustainability Manager, Europe	Automotive	1	60mins.
Citizenship Manager	Food & Beverage	1	60mins.
Public Relations/Corporate Branding/Strategy Consultant	Advertising and Branding Agencies	3	90mins.

Table 2: Coding Table

First order codes	Second order themes	Aggregate/overarching dimensions	
Breadth of communication tools used	Internal communication	Communication	
Communicate identity to customers and external stakeholders	External communication		
Communicating mission and values to employees	WOM communication		
Two-way dialogue and employee engagement			
Push and pull systems			
Growth of digital media			
Difficulty of control			
Two-way dialogue and customer engagement			
Consistency in communication and behavior			
Corporate logo, name, slogan, color, typeface	Corporate visual identity system		
Stationary, Architecture and interior design	Application of corporate visual identity systems		
Brand recognition	Consistency		
Indication of the value and character			
Standardization using formal guidelines			
Organization spokesperson	Top management behavioral leadership		Behavior
Representation at meetings.	Employee identification		
Speeches to reinforce corporate goals	Corporate social behavior		
Sense of pride and belonging to the company			
Brand messages reinforce pride			
Willingness to collaborate in CSR practices			
Corporate behavior reflects social values			
Community involvement			
Quality of products.			
CSR integral part of CI			
Principles and beliefs	Organizational values	Culture	
Glue that holds the organization together			
Direct employees' behavior			
Frame the way that organizations operate			
Sub-culture			
Define what the organization stands for	Mission statement		
Communication of values and mission			
CSR integration in mission			
Employees awareness of values			
			Stakeholder management

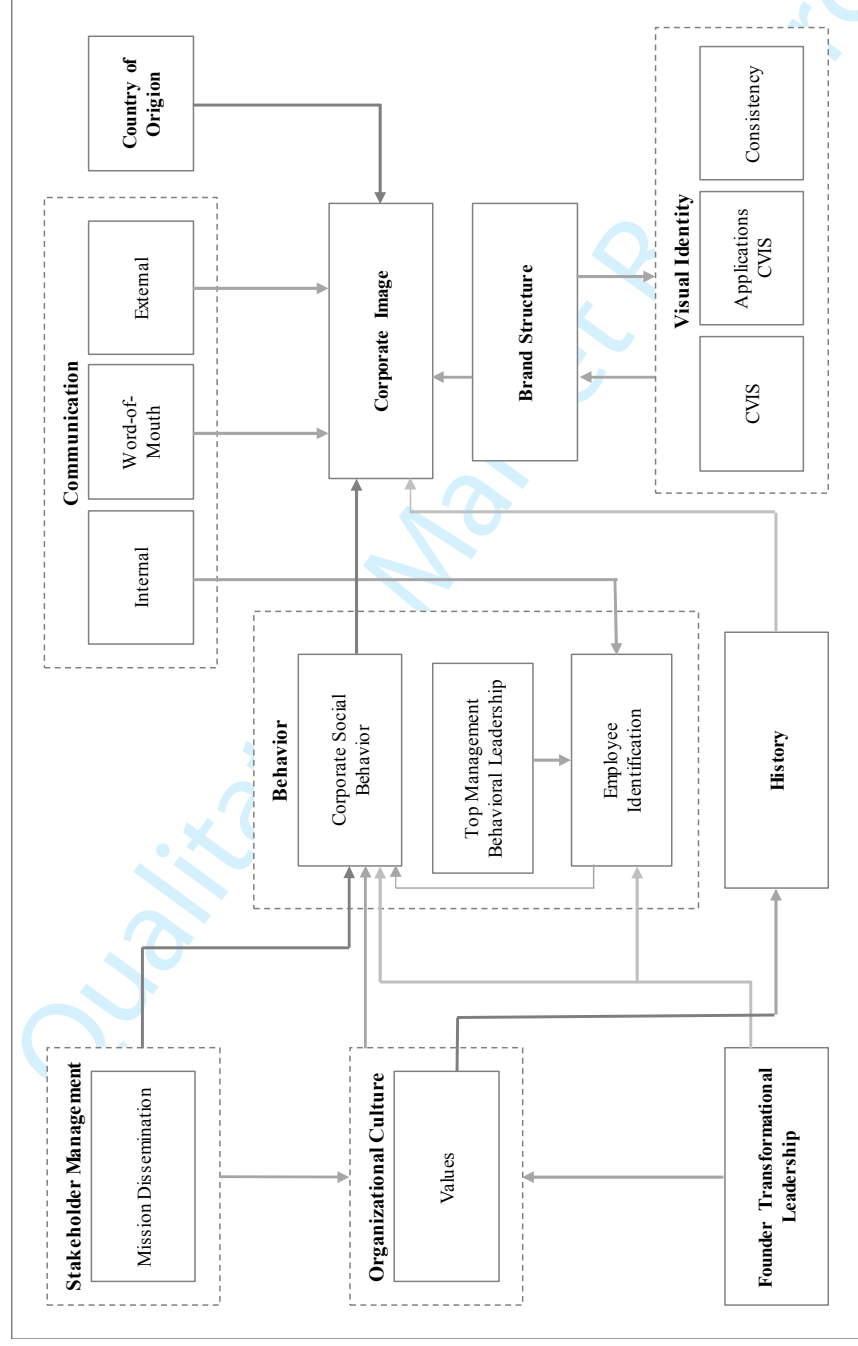
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Continuity of founding principles	Value-based leadership	Founder Transformational leadership
Generation of collective sense of mission		
Setting organization values		
Commitment/dedication to CSR		
Brand heritage	History	
Reputation		
Longevity		
Pride for employees		
Consumer perception	Country of origin	
Globalization		
Merger & Acquisition		
Centralization vs decentralization		
Visibility	Brand structure	
Endorsed brand structure		
Monolithic brand structure		
Branded brand structure		

Table 3. Measurement items for dimensions of corporate identity

Scale	Example of Scale items	Major references
External Communication	Our advertising is an important part of our corporate identity	Gray and Balmer (1998); Simoes <i>et al.</i> (2005); Van Riel (1995)
Internal Communication	Our internal marketing is an important part of our corporate identity.	Gray and Balmer (1998); Simoes <i>et al.</i> (2005); Van Riel (1995)
Word-of-Mouth (WOM)	Encouraging Word-of-Mouth is key to our corporate identity strategy.	Ennew <i>et al.</i> (2000)
Corporate Visual Identity System (CVIS)	The logo of our company communicates what it stands for.	Foroudi <i>et al.</i> (2014; 2017; 2018); Melewar and Saunders (2000); Simoes <i>et al.</i> (2005)
Applications of CVIS	Our stationary is an important constituent of our corporate identity.	Simoes <i>et al.</i> (2005); Melewar and Saunders (2000); Melewar <i>et al.</i> (2001)
Consistency of CVI	Our organization has formal guidelines for corporate visual elements.	Melewar and Saunders (2000); Van den Bosch <i>et al.</i> (2006a, 2006b)
Top Management Behavioral Leadership	Our organizational manager acts as the spokesperson of the organization	Stogdill (1963)
Employee Identification	I am glad to be a member of my company. When I talk about my company, I usually say "we" rather than "they".	Mael and Ashforth (1992)
Corporate Social Behavior	Our company cares about environmental issues.	Brown and Dacin (1997); Balmer and Soenen (1999)
Values	Our organization is a personal place (it is like a family).	Deshpande and Farley (1999; 2004)
Mission Statement	The mission statement is an important part of who we are.	Simoes <i>et al.</i> (2005)
Organization Founder	The approach our organization founder used to generate respect continues to be an important part of who we are.	Bass (1990)
History	Our corporate history is aligned with the organization corporate identity	Foster <i>et al.</i> (2011)
Country of Origin	"Made in a xxxx country" is part of our corporate identity.	Min Han and Vern Terpstra (1988)
Brand Structure	Our organization has a recognizable brand compared to the competitors	Van den Bosch <i>et al.</i> (2006a, 2006b)

Figure 1: Interrelationships between CI dimensions and their impact on image



Appendix A: Definitions for CI, corporate brand, and image

Term	Definition
Corporate Identity	<p>‘all those manifestations of an organization that enables it to be distinctive’ and “projecting who you are, what you do, and how you do it” (Lambert, 1989, p. 7)</p> <p>‘the self-presentation of an organisation; consisting of the cues which an organisation offers about itself via the behaviour, communication, and symbolism which are its forms of expression’ (Van Riel, 1997, p. 290).</p> <p>‘The corporate identity of the organisation is concerned with what the organisation is and what it seeks to be’ (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, p. 1051).</p> <p>‘... the presentation to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organisation unique and ... incorporates the organisation’s communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry identity, and strategy. It is ... intrinsically related to both personality and image’ (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006, p. 864).</p>
Corporate brand	<p>‘A corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation’s unique business model’ (Knox and Bickerton, 2003, p. 1013).</p> <p>‘A corporate brand is expressions and images of an organisation’s identity. The process of corporate expression spans an organisation’s corporate identity and its corporate brand building activities. It includes the development of visual identity, the brand promise and brand personality as well as the communication thereof’ Abratt and Kleyn (2012, p. 9).</p>
Corporate image	<p>‘[Corporate image is] the net result of the interactions of all the experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company’ (Bevis in Bernstein, 1984, p. 25).</p> <p>Corporate image can be said to be the totality of a stakeholder’s perceptions of the way an organisation presents itself, either deliberately (eg, through planned PR activities) or accidentally (eg, through comments made by staff or media comment) (Markwick and Fill, 1997, p. 398).</p> <p>Images form through encounters with the characteristics of an organisation, the net result of the interaction of all the experiences, beliefs, feelings, knowledge and impressions that each stakeholder has about an organisation (Bernstein, 1984).</p> <p>Corporate image is ‘the picture that an audience has of an organisation through the accumulation of all received messages’ (Ind, 1997, p. 21).</p>