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Managing corporate identity: an integrative framework of dimensions and determinants

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Managing corporate identity: an integrative framework of dimensions and determinants

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Keywords

Corporate identity, Corporate image

Abstract

Although there has been an enduring interest in corporate identity and image management, there is relatively little systematic empirical research on the topic. Largely due to the diffuse interpretations and dubious denotation that have characterized the subject of corporate identity so far, the authors present an integrative conceptual framework of dimensions and determinants of corporate identity management. This framework and its constructs specify the concept of corporate identity and can be used on a predictive basis to guide, frame and model empirical research into this area.

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1. Introduction

Few topics in the communications and public relations literature have been subject to theoretical obscurity and imprecision like corporate identity management (Grunig, 1993). Fuelled by the metaphorical qualities of the term, which lends itself to diffuse interpretations and dubious denotation (Cornelissen and Harris, 2001), the subject has made little theoretical headway. The lack of systematic conceptual and empirical work on the topic is particularly palpating in the light of the continuing interest in and debates about corporate identity management in both the academic and practitioner worlds. In an attempt at remedying this problematic state of affairs, the authors review prior research and posit an integrative conceptual framework of dimensions and determinants of corporate identity management that clearly defines the subject and enables systematic empirical research. Before outlining the framework in greater detail, the next section provides a brief overview of prior writings on corporate identity.

2. Corporate identity within academic and practitioner writings: an overview

The emergence and repeated use of the term “corporate identity” within academic and practitioner writings is a varied and complex phenomenon involving many cross-currents, but a few broad patterns present themselves. A first pattern, from a public relations and communications industry perspective, emerges with the corporate design specialists Lippincott and Margulies (1957) who were the first to coin the term “corporate identity” in relation to an organization’s logos and symbols as these were seen as “identifying” the organization to third parties. Ever since, fuelled by the dramatic growth of the graphic design industry in the USA, with companies investing in product and graphic design for logos, house styles and other publicity components, design and image consultancies have continued to endorse the label of “corporate identity” in their emphasising of the importance of visual “identity” systems (Olins, 1978, 1989). Recent years have yet seen a further extension of the meaning and use of corporate identity within the design and public relations industry, where the term has come to incorporate all communication techniques and even behavior

by which organizations communicate, that is leave an impression, with key publics and stakeholders (Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). A second pattern, and arising from the public policy and legal sphere, is the use of the term “corporate identity” as a result of the perceived need to personify organizations to embody the critical notion of accountability (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). As Christensen and Cheney (1994, p. 224) explain in this regard: “firms have gradually attained the status of juristic, artificial, or legal persons. Thus that which was originally thought to be explicitly collective in nature has come to be treated as individual: in the language of advanced capitalism, the corporation is a person with attendant rights and to a lesser extent ascribed responsibilities”. A third pattern of the use of “corporate identity” is located in the academic organizational behavior and management literature and emerged with the coining of analogies and metaphors by academics to understand organizational reality. Perceiving organizations as organisms was a particularly popular analogy:

... organizations were anthropomorphized as organic, corporeal entities, and terms as “corporate identity”, “organizational identity” and “corporate personality” have ever since the 1980s found continuing use in this regard (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Cornelissen and Harris, 2001).

Notably, while the term “corporate identity” had been used by public relations and marketing academics and practitioners as referring to the symbolic outward presentation of a company, within the organizational behavior and management literatures the term became reserved for the distinctive features and core activities of an organization. Informed by the metaphor that an organization is an actual organism similar to a real-life person, writers such as Larçon and Reitter (1979) have argued in this regard that “corporate identity” refers to a set of intrinsic characteristics or “traits” (e.g. strategy, culture, core competencies) that give the organization its specificity, stability and coherence.

3. Corporate identity: theoretical problems and concerns

The preceding section has briefly outlined the complexity of forces that appear to have

drawn out the repeated use and salience of “corporate identity” in academic and practitioner writings. Although there has been little commentary so far on the obvious differences for research and understanding that these perspectives of “corporate identity” imply, yet their diverging accounts of the nature of corporate identity are bound to unsettle the field and, the authors argue, have hampered theoretical progress. In effect, the generic term corporate identity now “includes under its head both the strict sense of an organization’s name or identifying emblems (e.g. logos) and the much broader sense of a system’s representations by/to itself and by/to others” (Christensen and Cheney, 1994, pp. 223-4). Such a stretched definition together with the undifferentiated use and discussion of the “corporate identity” construct, concealing its diffuse meanings, has already led to circularity and ambiguity in theory and research. Such ambiguity or openness of meaning of the construct has in turn expanded the variety of operationalizations that have been included within the theory’s encompassing frame of reference (Van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Cornelissen and Harris, 2001). The problem from an academic stance is then that this flexibility of meaning continues to permit researchers to apply the concept to qualitatively different types of public relations and organizational phenomena and processes located at different levels of analysis, in turn increasing the potential number of empirical tests conducted on the theory, but effectively reducing the chance that those tests can amount to a refutation of the theory. In effect, the corporate identity construct is through its stretched meaning and undifferentiated use so general in scope, and so ambiguous in meaning, that it is almost unbounded in its potential range of applications, and therefore virtually impossible to refute.

It follows that there is an apparent need for a further specification of the corporate identity construct through an examination of the social construction of the term “corporate identity” and its derivatives. It is however not an objective of the present article to provide for a full-fledged account and definitive etymology of the genesis and mutation of the term “corporate identity”. Rather, the article has set out to demonstrate, first, the previously implicit multiple constructions of the term as a vital means of deciphering the

varieties of academic use that have arisen as a result. Second, to heed the problems associated with theoretical imprecision mentioned above, and thus to enable theoretical progress and aid empirical research, the article posits a definition of “corporate identity” in communication management and public relations theory that enables an operationalization of the construct into measurable variables. From such a communications management and public relations perspective, corporate identity management can be defined as the strategic development of a distinct and coherent image of an organization that is consistently communicated to stakeholders through symbolism, planned communications and behavior. Notably, as mentioned, the corporate identity mix is thus considerably broader in scope than just conventional planned communications and public relations programs including symbolism (logos, house style) and representational forms of behavior (e.g. behavior of store employees, sales representatives, receptionists) alongside planned forms of publicity and advertising communications under the adage that everything a company “says, makes or does” in some way “communicates” (Balmer, 1998). Next to these three types of media (symbolism, communication and behavior), another dimension that has been considered as pertinent to corporate identity management and as instrumental in projecting a favourable image of the organization is the notion of a thematic and visual consistency across “messages” carried by these media (Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997).

To structure future enquiry, this set of discernible dimensions (the co-ordinated use of symbolism, communication and behavior, and the thematic and visually consistency of messages) within the public relations definition of corporate identity have subsequently been related to organizational and environmental conditions and drawn into a conceptual framework (see below). This has been done, as there has been an enduring gap between theoretical literature on corporate identity management and descriptive accounts of how companies actually construct an image of themselves for representation to third parties (Grunig, 1993). Therefore, one of the primary objectives of this article was the development of a theoretically well-founded

conceptual framework that identifies key dependent and independent variables whose relationship can be tested.

4. Overview of conceptual framework

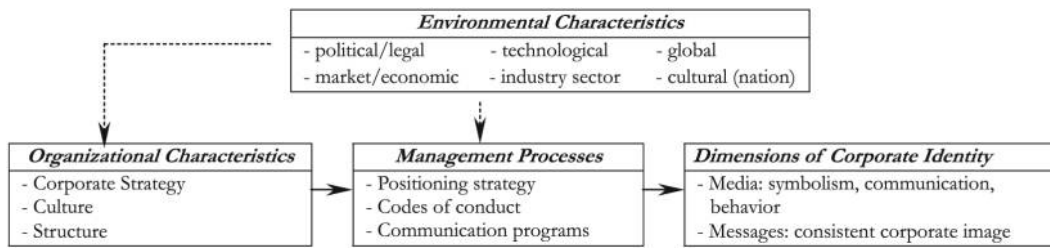
In this section, we introduce a conceptual framework that links dimensions of corporate identity management to situational and contextual factors (see Figure 1). We develop such a view in order to review and integrate prior literature, to provide a systematic perspective on the topic under consideration, and identify the types of factors that may be relevant. The framework, based on structural and open-systems precepts (Botan, 1993), helps structure future enquiry into the topic. To reduce complexity and be parsimonious, we cannot provide a comprehensive list of every construct that may be relevant in a specific context. Rather, the framework should be regarded as delineating the most important constructs in relation to corporate identity management. The next paragraphs provide an overview of the framework and its key constructs.

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 incorporates the original constructs of strategy, structure and culture that have been posited in prior work as determinants of corporate identity management, as well as a set of additional constructs under the headings of management processes and environmental characteristics. The addition of these sets of constructs is needed, in our view, as prior research has found little if any direct relationship between the original constructs of strategy, structure and culture on the one hand and dimensions of corporate identity management on the other. The present study highlights these issues and the potential interconnectedness among the various constructs, adding to the theoretical base for future construct specification, modeling and testing. The remainder of this section is organized around outlining each of these constructs and their relationship to dimensions of corporate identity management.

Strategy

The corporate positioning of an organization through the corporate identity mix has in much prior work been considered as a direct function of the strategy of an organization as

Figure 1 Conceptual framework for the study of corporate identity management



captured in its corporate mission and vision. The concerted interest in the construct of strategy, and the allocation of predictive value to the construct in relation to corporate identity management, is then primarily based upon the premise that mission and vision statements provide an overall unifying theme and goal for both motivating and focusing all employees, and for creating a coherent and distinct corporate image in advertising and publicity that differentiates the organization from its competitors (Balmer, 1995; Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Christensen and Cheney (2000) refer in this regard to “essentializing” the strategy of the organization, its products and its history through immediately recognizable symbols. However, as the article argues, there is little in the way of systematic research or anecdotes that identifies a direct relationship between strategy and dimensions of the corporate identity mix, leading writers such as Alvesson (1993) to claim that although corporate identity might be influenced and motivated by the mission of an organization, it is not wholly or, more importantly, directly determined by it:

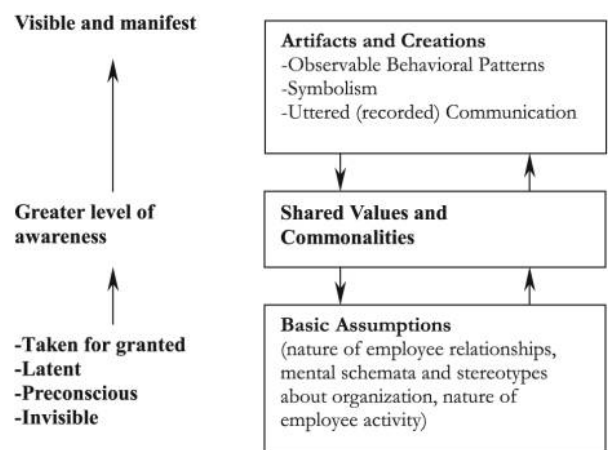
... corporate identity as something, which naturally and spontaneously is developed as an undifferentiated part of the basic activities of the corporation probably does not often characterize the modern sectors of the economy (Alvesson, 1993, p. 375).

As shown in Figure 1, rather than considering strategy as a direct antecedent of corporate identity, there is likely to be an intermediary or moderator phase, where strategy as captured in the mission and vision of an organization becomes translated into a positioning strategy, communication programs (delegated to different functional areas) and codes of conduct that, in turn, give rise to corporate imagery. These constructs in this “management processes” phase are discussed in more detail below.

Culture

Prior work has also shown a preoccupation with the construct of culture, variously labeled as “corporate culture”, “corporate personality” and “organizational identity”, as an antecedent of corporate identity management (Balmer, 1995; Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). The prevailing idea here is that an integrated, strong culture (i.e. shared meanings, ideologies and commonalities that are quite homogeneous, monolithic and organization-wide) gives rise to symbolization of the organization internally, but also externally in representation to stakeholders and publics through the corporate identity mix. Such an idea is, of course, as Figure 2 outlines, motivated by the view that visual manifestations through behavior and communication are derived from and grounded in the collective psychological attributes of an organized group (e.g. Schein, 1985), and that there should be such concordance to avoid outward manifestations that are not “factually” based within the corporate culture as these would then come to be considered as a mere façade or false front

Figure 2 Levels of culture in relation to corporate identity



Source: Adapted from Schein (1985)

(Kennedy, 1977; Cornelissen and Harris, 2001).

Importantly, however, despite these admissions, prior empirical research has found little if any evidence of a sheer correlation between culture and corporate identity management (Balmer and Wilson, 1998). Explanations for the breakdown of a direct relationship then include the observation in prior research that the notion of a single monolithic corporate culture is precarious as employees are subject to a complex set of identifications (including their identification with work and professional groups alongside the organization as whole), at times resulting in differentiated sub-cultures (Van Maanen, 1991), as well as the recognition that the role and figuring of cultural values and sense-making in corporate identity management is mediated and modified, in a managerial sense, by codes of conduct and prescribed communication programs:

If culture is thought to consist of beliefs and values that make sense in a company – to help employees serve the organization – that alone does not give a sense of the structure and principles of the organization, or the activities that are performed by each employee (Heath, 1994, p. 88).

Rather than considering culture as a direct antecedent of behavioral and communication manifestations within the corporate identity mix, the present article posits that, while the core credo, values and beliefs held by members of an organization might influence the content of representations to stakeholders and publics, such symbolic representations are, because of managerial mediation, not directly determined by it. This observation is also supported by Olasky (1987), who, reviewing the extant historical evidence on corporate communication, argued that there is no such thing as an antecedent “organizational reality” (in the form of the core cultural values of an organization) determining corporate communications: the creation of a corporate image is a largely subjective management affair as such an image is to be used as weaponry within the context of the market and societal conditions facing an organization.

Structure

The overall structure of an organization in the form of the relationship between the

corporate parent or group holding and its divisions has also been considered as a factor of importance in determining the corporate imagery that will be presented through the corporate identity mix to stakeholders and publics (Olins, 1989; Balmer, 1998; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Again, similar to the strategy and culture constructs detailed above, the construct of structure (e.g. division, geographic, hybrid) *per se* is not of a direct and immediate effect on corporate identity management; as senior managers of large organizations have a choice in deciding not only how divisions and the corporate group or holding are managed, but also how these are presented outwards. In particular, senior managers can decide whether separate divisions and products should be endorsed by and associated with a larger group or corporate brand (Hatch and Schultz, 2001) by opting for one of three general positioning strategies:

- (1) a choice for “uniformity” (monolithic position: corporate profile analogous to business-unit and product-level) (e.g. Sony, BMW, Virgin);
- (2) “variety” or “branded” (diversified: two or three different levels) (e.g. product brands of Procter & Gamble and Unilever); or
- (3) the “endorsement” model (brand with corporate image recognizable in the background) as a mixture of the previous two (e.g. GM, Kellogg, Nestlé) (Olins, 1978, 1989).

Management processes

The preceding sections have already started to articulate that while there might be a relationship between the original constructs of strategy, culture, and structure on the one hand and dimensions of corporate identity management on the other, such a relationship is ultimately modified by and hence subject to managerial interpretation of the organization and how it should be represented through the corporate identity mix. Such managerial interpretation and decision making on the corporate image that is to be presented to stakeholder and key publics then involves a choice for the positioning strategy (monolithic, endorsed or branded) as mentioned above, and, closely related, a specification of codes of conduct for employees and communication plans and programs, which, in turn, influence and guide

the media and messages employed within the corporate identity mix. In addition, as Figure 1 outlines, these managerial processes of deciding on a positioning strategy and of organizing communications and behavior accordingly are also influenced by factors and conditions in the environment of an organization. The corporate image and positioning of direct competitors of an organization, for instance, may influence the adoption of a corporate image that is sufficiently distinct to differentiate the organization from this competition (Cornelissen and Harris, 2001). Equally, the type of industry sector may steer an organization towards a particular image and positioning strategy, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of a monolithic positioning strategy in the financial and banking industry (Morison, 1997).

The concept of a contingency perspective where managerial decisions regarding the positioning strategy and the corporate identity mix are influenced by organizational and environmental characteristics has emerged at various points in the above analysis. This viewpoint is theoretically respectable in light of the empirical support presented, and it is at least realistic in recognising that there are no universal panaceas or answers to practising managers' questions regarding corporate identity management. Hence, as the article has argued, there is value in laying out the types of contingencies that may be important. In consideration of the little progress made so far in identifying the determinants of corporate identity management, the conceptual framework presented here outlines how such further work and thinking might systematically be carried out.

5. Discussion and implications

In this article, we have used our review of the literature to develop a theoretically well-founded conceptual framework that structures enquiry into how corporate identity management is established and managed within companies. Through our conceptual framework, we present an integrative view of dimensions of corporate identity management and relate these dimensions to the management processes of deciding on a positioning strategy, and of developing codes of conduct and communication programs, as

well as to organizational and environmental characteristics. We address the existing gap between theory and descriptive empirical research by drawing on prior research in the development of this framework and by articulating relationships between constructs that have not been studied extensively in empirical research.

The article lays out the groundwork for a theory of corporate identity management and points the way to further research. First, future contributions to corporate identity theory might be made by developing operational measures for each construct presented in the framework and by empirically examining and testing the relationships between these constructs. Doing so then also reveals the predictive value of the theory thus generated. Second, while the study and conceptual framework presented here concerns a specific focus on the dimensions and determinants of corporate identity management, additional empirical research is needed on the consequences and effects as well as other constructs, that, while having been considered less frequently in the study of corporate identity management, could contribute to our overall understanding. To illustrate, prior work has already hinted at the consequences and effects of corporate communications and publicity on employees who mirror themselves in the imagery produced (Dutton *et al.*, 1994).

For a managerial audience, we have identified organizational and management characteristics, as well as environmental parameters to be considered. Our study will help managers to identify the broad range of issues to consider with regard to corporate identity management. It might be that practitioners, when considering corporate identity management, tend to think primarily in terms of the positioning strategy of an organization and the media that are employed to communicate it. Our framework suggests many other parameters to be considered within corporate identity management. It follows therefore that, with our framework, we discard the whole idea of a "fixed" solution towards corporate identity management, and provide a more complex and balanced view which emphasizes the range of decisions and types of situations in which one corporate positioning strategy and associated corporate identity mix or another may arise and become significant. Exposing

these contingencies is, we believe, particularly relevant to public relations and communications managers, who through such insight and understanding will be more fully capable of advising senior managers on the corporate positioning strategy of the organization as well as of informing and counseling staff on the corporate image that is to be presented outwards not only through public relations and communication programs but also through symbolism and representational forms of behavior.

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