

# **Working Paper Series**

## **Initial Reflections on the Notion of Corporate Brand Cultures and Communities**

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**INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON THE NOTION  
OF CORPORATE BRAND CULTURES  
AND COMMUNITIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the notion of brand culture and brand communities through the lens of corporate branding. It begins by explaining why the business landscape has become *corporate brandscape*. The paper argues that corporate brand culture has its roots in the identity of the organisation. However, once established, a corporate brand can have an existence that is separate, and divisible, from its parent identity. This helps to explain why corporate brands can be viewed *as valuable and portable assets: this is because they can be bought, sold and borrowed*. Whereas legal ownership of a corporate brand resides with one or more corporate entities its real power comes from its *emotional ownership*. Emotional ownership resides within the corporate brand community consisting of variety of stakeholder groups. As such, a corporate brand can be viewed as an informal (but powerful) contract: a contract that links the corporate brand with its corporate brand community. Established corporate brands can be used as template for the creation or for the realignment of corporate identities so that they mirror the characteristics of a corporate brand. Membership of a corporate brand community can be varied with membership being defined by *consumption, employment, endorsement, association, acquisition, and aspiration (there can be, so to speak, multiple membership of the above)*. Just as there are corporate brand advocates there are corporate brand terrorists: those who dissociated themselves from or who abhor certain corporate brands, their values, and their cultural communities. Rival football teams are cases in point.

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## INTRODUCTION

Brands, in their various guises, are integral to our everyday existence. As argued by the anthropologist John Sherry, the corporate landscape has become a brandscape (Barwise et al 2000). The perspective adopted in this paper is that the brandscape in many ways has developed into a *corporate brandscape*. Consider your most favourite brands, or look at the brand valuation lists produced by organisations such as Interbrand, and you are likely to discover that they are *corporate* rather than product brands. Increasingly, many of the world's biggest companies - Coca Cola, Microsoft, and IBM - are seen as corporate brands rather than corporate entities (Davies 2004).

In this paper I wish to make the simple point that corporate brands and their cultures and communities are stronger, wider, and of greater consequence when compared to product brands and product brand cultures: consider BMW (a corporate brand) *vis a vis* KitKat (a product brand) in this regard. For the reasons cited above, corporate brands are worthy of scrutiny as a branding category *of their own*.

Of course, a world without brands would be almost unthinkable, as would a world devoid of cultural associations. As marketing scholars have realised for some time the spheres of culture and of branding are inextricably linked. Culture can help us to comprehend brands whereas brands can provide a powerful lens by which to comprehend organisational-related cultures. This helps to explain the utility of the phrase "brand culture." It is a phrase that is of considerable value to brand managers and scholars alike. The branding sphere often appears to be opaque. However, the notion of brand culture provides a window through which some of the quintessential attributes of brands may be discerned. No more so is this the case than with corporate brands where issues of brand culture (and, as I argue, corporate identity) afford a degree of translucence in our comprehension of corporate brands. It should also be noted that corporate brand scholarship is an area that is still in its adolescence.

Brands define not only who we are, and who we are not, at any one point in time in a given situation. Consider the brands we wear, eat, and use: the brands we use in the bathroom, at breakfast, at work, with our family, and during our leisure (including holiday/destination brands). Clearly, there are many. However, for the main the

conceptualisation of brands in the literature either tends to be narrowly conceived by its focus on *product brands* and on *customers*.

However, what is exciting in terms of brand culture is that it takes on a quite different hue in the context of corporate brands. Here its importance is tangible and incontrovertible. It is also challenging. This is because corporate brands, unlike product brands, are "consumed" by *different groups* in *different ways*. As such, notions of brand culture can be compared to a crucible: a crucible that subsumes different stakeholder groups and networks that feed in to, and benefit from, membership of a brand's cultural community.

Membership of a corporate brand culture is varied. It can be realised by a variety of stakeholder groups through a multitude of means through:

- *consumer consumption* (the preference accorded to a corporate brand in relation to consumer buyer behaviour: a preference to shop at Tesco rather than at Sainsburys)
- *employment* (the status accorded to a newly minted marketing graduate employed as a brand manager at Unilever),
- *endorsement* (the prestige accorded by the award of Royal Warrant by HM King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden)
- *association* (the "prestige" accorded to a spouse whose partner is Head of a Cambridge College)
- *acquisition* (the ownership of the QE2 and of the Cunard brand *and brand culture* by a US company) and
- *aspiration* (shoppers at Harrods whose current financial status mean that they can only afford a branded heavy-duty carrier bag.)

What I hope has started to become clear is that brand culture is particularly salient *vis a vis* corporate brands. Its significance is considerable not simply because it is of fundamental importance but also because corporate brands are increasingly being viewed as a vital component for organisational success in most, but not all, entities.

It has been argued that corporate brands serve as a powerful navigational tool to a variety of stakeholders, (and not just customers) for a miscellany of purposes including employment, investment, and for the creation of individual

identities. Moreover, in an era where the boundaries between corporate entities have become less distinct, where there is a blurring of the margins between the internal and external environment, and where traditional approaches to marketing have come under scrutiny, the corporate brand has emerged as a particularly salient and robust differentiator. This helps to explain why corporate brands are adored, venerated and coveted by customers and organisations alike (Balmer and Gray 2003).

From what I have already described, the notion of brand culture provides a useful lens through which corporate brands can be understood.

Corporate brands have a wide utility. They not only relate to corporations (Ford, HSBC Bank, Telia) but also to subsidiaries (Jaguar, Volvo and Aston Martin being subsidiaries of Ford). They are also applicable to Sovereign States (Denmark, Eire), Nations and Semi-Autonomous States (Greenland, the Faroes, Scotland and Wales), Regions (Campania in Italy, and the Tyrol in Austria) and Cities (Bergen, Edinburgh, Exeter, Naples, Paris); to the "ancient" universities of Bologna, Cambridge, Le Sorbonne, Oxford, and St. Andrew's; to the catholic church and its' various religious orders such as the Augustinians, Benedictines, Carthusians, Dominicans, Franciscans, Oratorians, Premonstratensians and Jesuits. At the supra-national level certain institutions have brand-like qualities such as the Commonwealth, European Union, Le Francophone and NATO and at the supra-organisational level the oneworld and star airline alliances may be viewed as corporate brands (albeit in their infancy).

All of the above have attendant brand communities.

Before returning to the issue of brand culture at the organisational level I will briefly explain some of the principal characteristics of the corporate brandscape.

#### **THE CORPORATE BRANDSCAPE**

Three observations may be made about corporate brands from the outset:

- (i) corporate branding scholarship is still in its infancy
- (ii) the majority of high profile and valuable brands are in fact corporate brands
- (iii) many organisations are indisputably corporate brands

In my discussion of corporate brands I (a) discuss the literature (b) the schools of thought relating to corporate brands, (c) the worth of corporate brands (d) the inseparability between corporate brands and corporate identity (e) the corporate brand covenant and lastly (f) explain why corporate brands have "a life of their own",

#### **(a) The nascent literature on corporate brands**

Currently, corporate branding is generating considerable ardour from marketing scholars (see Balmer 2001b, DeChernatony and Schultz 2002, Kapferer 2002, and Aaker 2004) and consultants (Ind 1995 and Olins 2004). Account is being taken of the protestations of King (1991) of Balmer (1995, 2001b) and Balmer and Greyser (2003) to face up to the challenges in terms relating to the comprehension and management of corporate brands. Of note is the recent literature on corporate branding from the UK. This literature is notable for its articulation of the differences between product and corporate brands (King 1991, Balmer 2001a).

From this literature it becomes apparent that the emergent theory on corporate branding is, for the most part, antithetical to traditional approaches to branding in that it draws on other disciplines and not just marketing. It has more in common with corporate strategy than it has with marketing strategy. Corporate brand values need to be authentic and need to mirror corporate policies, behaviours and activities. Exhibit one compares corporate brands with product brands.

#### **(b) Corporate brands: schools of thought**

The five schools of thought relating to corporate brands as identified by Balmer (see Balmer and Gray 2003) illustrate the various ways in which corporate brands have been characterised. They are as follows:

##### *(1) Marks denoting ownership*

At its simplest, a brand denotes a name, logotype or trademark signifying ownership (Barwise et al 2000). The principal objectives of this school are those of identification and ownership.

Understandably, the graphic design discipline is accorded importance. Invariably a good deal of importance is accorded to visual identification. However, other identifiers that draw on the non-visual senses can also be marshalled. Consider the inextricable association that link Gregorian chant to the Catholic Church. In a business setting the consistent use of the music from Delibes' opera *Lacme* by British Airways (BA) has resulted in this having the status of the signature tune for BA. In

**EXHIBIT ONE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN PRODUCT AND CORPORATE BRANDS  
(adapted from Balmer 2001b)**

	<b>PRODUCT BRANDS</b>	<b>CORPORATE BRANDS</b>
MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY	BRAND MANAGER	CHIEF EXECUTIVE
FUNCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY	MARKETING	MOST/ALL DEPARTMENTS
GENERAL RESPONSIBILITY	MARKETING PERSONNEL	ALL PERSONNEL
DISCIPLINARY ROOTS	MARKETING	MULTIDISCIPLINARY/
BRAND GESTATION	SHORT	MEDIUM TO LONG
STAKEHOLDER FOCUS	CONSUMERS	MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS
VALUES	CONTRIVED	REAL
COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS	THE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS MIX	TOTAL CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS  <i>Primary: Performance of Products &amp; Services; Organizational Policies; Behavior of CEO and Senior Management; Experience of Personnel &amp; discourse by personnel</i>  <i>Secondary: Marketing &amp; other forms of controlled communication</i>  <i>Tertiary: Word of Mouth</i>
DIMENSIONS REQUIRING ALIGNMENT	BRAND VALUES ( <i>covenant</i> ), PRODUCT PERFORMANCE,  VISION (AS HELD BY THE CEO  COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCE/IMAGE AND REPUTATION CONSUMER COMMITMENT  ENVIRONMENT ( <i>political, economic, ethical, social, technological</i> )	BRAND VALUES ( <i>covenant</i> ) IDENTITY ( <i>corporate attributes/sub cultures</i> )  CORPORATE STRATEGY  AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT)  COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCE/IMAGE AND REPUTATION  STAKEHOLDERS COMMITMENT (internal and external constituencies)  ENVIRONMENT (political, economic, ethical, social, technological)

2000 the Carlson Market Group established a new division to communicate corporate brands through sensory means and to address such questions as “What would Vodafone smell like?” (Brayfield 2000)

*(2) Image-Building Devices*

This school of thought focuses on the consumer and, in communications terms, on the “receiver-

end” of the equation. This school places considerable importance in “brand-building” activities. Galbraith (1986 p.29-30) mused that consumers are persuaded to believe in the conviviality associated with a particular brand by Art and reiteration and English economist Boulding (1956) noted that people respond to image as if it were a reality. As noted by Kapferer (2002) metaphor and animate objects

are used to convey an image. Consider Jaguar, Johnny Walker, and Sarah Lee in this regard.

*(3) Symbols associated with key values*

The recent literature on corporate branding observes that key values can characterise corporate brands DeChernatony (1999). Issues relating to culture and perception underpin this school. Urde (2003) makes a distinction between core values (based on brand identity), organisational values (based on corporate identity) and added values (based on consumer identity.) The BBC, for instance is associated with quality broadcasting and authoritative and impartial news coverage.

*(4) A Means by which to construct individual identities*

Brands are appropriated by consumers as a means of defining who they are, wish to be and/or wish to be seen as (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Newman, 2001) and as a means of creating individual identities. Issues relating to culture and psychology underpin this school. A wealthy man might drive to work in a Jaguar to communicate his status as the head of the Directorate of Marketing for a high street bank, own a Volvo which because of its safety credentials positions the driver as a "good parent" and which is used for school and university "runs" but, at the weekend and for non-family use our fictitious person drives an Aston Martin. This reflects his self perception as a stylish, sporty and distinctive individual and, perhaps, as an individual with the *savoir-faire* of James Bond/007 (or at least who would like to imagine that his wife and secretary thinks so!)

*(5) A conduit by which pleasurable experiences may be consumed*

It has been argued that corporate brands can be closely associated with pleasurable experiences Schmitt (1999). The Disneyland brand and the city brand of Venice, are two obvious examples. In an academic context it has been argued the collegiate system and the wearing of academic gowns at formal dinners (at some colleges) at the Universities of Cambridge, Durham and Oxford is part of the "experience" of attending these traditional universities (at least for some). This school appears to draw heavily on the theories relating to consumer buying behaviour.

**(c) The Value of Corporate Brands**

The value of brands has long been recognised by corporations. Established corporate brands are a guarantee of quality, and an insurance against poor performance or financial risk. They provide a

conduit by which the organisations values and culture/s may be communicated, identified and comprehended and the brand cultures that often emerge as a consequence can be of immense value. A key point to remember that stakeholders themselves determine a good deal of a brand's value. Brands are not made in the factory but in people's minds as the astute founder of the US graphic design agency Landor once remarked. I argue that whereas *legal ownership* of a corporate brand resides with one or more corporation's *emotional ownership* resides with stakeholders. It are these perceptions that give a corporate brand a good deal of its value and it also would seem logical to suggest that brand culture/communities is also important. These clearly account for the high financial values that are often apportioned to corporate brands. Consider the \$12.6 billion buyout of Kraft by Philip Morris, six times its book value, (Newman 2001) and the fact that 59% of Coca-Cola's, 61% of Disney's, and 64% of McDonald's capitalisation is attributable directly according to the value associated with the corporate brand (Barwise et al 2000).

Research has also revealed that managers see corporate brands as having distinct benefits in terms of increased profile, customer attractiveness, product support, visual recognition, investor confidence, as well as in encapsulating organisational values and providing staff motivation (Lewis, 2000). They are seen to afford benefits also in terms of the recruitment and retention of employees. Virgin Atlantic (Mitchell, 1999, p. 32) and Waterstones, (a leading UK retail book outlet) selects personnel that mirror corporate brand values (Ind 1997).

**(d) Corporate Brands and Corporate Identity**  
*"Corporate identity provides the grit around which a corporate brand is formed" (Balmer 2001b)*

The Latin phrase *Vultus est index animi* captures the awesome nature of corporate brands. Translated, the literal meaning of the phrase is: *"The expression on one's face is a sign of the soul"*. It takes only a small leap of imagination to realise that for many organisations, the corporate brand is the face of the organisation and is also an icon of the culture that customers, employees and others have an affinity to. As such, when we regard a thriving *corporate brand* that has stood the test of time, we also see important elements of the corporate identity and by this means the brand cultures that characterise corporate brands.

As such, the identity perspective informs my comprehension of corporate brands and notions

**EXHIBIT TWO: A COMPARISON BETWEEN CORPORATE IDENTITIES AND CORPORATE BRANDS  
(Balmer in Balmer and Gray 2003)**

	<b>CORPORATE IDENTITY</b>	<b>CORPORATE BRANDS</b>
<b>NECESSARY OR CONTINGENT?</b>	NECESSARY	<i>CONTINGENT</i>
<b>APPLICABLE TO ALL ORGANISATIONS?</b>	YES	<i>NO</i>
<b>STABILITY OF ATTRIBUTES</b>	CONSTANTLY EVOLVING	<i>RELATIVELY STABLE</i>
<b>APPLICABILITY</b>	NORMALLY A SINGLE ENTITY	<i>NORMALLY A SINGLE ENTITY BUT CAN BE MULTIPLE</i>
<b>MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY</b>	CEO	<i>CEO</i>
<b>FUNCTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY</b>	ALL FUNCTIONS	<i>ALL FUNCTIONS</i>
<b>DISCIPLINARY ROOTS</b>	MULTIDISCIPLINARY	<i>MULTIDISCIPLINARY</i>
<b>PRINCIPAL DRIVERS</b>	STRATEGY, CULTURE, VISION	<i>BRANDING COVENANT, CULTURE</i>
<b>GESTATION</b>	SHORT	<i>MEDIUM/LONG</i>
<b>STAKEHOLDER FOCUS</b>	MAINLY INTERNAL. EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS VARY IN IMPORTANCE DEPENDING ON STRATEGY	<i>MAINLY EXTERNAL. INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS ALSO IMPORTANT</i>
<b>DESIRED PROFILE AMONG INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER GROUPS</b>	VARIABLE: LOW TO HIGH	<i>VARIABLE: LOW TO HIGH</i>
<b>IMPORTANCE OF CONTROLLED COMMUNICATION</b>	VARIABLE	<i>NORMALLY CRUCIAL</i>
<b>IMPORTANCE OF ADVERTISING &amp; VISUAL IDENTITY</b>	VARIABLE	<i>NORMALLY CRUCIAL</i>
<b>KEY ELEMENTS</b>	CULTURE (SUB CULTURES), STRATEGY, STRUCTURE, COMMUNICATION, PERFORMANCE, PERCEPTION	<i>THE BRANDING COVENANT, COMMUNICATION PLUS OTHER IDENTITY ELEMENTS SUCH AS</i>
<b>KEY DIMENSIONS REQUIRING ALIGNMENT</b>	ORGANISATIONAL ATTRIBUTES - (including sub cultures)/ COMMUNICATION/ PERCEPTION	<i>CORPORATE BRAND COVENANT/COMMUNICATION PLUS OTHER IDENTITY ELEMENTS (including sub cultures)</i>
<b>PORTABILITY</b>	NORMALLY DIFFICULT	<i>VARIABLE</i>
<b>FINANCIAL GOODWILL</b>	VARIABLE	<i>CAN BE VERY HIGH INDEED</i>

of brand culture. You can no more take oxygen out of the atmosphere or remove identity when examining brands without catastrophic effect in both instances. In other words, corporate identities provide the bedrock of corporate brand building. Interestingly, there appears to be a symbiosis of thought among marketing scholars who adopt an identity perspective such as Balmer

(2001 p.281) and those who adopt a branding perspective such as Kapferer (2002 p.176) both of whom conclude that corporate brands are underpinned by corporate identities.

There appears to be a good deal of confusion relating to discussions relating to corporate identity and corporate branding with there being a

trend to simply regard the corporate brand as a surrogate term for corporate identity. Yet, corporate identities and corporate brands although related are distinct for the following reasons:

- (a) corporate brands have a value, portability and longevity that corporate identities may not have
- (b) every entity has a corporate identity but may not necessarily have a corporate brand
- (c) corporate brand culture tends to be explicit where culture in an identity context is complex and opaque
- (d) the focus of corporate brands is primarily external: customers are critical. Identity tends towards the internal: employees are critical.
- (e) corporate brands draw on the emotional and intangible to a greater degree compared to corporate identities
- (f) corporate brands when marshalled by other entities (franchise arrangements) in order to be effective require the identities of those companies to be altered so that they are in alignment with corporate brand values and culture

Exhibit two compares corporate identities with corporate brands

**(e) The corporate brand covenant: evangelists and terrorists**

Corporate brands often engender a loyalty that is not so dissimilar from that found in various faith groups. As such a corporate brand and the corporate brand community can be mutually dependant. The notion of the corporate brand as representing an explicit covenant between an organisation and its key stakeholder groups and vice versa is one way to describe the above (Balmer, 2001a, b). Some corporate brand covenants are expressed in terms of a brand mantra such as Nike's "*authentic athletic performance*", GE's "*imagination at work*", and Nokia's "*connecting people*". Others prescribe a set of corporate brand "laws" relating to the management and expression of the corporate brand: the so-called Codex of Mercedes Benz is one such example.

Another way of describing the above is in terms of an informal contract between an organisation and its stakeholders. Although such contracts are

underpinned by emotion rather than by law such emotional contracts can be enduring, powerful and highly valuable form.

However, it should be realised that the corporate brand covenant is likely to be a dynamic and evolving concept. This is because the covenant can be interpreted in different ways over time (the temporal dimension) and space (the stakeholder dimension). With regard to the latter some corporate brand communities may be best regarded as *communities of individuals*. With regard to the former, consider, 12th century notions of monarchy as a corporate brand compared to our contemporary understanding of the institution (Balmer, Greyser and Urde 2003). Or of the Harvard University brand of the 18th century (teaching a few subjects with an undergraduate focus) compared to that of the 21st century (teaching many subjects with both an undergraduate and a postgraduate foci).

As "corporate faith communities" emotions can be negative as well as positive. Corporate brands engender strong emotions. There are not only corporate brand *evangelists*: there are also corporate brand *terrorists*.

A good example of corporate *brand evangelism* can be found in team sports such as football where supporters show their brand affiliation by wearing the team colour, emblem, by chanting certain songs and chants and by referring (in a way not dissimilar to British Army Regiments) to successful campaigns of the past against a particular team. Stadia are the shrines of such communities and are sometimes spoken of in the hushed tones similar to a contemplative nun.

For their part *brand terrorists* can abhor the belief systems and manifestations of those who do not share "their faith and belief system" football teams are cases in point. For the most part there is good-humoured rivalry and ribaldry between supporters from different football teams. Occasionally, however, supporters react in acutely negative terms to football fans of other teams with actions that are violent and, sometimes, fatal. Then there are those who find certain corporate brands repulsive. For instance, in the UK, some ethnic communities resent "Coca-Colonialisation" and Muslim shopkeepers have responded by offering Islamic alternatives to Coca Cola such as Mecca Cola, Qibla Cola, and Zanzam Cola (Economist 2004). Interestingly, research undertaken by *Marketing* magazine in September 2004 supports the above proposition by its

identification of the UK's most hated brands. Among the most hated corporate brands were Manchester United, McDonalds, and the supermarket chain Lidl.

**(f) Corporate brands: a life of their own?**

However, once established, a corporate brand can have a life, a meaning, and a set of expectations of its own that although are derived from an identity but, with the passage of time, *can have a life of its own*. An organism that is separate and divisible from the corporate identity that gave it existence. This is because the values and cultures that underpin the various sub cultures of the organisation may, over time, be distilled to form a corporate brand with a clearly defined, communicated, understood and experienced set of values and may not only be owned by other entities but can be used as a template in the creation of new identities (as when Rolls Royce moved to the south of England).

The fact that corporate brands can have a life of their own can be seen in the fact that corporate brands have a portability that a corporate identity many not have. In such instances the corporate brand becomes the embryo in the creation of a new identity or the reformation of an existing identity so that the resulting corporate identity will be alignment with corporate brand values and culture.

Most corporate brand cultures are historically rooted in a particular identity type. Consider these well-known British brands: Bentley, Clydesdale Bank, Cunard, Harrods, Jaguar, The Times, Tetley, Thomas Cook and Yorkshire Bank. All are now in foreign ownership and this illustrates why they can have "a life of their own". Yet, all of the above corporate brands are still fundamentally concerned with the values associated with their historical roots as independent entities: in addition to their associations with the brand culture of an entity they are also associated with the brand culture of a nation. As such, to deny their British brand cultural associations of these brands would undermine their value and viability.

Corporate brands can, of course, be bought, borrowed, sold and, in certain circumstances, be shared among a variety of organisations: Virgin, Rolls Royce, and Hilton being cases in point. *Established* corporate brands can serve as a genetic template by which identities can be moulded around. Consider the Rolls Royce car marque. Today, Rolls Royce cars are made/assembled in rural Sussex, in a state of the art assembly plant

where many of the workers have not previously worked for Rolls Royce. The original Rolls Royce factory and most of its employees at its original factory in Coventry now make and work for Bentley. The numerous companies and identities that underpin the franchise operations of the Body Shop have been homed to provide a homogeneous promise, style and service that are in alignment with the corporate brand. Again, this illustrates why corporate brands can "have a life of their own" in that the brand can be at the one hand owned by one entity and marshalled by many as in the case of franchise arrangements.

**CORPORATE BRAND CULTURE**

Corporate brand culture is important in several regards: it needs to underpin the corporate brand's values, covenant and, importantly activities and behaviour. Adherents to a corporate brand, whether they are customers, employers, investors etc may regard themselves as belonging to a brand community or network. A community that encapsulates the values of a brand and a community whose actions also help to define a brand community.

**(a) Culture in context**

The notion of a single company culture is a very attractive one. It is based on the notion that organisational members have a similar comprehension of the organisation's mission, and ethos (Deshpande and Webster 1989). However, there is a growing realisation that organisations consist of multiple sub cultures. Such subcultures may be corporate but may also be professional or "national". They can be in the ascendant, descendant and may be moribund (Balmer and Wilson 1998). Just as issues of complexity and multiplicity characterise the identity literature the same appears to be true for issues associated with brand culture as the following section illustrates.

**(a) Cultures and Identities**

Organisations are typically underpinned by a number of identities each of which has an attendant "culture". The following is a representative rather than a comprehensive list of the *sources* of various identity types that may be present within organisations:

- (i) identity reflecting the values of the company founder (Virgin's Richard Branson *vis a vis* Virgin and Bill Gates *vis a vis* Microsoft)
- (ii) identity derived from the original corporate philosophy (the BBC's public service remit "*to educate, inform and entertain*").

- (iii) identity reflecting a key corporate competency (Volvo's impeccable credentials *vis a vis* safety)
- (iv) identity reflecting homogenous industries (undertakers/funeral parlours, oil companies, and building societies)
- (v) identity reflecting national norms and precepts (Italian style of Alfa Romeo, Swiss precision of Rolex and high service standards of Singapore's national airline)
- (vi) other identity types drawing on corporate social responsibility (Ben and Jerry's and the Co-operative Bank), feminine allure and sexuality (Ann Summers) and associations with human celebrations and sadness and emotions (Hallmark cards and Hallmark television)

#### Examples of Corporate Brand Communities

The power of brand communities is expressed in a multiplicity of ways. A key aspect of brand culture and community is that it transcends the traditional internal/external divide of organisations and may even boundary span groups of organisations. Brand culture is therefore not only a relevant notion for customers but also employees, prospective employees, investors, business partners and may also accommodate governments and the media. A good example of this is Marks and Spencer who, until quite recently eschewed advertising: it did not need to. Not only were customers and employees proud advocates of the corporate brand but also so were suppliers and a former British Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher). A similar phenomenon can be found in relation to the Harley Davidson brand in the US. Clearly, an organisation such as Marks and Spencer's derived real benefit from having such a strong brand culture which manifested itself not only in terms of loyalty from customers and staff but also resulted in considerable savings in terms of marketing and corporate communications. Amazingly the company did not accept credit cards and thereby saved on the commission paid to companies such as Visa and MasterCard: for many years this did not seem to concern customers.

One important aspect of corporate brand culture is how it has a value to multiple stakeholder groups. This can be seen with regard to a number of well-know British corporate brands that were built on philanthropic and Quaker foundations such as Cadbury and Rowntree. The wholesome

family values of these brands not only had meaning to customers in terms of brand messages built around health and goodness but also to employees with such corporations emphasising worker welfare and education, health and temperance (Pavitt 2000).

Not all "brand cultures" benefit the organisation in ways that are tangible or, indeed, financial. Consider the world famous football club of Manchester United. Although it enjoys a phenomenally large international following it does, all the same, find it difficult to leverage financial benefit from its supporter base. Contrast this with the news that the Prime Minister of Thailand's decision to acquire a significant share holding of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) which *de facto* means that the Kingdom of Thailand will be inextricably linked to LFC see Berger (2003) and Smith (2003). This gives a quite new meaning to brand culture and reminds us that while *legal ownership* of a corporate brand is vested within one or more corporations *emotional ownership transcends* not only the internal/external organisational divide, but transcends stakeholder groups and even nations. In the case of Thailand, that Kingdom's strong emotional attachment to the brand will be formalised in that country acquiring a substantial ownership-stake in the brand. Although UK supporters feel that this is incongruous they fail to realise that some of the club's most ardent supporters are to be found outside the UK. You don't have to be British to drive a Jaguar, to cover yourself in Burberry or travel with British Airways. What the above examples show, is that you don't need to be from Liverpool to have an attachment to Liverpool football club, the Beatles or to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra! Brand communities challenge traditional notions of organisational boundaries.

Consider, Coca Cola's corporate brand, which is as much about Americana as it is about fun refreshing beverages and, even, Christmas. It is a mix of corporate as well as national cultures. The Danish monarchy (as a corporate brand) would appear to be a fusion of national culture as well as the generic (and international) identity of Royalty. The Virgin brand is a fusion not only of a certain type of British identity but also is imbued with the identity of its founder whereas British Airways appears to draw on more traditional notions of Britishness and still appears to draw on its former role as the nation's flag carrier.

Of course, some corporate brands are a fusion of *several* national cultures. In Europe, the Anglo-

Dutch behemoths of Royal Dutch/Shell Transport and Unilever are cases in point. For the main, it is the “corporate” mix of cultures that predominates but as the Brent Spar example revealed national cultural differences came to the fore and as such there were serious divisions between the UK’s Shell Transport and Royal Dutch of the Netherlands and led to divergent policies being followed by each part of the Shell/Royal Dutch Group.

Orchestrating the mix of cultures that suffuse a corporate brand so as to form a coherent whole can be a far from easy task however. In the Netherlands, Phillips placed great store on its technological prowess but this aspect of its culture was not mediated by a sufficiently strong customer focus (something that has also characterised Marks and Spencer’s in the UK.) In the US when Coca Cola changed the taste of Coca-Cola this seemed to reflect its strong consumer credentials: exhaustive testing revealed that customers preferred the new taste. However, senior managers had failed to realise that such a change was seen in terms of assault on a quintessential American icon and this explained the public backlash (and the eventual reintroduction of the original coca-cola formula.)

Something similar happened when British Airways adopted symbols of the world as part of its new complex system of visual identification that was introduced in the late 1990s. This was an explicit attempt by senior management to reflect their strategy of internationalising its brand culture. Out went the red, white and blue of the Union Flag and out went its corporate coat of arms both of which had become closely associated with the airline. As with Coca Cola there was a public backlash (dismay and anger in the UK, incredulity in the US and confusion elsewhere.) It appears that senior executives at BA had made a number of cardinal errors in corporate branding, corporate brand culture and in identity (taking insights from the corporate identity literature.) Five will be detailed here:

1. British Airways failed to make a distinction between the legal and emotional ownership of the brand (the latter encompassing not only customers and staff but by the nation as a whole)
2. Changes to the “corporate brand culture” cannot be achieved simply through management fiat by resorting to changes in visual identity and formal corporate communications.

3. The changes caused anxiety in terms of British identity and identification in terms of two key identity questions; “Who are we?” and “What are we now?” It came during a period when notions of Britishness were out of fashion (particularly traditional notions of Britishness.) It took an Australian CEO to reintroduce British visual symbolism as part of the airline’s system of visual identification. There are very few truly British brands that have an international presence, and as such, these change were seen in terms of an assault on national identity and culture.
4. Whereas the airline viewed its brand community as comprising its customers many UK subjects (including former Prime Minister Lady Thatcher) saw themselves as part of BA’s brand community.
5. It was not authentic. The notion that BA was “A citizen of the World” although a commendable aspiration did not reflect the nationality, language, home base, service delivery and cultural norms of the airline, which was (and remained) unquestionably British. The change of face had not, in reality, been underpinned by a change of heart and, most certainly, by a change of brand culture. Yet, it can be done. Cathay Pacific responded in the years leading up to the ending of colonial administration in Hong Kong embarked upon a radical reorientation of its brand culture. It metamorphosed from an airline with overtly British credentials to one that is was overtly Asian: this was not simply reflected in logotype, but in terms of the airline’s strong Asian credentials in terms of personnel, service delivery and languages etc.

**(b) Brand Architecture, Culture and Custodianship**

Complexity reveals itself in terms of the myriad of relationships in terms of ownership and use of the corporate brand. Such associations are more complicated than is sometimes realised.

Consider corporate brand ownership and custodianship in terms of the following cultural values associated with nationality and life-style etc values of the following corporate brands: Hilton (US/a quality hotel marque), Volvo (Sweden with an emphasis on safety), Rolls Royce (British, high quality and aristocratic), Brooks Brothers (US, Ivy League and Preppy), Ben and Jerry’s (US with strong environmental credentials).

Now ponder the following:

*Hilton* brand is used both by a US as well as a British corporation.

*Volvo* is not only an independent engineering and commercial vehicles corporation but also a corporate brand that is owned by Ford, which exclusively manufactures Volvo cars.

*Rolls Royce* refers to the huge, British owned, aero-engines group as well as to the famous car marque which is owned by the Bavarian car manufacturer BMW.

*Brooks Brothers* is a quintessential preppy and East-Coast (US) outfitter that was acquired by the UK's Marks and Spencer's: a brand that was long-associated with middle of the range clothes that offered value, quality. It was especially noted for the durability of its underwear),

*Ben and Jerry's* which is known for its environmental and ethical values is now owned by the Anglo-Dutch Unilever corporation which does not have such a strong pedigree in terms of the above concerns.

In the context of the above it is no surprise that the latter given rise to an increased interest in questions relating to corporate brand architecture (LaForet and Saunders, 1994; Kapferer, 1997; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000, Balmer and Gray 2003). Brand architecture refers to the relationships between corporate, company (subsidiary). What has become apparent however is that such relationships are no longer restricted within the confines of a single corporation but can boundary-span organisations and industries. The tripartite characterisation of brands as monolithic, endorsed or branded is simplistic in the extreme when account is taken of the myriad types of relationships that characterise the branding domain.

In this sense the notion of brand culture may be seen in terms of pan-corporate as well as pan-industrial relationships. I have identified six additional categories in addition to the monolithic, endorsed, and branded categories identified by Olins (1978). My additional categories are as follows: *Familial*, *Shared*, *Surrogate*, *Supra*, *Multiplex*, and *Federal* (see Balmer (in Balmer and Gray 2003 p.984). A brief description of the above categories is as follows:

(a) *Familial* (where two organisations in the same

industry sector share the same corporate brand such as Hilton where there is common ownership of the corporate brand by two entities: one in the UK and the other in the US),

(b) *Shared* (where two or more organisations share the same brand but operate in different sectors such as Rolls Royce cars/aero engines companies),

(c) *Surrogate* (where the corporate brand is licensed through franchise arrangements as with McDonalds and the Body Shop),

(d) *Supra* (a corporate brand as pertaining to a entities such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth or to a business alliance),

(e) *Multiplex* (a corporate brand that is used in multifarious sectors and where there can be shared ownership such as in the case of Virgin), and

(g) *Federal* (a distinct business entity and corporate brand that is underpinned by a federal business arrangement as with Airbus).

The incidence of multiple entities sharing the same corporate brand is more common than is sometimes appreciated. Such relationships have existed for some time and some can be quite complex as in the case of the Keiretsu notion in Japan, which, incidentally, is the model that underpins the Virgin Family of brands. It can also be found in relation to non-business contexts such as the "British" monarchy. This is because Queen Elizabeth is separately and divisibly Queen of no less than sixteen autonomous monarchies of which the United Kingdom is one. Others include Canada, New Zealand and Jamaica. Constitutional scholars describe the above in terms of one monarch but different monarchies. In a branding context I view the above phenomena in terms of *one corporate brand and one brand culture but a brand that has shared ownership and different constitutional rôles in national contexts.*

## CONCLUSION

Corporate brands are beginning to be explored in terms in terms of their distinctiveness vis a vis product brands in terms of their composition, management and complexity. Brands that draw not only on branding theory but also from the nascent fields of identity scholarship (corporate identity as well as organisational identity.) Moreover, notions of corporate brand

culture/corporate brand communities afford a powerful new lens through which to comprehend the vibrancy of corporate brands and their role as strategic resources.

The following represents my attempt to bring the strands of thought discussed in this article in the form of my definition of what a corporate brand is/is not.

*"A corporate brand refers to an organisation (or organisations) that has/have a distinguishing and widely known name and or marque which is equated with key values that are derived from and/or reflects the organisation's identity and multiple sub cultures. It also has an attendant brand culture/community that cuts across different stakeholder groups and whose brand loyalty is a powerful corporate asset. Corporate brands are historically rooted in the mix of values relating to a particular entity. Corporate brands and corporate identities are inextricably linked and are mutually dependant. However, once established, corporate brands can have a life and value that is separate and divisible from the identity that gave it life. As such, corporate brands are portable assets that can be bought, sold and borrowed. Corporate brand values underpin the organisation's (s') covenant with its stakeholders and need to be expressed via a variety of channels including the performance and delivery of products and services, company and employee behaviours as well as through formal communication channels. Corporate brands differ from product brands in that brand values need to be authentic rather than synthetic (as in the case of product brands), emotional ownership of the brand is stakeholder and network rather than company-based, there are multiple channels of communication (both formal and informal), and it needs to be managed and viewed as an integral part of corporate, rather than marketing strategy, with the Chief Operating Officer having the ultimate responsibility as the corporate brand manager."*

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