

# **Working Paper Series**

**Introducing the Notion of Identity Based Views of the Corporation**

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**INTRODUCING THE NOTION OF IDENTITY  
BASED VIEWS OF THE CORPORATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*I introduce the notion of **identity-based views of the corporation.**' I advance the view that the above will increasingly emerge as a key platform from which we can comprehend contemporary organisations (corporate identities), institutional brands (corporate brand identities) and stakeholder's affinities with the above (stakeholder identification). Building on my earlier work relating to the schools of thought relating to corporate identity (Balmer 1995) I re-categorise such schools in the context of the nascent literature on the area: the latter represents, in effect, a quadrivium based around notions of corporate identity as it relates to (i) the identity of an organisation (focusing on the juridical and economic foundations), (ii) identification from an organisation (focusing on the symbolic and promotional), (iii) identification with an organisation (focusing on the affective and personal) and (iv) collective identification to an organisational culture (focusing on the collective, emotional and cultural). I also advance the view that the above quadrivium is broadly applicable to notions of corporate brand identity and what I call **'identity based views of corporate branding.'***

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going To?"* is the evocative title of what is, arguably, Paul Gauguin's most celebrated painting. Executed on a large canvas, the painting shares certain similarities with corporate identity and identity studies generally. Both the painting and the area of identity studies demand that we step back in order to discern their geography, content, and significance. Both have multiple levels of meaning: they are a great deal more than the sum of their parts. The allegorical title of Gauguin's painting has another purpose in that it provides me with a ready made route map for this article. As such, I will reflect upon the past and present of corporate identity scholarship and will, in addition, contemplate on its future and which provides me with a platform to introduce my notion of **'identity based view(s) of the corporation.'**

Adopting a panoptic view of corporate identity seems apposite since this commentary appears on the tenth anniversary of what is arguably a momentous occasion: the first ever special edition of an academic journal (in the *European Journal of Marketing*) devoted to *corporate identity* (Balmer and Van Riel 1997).

In this article I draw on the marketing, management (along with other literatures) which has identity as their focus. The reclassification of the schools of thought relating to corporate identity develops my earlier work in this regard (Balmer 1995).

In the following section I provide a short overview of the various facets of identity studies in non marketing/management contexts as well as noting some parallels between them. This provides the context for an exegesis of the corporate identity construct which I hope will, in part, untie the Gordian knot.

## IDENTITY: THE BIG PICTURE

Contemplating the identity canvas reveals that many of the great themes of intellectual inquiry since time immemorial are related to identity. Identities, as many scholars attest, are complicated, multidimensional and protean in character; their importance means that they are impossible to ignore. We can see this in identity studies relating to gender, personality, religion, nationalism, among many other disciplines. Identities are powerful. More often than not deeper notions of identity mean that although they cannot be always be seen but *their power*

*can invariably be felt.* Indeed wars, revolutions, friendship, and alliances, more often than not have issues of identity, identification and non-identification at their core.

The primordial nature of identity has meant that it hardly surprising that questions of identity and identification have been accorded a good deal of importance of scholars from a variety of disciplines. The same is true for marketing and for the corporate identity concept. At the present time, corporate identity scholarship is undergoing a process of re examination especially in the context of other areas of identity scholarship (He and Balmer 2005, 2007). In addition, a process of re discovery is underway as we revisit and informed by early work on corporate identity: Taguiri's (1982) seminal paper on corporate identity and his examination of employee a identification being illustrative as is the case study work of Stephen Greyser, another Harvard academician, whose case histories invariably reveals the strategic nature of the field (Phillips and Greyser 2001). These early, and more recent, contributions to the genre reminds us that corporate identity scholarship has not, and is not, merely concerned with company logos and visual identity schemes (important thought they are!) Whilst, in common parlance corporate identity is aligned to visual this represents is a narrow conceptualisation of the territory (Balmer and Wilkinson 1991). Taking an historical perspective I am of the view that it is more apposite to regard it as an umbrella term encompassing multiple perspectives.

Returning to our big picture, it is apparent it that issues of identity are, and have been, an enduring concern not only to personal, national and group identities but also in terms of institutions and industries. In my discussion on individual and group identities I also make a bridge with our understanding of corporate identity.

## Individual Identity

Individual identity is (along with gender) the most *fundamental* of all identity types. In Sophocles tragedy *Oedipus Tryannos* (Oedopus the King) the King's angst over his own identity is one of the drama's critical themes. Another is the fact that the self is a composite of other identity types relating to class, ethnicity, family and territory among others (Smith 1991). Within marketing, recent scholarship of how individuals interpreted identities (especially brand identities) and how such identities became meaningful to the self has received particular attention in the recent

literature (Fournier 1998; Hatch and Rubin 2006; Otnes and Maclaran 2007). Often, identities are consumed and decoded in ways that are different from that which is intended by the organisation, its managers and via communications (Balmer and Greyser 2002; Holt 2002; Schroeder 2002).

### **Collective Identity**

British social psychologists Tajfel and Turner (1979) were the progenitors of what is called social identity theory and this theory has been shown to be highly salient to marketing scholars in terms of collective identity and identification. According to this theory, the self can be defined in terms of group membership (as well as non membership) and this sheds light on the collective behaviours and cognitions of customers and others. The recent literature discussing the phenomena of brand cultures and tribes is also informed by this perspective (Cova and Cova 2002; Balmer 2005; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2005). Group affinity is predicated on a number of factors including relative, prestige and the effect of exogenous factors such as changes in societal norms and precepts. This perspective is similar to an individual's national and cultural affiliations as observed by historians (Colley 1996) and scholars of nationality (Mayo 1974; Sahlins 1989). For instance, in the 18th century exogenous factors determined whether an individual affirmed that they were British or English (or Scottish or Welsh). A similar occurrence characterises collective affinity (and changes of the same) in religious contexts rather like the *Vicar of Bray* in the eponymous song of the same name.

### **Juridical and Cultural Identities**

In examining issues of identity my view is that a critical distinction is that between *juridical* and *cultural* notions of identity and I found that a similar separation can be found in research into ethnicity and nationality (Smith 1991). Meinecke (1908), for instance, suggested something similar and noted the vital difference between the *Staatsnation* (the nation state: *a legal identity*) and the *Kulturnation* (the ethnic community: *a cultural identity*). The former can be seen in terms of a juridical identity and the latter a cultural identity. Consider Canada as a juridical identity but one that embraces many ethnic groups and the Basques as a cultural identity but one that does not recognised in terms of a juridical identity in constitutional law.

Such a distinction characterises the marketing (*corporate identity*) and organisational behaviour (*organisational identity*) literatures.

Corporate identity owes a good deal to juridical (and equally perhaps economic) notions of identity. This is because institutions have articles of incorporation or other defining documents which (partly) define an entity's traits and encompasses issues of corporate ownership and governance, and will articulate organisational purposes and markets. Over time, other identity traits that are derived from corporate history and which may (in varying degrees) be reflected in strategic and in marketing plans (quality levels, corporate style, inheritance and consumer profiles etc) Corporate identity has an explicit corporate, strategic and external focus. Broadly speaking corporate identities can be altered, changed and managed.

Organisational identity, in contrast, owes a good deal to cultural notions of identity which, typically, regards institutions as socially constructed phenomena which is defined by an entity's culture/s. As such, organisational identity has a more overt cultural, employee, cultural and an internal focus. It is less amenable to being changed and controlled. It requires comprehension of collective groups and their values and is less susceptible to management fiat. Juridical and cultural identities should be viewed as *alto egos*. Although, in some organisations both identity types are tightly coupled this is not always the case. For instance, over the course an entity's evolution, cultural identities can boundary span juridical identities in institutional contexts (the franchise operations of McDonalds and the Body Shop for instance) and juridical identities may boundary span multiple cultural identities (Volkswagen as the juridical owner of the Bentley automotive company and corporate brand).

### **Identity and Multiplicity**

Invariably, corporate and cultural identities are characterised by their multiplicity and there is a good deal of interpenetration between different identity types and modes of identity: quite often these draw on identity types beyond corporate and organisational identities. *Individual identities* can shape corporate identity (consider Lord Reith at the BBC and the establishment of Reithian values). *National identities* can infuse institutional identities (consider the strong US identity that characterises Coca Cola). Also consider how issues of *class identity* have underpinned the Co-op Movement (working class) and Royal Ascot

(aristocratic). Identities relating to *gender* can be important: consider the importance of male identity to an ancient institution such as the Japanese monarchy. *Religious identity* can also be important as illustrated by the catholic/protestant divide that respectively characterises the two Glasgow football clubs of Celtic Rangers (Calvanistic) and Glasgow Rangers (Catholic).

Of course, corporate identities can, equally, have a profound influence on a nation's identity (consider the importance of Nokia to the Finnish psyche and national identity).

Another key aspect of identity's multiplicity relates to the *temporal dimensions of identity*: identities can inhabit past, present and future times frames as Balmer's acid test has shown (Balmer and Soenen 1998; Balmer and Greyser 2002).

### Issues of identification

Finally, this short synopsis of identity in the round reveals that the concepts of *identity* (the essence of a person, group, entity or entities) and *identification* (from and to an organisation) are of importance.

Although the literature on organisational behaviour asserts that identification is primarily concerned with group (or individual) identification to a culture/corporation marketing scholars also use the word to describe how an institution conveys its espoused sense of corporate self *via* forms of identification relating to graphic design, advertising, corporate architecture and so on. For this reason, the characterisation of identification as used by organisational behaviourists this can be highly problematic for marketing scholars. As such a degree of circumspection needs to be made in its use in marketing contexts. As such, marketing scholars need to be reminded that identification can:

#### *Identification **from** the corporation*

- (a) Refer to the coordinated use of formal communications and symbolism (especially the visual) in projecting the ideal corporate self in a uniformed form to customers and other stakeholders. (*Such a perspective has traditionally informed marketing scholarship*).

#### *Identification **with** the corporation*

- (b) Refer to the feelings and degree of affinity (positive, negative and ambivalent) held by a group (or individual) towards a particular entity. (*Such a perspective has traditionally informed scholarship in organisational*

*behaviour/management studies generally*).

### Image and Identity

An abiding problem relating to corporate identity research is the relationship between image and identity. Corporate identity scholarship has followed a similar pattern of development that characterised the psychological study of individual identity (Bromley 2001; Balmer 1998). Initially, (in the 1930s) psychologists defined individual personality in terms of the impression and individual makes on others (Bromley 1993). In the 1950s psychologists began to focus on personality traits and defined personality in terms of *what a person really is* (Campbell and Fiske 1959). Corporate identity scholarship also initially focused on image projection (Kennedy 1977; Abratt 1989) and then focused on the tangible aspects of identity or *what an organisation really is* (Balmer 1995; Gray et al 1998; Marwick and Fill 2001).

### Working definitions of identity and identification

In examining the historiography of the concept I conclude that it is more appropriate to regard it as an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of conceptualisations. As such, uncovering these various strands of thought may, and in examining the various facets of corporate identity might, at first sight, appear to be akin to untying the Gordian knot (Balmer and Greyser 2003 p. 33).

However, with marketing colleagues and scholars firmly in my sight, I adopt the following, parsimonious fourfold definitions and schools of thought relating to identity and identification:

1. identity **of** an organisation  
(foci: *juridical/economic and corporate*)  
*Underlying Question: What are we?*
2. identification **from** an organisation  
(foci: *the symbolic and promotional*)  
*Underlying Question: What do we espouse we are?*
3. individual identification **with** an organisation  
(foci: *affective and personal*)  
*Underlying Questions: How do I relate to the organisation?*  
And  
*(can also relate to Who am I-in relation to an organisation?*
4. collective identification **to** an organisation  
culture

(foci: emotional/cultural and collective)  
 Underlying Question: Who are we (in relation to an organisational/organisational related culture)?

The four definitions will also inform my examination of corporate identity and as such, like scholars of old, represents a *quadrivium* by which we can advance and deepen our comprehension of the field. In meeting the demands of this syllabus I draw on Gauguin's masterpiece in order to provide us with our route map in relation to corporate and other identities in organisational contexts viz: "*Where Do We Come From? Where Are We? Where Are We Going To?*"

The next section examines the corporate identity concept in earnest by taking a retrospective of its development.

#### WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

**Foci: *1st School of Thought-Identification FROM the organisation***  
**And**  
***2nd School of Thought-Identity OF the organisation***

##### *1st School of Thought-Identification from the organisation*

For the most part, corporate identity has been narrowly conceived in terms of visual symbolism (Balmer and Wilkinson 1991).

In common parlance, corporate identity refers to an institution's system of visual identification (and, in particular, an entity's defining mark/logo and visual style including architecture etc). However, organisations do of course marshal a variety of communications channels to create awareness, distinctiveness and interest in the body corporate including advertising, architecture, music, public relations and so on. Perhaps the finest example of this was the pre-conciliar catholic church whose liturgies were a full sensory experience in that care was taken to communicate with all the senses to foster a sense of its corporate self, beliefs and of the divine (Balmer 1998). There is much that can be learnt from the catholic church about *how to* and *how not to* manage and nurture corporate identity and identification.

Scholars have for some time investigated broader notions of identification and symbolic management especially in terms of corporate image formation, image projection, customer perception and corporate associations and where a broader approach to symbolic management is

stressed (Kennedy 1977, Gray and Smeltzer 1985, Abratt 1991, Dowling 1993, Gray and Balmer 1998, Stuart 1999, Abratt and Mofokeng 2001, Dacin and Brown 2002).

Although a good deal of this literature is concerned with projecting the 'ideal self' to internal and external audiences via symbolic means a number of scholars have argued that serious account should be given to corporate activities, behaviours and relationships (Taguiri 1982; Grunig 1993, Balmer 1998; 2001).

However, it has the importance of visual identification that has received the greatest recognition within the marketing literature. Building on the earlier explanation cited above it can also be said that corporate marks not only denote ownership and differentiation but may also connote the organisation's reputation, values and standards. This aspect of corporate identity has a considerable provenance.

For instance, in European contexts corporate coats of arms being invested with considerable commercial, economic and, significantly, juridical importance since the 15th century when the first Courts of Heraldry began to appear. The Law of heraldry views coats of arms as inheritable property and Courts of Heraldry remain an integral part of the legal systems of both England and Scotland (Innes 1978; Slater 2005). The Law of Heraldry may be viewed as an early form of trademark law and, in effect, a quasi court of marketing. Organisations, such as the University of Strathclyde (Baker and Balmer 1997) still petition such courts for a full grant of arms whilst others seek legal redress to protect their use such as a famous case brought by the City of Manchester (Slater 2005). Scottish legal officers are especially active in bringing organisations such as car manufacturers and football clubs into line who have failed to matriculate their Shields of Arms (Bruce et al 1999).

Aside from the heraldic design vernacular we can see a broader interpretation of the above in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries corporations used visual identity both as a way of achieving differentiation and as one means to build their corporate brands. Inspired, in part, by England's Arts and Crafts Movement which fostered the notion of total design integration many British (The Great Western Railway, London Transport) and Continental Corporations (including the corporate behemoths of AEG, and Olivetti) used graphic design in order to achieve differentiation,

to project and image and to enhance corporate brand identity (Cumming and Kaplan 1991; Balmer and Greyser 2003; Jeremy 1998; Olins 1978).

Until the mid 1970s, (in British and Commonwealth contexts) the phrase House Style was used to describe an entity's visual style but the phrase gradually fell into abeyance with the introduction of the corporate identity concept by US graphic design consultant Walter Margulies in 1964 (Balmer and Greyser 2003). As such corporate identity is something of a doppelganger in that it is used to refer to an organisation's distinctive traits as well as to its visual house style: the latter being reinforced by the notion that a symbol can in some magical way encapsulate the whole idea of the organisation (Olins 1989).

However, visual identification was to receive a fillip as a consequence of the work of English Economist Boulding (1956) and through the research work of Martineau (1958, 1958a) undertaken in association with the *Chicago Tribune*. These authors made the a priori link between perception and behaviour and others used this work to assert a coordinated system of visual identification could create a stereotype image on the part of an institution's stakeholders. In short, the view began to take hold that visual identification could influence both perception and behaviour. For instance, Margulies (1977) in his celebrated *HBR* article defined corporate identity as the sum of all the ways a company *chooses* to identify itself to all its publics. The above perspective characterises a good deal of literature on visual identity both in the UK (Blake 1971; Olins 1979; Pilditch 1971) and in North America (Garbett 1988; Napoles 1988; Chajet and Shachtman 1998). In more general and less effusive terms, the importance of visual identity as part of a corporation's corporate communications efforts has also characterized academic writing on the area (Abratt 1989; Baker and Balmer 1999; Dowling 2001, Gray and Smeltzer 1985, Melewar *et al* 2001, Henderson *et al* 2003 Van den Bosch *et al* 2006). Van Riel *et al* 2001).

### *2nd School of Thought- Identity of the organisation*

Over the last decade or more, a deeper comprehension of corporate identity has taken hold with many marketing scholars defining corporate identity in terms an organisation's distinctive traits: traits that make one corporation different from another (Balmer 1995, Balmer and Greyser 2002, Bick, *et al* 2003, Bronn *et al* 2006, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

Among the most important traits identified by scholars are those relating to strategy, structure, culture and company history (Balmer 2002, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997). These organisational characteristics bestow the corporation with specificity, stability and coherence (Moingeon and Ramanantsoa 1997, Larçon and Reitter 1979).

The Swedish notion of 'the business concept' (BC) represents a not dissimilar viewpoint from the perspective outlined above. Having its roots in the work of Norman (1977) and expounded more fully by Alvesson (1998). For instance it takes a holistic view of the nature of the organisation, its products and services along with the markets in which it operates. The benefits of the BC according to Alvesson (1998) may be summarised in that it is: (a) *analytical* (determining the nature of the corporation and its operations); (b) *integrative* (unity of purpose throughout an entity and instilling a sense of belonging among employees); (c) *controlling* (as a guide to management decisions and actions); (d) *corporate communications and image* (transmitting an institutions purpose, essence and ethos to customers and stakeholders). Should also be based on fact.

It has been observed (He and Balmer 2005, 2007) that this more holistic approach to corporate identity is analogous to the characterisation of identity as advanced by Albert and Whetten (1985): the latter concluded that every entity is imbued with identity *anchors* that are central (inimitable organisational traits), distinctive (differentiated from similar entities) and enduring (stable over time).

Across a range of related areas, scholars have noted the centrality of corporate identity to our comprehension and the general management of corporate communications (VanRiel 1995), corporate reputation (Fombrun 1996), and corporate brands (Balmer 1998).

According to Balmer (2001a) this view of corporate identity (identity of the organisation) is characterised by its *complexity* (it is a multifaceted and multidimensional construct), *variability* (corporate identities are not sclerotic: they evolve) and *heterogeneity* (they are informed by multidisciplinary perspectives). It would also seem that corporate identities are contingent (in part draws on other identities) and relational (defined by making reference to other identities: not simply in terms of what we are but what we are *not*.)

Within the broader management literature there are parallels with the above perspective. For instance, The facts that determine an institution's identity are many and varied and include a variety of elements (Pugh 1973) including its origin and history; the mode of ownership; market position, assets and size; the range of goods and services offered (including quality); location and interdependence (the degree to which the entity is dependant upon customers, shareholders, government, suppliers etc for its survival and success)

Argyris and Schon (1978) in elucidating how a corporation may be understood concluded that an institution can be (a) a government or polis (b) an agency or (c) a task system. In the context of corporate identity as referring to the distinct characteristics of organisation it has more in common with their second definition: (b). As such the establishment of an entity (of whatever type) is the solution to a particular problem, market need/opportunity: the establishment of low cost carrier such as Easy Jet and the institution of Harvard Business School are cases in point. With regard to the latter, although there have been many changes since its formation in terms of faculty, syllabus and modes of delivery its broad mission, organisational structures and setting (among other things) remains unchanged.

#### **WHERE ARE WE?**

**Foci:** ***3rd School of Thought-Stakeholder Identification with the organisation and The 4th School of Thought-Collective Stakeholder Identification to a Cultural Identity.***

At the present time, marketing scholars are according increasingly importance to what I call stakeholder identification. My characterization of stakeholder identification is somewhat broader than the traditional conceptualisation of an

individual's and a group's identification with an institution or to a cultural identity. For the main, the literature has largely focused on employee identification and to a lesser extent customer identification. Issues of collective identification (for instance in relation to corporate brand communities, culture and tribes) are likely to emerge of increased importance; such notions challenge traditional notions relating to the consumption of corporate identities and corporate brands. In this discussion I make a divide between individual stakeholder identification and collective identification. Both afford distinct perspectives on corporate identities and corporate brands.

#### *3rd School of Thought: Individual Stakeholder Identification with the organisation*

An individual's identification with an entity is predicated upon what is believed and/or known about an organisation (Taguiri 1982; He and Balmer 2004, 2007). Such identification occurs among customers and other external and internal stakeholders. As such, stakeholder identification towards an entity is important since this is manifest in cognitive state can be positive, negative or ambivalent. An individual's cognition of a corporation is important since perception effects behaviour (Boulding 1956) and also materially influences how a customer (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) or an employee relates to, or defines the self with a corporation (Dutton and Harquail 1994). In addition, individual can also have identification with different corporate philosophies that reflect past and current organisational traits (corporate identities) as research with the BBC has shown (Balmer and Wilson 1998). The perspective outlined here is related to, but is different from, group identification with an entity (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Brown et al 2006.)

#### *4th School of Thought: Collective Stakeholders' identification to a corporate culture*

This aspect of identification has as its focus the identification with a corporate culture rather than with the corporation *per se*.

Having its origins in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) it can be argued that stakeholder identification - encompassing customer identification (Bhattacharya et al 1995; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and employee identification (Ashforth and Mael 1985) - relates to how individuals define themselves through their espoused affiliation with others in a social group relating to an organisation. The recent literature has embraced both customer and

employee perspectives on the area and has argued the efficacy of such an approach (He and Balmer 2004, 2007; Brown *et al* 2006; Cardador and Pratt 2006).

*My view* is that a more catholic interpretation of the above is likely to be efficacious: what I call *collective stakeholder identification to a corporate culture*.

These cultural groups are defined by comparative and relational cognitive states with other ('out') groups. Such membership is influenced by self esteem, as well as by cognitive and affective states. Company stakeholders, as members of a corporate culture affirm their strong identification to a corporation by emphasising commonalities with other members of the cultural grouping as well as highlighting their differences with so-called 'out groups' (Tajfel and Turner's 1985; Holt 1995; Donovan *et al* 2006).

To me it seems logical to assume that an individual's membership of such a group is not fixed however in that individuals may migrate to other groups in order to leverage self esteem and self-identity. This is a somewhat different notion of Maffesoli's (1996) notion of organisational tribes which represent a somewhat temporary type of affiliation on the part of customers and others.

Collective identification is more likely to occur when such associations are linked to prestige (Pratt 1998) and where, in addition, it is distinctive and of high saliency to group members (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Holt 1995). Specifically (within marketing contexts) the above approach is not dissimilar to notions of relationship marketing (e.g., Gummesson 1994, Morgan and Hunt 1994) which is based on the underlying premise that customers, employees and stakeholder should be regarded as *organisational partners*: stakeholders being viewed more as organisational actors rather than as passive corporate audiences.

#### **WHERE ARE WE GOING TO?**

Contemplating the future always needs to be tempered with a good deal of circumspection but I believe that there are enough indicators to indicate that (what I call) a **identity based view of corporate brands** will emerge as a highly salient feature of marketing scholarship and practice. In part, this takes account of the increasing attention accorded in the literature to corporate brands along with the importance

accorded to institutional brands by captains of industry and policy advisors generally (Aaker 2004; Balmer, 1995; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Keller and Lehmann, 2005; Knox and Bickerton, 2003;). As such, there appears to be a *prima facie* case for applying the *quadrivium* articulated earlier to corporate brand identity and corporate brand identification ('an identity-based view of corporate brands) viz:

- 1 identity **of** a corporate brand  
(foci: *juridical/economic and corporate*)  
*Underlying Question: What is the corporate brand covenant?*
- 2 identification **from** a corporate brand  
(foci: *the symbolic and promotional*)  
*Underlying Question: What does the corporate brand espouse to be?*
- 3 individual identification **with** a corporate brand  
(foci: *affective and personal*)  
*Underlying Questions: How do I relate to the corporate brand?*  
*And*  
*(can also relate to Who am I-in relation to the corporate brand?)*
- 4 collective identification **to** a corporate brand culture  
(foci: *emotional/cultural and collective*)  
*Underlying Question: Who are we (in relation to a corporate brand/corporate brand culture)?*

Space does not permit a detailed examination of the four identity types articulated above in relating to corporate brands other than to note that in the marketing literature a distinct contribution has been made to No 4 (collective identification). This can be seen in relation to the literature on consumer/*brand tribes* (Cova and Cova 2001, 2002; Kozinets, *et al* 2007) and *brand communities* (Muniz, and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002, Balmer 2005). It should also be noted that the current literature takes a holistic approach to brand tribes whereas I adopt a more focused approach in that I specifically focus on corporate brands/

In articulating the differences between corporate brand tribes and corporate brand communities it can be noted that whereas corporate brand communities tend to be homogenous in form but are not prescribed by geographical boundaries

(Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). They have a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions. Their counterparts, corporate brand tribes, tend to be smaller, more heterogeneous and less-permanent in character (Cova and Cova 2001, 2002).

Notions of corporate brand tribes and communities also require marketing scholars, and others, to reconsider what is meant by a stakeholder since membership of such collective groups may include those who do not neatly fall into one stakeholder group or another. Brand tribes and cultures associated with the British Crown and Manchester United are illustrative of this. For instance, many individuals outside the UK and the Commonwealth may be seen to be part of the brand culture of the British Crown but in constitutional (and even historical terms) be devoid of any relationship with the Crown. In addition, in international contexts, supporters of Manchester United Football club even though they have never been present at a football match and where the entity receives little in the way of material benefit.

The critical importance of corporate brand cultures can be seen with regard to organisations who rely to a considerable degree have franchise operations such as the Body Shop or who have a multiplex corporate branding structure such as Virgin. As such personnel may feel part of a corporate brand community even though they are employed by another entity. In the same terms a customer may have a close affinity to a corporate brand community but is unaware of the identities that underpin the corporate brand (this is only likely to emerge when a complaint it made!) As such, it is important to take cognisance of both identification with an entity as well as with a corporate brand.

Making the distinction between corporate and brand identity and identification highlight the importance in making a distinction between the strategic and institutional aspects of identity along with its cultural and individual/group perspective of the same.

#### **Reflections on the corporate identity canvas**

In gradually apply my final brush strokes to this paper and in contemplating the broad identity canvas that has been surveyed I believe that although there are reasons to be doleful in musing on the past there are also many reasons why corporate identity scholars should be both hopeful and well as cheerful.

#### *Reasons to be doleful*

Over the last decade, corporate identity scholars have (and continue to face) a number of trials and tribulations: not unlike Tantalus who was punished by the Gods in being barred from seizing what could so clearly be seen. Then, as now, corporate identity can still be narrowly conceptualised in terms of graphic design; more recently it has been obfuscated by the literature on organisational identity/identification. For some, corporate identity is little more than a minor part of the marketing communications mix. The failure, by some marketing scholars, to studiously ignore the distinct tradition of corporate identity scholarship within the UK, the Commonwealth and Continental Europe is a worrying (recent) development within the literature. Another are those marketing scholars who have turned their back on their marketing inheritance (owing to the stronger theoretical basis on organisational behaviour and the firmer basis of identity scholarship from that tradition) and have wholeheartedly embraced identity studies from the perspective of organisational behaviour: seemingly they have attempted to pulled down what they should have devotedly built up. Although employees are of especial importance, customers and other stakeholders are equally so (and in many regards considerably more so): such perspectives go beyond the traditional remit of scholars of organisational behaviour. Of course, this is a classic case of social identity theory where individuals have altered allegiance to a social grouping for reasons of prestige and career advance.

#### *Reasons to be hopeful*

However, there are reasons to up-beat. Corporate identity has begun to enter the mainstream of marketing thought as reference to leading journals in Europe and the US testify (Balmer and Greyser 2002, Simoes and Dibb 2005). Increasingly it is the case that other perspectives, other than the important graphic design perspective, is beginning to inform our comprehension of corporate identity in the marketing literature. Moreover, what I call identity-based views of the corporation/corporate brands is (implicitly rather than explicitly) beginning to enjoy considerable currency. Moreover, the introduction of courses that in whole, or in part, that focus on corporate identity/corporate brand identity have been introduced at a number of business schools (such courses were, of course, offered at Harvard and Strathclyde Business Schools in the 1990s) represent important developments as is the

increased number of special editions devoted to the area by marketing journals such as the EJM.

*Reasons to be cheerful*

Paul Gauguin's painting is not unlike a triptych: each of the three paintings parts is meaningful in itself but, when all three perspectives are scrutinised and additional *fourth, dimension* can often be discerned which represents the sum of its parts. In terms of identity studies this has led me to the conclusion that we are at the point when a further, critical, breakthrough in our discernment of corporate identity starts to surface and as such reveals the efficacy of adopting (what I call) *identity based views of the corporation*. (Analogous to this perspective is the field of corporate branding and here I am of the view that identity based views of corporate branding are also applicable).

Such a perspective is exciting because it has the potential to illuminate our comprehension of both corporate identity along with corporate brand identity in terms of their traits; their espoused identities (identification from such identities); individual and collective stakeholder identification with the corporate identities and corporate brands (identification with such identities) and stakeholder identification to the cultures of both corporate identities and corporate brands.

**CONCLUSION**

Over the last decade our discernment of corporate identity has become translucent and, it has to be admitted, more complicated in addition.

Looking to the future it is clear that there is still a good deal to be done by corporate identity scholars but we should also be pleased that so much has been achieved and take succour from the fact that it is common for big ideas start life on the fringes of debate.

Ten years on it becomes apparent that corporate identity is rather more than meets the eye: it has greater breadth, depth and meaning; very much like Gauguin's painting of course!

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