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## **Managerial corporate brand orientation: explication, significance, and antecedents.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Formally introduces, and explicates, the nature, significance, and antecedents, of managerial corporate brand orientation notion. Emphasizes that managerial corporate identification is a key precursor of managerial corporate brand orientation and is an incontrovertible requisite for a strong, and authentic, organisational-wide corporate brand orientation. Because of critically important bi-lateral, and synergistic, corporate brand/corporate identity relationships, managerial corporate brand orientation requires a dual corporate brand/corporate identity managerial identification. Enunciates the importance of social identity theory to managerial identification. Articulates a basic three stage process underpinning managerial corporate brand orientation which entails: managerial comprehension of the corporate brand/corporate identity; managerial perceptions of the corporate brand/corporate identity; and managerial identifications with the corporate brand/corporate identity. Given the on-going custodial and leadership roles of managers in nurturing a corporate brand-based organisational philosophy and culture, the article deliberates on the importance of recruitment, induction, training, acculturation, appraisal/ promotion, in fostering managerial corporate brand orientation.

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## **Managerial corporate brand orientation: explication, significance, and antecedents.**

### **Introduction**

The primary purposes of this article are to formally introduce, and elucidate, the managerial corporate brand orientation notion; to articulate the interrelatedness of social identity with corporate brand orientation; and to emphasize the importance of managerial corporate brand identification. Mindful of the strategic significance of corporate brands, along with the critical, and obligatory, corporate brand stewardship and leadership roles of managers, it is argued that *managerial corporate brand orientation* is of incontestable importance for the establishment of a corporate brand-focussed organisational philosophy and culture (a corporate brand orientation in other words). As argued in this article, the absence of a bona-fide managerial corporate brand orientation is likely to militate against the establishment of a strong, and authentic, organisational-wide corporate brand orientation.

Whilst the extant literature on corporate brand orientation focusses on organisational members per se (Balmer 2013; Balmer and Podnar 2021), this article, with its focus on managers and on corporate brands, formally introduces and explicates the critically important, but overlooked, dimension of “managerial corporate brand orientation”. Thus, a core premise of this article is to highlight the importance of managers in being corporate brand orientated. The approach enunciated in this article appreciates that managerial corporate brand orientation requires executives to understand their leadership role in nurturing a corporate brand focussed culture and philosophy; necessitates managers to view their organisation’s corporate brand as a strategic resource; and obliges executives to be cognisant how corporate brand management is a critical strategic management imperative. Given the above, it is incontrovertible that managerial corporate brand orientation is often a fundamental organisational requisite.

To reiterate, while the extant corporate brand orientation literature recognises the importance of employee corporate brand identification (Balmer 2013; Balmer and Podnar 2021) this article also shines a light on the necessity of managerial corporate brand orientation. These sentiments are in accord with the foundational literature on corporate brands:

“An essential element of corporate branding is the need for total organizational commitment”.  
(Balmer 2001b. p.3).

The article continues by outlining the nature of corporate brands; enunciating the importance of corporate brand management; explicating the logic of a managerial corporate brand orientation; enumerating how a

managerial corporate brand orientation can boundary span organisations; discussing the broader corporate brand orientation notion; explaining the importance of social identity theory apropos managerial corporate brand orientation and articulating managerial corporate brand orientation antecedents. The article concludes by delineating the paper's theoretical contribution; elucidating the management implications flowing from this article; identifying militating factors against managerial corporate brand orientation; and suggesting avenues for further research.

## **Overview**

### **Understanding corporate brands and their importance**

Although it has long been appreciated that brands can be meaningful at the product and services levels, the realization that brands could have an applicability to organisations in their entirety (corporate brands) is a comparatively recently phenomenon (cf. Balmer, 2010). Thus, the corporate brand management literature can still be regarded as nascent.

Whilst the formal introduction of the corporate brand notion occurred in the mid-1990s (Balmer, 1995), considerable indifference was initially shown towards the area from circa 1995-2005 by scholars and practitioners alike. Because of this, the foundational literature on the territory is frequently ignored and has resulted in some scholars and practitioners holding the view that the first articles in the field were penned in the decade following the turn of the millennium.

However, the foundational literature on corporate brands was highly mindful of the fact that as a distinct branding category, the corporate brand notion required a radical rethinking of the brand concept (cf. Balmer, 1995, 2001b). From the outset there was a growing appreciation by a few scholars that not only were corporate brands of considerable strategic importance but, moreover, came with a realization that corporate brands, in so many regards, represented the most powerful and important form of branding (Balmer, 1995, Balmer, 2001b, Balmer and Gray, 2003).

The growing realization of the importance of corporate brands was of significance for another, highly significant, reason. Seemingly, the earliest form of branding-as existed in antiquity-focused on corporate rather than on product brands. For instance, it has been shown that during the time of the Roman Empire small scale businesses (wine merchants, potters, bakers etc.) utilized and invested in corporate branding. Arguably, it was only during the British Industrial Revolution onwards that product brands became important (cf. Balmer, 2010). Moreover, in recent times, with the establishment of marketing as a discipline, there was an undue product marketing focus and this resulted, in effect, in a corporate marketing myopia. Thus, insufficient importance was accorded to stakeholders, to corporate identity, corporate image and reputation, corporate communication, and, significantly, to corporate brands (cf. Balmer, 2011).

With the increased importance accorded to corporate brands from the mid-1990s onwards (Balmer, 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Hatch and Schultz, 2001), senior managers slowly began to appreciate the strategic significance of their organisation's corporate brand. This came with an appreciation of their obligations to build, as well as nurture, their corporate brands (Balmer, 2001b; Balmer et al. 2017). Furthermore, there was a gradual discernment that corporate brands constituted a new and meaningful means by which companies and stakeholders could have mutually enduring and profitable interactions and relationships (Balmer, 2012a).

### **Distinguishing features of corporate brands**

Whilst all brands share certain commonalities, a corporate brand has certain, distinguishing, attributes.

Unlike product brands, corporate brands have an explicit stakeholder focus; are multidisciplinary in scope and are informed by a corporate marketing perspective (Balmer, 1995, 2010, 2012a).

At its heart a corporate brand represents an informal contract (sometimes termed a covenant) linking companies and their stakeholders and, of course, vice versa (Balmer, 2001a; 2001b; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Greyser, 2003). Therefore, a corporate brand can be viewed as a powerful navigational tool that is meaningful to a miscellany of stakeholder such as customers, and existing and prospective employees etc. (Balmer and Gray, 2003).

Given the bi-lateral nature of the corporate brand promise it is useful to consider *the two forms of ownership that characterise corporate brands*. At its core, the incontestable value of a corporate brand is to be found in the *emotional ownership* of a corporate brand by customer and other stakeholders (including internal stakeholders) and this can be compared with a corporate brand's *legal ownership*, which is vested in an organisation. Necessarily, the legal ownership of corporate brands by an organisation requires there to be on-going corporate brand stewardship on the part of managers (Balmer, 2010, 2012a, 2012b).

Whereas product brands are underpinned by *product identities* and service brands by a *service identities*, equally corporate brands have *corporate identities* as their bases. Corporate identity here should not be equated with visual identity and with company logos and the like but, rather, with the key, defining and distinguishing organisational traits relating to what an organisation makes, what it does and how it behaves. Consequently, it is an organisation's corporate identity that delivers the corporate brand promise (Balmer, 2012a, 2012b).

There are other distinguishing factors of corporate brands. Employees, for example, are of central importance in delivering the corporate brand promise (Balmer, 1995, 2001b). All employees have responsibility for the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001b, 2012a, 2012b). Consequently, an organisation should

have a corporate culture which is orientated around the corporate brand (Balmer, 2013). Thereby, organisational members should modify their behaviours so that they correspond to the corporate brand (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001).

In terms of stewardship the corporate brand is a senior management concern with the CEO being the de facto corporate brand manager (Balmer, 1995).

### **Corporate brand management matters**

Corporate brands serve as valuable cornerstones for companies, customers, and other stakeholders, and habitually have a vital role in terms of corporate navigation, positioning, and communication (Balmer 2001a; 2001b). Powerful corporate brands not only create value for companies and financial value for shareholders, but give emotional and promissory value, for customers and other stakeholders. For individuals, corporate brands also provide platforms on which social identities are formed; self-definitional meaning is created, and on which individual identities are shaped.

Habitually, a corporate brand can be an organisation's most valuable, powerful, and durable, strategic asset. Additionally, corporate brands can have considerable financial value for organisations. As powerful, sometimes flexible, strategic assets, corporate brands can be bought, sold, and borrowed (Balmer 2005). For customers, and other stakeholders, a corporate brand can have meaningful emotional value. Whilst employee corporate brand identification (Balmer 2013; Balmer and Podnar 2021), is of unquestionable importance to corporate brand orientation, it is a frequently overlooked fact, and desideratum, for there to be collective *managerial corporate brand identification* and, moreover, *collective managerial corporate brand orientation* too.

Owing to the strategic importance of corporate brands, corporate brand stewardship is a senior management concern and, to repeat, the CEO is the de facto corporate brand manager (Balmer 1995; 2001b).

Therefore, managers have constantly to be mindful of their responsibilities apropos an organisation's purposes, objectives, strategy, and of course in meeting the expectations of customers and other stakeholders as encapsulated in the corporate brand promise. Therefore, a corporate brand custodial role requires managers to nurture, and burnish, their corporate brands so it remains relevant, and attractive, for customers/stakeholders. Importantly, according to the precepts of corporate marketing, it also must be profitable and valuable for the organisation.

As has already been inferred earlier, corporate brand management is a complicated task since a strong corporate brand requires management to realise multiple dynamic alignments as evinced in the ACID Test of corporate brand management diagnostic framework (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). Thus, managers need to coordinate the many disciplines, and activities, of the organisation so they are dynamically calibrated with the corporate brand and, sometimes, vice versa (Balmer 1995; 2001a; 2012b).

Consequently, corporate brand management requires executives to ensure there is a meaningful bi-lateral corporate identity/corporate brand dovetailing and mindfulness of corporate marketing precepts (Balmer 2001a, 2001b, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012a). Furthermore, where there is organisational amenability to the precepts of corporate marketing this can provide a useful, and effective, buttress in effecting an organisation-wide corporate brand orientation. *Why is this the case?* This is because corporate marketing, because of its explicit organisational, stakeholder, trans-temporal, and Ethical/CSR foci provides an effective platform on which corporate identity, corporate communication, corporate communications, corporate image/reputation and, of course, corporate branding can be integrated (Balmer 2013).

Although the foundational articles on corporate brands stressed the importance of managers in corporate brand building, this article accentuates, and reiterates, the significance of management and leadership apropos corporate brands. As such, it stresses that a genuine corporate brand orientation requires senior managers to view their organisation's corporate brand as a strategic resource and, consequently, corporate brand management as strategic imperative (Balmer 2012a, 2012b). Thus, a corporate brand orientation needs to be reflected in an organisational-wide corporate brand orientated culture and philosophy (Balmer 2013) *and requires management identification with the corporate brand*. If managers meaningfully identify with a corporate brand their decisions, behaviours, and mind-set are more likely to be corporate brand orientated. It should not be forgotten that strong, and meaningful, corporate brands have the potential to serve customer and stakeholder needs and desires and, additionally, create stakeholder and shareholder value in the widest sense of the word. Consequently, corporate brand management, and the development of strong and sustainable corporate brands, represents a powerful means by which an organisation can be attractive, resilient, and profitable.

### **Managerial corporate brand orientation**

Managerial corporate brand orientation occurs when corporate brand values and promise underpin, the cognitions, leadership, actions, and communications etc. of executives. Critically, a managerial corporate brand orientation functions as a powerful, and unifying, mechanism whereby managers' actions, strategies, and even CEO vision, among other elements, are corporate brand orientated. Consequently, the corporate brand promise/covenant provides an effective benchmark against which, management strategies, decisions, actions, and behaviours can be appraised. For managers, mindfulness of a corporate brand's values can have significant normative and regularising worth. Moreover, it serves as an exemplar for (non-managerial) employee corporate brand orientation.

It should not be forgotten that managers have an important leadership role in fostering, and in instilling a corporate brand orientation throughout an organisation. Without a strong managerial corporate brand orientation, the materialisation of a compelling, and resilient, organisational corporate brand orientation is improbable. Given that a corporate brand orientation informs, as well as guides, the organisation's purposes, ethos, culture, and activities, the necessity for a resilient, managerial, corporate brand orientation is irrefutable.

Furthermore, given it is the responsibility of managers to guide the organisation and to give organisational direction managers should lead by example. Thus, if it is expected that rank and file staff should be orientated towards the organisation's corporate brand it seems a logical pre-requisite that managers should also be meaningfully orientated towards the corporate brand.

### **Managerial corporate brand orientation boundary spans organisations and may require multiple managerial orientations**

Managerial corporate brand orientation often boundary spans organisations and can traverse many entities. This is because a significant number of corporate brands inhabit more than one organisation (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer 2012a).

Consider the *Rolls Royce*, *Virgin*, and *Yamaha* corporate brands, all of which traverse more than one entity. Moreover, given the widespread use of corporate brand franchising (*viz: Coca Cola, Hilton Hotels, McDonalds, Subway*), this means that numerous organisations operate under a common corporate brand.

Given the above, there is a requirement for a common, cross-organisational, managerial corporate brand orientation to subsist in those entities operating under the same corporate brand name.

Furthermore, for organisations operating under a franchise, managers may be required to demonstrate a dual managerial corporate brand orientation. As such, they may be required to have a managerial corporate brand orientation towards the organisation which employs them as well as an orientation towards the customer-facing franchise corporate brand. Such a situation is common in the hospitality sector where franchising is a common occurrence (*viz: Hilton*). An analogous occurrence occurs when there is an endorsed corporate brand which requires managerial fealty to two corporate brands which typically is the parent corporate brand and subsidiary corporate brand (*viz: Courtyard by Hilton and Vivanta by Taj*). A similar approach characterises the airline sector where staff have not only to be mindful of the airline brand but also the airline alliance brand in addition (Balmer 2012a). Thus, management staff at *British Airways, American Airlines, Qantas, Cathay Pacific, Aer Lingus, Finnair*, etc should be intimately linked with the *One World Alliance* which is viewed as a supra corporate brand (Balmer, 2012a). Of course, many organisational members – and not just managers -will need to share the same multiple corporate brand orientation.

### **Corporate brand orientation**

Today, considerable interest is shown in the brand orientation notion as the burgeoning brand orientation literature attests (Anees-ur-Rehman et al. 2016; Balmer, 2013; Baumgarth 2010; Boso et al. 2016; Chang et al. 2018; Gromark, 2020; Gromark and Melin 2011). However, while recognising the utility and growing importance, of the brand orientation notion the literature does not always discriminate between different types of brand orientation *viz:* product brand orientation, service brand orientation, corporate brand orientation etc. (Balmer 2013). This can lead to the erroneous presumption that there is uniformity in approach across different brand orientation categories in relation to their formation, nature, meanings, and management.

Sometimes, brand scholars make a category error in assuming that a product brand orientation is identical in form, scope, management, and importance to corporate brand orientation. It most certainly is not.



Consequently, the formal introduction and explanation of the corporate brand orientation concept in 2013 marked a greatly overdue step-change in the brand orientation canon by highlighting the significance and importance of a corporate brand orientated logic (Balmer 2013). Moreover, it was asserted that the brand orientation perspective was most compelling, and effective, at the level of the corporate brand (Balmer 2013). It was observed that the basic brand orientation premise (Urde 1994), although highly valuable in its own terms, can be more-fully realised when it is placed within an unambiguous corporate brand genre (Balmer 2013).

Therefore, a corporate brand orientation considers corporate brand values/promise as a centripetal force which guides the entire organisation and serves as a vital touchstone against which corporate actions, staff behaviours, along with management decisions and stratagems, can be evaluated (Balmer 2013). A strong corporate brand orientation provides organisational members with a well-defined benchmark which guides their assessments, activities, and behaviours. Moreover, it was asserted that that the most commonsensical and meaningful form of brand orientations was a corporate brand orientation:

“A corporate brand orientation represents a logical development, if not a logical dénouement, of the brand orientation notion” (Balmer 2013. p.724).

It was also argued:

“The formal introduction and explication of the corporate brand orientation perspective represents the apotheosis of Urde’s (1994) brand orientation notion. In the writer’s estimation, a brand-based organisational-wide culture and philosophy is more intelligible at the level of the corporate brand than any other branding level or category.” (Balmer 2013. p.738)

The existence of an authentic, and organisational-wide, corporate brand orientation is dependent on a meaningful identification with a corporate brand on the part of organisational members. This perspective will inform this article’s deliberations on managerial corporate brand orientation and identification. Thus, a corporate brand orientation is akin to a psychological contract between an organisation (or organisations’) corporate brand and its managers and rank and file personnel.

Although lacking the force of law, this psychological contract can, all the same, be powerful since individuals acquire identity via the membership of a social grouping/s based on the corporate brand. Where an individual demonstrates affinity towards a corporate brand, they can experience a sense of emotional

ownership of the corporate brand (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). This is the same for managers as it is for employees generally.

It is important to remember that contracts are – and need to be - reciprocal. Where a corporate brand can bestow an individual with meaningful identity through their corporate brand values a person may respond in kind towards a corporate brand with affection and, quite often, with loyalty.

By means of context, this article, is informed by the corporate brand-based view of the firm perspective (Balmer, 2008); marshals the precepts underpinning corporate brand orientation (Balmer 2013), and develops, and particularises, recent scholarship in the area (cf. Balmer and Podnar, 2021).

#### **Social identity theory: managerial corporate brand identification and managerial corporate brand orientation**

Mindful of analogous work on corporate brand orientation (cf. Balmer and Podnar, 2021), this article emphasizes the interconnectedness between managerial corporate brand orientation and managerial corporate brand identification. This is because managerial corporate brand identification is a precursor to managerial corporate brand orientation.

More generally, it is logical to surmise that the stronger an individual identifies with a corporate brand the greater their corporate brand orientedness.

Managerial corporate brand orientation requires executives to view corporate brand values/promise as a navigational aid, strategic resource, and management imperative. Moreover, managers have responsibility for nurturing an organisational-wide corporate brand orientation grounded in corporate brand values. Given the above, it is imperative, as well as axiomatic, for a resilient managerial corporate brand identification to be evident among managers as a social group. Naturally, astute managers will wish to be appraised of an important theoretical foundation which helps to explain managerial corporate brand identification and, more expansively, employee, customer, and stakeholder identification. This can be undertaken by recourse to the psychological theory of social identity.

From a theoretical lens, managerial corporate brand identification, can be regarded as a branch application of social identity. Social identity theory recognises that individuals find psychological meaning, worth, and

a sense of personal identity, from their membership of a social group/s (Tajfel 1972; Tajfel and Turner; 1979). The related, *self-categorisation theory* (Turner 1987) expounded the conditions by which social identities become salient to individuals and its effect on both perception and action. Thus, social identity can be described as a cognitive mechanism that makes group behaviour possible (Turner 1982; 1987). When individuals share group membership, there are coordinated mindsets and behaviours (Cornilissen et al. 2007). Thus, managerial corporate brand identification is manifest in both a shared corporate brand management mentalité and common corporate brand behavioural norms among executives. However, both managerial corporate brand identification and corporate brand orientation takes time.

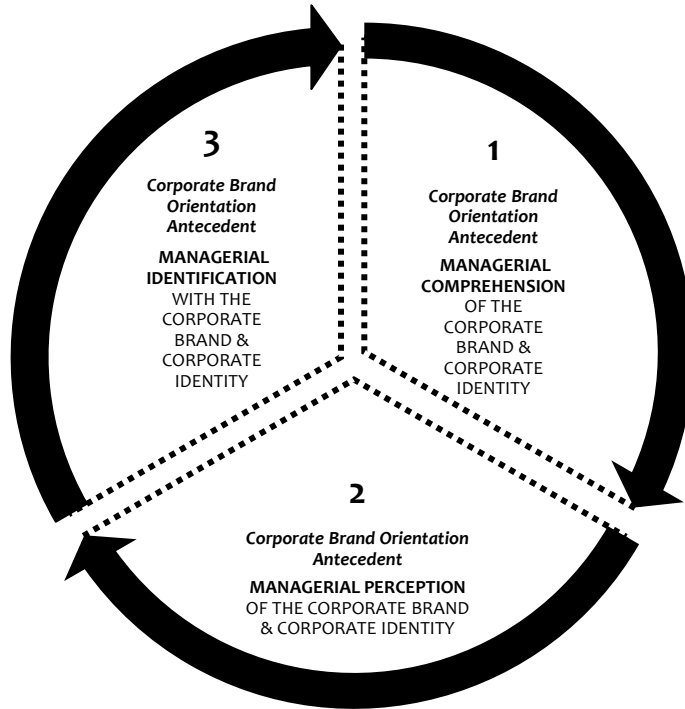
To reiterate, managerial corporate brand identification is an immediate precursor to corporate brand orientation.

### **Managerial corporate brand orientation antecedents**

Managerial corporate brand orientation does not materialise in a vacuum and can be conceptualised as a process: See Figure 1. Thus, at its most prosaic, is a consequence of (but not necessarily limited to):

- 1 Managerial comprehension of the corporate brand/corporate identity
- 2 Managerial perception of the corporate brand/corporate identity
- 3 Managerial identification with the corporate brand/corporate identity

**TAKE IN FIGURE 1 HERE (HALF A PAGE)**  
**Fig. 1 Antecedents of Managerial Corporate Brand Orientation**



### 1. Managerial comprehension of the corporate brand/corporate identity

The first part of the process (See Figure 1) requires managers to comprehend an organisation's corporate brand values and promise. Equally, managers need to be appraised of a firm's distinguishing and differentiating corporate identity traits.

An entity's corporate brand, is encapsulated in a set of brand values which are articulated in corporate brand covenant/promise (an informal contract) between an organisation and its customers/stakeholders (Balmer 1998; 2001a; 2001b; Balmer and Gray 2003; Balmer and Greyser 2003). It is this covenant which characterizes, and discriminates, one corporate brand from another.

Because of the above, a corporate brand is akin to a powerful navigational tool which has a utility to a variety of stakeholders, including existing and potential employees (Balmer and Gray 2003). Importantly, the real worth of a corporate brand comes from the *emotional corporate brand ownership* on the part of customers/stakeholders. This is different from *legal corporate brand ownership*, which is vested in the corporation (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). Thus, both corporate and customer/stakeholder assessments are fundamental to corporate brand management. Corporate brands are meaningful when they are profitable for the company and, indispensably, when they are attractive to customers and other stakeholders through

meeting their wants, needs, and expectations (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). Therefore, account must be given to customers/stakeholders' perceptions of the corporate brand (Balmer, et al. 2020).

Significantly, corporate brands are multidisciplinary in scope (Balmer 1995; 2001a; 2001b) and this requires a holistic approach to corporate brand management, in which all members of an organisation behave in accordance with the desired brand identity (Harris and deChernatony 2001).

Equally, executives need to be cognisant of a firm's corporate identity traits.

At its most prosaic, corporate identity denotes what an organisation is (Balmer 1995); what a company does along with how it undertakes its activities (Balmer 2008; 2017a; 2017b). More expansively, a corporate identity represents an amalgam of organisational traits. In their totality, corporate identity traits confer an organisation with specificity, stability, and unity (Larcon and Reitter 1994). Corporate identity characteristics can include, among others, a company's organisational type/genre; institutional purpose(s); organisational activities; company ethos and values; market position; markets and customers/stakeholders served; quality levels of products and services; management and staff behaviours; geographic scope; along with the vision and principles of the organisation's founders (Balmer 2017b).

Corporate identity is central to an understanding of corporate brands for two major reasons.

The first reason is because an organisation's corporate identity forms the foundation on which corporate brands are created (Balmer 1995; 2001a; 2001b). Over time, key corporate identity traits/competencies – which meet customer/stakeholders needs and wants – are recognised by customers/stakeholders and progressively become evident to managers through corporate marketing research. These traits bestow an entity with differentiation and distinctiveness. Consequently, managers emphasize these traits as a set of assurances via corporate communication. Accordingly, for customers/stakeholders, the company is associated with finite cognitive expectations which are viewed as meeting their wants and needs. It is at this juncture that a corporate brand comes into being. Hence, it is the task of managers to comprehend both the company's competencies, and more broadly, stakeholder's wants, needs, and expectations in a formalised, and explicit, corporate brand promise/covenant.

The second reason why corporate identity is of critical importance is because once a corporate brand is established – as represented in clearly defined promise manifested by an organisation and a set of corporate brand expectations recognised by customers and other stakeholders - a corporate brand promise requires the corporate identity to be in *dynamic alignment* with the corporate brand promise, and vice versa and this needs to come with an appreciation that other factors can, should, and do materially shape both corporate identity and the corporate brands (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). A cardinal precept of brand orientation is that it should be rooted in a company's actions and behaviours (Bridson and Evans 2004) and this analogous to saying that whereas a corporate brand constitutes a promise/covenant it is the corporate identity that delivers the corporate brand promise/covenant (Balmer 2012a; 2012b). Corporate brand values are not only linked to corporate identity but should also communicate corporate identity as well (Kay 2006).

Mindful of the need for mutual company/stakeholder profitability, an organisation's key identity competencies and characteristics are continuously shaped by senior managers in meeting the wants, and needs, of customers/stakeholders. Thus, management mindfulness apropos customer/stakeholder feedback is an on-going strategic imperative. It should be remembered that the corporate brand promise (sometimes called a corporate brand covenant) represent an informal (often powerful) contract between the corporate brand and its stakeholders (Balmer 2008). A corporate brand promise/covenant, to remain meaningful for customers/stakeholders and profitable for the organisation, often evolves with the passage of time. It is the task of managers to effect changes to corporate brand values/promise and be willing to accomplish incremental, or indeed, acute change.

From the above it is evident that corporate identity and corporate brand are inextricably linked (Balmer, 2001b).

## **2. Managerial perceptions of the corporate brand/corporate identity**

The second part of the process (See Figure 1) is informed by the view that managerial perceptions of *both corporate brand and corporate identity* are important antecedents of managerial corporate brand orientation.

Perception is important for organisations since perception effect behaviour since individuals

respond to images as if they are a reality (Balmer, et al. 2020, Balmer and Greyser, 2003, Gray and Balmer, 1998). Similarly, managerial images effect behavioural responses (cf. Alwi and Kitchen 2014; Balmer et al. 2020; Boulding 1956). Consequently, positive managerial corporate brand image and a positive managerial corporate identity image are necessary precursors to managerial corporate brand identification, and managerial corporate identity identification. *Managerial corporate brand image* is the immediate mental picture a manager has of their organisation's corporate brand, and, similarly, *managerial corporate identity image* represents the instantaneous impression an executive has of a company's corporate identity.

The *stereotype corporate image* notion is salient notion at the level of the social group, and this includes managers as a social group. The importance of the stereotype corporate image was stressed by Balmer and Greyser (2003) and was initially popularised by Pierre Martineau (cf. Martineau 1958a; 1958b) in his celebrated articles on corporate image published in the *Harvard Business Review*.

Hence, a stereotype managerial corporate brand image refers to collective perceptions held of the corporate brand. For its part, a stereotype managerial corporate identity image relates to shared conceptualisations of the corporate identity by executives.

However, image formation can be complex and can be the consequence of different mental processes. Thus, images of a corporate brand can be immediate or can be considered. Recently, it has been argued that image formation is the consequence of either *System 1 Processing* which is non-conscious, instant, and effortless, or *System 2 Processing* is purposeful, cerebral, and measured (Balmer et al. 2020).

It seems more probable, that System 2 Processing may be the dominant form of corporate image-processing by executives. Account, all the same, should also be given to System 1 Processing.

### **3. Managerial identification with the corporate brand and corporate identity**

The third, and final part of the process (See Figure 1) emphasizes how *managerial identification with both the corporate brand and corporate identity* are immediate, and necessary, antecedents in establishing an authentic corporate brand orientation. According to the precepts of social identity theory, managerial corporate brand identification is where managers have a self-defining, psychological attachment, and affinity, and sense of "managerial oneness", with a corporate brand. Thus, managerial corporate brand identification

is an important precursor for managerial corporate brand orientation. Importantly, the stronger the identification with a corporate brand on the part of senior managers the greater the likelihood for the above management imperatives to be actualised.

An analogous perspective underpins managerial corporate identity identification concerning an organisation's corporate identity traits.

Consequently, identification involves a manager internalising, and identifying with, corporate brand values (apropos managerial corporate brand identification) along with an organisation's corporate identity traits (apropos managerial corporate identity identification). Therefore, the corporate brand, along with a company's corporate identity, becomes self-defining and referential for managers (cf. Ashforth and Mael 1989; Balmer and Podnar 2021; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Cornelissen et al. 2007), with managers attaining a social identity through their cognitive association with other managerial colleagues who share the same identifications.

A manager's internalisation of corporate brand values, along with an entity's identity traits, means both the corporate brand and corporate identity shape an executive's psychology apropos beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (cf. Cornilissen et al. 2007). Similarly, managerial corporate brand identification translates into a manager engaging with, thinking highly of, and having a sense of togetherness with, the corporate brand so that collective management behaviour is aligned with the corporate brand and the same is true for managerial corporate identity identification (cf. Balmer 2012a; Cornelissen et al. 2007; Podnar and Golob 2015; Vallaster and deChernatony, 2006).

Managerial corporate brand identification underscores management socialisation; strengthens brand consistency; supports brand-consistent behaviours; and fosters management collaboration (Ashforth and Mael 2004; Balmer 2017a; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008; Löhdorf and Diamantopoulos 2014). It informs leadership; shapes communication and behaviours; accentuates group motivation, communication, and, in broad terms, impacts on the organisation (Bartel 2001; Cornilissen et al. 2007; Ellemers et al. 2004; Pratt 1998; Turner and Haslam 2001; Tyler and Blader 2000). Furthermore, it helps to realise the corporate brand promise through management thinking and actions; affords a sense of unity in the implementation, and fulfilment, of the corporate brand covenant (Löhdorf, and Diamantopoulos 2014; Reid et al. 2005).



## **Discussion and conclusion**

### **Contribution**

This article has advanced the corporate brand orientation field by explicating the character, importance, and antecedents, of managerial corporate brand orientation. The article contends that managerial corporate identification is a key requisite in the acquisition of a bona-fide managerial corporate brand orientation. In theoretical terms, it was shown that the psychological theory of social identity has utility in explaining a fundamental basis of managerial corporate brand identification.

A simple, and pragmatic, three-stage process is presented which articulates some of the key building-blocks (antecedents) of managerial corporate brand orientation. This includes managerial comprehension of the corporate brand/corporate identity; managerial perception of the corporate brand/corporate identity; and managerial identification with the corporate brand/corporate identity.

The emphasis accorded to corporate identity in the process is because of the synergistic and bi-lateral corporate identity/corporate brand relationship. The inextricable link between corporate identity and the corporate brand is often overlooked in the literature but care has been taken in this article (and the outlined process) to stress the critical corporate identity/corporate brand link.

In general terms, this article is deemed to be a salient, and timely, reminder of the critically important stewardship and leadership roles of managers in ensuring the corporate brand promise/values are credible and sustainable; are relevant and attractive for customers/stakeholders; and, furthermore, are profitable/valuable for the organisation (cf. Balmer, 2012a; 2012b). While it is unquestionable the case that the wants, needs, and sometimes desires, of customers and stakeholders are of central importance for sustainable corporate brands, and, certainly, it is the case that they can help to shape a corporate brand, this is not enough. This is because it is the case that corporate brands need to be valuable for the organisation, in addition. Sometimes there is a good deal of *naïveté* on this very point in the more recent corporate brand literature.

A central task of management is to be mindful of stakeholders' wants, needs, and desires; to appraise and take account of the general business environment; to ensure the corporate brand is beneficial in meeting a firm's objectives, purposes, and strategies; and, as advances in this article, to foster and provide leadership apropos an organisational-wide corporate brand orientation. It is the task of managers-especially senior managers and more particularly the CEO-to nurture, to burnish, and where necessary, to change- and sometimes even transform - the corporate brand. Therefore, ongoing stewardship of a corporate brand

should clearly reside with managers. Some recent narratives do not always emphasise this point as clearly as they might and, sometimes, give the impression that managers are passive observers apropos the creation and development of corporate brands. Whilst the corporate branding literature sometimes argues that customers and stakeholders co-create brands customers and stakeholders do not co-control corporate brands. Co-creation can never vitiate management responsibility in creating strong and meaningful corporate brands. Managers, not customers and other stakeholders, are answerable for failed or failing corporate brands.

Look beneath the surface of most great and meaningful corporate brands and you are likely to uncover a strong management team that is corporate brand orientated. Therefore, managerial corporate brand orientation is of crucial importance in building, maintaining, and burnishing strong and meaningful corporate brands.

### **Management implications**

Several, clear, managerial implications flow from the managerial corporate brand orientation logic enumerated in this article:

- 1 Managers have significant strategic responsibilities relating to corporate brand building, development, change, and management.
- 2 Managers should fully-comprehend the strategic importance, and worth, of their corporate brand.
- 3 Managers need to ensure a corporate brand is credible. A corporate brand should be profitable for the organisation and valuable and attractive for customers and other stakeholders in meeting their wants, needs, and expectations. Therefore, managers -whilst necessarily focussing on customers/stakeholders should also be mindful of an organisation's purposes, mission, and identity.
- 4 Managers have an obligation to nurture both an organisational-wide corporate brand-based culture and philosophy which translates into a company-wide corporate brand orientation among employees.
- 5 A strong, organisational-wide, corporate brand orientation necessitates the existence of a meaningful managerial corporate brand orientation where managers' actions, strategies, behaviours, and communications etc, are orientated towards, and are informed by, corporate brand values/corporate brand promise.
- 6 A key requisite of managerial corporate brand orientation is managerial corporate identification: this is where managers internalise, and identify with, corporate brand values so, for each manager, the corporate brand is self-defining.
- 7 Managers need to understand the inextricable link between the corporate brand and corporate identity apropos corporate brand formation and corporate brand delivery. Thus, managers should ensure there is a dynamic alignment between the organisation's corporate brand values and promise and the firm's corporate identity attributes.
- 8 Managers need to appreciate how managerial images of corporate brand and corporate identity will shape managerial corporate brand identification/managerial corporate identity identification and, therefore, impact on managerial corporate brand orientation.
- 9 Regular corporate brand/corporate brand orientation audits can be efficacious apropos the above (cf. Balmer, 2012a, 2012b)

10 Managers should also be informed by a corporate marketing philosophy which will reinforce corporate brand mindfulness in terms of serving stakeholders and ensuring the dynamic alignment between the corporate brand promise and corporate identity, corporate brand image/reputation, corporate brand communication, corporate strategy, management vision, etc. (cf. Balmer 2012a, 2012b)

Moreover, given the importance of managerial corporate orientation, there should be corporate brand mindfulness regarding the recruitment, induction, on-going training, appraisal/promotion, of managers. Thus, senior managers, along with the human resources (HR) department should be cognisant of the importance of the above. Consequently, HR managers also need to be aligned towards corporate brand values and the corporate brand promise as should senior managers generally.

Where recruitment consultants are retained, care must be taken by senior managers/HR to ensure they understand the importance of the organisation's corporate brand values.

Corporate brand acculturation should also be a concern of newly appointed management staff. Ideally, bespoke activities and engagements should be fashioned to foster corporate brand acculturation. This might involve managers spending time in different organisational roles as well as engaging in/observing customer-facing activities. The identification and designation of management corporate brand champions – perhaps drawn from managers of long standing with an organisation – could be efficacious. Such managers could act as mentors for newly appointed managers.

Particular attention should be given to newly appointed CEO's given their role as the organisation's corporate brand manager in chief. This is especially the case when they are appointed from outside the organisation. Consequently, bespoke familiarisation programmes should be developed in this regard to ensure the CEO understands the corporate brand and, over time, is appraised to ensure he or she is corporate brand orientated.

In addition to senior managers, boards of governors, boards of overseers, trustees, advisory boards etc. should also be appraised of corporate brand values. In some cases, outside consultancies may have a useful role in relation to all, or part, of the above.

While this article has stressed the importance of managerial corporate brand orientation care must be taken to ensure that a manager does not over identify with the corporate brand so that they become

psychologically unbalanced. Moreover, given the need for corporate brand adaptation and change, senior managers (including those in HR) should take care to avoid seeing corporate brand values as unalterable. Even corporate heritage brands with enduring values often undergo evolutionary change (cf. Balmer and Burghausen, 2015).

Furthermore, it is possible for managers to be cognitively, but not emotionally aligned with a corporate brand and therefore managers may not necessarily strongly and positively identify with a corporate brand so that it is self-definitional in nature.

However, where there is a strong managerial identification with a corporate brand and where the corporate brand has a self-definitional role for managers it seems logical to posit that a managerial corporate brand orientation will be stronger.

#### **Factors militating against managerial corporate brand orientation**

Whilst noting the above, there are many factors that can militate against the existence of a strong managerial identification with a corporate brand. Consequently, account must be taken of these factors. However, this should in no way be viewed as a justification for ignoring the importance of ensuring there is a bona fide managerial corporate brand orientation.

At one level, individuals define themselves in various ways. Whilst the organisation, and the corporate brand can provide a self-definitional purpose it should not be forgotten that gender, religion, nationality, class, politics, educational background etc. can be important apropos identification. These, and other forms of identification, may sometimes militate against a manager having a strong sense of corporate brand identification and corporate brand orientation.

For example, a manager may be primarily guided by their profession (as accountants, engineers, HR professionals etc.) rather than by the corporate brand. In some instances, an individual may still be attached to the corporate brand values of a former entity with which they were employed. Equally, they can derive meaning from an organisation's earlier corporate brand values. Furthermore, managers who see themselves as on a particular career trajectory may view their attachment to an organisation as temporary and their

position as merely as steppingstone to a higher managerial position elsewhere. In the US, the median time a person stays with an organisation is five years (The Economist, 2021). Therefore, they may see little merit in having an attachment with the corporate brand. Others may view managerial corporate brand orientation as having “nothing to do with them” owing to a misplaced view that corporate brands are only of importance to those in marketing. Even some within marketing may be sceptical and suspicious apropos managerial corporate brand orientation owing to their narrow marketing formation and work experience which has not stressed the importance of corporate marketing, corporate branding, and the importance of stakeholders. There can, of course, be many other barriers.

However, whilst noting the above, it is still highly desirous, and efficacious, for there to be a strong managerial corporate brand identification and although it may be difficult to achieve it should all the same be an important agenda item for an organisation. Managerial corporate brand orientation is too important to ignore. As such, the need for a corporate brand orientation is something that should be made clear at the recruitment stage, during induction, and when managers are appraised or are considered for promotion or for enhanced emoluments.

### **Further research**

The managerial corporate brand orientation notion affords many opportunities for further scrutiny, investigation, and research. In addition to researching the ideas contained in this article, further research could explore the nature of managerial corporate brand orientation in different sectors, regions and among different organisational types such as family-owned businesses, not-for-profit entities, public sector organisations, and co-operatives, to name but a few. The concept also merits further investigation in relation to corporate heritage brands, SMEs, and trans-national corporations. Consideration could also be given managerial corporate brand orientation among franchises and in organisations which have an endorsed corporate brand and, therefore, would suggest the need for two managerial corporate brand orientations to be enacted.

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

#### **Conflict of interest**

The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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