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Investigating the Determinants and Perceived Consequences of Corporate Auditory Identity Management: A Corporate Perspective

This research investigates corporate auditory identity from a company perspective. That is, this research examines determinants of auditory identity management as well as consequences of auditory identity management as perceived by companies. Based on a literature review, expert interviews and quantitative data, this research intends to test several hypotheses that conceptualise auditory identity as a company-controlled constituent of identity management, similar to visual identity. Expected contributions are, inter alia, clarifying the auditory identity concept, providing new insights to the auditory domain to foster future research, and offering guidelines for managers to utilise sound more successfully in the future.

Keywords – Corporate Auditory Identity, Corporate Visual Identity, Corporate Identity, Corporate Image
1. Introduction

The visual dimension of corporate identity has been recognised by many academics to be an important part of the corporate identity mix and is considered to be crucial when conveying the identity of an organisation (e.g. Baker and Balmer, 1997; Melewar and Saunders, 1999; Van den Bosch et al, 2006). However, intensive review of the identity literature reveals that non-visual sensory cues based on hearing, smelling, touching and tasting have been mostly ignored by marketing academics so far. Balmer (2001:267) argues that there is a visual dominance that “is clouding over the importance of the other senses of sound, scent, taste and touch”. Moreover, Balmer (2001:267) stresses the importance of non-visual elements in communicating corporate identity and corporate image, by arguing that “…upon reflection it becomes apparent that the non-visual senses can be just as powerful in communicating the identity of a collective group”. This view is supported by practitioners such as Lindstrom (2005:69) who argue “… all five senses are important in any form of communication and life experience”. As part of a holistic sensory ensemble, the auditory dimension has received some attention in recent years by academics and practitioners alike. For instance, research in the consumer behaviour area has put forward considerable evidence for the significance of sound (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Milliman, 1982) such as the role of background music in relation to customers’ purchasing behaviour (Herrington and Capella, 1996) or on the increase of accepted on-hold waiting time on the phone (North et al, 1999).

Moreover, anecdotal literature (e.g. Jackson and Fulberg, 2003; Lindstrom, 2005; Treasure, 2007) shows that sound already has been broadly applied by numerous companies (e.g. sonic logo of Intel and the Microsoft Windows start-up sound) (Jackson and Fulberg, 2003; Lindstrom, 2005). Some authors have acknowledged similarities between the auditory and visual dimension in terms of its role as a means to convey corporate identity (Balmer, 2001). Fraedrich and King (1998:134) for instance advocate a holistic sensory experience by arguing
that “sounds can become as familiar and representative to an audience as their visual brand logo counterparts”. Drawing on the conceptual similarity of the two concepts as constituents of the corporate identity mix, this research investigates the determinants of corporate auditory identity management at a corporate level, and in addition examines the consequences of corporate auditory identity management as perceived by companies.

2. Relevance of the Study

Despite some reasonable research regarding the role of sound in relation to consumer behaviour (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Milliman, 1982), there is still a lack of research on the subject of auditory identity on a corporate level. In particular, corporate identity and corporate image literature have neither conceptualised nor operationalised the auditory dimension sufficiently. This conceptual gap clearly is reflected by the fact that sound has not been included as a dimension of the corporate identity mix so far (c.f. Birkigt and Stadler, 1986). Apart from closing a gap in the existing literature, this research gains its relevance from the importance of sound in relation to corporate identity management and corporate image formation. Drawing on the importance of corporate identity management as a means to achieve positive corporate image (Baker and Balmer, 1997:369; Balmer, 2001:291; Balmer and Gray, 1999:172; Gray and Smeltzer, 1985; Van Heerden and Puth, 1995) the investigation of additional elements of the corporate identity mix such as auditory identity will offer additional opportunities for managers to use company-controlled communication elements as a means of identity management.

3. Aim of the Study and Research Questions

The overall objective of this research is to provide relevant knowledge regarding the role of corporate auditory identity as an additional element of the corporate identity mix next to cor-
porate visual identity. In order to do so, this research initially aims to identify the factors that constitute the corporate auditory identity construct, based on the existing conceptualisation of visual identity (Melewar, 2003). In addition, this research aims to investigate the antecedents of corporate auditory identity management from an organisational perspective and the consequences of corporate auditory identity management as perceived by companies. Overall the objectives are, first, to define the corporate auditory identity construct, second, to develop appropriate measurement scales in order to operationalise the corporate auditory identity management construct, third, to investigate the factors that determine the degree of corporate auditory identity management applied by an organisation, and fourth, to investigate the consequences of corporate auditory identity management as perceived by the company. Accordingly, the following research questions are presented:

RQ1: What elements and applications can qualify as determinants of corporate auditory identity?

RQ2: What factors determine the degree of corporate auditory identity management?

RQ3: What are the consequences of corporate auditory identity management as perceived by companies?

4. **Focal Construct & Hypotheses**

Corporate identity management has been conceptualised by various academics based on the view that the components of the corporate identity mix (i.e. visual identity, communication, behaviour) can be controlled or influenced by the company (Simões et al, 2005; Zinkhan et al, 2001). The focal construct of this research, namely ‘corporate auditory identity management’ is defined accordingly to this perspective as following: "Corporate auditory identity management is the management of all auditory cues by which an audience can recognize the
company and distinguish it from others” (Based on Melewar, 2003). Since this research considers corporate auditory identity as a supplement to corporate visual identity, both constructs being constituents of the corporate identity mix, consequently, this research strongly draws on the visual identity, corporate identity and corporate image literature in order to develop the following two sets of hypotheses. The first set of hypotheses (antecedents) proposes relations between factors such as company characteristics, visual identity management, corporate and communication strategy and the focal construct (i.e. corporate auditory identity management). The second set of hypotheses (consequences) proposes relations between corporate auditory identity management and various key outcomes as perceived by the company for instance gaining differentiation, improving positioning, image and reputation, and supporting communication.

5. Research Context and Unit of Analysis

Based on the presented research questions, the unit of analysis is the organisation. That is, investigating the determinants of corporate auditory identity management and the consequences of corporate auditory identity management as perceived by the company clearly indicates the company as the appropriate unit of analysis. With regard to the industry context, this research does not plan to be limited to one particular industry context since it aims to investigate corporate auditory identity management on a broader level. This perspective is based on the rationale that this research intends to investigate the role of corporate auditory identity management as a strategic factor of corporate and marketing communication. However, with regard to the country where the research will be conducted, at this stage it is planned that this research will be carried out in the UK, thus, gathering primary data from UK-based companies. The UK provides a well established western-European business environment with companies that have appropriate knowledge and capabilities in corporate and marketing commu-
nication. In other words, with companies that operate in a business environment in which corporate communication issues are an integral part, it is assumed to obtain valid information in the qualitative as well as the quantitative phase of this research. By not limiting the research in terms of industry context or type of company (i.e. product and service) in the beginning, it is not only aimed to provide findings that are more generalizable but also to examine possible differences of the conceptual research framework in relation to these factors. Consequently, in order to examine variances of the conceptual framework the three control variables (1) size of company, (2) type of company and (3) identity structure will be tested.

6. Research Methodology and Methods

Caused by the general newness of the focal construct of this research, only limited research has been carried out so far. Consequently, after a review of literature in the area of corporate identity, corporate image and visual identity, this research will adopt a qualitative approach in an initial exploratory phase in order to obtain relevant information regarding the new construct of corporate auditory identity management. In detail, this research aims to undertake in-depth interviews with specialists in the area such as experts from sound agencies and marketing managers. Based on literature and primary qualitative data, the aim is to provide a precise definition of the relevant constructs, in order to assess the conceptual research framework including the proposed hypotheses and to ensure content validity of measurement scales. In the second phase, quantitative methods will be used, in order to test the proposed hypotheses. After conducting a pilot survey in order to purify the measurement scales, quantitative data for the main study will be gathered by using questionnaires, which will be disseminated to companies in the UK. At this stage, a two-step procedure including confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) using SPSS 15.0 and LISREL 8.8 is planned in order to test the proposed hypotheses.
7. Expected Contributions

This research aims to contribute to existing knowledge in various ways. To start with, this research aims to expand the literature on sound, which is dominated by a consumer behaviour point of view so far, by taking an organisational perspective. In addition, this research aims to add knowledge to the corporate identity and corporate image literature by investigating the corporate auditory identity construct as an additional element of corporate identity management and corporate image formation. Moreover, by emphasising the auditory dimension as part of corporate identity, this research aims to help overcoming the existing visual dominance in the field. In addition, this research aspires to develop measurement scales in order to operationalise corporate auditory identity, which will offer additional insights into the way of how to manage corporate identity. The measurement scales that will be developed to operationalise the auditory identity construct will also offer opportunities for further research to examine the auditory dimension further.

Furthermore, this research aims to offer managerial contributions for decision-makers regarding the use of auditory identity as an additional dimension for managing corporate identity and corporate image. In detail, the findings of this research are expected to provide managers with insights regarding the utilisation of auditory elements and applications which will offer additional ways of communicating the identity of a company. Bearing in mind that adding further ways of communication might lead to an increasing complexity of the tasks for managers, this research contributes to the clarification on the subject matter by developing clear definitions of the domain and by offering insights about the role of the auditory dimension, which will help managers to more successfully incorporate the auditory dimension into the set of communication activities in the future.
8. References


