

The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization

Chapter 19: Towards an understanding of Corporate Web Identity

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Introduction

The study of the role of organizational websites in the communication of corporate identity is still in its infancy. Yet for many of its potential stakeholders the first encounter with an organization is through its webpages (Coupland and Brown, 2004; Pablo and Hardy, 2009). Websites provide stakeholders with information, are a means of transmitting (Segars and Kohut, 2001), and sometimes responding to, high level management messages (Coupland and Brown, 2004), and project the wider 'look and feel' of an organisation (Pablo and Hardy, 2009). Given the strategic importance of websites as global communication tools, calls have been made to gain a deeper understanding of their role as a component part of corporate identity, especially in terms of communicating messages and shaping perceptions of organizations worldwide (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu; 2006; Warren, 2009).

This chapter starts by examining how corporate identity has been defined and applied. We argue that its sub-concept, corporate visual identity (CVI), is not sufficiently broad to encompass, appreciate and evaluate holistically the complex medium of websites and the importance of corporate web presence. Working therefore towards developing the specific concept of Corporate Web Identity (CWI), we examine existing work on the nature, role and purpose of organizational websites and identify five major features of contemporary corporate websites which, it could be argued, constitute an emergent CWI. Different methodological approaches to website research and their suitability and efficiency for the study of this specific and complex medium are considered. A short study of a corporate webpage is then presented and the issues we encountered in researching its web identity are discussed. Finally, we identify emergent future research avenues and discuss possible methodological strategies for future organizational website research.

Websites and Corporate Identity

Various definitions of corporate identity have been developed within the extant literature. Gray and Balmer (1998:697) view corporate identity as the ‘immediate mental picture’ that audiences have of an organization. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006:864), through an extensive study of managers’ views, suggested that corporate identity is ‘the presentation of an organisation to every stakeholder’ and ‘it is what makes an organisation unique’. Bartholme and Melewar (2011) summarised the concept of corporate identity as ‘the set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it’ (p.53).

There have also been attempts to break down this ‘mental picture’ into component parts. Melewar (1993) for example, identifies seven main dimensions of corporate identity: corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity, and corporate strategy. Image and visual presentations of the organization certainly play a significant role in this framework. Indeed, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006:848) claim that the literature makes a ‘profound link’ between corporate image and corporate identity, stating that image is the ‘collective perception that the stakeholders have of corporate identity’.

Corporate image is deeply connected to a specific element of corporate identity, namely corporate visual identity (CVI), which has been described as ‘the most tangible facet of corporate identity’ (Simões et al., 2005:158) in that it provides a ‘visibility and recognizability’ (Balmer & Gray, 2000) of a given organization. It has been defined as consisting of five main elements: company name, symbol and/or logotype, typography, colour and slogan that ‘reflect the company culture and values and that create physical recognition for the organisation’ (Simões et al., 2005, p. 158; see also Melewar and Akel 2005:44; Bartholme and Melewar 2011:54). These elements have long been present in organisational artefacts, for example annual reports and letterheads, and are now also important elements in the design of corporate websites (see also Leonard 2013, this volume). Schmitt, Simonson and Marcus (1995) provide a framework for developing and managing CVI, involving paying attention to the ‘four Ps of aesthetics management’, namely properties, products, presentations and publications, as key components of corporate image management (in Bartholme and Melewar, 2011:56).

Certainly, comprising many of the elements of CVI discussed above, websites have been described as ‘carriers’ of visual identity (van den Bosch, De Jong, and Elving 2006:139). However if we start to apply Schmitt et al’s (1995) framework to corporate websites we see potential problems as: a) websites are not solely a visual medium and b) as part of wider social media they cannot be so easily controlled by the organisation. Websites are in fact multi-modal and as such their role in engaging with an organisation’s diverse stakeholders and shaping their perceptions of the organisation (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006:853) goes beyond reflecting, transmitting and protecting visual identity.

Given these issues it is perhaps time to explore whether an organization’s web presence needs a new framework to guide its creation and to evaluate its performance. At the very least contemporary research needs to develop an awareness of: a) how the design of an organization’s website conveys corporate identity, b) how it is open to the multiple interpretations of a diverse and global audience, and c) how stakeholders experience and make sense of their ‘visit’ to a given website.

A key issue for consideration, as Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006: 850) remind us, is that corporate communication can be both ‘controlled and uncontrolled in nature’, the former being ‘communication intentionally instigated by management with the aim of improving stakeholder relationships’, and the latter communication that ‘takes place when organisations influence stakeholders’ perceptions unintentionally’ (see also Price, Gioia, and Corley 2008). Developing the notion of Corporate Web Identity (CWI) allows us to explore the roles and purposes of websites and the emerging facets of their distinct identities starting with issues highlighted in contemporary research.

Towards an understanding of emergent corporate web identity

Websites serve many different stakeholders and play a wide variety of roles. As such they contain different combinations of visual, textual and interactive media. Early in their evolution, websites tended to consist of elements which existed in the same order elsewhere, in paper formats for example, such as brochures and prospectuses (Coupland and Brown, 2004). Criticism of traditional website design has been that ‘in mimicking paper forms of communication, the user under-utilizes the power of the new electronic medium’ (Dillon and

Gushrowski 2000, in Coupland and Brown, 2004), while Chaudhri and Wang (2007:242) in their study of the role of websites in CSR reporting in India noted a ‘lack of creativity’ in exploiting multimedia and interactivity in supporting corporate messages. However, although the traditional website genre, containing mainly a mixture of text and photos and other images, is still quite prevalent, corporate websites are becoming increasingly sophisticated, containing videos, podcasts, blogs and fora and so are becoming more interactive and as such boundaries between corporate and public more blurred (see Coupland and Brown, 2004, Pablo and Hardy, 2009, Leonard 2013, this volume). In this section we identify from the existing literature five emergent elements which, we argue, could constitute an initial framework for conceptualising Corporate Web Identity’ (CWI). These are: mobility, accessibility, visuality, interactivity and customisation.

1. Mobility

A striking feature of contemporary corporate webpages is that of *mobility*, that is the movement both of the site itself and of the way in which visitors can navigate freely around it. An innovation away from the ‘brochure’ model of web design is the use of revolving text and picture boxes and ‘headlines’ which allows for much more information to be transmitted in a short space of time. However, this also means that what a new user will see on first accessing the site can never be accurately predicted (Elliott and Robinson, 2012). Further increasingly sophisticated features of websites are the navigability features and opportunities provided through portals, portlets¹ and hyperlinks (Kalyanaraman and Sundar, 2008; Pablo and Hardy, 2009). These imply that, in contrast to a printed text where the reader’s journey is relatively linear, visitors can chose to navigate webpages in different ways according to their own needs and preferences and thus each user’s journey is likely to be unique.

This feeling of movement and personal agency is reinforced by the language associated with websites, which is active and evokes personal exploration. A person ‘visits’ a ‘home’ page, is welcomed and invited to ‘enter’, ‘explore’, ‘navigate’ and ‘browse’. Such activities suggest a very different type of experience from the reading of a brochure or a prospectus, and require more ‘physical’ engagement on the part of the visitor (Kivinen, 2006). In addition

¹ These are small editable information applications, or boxes, which typically are accessed from the right or left side bars of a page for example, calendar, events, recent items and so on.

there are the evocations of hosting and welcoming, so to what extent is it possible for visitors to feel at home on the site and find and take in the information and or the experience they are searching for, a feature we broadly term *accessibility*, discussed below?

2. Accessibility

This feature of web identity relates to how visitors are able to find what they are looking for, how they are able to navigate through a mass of information and how they receive, react to, and make sense of, the information and messages available.

Corporate websites are increasingly ‘multi-purpose’ and multi-activity, transmitting corporate information on one hand and facilitating corporate activity by the public on the other, for example through online shopping. Many organisations have in fact two websites, one of which we term the ‘informational’ and which, in the case of the U.K. supermarket Waitrose, outlines its history and relationship to the wider John Lewis Partnership, providing information about its head office, management team, constitution, principles, strategy and suppliers (for example, see <http://www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/about/waitrose.html>).

The other website, which we refer to as a ‘functional’ site, provides access to online shopping (see <http://www.waitrose.com/>). In the Waitrose example, the informational site has embedded links to the functional site whereas links to the informational site from the functional site are quite difficult to find, being positioned right at the end of the site in grey. In this case these are effectively two different portals – the John Lewis informational portal and the Waitrose shopping portal.

The role of portals in facilitating both visitor mobility and accessibility is significant. Portals are defined as ‘sites that serve as a point of access to information from diverse sources’ (Pablo and Hardy, 2009:822). Portals are also used by ‘umbrella’ organisations, for example the World Bank, to bring together organisations under a common theme such as international development (Pablo and Hardy, 2009). One of the main roles of portals, it is claimed, is to ‘help to make sense of information avalanches by establishing gatekeeping guidelines and streamlining information flow’ (Kalyanaraman and Sundar 2008:239).

Although these can be highly structured and controlled, some portal functionality, for example customisation, also implies a degree of agency and control on the part of the visitor. Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2008:246) argue that they ‘empower users to construct personal information systems that are receptive to individual needs by their ability to respond in an interactive manner’.

Several different roles and functions of portals have been conceptualised as ‘five different but inter-related metaphorical conceptions - gateways, billboards, networks, niches, and brands - which, in turn, suggest five dominant features of portal sites: customization, content, control, community, and commerce’ (Kalyanaraman and Sundar, 2008:239). Pablo and Hardy (2009) also research use of and engagement with metaphor through a study of 29 Web portals, established through a World Bank sponsored project - the Development Gateway. They identified three metaphors - ‘expert’, ‘market’ and ‘community’ - which were recurrent either on their own or in combination across this wide data set. They discovered that the use of such metaphors may sometimes be inadvertent but are also sometimes consciously constructed and adopted by organisations. However, on other occasions, the audience may play an active part in the implementation of a new metaphor. Pablo and Hardy (2009) identify patterns in the way these metaphors are used and co-exist, allowing organisations to address multiple stakeholders and audiences at the same time.

Other types of accessibility include issues of cultural appropriateness and relevance. For example, Singh, Zhao and Hu (2003:63), argue that ‘the web is not a culturally neutral medium, but it is full of cultural markers that give country-specific websites a look and feel unique to that local culture’. In their content analysis of American companies’ domestic websites and Chinese websites they found cultural adaptation that spoke to assumed cultural difference, e.g. collectivism, was still at the early stages of development. However, the domestic and Chinese websites were significantly different in terms of structure and appearance namely in the use of bold colour and animation (p75) (see also Section 5 for discussion on cultural customisation’ of websites).

3. Interactivity

Another active role played by the website visitor is that of dialogue facilitated through multiple channels of communication such as blogs and discussion fora. The inclusion of such interactive spaces within webpages means that individual stakeholders can connect publically with an organisation and other organisational stakeholders and be directly and publically replied to. Esrock and Leichty (1998) also noted the usefulness of such interaction in that it allows companies to engage in multi-stakeholder dialogue, which is often seen, for example, as a practical challenge of CSR communication. However such communication can be difficult to control and risky for the projection of a corporate image. For example, Coupland and Brown (2004) studied two e-mail exchanges posted on Royal Dutch Shell's web site in order to investigate how organizational identities are constructed through processes of 'description, questioning, contestation and defence'(p1325). Employing a discourse analytic methodology they study how what they term 'identity-as-argument' is enacted. They suggest that organisational identities are to a certain extent shaped by such interactions:

'Our suggestion is that organizations are best characterized as having multiple identities, and that these identities are authored in conversations between notional 'insiders', and between notional 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.' (p1325).

As demonstrated by Coupland and Brown (2004), such interactions can highlight some of the tensions and contradictions in corporate identity. However, such co-creation can also be very positive as pointed out by Afuah (2003), as in the example of Cisco which 'allowed its customers to form virtual communities in which they could exchange ideas and experiences on how to better use Cisco's products in their own systems' (Economist, 1999 in Afuah 2003:40).

Another use of this two-way conversation is the appearance of customer reviews, ratings and blogs on corporate websites which, although generally quite positive, and very useful for the potential consumer, also sometimes contain scathing comments about wider aspects of the organisation. For example, a comment on a recipe (posted 27th October 2011) on the website of Waitrose supermarket details frustration with the shopping experience in terms of not being able to find the given ingredients in store and disappointment at the behaviour of staff when asking for help. It is interesting how such a damning indictment is allowed to stay on a corporate website, albeit buried in a rather niche area, for 12 months at the time of writing.

Another connected form of dialogue is that which takes place through an intermediary website, e.g. Trip Advisor (www.tripadvisor.co.uk). Here customers rate and describe their experiences, e.g. of restaurants and hotels, which organisational representatives can respond to directly or, as is often suspected, indirectly (for example posing as a happy customer with a counter experience). Such examples pose questions as to what extent organizations feel it necessary to police, edit and respond to such input and how a balance is maintained, although such issues are beyond the scope of the present chapter.

4. Visuality

Webpages contain images, logos, text, videos and so on, and the aesthetics of, and interface between, these elements are all worthy of study. The visual function however is significant in its own right, so we use the term *visuality*, namely what is able to be seen by the eye, to refer to this element of CWI. In this limited space we briefly explore two interrelated issues concerning website visuality, namely: i) the use of the visual to replace or re-enforce feelings and emotions engendered by other organisational artefacts e.g. buildings, ii) the interaction between visuality and the transmission of organizational values and strategy and the creation of a unique organizational visual identity.

First, there is the issue of how an organisation can be represented virtually. For example, how can a website take the place of a physical building (e.g. company headquarters) as the public face and focal point of the first encounter between the organisation and the public? What feelings do they evoke in the visitor? This question relates in part to what has been termed a ‘visual monumentality’ (Harris 1996:460), in that corporate buildings have been designed to convey many different things including trust, wealth, power (see Dale and Burrell, 2008) and dependability. So can such reactions (and others) be evoked through webpage design and functionality? In this vein Schroeder (2002) studied the design of the web pages of banks, noting how the World Wide Web is already ‘infused with architectural metaphors’ (p. 93) such as portals, firewalls and so on. He examined how ten US banks expressed their ‘trustworthiness’ on their webpages. He found that over half of the banks studied drew on architectural images, including buildings, and bank headquarters. The choice of these images,

Schroeder (2002) argues, 'represent strategic choices' (p.111) as most other organizations do not show images of their headquarters on their webpages.

Such images are however predominantly external. Internal work environments have also been designed to engender certain feelings and encourage specific roles within staff, customers and other users. Hancock and Spicer (2011) for example, study the interplay between 'forms of identity' and internal design in relation to a new university library. In addition, in some cases corporate designs have been developed to have a 'homelike' environment (Pelkonen 2011:39) to both promote employee morale as well as identification with corporate ends. This home image is in fact often conveyed on websites, first through language, as discussed above but also through use of colour and relaxing images; internal pictures of organisations are often of lounges, waiting areas and so. On websites the inside and outside is conflated as to a certain extent is the concept of internal and external stakeholders in that both groups use, and are affected by, the corporate website.

Second, we consider the interaction between visibility and the transmission of organization values and strategy. Two traditional ways in which organisations have done this is: a) through company's annual reports and b) through CSR reporting. There are now many studies of image use within text-based corporate reporting exist (see for example, Preston, Wright and Young, 1995; Preston and Young, 2000, Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002, Davidson 2007) and Campbell, McPhail and Slack (2009) point to the ever increasing use of images and more specifically the use of 'faces' in annual reports.

However, there is still surprisingly little work which focuses specifically on websites' role in transmitting such messages, (some exceptions include: Chaudhri, and Wang, 2007; Coope, 2004; and Chapple and Moon, 2005). In addition, Pollock's (2003) study of CSR reporting on corporate websites identified different 'persuasive appeals' relating to Aristotle's three argumentative appeals: appeal to source credibility (ethos), appeal to reason (logos), and appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos) (p283). Pollack (2003:278) argues that companies concerned with CSR seek 'to project the image of a good corporate citizen', although she does not focus specifically on the use of visibility to achieve this.

Other text-based studies demonstrate how strategic uses of images certainly complement such discursive strategies. Logos and images appeal to contemporary audiences in different ways and are changed and adapted over time in terms of their 'projected images' (Price et al. 2008). Changes in representation can be traced for example in the changing face of Oxfam (see Davidson, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2012b) and other humanitarian organisations (see Chouliaraki, 2011, 2012a). For example, the homepage of Oxfam's present website (accessed 28.10.12) <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/> has the caption: 'We can make it: a future without poverty for everyone'. This is accompanied by a picture of smiling children with hands raised in a positive gesture. The page is framed by a combination of bright primary colours. The former famous tagline 'be humankind' (see Chouliaraki, 2011) is no longer in evidence. This is in contrast with the more sombre image of children used in its 2003/4 annual report (Davidson 2007), where they are 'dignified, neither happy nor sad, in harmony with objectives of support through self-help' (p.145). Such changes also point to the changing role of the 'spectator'/audience (Chouliaraki 2011, 2012a, 2012b), especially in terms of what it is that the multiple audiences are meant to do and feel.

More widely, image also plays a key role in directing/enticing people through portals which makes an interesting element in web-accessibility (see Pablo and Hardy, 2009). The collage or visual patchwork structure of portals is an emerging feature of website design. The choice, appropriateness and juxtaposition of images is often intriguing and in some cases puzzling (see RBS case study below). This visuality in portal use has been described as is a 'veritable gallery that serves as a billboard advertising a diversity of content, both informational and commercial' (Kalyanaraman and Sundar 2008:243). This gallery can include photos, pictures, graphics, sometimes eclectic and non-conformist in terms of colour and design, and so could actually be seen as a challenge to the control of CVI.

This diversity of image can lead to what Price et al. (2008) term the problem of 'scattered images' which occurs because 'there are many potentially disparate or competing images, interpretations, and understandings of one focal organization' (p174). The challenge then is how organisational websites can be designed, shaped and customised to speak to specific target audience.

5. Customisation and communication of ‘special’/strategic messages

With so much variety of design, visual genre, informational input and flexibility (of interaction) available, it is a challenge for organisations to ensure that the communication of key messages is achieved. The major themes, activities and distinctiveness of an organisation can be subsumed by the sheer mass of messages and information available on the webpages (see Elliott and Robinson, 2012). This is complicated by the question of audience and the perceived need to communicate with diverse groups with different informational needs: in the case of university business schools, for example, these would include potential students, current students, alumni, staff, the wider academic community, business communities and so on.

Portals in particular have the potential to target certain specialized consumers. Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2008) explain how ‘horizontal portals cover a wide array of topics and features, and also act as repositories for an extensive range of information. In contrast, vertical portals, or vortals, are considered to represent category leaders in a given topical group or cater to a specific segment of users’ (Kalyanaraman and Sundar 2008:244).

Certainly web messaging affords some freedoms for, as Chaudhri and Wang (2007: 235) point out, ‘the Web also offers organizations the opportunity to design messages that do not have to follow the dictates of gatekeepers as with print and electronic media’. Rolland and O’Keefe Bazzoni argue that ‘online messages can be carefully targeted in meaningful ways to specific stakeholders, be they internal or external, primary or secondary within national or global settings’ (Rolland and O’Keefe Bazzoni, 2009:259).

Esrock and Leichty (1999) claim that ‘The World Wide Web provides organizations an opportunity to communicate with a multiplicity of audiences at a single point in time through one medium, but in a manner that is somewhat customized to each public’ (p465). An example of this is IEKA (2012) <http://www.ikea.com/> where every country’s homepage is different and customisation occurs not only at the level of language but also in terms of the look, feel and presentation of main messages; although most of the supporting images are

actually taken from the generic catalogue. However, with the different audiences in mind, it would be interesting to explore further the differences in colour use and choice of content in developing the way the organisation is portrayed for its specific (national) audience. Continuing the IKEA example, other small differences arise in the look and organisation of the website per country. For example, the interactive questioning feature in some countries becomes 'Ask Anna', 'the automated online assistant'. The image of Anna changes per country. For example in UK, Ireland and Germany she is blonde, while in Spain, Iceland, and China she is brown haired. In other countries, for example, Bulgaria, Greece and Finland, the same feature exists (without the 'ask Anna' tag) and is accompanied by a blank head and shoulders image. In another group of countries - France, Italy, Poland, UEA - this feature is not available at all. This suggests an '*audience sensitivity*' (Hyland, 2007 in Price et al. 2008, p174), although, as in this example, it is not always clear to the external observer how messages are being tailored so that they 'resonate with recipients' (Price et al 2008:174). However, given that web accessibility is more and more open it is not only 'the intended' audience who can access the different iterations. As Price et al. (2008) point out, it could be the case that 'Organizational communicators often seem to underplay the degree to which unintended audiences receive the messages they are sending' (p174). It would seem therefore that this is an area worthy of more research activity.

Towards an understanding of Corporate Web Identity: implications for research and practice

The discussion of the concept of CWI has highlighted five distinct areas of corporate website activity which could be taken as constituting emergent web identities. In evaluating and researching the strength of web identity and its relation to corporate identity the following questions could be posed of the websites (and perhaps, by reflection, of the organisation more generally): *How mobile or navigable* is the website? *How accessible* is it to its multiple stake holders? *How interactive* and facilitative of two way conversations? *How visible* does the organisation make itself – what messages might the visual images be portraying? *How flexible* and strategic is its messaging in terms of customisation to the needs of multiple audiences? Certainly, as Coupland and Brown (2004) argue, organizational researchers need to be alert to the 'persuasive techniques' that organizations can deploy 'in their efforts to

render hegemonic their versions of an organization's identity' (p 1325) and posing such questions is an interesting way of interrogating the role and purpose of corporate identity. In fact, as our discussion and examples above illustrate, it is actually quite difficult for organizations to maintain hegemonic positions through websites (see also Price et al. 2008). How then can an organisation's web identity be researched? If we see CWI as a 'sub-construct' of an organisation's corporate identity (Coupland and Brown, 2004: 1325), how are the organisation's wider aims and intentions reflected through their web presence and its design? The constant flux between the part and the whole is certainly a research challenge and arguably one which has not been adequately addressed. This is because most research focuses on discrete aspects of an organisation's web presence. Another issue to add to the research focus is the choice of method and disciplinary orientation.

It has been argued that the study of corporate identity more generally needs a 'multidisciplinary approach' (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006:848), and although corporate website research is young there are already innovative transdisciplinary approaches emerging, focusing on different features and roles of webpages. The nascent discipline of internet studies is very much interdisciplinary in orientation (McLemee, 2001; Wellman, 2004). For example, the Journal of New Media and Society claims to publish work from the subject areas of 'communication, media and cultural studies, sociology, geography, anthropology, political and information sciences and humanities (<http://nms.sagepub.com/>). Work emerging from this new discipline ranges from the design and security of websites, through studies of online communities and culture, to the sociology of the internet and computer mediated communication (see also International Journal of Internet Science <http://www.ijis.net/>).

However, much of the work drawn on in this chapter uses methods traditionally associated with textual research, for example discourse and content analysis, focusing on discrete issues such as the use of metaphor and quantitative work on cultural suitability (see Table One for an overview).

Table 1: Summary of different foci, approaches and methodology

Authors	Research Site	Research focus	Methods used	Findings/type of web identity
Segars and Kohut, (2001)	CEO Letters	Effectiveness of letters	Q sort analysis	Evidence of credibility, efficacy, commitment, responsibility.
Singh, Zhao, and Hu (2003)	Chinese/American websites	American companies' domestic websites and Chinese websites	Content analysis	Slight differences in terms of perceived cultural differences but considerable difference in terms of brightness of colour and animation on Chinese websites
Schroeder (2003)	Ten US Banks websites	Representations of trustworthiness on the WWW	Content analysis	Half of websites studied included images of buildings to represent banks' trustworthiness
Coupland and Brown (2004)	Royal Dutch/Shell	Identity creation through dialogue	Discourse Analysis	Organizational identities are constructed through interactive processes of 'description, questioning, contestation and defence
Kivinen (2006, 2008)	2 energy companies home webpages	The concept of home and the different ways in which boundaries of identity and difference are drawn	Lefebvre's concept of space: social, physical and mental	A 'home' is constructed through the collection of ideas, objects and people within the space. But exclusion also takes place even though images of the environment are present on the website.

Chaudhri and Wang (2007)	100 IT companies in India	Analytical focus on the dimensions of prominence of communication, extent of information and style of presentation	Content analysis	Very little CSR information put on site and interactive opportunities not generally leveraged
Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2008)	Portals (different types)	metaphorical conceptions connected to web portals	Content analysis	Five dominant features of portal sites- customization, content, control, community and commerce
Pablo and Hardy (2009)	A comparative study of 29 Web portals	The functionality of web portals and the use of metaphors in relation to	Systematic analysis of the linguistic, visual and interactive features of Web portals	The metaphor of expert, market and community
Elliott and Robinson (2012)	Four UK Business Schools' MBA webpages	Portrayal of internationalisation	Visual semiotics Critical hermeneutics	Mixed and confused messages. Organisational distinctiveness obscured by mass of information and not congruent with stated student experiences.

We suggest that although such research has identified some significant issues and raised important questions, website methodologies remain rather limited and there remains a 'brochure' approach (i.e treating it as a written text) to website research even though the medium itself has developed and diversified considerably. It is time then to consider the development of more global research designs which could address website's multi-modal nature and capture some of the complexities of web identity.

Construction of a research approach: adaption of 'visual semiotic' method

In previous research, we took a holistic and 'layered' approach to website complexity (Elliott and Robinson, 2012). Focusing on the internationalisation of management education we studied four business school websites which we contrasted with student interviews from the same institutions. We employed a four stage hermeneutic cycle of analysis: (1) first

impressions, (2) stakeholder views, (3) a visual semiotic approach and (4) our reflexive account of our interpretations. Although distinctive approaches to internationalization at each institution are identified through student interviews, these are somewhat lost through the mass of information on the webpages. Our analysis also revealed that webpages portray mixed messages which do not necessarily support each School's distinct approach in terms of students' learning, pedagogy or curriculum.

In the next section, using a worked example, we demonstrate how using a multi-layered analytical method can uncover intended and unintended meanings and shed light on the workings of the different elements of CWI.

In examining organisations' communication of their corporate identity through their webpages we are working from the assumption that webpages constitute a form of 'text' in the widest hermeneutic sense (see Prasad, 2002), and draw on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual semiotic method. This approach claims that any one image (e.g. an advertisement, a painting) not only represents the world, but is also involved in interaction with a viewer. Visual semiotics has been described as 'the study of the ways in which visual images produce social meaning' (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 217). Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006) focuses on four main semiotic systems: *representational meaning*; *modality*; *composition*; and *interactive participants* as a means of interpreting this meaning.

Representational meaning is conveyed by the participants in a visual image and can include people, objects, or places. Panofsky (1970) refers to representational meaning as the recognition of what is represented based on the viewer's practical experience, 'taking into account the stylistic conventions and the technical transformations involved in the representation' (van Leeuwen, 2000: 100). For example, we understand that photography is unable to represent the world's three-dimensionality. Images, therefore 'involve two kinds of participants, represented participants', and 'interactive participants' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 114). In taking a visual semiotic approach to the analysis of webpages we draw attention to the different relationships between these two kinds of participants, 'the people who communicate with each other *through* images, the producers and viewers of images' (ibid, emphasis in original), as a means to explore the emergent CWI.

Modality refers to the degree to which a photograph appears ‘credible’ or real in a naturalistic sense. Naturalistic modality means that the greater the congruence between what the viewer sees in a visual image, and what the viewer sees in reality, the higher the modality of that image. Visual images can represent people, places and objects as if they are real, or as if they are not – ‘as though they are imaginings, fantasies, caricatures, etc.’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 156). In that sense, how we judge the modality of an image is inherently social as it depends on ‘what is considered real (or true, or sacred) in the social group for which the representation is primarily intended’ (ibid).

Composition: van Leeuwen (2005) refers to composition as the arranging of elements, whether these are people, objects, diagrams, either in or on a semiotic space which can range from a page or a canvas to a city.

Interactive meaning indicates relationships with the viewer, in that images can create particular relations between viewers and the world inside the image. For example, in photographs of individuals in advertising texts those individuals look directly at the viewer in an attempt to ‘make contact’ with them, to ‘establish an (imaginary) relation with them’ (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 145). Images can also keep the viewer at a distance, just as in everyday interactions social norms play a role in determining how close we stand in relation to one another. In photography, ‘this translates into the “size frame” of shots’ (Jewitt and Oyama 2001: 146), so a close-up shot of an individual, for example, suggests intimacy (Elliott and Robinson, 2012; and see also Campbell et al., 2009).

Corporate websites in action: Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS)

In this section we employ a visual semiotic analysis to the current homepage of RBS (2012). We chose this organisation’s webpage because it represents a sector, which following the financial crisis from 2008 onwards, is facing difficult times as well as public criticism and scrutiny. Therefore there is a need to study its corporate identity and to evaluate how has this been achieved.

In contrast to Schroeder’s (2003) analysis of architectural language on bank websites which identifies the presence of bank headquarters’ images on six of the ten banks studied, the RBS Group global portal’s home page does not feature any images of its headquarters.

Nevertheless, the top quarter of the webpage, dominated by a table of information, includes a photograph of the Forth Road Bridge, a well-known Scottish landmark.

Insert Figure 1 here

If we consider the *representational meaning* of the RBS webpage's imagery, the table of information can be seen as an organising device offering windows through which the viewer can enter in order to access different areas of RBS activity. Each 'window' of information contains an image underlined by explanatory text. The photographic images used are realist in nature, whereas the 'running of the bulls' image appears to be a pencil drawing, and the invitation to read RBS's annual review is more abstract. Considered as a whole image the table of information is a form of covert taxonomy (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 79). It shows the variety of areas that RBS is choosing to associate with. As a taxonomy it is ranking different categories of activity, and with the facilities available to us through internet-based technology the viewer can access what lies underneath the home page headline. Curiously though, when the lower four windows are clicked on to access further information, the linked pages are image-free, consisting of standard text that read like press releases.

Given the turbulence of the banking and financial sectors since 2008, banks are less trusted than when Schroeder (2003) conducted his examination of banks' use of architectural imagery on webpages to represent trust and stability. The presence of images and text relating to different aspects of RBS's activity in the taxonomy discussed above, and the corresponding absence of overt representations of RBS buildings on the home page, moves us to consider the reliability of the images presented, the degree to which we can trust what we see, that is the *modality* of the home webpage. The images used in the table-based taxonomy are mobilised in different ways but in terms of their modality are all, apart from the image of three iPads, used in symbolic ways. This includes the photograph accompanying the '50 new jobs to come as brokerage firm drives ahead' text, which shows three men in suits standing between, and at the front of, two expensive cars. Whether the cars are intended to symbolise the 'drive ahead', or the brokerage firm's wealth, is unclear; but they are nevertheless overt symbols of wealth. The photograph above the 'photographer investing in the community with NatWest help' text is ambiguous. The text does not provide any clues as to why a motorbike should feature in a piece about a photographer's relationship with the community. The drawing representing the running of bulls is a curious choice for a bank heavily criticised for

its role in precipitating the current economic recession. A bull market is associated with increased investor confidence in anticipation of future price increases, and ‘the running of the bulls’ is a controversial practice that occurs annually in some Spanish towns and villages. The Forth Road Bridge is used clearly here, as it is in other contexts, to symbolise Scottish identity and RBS as a Scottish bank.

The *composition* of the RBS homepage is structured along a vertical axis. The space above the vertical axis is dominated by the table-taxonomy, and the space below consists of more factual information relating to RBS. Making sense of the relationship with the viewer that the webpage’s overall composition effects, its *interactive meaning*, is complex. The RBS webpage includes a number of images in its composition that are elements in the overall layout. As we argue above, this makes the visual analysis of websites, particularly the interactive meaning they invoke, more complicated than the analysis of a single painting, photograph or magazine advertisement that are literally static. In the RBS case, the table dominating the upper part of the page gives the effect of an organised collage, or different windows through which to discover more about RBS activities.

Visual Semiotics and CWI

In applying a visual semiotic analysis to explore ‘the grammar’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) of organisations’ website design we are working to the assumption that webpages constitute a significant element in the evolution of an organisations’ aesthetic environment. That is, we suggest that a visual semiotic analysis of organizations’ webpages moves us to a deeper understanding of the role of corporate visual identity, and an appreciation of emerging corporate web identities whereas text-based analyses of websites focus on specific aspects of website content only.

The analysis of the RBS case, and the examples we have drawn upon earlier in this chapter, reveal that organisations’ corporate web identity, as evoked through the grammar of the webpages’ design, emerges in relation to their real or imagined stakeholders and audience. The use of the table-taxonomy of information in the RBS case, hints at the organisation’s awareness of stakeholder/viewer diversity. The amount of information included on home pages, including hyperlinks, suggests the organisation is also aware of viewer agency; any viewer can move swiftly from one bank’s website to another at the click of a mouse so key corporate messages need to feature prominently and be visually striking. Unlike corporate

brochures or other marketing materials, websites present organisations with the dilemma of choice. Through Web 2.0 technology they are able to include not only static images and text, but also access to social media and film (see also Leonard and also Bell and McArthur this volume). This can compromise the coherence and uniformity of corporate identity as each viewer practices their own ‘mash up’ of engagement with the website as they choose the amount of time spent, and routes into, through, between and out of the webpages.

By applying a visual semiotic method to analyse webpages we have attempted to provide insights into webpages as a form of visual communication. Visual social semiotics regards visual resources as developed ‘to do specific kinds of semiotic work’ (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 140); so the image of the Forth Road Bridge represents Scottish identity, and the image of a blonde woman (in the IKEA example) is intended to evoke Swedish identity. As a method however, visual semiotics was developed prior to internet-based technologies of communication, which leads to difficulties when trying to analyse the multiplicity of static and moving images common to many webpages. Do we focus on the page as a whole and examine its composition, or do we focus on specific images and sections of any one webpage? In our analysis of RBS above, we have looked at webpages through four semiotic systems. As the method lends itself to very detailed considerations of static images we are aware that doing so has led us to undertake a somewhat fleeting analysis, but one that we hope sheds some insights on how webpages communicate an organisation’s corporate identity.

Conclusions: Emergent research issues and suggested ways forward

Investigating the relationship between websites and corporate identity has revealed methodological, conceptual and practical questions. We began the chapter by examining how corporate identity has been defined and applied and argued that the sub-concept corporate visual identity (CVI) is not sufficiently broad to appreciate and evaluate the complex medium of websites; their multi-modal nature requires the introduction of a new concept that we term corporate web identity (CWI).

In terms of methodology there seems no one best method to undertake a qualitative exploration of how organisations communicate a corporate identity through their websites. Our analysis for example could have focussed exclusively upon the *composition* of the two websites or their *interactive meaning*; but this would not have revealed the complexity of

analysing a multi-modal communication technology². Visual semiotics offers one approach, but whilst organisations might seek to control the messages they send out through websites, they are not necessarily in control of the semiotics. There is further work to be done therefore on developing methodologies that take account of the viewer's experience of, and relationship to, organisations' corporate web identity as well as the viewer's role in shaping corporate web identity.

To conclude, earlier in this chapter we suggested the need for research that develops an awareness of: a) how organization website design conveys corporate identities, b) how websites are open to the multiple interpretations of a diverse and global audience, and c) how stakeholders experience and make sense of their 'visit' to a specific website. In our attempt to attend to these areas we have proposed: a) an analytic framework, which drawing on visual semiotics, uses a four stage process to focus upon the different ways in which images, and webpage's visual design, convey meaning. In addressing b) we have drawn attention to ways in which organizations' (e.g. Ikea) corporate web identities are customised according to the nationality/culture of the audience they are communicating to. To work towards an understanding of how stakeholders experience and make sense of their website visits, we have identified five questions that can be used as an analytic guide to investigate the features of corporate web identity:

- How *mobile* and *navigable* is the website?
- How *accessible* it is to multiple stakeholders?
- How *interactive* is it and does it facilitate dialogue?
- How *visible* does the organisation make itself through the images it uses?
- How do organizations *customize* and *communicate* their strategic messages?

Posing these questions of websites we suggest, draws attention to the significance of images in shaping corporate web identities, and websites' role in communicating to organization stakeholders.

² The Singapore based Multimodal Analysis Lab (www.multimodal-analysis-lab.org) is unusual in bringing together social scientists and computer scientists and has, as a key objective, the development of interactive media technology for the analysis of images, video texts and interactive digital sites.

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