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Corporate Identity at the Stakeholder Group Level
A Conceptual Model of Front-Line Employee Corporate Identity

Abstract: *There is a paucity of literature regarding the construction and operation of corporate identity at the stakeholder group level. This article examines corporate identity from the perspective of an individual stakeholder group, namely, front-line employees. A stakeholder group that is central to the development of an organization's corporate identity as it spans an organization's boundaries, frequently interacts with both internal and external stakeholders, and influences a firm's financial performance by building customer loyalty and satisfaction. The article reviews the corporate identity, branding, services and social identity literatures to address how corporate identity manifests within the front-line employee stakeholder group, identifying what components comprise front-line employee corporate identity and assessing what contribution front-line employees make to constructing a strong and enduring corporate identity for an organization. In reviewing the literature the article develops propositions that, in conjunction with a conceptual model, constitute the generation of theory that is recommended for empirical testing.*

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The existent corporate identity literature is both mature and established (Melewar et al. 2012). Over its 30 or more years of development, the identified advantages for organizations that hold a strong and enduring corporate identity are numerous (Melewar, Karaosmanoglu and Paterson 2005). They include achieving competitive advantage by influencing consumer perceptions of the organization (Balmer 1995; Markwick and Fill 1997), attracting investment to the firm by making investors aware of an organization's strategic capabilities (Lippincott and Margulies 1988; Milgrom and Roberts 1986), and motivating and retaining high quality employees by developing an understanding of the purpose and direction of the organization (Downey 1987).

In the majority, the models that aim to encapsulate the corporate identity phenomena are formed at the organizational level (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006). These models present a series of constructs, internal and external to the firm, proposing a set of relationships between them (Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). Fundamental to the construction of these models are the stakeholder groups that comprise the organization, i.e. managers, employees, customers, investors and suppliers (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). The models emphasize the major contribution made by strong and effective relationships between these stakeholder groups to the building of a strong and enduring corporate identity for an organization (Melewar 2003).

However, there is a paucity of literature relating to the construction and operation of corporate identity at the individual stakeholder group level (Melewar et al. 2012). In other words, for particular stakeholder groups, the literature does not address how corporate identity manifests itself, what comprises corporate identity for a particular stakeholder group, and what contribution a particular stakeholder group makes to constructing a strong and enduring corporate identity for an organization. The purpose of this article is to address these issues for a specific corporate identity stakeholder group - front-line employees.

So why is it important to understand corporate identity at the stakeholder level? Organizations need to integrate disparate internal and external stakeholder groups for a number of purposes, not least the effective development and implementation of corporate strategy (Gray and Smeltzer 1985). In recent times the integration of disparate stakeholder groups has been associated with the development of effective organizational sustainability (Dahlmann and Brammer 2011), corporate and social responsibility (Brammer, Jackson and Matten 2012) and the building of strong corporate brand communities (Merz, He and Vargo 2009). For example, in order to effectively implement strategy an organization requires financiers who have sufficient confidence in the organization to invest, a management team that believe in and own the organization's mission and vision, support staff that understand the contribution they make to the performance of the organization, and front-line employees who are not only committed to contributing to the delivery of results for the organization but are also committed to working with customers to deliver customer satisfaction.

Despite their differing roles, each of these stakeholder groups bears witness to the organization's corporate identity (Melewar 2003). Each stakeholder group is an audience for this presentation of the organization, and each stakeholder group, in its own context, is exposed to, and accesses, differing elements that comprise the organization's corporate identity (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the manifestation of corporate identity at the stakeholder group level and to appreciate what aspects of the organization are important for each stakeholder group and, therefore, the degree to which an organization's stakeholder groups are integrated.

With that understanding the corporate identity of each stakeholder group provides a guide for its integration into the organization and highlights the potential implications for applying organizational-wide activity relating to strategy implementation, corporate and social responsibility, organizational sustainability and corporate brand community

development. However, a complication may arise as it is possible that elements of corporate identity accessed by each group are specific to that group and no other. This may potentially result in little or no commonality between groups, making it difficult to measure the integration of individual stakeholder groups into the corporate whole.

Nevertheless, the corporate brand, a specific and important element of corporate identity, reaches all the organization's stakeholder groups and is a common reference point accessible to all (Merz, He and Vargo 2009). Empirically, it is established that strong corporate brands influence a range of stakeholder groups, which include institutional investors (Rego et al. 2011), stock markets (Madden, Fehle and Fournier 2006), an organization's managers (Ballantyne and Aitkin 2007) and importantly, those who interact with and influence customers, that is, front-line employees (Punjaisri, Wilson and Evanschitzky 2009). All of these groups are constituent members of the organization's corporate brand community (Merz, He and Vargo 2009). It is therefore possible to determine three sets of corporate branding phenomena that are shared by an organization's stakeholder groups.

The first, corporate brand identification, is a new construct proposed in this article. It is defined as "the extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership of a brand community, where identification with the brand community partly answers the question of, 'who am I?'". The construct, grounded in social identity theory, establishes the degree to which individuals affiliate with the organization's corporate brand community. Therefore, the stronger the identification with the corporate brand community the stronger the integration with the organization. The second phenomenon is the influence of the corporate branding elements of corporate identity upon stakeholder's corporate brand identification. This determines the degree by which those elements of an organization's corporate identity influence stakeholder integration. The third is the influence of corporate brand identification

upon activity undertaken by stakeholders in support of the corporate brand, including positive word-of-mouth advocacy, their relatedness to the corporate brand community and participation in the corporate brand community. This determines the influence of stakeholder integration on the day-to-day activity of stakeholders that supports the organization and its corporate brand.

In order to develop a conceptual framework for corporate identity at the stakeholder group level, this article applies the existent literature to a specific corporate identity stakeholder group, namely, front-line employees. This group was selected because of its vitally important role in delivering the services of an organization to its customers (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Bettencourt, Brown and MacKenzie 2005) and in representing the organization by communicating and transporting its core defining characteristics to customers through continual customer contact and interaction (Hartline, Maxham and McKee 2000). This person-to-person contact between a front-line employee and the customer, termed a 'service encounter' (Bitner 1990; Bitner et al. 1994), influences both customer satisfaction and loyalty (Brady and Cronin 2001), and, in turn, the profitability and growth of the organization (Heskett 1994; Rucci, Kirn and Quinn 1998).

The article, therefore, first reviews existent corporate identity models and literature to characterize the corporate identity environment of front-line employees and to determine which group front-line employees are most affiliated to within an organization. The review characterizes their environment and establishes that (1) they are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group; (2) they are influenced by internal and external corporate identity phenomena; (3) these phenomena influence their psychological identification within specific groups; and (4) their brand building behaviors are influenced by and support the organization's corporate identity. In conclusion the first section of the article concludes that

front-line employees are members of a corporate brand community and this is the group with which they are potentially most affiliated.

Second, the branding, services marketing and social identity literature are applied to the characteristics of the front-line employees' corporate identity environment in order for the front-line employee corporate identity to be analyzed and a conceptual model of the construct developed. In reviewing the literature, the article develops propositions that, in conjunction with a conceptual model, constitute the generation of theory that is recommended for empirical testing. Finally, the article concludes by addressing how corporate identity is manifested in the front-line employee stakeholder group, what components comprise front-line employee corporate identity, and what contribution front-line employees make to constructing a strong and enduring corporate identity for an organization.

In undertaking a literature review to construct a conceptual model of front-line employee corporate identity, the foundations of the model are grounded in a series of specific core constructs. In referring to corporate identity the article adopts the Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) definition of "The presentation of an organization to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organization unique and it incorporates the organization's communication, design, culture, behavior, structure, industry identity and strategy" (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006, 864). Corporate image is defined as "the totality of stakeholders' perceptions of the way an organization presents itself, either deliberately or accidentally" (Melewar 2003, 209), and corporate branding as "comprising the organization's name, slogan, logo type and/or symbol, typography and color", which projects the organization's "quality, prestige and style to stakeholders" (Melewar 2003, 201).

The corporate brand identification construct is developed from social identity theory, where social identity is defined as the "psychological causes and consequences of individuals seeing themselves, and being seen by others, as part of a social group" (Tajfel and Turner

1979, 21), and its application at the corporate level, organizational identification, as the "extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership of the organization and where identification with an organization partly answers the question of who am I?" (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 33).

The antecedents of corporate brand identification emerge from the corporate associations' literature; corporate associations being "all the information about a company that a person holds" (Brown and Dacin 1997, 69), whilst the corporate associations retained by organizational members, relating to what they believe "others outside the organization hold about the organization," are termed as construed associations (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006, 103). The corporate associations held by "organizational members about the organization" (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006, 103) are termed 'organizational associations'. Each of the consequences of corporate brand identification are established constructs and are applied in a new context for front-line employee corporate identity. As such, they are defined in the literature review as part of the development of propositions five, six and seven that are presented in this article.

Characterising the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment
Defining and modelling corporate identity
An overarching and universally accepted definition of corporate identity remains elusive (Wilkinson and Balmer 1996; Melewar and Jenkins 2002). Despite a number of schools of thought emerging there is a widely held view that corporate identity is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon, the scope of which spans multiple stakeholder groups (Melewar, Karaosmanoglu and Paterson 2005). Overwhelmingly, the corporate identity construct is defined at the corporate level (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006; Cornelissen and Harris 2001). In the main, the models that support these definitions are not empirically tested and so

their definitions and conceptual models remain theoretical. However, one aspect of the literature combines an inductive theoretical construction of the components of corporate identity supported by empirical testing (Melewar 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

Out of the many available definitions of corporate identity some scholars consider the construct to be an expression of corporate personality (Cornelissen and Harris 2001), others conclude that corporate identity is defined by the organization (He and Balmer 2005), whilst others explain the construct by concentrating on how the visual elements of an organization distinguish one firm from another (Gregory and Weichman 1999).

In contrast, Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) take a stakeholder perspective to define corporate identity. Therefore, the definition of corporate identity, adopted for the purposes of characterising the front-line employee corporate identity environment and development of a front-line employee corporate identity conceptual model is "The presentation of an organization to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organization unique and it incorporates the organization's communication, design, culture, behavior, structure, industry identity and strategy" (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

In order to address this article's research questions, one has first to characterize the front-line employees' corporate identity operating environment. Front-line employees are people who deliver the services of an organization to its customers (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Bettencourt, Brown and MacKenzie 2005) and represent the organization by communicating and transporting its core defining characteristics to customers through continual customer contact and interaction (Hartline, Maxham and McKee 2000). Their corporate identity operating environment is derived from placing them in the context of the existent corporate identity literature and, in particular, a set of corporate identity models (Abratt 1989; Alessandri 2001; Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt 2003; Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006; Dowling 1986; Kennedy 1977; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006; Stuart

1998; Stuart 1999; Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). These models span the development of the corporate identity construct during the formative stages of its development from1977 through to 2006. Post 2006, scholars recognized the need to move onto the incremental development of model components, instead of developing new models of corporate identity (Otubanjo and Melewar 2007; Bartholme and Melewar 2010).

Front-line employees are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group

From the very early development of corporate identity models, an organization's employees have been represented as a distinct and individual stakeholder group. Kennedy (1977) identifies company personnel as a specific stakeholder group, as does Dowling (1986), who specifies employees holding a distinct and unique image of the organization. Stuart (1998; 1999) distinguishes employees from managers, placing them alongside managers, but as a separate and distinctive group.

Importantly, the corporate identity literature establishes employees as boundary spanners of the organization's internal and external environments (Dowling 1986; Stuart 1999; Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). The literature places employees directly in-between the organization and its external stakeholder groups, interacting with them, in particular with customers, and feeding back information into the organization as a result (Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt 2003; Stuart 1999). Distinguishing employee behavior from that of managers (Melewar 2003), highlights the presence of a specific group of employees who represent an organization's corporate identity to customers along with other external stakeholders (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). Front-line employees are therefore a specific corporate identity stakeholder group.

Front-line employees are influenced by internal corporate identity phenomena

Melewar (2003) posits that inside the organization employees are internally influenced by specific corporate identity constructs that include corporate communication, corporate design, corporate structure, and corporate mission and values. In receiving messages from different forms of corporate communication and exposure to corporate symbols, front-line employees form a perception of the firm's corporate identity that they, in turn, represent and present through personal communication with customers and other external stakeholders (Abratt 1989; Alessandri 2001; Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt 2003; Kennedy 1977).

Melewar (2003) states that the corporate structure, with its particular sub-dimension of the corporate branding structure, is a key component of corporate identity. Stating that an organization's corporate brand "comprises the organization's name, slogan, logo type and/or symbol, typography and color," which projects the organization's "quality, prestige and style to stakeholders" (Melewar 2003, 201). Employees are influenced by the organization's corporate brand, as a corporate symbol and a component part of corporate identity, as the brand visually presents the organization with its logo, tagline, color palette and architecture (Alessandri 2001). Therefore, establishing an organization's corporate brand as a component of the organization's corporate identity has an internal influence upon front-line employees (Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). In this manner front-line employees are internally influenced by the organization's corporate identity.

Front-line employees are influenced by external corporate identity phenomena

Within the larger grouping of external stakeholders, customers are a specific stakeholder group that are exposed to a number of corporate identity phenomena, which includes interacting with front-line employees. As an element of corporate communications (Melewar 2003), customers regularly receive marketing communications (Markwick and Fill 1997; Stuart 1998, 1999), that comprise not only product and service information, but also more

broader corporate messages concerning the organization and its brand (Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). Demonstrating that an organization's corporate brand influences external stakeholders (Alessandri 2001; Stuart 1998; 1999) as they form part of the corporate design and corporate branding structure dimensions of an organization's corporate identity (Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005).

Therefore, when entering a service encounter with a front-line employee, a customer carries with him an image of the organization, i.e. "the totality of stakeholders' perceptions of the way an organization presents itself, either deliberately or accidentally" (Melewar 2003, 209). As part of the service encounter, this image, and the associations a customer attaches to it, are used to inform the feedback customers give front-line employees (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006; Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005). In this manner front-line employees are externally influenced by the organization's corporate identity.

The organization's corporate identity influences front-line employee's psychological identification with specific organizational groups

Stuart (1998; 1999) and Dowling (1986) established that employees hold an image of the organization, which directly establishes a relationship between employees and the organization. This image comprises a set of corporate associations (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006).

Corporate associations, the set of mental associations about a company held by individuals (Brown and Dacin 1997), concern the types of beliefs, moods, emotions and evaluations held by individuals about an organization (Dacin and Brown 2002). According to Brown and Dacin (1997, 69), corporate associations are defined as "all the information about a company that a person holds." Corporate associations apply to all stakeholders of an

organization, including managers, employees, shareholders, financial analysts, competitors and government entities (Spears, Brown and Dacin 2006).

Melewar (2003) states that the organization's corporate brand encapsulates the organization's values, underpins the organization's communication efforts and projects the quality, style and prestige of an organization to its stakeholders. The organization's corporate brand is very important in guiding employees as to what is expected of them, and influences their role in controlled and non-controlled corporate communications (Melewar and Karaosanoglu 2006). The corporate associations, which are conveyed through an organization's corporate identity, serve as the reality of the organization for the individual member of the organization holding them (Spears, Brown and Dacin 2006). A number of central and enduring associations, once internalized, "form a basis for self-referential meaning, constituting an organizationally relevant but individually held, identity for the organization member" (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006, 103). In this way front-line employees hold corporate associations that are informed by an organization's corporate identity, that, in turn, influence their identification with specific organizational groups.

Front-line employee behavior is influenced by, and supports, the organization's corporate identity

Employee behavior, a component of the behavior dimension of corporate identity, is considered to be an important part of the corporate identity construct (Melewar 2003). Corporate identity empirical research establishes that employee behavior, part of controlled and uncontrolled corporate communications, is influenced by the organization's corporate brand (Melewar and Karaosanoglu 2006). This, in turn, influences how the employee presents the organization to external stakeholders and customers (Alessandri 2001; Stuart 1998; 1999). Front-line employee brand building behaviors, their contribution, both on- and

off-the-job, to an organization's customer-orientated branding efforts (Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak 2009), influence and are supported by an organization's corporate brand, which is a dimension of an organization's corporate identity.

This behavior is part of front-line employees spanning the boundary of the organization, bridging the internal and external environments. When bridging the organization's external and internal environments, they perform three specific activities that support the organization's corporate identity and its corporate brand: (1) building closer relationships with other stakeholder groups (Dowling 1986; Stuart 1999; Suvatjis and de Chernatony 2005); (2) advocating the organization and its corporate brand when communicating with stakeholders; and (3) feeding back information into the organization as a result of interacting with external stakeholder groups (Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt 2003; Stuart1999). In this manner front-line employee behaviors are influenced by, and support, the organization's corporate identity.

Table 1

Model support for the five characteristics of a front-line employee corporate identity operating environment

Five characteristics of front-line employee corporate identity operating environment	Front-line employees are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group	An organization's corporate identity internally influences front-line employees	Front-line employees construe customers' attitudes toward the organization's corporate identity during service encounters	The organization's corporate identity influences a front-line employees psychological identification with the organization	Front-line employee behaviors are influenced by and support the organization's corporate identity
Kennedy (1977)	√	√	√	√	-
Dowling (1986)	√	√	√	√	**-**
Abratt (1989)	**-**	√	**-**	**-**	**-**
Stuart (1998)	√	√	√	√	√
Stuart (1999)	√	√	√	√	√
Alessandri (2001)	√	√	**-**	√	√
Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt (2003)	√	√	**-**	**-**	**-**
Melewar (2003)	√	√	**-**	√	√
Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006)	√	√	√	√	√
Suvatjis and de Chernatony (2005)	√	√	**-**	√	√
Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten (2006)	√	√	√	√	√

Table 2

Findings from characterizing a front-line employee's corporate identity operating environment

Five characteristics of the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment	Front-line employees are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group	An organization's corporate identity internally influences front-line employees	Front-line employees construe customers' attitudes toward the organization's corporate identity during service encounters	The organization's corporate identity influences front-line employee psychological identification with the organization	Front-line employee behaviors are influenced by and support the organization's corporate identity
Findings	The corporate identity models indicate that front-line employees are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group.	The corporate identity models indicate that stakeholder groups cluster into two broad internal and external groupings. Front-line employees are internally influenced by the organization's corporate identity, in particular the organization's corporate brand. This influence is termed front-line employees member organizational associations.	The corporate identity models indicate that front-line employees construe customer attitudes toward the organization's corporate identity; specifically, the organization's corporate brand, during service encounters.	The corporate identity models indicate that, from an organization's corporate identity, front-line employees hold an image of the organization. This influences the development of a front-line employee's psychological relationship with the organization. The organization's corporate brand significantly influences a front-line employee's psychological identification with the organization.	Front-line employees exhibit different behaviors during service encounters that are influenced by and support the organization's corporate identity. Front-line employee brand building behaviors are influenced by and support the organization's corporate brand. Front-line employees support the organization's corporate identity by building closer relationships with other stakeholder groups, positively advocating the organization and its brand, and feeding back information into the

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					organization as a result of interacting with external stakeholder groups.

The five characteristics of the front-line employee corporate identity environment

The review of the corporate identity literature, and the set of corporate identity models, establishes five defining characteristics of the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment (Tables 1 and 2). First, the review strongly indicates that front-line employees are a defined and important corporate identity stakeholder group, which is anchored to a corporate brand community. Second, front-line employees fall under the influence of a number of corporate identity phenomena, including the organization's corporate brand. Third, front-line employees fall under the influence of a number of external corporate identity phenomena including those derived and construed from interacting with external stakeholders. Fourth, corporate identity phenomena influence front-line employees' psychological identification with the organization, and, fifth, front-line employee behaviors, particularly brand building behaviors, both support and are influenced by the organization's corporate identity. Because of the pervasive nature of the organization's corporate brand within the front-line employee corporate identity environment, it is proposed that the corporate brand forms the basis of the formation of a front-line employee corporate identity stakeholder group, in the form of a corporate brand community.

Conceptual model of front-line employee corporate identity

Front-line employee group membership

The branding literature considers front-line employees as presenters of the organization's brand to other stakeholders, thereby, living the brand as groups of brand evangelists, brand champions or brand ambassadors (Schultz 2003). Each term may represent a slightly different interpretation of 'living the brand', but, at its core, each term advocates that front-line employees transform the vision for a brand into a reality (Berry 2000). When front-line employees represent the corporate brand to the organization's customers (Miles and Mangold

2004) they exhibit employee brand building behavior and this is defined as an "employee's contribution (both on and off the job) to an organization's customer orientated branding efforts" (Mohart, Herzog and Tomczak 2009, 123).

Front-line employees are members of a corporate brand community through which a continuous social process co-creates brand value by stakeholder interaction and stakeholder-based negotiation (Brodie et al. 2009). This process of negotiation and dialogue leads to the development of brand meaning and value over time (Gregory 2007). The corporate brand is dynamically constructed through this social interaction and its value is located in the minds of its stakeholders, including employees and customers (Ballantyne and Aitkin 2007). Brand community members indirectly or directly share consumption and enhance their mutual experiences of the corporate brand. Employees, customers and other stakeholders are, therefore, involved in the development of the brand (Ind and Bjerke 2007).

Front-line employees' corporate brand community membership and corporate brand identification

It is this brand community membership that is central to a front-line employee's corporate identity and the principal group of which they are members. Their presentation of the organization and its brand to other stakeholders, and their receipt of messages and signals about the organization, are within a context of their membership of a corporate brand community. There are psychological "causes and consequences of individuals seeing themselves, and being seen by others, as part of a social group" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 21). As members of a corporate brand community front-line employees extend how they consider themselves in their environment; they are not just limited to the unique and individual personal characteristics that distinguish them from others, but also consider their membership of social groups (Hogg et al. 2003; Van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006; Tajfel and Turner

1979; Turner et al. 1987). In this case their membership of a brand community is internalized to contribute to the individual's sense of self (Meyer, Becker and Van Dick, 2006; Riketta 2005; Turner 1982). This self-definition is not constructed in terms of their individual personal identity, but in relation to their group membership, and is termed social identity, where 'we' is more important than 'I' (Cornelisson, Haslam and Balmer 2007). Therefore, having a salient social identity involves seeing oneself as part of a larger whole, which, in this case, is as a member of a brand community (Meyer, Becker and van Dick 2006; Rousseau 1998; Turner 1985).

The social identity literature proposes a psychological relationship between an individual and an organization, which is termed 'organizational identity' (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002; van Dick et al. 2004). This is defined as the "extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership of the organization and where identification with an organization partly answers the question of who am I?" (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 33), and it manifests itself as a perceived oneness with the organization (Mael and Ashforth 1992), reflecting the psychological merging of the self and the organization (Haslam et al. 2001; van Knippenberg 2000; Tyler and Blader 2001). It is established that front-line employees, as members of an organization, hold an organizational identity (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Podsakoff et al. 2000; Riketta 2005). This raises the question: do front-line employees, similarly, hold a social identity related to their membership of a brand community?

Different scholars propose a direct relationship between front-line employees and an organization's brand, but do not consider this relationship in terms of their membership of a brand community. Burmann, Zeplin and Riley (2009, 266) use the term 'brand commitment' to label a construct that is defined as "the extent of the psychological attachment of employees to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards

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reaching the brands goal." Punjaisri, Wilson and Evanschitzky (2009) conclude that front-line employees hold a direct psychological relationship with a brand, but, again, make no reference to front-line employees as members of a brand community. They operationalize their employee brand identification construct by mixing items that both refer to the organization and the organization's brand, mixing a front-line employee's organizational identity with the organization and their direct psychological relationship with the organization's brand. Hughes and Ahearne (2010) apply brand identification to front-line employees that re-sell other organization's manufactured products in a retail setting. In this context, brand identification is defined as "the degree to which a person defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes defines a brand" (84) where "membership of a group is not required for identification" (84). None of the above address the social identity held by front-line employees as members of a corporate brand community.

As front-line employee corporate identity is routed in its membership of a corporate brand community, it is essential that the social identity relating to this group membership is defined. Derived from the definition of organizational identity, the "extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership of the organization and where identification with an organization partly answers the question of who am I?" (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 33), the application of social identity theory to front-line employee membership of a corporate brand community suggests that this membership will also influence how an individual defines him or herself, and partly answer the question of who they are. This construct, termed 'front-line employee corporate brand identification', is defined as "the extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership of a brand community, where identification with the brand community partly answers the question of who am I?", forming the central construct of the front-line employee corporate identity theoretical model.

As a form of social identity, the development of front-line employee corporate brand identification conforms to self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987; 1994), the conditions under which social identities become salient (Cornelissen et al. 2007). In this context individuals perceive groups within their operating environment in terms of their similarities and differences, comparing these groups with themselves in order to identify with specific groups (Ullrich, Wieseke, Christ, Schulze and van Dick 2007). Cues in the environment, by communicating the group's similarities and differences, influence and guide an individual's social perception, and point them to groups with which they can identify and affiliate (Turner 1985; 1994). In this case the branding cues that are internal and external to the organization are the catalysts for developing a set of associations for front-line employees, and point them to groups associated with the brand, thereby, making them accessible. Based upon this accessibility, front-line employees compare the available groups and assess their personal affinity in order to identify with the group or groups most relevant to them, which are, in this case, the organization's corporate brand community.

Internal corporate identity phenomena

Front-line employee organizational associations

In spanning the boundary between the organization and its external stakeholders, and as members of a corporate brand community, front-line employees hold a set of associations about the organization, termed 'corporate associations' (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006). Defined as "all the information about a company that a person holds" (Brown and Dacin 1997, 69) corporate associations are conveyed to the individual through the presentation of an organization's corporate identity, and serve as the reality of the organization for that individual. A number of central and enduring associations, once internalized, "form a basis for self-referential meaning, constituting an organizationally

relevant but individually held, identity for the organization member" (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006, 103). Specifically, those corporate associations held by members of the organization are termed 'member organizational associations' (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006).

In the operating environment of a front-line employee, and as members of a brand community, front-line employees are an internal audience for cues and signals conveyed by the corporate brand about the organization (Balmer 1998; Harris and de Chernatony 2001). However, in practical terms, front-line employees are only one of a number of organizational stakeholder groups (Merz, He and Vargo 2009) each of which uses the corporate brand as a means of making a covenant with the organization that informs their actions as members of that organization (Balmer 2008). It is difficult to communicate a consistent and relevant message across all of these groups and, in turn, achieve a consistent understanding of the organization, its brand and the resulting covenant (Balmer and Gray 2003). That is why if the organization's corporate brand embodies a few core values this increases the likelihood of achieving consistency across all stakeholder groups (de Chernatony 2002).

It is also recognized, particularly for internal stakeholder groups, such as front-line employees, that the means of communicating these values through the corporate brand requires internal management. This is particularly important for communicating the organization's mission and vision, presenting a consistent corporate image of the organization, and for the consistent implementation of the corporate brand's visual identity (Simoes, Dibb and Fisk 2005). Such internal corporate identity phenomena add to the information held about the company by front-line employees, informing the organizational associations they hold.

The organization's mission and vision is a recognized component of an organization's corporate identity (Melewar 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). Front-line

employees are an important stakeholder audience in respect to the internal management of the organization's corporate brand (Savutjis and de Chernatony 2005). Involving front-line employees in the development of an organization's mission and vision is considered to be of significant strategic value (de Chernatony 2002; Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Therefore:

> *Proposition 1: Front-line employee organizational associations concerning the dissemination of the organization's mission and vision directly affect front-line employee corporate brand identification.*

Corporate image is also a recognized component of corporate identity, as communicated by the organization's corporate brand contributing to "the totality of stakeholders' perceptions of the way an organization presents itself, either deliberately or accidentally" (Melewar 2003, 209). In order to be effective, the organization's corporate image requires internal management (Zinkhan, Ganesh, Jaju and Hayes 2001) to co-ordinate its internal operations so that the corporate image is consistent across all stakeholder groups, including front-line employees (Simoes, Dibb and Fisk 2005).

> *Proposition 2: Front-line employee organizational associations concerning the organization's consistent implementation of its corporate image directly affect front-line employees corporate brand identification.*

The components of an organization's corporate visual identity comprise corporate symbols, such as the corporate name, a symbol or logo type, typography, color and slogan (Dowling 1994; Melewar 2003; Melewar and Saunders 1998; Olins 1995), and, as such, are recognized components of an organization's corporate identity (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). Simoes, Dibb and Fisk (2005, 158) consider corporate visual identity as "the most tangible facet of corporate identity," because, in line with Melewar, Saunders

and Balmer (2001), it requires internal management and standardization to develop a consistency in corporate visual identity implementation across the organization, in order to enhance its influence with all stakeholder groups. Therefore:

> *Proposition 3: Front-line employee organizational associations related to the organization's corporate visual identity implementation directly affects their corporate brand identification.*

External corporate identity phenomena

Front-line employees' construed associations

In spanning the boundary between the organization and its external stakeholders, front-line employees also develop and hold a set of associations about the organization, relating to what they believe "others outside the organization hold about the organization." This is termed 'construed associations' (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten 2006, 103).

The continuous social process of frequent interaction between front-line employees and customers co-creates value and associations with an organization's brand, based upon the discourse between the two parties and the implicit stakeholder negotiation (Brodie et al. 2009). During such service encounters front-line employees construe knowledge of the customer, which is known as 'customer need knowledge' (Homburg, Wieseke and Bornemann 2009). Acting with the ultimate goal of customer satisfaction in mind, front-line employees need to develop knowledge of the customers' underlying needs to achieve this goal (Goff et al. 1997). In uncovering a hierarchy of customer needs during this social interaction, front-line employees collect a substantial quantity of information (Blackman and Funder 1998; Gill and Swann 2004), some of which is brand related. This places the front-line employee in a position to construe what customers think of the organization and to develop construed associations relating to both the organization and its brand.

Several scholars have presented conceptual models to address the assimilation and structuring of employee's knowledge of a brand. In particular, King and Grace (2009) introduce the employee-based brand equity construct, determining that employees develop knowledge of an organization's brand, which is based upon the internal communication and socialization of the brand, and the tacit knowledge individuals develop within the organization. However, they do not address the way that employees construe brand knowledge from interaction with customers. Indeed, they consider employee-based brand equity as informing the brand knowledge held by customers. This is known as consumer-based brand equity (Keller 1993) and is the front-line employee influencing the customer, and not vice-versa. These models consider employees as an internal market within the organization, and propose promoting the brand via an internal marketing approach (Lings 2004).

The organization's internal brand influence on the firm's internal market, and its internal marketing influence upon front-line employees (Lings and Greenley 2005), is very different from front-line employees construing the brand knowledge of customers through their service encounter interactions. But King and Grace (2009) recognize that both front-line employees and consumers hold knowledge of the brand, and that both groups store the related information in their memory as associative networks (Anderson and Bower 1973; Ellis and Hunt 1992).

Individuals, either as employees or consumers, hold knowledge of a particular domain, for example brands, which are represented in the memory as links of associations among concept nodes (Sirsi, Ward and Reingen 1996). Concept nodes refer to units of information held in the memory, i.e. brand names, brand attributes, and so on, that link together to form a knowledge structure (Knoke and Kuklinski 1982). The connections between nodes, are termed 'associations', and have been used to form the basis of models

that measure the strength of brands, or their 'brand equity' (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). It is, therefore, common for both front-line employees and customers to hold and store corporate associations and knowledge of the organization's brand in a similar manner.

In the case of front-line employees they gather knowledge of customer needs during service encounters (Homburg, Wieseke and Bornemann 2009), and, in doing so, construe the brand equity held by customers. This construed brand equity is structured and mentally stored as corporate associations. From the consumer perspective, brand equity is measured by the brand's strength in gaining strong and favorable associations with target consumers (Falkenberg 1996). Although there are numerous models of consumer-based brand equity within the literature, two models dominate, (Christodoulides and de Chernatony 2010), one by Aaker (1991) and the other by Keller (1993). Both models are founded upon consumer associative network theory (Henderson, Iacobucci and Calder 2002), whereby consumers hold knowledge of a brand that comprises a set of brand associations.

Given the substantial empirical testing of the Aaker (1993) model, Christodoulides and de Chernatony (2010) recommend this model's use in measuring consumer-based brand equity, which entails deploying its components of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty, to measure a consumer's evaluation of a brand. It is, therefore, proposed that during service encounters front-line employees construe the brand equity held by consumers using the following four components. Brand quality,"the consumer's judgement about a brand's overall excellence and superiority" (Aaker 1991, 26); brand loyalty, "the attachment that a customer has to a brand" (Aaker 1991, 39); brand awareness, "the ability for a buyer to recognise or recall that a brand" (Aaker 1991, 61); and brand associations, "anything linked in memory to a brand" (Aaker 1991, 109). Therefore:

> *Proposition 4a: Front-line employee construed corporate brand quality*
>
> *directly affects front-line employee corporate brand identification.*

Proposition 4b: Front-line employee construed corporate brand loyalty

directly affects front-line employee corporate brand identification.

Proposition 4c: Front-line employee construed corporate brand

awareness/associations directly affect front-line employee corporate brand

identification.

The consequences of front-line employee corporate brand identification

Retaining a social identity for a particular group holds consequences for an individual when

determining which organizational objectives and targets they bind themselves to, and the

manner in which they seek to achieve these targets as part of their job (Meyer et al. 2006).

For example, holding a strong organizational identity influences a number of outcomes

related to an individual's job performance (Van Knippenberg and Sleebos 2006). These

outcomes include job motivation, in and extra role performance, job satisfaction, absenteeism

and turnover (Podsakoff et al 2000; Riketta 2005). The social identity of front-line

employees in relation to their membership of a corporate brand community, has a number of

potential consequential outcomes for them. In describing a front-line employee's corporate

identity operating environment it is very evident that they exhibit brand building behaviors

that are not only influenced by corporate identity phenomena but which, also, importantly,

support the organization's corporate identity. The principal models of corporate identity

suggest that front-line employees support the organization's corporate identity by building

closer relationships with other stakeholder groups (Dowling 1986; Stuart 1999; Suvatjis and

de Chernatony 2005), by positively advocating the organization and its brand, and by feeding

back information into the organization as a result of interacting with external stakeholder

groups (Stuart 1999; Bick, Jacobsen and Abratt 2003).

Brand communities are strengthened by their members sharing in brand experiences (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002), and by the community being centered on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This social interaction leads to social influence between the community members (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrman 2005). In a front-line employee context, Thurston, Buff and Devasagayam (2009) propose and verify that such social interaction, in the form of employee interaction, results from employee membership of a brand community (Miles and Mangold 2004; 2007). Brodie et al. (2009), and Merz, He and Vargo (2009) consider employees to be a resource that co-creates brand value through continuous, highly dynamic and social interaction. Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak (2009) contend that the effectiveness of this social interaction is because of the strength of the perceived relatedness between individual members of a corporate brand community. This construct is termed as 'relatedness to the corporate brand community' and defined by Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak (2009, 123) as "the strength of the perceived relatedness to other individual members of a brand community" (Morhart et al. 2009, 123). In the context of the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment this construct is termed 'front-line employee relatedness to the corporate brand community'. Therefore:

> *Proposition 5: Front-line employee corporate brand identification directly*
> *affects front-line employee relatedness to the corporate brand community.*

From a consumer perspective, those who hold a strong identification with an organization are more loyal and positively promote the organization, its product, services and brands, by word-of-mouth (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). They will recommend the company's products more often (Ahearne, Bhattacharya and Gruen

2005), and make positive recommendations about the brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005).

Members of a corporate brand community front-line employees also exercise their advocacy of the organization and in particular its brand, during the continuous social process of interacting with other stakeholders (Brodie et al. 2009). This interaction is not restricted to just customers, but extends to internal and external stakeholder groups, formally, within their job role and, informally, outside of the job role (Gregory 2007). Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak (2009, 123) consider word-of-mouth advocacy to be stronger if delivered outside the job context. Such interaction and negotiation with all stakeholders is considered discretionary and classified to be extra-role brand building behavior. It is termed 'positive word-of-mouth', and it is defined as "employees' personal advocacy of the organization's brands outside the job context." In the context of the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment, this construct is termed 'front-line employee word-of-mouth', and defined as "front-line employee personal advocacy of the organization's corporate brand outside the job context." Therefore:

> *Proposition 6: Front-line employee corporate brand identification directly*
> *affects front-line employee positive word-of-mouth.*

As part of a corporate brand community, front-line employees participate in a number of ways. They enact the corporate brand, where the "staff are the embodiment of the [corporate] brand providing a welcomed difference, not just through what the customer receives but also how they receive it" (de Chernatony 2002, 114). Ind (2003, 74) concludes that some front-line employees participate more than others, with some "spreading the brand idea" and others only "interested and not committed." Also, through the lens of a corporate brand, front-line employees challenge the norms of an organization and participate in the

brand's development (de Chernatony and Cottam 2006). To the extent that front-line employees interact with each other and their managers on brand-related matters (de Chernatony, Cottam and Segal-Horn 2006; Wallace and de Chernatony 2009). Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak (2009, 123) conclude that front-line employees participate in a brand's development "by internally passing on branding relevant customer feedback from customer touch points." This represents extra-role brand building behavior and is termed 'brand participation', where "employees provide a company with high quality input for its brand management" (Morhart, Herzog and Tomczak 2009, 123). In the context of the front-line employee's corporate identity operating environment this construct is termed 'front-line employee corporate brand participation'. Therefore:

> *Proposition 7: Front-line employees' corporate brand identification directly affects front-line employee corporate brand participation.*

Figure1: Conceptual model of front-line employee corporate identity
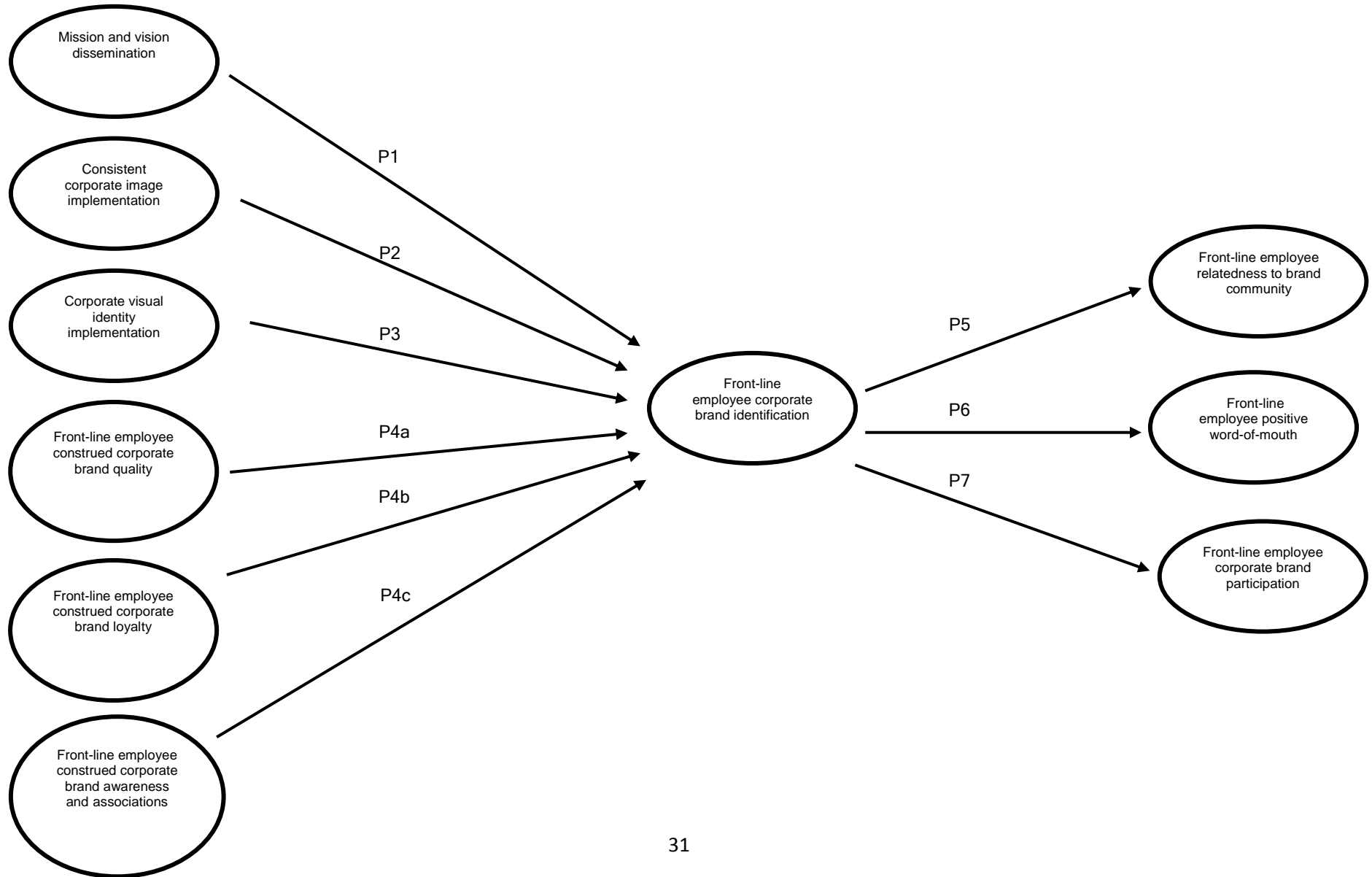
Conclusions and implications

The article contributes to the examination of corporate identity at the level of one of its

constituent stakeholder groups, namely, front-line employees. This article makes three

specific contributions resulting from characterizing the front-line employee corporate identity

operating environment, by reviewing the existent corporate identity literature, and then

applying these characteristics to the branding, services marketing and social identity

literatures. First, it establishes how corporate identity at the organizational level manifests

itself within the front-line employee stakeholder group. Second, it constructs a conceptual

model of the components that comprise front-line employee corporate identity. Finally, it

identifies the contribution this group makes in constructing a strong and enduring corporate

identity for an organization.

Reviewing the existent corporate identity literature determines that corporate identity

manifests itself at the front-line employee stakeholder level with five specific characteristics

of their day-to-day operating environment (Table 3). Applying these characteristics to the

branding, services marketing and social identity literature derives a conceptual model of

front-line employee corporate identity (Figure 1), anchoring them as a stakeholder group to

the group to which they are most affiliated, which is a corporate brand community.

Therefore, front-line employee corporate identity is best characterized as "The internal and

external communication of an organization's corporate brand to front-line employees,

internally through the operationalization of an organization's corporate brand, and externally

by front-line employees construing the external performance of the corporate brand during

service encounters with customers. This set of corporate associations is the basis of their

membership of a corporate identity stakeholder group, which is a corporate brand

community, formed around the organization's corporate brand. Membership encourages the

development of strong relationships with other stakeholder groups, promotion of the

organization and its brand both within and outside the member's job role and the feeding back of important brand-related information to the organization".

Front-line employees make a strong contribution to constructing a strong and enduring corporate identity for the organization. By spanning the boundary of the organization front-line employee are lynch pins in the development of an organization's corporate identity. Through regular contact, front-line employees integrate the majority of stakeholders into the organization by their presentation and advocacy of the organization's brand for onward communication to both internal and external stakeholders. In receiving and communicating corporate identity cues, front-line employees are the predominant translator of corporate identity signals at the stakeholder group level. In construing the associations made about the organization and its brand by other stakeholder groups, they are the best placed of all stakeholders to judge the strength and influence of an organization's corporate identity. Their ability to form strong relationships with other stakeholder groups, promote the organization and its brand, both within and outside their job role, and to feed back to the organization important brand-related information, places them in a strong position to build, support and influence a consistent and enduring corporate identity for an organization. The influence of the organization's corporate identity is not purely on front-line employees at an individual level, but they also influence their social identity in a corporate brand community context. The strength of front-line employee affiliation to the corporate brand community provides the foundation upon which to build a commonality with other stakeholder groups and to strengthen the organization's corporate identity, by its strong and consistent presentation of what makes the organization unique to both internal and external stakeholders.

Table 3
The manifestation of corporate identity at the front-line employee stakeholder group level

Manifestation of corporate identity at the front-line employee stakeholder group level The five characteristics of the front-line employee corporate identity operating environment	Front-line employees are a specific corporate identity stakeholder group	An organization's corporate identity internally influences front-line employees	Front-line employees construe customers' attitudes toward the organization's corporate identity during service encounters	The organization's corporate identity influences front-line employee's psychological identification with the organization	Front-line employee behaviors are influenced by and support the organization's corporate identity
Operationalising front-line employee corporate identity	Front-line employees form a stakeholder grouping around the organization's corporate visual identity, in the form of a corporate brand community.	The influence of internal brand management activity upon front-line employee social identity, relating to their membership of a corporate brand community.	The influence of front-line employees construing the brand equity held by consumers during service encounters upon the social identity they hold relating to their membership of a corporate brand community.	Front-line employees hold a social identity in relation to their membership of a corporate brand community.	As a consequence of holding a social identity relating to their membership of a corporate brand community, front-line employees support the organization's corporate identity by building closer relationships with other stakeholder groups, advocating the organization and its brand and feeding back information into the organization as a result of interacting with external stakeholder groups.
Constructs	N/A	Mission and vision dissemination. Consistent corporate image implementation. Corporate visual identity implementation.	Front-line employee construed corporate brand quality. Front-line employee construed corporate brand loyalty Front-line employees' construed corporate brand awareness and associations.	Front-line employee corporate brand identification.	Front-line employee relatedness to corporate brand community. Front-line employee positive word-of-mouth. Front-line employee corporate brand participation.

Propositions		1, 2, 3	4a, 4b, 4c		5, 6, 7

This article, therefore, establishes, through the examination of the operation of corporate identity at the stakeholder group level, that it is possible to derive and assess the importance of a particular stakeholder group to an organization. Further, using the corporate identity literature to characterize and frame an operating environment for a specific stakeholder group, it is able to apply multi-disciplinary literature to examine stakeholder groups from new and different perspectives. In this particular case it is the application of social identity theory to a corporate identity context, and this offers benefits for both scholars and practicing managers alike.

The re-examination of the corporate identity literature from a different perspective has highlighted a number of theoretical implications that warrant empirical investigation. In particular, front-line employees construing the associations held by other stakeholders as a result of day-to-day stakeholder interaction. Along with empirically testing the theoretical model of front-line employee corporate identity. This research establishes that practicing managers need to consider influencing the front-line employee, not just at the individual level, but as a group affiliated to the organization's brand. The implication is that an organization's brand needs to be managed in an integrated and holistic way, and not as separate internal and external elements.

The article establishes a set of branding constructs that have the potential to be deployed across the range of organizational stakeholder groups to determine the degree of their integration into the organization. Also considered is the extent to which the corporate identity elements of corporate branding impact on integration, and how stakeholders advocate the organization through the brand community. In this context it is recognized that each stakeholder group may specifically associate with the particular elements of an organization's corporate identity that are particular to that group's operating environment and context. These observations remain important as they add a further depth and richness to understanding

corporate identity for a particular stakeholder group. At the same time, this article also establishes that the organization's corporate brand and membership of its associated brand community is potentially common to all stakeholder groups and, as such, is a means of assessing commonality between, and the integration of, specific stakeholder groups.

It is recognized that this article is limited in a number of respects, particularly as the conceptual model is purely theoretical and requires empirical testing by deploying a cross-sectional quantitative study. However, the intention of the article is to provide an example of the potential opportunity for scholars to examine corporate identity at the stakeholder group level and, in doing so, to begin a discourse on its theoretical and practical value.

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