



**IJMRBS**

ISSN 2319 - 345X

Vol. 1, No. 1, October 2012

**International Journal** of  
Management Research and  
Business Strategy



[www.ijmrbs.com](http://www.ijmrbs.com)

# THE MEANING OF CORPORATE IDENTITY: A STRUCTURALIST AND SEMIOTIC INSIGHT

Olutayo Otubanjo<sup>1\*</sup>

\*Corresponding Author: **Olutayo Otubanjo**, ✉ [totubanjo@lbs.edu.ng](mailto:totubanjo@lbs.edu.ng)

The debate over the meaning of corporate identity has gradually witnessed a shift from the search for a universal definition to an attempt to create a deeper understanding of its meaning. Reflecting this shift are a number of social theory models compartmentalising and describing common assumptions in author perception of the concept. This paper explores these models, acknowledges their significance and limitations and compliments them by introducing Saussure's 'sign' structuralist theory firmly supported by a semiotic method of interpretation. The implication of this philosophy for corporate identity is highlighted and discussed.

**Keywords:** Corporate identity, Meaning, Construction, Sign, Interpretation

## INTRODUCTION

The meaning of corporate identity has attracted considerable attention and generated far reaching reverberations from authors belonging to several disciplines (Ravasi and Rekom, 2003; Balmer, 2001b; Balmer and Wilson, 1998) ranging from public relations, graphic design, marketing, organizational studies to architecture. The review of existing literature reveals that at least forty viewpoints relating to the definitions of corporate identity, have been put forward and that, in fact, this issue has been addressed at several conferences globally. Given the enormity of the theoretical literature contributing to this subject, it is possible to argue that ideas concerning the

debate over the meaning of corporate identity have been thoroughly exhausted, rendering further research (on it) fruitless. This paper provides evidence to negate such an argument suggesting and demonstrating the need for further research. Indeed, the last few decades has witnessed a gradual shift from 'the search for a universal definition' to an attempt 'to create a better understanding' of the concept. This shift makes the debate concerning the meaning of corporate identity even more relevant today. The aim in this paper, therefore, is not to define the concept of corporate identity but to compliment this emerging wave of thought by introducing a new philosophy that will enhance a better understanding of its meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Lagos Business School, Pan-African University, Km 22 Lekki Epe Expressway, Ajah, Lagos, Nigeria.

This paper has been divided into four sections. The first examines existing models that attempt to create a better understanding of the meaning of corporate identity. In the second a synopsis of the contributions and limitations of these models are made. The third section examines Saussure's 'sign' structuralist theory and its role in understanding the meaning of corporate identity. Section four makes a case for the significance of adopting Saussure's structuralist philosophy. A summary of the issues discussed is drawn in section five.

### **The Meaning of Corporate Identity: A Review of Existing Models**

It has already been stated that several knowledge enriching statements defining the concept of corporate identity were advanced by several authors in literature. Whereas these definitions enhanced our understanding of corporate identity, they also created deep seated confusion as to what corporate identity really means. While the debate over the meaning of the concept raged, several authors including Balmer (1995), van Riel and Balmer (1997), Cornelissen and Harris (2001), He and Balmer (1995), Moingeon and Ramanantsoa (1997) turned to social theory models to explain the meaning of the concept. These models are discussed below:

#### **Balmer's Seven Corporate Identity Schools of Thought**

In attempt to developing a conceptual framework towards creating an understanding of the meaning of corporate identity, Balmer (1995) put forward seven schools of thought relating reflective of strategic, visual, strategic-visual, behavioural, visual behavioural, corporate communications, visual communications and design-as-fashion schools; exhibiting author perceptions of

corporate identity; exemplifying different types of identity issues confronting organizations. Balmer (1995) concluded that identity was analogous to a mosaic; that the individual approaches were part of a much larger whole. In essence the strategic school advocates the articulation of corporate mission and philosophy while the strategic-visual school advocates the pursuit of strategic change through visual means. The behavioural school on the other hand champions the nurturing a distinct cultural mix and the visual-behavioural school makes a case for communicating organization's distinct culture visually. The corporate communications school promotes the expression of organization's mission and philosophy through formal corporate communication policies and the visual communication schools exemplifies the expression of mission and philosophy visually. The designer-as-fashion school represents how firms keep visual elements fashionable in the marketplace.

#### **van Riel and Balmer (1997) Perspectives on The Meaning of Corporate Identity**

Building on Balmer's (1995) seven school of thought, van Riel and Balmer (1997) proposed three disciplinary paradigms namely 'graphic design', 'integrated corporate communications' and 'interdisciplinary' to explain the meaning of corporate identity. Under the graphic paradigm, van Riel and Balmer (1997) avowed that corporate identity was originally conceived in literature (see Pilditch, 1970; Jackson, 1987; Carter 1975, 1976, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1997; Birkigt and Stadler, 1980; Selame and Selame, 1975; Bernstein, 1986; Ind, 1990; Olins, 1978, 1989, 1995; Marguiles, 1977; Chajet, 1993, Jenkins, 1991; Schmidt, 1995) as organizational nomenclatures, logos, house styles. They argued that the concept

was originally conceived from organizational nomenclature, logos, housestyle and visual identification standpoints owing to authors' professional backgrounds in identity design agencies like Anspach Grossman, Henrion Ludlow and Schmidt, Landor Associates, Lippincott and Marguiles, Sampson Tyrrell, Siegal and Gale, Wolff Olins and so on. This is apparent given their use of graphic designs in the rectification of a whole spectrum of problems faced by organizations (Balmer and Wilson, 1998). Although visual designs were used earlier as a lens for representing the concept of corporate identity, recent definitional constructs (see van Riel, 1995; Birkigt and Stadler, 1985) reveals that it has been assigned greater responsibility in strategic positioning and achievement of competitive advantage.

The rising desire to convey coordinated organizational messages through corporate symbols and corporate communication consistently attracted the attention of several authors in the 1980s and 1990s. Subsequently a new definitive construct reflective of the communication of corporate personality (see Abratt, 1989) emerged in the definition of corporate identity (Leitch and Motion, 1999; Bernstein, 1986; Schultz *et al*, 1994; van Riel, 1995). van Riel and Balmer (1997) called this integrated corporate communication paradigm. Both are of the opinion that conceptual definitions belonging to this paradigm of corporate identity are illuminative of visual and non visual presentation of organizational characters (Blauw, 1994).

The interdisciplinary paradigm brings together authors whose definition recognizes the interdisciplinary nature of the characteristics of corporate identity – especially those whose views

are deeply rooted in employee behaviour (Balmer 1995, Ramanantsoa, 1989), symbolism, behaviour, organizational imagery, history, market conditions (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002), visuals, strategy (Alessandri, 2001; Shultz, Hatch Holten-Larsen, 2000).

For van Riel and Balmer (1997) authors in this scholarship argue that corporate identity is a borderless discipline reflecting not just one branch of management but several interdisciplinary scholarships (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Balmer, 1995). This philosophy regarding the definition of identity is also reflective of the International Corporate Identity Group (ICIG) Strathclyde statement, which in van Riel and Balmer's (1997) view reflects the multidisciplinary nature of corporate identity and how it differs from brand management.

### **Cornelissen and Harris (2001) Three Metaphorical Perspectives to Corporate Identity**

Cornelissen and Harris (2001) grouped author theoretical perceptions of corporate identity into three metaphorical perspectives notably, 'corporate identity as an expression of corporate personality', 'corporate identity as organizational reality' and 'corporate identity as all the expressions of a company'. The first metaphorical theory credited conceptual definitions, which positioned corporate identity mainly in the light of corporate personality philosophy (Bernstein, 1984; Lux, 1886; Baker and Balmer, 1997; Marwick and Fill, 1997; Markkanen, 1998) and as the presentation of organizational characteristics (see Olins, 1978; Kiriakidou and Millward, 2000; Abratt, 1989; Dolphin, 1999; Baker and Balmer, 1997) which reside at the heart of an organization's corporate identity (see Markham, 1972; Olins, 1978, 1989; Bernstein, 1984; Birkigt

and Stadler, 1986) as viewed by valued stakeholders. Cornelissen and Harris (2001) broadened this framework incorporating definitions confining corporate identity to the manifestation of perceptions, corporate image and reputation formed in the minds of stakeholders (see Carls, 1989; Abratt 1989; Hawn, 1998; Carter, 1982; Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; International Corporate Identity Group, 1997; Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

The second perspective (i.e. corporate identity as 'organizational reality') brings life to the first perspective with the addition of an intentional aspect – which is embodying and epitomizing the 'factual' identity or the internal organizational characteristics. As Cornelissen and Harris (1997) argue, authors belonging to this scholarship (Balmer 1995, 1998; van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Larçon and Reitter, 1979; Kennedy, 1977; Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Gutjahr, 1995; Birkigt, *et al.*, 1995) contend that organizations have a factual identity (Smythe *et al.*, 1992; Blauw, 1994; van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Marwick and Fill, 1997; Gray and Balmer, 1998; Hawn, 1998) or an internal personality or characteristic akin to an actual organism similar to a real-life person. The internalities in this regard include corporate strategy (Portugal and Halloran, 1986; Leuthesser and Kohli, 1997; Alessandri 2001; Balmer, 1993; Birkigt and Stadler, 1986), philosophy, (Olins, 1993; Topalian, 1984; Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Leuthesser and Kohli, 1997), ownership, history (Downey, 1986), business scope (Downey, 1986), the range and types of products and services offered, corporate and product performance (Portugal and Halloran, 1986), internal systems and structures, core values (Balmer and Soenen, 1997), and a company's communication, both formal and

informal (Downey, 1986; Ind, 1992; van Rekom 1997; Balmer 1998; van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Balmer and Soenen, 1999). For Cornelissen and Harris (2001) the semantic shift in author constructs of corporate identity might have been triggered by changes in usage of the term identity from 'sameness' in expressions to 'essences' and 'properties'. Authors in this line of thought defined corporate identity as a set of interdependent characteristics of the company that give its specificity, stability and coherence (Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997; Larçon and Reitter, 1979).

Cornelissen and Harris (2001) theorized the third viewpoint of corporate identity as 'all expressions of a company' particularly as they relate to the dualistic conceptions of corporate image and reality and that corporate identity emerges in the course of all organizational activities (see Olins, 1995). Authors holding this view assume that corporate identity emerges in the course of social interaction and that there may be an emergence of multiple identities in the course of such interaction (see Bernstein, 1984, Cohen and Basu, 1987). This is close to the rhetorical or symbolic interactionist view of communication (see Olasky, 1987; Cheney, 1991; Grunig and Grunig, 1992; Ewen, 1996) in which signs and symbols issued by a company do not so much designate objects but rather constitute them. Meaning in Cornelissen and Harris's (2001) view thus cannot be objectively transferred but is created by organizations in the course of various forms of organizational communication. Authors in this scholarship believe that corporate identity can be created, transformed (see Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Gioia *et al.*, 2000), restructured and that organizations have to achieve a defined standard of consistency (see

Leitch and Motion, 1997) to create desired impressions with stakeholders over a period of time in order to establish viable reputations and a high degree of credibility and trust (see Fombrun and Shanley, 1990, Fombrun and van Riel, 1997). Authors belonging to this discipline believe that the meaning of corporate identity does not necessarily have to refer to any inner values or essence.

### **He and Balmer (2005) Five Perspectives of Corporate Identity**

He and Balmer (2005) advanced five identity constructs (namely visual identity, corporate identity, multidisciplinary identity, collective organizational identity and organizational identification) to create an understanding of the meaning of corporate identity. Beginning with the first construct, He and Balmer (2005) assembled author conceiving corporate identity as visual phenomenon (see Feldman, 1969; Selame and Selame, 1975; Margulies, 1977; Olins, 1978; 1979; 1989; King, 1982; Bernstein, 1984; Chajet, 1984; Perkins, 1995; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997) calling it the visual identity perspective. Authors within this construct perceive visual identity not only as various visual and corporate communication cues but most importantly as a technique enhancing recognition and identification of organizations by stakeholders (see studies by Baker and Balmer, 1997; Henderson and Cote, 1998; Melewar and Saunders, 1999; van Riel *et al.*, 2001; Glynn, 2002; van Riel *et al.*, 2001). Corporate visual identity normally includes: nomenclature, logo, slogans, colour (see Olins, 1995), strap line, architecture (see Olins, 1989) and other things relating to graphic design.

Under the second perspective, authors adopting a multidisciplinary approach to the meaning of corporate identity were reviewed.

Multidisciplinary approach to the meaning of corporate identity in this case refers to perceptions characterized by multiple schools of thought (van Riel and Balmer, 1997, Balmer, 1995), multiple identity mix (see Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Balmer and Soenen, 1998; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002a, 2002b; Balmer, 2001b) and multiple categorizations, (Balmer and Greyser, 2002).

### **Collective Organizational Identity (Identity of Organizations)**

This third perspective puts together all scholarships conceiving corporate identity from employee (see Gioia, 1998; Cornellissen, 2002a) and social psychological viewpoints (Haslem *et al.*, 2003). Authors belonging to this construction hold the view that the basic assumption is that every entity has an identity defining that entity and representing its essence. This assumption is reflective of Albert and Whetten's (1985) conceptualization of identity as a claimed central, distinctive, and enduring characteristic, reflective of 'who' and 'what an organization is'. This philosophy has been exemplified in several collective organization's identity literatures (see Dutton and Duckerich, 1991; Dutton and Penner, 1993; Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Gioia *et al.*, 2000).

He and Balmer's (2005) fourth perspective is organizational identity or identity of people within organization. The philosophy of authors belonging to this perspective holds that employees have own/individual social identity within an organizational context. Authors in this scholarship hold that organizational identity encapsulates the degree of salience with which an individual defines himself by his membership of an organization in given circumstances (see Ashforth and Johnson,

2001) and that individuals also have a personal identity (i.e. who I'm I?) as well social identity relating to organizational membership (see Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

The organizational identification (identify with organization) is the fifth perspective. Here, He and Balmer (2005) epitomized authors' perceptions in relation to the degree in which a person defines him or herself as having the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization (see Dutton *et al.*, 1994). It is a type of social identification for an individual (see Cheney, 1983) and has been overtly adopted in literature from a cognitive approach drawing heavily on social identity theory and self-categorization theory in organizational and management contexts (see Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). For He and Balmer (2005), one of the areas that has attracted great attention in research focus in this area has been how to determine the antecedents and consequences of organizational identification further reflecting social identity perception of corporate identity (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002; Reade, 2001; Dukerich *et al.*, 2002). Studies have also revealed the link between organizational identification and turnover (see Mael and Ashforth, 1992) and between organizational identification and organizational support and favourable corporate evaluations (see Dutton *et al.*, 1994).

### **Moingeon and Ramanantsoa (1997) French School of Thought**

Moingeon and Ramanantsoa's (1997) philosophy relating to understanding the meaning of corporate identity has been thoroughly discussed under the 'French School of Thought on

Corporate Identity'. The French school brings together authors' perceptions, especially viewpoints that position corporate identity as corporate personality (see Olins 1978; Topalian, 1984) and as corporate culture (see Allaire and Firsirotu, 1984; Schein, 1992; Smircich, 1983). The French philosophy extends beyond these notions incorporating viewpoints that position corporate identity as internal images or organizational image as held in the minds of internal stakeholders (see Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994; Gray, 1986; Kennedy, 1977). Quoting Larcon and Reitter (1979), Moingeon and Ramanantsoa contend that the French school conceives identity as a "set of interdependent characteristics of the organization that give it specificity, stability and coherence" thus making it identifiable, distinct and unique. Besides its interdisciplinary nature, the French scholarship advocates the need to move past the descriptive level of corporate identity to arrive at the level of explanation. Moving beyond this level of description, argues Moingeon and Ramanantsoa (1997), allows an in-depth analysis of corporate identity and advances over corporate culture.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING MODELS**

The use of abstracts, models and other forms of social theory is a common phenomenon in social science literature. Similarly in business studies and in particular corporate identity literature, social theories including schools of thought, paradigms, metaphors etc. (as we have seen above) have forged a deeper and richer understanding of the meaning of the concept of corporate identity. Prior to these models, the use of numerous and often contradictory definitions indicating deep rooted

discord and dichotomically opposed views upon the definition of corporate identity held sway.

However, the emergence of these models provided a holistic view of what has been said in relation to the definition of corporate identity in literature. It developed a conceptual theoretical angle to corporate identity, amplified theoretical literature and the development of theory, gave a boost to the generation of greater attention to the concept in general and in the process enhanced the understanding of the meaning of corporate identity. Besides these contributions, the intervention of these models led scholars out of an absolute state of confusion, obscurity, and literary bewilderment, drawing attention to the dimensions in which corporate identity has been constructed in literature.

While social theory has been duly credited with serving the purpose of explaining and analyzing social patterns of behaviour and large scale social structures, it has also been criticized for its inherent flaws. It has been argued that too often thinkers may present their ideas as social theory because the social reality that those ideas describe appears so overarching as to remain unprovable (Leppert, 2005). These fundamental purposes and criticisms hold forth even in business studies and in particular corporate identity. Thus, whereas the social corporate identity theories above can be credited for thoroughly elucidating, enhancing and provoking a deeper understanding of corporate identity, it could also be argued that they were weakened by their lack of empirical support. Most importantly, these models are weakened by the exclusion of organizational perception of corporate identity,

which is often constructed through corporate communication tools (i.e. corporate literature, corporate advertisements).

The challenge however is how to explore these views in relation to corporate identity. Saussure's social constructionist philosophy supported by a well articulated semiotic method allows the constructed views of organizations (as it relates to corporate identity) to be fully explored and interpreted. In the paragraphs that follow, we explore social constructionist philosophy and describe Saussure's sign philosophy. We examine the relevance of Saussure's theory for corporate identity and examine how semiotic analysis can be deployed to interpret these views, which is often locked in corporate advertisements.

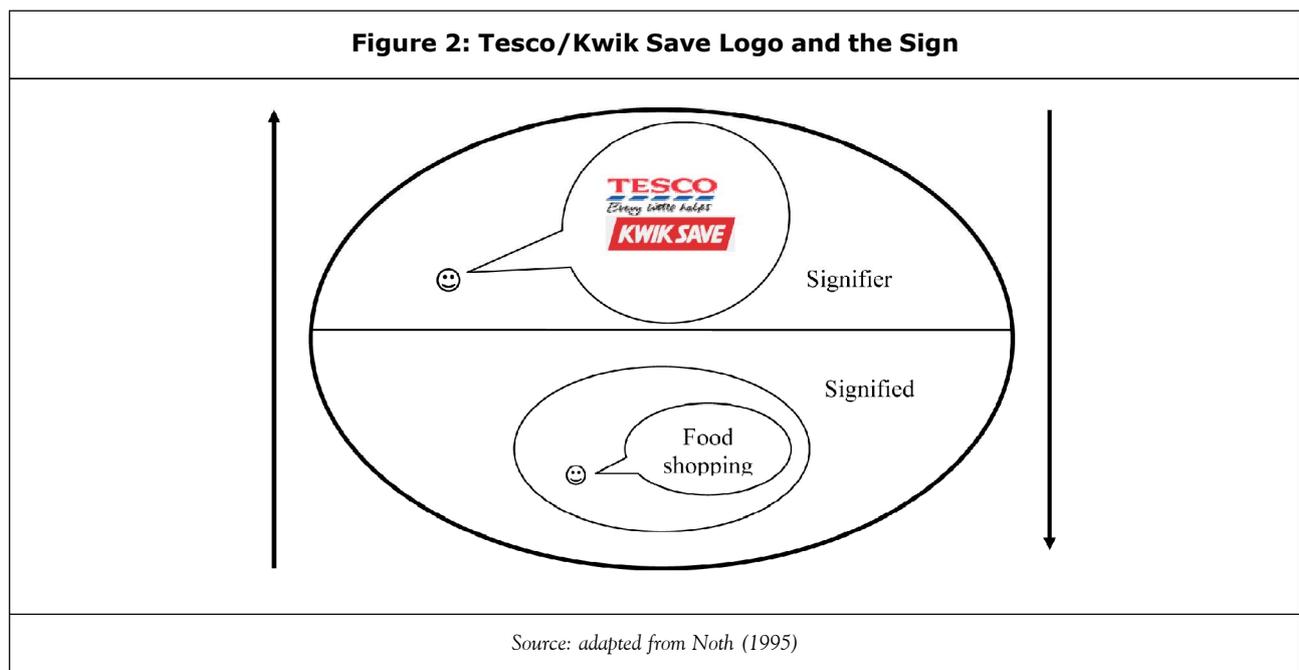
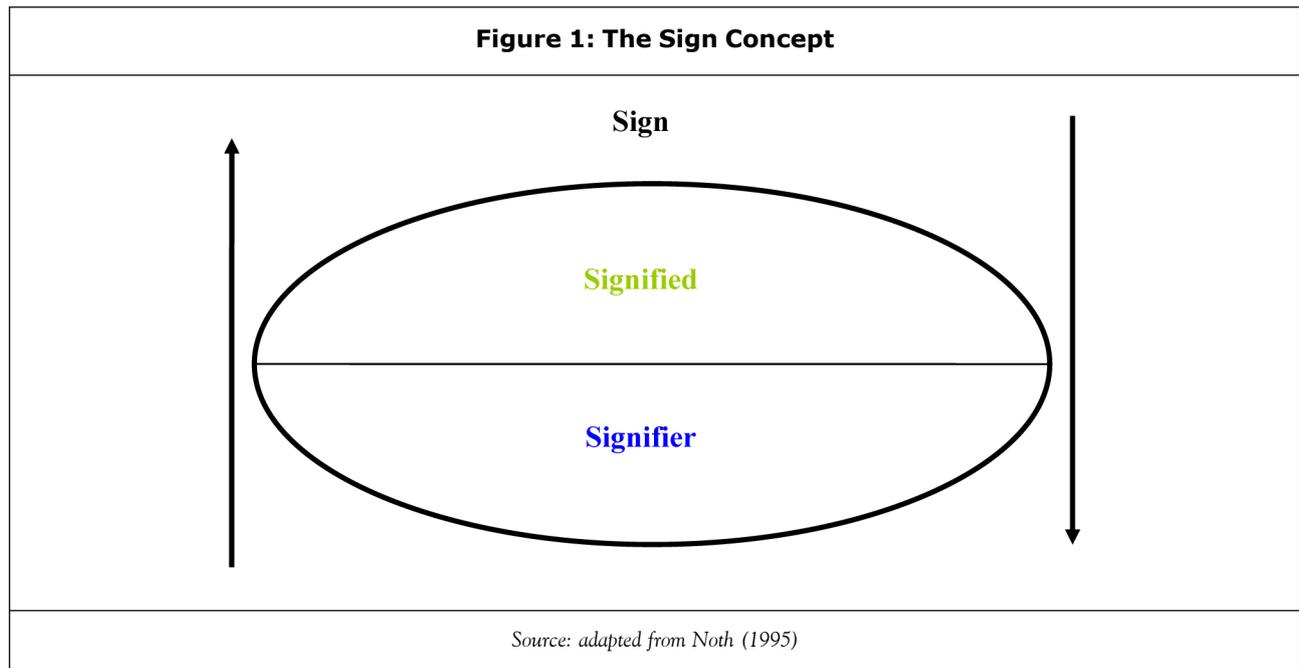
## **SAUSSURE'S STRUCTURALIST PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF CORPORATE IDENTITY**

The 'sign' theory is a structuralist philosophy developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, in the course of his lectures at the University of Geneva between 1907 and 1911 (Noth, 1995). The central tenet of this theory is that the signs including words, visual designs or symbols, odour, images, sounds, arts, objects, flavour, photographs are primary sources of language, especially when they communicate or convey ideas (Hall, 1999) or certain philosophies to stakeholders, given that they serve as part of a system of conventions (Culler, 1976). They are, therefore, primary or important sources of producing meanings. Saussure divided the sign into two elements calling them the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The signifier is the material vehicle, or the physical part of the sign, the actual

substance of which it is composed (Saussure, 1983; Danesi, 1993). It represents written words, visual designs or objects. The signified, however, is the meaning or mental concept to which the signifier refers (Saussure, 1974; Sebeok, 1994). It relates to the idea or concept triggered in the mind.

Thus for instance when confronted with the symbol of a brands like Tesco and Kwik Save (the signifiers) it may trigger a desire to shop for food shopping (the signified), (see Figures 1 and 2).

Given this example, it may be argued at this juncture that the signifier and the signified are conceptual theories enhancing the construction



or production of meanings for specific corporate identities in view of the relationship subsisting between these conceptual theories (i.e. sign and signified) and our cultural and linguistic codes of expression.

Saussure observed that meaning is not the outcome of correspondence between the signifier and signified. It is the result of difference and relationship between both. Signs do not possess fixed or essential meaning (Hall, 1999). What signifies in the case of Tesco and Kwik Save is not just the essence of food shopping but the perceived difference between the standards of quality of the two brands. As Saussure argues, signs are members of a system and they are defined in relation to the other members of that system. Consequently, it may be difficult to construct or give meaning to what corporations stand for or what their corporate identities mean except in relation to and in terms of marking the differences between them and others corporations with similar business inclinations. This idea of 'marking of difference' in Saussure's view lies at the heart of the production of meaning, arguing that the adoption of binary opposition is the simplest way of marking of difference. Whereas Tesco and Kwik Save have common business inclinations as grocery brands, the difference between the two is in the standard of the quality of products offered for sale. It is this difference that signifies.

As Saussure argues, the relationship that subsists between the signifier and the signified is not a permanently fixed phenomenon. Indeed, words shift in meanings and the concepts (signifieds) to which they refer also change over a period of time. A review of social history literature is likely to reveal shifts in the conceptual map of culture and demonstrate the continued

emergence of different cultures (see Jenkins, 1991; Marwick, 1989; Woods, 1999) at different historical moments redefining and giving new meanings to words, differently. This is similar among consumers. In the recent past, many consumers associated Marks and Spencer with poor quality clothing and personal accessories. This negative image/identity changed after a series of restructuring and re-engineering activities involving total refurbishment of stores, introduction of top of the line 'stylish and fashionable' cloths and personal accessories etc. endorsed by celebrities. Today, Marks and Spencer is known for its top quality stylish clothing and products.

What is important in Saussure's theory is that there is constant change occurring in the meanings given to signs and that the meaning of signs is never finally fixed. Given this backdrop, the apportioning of meanings to signs will constantly entail a dynamic process of interpretation. Audience will actively give interpretation to signs or stimuli. Sadly however, the meanings given to signs by audiences in many cases have never exactly been the meanings intended by the sponsor of the sign. Consequently, controversy erupts. For example the signs coded in a United Colours of Benetton campaign aimed at achieving racial harmony were wrongly interpreted causing uproar among African Americans (see Figure 3). The advertisement showed a black woman breastfeeding a white child (Belch and Belch, 1995). Another Benetton's campaign aiming at racial harmony shows an angelic looking white child embracing another black kid with hair shaped into devil's horns, creating yet another round of controversy among African Americans in the United States (see Figure 4). In Figure 5 is another Benetton ad

showing a priest and a nun sharing a passionate kiss. This also created a lot of controversy in many Christian countries. Benetton's advertisement about a man dying of AIDS surrounded by his family fueled and invigorated a furious debate. The campaign was meant to dispel the view relating to the possibility of acquiring AIDS when in contact with AIDS victims. (See Figure 6).

Meanings are developed in all interpretations. Many signs are often interpreted in excess of what they originally meant to communicate. This makes interpretation an essential and unavoidable discipline in the meaning production process

(Hall, 1999). Therefore, we argue that every signifier encoded with meanings must be meaningfully interpreted by audience and that signs not comprehensibly received and interpreted are not meaningful (Culler, 1976). Now given the importance of interpretation in the meaning production process, we present a semiotic method for the interpretation of signs.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF ADOPTING SAUSSURE'S STRUCTURALIST PHILOSOPHY

Saussure's structuralist theory is subject to

**Figure 3: Benetton's Ad of Coloured Woman Feeding a White Baby**



Source: <http://www.athabascau.ca/courses/cmns/301/icons/angeldevil.jpg>

**Figure 4: Benetton's Ad of Angelic Looking White Child Embracing a Black Kid**



Source: <http://www.athabascau.ca/courses/cmns/301/icons/angeldevil.jpg>

**Figure 5: Benetton's Controversial Ad of a Priest Kissing a Nun Sharing**



Source: <http://www.athabascau.ca/courses/cmns/301/icons/angeldevil.jpg>

**Figure 6: Benetton's Ad of AIDS Victim Surrounded by Family**



Source: <http://www.athabascau.ca/courses/cmns/301/icons/angeldevil.jpg>

organizational history and conditional upon a combination (at a given period) of a given signifier and signified as a contingent result of the historical process (see Hall, 1999). Given this principle, it is assumed that the meaning of corporate identity can never be rigidly or permanently fixed and that it will change constantly from one historic business period to another. Consequently, it may be difficult if not impossible to achieve a single, common, fixed and accurate meaning of organizational construction or perception of corporate identity or ways that organization produce meaning for the concept of corporate identity. Although Saussure's theory is not grounded on a longitudinal (empirical) study of the changes witnessed in the use of the sign over a long period, nevertheless, it exposes corporate identity researchers how the study of signs unfixes meanings. It draws our attention to how natural and inevitable ties between signifier and signified (see Hall, 1999) are broken. It allows identity researchers to appreciate the need to conceive the meaning of corporate identity as a phenomenon slipping away in terms of conception (Hall, 1999) towards an unending production of new meanings.

Semiotics draws the attention of corporate identity scholars and practitioners to cues about organizational reality, which have hitherto been taken for granted. It makes us become more aware of the processes in which organizational reality is constructed and the roles played by organizations in constructing these realities. Semiotics helps us realize that the communication of ideas or organizational philosophies and strategic intentions is not meant to be locked or 'contained' in corporate communications instruments (i.e. corporate advertising, guided editorials) but that in fact

'meaning' is made from these materials or transmitted given the ability of stakeholders to create meanings in relation to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware (Chandler, 2005). Awareness about the role of signs and their capabilities empowers corporate identity scholars and practitioners. It put them in a position that enhances their understanding of the best ways to organize organizational signs and equips them with the ability to interpret *all* hidden codes emerging from the business environment (including those belonging to competitors). Signs often appear in realistic but often disguised forms. The study of signs and semiotics, however, allows corporate identity scholars and practitioners to look beyond these signs to 'unlock' messages that have been carefully constructed or hidden in such codes. By deconstructing hidden signs the corporate communications and corporate identity function become even more ideological and strategically important to issues of competition, making corporate communications fundamentally important to the survival and success of business organizations

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The social theory models reviewed in this paper enhanced theory development and improved our understanding of the meaning of corporate identity. However, it may be difficult to fully accept the dimensions in which the meaning of corporate identity have been constructed by these models because they lack practical viewpoints and are completely void of scientific empiricism. This paper proposed the sign construction theory developed by Ferdinand de Saussure together with the semiotic technique to give insight into how organizations produce meanings for the

concept of corporate identity. The 'sign' theory proposes two elements: 'signifier' representing written words, visual designs or objects and the 'signified' i.e. meaning to which the signifier refers or the idea or concept triggered in the mind. The sign theory assumes that meanings can never be permanently fixed and that it will change constantly from one historic business period to another. For academic and practitioners, this implies that as organizations adjust to never ending environmental changes so will they continue to exhibit and produce meaning for their corporate identity in a never ending cycle.

We argued that organizations will continue (in a never-ending manner) to produce and reproduce meaning for the concept of corporate identity and that target audience will be actively involved in the sign interpretation process. Although, the meanings given to signs by audiences in many cases have never exactly been the meaning intended by the sender, these views are nevertheless meanings. The process leading to the development of meanings is anchored by interpretation, making interpretation a crucial factor in the meaning production process (Hall, 1999). Hence, given the importance of interpretation in the meaning production process, semiotic interpretive method was proposed. Semiotics is helpful because it draws attention to the processes involved in which organizational reality is constructed as well the roles by organizations in constructing these realities. Semiotics helps us to understand the complex signs that have been securely locked in texts empowering scholars and practitioners with the skills to understand and interpret hidden codes in competitor texts. This makes the corporate identity function important and highly strategic within the framework of organizational competitiveness.

## REFERENCES

1. Abratt R (1989), "A New Approach to the Corporate Image Management Process", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 63-76.
2. Alessandri S (2001), "Modeling Corporate Identity: A Concept Explication and Theoretical Explanation", *Corporate Communications*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 173-182.
3. Albert S and Whetten D A (1985), "Organizational Identity", in Cummings L L and Staw B M (Eds.), *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, Vol. 7, pp. 263-95, Jai Press, Greenwich, CT.
4. Allaire Y and Firsirotu M E (1984), "Theories of Organizational Culture, Organization Studies", Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 193-206.
5. Alvesson M (1993), "Organization: From Substance to Image", *Journal of Management Studies*, pp. 373-394.
6. Ashforth B E and Johnson S A (2001), "Which hat to wear? The relative Salience of Multiple Identities in Organizational Contexts, Social Identity Processes in Organizational Contexts", Hogg M A and Terry D J (Eds.), Philadelphia Psychology Press, Psychology Press, pp. 31-48.
7. Ashforth B E and Mael F A (1989), "Social Identity Theory and the Organization", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, pp. 20-39.
8. Ashforth B E and Mael F A (1996), "Organizational identity and strategy as a context for the individual, Advances in Strategic Management", Baum J A C and Dutton J E, Greenwich, CT, JAI Press, Vol. 13, pp. 19-64.

9. Baker M J and Balmer J M T (1997), "Visual Identity: Trappings or Substance?", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, pp. 5-6 and 366-382.
10. Balmer J M T (1993), "Corporate Identity: The Power and The Paradox", *Design Management Journal*, pp. 39-44.
11. Balmer J M T (1995b), "Corporate Branding and Connoisseurship", *Journal of General Management*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Autumn, pp. 24-46.
12. Balmer J M T (2001b), "Corporate Identity, Corporate Branding, and Corporate Marketing: Seeing Through the Fog", *European Journal of Marketing: Special Edition on Corporate Identity and Corporate Marketing*, Vol. 34, Nos 3&4.
13. Balmer J M T and Greyser S A (2002), Managing the Multiple Identities of the Corporation, Working Paper, No 02/05, School of Management, University of Bradford, England.
14. Balmer J M T and Soenen G R (1997), "Operationalising the Concept of Corporate Identity: Articulating The Corporate Identity Mix and the Corporate Identity Management Mix, Working Paper, University of Strathclyde International Centre for Corporate Identity Studies, Glasgow.
15. Balmer J M T and Soenen G B (1999), "The Acid Test of Corporate Identity Management", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 15, Nos. 1-3, pp. 69-92.
16. Balmer J M T and Wilson A (1998), "Corporate Identity: There is More to Meet it than Meets the Eye, International Studies of Management and Organization", *White Plains*, Vol. 28, No. 3, p. 12.
17. Balmer J M T and Wilson A (1998), "Corporate Identity and the Myth of Single Company Culture", available at <http://homepages.strath.ac.uk/~idp97272/trellix%20files/workpap3a/id24.htm>. Accessed on March 17, 2006.
18. Belch G and Belch M (1995), *Introduction to Advertising and Promotion*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Chicago, Irwin.
19. Berger Peter and Thomas Luckmann, (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*.
20. Bernstein D (1986), "Company Image and Reality: A Critique of Corporate Communication", *Holt Reinhart and Winston*, Eastbourne.
21. Bhattacharya C B and Elsbach K D (2002), "Us Versus Them: The roles of Organizational Identification and Disidentification in Social Marketing Initiatives", *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 26.
22. Bhattacharya C B and Sen S (2003), "Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers, Relationships with Companies", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 67, No. 2, p. 76.
23. Birkigt K and Stadler M M (1980), *Corporate Identity, Grundlagen, Funktionen, Fallspielen*, Holt Reinhart and Winston, Eastbourne.
24. Birkigt K, Stadler M M and Funck H J (Eds.) (1995), *Corporate Identity: Grundlagen, Funktionen, Fallbeispiele*, Landsberg/Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition.

- 
25. Blauw (1994), *Het Corporate Image*, Vierde Geheel Herziene Druk, De Viergang, Amsterdam.
26. Boyd-Barrett, Oliver and Braham Peter (Eds.) (1987), *Media, Knowledge and Power*, Croom Helm/Open University.
27. Carls K (1989), "Corporate Coats of Arms", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 67, May/June, pp. 135-139.
28. Carter D E (1975), "Designing Corporate Symbols", Art Direction Book Company.
29. Carter D E (1976), "Corporate Identity Manuals, Century Communications Unlimited".
30. Carter D E (1982), "Designing Corporate Identity Programs For Small Corporations", Art Direction Book Co.
31. Carter D E (1983), *Evolution of Design*, Art Direction Book Company.
32. Carter D E (1985), *How to Improve Your Corporate Identity: The Businessman's Guide to Creating a Better Company Image*, Art Direction Book Company.
33. Carter D E (1986), "American Corporate Identity: The State of the Art in the 80s (American Corporate Identity)", Art Direction Book Company, New York.
34. Carter D E (1997), *Trends in American Logo Design*, Art Direction Book Co.
35. Chajet C (1984), "Communicating Corporate Identity", *Bankers Magazine*, Vol. 167, No. 6, pp. 53-58.
36. Chajet, C. and Shachtman, T. (1992). *Image By Design*, Reading, MA.
37. Chandler D (2005), "Semiotic for Beginners", available at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Document/S4B/sem01.html>
38. Cheney G (1983), "The Rhetoric of Identification and the Study of Organisational Communication", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 69, pp. 143-158.
39. Cheney G (1991), *Rhetoric in an Organizational Society: Managing Multiple Identities*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, SC.
40. Cohen J B and Basu K (1987), "Alternative Models of Categorization: Toward a Contingent Processing Framework", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 13, March, pp. 455-472.
41. Cornelissen J P (2002a), On the "Organizational Identity" Metaphor, *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 259.
42. Cornelissen J and Harris P (2001), "The Corporate Identity Metaphor: Perspectives, Problems, and Prospects", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 17, pp. 49-71.
43. Czarniawska B and Wolff R (1998), "Constructing New Identities in Established Organization Fields", *International Studies of Management and Organization*, White Plains, Fall.
44. Danesi M (1993), "Messages and meanings: An introduction to semiotics. Toronto, Canada
45. Dolphin R R (1999), *Fundamentals of Corporate Communications*, Butterworth Heinemann, Oxford.
-

- 
46. Downey J M (1986/1987), "The Relationship between Corporate Culture and Corporate Identity", *Public Relations Quarterly*, pp 7-12
47. Dukerich J M and Golden B R (2002), "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: The Impact of Organizational identification, identity, and image on the cooperative Behaviors of physicians", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3, p. 507.
48. Dutton J E and Dukerich J M (1991), "Keeping an Eye on the Mirror: Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 517-555.
49. Dutton J E and Dukerich J M (1994), "Organizational Images and Member Identification", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 39, pp. 239-263.
50. Dutton J E and Penner W J (1993), "The Importance of Organizational Identity for Strategic Agenda Building, Strategic thinking: Leadership and the Management of Change", J Hendry, G Johnson and J Newton (Eds.), Chichester, UK, JohnWiley, pp. 89-113.
51. Eco Umberto (1976), "A Theory of Semiotics", Bloomington, in Indiana University Press/London, Macmillan.
52. Elsbach K D and Kramer R M (1996), "Members' Responses to Organizational Identity Threats: Encountering and countering the Business Week rankings", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 41, pp. 442-476.
53. Ewen S (1996), "PR! A Social History of Spin", *Basic Books*, New York.
54. Feldman L P (1969), "Of Alphabets, Acronyms and Corporate Identity", *Journal of Marketing* (pre-1986) 33(000004), p. 72.
55. Fiske John (1990), *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd Edition, Routledge.
56. Fombrun C and Shanley M (1990), "What's in a Name? Reputation Building and Corporate Strategy", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 233-258.
57. Fombrun C and van Riel C B M (1997), "The Reputational Landscape", *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1/2, pp. 5-13.
58. Gioia D (1998), "From Individual to Organisational Identity", in Whetten DA and Godfrey P C (Eds.), *Identity in Organisations: Building Theory through Conversations*, Newbury Park, Sage.
59. Gioia D A, Schultz M and Corley K (2000), "Organisational Identity, Image and Adaptive Instability", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 63-81.
60. Gioia D and Thomas J (1996), "Identity, Image, and Issue Interpretation: Sensemaking During Strategic Change in Academia", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 41, pp. 370-403.
61. Glynn MA (2002), "Institutionalizing Identity: Symbolic Isomorphism and Organizational names", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 1, p. 267.
62. Gray J G (1986), *Managing the Corporate Image*, Quorum Books, Westport.
-

63. Gray E R and Balmer J M T (1998), "Managing Corporate Image and Corporate Reputation", *Long Range Planning*, Vol. 31, No. 5, pp. 695-702.
64. Grunig J E and Grunig LA (1992), "Models of Public Relations and Communications", in Grunig J E (Ed.) (1992), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Hillsdale, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 285-323.
65. Gutjahr G (1995), "Corporate Identity – Analyse und Therapie", in Birkigt K, Stadler M M and Funck H J (Eds.), *Corporate Identity: Grundlagen, Funktionen, Fallbeispiele*, Landsberg/Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition, pp. 111-126.
66. Haslam S A and Postmes T *et al.* (2003), "More than a Metaphor: Organizational Identity Makes Organizational Life Possible", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14, p. 357.
67. Hall S (1999), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London.
68. Hatch M J and Schultz M S (2002), "Organizational Identity Dynamics", *Human Relations*, SS, pp. 989-1018.
69. Hawn R (1998), *Image vs. Identity, Trends*, Vol. 14, April/May, pp. 22-27.
70. He H W and Balmer J M T (2005a), "Identity Studies: Multiple Perspectives and Implications for Corporate-level Marketing", Working paper, Bradford University School of Management, UK.
71. He H W and Balmer J M T (2005b), "Identity Studies: Multiple Perspectives and Implications for Corporate-level Marketing", Working paper, Bradford University School of Management, UK.
72. Henderson Pamela W and Joseph Cote A (1998), "Guidelines for Selecting or Modifying Logos", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 62, April, pp. 14-30.
73. Hogg M A and Terry D J (2001), *Social Identity Process in Organizational Contexts*, Philadelphia, Psychology Press.
74. Ind N (1990), *The Corporate Image: Strategies for Effective Identity Programmes*, Kogan Page, London, pp.19-20.
75. Ind N (1992), "The Corporate Image: Strategies for Effective Identity Programmes", Revised Edition, Kogan Page, London.
76. Inglis Fred (1990), "An Introduction to Media Theory", Oxford: Blackwell International Corporate Identity Group (1997), *The Strathclyde Statement*, In van.
77. Riel C B M and Balmer J M T (1997) "Corporate Identity: the Concept, its Measurement and Management", *European Journal of Marketing*, Bradford, Vol. 31, No/ 5, pp. 340-355.
78. Jackson P (1987), *Corporate Communication for Managers*, Pitman, London.
79. Jenkins K (1991), *Re-thinking History*, London, Routledge.
80. Kennedy S H (1977), "Nurturing Corporate Images: total communication or ego trip?", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 120-164.
81. Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995), "The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication", Thousand Oaks, Sage, CA.

82. King R L (1982). "Developing a Corporate Identity: How to Stand Out in a Crowd", *Academy of Marketing Science Journal*, (pre-1986) 10(000003), p. 330.
83. Kiriakidou O and Millward L J (2000), "Corporate Identity: External Reality or Internal Fit?", *Corporate Communications*, Bradford, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 49.
84. Larçon J P and Reitter R (1979), *Structures de pouvoir et identité de l'entreprise*, Nathan, Paris.
85. Leppert Richard (2005), "The Social Discipline of Listening in Fink, Robert", *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice*.
86. Leitch S (1999), "From Logo-Centrism to Corporate Branding?", *Australian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 26, No. 3.
87. Leitch S and Motion S (1999), "Multiplicity in Corporate Identity Strategy", *Corporate Communications*, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 193, Bradford.
88. Leuthesser L and Kohli C (1997), "Corporate Identity: The Role of Mission Statements", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 59-66.
89. Lux P G C (1986), "Zur Durchführung von Corporate Identity Programmen", in Birkigt and Stadler M (Eds.), pp. 515-537.
90. Mael F and Ashforth B E (1992), "Alumni and their Alma Mater: A Partial Test of the Reformulated Model of Organizational Identification", *Journal of Organizational Behavior (1986-1998)*, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 103.
91. Marguiles W P (1977), "Make The Most of Your Corporate Image", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 55, July/August, pp. 66-74.
92. Markham V (1972), "Planning the Corporate Reputation", George Allen and Urwin, London.
93. Markkanen Tuula-Riitta (1998), "Corporate Identity: A Process of Strategic Interpretation in an MNC", Helsinki: Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration / HeSe Print.
94. Marwick A (1989), *The Nature of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, London, MacMillan.
95. Marwick N and Fill C (1997), "Towards A Framework For Managing Corporate Identity", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, Nos. 5/6, pp396-409
96. Melewar T C and Jenkins E (2002a), "Defining Corporate Identity: The Search For A Holistic Model", *Advanced Issues in Marketing Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 76, London.
97. Melewar T C and Jenkins E (2002b), "Defining the Corporate Identity Construct", *Corporate Reputation Review*, pp. 576-590.
98. Melewar T C and Saunders J (1999a), "International Corporate Visual Identity: Standardisation or Localisation?", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 30, pp. 593-598.
99. Moingeon B and Ramanantsoa B (1997). Understanding Corporate Identity: The French School of Thought, *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 3, Number 5/6, pp383-95.
100. Noth W (1995), *Handbook of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.
101. Olasky M N (1987), *Corporate Public Relations: A New Historical Perspective*, Hillsdale, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- 
102. Olins W (1978), *The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry Into The Nature of Corporate Identity*, Design Council, London.
103. Olins W (1989), *Corporate Identity: Making Strategy Visible Through Design*, Thames and Hudson, London.
104. Olins W (1991), *The Power of Corporate Identity*, *World Executive's Digest*.
105. Olins W (1995), *The New Guide To Identity*, Aldershot, London.
106. Perkins A G (1995), "Corporate Identity: What's in a Name?", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, p. 14.
107. Peirce Charles Sanders (1931-58), "Collected Writings, 8 Vols., Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss and Arthur W Burks (Ed.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
108. Pilditch J (1970), *Communication By Design: A Study In Corporate Identity*, McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead Edition, London.
109. Portugal J and Halloran K (1986), "Avoiding a Corporate Identity Crisis", *Management Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4, pp. 43-45.
110. Ramanantsoa B (1989), "Histoire Et Identite De L'entreprise", *Revue Francaise De Gestion*, Janvier/Fevrier, pp. 107-111.
111. Ravasi D and van Rekom J (2003), "Key Issues in Organizational Identity and Identification Theory", *Corporate Reputation Review*, Summer, Vol 6. No 2, pp. 118-132.
112. Reade C (2001), "Antecedents of Organizational Identification in Multinational Corporations: Fostering Psychological Attachment to the Local Subsidiary and the Global Organization", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 12, No. 8, pp. 1269-1292.
113. Saussure Ferdinand de ([1916] 1974), *Course in General Linguistics (trans. Wade Baskin)*, London, Fontana/Collins.
114. Saussure Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983), *Course in General Linguistics (trans. Roy Harris)*, London, Duckworth.
115. Schmidt K (1995), *The Quest For Identity*, Cassell, London.
116. Schmitt B and Simonson A (1997), *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image*, Free Press, New York.
117. Smircich L (1983), "Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, No. 28, pp. 339-358.
118. Schein E H (1992), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Revised, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
119. Schultz M, Hatch M J and Larsen M H (2000), *The Expressive Organization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
120. Schultz D, Tannenbaum S J, Lauterborn R F (1994), "Integrated Marketing Communications: Pulling it together and Making it Work, NTC Business Books Sebeck T (1994), *Signs: An introduction to semiotics*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
121. Selame E and Selame J (1975), *The Company Image*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.
122. Smythe J, Dorward C and Reback J (1992), *Corporate Reputation: The New Strategic Asset*, Century Business, London.
-

- 
123. Tajfel H and Turner J C (1985), "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior", *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, S Worchel and W G Austin, Chicago, Nelson-Hall, pp. 7-24.
124. Topalian A (1984), "Corporate Identity: Beyond the Visual Overstatements", *International Journal of Advertising*, No. 3, pp. 55-62.
125. Tosh J (1999), *The Pursuit of History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, London, Longman.
126. van Rekom J (1997), "Deriving an Operational Measure of Corporate Identity", *European Journal of Marketing*, Special Edition on Corporate Identity, Vol. 31, Nos. 5 and 6, pp. 410-422.
127. van Riel C B M (1995), "Principles of Corporate Communication", Prentice-Hall, London.
128. van Riel C B M and Balmer J M T (1997), "Corporate Identity: The Concept, Its Measurement and Management", *European Journal of Marketing*, Bradford, No. 5, pp. 340-255
129. van Riel C B M and van den Ban A (2001), "The Added Value of Corporate Logos: An Empirical Study", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 35, p. 428.



**International Journal of Management Research and Business Strategy**

**Hyderabad, INDIA. Ph: +91-09441351700, 09059645577**

**E-mail: editorijmrbs@gmail.com or editor@ijmrbs.com**

**Website: www.ijmrbs.com**

