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Explicating Corporate Brands and Their Management: Reflections and Directions from 1995

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Introduction: corporate brands come of age

To me, and I would conjecture to a good many other corporate marketing scholars, policymakers and consultants, one of the most exciting, stimulating and intellectually challenging developments in the corporate world since the mid 1990s has been the stupefying ascendancy of corporate brands as a distinctive institutional-identity type. It is an identity category that enjoys a prominent place in corporate marketing and strategic management owing to their ability to create corporate and shareholder value. In addition, it is an identity category that can be highly meaningful to stakeholders including groups and individuals. Why? Because corporate brand can help individuals define who they are.

Not surprisingly, therefore, corporate brands increasingly engage the minds of policymakers, practitioners, professors and preceptors from the old, new and emerging business worlds – from Auckland to Azerbaijan, from New York to New Delhi and from Peking to Paris.

As noted by Erdogmus *et al* (2010), brands are a key dimension of internationalisation. For instance, Hamel and Prahalad (1985), two decades ago, made the prescient observation that in international business contexts a key corporate aim was to achieve brand dominance. In similar vein, Craig and Douglas (2000) concluded that the establishment of global brands represented one of the biggest challenges facing contemporary corporations.

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Increasingly, there is a realisation that modern organisations – Tata, Microsoft, Nokia and Lenovo – and not so modern institutions – The British Monarchy, The Catholic Church and Harvard University for instance – not only need to be understood in terms of their identity anchors (*corporate identity)* but, importantly and additionally, in terms of individuals and groups' cognitions of the expectations and associations of the institutional brand (*corporate brand identity).*

This is why, for me, adopting an identity-based view of the firm and, importantly, an *identity-based view of corporate brands* (including identification in its various permutations) is of such pivotal importance. Our comprehension of the modern organisation is, to me, greatly assisted by taking account of corporate brand identity along with corporate identity (Balmer, 2008a).

In broader contexts, the corporate branding construct can be seen to have an applicability not merely to entire corporations (McDonalds, HSBC Bank), but also to subsidiaries (Opel and Vauxhall are subsidiary brands of Ford); to nation states (Italy, Scotland, Canada and Singapore); cities (Shanghai, Sydney and Stockholm); to alliance brands (the airline alliances of OneWorld, Star Alliance and so on) and to supra-national organisations (The United Nations, the Olympics and so on).

Importantly, and to reiterate an earlier observation, corporate brands are marshalled by individuals and groups to define who they are – and who they are not – and in ways that sometimes augment, and sometimes supplant, the 'official' corporate brand positioning and promise promulgated by entities.

To me, corporate brand identities – although derived from an institution's identity anchors – are quintessentially a perceptual (cognitive) construct: corporate brand identities exist in our minds; corporate identities inhabit organisations. For instance, although we might view Cadburys, Rolls Royce and Jaguar as quintessential English brands, they are, respectively, owned by a US (Kraft), German (Mercedes Benz) and Indian (Tata) corporation. Thus, although US, German and Indian influences might be found within the corporate identities of the above, the Englishness of these brands is, to me and I suspect to most consumers and many stakeholders, of paramount importance.

As I have argued for many years now, whereas *legal ownership* of corporate brands resides with organisations, *emotional ownership (and thereby its real value)* is owned by customers, employees and other stakeholder groups. I will return to this observation again.

In broader contexts – and drawing on the notion of identity-based views of the firm – this has led to a development of marketing thought and the advent of corporate marketing as an organisational rather than product/service *philosophy* (Balmer, 1998, 2008a, 2009).

Of course, we will all be aware that the construct of the corporate brand has entered the management lexicon with considerable vengeance and with good reason. This is because senior managers – and organisations *per se* – view the institutional brand as something of especial strategic significance. It is no surprise therefore that a corporate branding perspective forms a veritable *leitmotif* in many CEO speeches and statements; in business commentary and in academic research, debate and scholarly discourse. Academic interest is not only confined to those in marketing, but also to those in management and organisational studies generally, and more broadly scholars within the social sciences.

Increasingly, and encouragingly – and in international contexts – organisational brands are the focus of doctoral research, taught business school degrees, MBA courses and case studies in international contexts. And, we should not forget that this heightened interest in organisational brands is international in scale; increasingly, it is interdisciplinary in scope.

This being said, there is often considerable confusion as to what corporate brands *are* and what they *are not;* how they differ from product brands and how corporate identity consultancy and management. It has also been observed that quasi schisms can surface among certain branding scholars who do not see the need to categorise corporate brands as a distinct branding type (Abimbola, 2004).

Significantly, corporate brands are also of saliency to both medium and small-scale organisations along with not-for-profit entities. Studies by Abimbola and Kocak (2007) and Abimbola and Vallaster (2007) also noted much of the same.

In this commentary, I hope to contribute to our comprehension of the above. The approach adopted by her is a very personal one, and I draw heavily on my individual and collaborative work/publications relating to corporate brands, which dates from the early 1990s and which represents a very personal odyssey (Balmer, 1995, 2001a, b, 2005a, b, 2006; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Liao, 2007; Urde *et al,* 2007; Balmer *et al,* 2009).

This being said, I am *highly mindful* of the critical contributions that marketing, branding and other scholars have made in terms of our understanding of corporate brands: the following list is an indicative, and organisational marketing scholars will wish to explore this literature in considerable depth of course: Aaker (2004); Argenti and

Druckenmiller (2004); deChernatony (2002); Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998); Einwiller and Will (2002); Gotsi and Andriopolous (2007); Greyser (2009); Harris and deChernatony (2001); Gylling and Lindberg-Repo (2004); Hatch and Schultz (2001, 2003); Hatch and Rubin (2006); He and Balmer (2004); Hulberg (2006); Kapferer (2002, 2004); Kay (2006); Keller and Richey (2006); Kernstock and Brexendorf (2009); Knox and Bickerton (2003); Knox (2004); Lawer and Knox (2008); Leitch and Richardson (2003); Leitch and Devenport (2008); Lomax and Mador (2006); Ohnemus and Jenster (2008); Merrilees and Miller (2008); Morsing and Kristensen (2001); Mukherjee and Balmer (2008); Roper and Davis (2010); Schultz and Hatch (2003); Schultz and deChernatony (2002); Urde (2003, 2009).

To me, as my students of long standing will recall, there are three strategic benefits of corporate brands in terms of being a *currency, language and navigational tool:*

Currency: The worth of corporate brands – corporate brand value – can be reflected in the goodwill element of the corporate brand name; for customers in terms of the preference towards a corporate brand vis-a-vis other; employees in terms of a preference to be associated with a corporate brand via employment and for business partners in terms of a desire to be allied with a corporate brand in the context of business to business marketing. Of course organisations and shareholders can derive economic value in terms of financial brand power, but this form of hard power is complemented by soft power in terms of the emotional response that institutional brands can evoke.

Language: Corporate brands are 'known and understood' among specific groups and communities; brand names have meaning. It can be global in scope such as Coca Cola or specific to a small town such as the loyalty shown to local institutional brand such as a local fish and chip shop, bakery or cafe. In certain regards, corporate brands are a form of *lingua franca* for twenty-first century global brands and a patois for more local ones.

Navigational tool: In cognitive terms, a corporate brand not only defines what a brand is, but, importantly, what it is not, as such it can help individuals, groups and managers to navigate between and among brands. In marketing terms, this aspect of branding has a certain similarity to the central marketing notions of positioning. Of course, individual and groups reference to brands as navigational tools will not be uniform, and in certain instances can be markedly different among groups and individuals.

Corporate brands: a hot topic

Scrutinising the contents of leading marketing journals including *The Journal of Brand Management,* there is clear evidence to see that corporate brands are very much a 'hot topic'. For policymakers, corporate marketers and branding consultants, institutional brands are accorded importance owing to their utility, economic value and, of course, strategic importance. In broader contexts, we can note that scholars view corporate brands to be of sociological, psychological and anthropological significance; institutional brands represent a powerful lens through which we can comprehend contemporary organisations, the business environment and, importantly, our modern world.

Historical perspectives: intrinsic and extrinsic corporate brand/identity relationships

Intrinsic: Before the industrialisation of markets and, in our own time in small market towns and in city 'villages', companies (local shops for instance), issues of corporate brand identity/corporate identities were/are *intrinsic* feature of bilateral relationships between organisational – customer/stakeholder relationships. Typically, with the above, there is closeness among those who produce goods and services and those who consume them/local stakeholders. As such, there was less need for small companies to manage and communicate the corporate brand and identity (I am not saying no need, however). This is because the touch-points vis-a-vis the corporate brand/identity were immediate and tangible: there was little in the way of spacial-temporal distance. In such situations, there is often a considerable local awareness of the *corporate brand identity* (the key attributes and associates with a corporate brand name and/or marque) and also a heightened understanding of its innate *corporate identity* (what it does, how it does it, quality of products and services, ethos and so on).

Anyone who has lived in a market town/city village is likely to have a wide corporate brand/identity repertoire, and will be able to differentiate in branding terms (in terms of expectations) between various bakers, butchers, cafes and pubs, and, moreover, is likely to have knowledge about their corporate identity (more indepth company/organisational knowledge).

Extrinsic: Taking a historical perspective, during the British industrial revolution for instance, we can observe that when organisations grow and significantly broaden their geographical reach, the relationship between a producer, consumers and others in terms of its innate identity becomes increasingly more distant: spacial-temporal issues become much more salient. Increasingly, third parties provided the key interface with end-users. As such, the bilateral relationships between organisations and their customers and stakeholders become progressively more *extrinsic*. For some (but not all) producers, a critical strategic imperative as a result leads them to reach end-users by communicating its corporate brand/identity through various touch-points and creating value through recognised and sought-after brands (both product, service and corporate).

Of course, brands have the ability to leverage an organisations' financial position through the ability to charge more for well-known and sought-after brands. This phenomenon characterised the British Industrial Revolution, and, in our own times, can be seen in rapidly developing nations such as China and India – who increasingly appreciate the strategic value of brands, and have, over recent years, been building their own brands and acquiring corporate brands from the west. In another analogous context, reference can be made to the Intel inside campaign that resulted in greater brand connectivity and visibility: take a look at your computer/other computers for evidence of this.

Contemporary/critical branding perspectives

In recent times, critical and postmodern marketing thought has begun to meaningfully inform our comprehension of brands (Elliot and Percy, 2007). The latter, for instance, noted that brands are consumed not merely in terms of their functional value, but their symbolic value; in addition, this represents, perhaps, an augmentation of the work of Levy (1959). For example, brands are appropriated by individuals in order to convey to others a desired personal identity (*social-symbolism*). Brands may also serve a role in terms of self-definition and the creation of individual identity (*self-symbolism*). The realisation that brands (and corporate brands) are appropriated by individuals and groups for a variety of ends has caused marketing scholars to consider issues relating to corporate communication, and have argued that corporate brands create meaning rather than messages (Leitch and Richardson, 2003).

Drawing on the above, it is also apparent that groups do much of the same as do organisations. For instance, Brunel University has appropriated the brand identity of the legendary British engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, as a means of conveying its identity to prospective students, faculty, stakeholders and other organisations, and as a means of forging its own identity: to me, these are examples of *corporate social symbolism and corporate self-symbolism?*

Practical and cerebral challenges of corporate brands

Corporate marketing academicians, and others, are increasingly attracted by the practical and cerebral challenges of the field. Increasingly, they are mindful of the penetrating and important insights on corporate brands offered by various scholars. These include cultural historians, economists, human resources scholars, organisational behaviourists, sociologists, among other disciplines.

One corporate marketing challenge is to keep abreast of such developments.

On reflection we can see that there is an enviable provenance within marketing scholarship of being open to penetrating insights from other disciplines. After all, marketing is and always has been broad in scope. One of its strengths is its ability to fuse theoretical and normative insights from a variety of disciplines to inform our comprehension of marketing as a philosophy, function and orientation; this is especially so in relation to the nascent domain of corporate marketing (Balmer and Greyser, 2006).

Of course, organisational marketers are faced with the cerebral challenges vis-a-vis the burgeoning research agenda in terms of explicating corporate brands. Scholars, in addition, are faced with the challenges of explicating the role of corporate brands vis-a-vis identity creation for individuals, groups, other organisations, nations and supra-national organisations.

Among the corporate branding issues requiring further elaboration include their nature, formation, management, maintenance, value and saliency; how they are co-created and consumed by customers, employees and stakeholders; how organisations align multiple identity types; how individual corporate brands are marshalled and underpinned by multiple institutions/corporate identities; how corporate brands are communicated by traditional and non-traditional modes of corporate communications; and through total sensory communication and how institutional brands create value in economic and in other terms.

The institutional branding concept has a clear practical applicability ranging from the multi-national corporation: the small, family, business; no-for-profit organisations, public sector entities and industry and sectoral alliances (airline alliances for example) among others. The utility and strategic importance of corporate brands will also need to be a key focus of organisational marketing scholars and others; we have an obligation to engage the cerebral and practical perspectives of this vital branch of corporate marketing.

Corporate brand inflation and vagueness

As an aside, it should be noted that reference to corporate brands can occasionally be used as a smoke screen. Corporate brands are not a management or organisational panacea; for instance, where there is lack of strategic focus or where a corporate marketing (stakeholder and societal) philosophy has not taken hold. Sometimes, for instance, the ardour shown by some CEOs, consultants and scholars in their reference to corporate brands occasionally results in the institutional brand being used as *a* – and perhaps *the* – metaphor for the organisation: it should be remembered that corporate brands are a distinct identity type that inhabits the minds of individuals and groups; it is a cognitive construct and some organisations are, in branding terms, weak. (To me, all organisations have a corporate identity – those organisational traits that make one institution distinct from another, but not all institutions have a clear and valued corporate brand promise.)

Such equivocation by organisations and senior managers may render a powerful, cognitive, corporate marketing construct – corporate brands – hollow and valueless. Fortunately, a clearer counterpoint is given by others who regard the organisational brand as a powerful perspective through which we can more fully comprehend a dimension of the business environment; more fully appreciate the multiple identities associated with organisations, and the way that institutional brands are created by organisations and individuals.

To me, along with corporate and organisational identity, it affords an additional, although powerful and highly meaningful, lens through which we can perceive and comprehend an important aspect of the corporate marketing domain.

Corporate brands: back to the future – the legacy of the 1990s

In the remainder of this article, I draw on a good deal of my own work on the territory (both individual and collaborative) dating back to 1995 when my first article – and musings – on institutional brands entitled *Corporate Branding and Connoisseurship* appeared in *The Journal of General Management* (Balmer, 1995).

At that time, reference to corporate brands was – or so it seemed to me then – in British contexts, was not/very occasionally mentioned in management parlance; received fleeting attention in branding books and for strategic and design consultancies; was ignored or viewed as a dimension of an organisation's corporate identity. For the main, the branding domain was primarily concerned with the important marketing areas of product and services brands.

Of course, there were honourable exceptions: those consultants and writers who presaged the academic work in the territory, which appeared from the 1990s onwards and included Wally Olins (1978); and, importantly and to me, the late and greatly missed Stephen King (1991). Of note, too, are the contributions of the English branding consultant and writer Nicholas Ind (1997).

In a seminal and elegantly written paper by Stephen King in 1991, he argued that marketing scholars and practitioners should note the rise of importance of the corporation vis-a-vis product and services, and that, as a consequence, we should go back to the drawing board in terms of our comprehension of marketing. He also argued that we should focus on a new branding category, which he termed *company brands*.

Reflecting on my own work almost two decades after Stephen King's article, I can see how Stephen King's insight has greatly informed my own work in the early 1990s and continues to do so. We stand on the shoulders of giants such as King. Stephen King's work has been formative not only in terms of my work on corporate brands, but additionally in relation to my advocacy of what I consider to be a logical development of marketing thought: corporate marketing (Balmer, 1998, 2001a; Balmer and Greyser, 2006).

Stephen King (1991), to me, is a seminal/prophetic figure from the world of practice in the corporate brand domain as is Wally Olins (1978) in terms of his influential and highly insightful book 'The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry into the Nature of Corporate Identity'.

Enduring problems: corporate brand/corporate identity relationships and their links with verbal and visual identification

One of the problems of the period – and one that continues to endure – is the relationship between corporate identity and corporate brand identity and the role of verbal and visual identification in communicating a corporate identity and a corporate brand.

Of course, whereas some identity scholars are concerned with comprehending the nature and utility of identities and modes of identifications, some practitioners, understandably, regard discussion about the nature and links between corporate identity and corporate brand identity to be an arcane academic concern.

To me, corporate identity refers to the defining identity attributes of every organisation. Every organisation, therefore, has a corporate identity. Corporate identity is – to a large degree – based on *fact*. It is an institutional, economic and legal identity type.

Corporate brand identity refers to a distillation of corporate identity attribution into clearly defined perceived attributes and associations that are linked to a corporate name and, secondary, to an institutional marque. Corporate brand identity is a *perceptual/cognitive* identity type. It is an identity type that has especial meaning to groups and to individuals.

Institutional brands represent a distinct identity type that, over time, may be divorced from the original company identity and can have a value and life of their own.

Corporate brands are born out of corporate identities, but *live in the minds of groups and individuals*.

Verbal and Visual identification (company logos, house style and so on) have an important role in communicating *both corporate identities and corporate brand identities*. Thus, the Rolls Royce name and logo are identifiers for the Rolls Royce brand. In addition, it serves as the identifier for two corporate identities/organisations, namely the large British-owned Rolls Royce aero engine/engineering/services corporation and the German-owned Rolls Royce automotive manufacturer.

Revisiting 'corporate branding and connoisseurship' (1995)

Back in 1995 I opined – both explicitly and implicitly – the following in relation to corporate brands and their management (Balmer, 1995):

a. The *de facto* corporate brand manager is the CEO, who will increasingly need to show their *connoisseurship of corporate brand management.*
b. Personnel are critical vis-a-vis corporate brand management. Whereas the CEO has ultimate responsibility for the corporate brand (he is the *de facto* corporate brand manager), everyone has a responsibility for the corporate brand. It is in effect an organisational-wide philosophy (such a perspective has informed my understanding of corporate marketing).
c. Corporate brand management is broad and clearly multidisciplinary in scope; *corporate strategy, corporate communications,* and, most importantly, *corporate culture* underpin and inform the aforementioned.

d. Corporate brands and corporate identities *are inextricably linked* (by inference, there is a bilateral relationship between the two identity types).
e. Corporate brand management is of strategic importance; policymakers needed to take account of this.
f. Corporate brand management was likely to emerge as a new management responsibility and by implication a cognate management activity.
g. Increasingly, institutions will find it *difficult to hide behind their product brands* with a more astute public wishing to know more about corporations, including their ethical policies.
h. The ascendancy of corporate brands was inexorable.

The article also noted a number of trends vis-a-vis the corporate branding as noted by two legendary figures in the field: Alan Siegel and Michael Peters. The former noted that policymakers at Proctor and Gamble increasingly viewed their corporation as a brand and, progressively, viewed their institution as, in effect, *'the ultimate corporate product'*. For his part, Michael Peters opined that in a world where products and services are rapidly imitated, *emotional attachment to the corporate brand* would emerge as a key institutional asset and would give corporations a competitive advantage (Balmer, 1995, p. 25).

More recently, (see Balmer, 2005b) I argued that corporate brands (vis-a-vis the AC^4ID Test of Corporate Brand Management) required the meaningful and dynamic alignment of *seven, key,* identity types namely: the *actual* (corporate) identity; *corporate brand* identity (the corporate brand promise); *cultural* identity, *communicated* identity, *conceived* identity, *ideal* (strategic) identity and *desired* identity (the CEO's vision).

A key aspect of established corporate brands is that they are separate and divisible from the institution from which they evolved; one reason why they should be regarded as a distinct identity type.

Of course, identities are not static and as the corporate brand covenant/promise changes over time so should the corporate identity so that actions reflect the promise; in short, they need to be in dynamic alignment: a failure to focus on the latter will mean that the corporate brand and the corporate identity are loosely coupled, and this can cause difficulties as our examination of the eponymous Hilton hotel brand revealed (Balmer and Thompson, 2009).

The corporate brand: what is it?

For me, the following articulates some of the key precepts of corporate brand and their management in that corporate brands are:

a. A distinct identity type and differs from corporate identity

A corporate brand is a distinct identity type (Balmer, 2001a) and, as such, corporate brands have a life of their own in that they can be bought, sold and borrowed (Balmer, 2005c, p. 41). Corporate brands as a distinct identity type 'have a life of their own' (Balmer, 2005c).

b. Derived from corporate identity

Corporate identities provide the foundation on which corporate brands are formed and that they are inextricably linked (Balmer, 1995, 2001a, b; Balmer and Thompson, 2009). As defined here, corporate identity refers to those organisational characteristics that anchor an organisation in a given period of time (Cornelissen *et al,* 2007). Within the literature, a number of authors assert that corporate brands and identities are interlinked Balmer (1995); Balmer and Gray (2003); Harris and deChernatony (2001).

c. Requires alignment with key identity types

Once established, a corporate brand identity requires alignment between diverse identity types. This approach, which is informed by what I have termed identity-based views of the firm (Balmer, 2008a), recognises the importance of diverse identity types. It is the task of policymakers to ensure that there is a meaningful and dynamic alignment between them. The latest version of the AC^{4}ID Test of corporate brands encompasses seven identity types: actual, communicated, conceived, covenanted, cultural, ideal and desired identities (Balmer, 2005c). An explanation of these identity types was provided earlier on.

The 2001 version of corporate brand management for instance (Balmer in Balmer and Greyser, 2003, p. 251) includes the covenanted identity (the identity associations relating to the corporate brand identity), and this was used as the basis for an examination of British Airway's corporate brand development (Balmer *et al,* 2009). This is shown in Figure 2.1.

The 2005 (Balmer, 2005c) version of the model includes corporate culture as a distinct identity type, but to date comparatively little reference has been made to this framework.

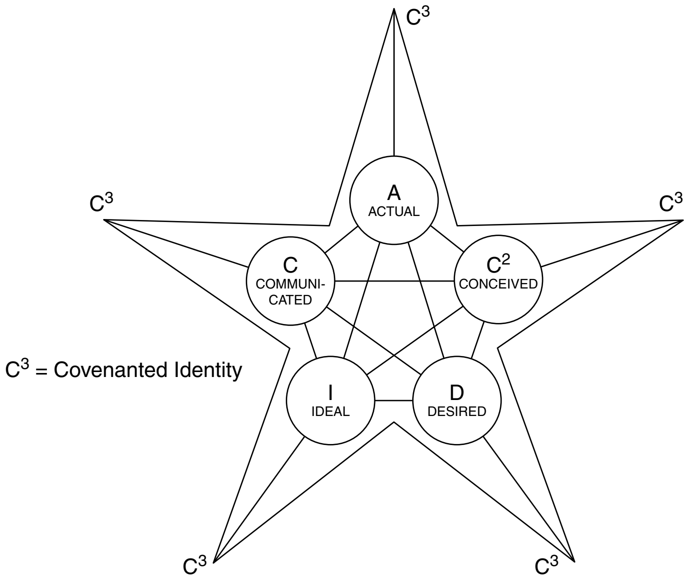

Figure 2.1 Balmer's AC^{3}ID Test of Corporate Brand Management™
Source: Balmer in Balmer and Greyser (2003, p. 251).
Note: Subsequently, an additional identity type – cultural identity – was incorporated into the framework: See Balmer (2005c), vis-á-vis the AC^{4}ID Test.

Where several or many organisations share the same corporate brand, it is imperative that corporate identities are meaningfully aligned with the corporate brand identity. For many years, the Hilton corporate brand was shared by two corporations and they worked to achieve a degree of synchronisation between the two institutions so that they more closely reflected the Hilton corporate brand promise (Balmer and Thompson, 2009).

It should be noted that the most recent version of the ACID test framework has a considerable provenance and draws on a long line of scholarship relating to identity alignment (Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Balmer, 2001c; Balmer and Greyser, 2002).

d. Is markedly different from product brands

Although there are key similarities between product and services brands, there are also key differences and these should be understood. This can be seen in terms of their *raison d'être,* disciplinary roots, management and communication.

By means of context, the notion of *brand touch-point* (Davis and Longoria, 2003; Elliot and Percy, 2007, p. 208) provides one means by which we can differentiate between product and institutional brands. Brand touch-points refer to the variety of brand interfaces and the resulting impressions that are formed: touch-points need to be managed by policymakers in order to create a *touch-point chain* (Hogan *et al,* 2005). To me, in the context of this commentary, *corporate brand touch-points* are broader and deeper in scope; impact on a variety of groups and are of especial significance to organisational members.

The difference between corporate and product brands has attracted my attention, as my initial interest in the area in the area (Balmer, 1995), and Table 2.1 details my understanding of these key differences.

e. Underpinned by a corporate covenant (the corporate brand 'promise')

At the heart of corporate brand management is an informal contract between the organisation and its customers, employees and stakeholders. This bilateral corporate brand covenant – or what is more colloquially termed 'a promise' – goes to the essence of corporate branding (Balmer, 2002; Balmer and Gray, 2003, p. 982). The maintenance of this covenant based on the promise of a bilateral relationship between the organisation and stakeholders *viz:* what is promised (from the corporate side) and what is expected (from the customer and stakeholder side) needs to be at the forefront of an organisation's deliberations. However, the nature of the covenant is evolutionary; can change with the passage of time and may differ among individuals, groups and in different contexts (*viz:* the perception of and, importantly, the consumption of corporate brands may differ between individuals, groups and cultural/national contexts).

Although individuals and groups can consume and create brand meaning – a meaning that may be different from the espoused brand promise conveyed by an organisation/s – the corporate brand promise is critical as it provides *a sounding board* by which individuals and groups can adopt, adapt – or indeed reject – the official corporate brand promise: corporate brand consumptions, relations and refutations do not easily take place in a vacuum.

f. Making a distinction between legal and emotional ownership of corporate brands

I have long argued that whereas legal ownership of corporate brands resides with one or more entities, the real value of corporate brands is

Table 2.1 A comparison between product and corporate brands

	Product brands	**Corporate brands**
Management responsibility	Brand manager	Chief executive
Functional responsibility	Marketing	Most/All departments
General responsibility	Marketing personnel	All personnel
Disciplinary roots	Marketing	Multidisciplinary
Brand gestation	Short	Medium to long
Stakeholder focus	Consumers	Multiple stakeholders
Values	Contrived	Real
Communications channels	The marketing communications mix	Total corporate communications Primary: Performance of products and services; organisational policies; behaviour of CEO and senior management; experience of personnel and discourse by personnel Secondary: Marketing and other forms of controlled communication Tertiary: Word of mouth
Dimensions requiring alignment	Brand values (covenant), product performance	Brand values (covenant) Corporate identity (corporate attributes/sub cultures) Corporate strategy vision (as held by the CEO and senior management)
	Communication Experience/image and reputation	Communication Experience/image and reputation
	Consumer commitment	Stakeholders' commitment (internal and external constituencies)
	Environment (political, economic, ethical, social, technological)	Environment (political, economic, ethical, social, technological)

Balmer (2001b).

to be found in the emotional ownership of institutional brands by individuals and groups both outside and inside the organisation (Balmer, 2005c).

These groups include not only customers, employees, suppliers, governments and many other stakeholder groups. It is the emotional ownership of brands that gives them considerable value.

g. The importance of personnel and of brand communities and cultures

Personnel are at the heart of the corporate branding process (King, 1991; Balmer, 1995, 2001a; Ind, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Schultz *et al,* 2005). This viewpoint is understood to inform the branding policies of a number of leading brands such as Virgin whose espoused branding mantra is to accord primacy to employees, then customers and thirdly shareholders. The realisation that employees are important is significant in terms of the theoretical development of corporate branding as increased focus was accorded to internal/organisational concerns, and this marketing insight opened up a dialogue between marketing and scholars or organisational behaviour and, to a lesser degree, human relations academicians. Sometimes the label *The employee brand* is used vis-a-vis corporate brands in terms of attracting and motivating personnel: employees being a key touch-point for the corporate brand.

To reiterate an earlier point, to me, the real value of corporate brands comes from the fact that emotional ownership/s resides with brands users and, moreover, with corporate brand cultures and communities. These brand communities can be of major importance in contributing to an individuals sense of identity: consider supporters of major football brands such as Arsenal, Liverpool or Real Madrid. The importance of this importance aspect of branding has attracted the attention of marketing scholars over recent years (Cova and Cova, 2001, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Mc.Alexander *et al,* 2002; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006; Kozinets *et al,* 2007).

h. Multidisciplinary in scope

Traditionally, product and services brands have fallen within the purview of marketing and rightly so. In terms of corporate brands, it becomes apparent that as a distinct identity and branding type they have a far greater breadth and depth; for these reasons, corporate branding scholars need to marshal a much wider palette of disciplines in order to comprehend institutional brands. The nascent domain of corporate marketing affords one means by which this broad perspective can be achieved.

The multidisciplinary nature of the territory was articulated as follows (see Balmer in Balmer and Thomson, 2009):

- Corporate brands have their origins in an organisation's corporate identity (*ergo corporate identity management*).
- Require the coordination of management, marketing and organizational communications to ensure consistency in brand promise via

the association with the corporate name/logo (*ergo corporate communications management*).
- Impact upon many external/internal stakeholder groups where *emotional* ownership of the brand resides (*ergo stakeholder management*).
- In the delivery of brand promise requires consistency in product/service performance, brand heritage (where appropriate) brand ethos style, visual/design identification (*ergo integrated identity and identification management*).
- Are strategic in orientation, and therefore are a senior management concern (*ergo strategic management/leadership*).
- Require commitment from all personnel (*ergo human resource management/employee branding);*
- Impact on organisational structure as well as on other branding types (*ergo brand management and the management of organisational structure*).
- Can evoke strong emotional responses from stakeholders (*ergo the understanding and 'management' of brand tribes and cultures*).

i. Are key strategic resources as a currency, language and navigational tool

The notion that corporate brands are strategic resources is reflected in terms of them deriving value in terms – according to my comprehension – of being

- *a currency* (having financial value as a guarantee of quality);
- *a language* (strong brand names are readily understood;
- *a navigation tool* (as a means by which corporate brands are positioned).

See Balmer (2005c).

Marketing scholars have noted the strategic nature and importance of corporate brands are important, strategic, resources (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Knox and Bickerton, 2003). It has been concluded that institutional brands are major drivers of corporate value (Haigh, 2003, p. 32); are a magnet for investment (Barwise, 1993; Gregory and Sellers, 2002) and cushion a corporation in times of crisis (Greyser, 1999) and have a critical role in both attracting and retaining key staff (Einwiller and Will, 2002). They contribute to stronger corporate profits (Keller, 2003).

Balmer and Gray (2003) adapted the economic theory of the resource-based view of the firm to corporate brands, and this has, additionally, been applied to the British Monarchy in order to conceptualise its worth as an institutional brand (Balmer, 2008b).

j. Have a broader branding architecture (the significance of bilateral, tripartite and complex corporate branding relationships)

The strategic nature of corporate brands and the fact that they have a meaning not only to individual organisations, but also to groups of organisations has meant that traditional notions of brand architecture had to be reappraised and redefined. Table 2.2 reflects my earlier work in this regard (Balmer in Balmer and Gray, 2003).

k. Consumed in different ways by different individuals and groups

I have noted that corporate brands can be consumed by individuals and groups in a variety of ways (Balmer in Shroeder and Salzer-Morling (2006, p. 35).

Of course, along with positive associations towards brands, there may also be negative associations of course. As with any identity type, corporate brand identities and associations are characterised not only by what they are, but also by what they are not; by what individuals and groups like and what they detest. Thus, in British contexts some of the most loved and hated corporate brands include football clubs such as Manchester United.

To reiterate, some corporate brands are disliked and in some cases abhorred.

- Consumer consumption (the preference given to one corporate brand over another viz: Ford vis-a-vis Fiat).
- Employment (the status accorded to an individual through an association – through work – with a corporate brand (working for the BBC, Interbrand or for a town's most prestigious secondary school).
- Endorsement (the conferment of a Royal Warrant – 'By Appointment to the King of Spain' – to a company or, in industrial contexts, the winning of a contract to supply foodstuffs to Harrods Departmental Store in London).
- Association (the prestige accorded to a spouse whose partner is a University Don at Oxford University).
- Acquisitions (the purchase by Carnival Cruise Lines of heritage corporate brands such as Cunard, Costa Cruises and so on).

- Aspiration (the opening of a private bank account by individuals of modest means, who seek the status and service afforded by such institutions).

Table 2.2 The new corporate branding architecture typology

Monolithic – the use of a single verbal and visual identification across the organisation and its products and services. An example of this is the BBC.
Endorsed – this is where a subsidiary or business unit makes reference to the holding company's visual identity: products and product-services also do this. An example is *Royal Holloway College, London*, which is endorsed by *The University of London* and at the product level by *Shredded Wheat*, which is endorsed by *Nestle*.
Branded – these are stand-alone corporate, service or product brands that make no visual reference to the holding company. Examples (at the corporate level) include *Bentley* vis a vis *Volkswagon* (the parent corporation) and, at the product level, *Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce vis a vis Heinz* (the parent corporation).
Familial – describes the sharing or adoption of the same corporate brand by two identities within the same industry. An example of this is the *Hilton organisation*, which was until recently shared by two separate organisations, one in the United States and one based in the United Kingdom.
Shared – this describes the same situation as above but with the organisations operating in distinct and sometimes related markets but under separate ownership. The UK-owned *Rolls Royce* brand operates both in the aero-engineering sector and in the automotive market: the *Rolls Royce* car marque is owned by *BMW*.
Surrogate – describes a franchise arrangement where one organisation's products or services are branded as that of another. This is quite common in the airline industry, for example*, British Regional Airways use of the British Airways brand*.
Federal – is the creation of new corporate brand by separate companies that pool resources in joint venture to, in effect creating a new identity/company. Examples of these are the Airbus Consortium and Eurofighter.
Supra – this is a relatively new phenomenon, and, again, is common within the airline industry. A supra brand is derived from several as opposed to a single corporate entity, and it is characterised by ethereal and virtual qualities. Examples of this are Alliance (corporate) Brands *viz*: the *One World Alliance and the Star Alliance*, both of which include numerous other airlines as 'affiliate members'.
Multiplex – describes a situation where there are multiple uses and possibly multiple ownership/rights of a corporatebrand among a variety of entities in a variety of industry sectors. *The Virgin and Easy* (Group) brand is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Richard Branson's empire exists across many sectors including airlines, finance, cosmetics, rail, soft drinks and many more.

Adapted from Balmer in Balmer and Gray (2003).

l. Not only corporate brand adherents, but also corporate brand detractors as well as terrorists

Although a good deal of the literature details the benefits of corporate brands, there are also disadvantages, and scholars familiar with identity theory will appreciate that issues of difference and of groups that are 'in' and 'out' are central to our association to various identity types (Balmer, 2008a). For instance, some of the most hated corporate brands in Great Britain are Manchester United Football Club, McDonalds and the supermarket chain Lidl (Balmer, 2005c). Of course, many people also like these brands. The degree of brand antipathy can vary between brands and among different groups. For instance, in the United Kingdom some ethnic communities resent the so-called 'Coca-Colonisation', and this has led a minority of Muslim shopkeepers to offer Islamic alternatives to Coca-Cola such as Mecca Cola, Quibla Cola and Zanzam Cola (Balmer, 2005c and *The Economist,* 2004).

Discussion: the new identity and brandscape

As we have seen, since the mid 1990s, the ascendancy of corporate brands has permanently altered our comprehension of the brandscape, challenged traditional approaches to marketing, and has given rise to a new branch of marketing thought: corporate marketing.

Theoretical, conceptual and normative insights associated with the construct and management of the corporate brand may be seen to have provided a meaningful foundation for the nascent domain of corporate/organisational marketing.

The corporate marketing philosophy, as with our comprehension of corporate brands/corporate brand management, shares certain similarities. This is because both have an explicit institutional as well as a stakeholder foci; both, to me, are central to our comprehension and management of other, key, corporate-level concepts including corporate communication, corporate reputation and, importantly, the centrality of corporate identity to both.

In addition, we can observe that institutional as well as corporate brand identification in its various manifestations are highly meaningful to our comprehension of both *viz:* identification *from* organisations/the corporate brand; individual and group identifications *to* corporate identities/corporate brands; individual and group identifications *with* organisational as well as corporate brand cultures at both the level of the group as well as at the individual (Balmer, 2008a, b).

To me, these developments have broadened and heightened our understanding of identity and identification; have caused us to reappraise the relationships between organisations, customers, stakeholders, employees and society at large. It has also caused us to reflect on how individuals, groups, societies and national polity of nations *use, consume and repudiate* corporate brands.

As our comprehension of corporate brands evolves, we are likely to segment corporate brands into various categories such as business-to-business; public; not-for-profit; international; local; educational; financial; pharmaceutical, religious and ethical.

Of course, scholarships on the above areas have already begun: collaborative and individual work on monarchies as corporate brands is a case in point, and one critical insight from this study was the identification of *corporate heritage brands* as a distinct category of corporate branding (see: Balmer *et al*, 2006). Subsequently, we explored this category in greater detail (see: Urde *et al*, 2007).

Finally, what is clear to me is that corporate brands have made me – and I believe many others – to reflect on the nature of the modern organisation and its associated identities along with the mix of bilateral identity relationships among brands, institutions, customers, employees and stakeholders.

Importantly, and to reiterate, it has caused us to reflect on the key precepts of marketing and has led to the identification of an institutional/identity-based stakeholder-focussed marketing philosophy: corporate marketing.

In bringing this commentary to a close, to me, the past 15 years has witnessed extraordinary developments in the corporate branding domain, and we now more fully understand the nature of corporate brands and their management. The next 15 years are likely to be at least equally so. For corporate branding scholars, policymakers and consultants, these are indeed exciting times.

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