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# Modelling for corporate identity studies: case of identity as communications strategy

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## Abstract

A generic model is developed to systematise research to build case studies on the shaping of corporate identity. In embedding the model with a case, we discuss how a firm sited both in Singapore and Indonesia perceives identity to be inherently part of communication strategy.

## Introduction

In our survey of the identity literature we are surprised to find a rather scarcity of systematic, empirical studies of corporate identity development especially within Asia. What forces shape the processes of corporate identity development in the East? As say, when compared to the West. With global village emerging there is a dire need to understand how identity within a firm develops both in the the East as in the West. Such empirical work is necessary to ground the theory of identity development empirically inside firms. In recent times, explanatory research by the British Broadcasting Corporation (Balmer, 1997) discovered for example, the presence of multiple identities.

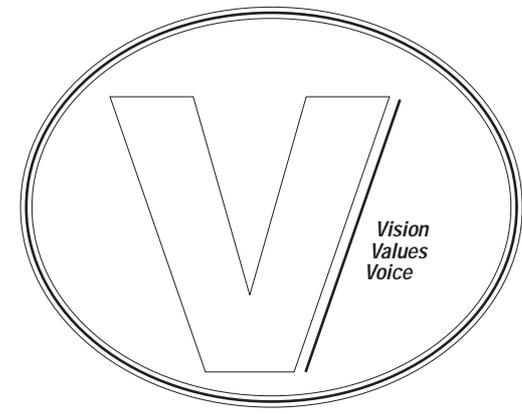
The paucity of empirical work on identity development within firms means a viable opportunity for identity researchers working in both East and West to share in a common, broad conceptual (e.g. van Reil and Balmer, modelling of interactions between corporate identity formation, reputation, improvement and organizational performance) (Van Riel and Balmer, 1997) and methodological framework. By doing research using a shared framework these studies may then later be integrated to provide empirically validated insights as to the theory on the processes of identity development.

## Conceptual modelling

To begin our fundamental concept of identity mix it is best conveyed visually. It is based on one big V within which overlaps the three “V” elements. These are Vision (e.g. as expressed by the founder) or seen as graphic symbols, i.e. logo which may be a trade mark), Values (may be influenced by origin, age or may be expressed) and Voice, (as in our case here of identity for communications) (see Figure 1).

As appropriate in a field rich in symbolism as embedded in corporate identity, our bold, big V is a universal symbol for Victory to be sustained by strategies through identity via the three Vs. Implicitly identity is there to sustain the firm’s performance for victory. While this appears to be similar to the conception of Mind, Soul and Voice (Balmer and Soenen, 1997) there are subtle differences.

Figure 1 Foo and Lowe's "Corporate identity mix"



### Contextual elements

Our concept of identity as Vs help us in modelling the identity process. One of our interests in embarking on this research is to map possible contextual forces shaping the emergence of a given corporate identity.

Within a single research design it is futile to try to capture every conceivable contextual variable. These are some elements in our opinion which may feature strongly in the corporate identity process as follows:

### Founder

We try to probe into the history surrounding the founding of the firm. Since firms tend to be young in Singapore, we hope to gain insights into the founders possible influences. One quantifiable measure is in the length of time that the firm comes under his direct influence.

For instance, whether any measures are taken to sustain his philosophy and beliefs in the firm.

Another matter relating to the founder will be if he is to be remembered. While this issue may in some cases not have any bearing on corporate identity it remains an unexplored area of study. Remembrances of founders through memoirs and endorsed autobiographies may help the firm keep core values. Also in our model we take the view that owner-founders of firms, especially those in Asia, are likely to view firms founded by themselves as their alter ego.

Besides the founder we also research into the context that surrounds the birth of our firm by capturing expressions on how the firm originated. Where the interviewee is himself the founder it becomes instructive to also document his philosophy about corporate identity.

Another variable that we believe may have a bearing on the development of the corporate

identity is in knowing the age of the firm. For the presence of contextual variables such as being conservative or market aggressiveness may be suggested by whether a firm is newly founded, young, middle-aged or old. The age of the firm can also provide us with a quantitative handle if we later integrate a series of case studies into a sizeable sample to enable a statistical analyses.

### Elements of process

Our central interest is in how logos, as expressions of corporate identity, come to be? Thus we begin by tracing how the current name of the firm was chosen.

Then for firms that are Chinese-owned we are specific in wanting to know if Chinese beliefs in any way influence the choice of name and design.

Where there is a history of changing of firm's names we are interested to follow through with the same process of inquiry to the limits of fading human memory.

### Nature of corporate identity

We will then document the precise logo that is currently in use. Here is where we are required to gain an in-depth understanding to probe far more deeply for a Chinese rather than a Western firm.

Thus we question into the how and why a particular logo comes to be so chosen: shape, colour, strokes. There is even an express and specific query of whether the nature of the logo as it stands is affected by Chinese beliefs like in the eight characters of presumably the founder or owner or CEO.

Another cultural influence we also seek to gain is an understanding of the possible influences of geomancy or *feng shui* principles in the design of the office. So far there are few empirical studies of such cultural factors in management. In our opinion, corporate identity may well be a good topic to begin such an inquiry.

As part of the conceptual model we delve into symbolic meanings that may be attached to a corporate logo.

Also as an indirect measure of commitment to a given corporate logo we ask if intellectual protection has been sought for the corporate logo as a trademark. For there are Asian firms that do not bother with taking such protection.

### Consequences

Here we seek to learn of possible consequences of using a given corporate logo.

First we like to know how satisfied the person is with the current name and logo. We structure a scale that is progressive and begin with “want a total change” then “minor changes” and at the mid-point of “not pleased but no change”. Where there are desired changes these are also documented as part of the model. Words “pleased” and “very satisfied” are used to calibrate feelings of satisfaction.

Second, we seek to discover if by the presentation of a corporate identity in the print media it contributed to a company’s performance. Our purpose is not to “test” for efficacy of a logo design but more of research of the possible roles for symbolism in a business context.

Third, another measure of consequences is the strength of a firm’s identity in the marketplace. That is scaled at the low end as “no presence” and then “weak”. The mid-point is reflected by the word “average” and “strong” and “very strong”.

There are two different theoretical approaches worth exploring. One is of a firm’s desire to deepen its strength through formal identity development. Two, that the firm through the process gain greater market identity and presence.

### Strategies

What kind of corporate identity strategies are these firms pursuing? Here we tap different focuses such as of efforts in sustaining an identity in marketplace. Then the more specific of how these firms seek to sustain their identity in overseas markets. This is especially exciting for Singaporean firms have in the last few years being rather aggressive with government encouragement to become players in the region.

We also seek to learn how the firm integrates the management of corporate identity with strategy.

This is an interesting nexus to explore since our current work has found empirical linkages between corporate identity and the process of strategy for publicly listed ASEAN corporations (Foo and Lowe, in progress).

Our proposal in modelling conceptually for corporate identity studies on a wide geographical basis as discussed above is summarized by a simple Table I.

### Illustration by case study

To illustrate the utility of modelling a corporate identity in this way we try to embed the model with an in-depth study of how a

Table I Modelling conceptually for corporate identity studies

Context	Process	Nature	Consequences	Strategies
Founder	Current name			
Origin		Logo	Satisfaction	
Age	Chinese beliefs	Trade mark	Performance	Sustaining identity
Feng shui	Changes		Presence	

recently founded (1996) holiday resort, *SIJORI*, in Singapore [1], with off-shore branches on Sentosa and Batam, sets about shaping their own corporate identity. Here we limit our discussions to what we found to those aspects that pertain to identity as being integral to corporate communications.

The company is under the leadership of a highly dynamic person, Mr Ong Kim Kiat, as chairman. *SIJORI* believes itself to be a state-of-the-art provider of holiday services in recreation, therapeutic massage, business centre, multi-function rooms, etc.

### Communication strategy: name and logo

What is particularly interesting from our analysis of their corporate identity strategy is one of immediacy in communication. One can communicate their locale or destination by name and their activities through their logo (e.g. golfing by a golf ball).

Indeed, the name of *SIJORI* is chosen with such care so as to reflect an amalgam of Singapore, *Johor* and *Riau* Islands (that includes Batam). Consistent with their using identity as a communication medium their logo (see Figure 2) of *SIJORI* reflects a recreational environment such as in the rainbow, seagulls, tree, seawater and a golf ball.

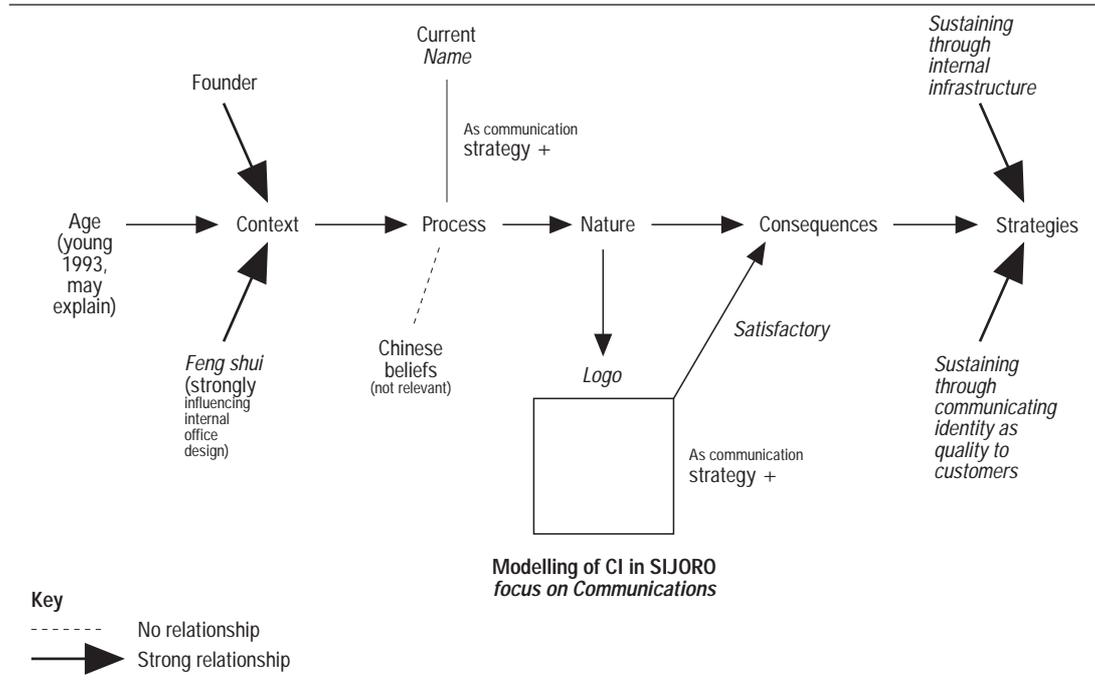
What is even more interesting is that the casual emergence of the logo occurred during a time when corporate identity was not the major concern it is now.

These facts reinforce one central argument on the nature of symbolism used in corporate identity. That of communicating to customers of where (*SIJORO*) the facilities are situated and also what these are.

Currently the firm has recognized the importance not only of corporate identity (CI) but also of integrating CI with their strategy as in communications.

We summarize our other aspects relating to the case as per context, process, nature, consequences and strategies.

Figure 2 Modelling of CI in SIJORO focus on communications



### Concluding remarks

We hope this paper may stimulate others in Asia, Europe and America to follow [2]. That is that they too use our approach in modelling corporate identity research.

If this happens then it may be possible in the future to integrate the findings across the globe and simultaneously integrate the often rich local cultural colours in how the identity within a firm is being shaped in the process of its development.

### Notes

1 We wish to thank Seow Wee Gee, Lee Aim Siong and Seah Suan Hee for their research help.

2 A copy of the *Corporate Identity Questionnaire* as developed by the first author is available on request. Researchers should adapt the instrument to be appropriate for the locale of their studies.

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