

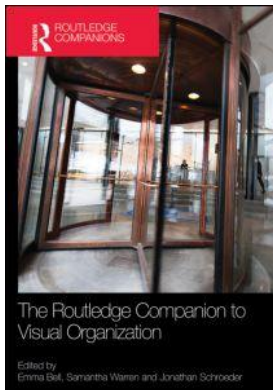
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### **Towards an understanding of corporate web identity**

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# Towards an understanding of corporate web identity

*Carole Elliott and Sarah Robinson*

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## Introduction

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

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

## Websites and corporate identity

Various definitions of corporate identity have been developed within the extant literature. Gray and Balmer (1998: 697) view corporate identity as the 'immediate mental picture' that

audiences have of an organization. Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, through an extensive study of managers' views, suggested that corporate identity is 'the presentation of an organisation to every stakeholder' and 'it is what makes an organisation unique' (2006: 864). Bartholme and Melewar summarized the concept of corporate identity as 'the set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it' (2011: 53).

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

Corporate image is deeply connected to a specific element of corporate identity, namely CVI, which has been described as 'the most tangible facet of corporate identity' (Simões *et al.* 2005: 158) in that it provides a 'visibility and recognizability' (Balmer and Gray 2000) of a given organization. It has been defined as consisting of five main elements: company name, symbol and/or logotype, typography, colour and slogan that 'reflect the company culture and values and that create physical recognition for the organisation' (Simões *et al.* 2005: 158; see also Melewar and Akeel 2005: 44; Bartholme and Melewar 2011: 54). These elements have long been present in organizational artefacts, for example, annual reports and letterheads, and are now also important elements in the design of corporate websites (see also Leonard, Chapter 20, this volume). Schmitt *et al.* (1995) provide a framework for developing and managing CVI, involving paying attention to the 'four Ps of aesthetics management', namely, properties, products, presentations and publications, as key components of corporate image management (in Bartholme and Melewar 2011: 56).

Certainly, comprising many of the elements of CVI discussed above, websites have been described as 'carriers' of visual identity (van den Bosch *et al.* 2006: 139). However, if we start to apply Schmitt *et al.*'s (1995) framework to corporate websites, we see potential problems as: (1) websites are not solely a visual medium; and (2) as part of wider social media, they cannot be so easily controlled by the organization. Websites are, in fact, multi-modal and, as such, their role in engaging with an organization's diverse stakeholders and shaping their perceptions of the organization (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006: 853) goes beyond reflecting, transmitting and protecting visual identity.

Given these issues, it is perhaps time to explore whether an organization's web presence needs a new framework to guide its creation and to evaluate its performance. At the very least, contemporary research needs to develop an awareness of: (1) how the design of an organization's website conveys corporate identity; (2) how it is open to the multiple interpretations of a diverse and global audience; and (3) how stakeholders experience and make sense of their 'visit' to a given website.

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

## Towards an understanding of emergent CWI

Websites serve many different stakeholders and play a wide variety of roles. As such, they contain different combinations of visual, textual and interactive media. Early in their evolution, websites tended to consist of elements that existed in the same order elsewhere, in paper formats, for example, such as brochures and prospectuses (Coupland and Brown 2004). Criticism of traditional website design has been that ‘in mimicking paper forms of communication, the user under-utilizes the power of the new electronic medium’ (Dillon and Gushrowski 2000, in Coupland and Brown 2004), while Chaudhri and Wang (2007: 242) in their study of the role of websites in CSR reporting in India noted a ‘lack of creativity’ in exploiting multimedia and interactivity in supporting corporate messages. However, although the traditional website genre, containing mainly a mixture of text and photos and other images, is still quite prevalent, corporate websites are becoming increasingly sophisticated, containing videos, podcasts, blogs and fora, and so are becoming more interactive and, as such, boundaries between corporate and public more blurred (see Coupland and Brown 2004; Pablo and Hardy 2009; Leonard, Chapter 20, this volume). In this section, we identify from the existing literature five emergent elements which, we argue, could constitute an initial framework for conceptualizing CWI. These are: mobility, accessibility, interactivity, visuality and customization.

### *Mobility*

A striking feature of contemporary corporate webpages is that of *mobility*, that is the movement both of the site itself and of the way in which visitors can navigate freely around it. An innovation away from the ‘brochure’ model of web design is the use of revolving text and picture boxes and ‘headlines’, which allows for much more information to be transmitted in a short space of time. However, this also means that what a new user will see on first accessing the site can never be accurately predicted (Elliott and Robinson 2012). Further increasingly sophisticated features of websites are the navigability features and opportunities provided through portals, portlets<sup>1</sup> and hyperlinks (Kalyanaraman and Sundar 2008; Pablo and Hardy 2009). These imply that, in contrast to a printed text where the reader’s journey is relatively linear, visitors can choose to navigate webpages in different ways according to their own needs and preferences and thus each user’s journey is likely to be unique.

This feeling of movement and personal agency is reinforced by the language associated with websites, which is active and evokes personal exploration. A person ‘visits’ a ‘home’ page, is welcomed and invited to ‘enter’, ‘explore’, ‘navigate’ and ‘browse’. Such activities suggest a very different type of experience from the reading of a brochure or a prospectus, and require more ‘physical’ engagement on the part of the visitor (Kivinen 2006). In addition, there are the evocations of hosting and welcoming, so to what extent is it possible for visitors to feel at home on the site and find and take in the information and/or the experience they are searching for, a feature we broadly term *accessibility*, discussed below?

### *Accessibility*

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

Corporate websites are increasingly ‘multi-purpose’ and multi-activity, transmitting corporate information, on the one hand, and facilitating corporate activity by the public, on the other, for example, through online shopping. Many organizations, in fact, have two websites, one of which we term the ‘informational’ and which, in the case of the UK supermarket Waitrose, outlines its history and relationship to the wider John Lewis Partnership, providing information about its head office, management team, constitution, principles, strategy and suppliers.<sup>2</sup>

The other website, which we refer to as a ‘functional’ site, provides access to online shopping.<sup>3</sup> In the Waitrose example, the informational site has embedded links to the functional site, whereas links to the informational site from the functional site are quite difficult to find, as they are positioned right at the end of the site in grey. In this case, these are effectively two different portals – the John Lewis informational portal and the Waitrose shopping portal.

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

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

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

Other types of accessibility include issues of cultural appropriateness and relevance. For example, Singh *et al.* argue that ‘the web is not a culturally neutral medium, but it is full of cultural markers that give country-specific websites a look and feel unique to that local culture’ (2003: 63). In their content analysis of American companies’ domestic websites and Chinese websites, they found cultural adaptation that spoke to assumed cultural difference, e.g. collectivism, was still at the early stages of development. However, the domestic and Chinese websites were significantly different in terms of structure and appearance, namely in the use of bold colour and animation (ibid.: 75) (for discussion on cultural customization of websites, see ‘Customization and communication of “special”/strategic messages’ below).

### *Interactivity*

Another active role played by the website visitor is that of dialogue facilitated through multiple channels of communication such as blogs and discussion fora. The inclusion of such interactive

spaces within webpages means that individual stakeholders can connect publicly with an organization and other organizational stakeholders and be directly and publicly replied to. Esrock and Leichty (1998) also noted the usefulness of such interaction in that it allows companies to engage in multi-stakeholder dialogue, which is often seen, for example, as a practical challenge of CSR communication. However, such communication can be difficult to control and risky for the projection of a corporate image. For example, Coupland and Brown studied two email exchanges posted on Royal Dutch Shell's website in order to investigate how organizational identities are constructed through processes of 'description, questioning, contestation and defence' (2004: 1325). Employing a discourse analytic methodology they study how what they term 'identity-as-argument' is enacted. They suggest that organizational identities are to a certain extent shaped by such interactions: 'Our suggestion is that organizations are best characterized as having multiple identities, and that these identities are authored in conversations between notional "insiders", and between notional "insiders" and "outsiders"' (ibid.).

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

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

Another connected form of dialogue is that which takes place through an intermediary website, e.g. Trip Advisor.<sup>4</sup> Here customers rate and describe their experiences, e.g. of restaurants and hotels, which organizational representatives can respond to directly or, as is often suspected, indirectly (for example, posing as a happy customer with a counter experience). Such examples pose questions as to what extent organizations feel it necessary to police, edit and respond to such input and how a balance is maintained, although such issues are beyond the scope of the present chapter.

### Visuality

Webpages contain images, logos, text, videos and so on, and the aesthetics of, and interface between, these elements are all worthy of study. However, the visual function is significant in its own right, so we use the term *visuality*, namely what is able to be seen by the eye, to refer to this element of CWI. In this limited space, we briefly explore two interrelated issues concerning website visuality, namely: (1) the use of the visual to replace or reinforce feelings and emotions engendered by other organizational artefacts, e.g. buildings; and (2) the interaction between visuality and the transmission of organizational values and strategy and the creation of a unique organizational visual identity.

First, there is the issue of how an organization can be represented virtually. For example, how can a website take the place of a physical building (e.g. company headquarters) as the public face and focal point of the first encounter between the organization and the public? What feelings do they evoke in the visitor? This question relates in part to what has been termed a 'visual

monumentality' (Harris 1996: 460), in that corporate buildings have been designed to convey many different things including trust, wealth, power (see Dale and Burrell 2008) and dependability. So can such reactions (and others) be evoked through webpage design and functionality? In this vein, Schroeder studied the design of the webpages of banks, noting how the World Wide Web is already 'infused with architectural metaphors' (2002: 93), such as portals, firewalls and soon. He examined how ten US banks expressed their 'trustworthiness' on their webpages. He found that over half of the banks studied drew on architectural images, including buildings, and bank headquarters. The choice of these images, Schroeder argues, 'represent strategic choices' (ibid.: 111), as most other organizations do not show images of their headquarters on their webpages.

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

Second, we consider the interaction between visuality and the transmission of organization values and strategy. Two traditional ways in which organizations have done this is: (1) through company's annual reports; and (2) through CSR reporting. There are now many studies of image use within text-based corporate reporting (see, for example, Preston *et al.* 1996; Preston and Young 2000; Benschop and Meihuizen 2002; Davison 2007) and Campbell *et al.* (2009) point to the ever-increasing use of images and, more specifically, the use of 'faces' in annual reports.

However, there is still surprisingly little work that focuses specifically on websites' role in transmitting such messages (some exceptions include: Chaudhri and Wang 2007; Coope 2004; Chapple and Moon 2005). In addition, Pollach's study of CSR reporting on corporate websites identified different 'persuasive appeals' relating to Aristotle's three argumentative appeals: appeal to source credibility (ethos), appeal to reason (logos), and appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos) (2003: 283). Pollach argues that companies concerned with CSR seek 'to project the image of a good corporate citizen' (ibid.: 278), although she does not focus specifically on the use of visuality to achieve this.

Other text-based studies demonstrate how strategic uses of images certainly complement such discursive strategies. Logos and images appeal to contemporary audiences in different ways and are changed and adapted over time in terms of their 'projected images' (Price *et al.* 2008). Changes in representation can be traced, for example, in the changing face of Oxfam (see Davison 2007; Chouliaraki 2012b) and other humanitarian organizations (see Chouliaraki 2011, 2012a). For example, in October 2012, the homepage of Oxfam's website<sup>5</sup> had the caption: 'We can make it: a future without poverty for everyone'. This was accompanied by a picture of smiling children with hands raised in a positive gesture. The page was framed by a combination of bright primary colours. The former famous tagline 'be humankind' (see Chouliaraki 2011) was no longer in evidence. This was in contrast with the more sombre image of children used in its 2003/2004 annual report, where they were 'dignified, neither happy nor sad, in harmony with objectives of support through self-help' (Davison 2007: 145). Such changes also point to the

changing role of the 'spectator'/audience (Chouliaraki 2011, 2012a, 2012b), especially in terms of what it is that the multiple audiences are meant to do and feel.

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

This diversity of image can lead to what Price *et al.* (2008) term the problem of 'scattered images', which occurs because 'there are many potentially disparate or competing images, interpretations, and understandings of one focal organization' (*ibid.*: 174). The challenge then is how organizational websites can be designed, shaped and customized to speak to a specific target audience.

### *Customization and communication of 'special'/strategic messages*

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

Portals in particular have the potential to target certain specialized consumers. Kalyanaraman and Sundar explain how

horizontal portals cover a wide array of topics and features, and also act as repositories for an extensive range of information. In contrast, vertical portals, or vortals, are considered to represent category leaders in a given topical group or cater to a specific segment of users.

(2008: 244)

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

Esrock and Leichty claim that 'The World Wide Web provides organizations an opportunity to communicate with a multiplicity of audiences at a single point in time through one medium, but in a manner that is somewhat customized to each public' (1999: 465). An example of this is IKEA (2012)<sup>6</sup> where every country's homepage is different and customization occurs not only at the level of language but also in terms of the look, feel and presentation of main messages, although most of the supporting images are actually taken from the generic catalogue. However, with the different audiences in mind, it would be interesting to explore further the differences



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

### Towards an understanding of CWI: implications for research and practice

The discussion of the concept of CWI has highlighted five distinct areas of corporate website activity which could be taken as constituting emergent web identities. In evaluating and researching the strength of web identity and its relation to corporate identity, the following questions could be posed of the websites (and perhaps, by reflection, of the organization more generally): *How mobile or navigable* is the website? *How accessible* is it to its multiple stakeholders? *How interactive* and facilitative of two-way conversations? *How visible* does the organization make itself – what messages might the visual images be portraying? *How flexible* and strategic is its messaging in terms of customization to the needs of multiple audiences? Certainly, as Coupland and Brown argue, organizational researchers need to be alert to the 'persuasive techniques' that organizations can deploy 'in their efforts to render hegemonic their versions of an organization's identity' (2004: 1325), and posing such questions is an interesting way of interrogating the role and purpose of corporate identity. In fact, as our discussion and examples above illustrate, it is actually quite difficult for organizations to maintain hegemonic positions through websites (see also Price *et al.* 2008). How then can an organization's web identity be researched? If we see CWI as a 'sub-construct' of an organization's corporate identity (Coupland and Brown 2004: 1325), how are the organization's wider aims and intentions reflected through their web presence and its design? The constant flux between the part and the whole is certainly a research challenge and arguably one which has not been adequately addressed. This is because most research focuses on discrete aspects of an organization's web presence. Another issue to add to the research focus is the choice of method and disciplinary orientation.

It has been argued that the study of corporate identity more generally needs a 'multidisciplinary approach' (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006: 848), and, although corporate website research is young, there are already innovative transdisciplinary approaches emerging, focusing on different features and roles of webpages. The nascent discipline of Internet studies is very much interdisciplinary in orientation (McLemee 2001; Wellman, 2004). For example, the *Journal of New Media and Society* claims to publish work from the subject areas of 'communication, media and cultural studies, sociology, geography, anthropology, political and information sciences and humanities'.<sup>7</sup> Work emerging from this new discipline ranges from the design and security of

websites, through studies of online communities and culture, to the sociology of the Internet and computer-mediated communication.<sup>8</sup>

However, much of the work drawn on in this chapter uses methods traditionally associated with textual research, for example discourse and content analysis, focusing on discrete issues, such as the use of metaphor and quantitative work on cultural suitability (see Table 17.1 for an overview).

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

### Construction of a research approach: adaption of ‘visual semiotic’ method

In previous research, we took a holistic and ‘layered’ approach to website complexity (Elliott and Robinson 2012). Focusing on the internationalization of management education, we studied four business school websites, which we contrasted with student interviews from the same institutions. We employed a four-stage hermeneutic cycle of analysis: (1) first impressions; (2) stakeholder views; (3) a visual semiotic approach; and (4) our reflexive account of our interpretations. Although distinctive approaches to internationalization at each institution are identified through student interviews, these are somewhat lost through the mass of information on the webpages. Our analysis also revealed that webpages portray mixed messages that do not necessarily support each school’s distinct approach in terms of students’ learning, pedagogy or curriculum.

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

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

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

Table 17.1 Summary of different foci, approaches and methodology

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Research site</i>	<i>Research focus</i>	<i>Methods used</i>	<i>Findings/type of web identity</i>
Segars and Kohut (2001)	CEO letters	Effectiveness of letters	Q sort analysis	Evidence of credibility, efficacy, commitment, responsibility
Singh, Zhao and Hu (2003)	Chinese/American websites	American companies' domestic websites and Chinese websites	Content analysis	Slight differences in terms of perceived cultural differences but considerable difference in terms of brightness of colour and animation on Chinese websites
Schroeder (2003)	Ten US banks' websites	Representations of trustworthiness on the WWW	Content analysis	Half of websites studied included images of buildings to represent banks' trustworthiness
Coupland and Brown (2004)	Royal Dutch/Shell	Identity creation through dialogue	Discourse analysis	Organizational identities are constructed through interactive processes of 'description, questioning, contestation and defence'
Kivinen (2006)	Two energy companies' home webpages	The concept of home and the different ways in which boundaries of identity and difference are drawn	Lefebvre's concept of space: social, physical and mental	A 'home' is constructed through the collection of ideas, objects and people within the space. But exclusion also takes place even though images of the environment are present on the website
Chaudhri and Wang (2007)	100 IT companies in India	Analytical focus on the dimensions of prominence of communication, extent of information and style of presentation	Content analysis	Very little CSR information put on site and interactive opportunities not generally leveraged
Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2008)	Portals (different types)	Metaphorical conceptions connected to web portals	Content analysis	Five dominant features of portal sites – customization, content, control, community and commerce
Pablo and Hardy (2009)	A comparative study of 29 web portals	The functionality of web portals and the use of metaphors in relation to them	Systematic analysis of the linguistic, visual and interactive features of web portals	The metaphor of expert, market and community
Elliott and Robinson (2012)	Four UK business schools' MBA webpages	Portrayal of internationalization	Visual semiotics Critical hermeneutics	Mixed and confused messages. Organizational distinctiveness obscured by mass of information and not congruent with stated student experiences.

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

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

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

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

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

In contrast to Schroeder’s (2003) analysis of architectural language on bank websites, which identifies the presence of bank headquarters’ images on six of the ten banks studied, the RBS Group global portal’s homepage does not feature any images of its headquarters. Nevertheless, the top quarter of the webpage, dominated by a table of information, includes a photograph of the Forth Bridge, a well-known Scottish landmark.

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

Given the turbulence of the banking and financial sectors since 2008, banks are less trusted than when Schroeder (2003) conducted his examination of banks’ use of architectural imagery

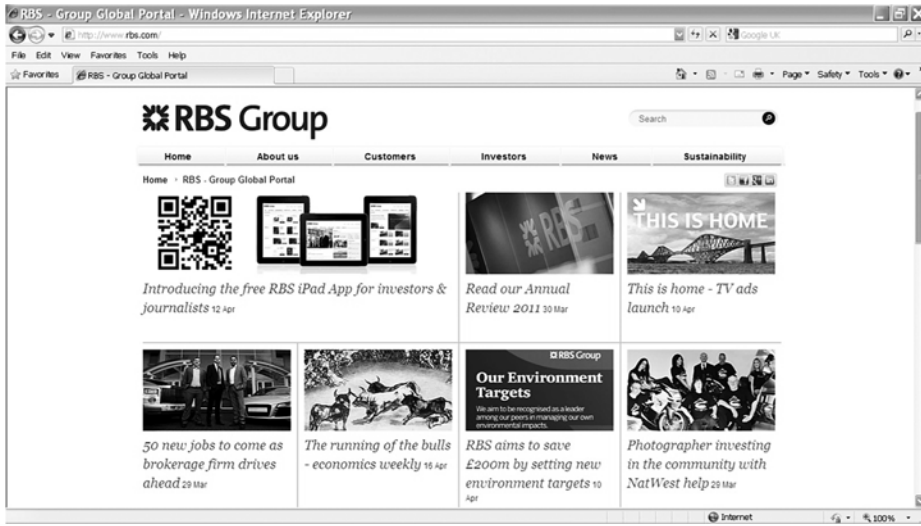


Figure 17.1 Royal Bank of Scotland, website homepage, 10 November 2012

on webpages to represent trust and stability. The presence of images and text relating to different aspects of RBS’s activity in the taxonomy discussed above, and the corresponding absence of overt representations of RBS buildings on the homepage, moves us to consider the reliability of the images presented, the degree to which we can trust what we see, that is the *modality* of the home webpage. The images used in the table-based taxonomy are mobilized in different ways, but, in terms of their modality, are all, apart from the image of three iPads, used in symbolic ways. This includes the photograph accompanying the ‘50 new jobs to come as brokerage firm drives ahead’ text, which shows three men in suits standing between, and at the front of, two expensive cars. Whether the cars are intended to symbolize the ‘drive ahead’, or the brokerage firm’s wealth, is unclear; but they are nevertheless overt symbols of wealth. The photograph above the ‘photographer investing in the community with NatWest help’ text is ambiguous. The text does not provide any clues as to why a motorbike should feature in a piece about a photographer’s relationship with the community. The drawing representing the running of bulls is a curious choice for a bank heavily criticized for its role in precipitating the current economic recession. A bull market is associated with increased investor confidence in anticipation of future price increases, and ‘the running of the bulls’ is a controversial practice that occurs annually in some Spanish towns and villages. The Forth Bridge is used clearly here, as it is in other contexts, to symbolize Scottish identity and RBS as a Scottish bank.

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

## Visual semiotics and CWI

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

The analysis of the RBS case, and the examples we have drawn upon earlier in this chapter, reveal that organizations’ CWI, as evoked through the grammar of the webpages’ design, emerges in relation to their real or imagined stakeholders and audience. The use of the table-taxonomy of information in the RBS case hints at the organization’s awareness of stakeholder/viewer diversity. The amount of information included on homepages, including hyperlinks, suggests the organization is also aware of viewer agency; any viewer can move swiftly from one bank’s website to another at the click of a mouse, so key corporate messages need to feature prominently and be visually striking. Unlike corporate brochures or other marketing materials, websites present organizations with the dilemma of choice. Through Web 2.0 technology, they are able to include not only static images and text, but also access to social media and film (see also Leonard, Chapter 20, and Bell and McArthur, Chapter 23, this volume). This can compromise the coherence and uniformity of corporate identity as each viewer practises their own ‘mash up’ of engagement with the website, as they choose the amount of time spent, and routes into, through, between and out of the webpages.

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

## Conclusions: emergent research issues and suggested ways forward

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

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

communication technology.<sup>9</sup> Visual semiotics offers one approach, but, while organizations might seek to control the messages they send out through websites, they are not necessarily in control of the semiotics. There is further work to be done, therefore, on developing methodologies that take account of the viewer's experience of, and relationship to, organizations' CWI, as well as the viewer's role in shaping CWI.

To conclude, earlier in this chapter, we suggested the need for research that develops an awareness of: (1) how organization website design conveys corporate identities; (2) how websites are open to the multiple interpretations of a diverse and global audience; and (3) how stakeholders experience and make sense of their 'visit' to a specific website. In our attempt to attend to these areas we have proposed: (1) an analytic framework, which, drawing on visual semiotics, uses a four-stage process to focus upon the different ways in which images, and webpages' visual design, convey meaning. In addressing (2), we have drawn attention to ways in which organizations' (e.g. IKEA's) corporate web identities are customized according to the nationality/culture of the audience to whom they are communicating. To work towards an understanding of how stakeholders experience and make sense of their website visits, we have identified five questions that can be used as an analytic guide to investigate the features of CWI:

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

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

## Notes

- 1 These are small editable information applications, or boxes, which typically are accessed from the right or left side bars of a page for example, calendar, events, recent items and so on.
- 2 For example, see <http://www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/about/waitrose.html>.
- 3 See <http://www.waitrose.com/>.
- 4 <http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk>.
- 5 <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/> (accessed on 28 October 2012).
- 6 <http://www.ikea.com/>.
- 7 <http://nms.sagepub.com/>.
- 8 See also *International Journal of Internet Science*: <http://www.ijis.net/>.
- 9 The Singapore-based Multimodal Analysis Lab ([www.multimodal-analysis-lab.org](http://www.multimodal-analysis-lab.org)) is unusual in bringing together social scientists and computer scientists and has, as a key objective, the development of interactive media technology for the analysis of images, video texts and interactive digital sites.

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