

CORPORATE IDENTITY AND CORPORATE WEBSITE: QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED BANKS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Research establishing the mediation of corporate identity and corporate website is still at its infancy. Researchers have established the necessity to have stakeholders' confidence through the creation and maintenance of functional website, while others concluded that it is an organisational strategy for success in the market place. The failure of Nigerian banks to have a univocal corporate identity definition and understanding of how to construct a corporate website that can communicate desired corporate identity for stakeholders confidence hold sway. This study examined how banks in Nigeria developed their corporate identity through their corporate website. The theory of social construction was used to discuss the relationship among corporate identity and corporate website. A quantitative approach was adopted using questionnaires to customers of three selected banks based on their international status. 520 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to selected customers of the three banks who use electronic banking applications via the corporate website. 473 copies of the questionnaire were returned and found useful for the study giving a 79% response rate. Data were analysed using correlation analysis. Findings revealed that the banks use their website to disseminate generic, distinctive, transformative and innovative corporate personalities. Also, there is a significant relationship between corporate identity and corporate website ($r=0.616$; $P=0.000$). Based on these findings, Management of firms should strive for higher commitment and guarantee from

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the stakeholders through a continuous communication and feedback using the websites that offer quality and timely information that maximize their welfare and wealth. There is a need for firms' management to pay adequate attention to the nature of corporate identity that will be reflected by their websites in terms of culture, ethos and philosophy guiding their operations and expectations. Further studies can consider other aspects of corporate websites that can influence corporate identity and image in Nigeria while the use of websites in promoting corporate identity and image should be encouraged as a means of creating deeper deliberations on how several measures of corporate websites can influence the development of corporate identity and image.

Keywords: *corporate identity; corporate website; social construction theory.*

JEL Classification: G21

1.0 Introduction

Over the past decades, the decision to use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by organisations has long been of interest due to its increasingly important roles in the existence of individuals and firms (AbuGhazaleh, Qasim & Hadad, 2012). The World Wide Web (WWW) evolved from the internet to become a useful tool of wireless technology for multiple exchanges, customization and adaptation within a secure and interactive environment (*Chu, Leung, Hui & Cheung, 2007*). Also, patterns and expectations of web users, businesses and the role they play in attracting and retaining customers has changed due to the adoption of corporate websites such that good service offerings is inadequate to differentiate competitors (*Ageeva, Melewar, Foroudi, Dennis & Jin, 2018*).

Whilst offerings by Gordon Lippincott led him to develop the corporate identity concept so as to differentiate his corporate products (*Meech, 2006; Otubanjo & Melewar, 2007*); till date, constructing corporate identity's meaning has been problematic for both academics and practitioners despite increased development in corporate identity literature (*Otubanjo & Melewar, 2007; Mohammed, Guilet, Schuckert, & Law, 2016*). After the initial definition of corporate identity as visual design elements by Selame and Selame (1975), a series of corporate identity models have evolved to express the conceptual thinking of academics and practitioners illustrating the significance of corporate identity (*Stuart, 1999*).

Nevertheless, the rising importance of corporate identity communication among businesses, continued to develop reliance on corporate websites for information searches and communication to sprout research interest in corporate identity communication on corporate websites (Mohammed, et al., 2016).

Bartholmé and Melewar (2011) distinguished between organisation's identity and CI as he explained that the focus of organisational theorists is on the relationship between organisational member (employees) and their feelings and beliefs about the organisation; while marketing theorists see corporate identity as a management driven perspective of conveying key idea of organisation to external audiences. But reaching a consensus of opinion with regards to what corporate identity is has proved challenging due to the multidisciplinary nature of the literature (Balmer, 2018; Coleman, 2011) since the construct has different meanings to different stakeholders (Melewar, Karaosmanoglu, & Patterson, 2005; Coleman, 2011). For instance, earlier scholars defined CI based on the visual aspects observed such as logo or other visual manifestations that can be used to identify an organisation (Carter, 1982) but Dowling (1994), argued from the position that CI is a representation of symbols which organisations use to identify self to stakeholders.

Inference from Otubanjo (2008), suggests that the Nigerian banking industry was not initially concerned about creating an identity or image that can compete with other financial institutions outside the boundary of Nigeria because the usage of traditional marketing techniques were conscious of the natural national boundaries. Hence, competition was within while their level of development and adoption of technology was still very low. Nigerian banks had been slower than some other international banks in joining the use of the internet in e-commerce activities until the early 1990s when organisations began to adopt the use of the new internet technology for real time online banking communication and conscious corporate image management (Fashola, 2014).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Literatures (such as AbuGhazaleh, et al., 2012; Lien, Wen, Huang and Wu, 2015; Hetze and Winistorfer, 2016; Maahlo, Ratsoana and Mearns, 2014; Cyr, 2013; Cyr and Head, 2013; Diaz and Koutra, 2013; Wagner, Hassanein and Head, 2014) have examined how corporate websites enhances purchase intentions, usability, investor relations, persuasiveness, role of gender, trust and culture, strategic alignment and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) amongst others.

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But, not many empirical researches have been conducted to capture how corporate websites mediate the relationship between corporate identity and corporate image. More importantly, there is a gap in literature regarding how meaning of corporate identity and corporate image cues are communicated effectively and efficiently via a mediating corporate website.

Unfortunately, organisations have many design concerns (Lee, & Kozar, 2012) that do not effectively project and manage intended meanings of corporate identity as perceived by organisations. The lack of effectiveness and quality of the corporate website to interface between organisations and stakeholder so as to gain competitive advantage, improve customer relationships and enable innovation will not project corporate identity and manage corporate image (Bravo, Matute & Pina, 2012; Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2008; Foroudi, Dinnie, Kitchen, Melewar & Foroudi, 2017). However, in spite the inadequate utilisation of corporate websites for effective communication of desired messages, interest in its use has increased considerably (Cyr & Head, 2013; Ageeva, Melewar, Foroudi, Dennis, & Jin, 2018). This therefore necessitates the requirement to examine the relationship that exists between corporate identity and corporate websites in Nigeria.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate how banks in Nigeria develop their corporate identity through their corporate websites so as to influence a corporate image. The specific objective of the study is to examine the relationship between corporate identity and corporate website of selected banks in Nigeria.

1.4 Research Question

In carrying out this research, the major research question on how does corporate identity relate with the use of corporate website of selected banks in Nigeria?

1.5 Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between corporate identity and the use of corporate website of selected banks in Nigeria

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual review

Holland (2012) observed that several scholars have, over the years, given different definitions to the corporate identity (CI) as a concept in order to show its

importance to organisations. Although Gordon Lippincott developed the corporate identity concept so as to differentiate his corporate products (Craciun, 2019; Otubanjo & Melewar, 2007). It is believed to encompass the way organisations communicate and its behaviour (Almeida & Coelho, 2019). Corporate Identity was first considered to consist of logos, house styles, visual symbols and visual expressions of the entire organisation (Holland, 2012).

This justifies why Abratt (1989) personified CI in his seminal study by arguing that brand personality is an antecedent of CI, and that CI is an assemblage of physical and behavioural cues by which an audience could recognise the organisation and distinguish it from others. This definition conceivably boosts the recognition of corporate identity beyond visual clues to include behavioural representations. Therefore, the definition of van Rekom (1997) is centred on the ability of an organisation to continuously, distinctively and centrally express sameness over time. These expressions can also be constant behavioural expression of employees. This position of van Rekom (1997), about CI further extends a similar work by Dowling (1986), and Abratt (1989), as it considers visual and behavioural elements respectively (Coleman, 2011).

While the scholars perceived CI from visual behavioural and perspectives, Olins (1991) focused on how organisations communicate, by defining CI as everything that the organisation does, in every way it communicates. This definition led to the emergence of the corporate identity mix (van Riel & Balmer, 1997). These complexities surrounding the definition of CI, perhaps, made scholars to come up with simple expressive statements like - what the organisation really is (Thomas & Kleyn, 1989), what an organisation is (Baker & Balmer, 1997); or the use of baseline questions (Coleman 2011), which tends to ask what the organisation is?, what it stands for?, what it does? How it does it, where it is going, how the firm is different, or how the firm carries out its business (Bernstein, 1984; Coleman, 2011; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; *Melewar, et al. 2005*; Otubanjo & Melewar, 2007). But do all these questions appear to answer what corporate identity really is?

Gray and Balmer (1998), expressed that CI is reality and uniqueness of the organisation, while Hatch and Schultz (2000) posit that the concept should be viewed as the central or distinctive ideas of the organisation and how this idea is represented and communicated to a variety of audiences. This definition, according to Coleman (2011), is similar to Marwick and Fill (1997), that it is organisation's presentation of itself to its various stakeholders and the means by which it distinguishes itself from all other organisations. Hence, the understanding of the

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central or distinctive attributes of the organisation which are to be communicated to a broad range of stakeholders (Coleman, 2011). Melewar and Karaosmanoglu (2006) offered their definition based on result gathered from in-depth interviews which gave the benefit of being empirically informed to operationalise the constructs used in defining CI as the presentation of organisation's unique features to every stakeholder through behaviour, design, structure, culture, industry identity and strategy via organisation's communication.

For example, Marsden (2019) expressed understanding of corporate identity via the framework of brand expression by positing that there exist very little conceptual apparatus for understanding the type of expressions that feature in a corporate logo. Based on the position of Olins (2008) that corporate identity expresses who we are, what we do, how we do it and where we are heading; Marsden (2019) explained that researches within visual identity majorly offers incomplete understanding of brand mark expression. This result suggests therefore, that management is expected to play a key role in the development and maintenance of corporate identity (Simoes, Dibb & Fisk, 2005). This is because corporate identity deals with the impressions, personality and image that an organisation presents to stakeholders. Conversely, corporate image is a concept set in the subjectivity of the public, based on the public's accumulated experiences (Nguyen & Le Blanc, 1998). It is a multidimensional construct that can be seen as either organization brands promise or associations that the audience has towards the organizations (Tran, Nguyen, Melewar, & Bodoh, 2015). Unfortunately cooperate image and be portrayed differently from what an organization is trying to portray due to its Nature as a subjective evaluative construct held in the minds of individuals but not part of an organizations possessions (Tran, et al 2015).

2.1 Indicators of Corporate Identity

Corporate identity comprises the following perspectives: behavioural and visual perspectives, corporate symbolism, corporate culture and structure, and communication.

2.1.1 Behavioural and visual perspectives: Bartholme and Melewar (2011), and Jabbar (2014) recognised corporate visual identity to be an integral to corporate identity mix which serves a crucial aspect when conveying the identity of an organisation. It is important because characteristics that are enduring, distinctive and central to the organisation such as corporate logos, corporate slogans, corporate

names and colours typography (Simoes & Sebastiani, 2017) and very often additional graphical elements (Jabbar, 2014) are transmitted to external and internal stakeholders. For example, corporate symbol or corporate logo expresses organisational characteristics (Jabbar, 2014) with other corporate visual elements on a variety of platforms / applications such as buildings, vehicles and corporate clothing. Balmer and Gray (2000), sees corporate visual identity as providing recognisability as an important component in the structure of corporate identity because it communicates and develops symbolic associations with stakeholders which are important components in the building of branding strategy (Jabbar, 2014). Furthermore, Machado, Torres, Vacas-de-Carvalho and Costa (2018) expressed that visual expression forms an integral component in the branding strategy because of its ability to communicate and develop symbolic association with stakeholder. This interaction of the brand influences many stakeholders because it is the most frequently discussed aspect of the corporate identity. This posits why Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, (2006) suggests that when alterations in corporate image is in line with corporate identity projections, there is transition in identity as desired by the organisation.

2.1.2 Corporate symbolism: Anisimova (2016), observed that symbolic meanings are associated to brands which can help consumers to achieve their fundamental identity goals and projects. This is so because consumers often choose their brands as symbol of their social interactions with others. Possibly, Cornelissen and Harris (2001), posit corporate identity to be a tangible symbol of corporate personality which is manifest in the behaviour and communication of organisations. The symbols are considered as interface (*Melewar, et al, 2017*) between corporate identity and corporate image. For example, Faroudi and Montes (2017) stated that a logo is a sign of symbolic nature, with its own autonomy to develop recognition and empathy from stakeholders towards an organisation. Therefore, symbols are seen to be more harmonious with our goals, feelings and self-definitions; because it eases the making of choice (Anisimova, 2016).

2.1.3 Corporate culture and structure: Over the years, corporate communication has very often been seen as an expression of corporate personality that forms the corporate philosophy embodying the core value of a company (Abratt, 1989). These core values according to Abdullahi, Nordin, and AbdulAziz (2013), are the philosophies and organisational values that are the cultural

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influencers embedded in the vision and mission statements of organisations. These two statements are strategic focus of corporate information as they articulate culture, communication, fashionability of visual elements and the control of information communicated with internal and external stakeholders (Balmer, 1995), in order to have a unique and coherent meaning.

2.1.4 Communication: Communication can therefore be seen as a medium of relating persuasive information to enhance participatory decision making. It can also be seen as a strategy used by organisations to coordinate its activities so as to gain loyalty and commitment of stakeholders (Faroudi & Montes, 2017). Melewar, et al (2017) further posit that corporate identity and corporate image are connected via communicating corporate strategy. It also provides a corporate communication system to stakeholders. Therefore, central form of communication between corporate identity and corporate image is hinged on organisational and marketing communications are because it affords organisation the capacity to integrate information between external and internal stakeholders (Simon, & Peppas, 2005).

Therefore, firms must deliberately choose how to shape the perceptions of the public by having defined standard of consistency to position itself through its corporate communication and create desired impressions with stakeholders over time (Faroudi & Montes, 2017). This will enhance a viable reputation and high degree of credibility and trust of stakeholders (Belasen & Belasen, 2018).

2.2. Corporate Identity Models and Corporate Website Theories: a Critique

A critical look at the corporate identity models and corporate website theories above suggests that they belong to Compté's metaphysical realm of positivism due to the assertive and non critical nature of the authors. Their discussion assumes that physical and social world exist independently of humans based on hypothetic – deductive logic and analysis (Dube & Pare, 2003). They posit that a priori fixed relationship can be tested within given phenomena (corporate identity or corporate websites). Furthermore, these developed models and theories define the nature of corporate identity and corporate websites over the years. But unfortunately, their trials to advance existing knowledge and give further information about the development of a corporate website are limited to positivistic thinking. This implies that the nature of these studies did not put into consideration issues that are of critical concern or central to the social constructionist or interpretive orientation

(Gioia, 1998). Likewise, they fail to recognise the notion of continuous change which is responsible for making a never-ending set of interaction between firms and their corporate websites. The notion of continuous change is a basic requirement for the development and maintenance of corporate communication tools that led to the development of the corporate website to communicate desired corporate information effectively.

It is also observed that the reviewed Literature on corporate websites and corporate identity disregard the importance of social order, direction and stability that form the basis of social construction which provides a platform of social interaction between the firm and stakeholders with the aid of the corporate websites. While these positivist positions about the two concepts under studied arrogate the conceptualisations of meanings and roles to stakeholders' realm of interpretations alone, they also lack the understanding of Habitualisation which is the notion that the frequency or continuous use of corporate websites will lead to the development of better features. Furthermore, the above view-points remotely promote the development of a desired corporate image by the nurturing of relationships between firms and their various stakeholders. Unfortunately, there is not notice to show from these view-points about firms that use these corporate websites share a habitual and continuous or ongoing interaction (institutionalisation). This is fundamental to the development of strong knowledge about how to use the corporate websites to communicate effective corporate identity.

2.3 Theoretical review

2.3.1 Theory of Social Construction

Berger and Luckmann (1966) observed that epistemological position of social construction is to investigate how reality is observed. Hackley (2001) buttresses the argument of Berger and Luckmann (1966) that social construction is beliefs that are deeply-rooted in the hearts of people within societies. This suggests that perception of reality by individuals, groups or organisations is based on their mindset. Therefore, the changing or continuous creation of social phenomena that are made into custom by groups of people is based on their understanding, knowledge and interpretations of such changing processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Otubanjo, 2008). Thus, social construction is the belief that is maintained by individuals or organisations about how they see reality within their environment. The reality is constantly reinforced (Searle, 1995) by social interactions (Gergen, 1994). In the

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following section, we look at social construction from two epistemological assumptions which are that people try to understand their environment or society which they exist as an external, objective reality or approaching and experiencing their environment as an internal, subjective reality.

Society as an external and objective reality

Societies have strict rules of governance which have been preserved and passed through generations. As these rules, norms, practices, values and customs are practiced as way of life, alteration or non compliance are grievously frowned at through invocation of sanctions for strict compliance. Consequently, these norms become customary and institutionalised as objective reality by individuals, groups or firms within such environment that conform to the dictated norm over time.

Society as an internal and subjective reality

This situation occurs when there is conflict with the line of thinking of the community by the individual, group or organisation. This is because every individual, group or organisation has the right to make sense of their own world. In this situation, they are not influenced by the external objective reality they exist, but coexist with selected people, groups or organisations within their environment that identify with their own line of thought. By the nature of the individual, group or firms ability to constantly pan the objective reality to make other importance in which they can act upon; it makes the individual, group or organisation to create a subjective consistent identity that will eventually sway the society on the long run. This becomes an objective reality when the society accepts, engages and enforces a continuous practice. The assumptions indicate that there will be a continuous interaction between external, objective reality and internal subjective reality due to continuous generation of new idea or practice. This never ending cycle of change (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) is based on the growth of a personal version of reality that is offered, established, habitualised and institutionalised as objective reality by the society. However, a later critic may challenge or query the existing external objective reality which may inform the creation of a new internal subjective reality. This continuous change is shaped by the following ontological assumptions.

3.0 Research Methods

This study adopted a descriptive design with a quantitative research method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The population of this study is grouped into two. The

first set are the customers of the banks that interact with the corporate websites and other corporate communication channels available for e-banking and other banking transactions. This group’s population is infinite in nature (Gray, 2017). The sampling technique employed was multiphase in nature. This sampling method comprises convenience sampling for selection of banks and snowball sampling for selection of banks customers via their customer service. For data collection purpose, the questionnaire was employed. Therefore, 400 questionnaires plus 120 questionnaires (30% of 400) equals 520 questionnaires. However, since the number of banks used as sample for this study is 3 commercial banks, 520 units of questionnaires is not totally divisible by three. The researcher deconstructs the home pages of the three commercial bank’s corporate website namely UBA Plc, First Bank, Plc and Union Bank Plc with the aid of critical hermeneutics analytical process. The critical hermeneutic phase consists of three major phases namely social historical moment, formal moment and moment if interpretation and re-interpretation. The statistical technique for data analysis was Pearson correlation technique.

4.0 Results, Analysis, and Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between Corporate Identity and Corporate Website.

In order to test the hypothesis, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient technique was used to establish the relationships between the study variables. The correlation results are summarized on Table 4.12

Table 4.12: Bi-variate Correlations of Corporate Identity and Corporate Website

		CORPORATE IDENTITY	CORPORATE WEBSITE
CORPORATE IDENTITY	Pearson Correlation	1	0.616**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	473	473
CORPORATE WEBSITE	Pearson Correlation	0.616**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	473	473

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Bi-variate correlation table above shows the relationship between corporate identity and corporate website. The results in Table 4.12 shows that the relationship

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between corporate identity and corporate website was positive and statistically significant ($r=0.616$, $p\text{-value}=0.000$). This result is supported by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), that any result above 0.60 on the scale of correlation is strong. This implies that corporate website and corporate identity move in the same direction towards enhancing the corporate image of Nigerian Banks. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between Corporate Identity and Corporate Website was rejected.

The relationship between corporate identity and corporate website is observed to be symbiotic in nature. This suggests why the result of this study rejects the hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between corporate identity and corporate website. The significant relationship identified to exist between corporate identity and corporate website further supports the work Hetze and Winistorfer (2016) who affirmed the synergy between organisation and its use of corporate website. Likewise, this result of this hypothesis further confirms the position of Simoes and Sebastini (2017), that both strategic and instrumental relationship exist between the two variables because the corporate website enhances coherent expression of organisation's messages in the form of visual identity systems, behaviour and other forms of communication. Furthermore, corporate websites is believed to be the most important vehicle for the expression of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Hetze and Winistorfer, 2016). The characteristic features expected of a corporate website (Siano, et al, 2016; Ageeva et al, 2017; Simoes et al, 2015) also satisfies the need for an ongoing management of corporate identity traits. Therefore, he argued that in the need to continuously meet stakeholders' identifications and resultant behaviours, organisations adopt the use of corporate website due to its characteristic features that allow continuous re-modifications for corporate identity sustainability and management.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Arising from the major findings emphasized above, the study concludes that there is a functional relationship between corporate identity and corporate website. This is because corporate websites are maintained by organisations in order to present the firm to various external stakeholders such as customers, investors etc. The information circulated on these platforms by the organisations provides the best means of communicating vital information to their stakeholders. Because organisations have direct control over the corporate websites, the information transmitted through this channel cannot be filtered by business angels.

On recommendations, the followings were suggested

1. There is a need for firm managers to realise and appreciate the relevance of corporate website and its influence on corporate identity and image. It is imperative for managers to design plan of actions that will present the firm in the right logic to all stakeholders that elicit appropriate responses using that most ideal website designs.

2. Management of firms should strive for higher commitment and guarantee from the stakeholders through a continuous communication and feedback using the websites that offer quality and timely information that maximize their welfare and wealth. This is essential in order to have an up-to-date response from their interactions and expectations from the firm.

3. There is a need for firms' management to pay adequate attention to the nature of corporate identity that will be reflected by their websites in terms of culture, ethos and philosophy guiding their operations and expectations. This is important to preserve the personal preference and belief of stakeholders from different background and settings.

Contribution to knowledge

1. The development of a conceptual framework that shows the linkages and relationship between corporate identity, corporate website and corporate image.

2. The review of extant literature was able to establish that most definitions of corporate website were positivist in nature and that the lack of a social constructionist based definition cannot explicitly describe what a corporate website is. Hence, this study came up with a social constructionist based definition.

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