COMPANY IDENTITY AND MARKETING: AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Avinandan Mukherjee and Hongwei He

Contemporary work on company identity has mostly emanated from management and strategy fields. However, there are several possible applications of company identity in the field of marketing. Our paper proposes a new integrative framework linking company identity and marketing performance. Building on 14 key propositions, our model expands the recent notion on the effects of company identity on competitive advantage by unveiling the "black box" of how company identity, as perceived by three key company stakeholders (senior managers, employees, and customers) constitutes the central evaluation of the company by those stakeholders, thus influencing their cognitive, interpretive, and behavioral consequences. Such consequences would help the company to achieve and sustain superior performance. We then offer future research directions and develop a research agenda grounded in the positive/normative, micro/macro, and specialized/integrative taxonomy.

Corporate-level marketing is an emerging paradigm within the discipline of marketing. Corporate-level marketing connotes marketing's concern with corporate entities in their totality, including networks and partnerships. Originally espoused by Webster (1992), corporate-level marketing is distinct from the traditional theories of product-level marketing (Balmer and Greyser 2003). Webster (1992) concluded that marketing should make a paradigm shift away from products and brands to people and organizations. Corporate or company identity is an important component of corporate-level marketing. The company identity portrayed to stakeholders evokes corporate associations that represent the beliefs, moods, emotions, and general evaluations stakeholders hold about the corporation (Brown and Dacin 1997; Dacin and Brown 2006). The objective of this paper is to propose research in marketing around the concept of company identity.

Drucker (1994) argued that many companies fall into the trap of implementing "how to do" programs, such as downsizing, outsourcing, total quality management, benchmarking, reengineering, and so on, while failing to focus on "what to do." To understand "what to do," he argued that a company should pay more attention to *the theory of the business.* A company's theory of the business has three parts: assumptions about the environment of the organization, assumptions about the specific mission of the organization, and assumptions about the core competencies needed to accomplish the organization's mission. The second part of the theory of the business—organizational mission—is the core component of the identity of a company (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Also, the theory of the business shows that the identity of a company is closely related to the marketing concept through product–market choice and the strategic choices of segmentation, targeting, and positioning in the perceptions of stakeholders and networks. The theory of the business therefore implies that company identity has an effect on the market and strategic behavior ("what to do") of a firm and thus on its performance.

Company identity refers to the features, characteristics, traits, or attributes of a company that are presumed to be central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert and Whetten 1985; Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Gioia and Thomas 1996). First, company identity should capture the essence of the company—the criterion of claimed central character. Second, company identity should distinguish the company from others—the criterion of claimed distinctiveness. Third, company identity should exhibit some degree of sameness or continuity over time—the criterion of claimed temporal endurance (Balmer and Greyser 2003). For example, The Body Shop's identity is represented by its prosocial values. Co-operative Bank's identity is related to its mutual and cooperative tradition. Cathay Pacific Airways changed its identity from being British colonial to more Asian in 1997, when Hong Kong returned to China. Virgin Atlantic Airways's identity

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is rooted in Richard Branson's charismatic personality and astute entrepreneurship.

Company identity is strategically related to the marketing concept at the corporate level. Corporate-level marketing seeks to define a distinct company identity—a fundamental shared set of company's perceived attractiveness, similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige that put the managers, customers, and employees of the company in the center of the firm's thinking about strategy and operations. Despite this centrality of company identity to corporate-level marketing issues, there has been relatively little scholarly study of its impact in a marketing context. This lack of focus in this area is perhaps due to the relatively greater attention given to consumer issues compared to organizational issues in marketing research (Ruekert and Walker 1987).

The main objective of our paper is to encourage the development of a stream of research on company identity and performance. Identity perceptions flow through the relationship between the senior managers and the customers (via external marketing), between the senior managers and the employees (via internal marketing), and the interactions between the employees and the customers (via interactive marketing) (Kotler and Armstrong 1991).

COMPANY IDENTITY AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Even though company identity is an emerging area of research, a related concept called organizational identity has caught the imagination of management academicians and practitioners for more than a decade. However, research on organizational identity has been conducted mostly in other management domains, such as organization theory and strategic management. Corporate identity and organizational identity, although representing similar phenomena, differ somewhat in terms of their conceptualizations and research focus. Corporate identity has been defined mainly as the distinctive features and positioning of a company, whereas organizational identity has mainly been defined as organizational employees' claim or perception of who/what the organization is. Research in corporate identity has focused on issues such as the company's core value, mission, and visual representation (e.g., name, logo) and customer–company identification, whereas organizational identity research has emphasized antecedents and consequences of employee identification. The present study tries to integrate these two different views under the umbrella of "company identity."

Albert and Whetten's (1985) work on organizational identity was seminal and spawned the popularity of organizational identity research in both organizational studies and strategic management fields. Subsequently, Ashforth and Mael's (1989) introduction of social identity perspective into organization research enriched the conceptual base for organizational identity. These two pioneering works were followed by a plethora of empirical studies relating to organizational identity in management, organization, and strategy. For example, Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) examination of the managerial responses of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to homeless people suggests that managerial perception of organizational identity influences their cognitive and behavioral reaction to strategic issues. Similar findings have been reported by Elsbach and Kramer (1996) and Gioia and Thomas (1996). Dutton and Penner (1993) presented a systematic framework for understanding the implications of organizational identity for strategic performance by unveiling salience of organizational identity during the process of strategic agenda building. The commonality of the above studies is the recognition of the link between organizational identity, cognition, interpretation, and behavior. The application of social identity perspective to organization studies also rejuvenated the research on organizational identification. Organizational identification is the cognitive linking between an individual's self-definition and the definition of the organization. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) proposed that perceived organizational identity attractiveness has positive effects on organizational identification, which, in turn, leads to better employee performance. Such argument has empirical support (e.g., Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Mael and Ashforth 1992, 1995). Organizational identity has also captured increasing attention from strategy scholars. Fiol (1991), drawing on resource-based view, championed the proposition that identity–based organizational identification can lead to sustainable competitive advantage because it is valuable, more enduring, path dependent, and socially complex. Such proposition has been followed by Reger et al. (1998). Similar concepts to organizational identity, such as dominant logic (Prahalad and Bettis 1986) and theory of the business (Drucker 1994), have also been proposed. The above examples suggest that organizational identity has been an established research area within organizational theory and strategy domains.

Yet, in marketing, company identity is only an emerging concept. However, similar concepts to company identity exist in the marketing literature, such as corporate image, corporate reputation, and corporate brand. It is easy to confuse these apparently similar concepts. However, company identity differs from these concepts. There are clear differences between company identity and the other corporate-level marketing concepts such as corporate image, corporate reputation, and corporate brand, which are best explicable by the work of Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen (2000).

In their book *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation, and the Corporate Brand,* Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen (2000) delve into the conceptual similarities and differences between corporate identity, image, and reputation, using dichotomies such as the external and internal perspectives, other and self, multiplicity and singularity, the textual and the contextual, the explicit and the tacit, and the instrumental and the emergent. Identity is explicit, above the surface, textual, and instrumental. Although an organization can have multiple images, identity is more singular, and, hence, central. None of the three associated constructs—corporate image, reputation, and brand—is concerned with traits that are central, distinctive, and enduring, which company identity does. Company identity addresses core characteristics of a company rather than superficial characteristics. Corporate image refers to beholders' immediate and transitory perception of a company, whereas corporate reputation is more stable than corporate image in that it represents a generalized public evaluation and assessment of a company (Fombrun and van Riel 1997; Gray and Balmer 1998). Company image may be distinctive, but it is rarely central or enduring. Reputation may be central but not really enduring or distinctive. Corporate brand refers to a company's name as a brand instead of separate brands for different products or product lines within the company (Rao, Agarwal, and Dahlhoff 2004). An effective way of distinguishing corporate brand and product brand is to apply Olins's (1995) typology of different identity-based branding strategies: monolithic identity (a company's corporate brand and product brand are the same), endorsed identity (product brand is a composite of corporate name and a specific name for the products), and branded identity (products have their own distinct brand name with minimum visibility of corporate brand in the product brand).

Thus, it is clear from the above discussion that none of the traditional concepts (i.e., corporate image, reputation, and brand) can capture exactly the same meaning as company identity. Company identity is critical for marketing because it defines the essence of a company and locates a company within a broader nexus of customers, employees, and other stakeholders. Not only are the concepts of company identity, corporate image, and corporate brand distinct from each other, but their differences also have significant implications for the development of marketing theory and practice. There is already some literature on the relationships between corporate brand, corporate image, and performance in marketing (e.g., Harris and de Chernatony 2001). However, corporate identity influences performance differently than corporate brand or corporate image. The process of stakeholder identification with the focal company is the difference in point.

In their seminal article, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) elaborate on company identity as a key antecedent to consumer–company identification. However, the authors exclusively focused on the consumer and ignored other stakeholders who are critical in the analysis of the effects of company identity. The implications of company identity for marketing far exceed customer relationship marketing. In our paper, we go beyond the customer and explore the effect of company identity on managers, customers, and employees of a company, and ultimately on company performance. To conduct an appraisal of and provide some directions to the emerging body of literature relating to company identity from a marketing perspective, we draw on the rich findings of organizational identity and organizational identification research from organization and strategy fields, customer–company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) from marketing, and strategic cognition research (Walsh 1995) from psychology. We propose that company identity, as perceived by various stakeholders, has strong implications for marketing strategy and performance because company identity in the eyes of the beholders has cognitive, interpretive, and behavioral consequences for them.

The objectives of this paper are twofold. First, we draw on the extant piecemeal studies on company identity and apply relevant organization, psychology, and management theories to develop a set of research propositions, leading to an integrative framework of company identity and performance. Second, we discuss specific applications of company identity to marketing problems to provide research directions for programmatic work on the area.

IMPORTANCE OF COMPANY IDENTITY FOR MARKETING

Company identity is important for marketing because it (1) defines the essence of a company (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000) and accords economic, social, and symbolic meanings to a company; (2) situates the company at the fundamental level among the social and economic exchange network of other organizations, such as competitors, suppliers, distributors, buyers, governmental agents, and so on; and (3) represents the basic subject for evaluation by beholders, such as perceptions, images, identifications, and action for/against the focal company, which, in turn, has cognitive, affective, and behavioral consequences for those beholders (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Pratt 1998). Company identity has a strong interface with marketing because it propagates through multiple stakeholders and multiple channels, uses a variety of communication types, positions an entire organization, and needs to be consistent with key marketing decisions such as product–market choice, STP (segmentation, targeting, positioning), and the 4Ps (product, price, place, promotion). Company identity particularly shapes contemporary marketing through postmodern trends concerning networks, partnerships, people, and organizations, such as mergers and acquisition, globalization, technology advancement (Balmer and Greyser 2002), mass media development, change of population demographics, and more knowledgeable employees and customers (Drucker 2002).

The specific content of a company identity is amorphous and fluid (Ashforth and Mael 1996), leading to lack of consensus in literature on its definition, dimensions, or measurement (Melewar 2003). However, it is reasonably accepted that company identity is constituted of core values (e.g., operating philosophy, vision and mission, leadership) and demographics (e.g., business, size, age, competitive position, country of origin, location) of the company (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Both core values and company demographics have a strong effect on company marketing strategy and performance. However, the missing link in this effect is the cognitive structure of the stakeholders toward the focal company. In other words, perceived company identity has more cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects than the actual company identity (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Pratt 2000). This has implications for identifying the salient dimensions of company identity.

Identity measurement is a complicated process, albeit one that is important as it forms the basis for the organization's relationships with its stakeholder groups. In our research framework, we consider "perceived" company identity as the variable predicting performance. Measuring "actual" or objective company identity is a problematic issue (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002) because identity is basically a cognitive construct that exists in the minds of beholders. A measurement of objective company identity and linking it to behavioral and performance implications is also methodologically questionable, because if we, as researchers, measure the company identity by undertaking identity audit, we potentially fall into the trap of uncovering our own cognitive representation of the company, instead of discovering the company identity in the minds of salient stakeholders. To solve such a dilemma, we adopt a beholders approach to company identity (Rindova and Fombrun 1998). In this study, we focus on three groups of beholders based on traditional stakeholder theory—senior managers, employees, and customers (Freeman 1984). Thus, we have three types of company identity—managerial-perceived company identity (MPCI), employee-perceived company identity (EPCI), and customer-perceived company identity (CPCI).

DIMENSIONS OF COMPANY IDENTITY

Four salient dimensions of company identity have been proposed in the literature (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). They are perceived identity attractiveness, perceived identity similarity, perceived identity distinctiveness, and perceived identity prestige. Perceived identity attractiveness refers to how attractive the company identity is as perceived by the beholders, especially in relation to the self-definition of the beholders (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). It has been argued that perceived identity attractiveness is positively linked with the beholder's psychological attachment (e.g., identification) with the focal company, because it has the utility of meeting the self-definition needs—self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement. Company identity is perceived as attractive when it matches the self-definition needs of beholders.

Second, company identity needs to be perceived as consistent with (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) or similar to (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) the beholders' self-concepts. Thus, perceived company identity similarity has the potential of fulfilling the beholders' own need of self-concept continuity (Pratt 1998). Beholders tend to evaluate company identity with reference to their own identities. Perceived identity similarity refers to the degree of match or mismatch between a company's identity and the beholder's identity. Social identification process (Tajfel and Turner 1985) suggests that the higher the similarity between the stereotypic image of a social category (e.g., religion, ethnic group) and individual's self-image, the more likely it is that the individual would define him- or herself by that particular social membership. This theory has been applied to the contexts of organizational and marketing research and has resulted in similar propositions: the higher the extent of perceived match between the organization's identity and the organizational employees' identities (or customers' identities), the more likely it is that employees (or customers) would develop strong identification with the focal organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003).

Third, company identity needs to be perceived as distinctive for beholders to fulfill their self-definitional need of self-distinctiveness. Company identity is a relational concept (Ashforth and Mael 1996). Beholders form their evaluation of a company by comparing the company with social referents. Social referent can be defined as any other organization that emerges to the conscious awareness from the beholders' memory during the social comparison. Thus, if the company identity is perceived to be more distinctive than other companies, the beholders have greater tendency to identify with the focal company, because a more distinctive identity can better fulfill the beholders' self-definitional need of self-distinctiveness.

Fourth, perceived prestige of company identity is also important for beholders to define their self-identity based on the perceived company identity. Self-enhancement and self-actualization are the fundamental human motives (Maslow 1954). Individuals engage in social interaction with other individuals, groups, organizations, brand, and so on for the purpose of fulfilling their social needs, such as sense of belongingness and self-enhancement. Thus, individuals tend to interact with those individuals, groups, or companies whose identities are perceived to be prestigious (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Pratt 1998). Therefore, perceived company identity prestige is positively associated with beholders' identification with the focal company.

In sum, we argue that perceived identity attractiveness, similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige are the antecedents of beholders' identification with the focal company.

PERFORMANCE

One of the main concerns of strategic marketing is to identify the various factors (internal and external) for company performance (Rumelt, Schendel, and Teece 1994). In this paper, we treat performance as a broad multidimensional concept. Performance is conceptualized at both micro (individual and group) and macro (business and firm) levels. For example, Forbes and Milliken (1999) argued that board directors' cognition can have effects on both board-level performance (group level) and firm performance (organizational level). Performance also takes the form of perceptual and objective (Reinartz, Krafft, and Hoyer 2004). And, finally, performance covers both financial and social aspects. Performance dimensions on the micro level differ based on stakeholder groups. For customers, performance is translated into loyalty, satisfaction, relationship, support, and word of mouth (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). For senior managers, performance has to do with strategic innovation (Hodgkinson et al. 1999), long-term focus, effectiveness of strategic diagnosis, managerial commitment, and so on (Dutton and Penner 1993). For employees, performance is reflected through turnover intentions, productivity, service quality, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and so on (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Li, Xin, and Pillutla 2002; Mael and Ashforth 1992). We argue that company identity has implications for all the dimensions of performance.

INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK LINKING COMPANY IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE

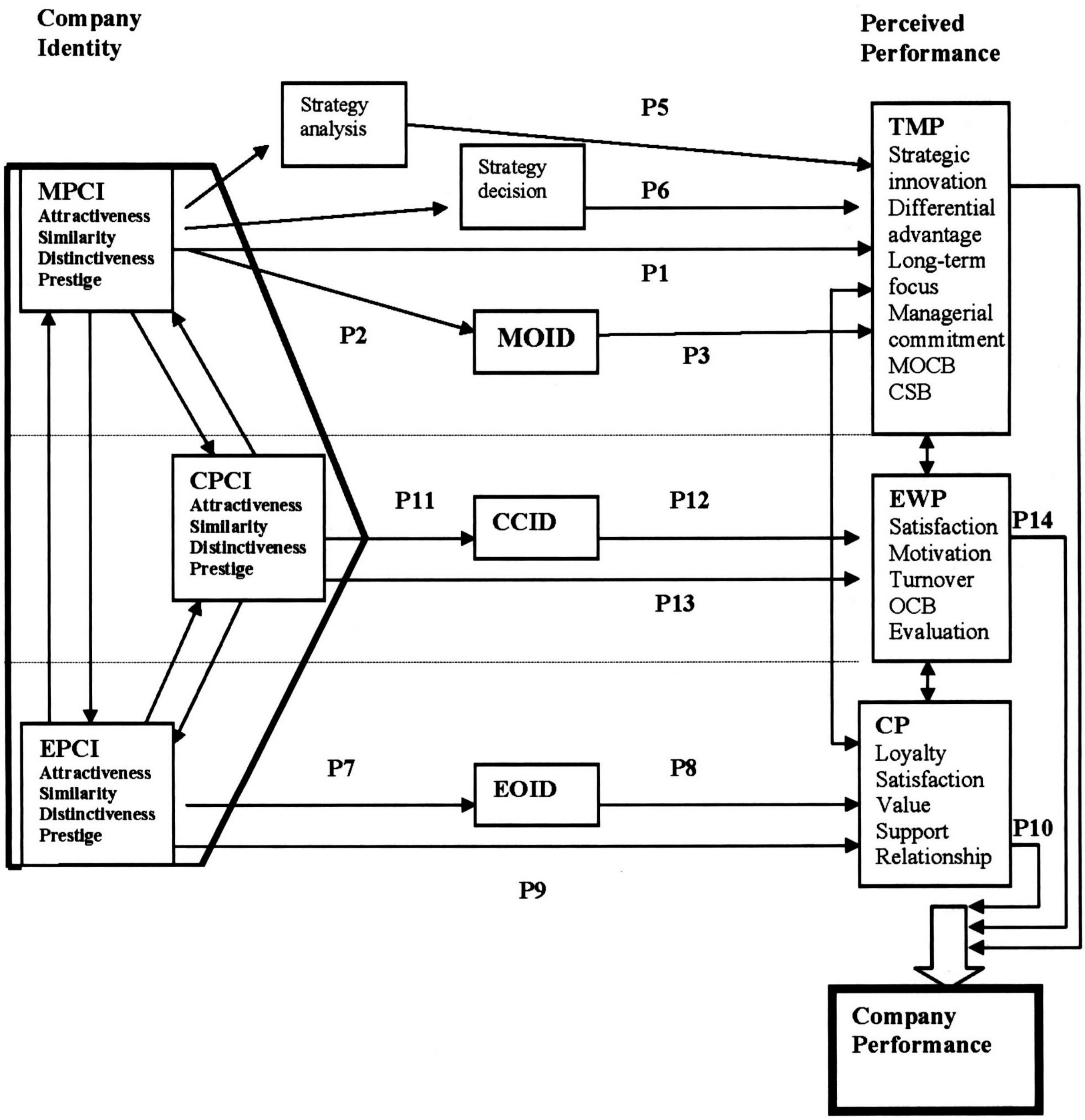
Reger et al. (1998) argued that company identity has strong strategic implications in terms of diversification, issue interpretation, firm heterogeneity, and competitive advantage. However, little is known on how company identity actually exerts influence on performance. We argue that company identity has implications for performance because company identity, in the minds of beholders (senior managers, employees, and customers), has cognitive, affective, attitudinal, interpretive, and behavioral consequences, which, in turn, can be translated into superior performance for the focal company. Figure 1 depicts our conceptual framework on how company identity can lead to performance.

This integrative company identity–performance framework is characterized by two unique contributions: (1) it regards company identity as a cognitive construct having an effect only when it is in the minds of beholders and (2) it recognizes the multiple routes through which company identity can be translated to performance. We now discuss the three types of company identity—MPCI, EPCI, and CPCI—and develop our research propositions by delineating how MPCI, EPCI, and CPCI influence company performance.

Company Identity and Senior Managers (MPCI)

Company identity, as perceived by senior managers, has performance implications via three routes. The first route is related to managerial cognition (Hodgkinson et al. 1999; Kilduff, Angelmar, and Mehra 2000; Schwenk 1984; Stubbart 1989), strategic choice (Child 1997), and strategic process (Pettigrew and Whipp 1991). The second route is related to the senior managers' identification with the company and its attendant affective and behavioral outcomes. We propose that social identification process applies not only to ordinary employees but also to senior managers' relationships with the focal organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989). And the third route is related to the normative and legitimating power of identity, which implies the desirability and legitimacy of certain strategies (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Kogut and Zander 1996).

Figure 1
Company Identity and Performance from Beholders' Perspective: An Integrative Framework



Notes: MPCI = managerial-perceived company identity, EPCI = employee-perceived company identity, CPCI = customer-perceived company identity, MOID = managerial organizational identification, EOID = employee organizational identification, CCID = customer–company identification, TMP = top management performance, EWP = employee work performance, CP = customer performance, MOCB = managerial organizational citizenship behavior, CSB = corporate social behavior, OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

Managerial Cognition, Strategic Choice, and Strategic Process

Strategic management deals with understanding and explaining firm performance based on the effective formulation and implementation of strategies. Senior managers, according to strategic choice theory (Child 1997), have the circumscribed liberty to formulate a strategy to fulfill certain strategic objectives, facilitated by information/intelligence-based strategic analysis, which, in turn, is influenced by their perception of company identity. Research on bounded rationality (March and Simon 1958), managerial cognition, and strategy process perspectives in strategic decision making suggests that (1) strategic decision making is made out of imperfect information; (2) managers have cognitive bias in terms of paying attention to and interpreting information and events; (3) managerial cognition of company identity is a key component of managerial cognitive structure, which directs managerial attention to certain events and influences managers to interpret information as opportunities/threats and strengths/weaknesses (Dutton and Penner 1993); and (4) strategic decision making is made based on strategic analysis, supported by sound strategic implementation, leading to superior company performance. This process/route suggests that MPCI plays a central role in strategic analysis and decision making, which, in turn, has performance implications. Hence, we propose

Proposition 1: MPCI influences performance through its effect on strategic processes.

Managerial Organizational Identification and Consequences

Senior managers are a special group of organizational members in that they are responsible for designing the strategy of the company. Due to agency problems (Fama 1980), senior managers may not always act to maximize the benefits of the shareholders. Although corporate governance, financial incentives, shareholder pressures, media, and so on influence managerial behavior, it is difficult to control managerial behavior exclusively by external action. Therefore, cognitive and affective control is more important. We propose that senior managers as well as organizational employees identify with the company when they perceive the company identity to be attractive, distinctive, and meeting their self-definitional needs (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994), such as self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement. The concept of organizational identification will be discussed in more detail in the Company Identity and Organizational Employees section. However, managerial organizational identification (MOID) follows a different process compared to employee's organizational identification. Senior managers are able to manipulate company identity by various devices, such as cultural management, symbolic management, and strategic management. In other words, senior managers, unlike ordinary employees, can be both the producers and consumers of company identity. According to the logic of structuration theory (Giddens 1984), senior managers behave within the structure (company identity) created by themselves, and they can volitionally override the existing structure (company identity) by managerial intervention. On the other hand, senior managers' capability to manipulate company identity is constrained by institutional pressure (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and organization's historical legacy, especially of the founder(s) (Olins 1978). It means that there are certain company identity elements such as founder's value and institutional value that are beyond the managerial control. It is these organizational elements that make it attractive for senior managers to identify with the company. The perceived strength of identity legacy, institutional prestige, and top management team-specific factors such as top management team demographics (Hambrick and Mason 1984) are moderating factors in the process. The consequences of MOID would be lessening of agency problems, higher managerial commitment, intragroup top management communication (Kramer 1991), speed and quality of decision making (Li, Xin, and Pillutla 2002), strategic commitment (commitment to the corporate strategy, such as consistence of strategic implementation), managerial citizenship behavior (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994), corporate citizenship, and long-term focus. Hence, we develop the following propositions:

Proposition 2: MPCI (attractiveness, similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige) is positively related with MOID.

Proposition 3: MOID leads to top management performance, more specifically to (a) top management strategic innovation, (b) differential advantage, (c) long-term focus, (d) managerial commitment, (e) managerial organizational citizenship behavior, and (f) corporate social behavior.

Proposition 4: Top management performance is positively related with company performance.

Company Identity and Strategy

In addition to having an effect on strategy indirectly via strategic analysis and managerial organizational identification, company identity can influence strategic decision directly. Company identity, as perceived by the senior managers, has normative and regulatory power (Alvesson and Willmott 2002).

> Firms provide the normative territory to which members identify. This identification has two implications. First it defines the conventions and rules by which individuals coordinate their behavior and decision making. . . . Second, identification sets out the process

> by which learning is developed socially through the formation of values and convergent expectations. (Kogut and Zander 1996, p. 506)

An organization with a certain type of identity is expected to behave in a certain way, thus creating stakeholder expectations of its strategies. Organizational strategists are normally aware of such identity-driven stakeholder expectations, which are derived from stereotyping and the cultural meanings of company identity. For example, mutual organizations, cooperatives, and nonprofit organizations are not expected to set profitability as their strategic objective. Otherwise, their identities will be challenged by stakeholders. Moreover, the senior managers' managerial and ethical capabilities shall be suspected. The identity of a company provides the basis of organizational sense of continuity and sameness. If company identity is not confirmed by its strategic behavior, the company loses credibility and sense of continuity, which, in turn, leads to company identity crisis. Rationally, to avoid the occurrence of identity crisis, cautious strategists would assess the fit of possible strategies to company identity. In sum, company identity, especially in the minds of senior managers, rules out many strategic options and facilitates the process of strategic analysis (Reger et al. 1998). Hence, we develop the following propositions:

Proposition 5: MPCI facilitates the process of strategic analysis.

Proposition 6: MPCI enables the senior managers to make effective strategic decisions that conform to their perceptions of normative stakeholder expectations.

Company Identity and Organizational Employees (EPCI)

Company identity has an effect on performance through its effect on employees. The difference between EPCI and MPCI is that EPCI refers to company identity as perceived by ordinary organizational employees rather than senior managers. Perceptions of company identity have a strong effect on the organizational employees' psychological attachment with the focal organization through the process of organizational identification (OID), which, in turn, improves their work motivation, organizational commitment, cooperation, organizational citizenship behavior, loyalty, and job satisfaction, and lowers turnover intentions (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Kramer 1991; Mael and Ashforth 1995; Pratt 1998). Research has shown that organizational identification is a distinct construct that is conceptually different from organizational commitment and its other consequences. All of the above OID consequences are dimensions, indicators, or surrogates of employee performance.

However, the recent resurgence of organizational identification as an established construct in organizational behavior was attributed to the application of social identity approach to organizational studies (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Social identity approach—both social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985) and self-categorization theory (Turner 1987)—suggests that an individual's self-concept consists of two identity types—personal identity and social identity. Personal identity refers to the personal traits and attributes idiosyncratic to the individual; further, individuals often define themselves as members of social categories (e.g., gender, ethnic, religious) via the process of self-categorization through which individuals internalize the characteristics of the social category into their self-definition. In other words, social identification suggests a cognitive link between self-identity and the identity of social categories. Social identity theory also argues that the stronger the identification with a social group (category), the more the individual's attitudes, perception, and behavior are regulated by group membership (Hogg and Abrams 1988).

Drawing on social identity and self-categorization perspectives, Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) and Pratt (1998) redefined organizational identification from a cognitive perspective. For example, Patchen (1970) defined identification as implying some degree of belongingness, loyalty, or shared characteristics. Such conceptualization was followed by Cheney (1983) and Lee (1971), who advocate that organizational identification consists of three interwoven phenomena—feelings of solidarity, support of the organization, and perceptions of shared characteristics. However, from social identity and cognitive perspectives, Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail redefined organizational identification as "a cognitive linking between the definition of the organization and the definition of self" (1994, p. 242).

The implications of this are threefold. First, the social identity perspective of organizational identification suggests that the perceived salience of organizational identity (Pratt 1998) in terms of its dimensions—perceived identity attractiveness, perceived identity similarity, perceived identity distinctiveness, and perceived identity prestige—are the antecedents of organizational identification (Dukerich, Golden, and Shortell 2002; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Second, organizational identification, being a cognitive state, is different from organizational membership, which is a related behavior. In other words, although one does not need to be an organizational member to identify with an organization (e.g., customer-company identification), not all members identify with their organizations. Third, being a cognitive construct, organizational identification is distinct from and antecedent to behavioral responses such as commitment, loyalty, and so on. Indeed, a body of studies over the 1990s has empirically and conceptually supported that strong organizational identification is positively associated with more supportive, cooperative, and loyal employee behavior. Hence, we develop the following propositions:

Proposition 7: EPCI (attractiveness, similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige) is positively related with employees' organizational identification.

Proposition 8: Employees' organizational identification is positively related with employees' work performance; more specifically to (a) job satisfaction, (b) work motivation, (c) turnover, (d) organizational citizenship behavior, and (e) positive evaluation of the company.

Proposition 9: EPCI positively influences company performance.

Proposition 10: Employee's work performance is positively related to company performance.

Company Identity and Customers (CPCI)

Company identity also has an impact on performance from customers' perspective. Research has suggested that the social identification pattern of customers has a strong impact on their behaviors and attitudes (Reed 2002), particularly in brand usage and loyalty (Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986). However, customers' psychological attachment with the company goes beyond the brand to encompass the organization. Although social identity perspective has been useful in understanding consumer behavior, the application of company identity is relatively new in this regard. Drawing heavily from organizational identity, identification theories, and corporate identity studies, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed the construct of customer–company identification to advocate the salience of consumers' psychological attachment with focal companies and attendant consequences in terms of consumer's behavioral responses. According to Bhattacharya and Sen, customers tend to identify with the focal organization if they perceive that the identity of the company is attractive. And, as a result of customer–company identification, customers tend to be more loyal to the company, be resilient to the negative information about the company, help the company to recruit customers, promote the company, and have stronger claim on the company.

The link between customers' positive attitudinal, affective, and behavioral responses to the focal company and company performance has been well established. For example, The Body Shop has managed to carve a niche among environmentally conscious women, which has led to strong performance of the company over the years. Therefore, we argue that company identity has implications for company performance via the process of (1) being seen by the customers as attractive and meeting their self-definitional needs; (2) customer–company identification; (3) identification-derived affective, interpretive, and behavioral response to the focal company by the customers; and (4) competitive advantage derived from such customers' responses.

Proposition 11: CPCI (attractiveness, similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige) leads to customer organizational identification.

Proposition 12: Customer organizational identification is positively related with company's customer performance; more specifically to (a) customer loyalty, (b) customer satisfaction, (c) customer value, (d) customer support, and (e) long-term customer relationship.

Proposition 13: CPCI positively influences company performance.

Proposition 14: Customer performance is positively related with company performance.

Interplay Between MPCI, CPCI, and EPCI

A distinguishing feature of our company identity–performance model is the acknowledgment of the mutual influences between different stakeholders' cognition of the company identity in the process of how company identity affects performance (Hatch and Schultz 2000, 2003; Scott and Lane 2000). According to the new organizational identification model, in addition to perceived organizational identity attractiveness, perceived attractiveness of construed external identity is an important factor influencing identification (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Construed external identity refers to the interpretation of organizational members of how external stakeholders perceive the identity of the company (Dutton and Dukerich 1991).

Interplay Between MPCI and CPCI

MPCI influences CPCI via corporate communications (van Riel 1995). Senior managers can use identity communicators (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) to shape how customers perceive the company identity. Identity communicators are the vehicles of MPCI or desired company identity. Communicators of identity can be either directly or indirectly controlled by the senior managers. Directly controlled identity communicators include corporate advertising, public relations, corporate branding, corporate social initiatives, products/services, employees' interaction with external stakeholders, and company-sponsored forums. Indirectly controlled communicators include media coverage, customers' word of mouth, opinion leaders, monitoring groups, shareholders, and channel members. Thus, directly or indirectly, the company identity in the minds of senior managers can be translated into identity communicators, which, in turn, can be received by the customers who form their own perception of the company identity based on such information.

On the other hand, CPCI can influence how senior managers perceive the company identity. To form their perception of the company identity, senior managers often try to construe how external stakeholders, especially customers, perceive the company identity. Such a construed external image (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994) has a strong influence on how the senior managers view the company. For example, managers often monitor their customers' perception of the company's products, services, and identity by conducting customer opinion surveys and encouraging customer feedback and complaints. Other approaches include organizing customer forums, conducting meetings, calling customers, inviting customers for product launch or annual day, and so on.

Interplay Between MPCI and EPCI

MPCI influences EPCI by treating employees as internal customers. Internal marketing and branding emerges as a subfield of marketing under such premise. Identity communicators are received not only by customers but also by employees. For example, in-company communication campaigns, internal newsletters, magazines, training seminars, and so on are designed exclusively for the purpose of communicating company identity, policy, and value to employees (van Riel 1995). Moreover, external identity communicators on mass media are received by internal members.

On the other hand, senior managers not only construe external image but also construe how internal members see the company identity. Organizational opinion surveys, focus groups, and brainstorming among employees are also common practice of how senior managers can monitor company identity perceived by employees. Such feedback helps senior managers to construe the internal organizational image. Such construed internal image may not only influence how the senior managers perceive the organization but also have an impact on the company identity accommodated in the identity communicators.

Interplay Between CPCI and EPCI

EPCI influences CPCI because, in many cases, particularly in "service encounters," customers have frequent contact with the organizational employees (e.g., frontline employees) (Gronroos 1985). The attitudes and behavior of organizational employees in customer encounters affect how customers form their perception and evaluation of the focal company. Meanwhile, such attitudes and behavior of organizational employees are partially the results of their cognitive interpretation of and identification with the identity of the focal company. Similarly, CPCI can also influence EPCI, because organizational employees also construe how the customers see their organizations when they are reflecting on the company identity. Although employees might not always be able to access the results of customer opinion surveys, they can construe such external image by direct interaction with customers, talking with customers, studying their body language and gestures, as well as indirect means such as conjecturing, imagination, interpretation of the media coverage, studying opinion leaders, and analyzing the company's market performance. Thus, perceptions of company identity in the minds of senior managers, organizational employees, and customers interact with and reinforce each other.

DISCUSSION

Company identity is a central strategic marketing concept that has hitherto been underinvestigated. As we can see from the above conceptualization, company identities in the minds of different stakeholders, such as senior managers, employees, and customers, are dynamic and mutually reinforcing. This is a hallmark of our proposed company identity–performance framework. Our framework is an attempt to integrate extant fragmented understanding of company identity, to explore its effects on firm performance, and focus on multiple groups of stakeholders/beholders. Our key argument is that company identity's performance implications are derived from stakeholders' and beholders' perceptions of it. Thus, based on stakeholder theory and drawing on different streams of business studies, we propose an integrative framework that links company identity to firm performance. CPCI represents the share of marketing on company identity studies, EPCI represents the contribution of organization studies, and MPCI summarizes the thinking of strategy field on company identity. Our integrative framework also highlights the multiple routes and paths of how company identity (with meanings attached by stakeholders) can lead to better firm performance. And these routes are clearly more comprehensive than what has been suggested by extant literature. Although we examined only three groups of stakeholders, company identity would influence other stakeholders' cognitive, interpretive, and behavioral responses to the focal company as well. These include shareholders, media, suppliers, and so on. In our framework, we not only focus on the linear process of how company identity influences performance but also acknowledge the potential reciprocal effect of performance on company identity. Indeed, in many cases, especially for those companies that do not have strong identity control or management, stakeholders tend to form their perception of the identities of those companies by evaluating their performances.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MARKETING THEORY

The company identity framework extends our theoretical understanding of how companies can create a unique position in the market through central, enduring, and distinctive identity traits. To develop a theory of company identity, it is important to empirically verify our proposed framework on company identity and performance. Empirical studies need to be undertaken to test the hypothesized performance implications of identity. The research in this area is so far mostly exploratory, with conceptual and operational inconsistencies. Marketing scholars seeking to apply the concept of company identity to marketing problems face two challenges. First, we need to critically evaluate the newly emerging literature on company identity in terms of definitional, conceptual, and methodological issues. The theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding company identity need to be strengthened. Second, we need to develop theoretical structures that relate carefully defined constructs and dimensions of company identity to the marketing phenomena being studied.

Operationalization of the key constructs is the primary challenge for future research. The paucity of empirical studies on company identity can be partially attributed to the lack of universally accepted measurement for company identity, which, in turn, can be explained by the existence of multiple schools of thought, multiple paradigms, and multiple conceptualizations of company identity. Although some measures can be borrowed from the literature, they are either too broad to cover other areas of corporate-level marketing or too biased to only certain elements of company identity (e.g., visual identity, organizational communication), which makes them less conducive to empirical testing. van Riel (1995) reviewed the earlier measures proposed to measure company identity or its parts. General measures, which are supposed to measure company identity holistically, include the cobweb method, star method, Keller's Mannheimer company identity test, and laddering (see van Riel 1995 for a summary). There are two areas of disparities between these methods. First, the dimensions of the company identity construct used in these methods are different. For example, the dimensions in the cobweb method are integrity, value for money, quality, technical innovation, social responsibility, service, reliability, and imagination; whereas the star method has dimensions of internal and external motivation, competences, attitude, constitution, temperament, origin, and interests. Second, the first three methods are quantitative, whereas the laddering method is more qualitative. Another more qualitative-oriented method is Balmer's affinity audit (van Riel and Balmer 1997), which takes an interpretative approach and follows the principles of grounded theory. van Riel (1995) also summarized the methods of revealing particular elements of company identity mix (behavior, communication, symbolism). He argued that behavior can be revealed by organizational climate studies and the Rotterdam organizational identification test (ROIT), communication can be assessed by organizational climate studies and communication audits, and symbolism can be evaluated by facilities audit and graphic design audit. All of these measures can be used, with some modification, for empirically testing the relationship between the different elements of company identity mix, and the relationship between particular company identity elements with other marketing constructs. However, because they do not measure the company identity construct, they have limited use for testing the relationship between company identity theories.

Regardless of the usefulness of existing measures, a new, more comprehensive, and holistic company identity measure is badly needed. Simoes, Dibb, and Fisk (2005) attempt to develop such a measure by following the process of (1) reviewing extant conceptualizations and measures, (2) conducting qualitative and inductive interviews, (3) developing and testing initial items, and (4) further validating the items by both qualitative and quantitative studies. However, their measure is more applicable to corporate identity management from an internal (managerial) perspective, instead of company identity. Similar procedures can be used to develop measures for company identity. But a company identity measure is more complicated due to the diversity of conceptualizations. Drawing from Fombrun (1996), a good measure of corporate identity should (1) develop the theoretical background for the construct, (2) develop a cognitive map for understanding identity, (3) purify the measure by checking reliability and conduct exploratory factor analysis, and (4) reassess reliability and check for validity. The biggest challenge for developing a company identity measure at the moment is the difficulty of going through the first stage of measure development (Churchill 1979; Fombrun 1996).

Future research also needs to address the relative importance of several identity-related variables for corporate success. Attempts should be made to test the theory of identity-based view of competitive advantage by empirical means on large samples of companies. We also need to incorporate moderating variables, such as market orientation and strategic type, in the identity–performance linkage. Because identity or the perceptions of it is culturally embedded, the framework needs to be tested in different and economically active cultural settings in America, Europe, and Asia.

The broader research agenda on company identity in marketing is grounded in the positive/normative, micro/macro, specialized/integrative taxonomy. This is adapted from the general schema on the scope of marketing presented by Hunt (1976).

The schema proposes that the research agenda can be categorized using the three categorical dichotomies of (1) positive/normative, (2) micro/macro, and (3) specialized/integrative. The three categorical dichotomies yield 2 × 2 × 2 = 8 classes or cells in the schema. The specialized/integrative dichotomy suggests a classification based on the level of focus. Specialized topics refer to focused areas such as functional areas or clear decisions. Integrative topics are broader with lesser focus, and can be interpreted and analyzed from multiple perspectives. The micro/macro dichotomy suggests a classification based on the level of aggregation. Micro refers to the marketing activities of individual units or firms. Macro suggests a higher level of aggregation, usually business systems or society. The positive/normative dichotomy provides categories based on whether the focus of the analysis is primarily descriptive or prescriptive. Positive marketing adopts the perspective of "what *is*"—that is, attempting to describe, explain, predict, and understand the marketing activities and phenomena that actually exist. Normative marketing adopts the perspective of "what *ought to do*"—that is, attempting to prescribe what marketing organizations and individuals ought to do. Some possible research areas that are micro-positive with a specialized focus are the role of marketing in company identity formulation and implementation, the effects of company identity on market orientation, and the effects of company identity on marketing analysis. Examples of research areas that are micro-normative with a specialized focus include developing a quantitative scale to measure corporate identity; uncovering the underlying dimensionality of the corporate identity construct; and determining how corporate identity influences decisions on segmentation, targeting and positioning, branding, product decisions, pricing decisions, promotion decisions, packaging decisions, distribution decisions, marketing organization, marketing planning, purchasing, international marketing, and so on. Research that is macro-positive with a specialized focus includes effect of company identity on trust in marketplace and society, and relations between consumerism, consumer knowledge, and company identity. Questions such as "How can corporate identity help focus on greater efficiency of marketing expenditures?" and "What should a company do to better align MPCI, EPCI, and CPCI?" constitute research that is macro-normative with a specialized focus. Integrative micro-positive research questions could include differences between company identity and associated constructs, such as company image, reputation, and culture, and the interplay between company identity and marketing strategy. Examples of integrative micro-normative research could include how company identity should be used to decide on choice of products and markets, how company identity can be leveraged for customer relationship management, and how company identity can be translated into differential advantage. Research that is macro and positive with an integrative focus includes effect of company identity on corporate reputation and the interplay between company identity and company citizenship. Research that is macro and normative with an integrative focus includes how can company identity be controlled to maximize corporate valuation and how to nurture a more socially responsible company identity.

These few examples of possible future research areas are by no means exhaustive, and they are not intended to be. But they do point to the vast array of research agendas that can be pursued in this potentially rich, interesting, and emerging area of company identity within the domain of marketing.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MARKETING PRACTICE

Our framework shows how the concept of company identity can connect to managerial decision making and to the formulation and implementation of marketing strategies. Based on Dacin and Brown (2006), managers need to ask four critical questions pertaining to company identity that can lead to creating a sustainable competitive advantage: (1) "Who are we as an organization?" (2) "What does the organization want others to think about the organization?" (3) "What does the organization believe others think of the organization?" and (4) What do stakeholders actually think of the organization?" In short, the company identity framework helps companies to design product–market choices, develop generic marketing strategies, understand positioning, and identify sources of competitive advantage. Companies are increasingly devoting a considerable amount of effort to strategically position themselves with respect to various constituents (employees, managers, customers, shareholders, governmental entities, etc.). At the center of these imperatives lies the key concept of company identity. Our company identity framework would help managers to position their companies to better influence key constituents (e.g., in terms of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors). Company identity can positively affect market and internal relationships between organizations and their various constituents. Most importantly, astute management of company identity can positively affect marketing performance.

The analysis of company identity for designing marketing strategies is especially critical in today's turbulent business environment. In light of recent spectacular collapses of blue-chip companies such as Enron, WorldCom, Sunbeam, and Arthur Andersen; recent implosions of former hypergrowth companies such as K-Mart, Lucent, Compaq, and Tyco; and a wave of mergers and acquisitions in pharmaceuticals, automobiles, media, and other industries, an analysis of company identity in the minds of the stakeholders is necessary to understand the competitive positioning of the company and its likely performance.

Company identity management is a challenging task for market leaders in many situations. The identity of Merck in the pharmaceutical industry has been traditionally rooted in its pipeline of innovative drugs, exceptional research, ethical practices, and steadfast commitment to employees. However, it is possible that the perceptions of stakeholders have been shaken following the recent Vioxx scandal. The company needs to reanalyze its identity to develop a resurgence strategy. Similarly, Wal-Mart evokes a mixed identity in the U.S. market, representing great cost savings for consumers but questionable employment practices for employees. On the other hand, some market challengers have developed strong identities to gain competitive advantages. For example, Westin Hotels, Jet Blue, and Whole Foods are identified with outstanding service.

However, as a caveat, it has also been warned that company identity is a double-edged sword (Bouchikhi and Kimberly 2003), which means that a strong company identity can lead to both competitive advantage and disadvantage. The dark side of identity can be explained by (1) cognitive bias in terms of attention and interpretation of information due to a rigid cognizance of identity; (2) a strong identity leading to members' (including senior managers') overidentification with the existing company identity, which, in turn, acts as a cognitive inertia to organizational change that might be suggested by environmental changes; and (3) the existing identity being no longer appealing or simply obsolete.

CONCLUSION

There has been some anecdotal evidence on the marketing performance outcomes of company identity management. However, little is known from the literature on how exactly company identity can be transformed into marketing performance. The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, we present an integrative framework of how company identity generates superior marketing performance by drawing on different bodies of literature where company identity research could be found. Our framework is not confined by mere customer perspective, but takes into account other major groups of stakeholders, such as senior managers and employees. We delineate the multiple processes of how company identity influences stakeholders'/beholders' attitudes and behaviors that are beneficial to firm performance. We also discuss the possible interplays between perceptions of company identity held by different groups of stakeholders. We have thus extended the work of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) by proposing a more holistic view of company identity that includes EPCI and MPCI. Second, we present the agenda for future research in this emerging area within marketing and highlight issues pertaining to operationalization of the key constructs. Third, managerial implications are examined as to how company identity can be managed from the stakeholders' perspective. The importance of company identity to the formulation and implementation of marketing theory and practice cannot be overstated. We hope incorporating the paradigm of company identity in the future can better explain why some marketing programs succeed while many others fail.

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