

Are we one, or are we many? Diversity in organizational identities versus corporate identities

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Abstract

Purpose – The implications of multiple organizational identities for branding research have been scarcely considered. This paper aims to explore what sources of identity internal stakeholders use to construct organizational identities and corporate identities, and identify how diversity emerges in the perceived identities across various stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical study includes 59 in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders in a business-to-business service company.

Findings – Employees may perceive identity diversity as a strategic benefit for the company, and employees may not identify with a uniform corporate identity. The corporate identity could become more identifiable for employees through managerial recognition of different dimensions of identity diversity, such as multiple professional and locational identities.

Originality/value – The study bridges insights between organizational identity and corporate identity and problematizes identity coherence and consistency as strategic principles for corporate branding by proposing an alternative approach guided by identity diversity. Additionally, the study discusses identity diversity-based approaches to internal branding and co-creation in branding.

Keywords Brand identification, Brand co-creation, Organizational identity, Corporate branding, Internal branding, Multiple identities, Corporate identity

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Multiple organizational identities are an acknowledged phenomenon in organizational studies (Pratt, 2016), yet their implications for branding in marketing literature have been scarcely considered. This study contributes to corporate branding research by bridging corporate identity literature and literature on multiple organizational identities. Additionally, this study discusses implications of multiple organizational identities for internal branding research and co-creation research in branding. By exploring diversity in internal stakeholders' perceptions of organizational and corporate identity, this study problematizes identity coherence and consistency as strategic principles for branding, instead proposing an alternative approach guided by identity diversity.

Organizational identity refers to organizational characteristics from the perspective of internal stakeholders, especially employees (Albert and Whetten, 1985). As multiple identities may co-exist in organizations, members do not necessarily perceive the organizational identity uniformly, but diversely based on individual experiences (Rindell, 2013). In organizational identity literature, organizational identity typically refers to members' sensemaking and sensegiving regarding the identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), while in

branding and marketing literature, corporate identity rather refers to what is seen as strategically differentiating about the company (Balmer, 2017). As Greyser and Urde (2019, p. 83) propose: “[a] clear, unified corporate identity... serves as a north star, providing direction and purpose.” Few empirical studies in marketing have considered how internal stakeholders perceive the corporate identity in relation to the organizational identity and how perceptions of the identities differ.

Traditionally, the diverse perspectives of employees have been underrepresented in marketing and branding literature (Stuart, 2003; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). Rather than employees' perspectives in their own right, studies have focused on the gaps between external vs internal stakeholders' perceptions of the company, that is, identity–image gaps (Hatch and Schultz, 2002), identity–reputation gaps (de Chernatony, 1999) or brand meaning gaps (Wilson *et al.*, 2014). Further, minimizing such gaps has been encouraged in

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branding research (de Chernatony, 1999), and it has been argued that corporate identity will grow stronger if shared brand meaning is pursued among stakeholders – both external and internal (Balmer, 2012; Bickerton, 2000; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005; Roper and Davies, 2007; Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002). It is a common notion that a coherent core message across multiple platforms and toward multiple stakeholders is essential to achieve a strong corporate identity (Johansen and Andersen, 2012; Balmer, 2012). From a temporal perspective, too, a brand is assumed to remain identifiable and distinctive by maintaining a certain level of consistency over time (Abratt and Mingione, 2017; Bickerton, 2000; Da Silveira *et al.*, 2013; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1995).

This study challenges the assumption that corporate identities grow stronger through a maximal pursuit of coherence across stakeholders and consistency over time. While corporate identity *claims* may remain coherent and consistent, corporate identities are still *interpreted* incoherently across stakeholders and over time (Morsing and Kristensen, 2002). Importantly, excessive coherence and consistency may reduce the relevance of the corporate identity, especially for employees (Sheikh and Lim, 2011). Coherence and consistency as principles for identity have also been questioned in other branding contexts, including product branding (Charters, 2009), employer branding (Edwards and Kelan, 2011), place branding (Ren and Blichfeldt, 2011), public sector branding (Schmeltz and Kjeldsen, 2020), higher education branding (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Spry *et al.*, 2018) and event branding (Kenyon *et al.*, 2018).

The diversity of stakeholders' identity perceptions has also been noted in research on the co-creation of corporate brand identity (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020; Essamri *et al.*, 2019). Whereas corporate identity reflects defining attributes of a company, *corporate brand identity* reflects stakeholders' perceptions about the corporate brand (Balmer, 2010) and is suggested to be dynamically co-created during interactions among multiple stakeholders (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020). However, co-creation does not necessarily lead to a harmonious brand identity, as stakeholders may resist co-creation (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Schmeltz and Kjeldsen, 2020; Spry *et al.*, 2018; Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach, 2018). Furthermore, recent branding literature discusses non-collaborative co-creation (Kristal *et al.*, 2018) and brand co-destruction (Lund *et al.*, 2019), showing that bringing stakeholders together to discuss a brand is not necessarily a constructive process.

While recent branding literature acknowledges multiple stakeholders' perceptions, few studies explore how the diversity of stakeholder perceptions could be recognized in corporate identity management. Particularly few studies focus on internal stakeholders and internal branding.

Against this background, this paper presents a qualitative study addressing a business-to-business (B2B) service company. Based on insights from in-depth interviews with 59 internal stakeholders, this study discusses how the corporate identity may be developed while recognizing diversity in internal stakeholders' perceptions of the company. The research questions are:

RQ1. What sources of identity do various internal stakeholders use to construct their perceptions of organizational identities and corporate identities?

RQ2. How do various internal stakeholders' perceptions of organizational identity and corporate identity differ, and how do the stakeholders make sense of the differences?

This paper is structured as follows. First, literature on corporate identity, organizational identity and their interrelationships is reviewed. Second, the methodology is presented, followed by a synthesis of findings. Finally, implications are discussed with limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Conceptual development

2.1 Corporate identity and its coherence and consistency as principles in branding

In corporate branding, because of its strategic nature and roots in marketing (Balmer *et al.*, 2016), corporate identity is expected to reflect and contribute to corporate brand equity, that is, the value of the corporate brand from the firm's perspective (Aaker, 1996). Corporate identity is typically seen to not only reflect defining organizational characteristics, but also what is advantageous, beneficial, critical, differentiating and effectual for the company (Balmer, 2017). Such characteristics are reflected in the company's communication and visual identity, management and employee behavior, corporate culture (such as goals and principles) and market conditions, such as the nature of its industry (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002). This study applies the corporate identity definition by Abratt and Kleyn (2012) as the strategic choices of the firm – including mission, vision, values and strategy formulation and implementation – and its expression thereof. Therefore, corporate identity reflects the future intent of the firm's management.

As mentioned in the introduction, two common principles of corporate identity are coherence and consistency over time (Abratt and Mingione, 2017). Corporate identity *coherence* may refer to different types of coherence, including statement coherence (i.e. coherence in strategic communications across platforms) and interpretation coherence (i.e. the extent to which multiple stakeholders perceive the corporate identity similarly) (Morsing and Kristensen, 2002). Corporate identity *consistency* refers specifically to the persistence of the corporate identity over time, having been defined as “a system of characteristics giving the company its specificity, its stability and its coherence” (Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1995, p. 253). While not all aspects of corporate identity can be controlled, senior management may strive to strengthen corporate identity through determining, modifying or terminating managerially defined corporate identity traits according to continuous stakeholder feedback (Balmer, 2017). Similarly, Abratt and Mingione (2017) argue that corporate identity is not static but rather maintains coherence and consistency while management makes incremental changes to the identity in a continuous process. In corporate brand identity co-creation, which involves interactions among multiple stakeholders, Iglesias *et al.* (2020) argue that the role of management is to allow the identity to progressively change, while management may still strive to preserve core values.

Employees are an important group of stakeholders who are central company representatives and influencers of customers'

corporate brand image formation (Davies and Miles, 1998; Stuart, 2012). This notion is emphasized in corporate branding, which includes the totality of corporate communications toward multiple stakeholders (Balmer, 2017), and is especially fundamental in internal branding, which stresses the role of customer-facing employees in influencing customers' perceptions during service encounters (Sirianni *et al.*, 2013). Through an internal branding lens, employees may be trained and encouraged to deliver the corporate brand promise or "live the brand" and its values as established by management (Ind, 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Foster *et al.*, 2010; Baumgarth, 2010). This approach is in line with the notions of corporate identity coherence and consistency, as it encourages companies to speak with one voice, have one gestalt and communicate as one persona with one identity (Johansen and Andersen, 2012).

More recently, internal branding has been redefined to encompass the integration of "brand ideologies, leadership, HRM, internal brand communications and internal brand communities as a strategy to enable employees to consistently co-create brand value with multiple stakeholders" (Saleem and Iglesias, 2020, p. 50). This emphasizes the shared effort of internal stakeholders and brand partners in collectively developing the brand (Ibid.), while being grounded in the perspective that brands are social processes co-created by multiple stakeholders (Iglesias *et al.*, 2013).

Co-creation as a concept has been relatively recently introduced into branding research (von Wallpach *et al.*, 2017) but is gaining prominence in corporate branding (Iglesias *et al.*, 2020) and internal branding (Saleem and Iglesias, 2020). However, stakeholder interpretation coherence (Morsing and Kristensen, 2002) remains an expressed goal in the co-creation domain – while it recognizes the influence of multiple stakeholders, it emphasizes the potential of co-creation leading to shared meaning among stakeholders (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Ind *et al.*, 2013; Essamri *et al.*, 2019). Internally, research on internal brand identity co-creation (Dean *et al.*, 2016) suggests that reaching shared meaning is challenging as employees take on the role of both brand readers and authors, interpreting management's messages while creating individual brand meanings.

2.2 Organizational identity and its diversity

Organizational identity is traditionally defined as central, enduring and distinctive organizational characteristics (Albert and Whetten, 1985). However, the relevance of these cornerstones has been challenged. It has been questioned what exactly makes an identity central, and whether an identity may have many centers (Corley *et al.*, 2006; Kreiner *et al.*, 2015). The endurance of organizational identity has also been debated, as identity remains somewhat continuous over time in terms of labels, but internal meanings also change over time through social construction processes (Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Moreover, because of benchmarking, which is reflected in companies using competitors as a reference for their corporate identities (Ingenhoff and Fuhrer, 2010), it becomes difficult for organizations to maintain distinctiveness from competitors (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Overall, scholarly perspectives on organizational identity have developed into a nuanced view, including the recognition of multiple organizational identities

(Pratt and Foreman, 2000) and organizational identity change (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Schultz and Hernes, 2013).

Studies on organizational identity shed light on how organizational identity diversity occurs, also referred to as variation in members' organizational identity perceptions (Hsu and Elsbach, 2013). Pratt and Foreman (2000, p. 19) argue that "for an organization to have multiple organizational identities, there must exist several different views about what is central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization." Empirical studies have explored organizational identity from managers' and employees' perspectives, recognizing different dimensions of diversity. Variation may emerge among professional groups' and individuals' identities (Glynn, 2000; Sheikh and Lim, 2011), between conflicting ideologies (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), across hierarchical levels (Corley, 2004; Sheikh and Lim, 2011) and between different subdivisions after mergers or acquisitions or other events in the organization's history (de Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015). Locational or cultural differences may also spark diversity in the organizational identity (Foreman and Parent, 2008; Gioia *et al.*, 2013), while members of smaller organizations may perceive the organizational identity more uniformly (Wilson *et al.*, 2014).

Access and exposure to external stakeholders' images influence employees' perceptions of organizational identity (Hatch and Schultz, 2002), as do employees' *construed external images*, or how they *believe* the organization is perceived by external stakeholders (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). As De Roeck *et al.* (2013) suggest, *construed images* influence members' organizational identity perceptions.

Organizational identity diversity has commonly been observed as tensions between groups holding relatively uniform organizational identity perceptions (Corley, 2004; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Glynn, 2000). Yet, perceptions *within* groups also inherently vary because of individual differences. Harquail and King (2010) suggest that two individuals are unlikely to share the same construct of organizational identity because of their individual situation, including their "specific physical location, structural place in the organization, length of tenure, functional responsibilities, and degree of interaction with other members and non-members" (Harquail and King, 2010, p. 1634).

2.3 Recognizing stakeholder-perceived identity diversity in corporate identity management

Organizational identity has been considered an element of the corporate identity, reflecting an internal, "cultural" facet of the identity (Balmer, 2012). As De Roeck *et al.* (2013) recognize, internal stakeholders' perceptions of organizational identity inform how organizational leaders develop and express the corporate identity.

However, there is a discrepancy between diversity occurring in stakeholders' perceptions of organizational identity and companies pursuing coherence and consistency for the corporate identity. Firms' management of univocality vs multivocality has even been painted as ironic:

The irony of corporations insisting on univocality while simultaneously claiming to listen and adapt to their customers cannot go unnoticed; yet very few organizations acknowledge this contradiction in their practices (Cheney *et al.*, 2004, p. 93).

Scholars also advocate for a balance between identity coherence and diversity. [Kapferer \(2008\)](#) argues that a clear sense of identity requires respect for key values and defining attributes; however, too much predictability and uniformity can be a disadvantage.

Furthermore, previous studies suggest that an ignorance of multiple organizational identities in corporate identity management causes employee disidentification ([Stuart, 2003](#); [Tarnovskaya and Biedenbach, 2018](#); [Spry et al., 2018](#)). Organizational identification is defined as “the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization” ([Dutton et al., 1994](#), p. 239). Organizational identification and, in contrast, disidentification ([Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002](#)) highlight individuals’ abilities to mentally attach to or distance themselves from the organization. As [Aspara et al. \(2008\)](#) note, individuals may, through affective self-affinity (ASA), also identify with a multitude of things related to the organization, such as its brands, products, activities, ideals or people, and through ASA transference, identification with those things also influences organizational identification.

Empirical studies show that ignoring multiple organizational identities in branding initiatives causes tension among employees. Challenges of developing a shared brand identity are seen in the study by [Aspara et al. \(2014\)](#), who examined a Finnish university’s branding process after a merger. Despite the organization’s attempts to involve multiple stakeholders in the branding process, struggles and dynamics of power and resistance emerged in the stakeholder network (*Ibid.*). As another example, [Sheikh and Lim \(2011\)](#), studying employee perceptions in an engineering consultancy, discussed the tensions between consultants’ personal brands and the corporate brand, finding that the personal identities of consultants overshadowed the corporate identity and that employees did not resonate with its simplified message (*Ibid.*). [Spry et al. \(2018\)](#) reported comparable findings in a higher education context, where staff felt a disconnect toward the firm’s vision and values, which were grounded in business imperatives. Hence, [Spry et al. \(2018\)](#) proposed an approach to corporate brand architecture endorsing multiple specialisms and allowing different specialisms to project different identities to different stakeholders. Comparably, [Schmeltz and Kjeldsen \(2020\)](#) propose involving internal stakeholders in co-creation processes to reach compatibility between employees’ perceptions while still embracing employees as brand communicators with diverse views.

Empirical studies have also supported the notion of a multifaceted corporate identity in communication toward external stakeholders. [Coleman et al. \(2011\)](#), in their study on B2B service brand identity, suggest that too-consistent brand communications toward customers have a negative effect on brand performance and that companies may draw strength from multifaceted messages across channels. Likewise, [Sillince and Brown \(2009\)](#), studying identity claims on police websites, suggest that multiple identity claims in an organization’s rhetoric might increase organizational legitimacy. In a consumer context, [Charters \(2009\)](#) suggests that inconsistent brand identities spark continuing customer interest and curiosity.

These examples highlight that coherence and consistency are not generalizable principles for corporate identity – neither from an internal nor external branding perspective, neither in service nor product settings. There is a need to explore alternative branding approaches that embrace identity diversity rather than pursue a unified identity and shared meaning.

3. Methodology

This study is guided by a problematization methodology ([Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011](#)) to challenge underlying assumptions in previous research – in this case, coherence and consistency as principles for corporate identity. In line with a social constructionist approach to identity ([Berger and Luckmann, 1966](#); [He and Brown, 2013](#); [Melewar et al., 2012](#)), the study pursues a rich understanding of how stakeholders perceive a company’s identity and the social contexts that influence their perceptions over time.

As [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#) advocate, revisiting the site of research after initial data collection enhances research dependability. Hence, data were collected on two occasions separated by over three years to acknowledge the fluctuating natures of organizational identity and corporate identity. Allowing room for stakeholders to voice their perspectives, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted ([Patton, 2002](#)). The interviews followed a thematic guide ([Patton, 2002](#)), and informants were encouraged to freely associate ([Mason, 2002](#)) upon emerging issues. Construed external images ([Dutton et al., 1994](#)) emerged during the interviews as an influencer on perceived organizational identity and corporate identity and were included as a phenomenon of interest in the interview guide, which is summarized in [Table 1](#).

3.1 Data

The data include 36 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted between October and November 2015 and 23 interviews conducted between February and March 2019. The data include 39 h of audio, and each interview lasted for 40 min on average. The participants are listed in [Appendix 1](#), categorized and indexed according to the hierarchical level and the service areas that they represent. Theoretical saturation ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#)) was reached as new themes stopped emerging.

3.2 Empirical context

Consistent with the research aim, including exploring the perceptual diversity of internal stakeholders, a single case company was chosen to enable a large and heterogeneous sample of informants. The company is an engineering consultancy in Northern Europe, offering engineering, documentation and software-related services. To protect informants’ anonymity, the company is not mentioned by name. It has operated for over 30 years, and being active in a B2B setting, it relies on deep, long-term customer relationships. The organization has grown significantly since its establishment, organically and through mergers, acquisitions and outsourcing agreements. In 2015, when the first round of the empirical study was conducted, the company employed over 2,000 professionals, operating internationally at over 40 locations in 4 countries. By 2019, during the second round of

Table 1 Thematic interview guide

Theme	Concepts or phenomena of interest
Background info	Position and hierarchical level; previous positions in the company; service areas worked in; years of experience with company; locations worked at or visited
Perceptions of the company and its defining characteristics	Perceived organizational identity Albert and Whetten, (1985)
Perceptions of the company's strategic choices and expression, and differentiating characteristics	Perceived corporate identity Abratt and Kleyn, (2012) ; Balmer, (2017) ; Melewar and Jenkins, (2002)
Potential changes in the perceptions of the company over time	Influences to and changes in the perceived organizational identity and/or corporate identity Gioia et al., (2013) ; Schultz and Hernes, (2013)
Perceptions of the difference between the informant's and other stakeholders' perceptions	Construed organizational/corporate identity diversity Construed external images Dutton et al., (1994) Identity-image gaps (Hatch and Schultz, (2002))

the study, the company had over 3,000 employees at over 70 locations in 7 countries. In between the two data collection rounds, the company implemented a rebranding initiative, including updating the visual corporate identity and the strategically defined corporate brand values. Consistent with the suggestion by [Holmlund et al. \(2019\)](#), representatives from the selected company were involved in the initial phases of the study in which managers at the marketing and communications department provided background information about the organization's situation. Their involvement supported understanding the context and developing interview themes. Furthermore, they assisted in selecting and contacting informants and commenting on initial findings.

3.3 Rationale behind choice of empirical context

The selected case company can be considered an intensive sample ([Patton, 2002](#)), as it portrays a rich example of how identity diversity occurs in organizations. The company was selected because of the nature of its offerings, which include multiple service areas, with employees actively facing customers and maintaining long-lasting customer relationships. Furthermore, the company being active at a wide range of locations raised the question of whether members' identity perceptions showed locational variety. The nature of the consultancy work of the company also involves some employees working for longer periods at clients' premises, while others work in-house.

3.4 Sampling

Purposeful heterogeneity sampling, which aims at "capturing central and describing themes that can cut across a great deal of variation" ([Patton, 2002](#), p. 235), was used to ensure a wide range of stakeholder perspectives. Thirteen locations in two countries were included (i.e. 25% of all locations in the chosen countries). The interviewed stakeholders included 3 senior managers, 15 middle managers, 10 team leaders and 31 experts representing 3 service areas. Informants represented each hierarchical level as defined by the company at the time, and their experience working in the company ranged from 1 month up to 27 years. Employees in non-customer-facing positions were excluded from the study.

3.5 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through categorization and comparison between the categories and informants ([Spiggle, 1994](#)) in the NVIVO 12 software. However, one informant did not consent to audio recording, and their responses were categorized based on field notes.

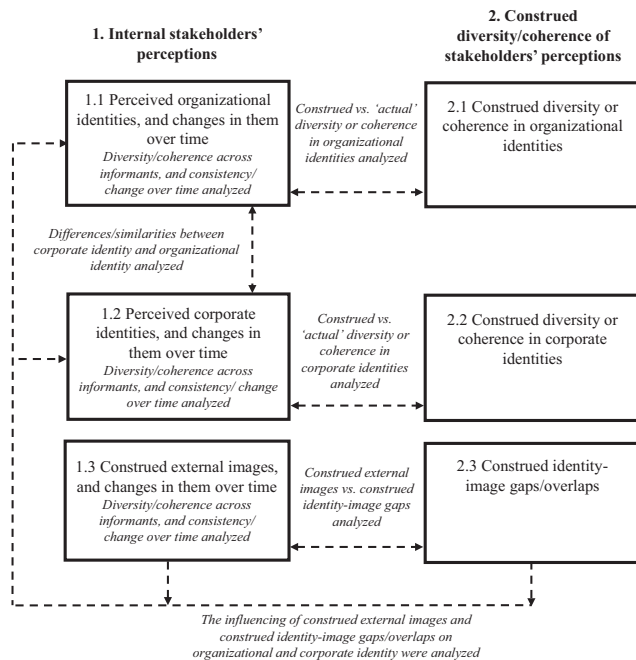
As seen in [Figure 1](#), differences and similarities between stakeholders' perceived organizational identities (1.1) and perceived corporate identities (1.2) were analyzed. Informants' statements reflecting defining characteristics ([Albert and Whetten, 1985](#)) were categorized as perceptions of organizational identity. Stakeholders' characterizations of the firm's strategic choices and their expression ([Abratt and Kleyn, 2012](#)) were categorized as perceptions of corporate identity. For instance, informant statements explicitly regarding internal organizational attributes, such as "this organization has a low hierarchy," were categorized as perceptions of the organizational identity, and informant statements explicitly reflecting managerial intent, such as "this company wants to provide high-quality services," or including strategic wording, such as "our company values include customer orientation," were categorized as perceptions of corporate identity. In cases of overlap – for instance, when informants discussed defining but also strategically differentiating characteristics of the firm, such as the personnel's areas of specialization – informants' statements were categorized as aspects of both the perceived organizational identity and corporate identity.

Temporality (i.e. consistency or change) in stakeholders' perceptions – including perceived organizational identities (1.1), corporate identities (1.2) and construed external images (1.3) – was considered by analyzing informants' statements concerning how their perceptions had changed or endured over time and by comparing interviews conducted in 2015 vs 2019.

Dimensions of identity diversity or coherence were in part identified based on construed identity diversity (2.1 and 2.2), that is, based on informants' own statements, and in part by identifying "actual" diversity or coherence by comparing different informants' responses regarding their hierarchical positions, professional positions, locations of work, nature of work, prior experiences and other emergent characteristics (1.1 and 1.2).

As construed external images (1.3) and construed identity-image gaps (2.3) emerged in the data, diversity or coherence

Figure 1 Process of data analysis



between informants' construed external images vs construed identity–image gaps was also analyzed. Additionally, their influencing role on perceived organizational identity and perceived corporate identity was analyzed.

While the company and informants remain unnamed, informant quotes are provided for transparency and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

4. Findings

The interviews resulted in rich and nuanced data, demonstrating that internal stakeholders held both shared perceptions of company characteristics and varying perceptions that confirm the existence of multiple perceived identities. The first section presents stakeholders' findings concerning perceived organizational identities, perceived corporate identities and construed external images. The second section presents identified dimensions of diversity vs coherence in the organizational and corporate identities.

4.1 RQ1. Perceived dimensions of organizational identity versus corporate identity

Findings suggest that there is a difference between how organizational identity and corporate identity are perceived, revealing various sources that informants use for identity construction. Additionally, identities influence each other and are influenced by construed external images.

4.1.1 Perceptions of organizational identity, corporate identity and construed external images

Various dimensions of organizational identity and corporate identity emerged, as presented in Figure 2 and detailed in Appendix 2. Data show that internal stakeholders' perceptions of organizational and corporate identity are influenced by

construed external images emerging from various sources, including encounters with customers and potential employees.

The boundaries between organizational and corporate identity were blurred and overlapping. Both identities included organizational characteristics such as size, which was seen as both defining and differentiating. The personnel's characteristics, such as their competences, were seen as self-identifying but also valuable for customers.

Construed external images overlapped with aspects of the informants' perceived organizational and corporate identities – for instance, construed external images of the personnel's competences overlapped with the perceived organizational identity. Construed external images overlapped with corporate identity through the perceived value proposition.

Furthermore, core elements emerged linking organizational identity, corporate identity and construed external images. The core area in Figure 2 reflects this. In the case company, a recurring theme for each category was the focus on customers. First, informants noted that supporting customers was embedded in their organizational identity:

En23: We seek to help customers as best we can.

Likewise, in terms of corporate identity, customer orientation as an official corporate value resonated with informants:

MidM9: What I find important [in the brand] is customer orientation, and adding value to the customers... seeking to solve customers' problems.

In terms of construed external images, informants believed the firm to be attractive because of its ability to solve customers' problems:

Doc3: We are a wanted partner since we solve our customers' problems.

However, gaps emerged between the identities and construed external images, as a construed organizational identity–image gap (i.e. how informants believed the organizational identity and image to be misaligned). Informants reported that they believed the public had the wrong idea about the company's nationality:

MidM8: We are still perceived falsely as a company from [country X] ... because of our presence [in social media] ... managed in [that country].

As a construed corporate identity–image gap (i.e. how informants believed the corporate identity and corporate image to be misaligned), informants believed some customers to have a narrower understanding of the company's core business than they themselves perceive:

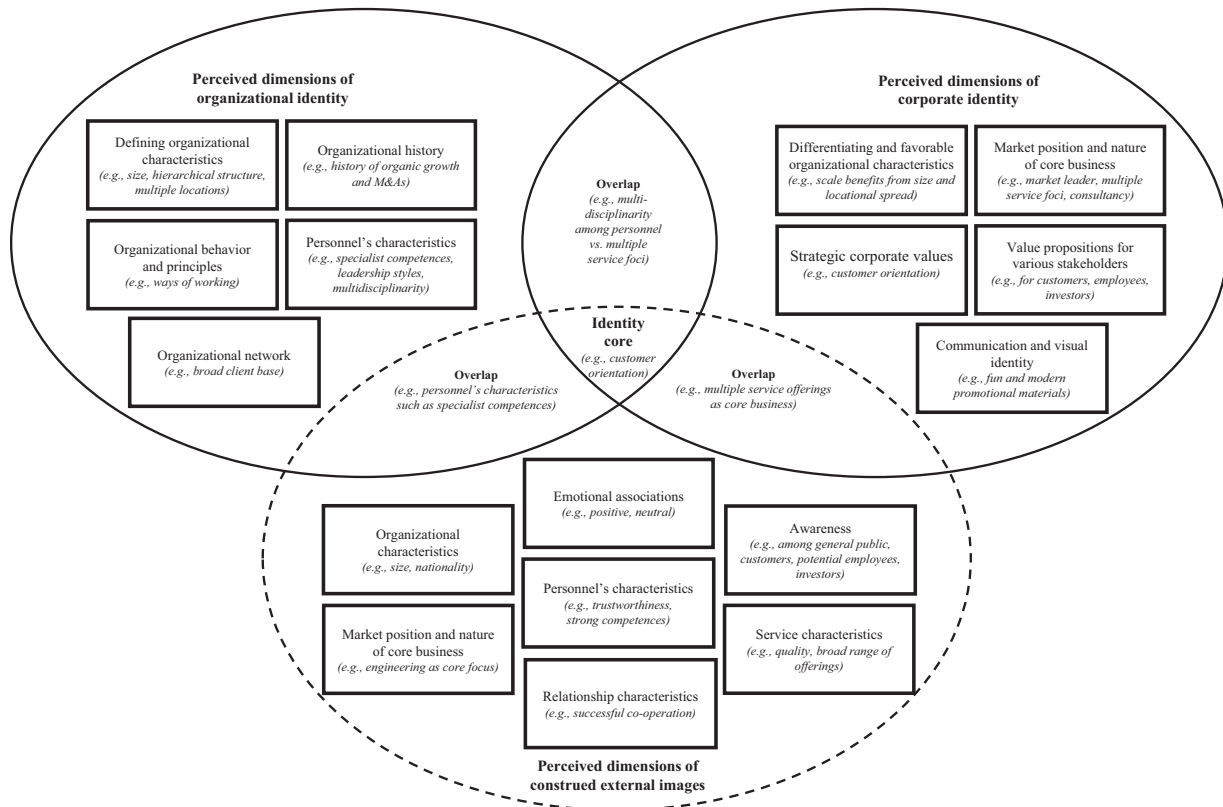
MidM7: Customers [...] tend to perceive us through one function [...] they say, I thought you were a mechanical engineering company [...] 'oh, we can get those services from you too?

MidM9: Some customers still unfortunately perceive us only as a large mechanical engineering firm.

In summary, the data demonstrated a multiplicity of perceptions of organizational identity, corporate identity and construed external images, with gaps but also overlaps. In some cases, the three categories aligned and core elements emerged.

4.1.2 Sources used to construct organizational identity versus corporate identity.

Differences between perceived organizational and corporate identity occurred when analyzing the identity sources stakeholders used to construct their perceptions.

Figure 2 Overview of informants' perceptions of the company

Organizational identity perceptions were influenced by day-to-day impressions concerning employment, management and team members, as well as their behavior:

Q: What most affects how you perceive the company?

En18: The company as a whole, the work contract, managers, teammates, how we treat each other.

Employees' professional identities also influenced the perceived organizational identity. For example, employees with niche competences associated the firm with those competences:

En12: I work in a small group that focuses on [a niche technology]. This specialist competence makes us unique.

Additionally, perceptions were influenced by work experiences and changes in work over time:

Q: How has your perception of the company formed?

En11: It opened up for me during the past years [after starting work in-house] [...] previously I worked as a full-time consultant for [client X], then I barely had any perception of the company.

Prior perceptions from before employment influenced organizational identity perceptions:

Q: Can you tell what has made you think it is a traditional engineering company?

En24: "Probably when a guest lecturer visited [university], and they talked specifically about mechanical engineering and mechanical engineers."

Growth and changes in the organizational structure influenced organizational identity perceptions:

Q: How has your own perception changed?

MidM6: It has changed in that...many things [in the organization] have changed, it has been globalized and streamlined.

Furthermore, changes in ways of working influenced perceptions of organizational identity, from a perception of a fragmented firm toward a unified firm in which employees co-operate across locations:

MidM8: Through changes in how we work [i.e., co-operation between locations], we have become more like one firm rather than many small ones.

In contrast, informants' – particularly specialist employees' – understandings of the corporate identity emerged in a top-down manner, compared to organizational identities that emerged freely based on multiple experiences. For instance, team meetings and training sessions where brand-related themes are addressed emerged as sources for corporate identity construction:

Q: In what types of situations have you grasped what the company's brand is about?

En23: We have monthly training sessions...where we touch upon these [brand-related] things, we don't talk about strategy per se but about what's most important in the solutions [that we offer]

The company's corporate identity and values had also been a part of leadership training:

TopM2, 2015: We have used our renewed values as a basis for our leadership coaching this year...all managers have had to think about what the values mean in practice, and what kind of company we are.

Official statements on the company's website or other promotional materials influenced the perceived corporate identity:

Q: In what ways has the [corporate] brand been talked about while you have been at work here?

Doc3: [...] during training [...] and in department meetings for everyone, and on the web page [...] it's interesting to know what the company thinks its values and brand are.

However, informants – particularly specialists without managerial duties – reported that they had few perceptions of the corporate identity because of its low relevance to their own experience or position. For instance, informants reported that they did not know the values of the company:

Q: Do you know the values of the company?

En17: Should I know them? [laughter]. They are brought up at every department meeting, but I can't always remember them.

Furthermore, informants reported that the visual identity was not personally relevant:

Q: What do you think about the [company's] visual presence and the brand?

En4: I haven't followed how it is presented [...] it is not important for me personally, though it's surely important for the company how customers perceive it.

These findings suggest that corporate identity may be perceived as more relevant by managers or specialists who are expected to be familiar with the corporate identity.

Finally, both perceived organizational identities and corporate identities were influenced by informants' construed external images, especially the aspect of awareness among stakeholders:

MidM3: It has an enormous effect on how [...] the general public views [the company]; it sticks [with employees].

4.1.3 *Influencing between organizational identity and corporate identity.*

Perceived organizational and corporate identity influenced each other in informants' sensemaking.

First, perceived corporate identity influenced organizational identity as informants internalized aspects of the corporate identity – including value propositions:

TLDoc2: My own perception has changed over the [12] years [...] now I sell solutions rather than [manpower] to customers

Customers' acceptance of the corporate identity also influenced how the corporate identity has been internalized:

TLDoc2: Since [our business] has changed into a solution-oriented model recently [through a strategic change] [...] our customers' requests have changed too; they believe us [our value proposition]

Comparatively, perceived organizational identity influenced corporate identity as senior managers internalized employees' perceptions of the company. Employees' perspectives then influenced corporate identity management, including the choice of corporate values:

TopM2: The corporate values were chosen [based on responses from] employees [who] were asked how they perceive this company

Another senior manager reflected on their role in managing the multiplicity of values reflected in the organizational identity, translating them into shared corporate values and norms:

TopM3: There has been a mix of cultures [...] and values [...] it has been an effort for me to unite them [towards] shared values and norms

Employees' perceptions of corporate identity were influenced by organizational identities – including professional identities – through (dis)identification. Informants expressed identification with elements of the corporate identity, including the company's mission to grow their range of competences:

Doc3: I think that [this company] seeks to conquer new areas... in that sense, I fit in well [with my niche competence].

Yet, the same informant expressed disidentification toward the corporate values, which were seen to be missing employee satisfaction:

Doc3: The values lack the element of the employee [...] they could show how we focus on employee wellness.

An informant with a linguistic background reflected upon corporate communication and jargon as an aspect of the corporate identity, showing that trend-seeking and benchmarking led to disidentification for them:

Q: "You talked about jargon – how do you relate to that, how the company presents its values and such?"

Doc5: Having been working for so long, I'm mostly amused about how companies seek the trendiest expressions and terms [...] as a linguistic person I know the power and influence of words [...] it's understandable that this is how firms do it – all do – and that oneself has to be branded... I'm not sure how seriously I can take [such jargon].

As summarized in Table 2, internal stakeholders' organizational vs corporate identities differed in terms of emergent identity perceptions and identity sources, and influenced each other in stakeholders' sensemaking.

4.2 RQ2. Coherence and diversity in perceived organizational and corporate identities

In the study, diversity occurred both in stakeholders' perceived organizational identities and corporate identities, while aspects of the identities were also relatively coherent across stakeholders. Informants reflected upon identity diversity as not necessarily conflictual, but as a source of strength for the company.

4.2.1 *Coherence and diversity across stakeholders' perceptions of organizational identity.*

As discussed previously, some perceptions of organizational identity recurred across stakeholder groups hierarchically (i.e. across top and middle management, team leaders and specialists) and across the three main service areas. Recurring perceptions included that the company has competent personnel representing multiple disciplines and a broad network of clients.

Diversity in informants' perceptions was also identified. Comparing managers' and specialists' statements, managers emphasized broad-ranging organizational attributes, while specialists focused on attributes of their local units. Informants representing different service areas tended to reflect on the organizational identity through their professional foci. Informants also perceived that organizational identity diversity existed between hierarchical levels, between service areas that individuals represent and depending on specific work positions and experiences.

Table 2 Differences between perceived organizational identities vs corporate identities

Category	Perceived organizational identities	Perceived corporate identities
Emergent perceptions of the identities	Defining organizational characteristics Organizational history Organizational behavior and principles Personnel's characteristics Organizational network	Differentiating and favorable organizational characteristics Market position and nature of core business Corporate values Value propositions for various stakeholders Communication and visual identity
Emergent identity sources used to construct perceptions of identities	Professional identities Work experiences Changes in ways of working Prior experiences before employment Managers' and team members' behavior Construed external images	Team meetings Training sessions Website and promotional materials Construed external images
Influencing between organizational identity and corporate identity	Employees' perceived organizational identities are influenced through internalization of corporate identity	Corporate identity management is influenced by managers' perceived organizational identities Employees' perceived corporate identities are influenced by organizational identities through (dis)identification

In terms of hierarchy, middle managers and team leaders perceived that their broader involvement in the company gave them a more general understanding of the organization than employees in specialist positions:

TLen2: "My perception has changed...since I have higher level work tasks, I get insights that I wouldn't while working as a consultant."

MidM13: When I became a team leader, my knowledge grew...and then when I jumped to the middle management level, when I was more involved in financial aspects, then [my perspective] really broadened, because I got new colleagues from other units, and my knowledge grew about what we do and for which client companies

As seen in the above quotes, the nature of employees' work and how closely they work with clients (e.g. as a full-time consultant on clients' premises rather than in-house), emerged as an influencer of organizational identity diversity. While working on the client's premises, employees' perceptions of the company remained limited. Employees even identified with the client as a "second employer":

Q: How would you describe this company?

En4: "I don't have many perceptions other than [from this client]; this is practically my second employer."

Comparatively, specialists reported not having a broad understanding of the company even while working in an in-house position:

En9: [This company] is so broad that I only know the business area I am in; I don't know anything about any other business areas.

In terms of diversity between informants from different service areas, informants perceived a variety of professional identities within the firm:

Doc3: I'm here as a humanist. I have wondered if I'm a black sheep here...if this is just an engineering firm...but my perception has changed in that there are people from a lot of different educational backgrounds.

Some informants perceived the engineer identity to be dominant in the company:

Sw1: Almost everybody here are engineers... [the engineer identity] is very analytic; we investigate things based on facts.

Still, informants also perceived professional identity diversity *within* the engineering service area:

MidM9: "[During leadership training] I grasped how many different [services] we have [...] there were mechanical engineers, software engineers, electrical engineers, layout specialists, user interface specialists, cloud engineers [...] it opened up my eyes regarding how many we are."

Informants also reflected upon the length of experience working in the firm as an influencer of organizational identity diversity:

MidM4: "I am committed to this organization [through years of experience] [...] I believe I perceive [the company] more positively than others."

MidM3: "People who have been here a shorter time may have a different perception. Those that have been around longer have a perception of the history; that also has an influence."

Furthermore, informants suggested that the kind of experience in the company may have an impact:

En3: I believe my perception may differ in that I've had the opportunity to develop quickly...if one is content versus maybe a little discontent, then one might perceive [the company] differently.

Additionally, prior experiences from before employment in the company may have an impact on how the organizational identity is perceived:

En7: My perception of my previous place of employment was more negative [...] it might be [different] for someone directly employed here [without prior experience]

Another emergent aspect of organizational identity diversity relates to the wide geographical and therefore cultural spread of units. Of the 13 units included in the study ($n = 9$ in country A and $n = 4$ in country B), many seemed to have distinct local identities that differed from the perceived identity of the company as a whole. Differences could be observed between countries; country A's organization was larger and was perceived as sometimes bureaucratic, while the scale of business in country B was smaller in relation and was perceived as more flexible.

Furthermore, based on informants' own reflections about locational identity diversity, national or local culture emerged as an influencer:

MidM9: I've noticed that there may be some international difference [between how the company is perceived in countries A, B, C and D]

MidM7: People are different if you are in [location A4] compared to [location A5] [...] local cultures have an impact, but maybe in a good way; not everybody is the same.

Furthermore, informants stressed that the service areas represented at different units varied, and hence the professional identities present in different units varied as well:

Doc2: Here at [location A4] we have one of the largest offices, and specialists from many different areas [...] we understand [the company] through that [multidisciplinarity], compared to if we were a [more specialized] or smaller unit.

Some local units' identities were also influenced by the local clients working with them:

Doc1: [At location A4] [...] they do all kinds of things [decided in-house]. Here, things we do are according to the requirements of [the client].

A history of mergers, acquisitions or outsourcing agreements also emerged as an influencing factor of locational identity diversity, as well as individual management styles:

MidM7: This company has historically consisted of multiple separate units...some established following an outsourcing agreement...some have been part of [the company] from the start and grown organically [...] different office cultures emerge and [they have their] own ways of working...different managers gather different people and vice versa.

Furthermore, local units' age and spatial or visual attributes were influencers of identity diversity:

MidM5: [The offices] differ based on when they were established, and visually, it's not like walking into McDonald's restaurants.

Finally, the study shows how informants reflect upon potential identity diversity vs coherence in the corporate identity. Professional identity diversity was seen as advantageous for the company:

Doc5: I perceive [the multiplicity of competences and identities] as a strength, something that can truly be used for benefit, especially when the team spirit is good [...] you can share knowledge.

Additionally, locational identity diversity was seen as favorable as locations could support each other, increasing potential value for stakeholders:

MidM1: One of our biggest strengths...is that we have local presence [in multiple locations]

En24: If we don't have specialist knowledge about something...we will find it in the neighboring city.

The identified dimensions of organizational identity diversity are summarized in [Table 3](#).

4.2.2 Coherence and diversity across stakeholders' perceptions of corporate identity.

In terms of perceived corporate identity (i.e. the firm's strategic choices and expression thereof) ([Abratt and Kleyn, 2012](#)), coherent aspects emerged across stakeholder groups at different hierarchical levels and in different service areas. Customer orientation as a corporate value appeared as a shared perception, as did solution orientation as a value proposition for customers. All stakeholder groups emphasized the company's broad range of services and locations, which enabled employee mobility and flexibility.

Diversity in the corporate identity, that is interpretation incoherence ([Morsing and Kristensen, 2002](#)), also occurred through multiple interpretations of the corporate identity. First, in terms of hierarchical differences, middle managers tended to emphasize corporate values and strategy, as well as communication and visual identity, as differentiating elements more often than specialists. Informants also reported such perceived hierarchical identity diversity:

MidM8: "I look at what we do from the managerial level, and the company manifests differently than it does for the engineers...the most concrete example [I can give] is probably our strategy...if you ask engineers about how important they perceive the strategy to be, they probably...don't see its benefits."

En6: Managers need to...internalize [the company's goals] [...] my perception probably differs [from managers'].

En5: I have worked in a niche area...brand visibility or its development is unfamiliar territory for me

Second, in terms of informants from different service areas, engineers tended to view engineering as the core business reflected in the corporate identity, while informants representing smaller services interpreted the corporate identity through their own expertise:

MidM1, engineering: I think our branding campaign is great...since it expresses that we are an engineering firm

MidM9, software services: "Personally, [what's important in our brand promise] is that we help the customer succeed [...] through our own expertise [...] [the brand promise] means something different for each of us"

Notably, informants representing minority identities saw it as a potential benefit to emphasize professional identity diversity in the corporate identity, including corporate brand communications:

MidM2, background in business management: "It is [currently] very engineer-focused [...] it would do good to take in some other influences to make [the brand] a bit fresher, more modern. I think we are a little too engineering-focused in our tone."

Sw1: "I think we could communicate [through brand communications] that, hey, we sell these other things too [...] beyond the traditional, that we are an engineering company and work with steel."

In conclusion, the case explores the multiplicity of perceptions among internal stakeholders, showing the variety of what the organization is seen to be like, what is seen as intended by top management going into the future and how these identities influence each other.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to branding research based on insights from 59 qualitative interviews exploring how internal stakeholders perceive organizational identity and corporate identity, and diversity within them, in a B2B service company.

5.1 Contributions to research

This study contributes to research *vis-à-vis* two themes: the dynamics of organizational identity, corporate identity and construed external images; and implications of organizational and corporate identity diversity for branding research.

5.1.1 Dynamics of organizational identity, corporate identity and construed external images.

First, this study adds to the literature that aims to bridge corporate identity literature in marketing research and organizational identity literature in organizational management research ([De Roeck et al., 2013](#); [Kärreman and Rylander, 2008](#)). Previous studies focus on how managerial understandings of organizational identity inform corporate branding initiatives ([De Roeck et al., 2013](#)) and how employees' sensemaking of organizational identity is guided by

Table 3 Identified dimensions of diversity in organizational identities

Dimension of identity diversity	Sub-dimensions
Related to stakeholders' position in company or experiences	Hierarchical position Nature of work and employment Represented service area Professional identity Experience within company or other companies
Related to locations, their characteristics, history or culture	National/local culture Services offered at unit/ professional identities Unit's network and customers Unit's age and history, e.g. mergers and acquisitions Management styles Visual/spatial characteristics of offices

branding (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). Additionally, De Roeck *et al.* (2013) recognize the role of construed external images in influencing managements' strategic vision and employees' organizational identity perceptions. The present study extends these views by demonstrating how perceived organizational identity, perceived corporate identity and construed external images overlap, differ and influence each other (see Figure 3). Analyzing the dynamics between these phenomena may reveal what elements of the identity are central for internal stakeholders, and where gaps – positive or negative ones – may occur. Gaps between organizational and corporate identity may reveal identity diversity between hierarchical levels. Construed identity–image gaps shed light on what employees think should be emphasized in communication toward customers.

Furthermore, this study extends literature discussing how blurred organizational boundaries influence identity perceptions (Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Sources of such blurring include the intertwinement of internal and external communication (Cheney and Christensen, 2001) and the involvement of stakeholders in the focal firm's everyday activities, and vice versa (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). The present study adds the boundary-spanning consultancy work of the focal company's employees in client organizations as a source of blurring. The blurring was amplified as employees even identified with client organizations.

Through the B2B service context, this study also contributes to B2B branding research, where B2B brands remain underrepresented (Keränen *et al.*, 2012), yet findings from consumer studies are not always transferable (Mudambi *et al.*, 1997). Specifically, this study identifies challenges related to employee (dis)identification, emerging through work across organizational boundaries (e.g. in consulting firms). This emphasizes the relevance of internal branding in B2B firms, which may increase employee identification and ultimately employee retention (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018).

5.1.2 Implications of organizational and corporate identity diversity for branding research.

This study problematizes the principles of coherence and consistency for corporate identity (Johansen and Andersen,

2012; Balmer, 2017; Abratt and Mingione, 2017), as previous studies have identified flaws in these principles both from internal (Sheikh and Lim, 2011; Spry *et al.*, 2018) and external stakeholder perspectives (Sillince and Brown, 2009; Coleman *et al.*, 2011; Charters, 2009). This study explores internal stakeholders' perceived identity diversity in-depth.

Consistent with organizational literature on multiple identities, organizational identity may diverge along hierarchical lines (Corley, 2004), among professional identities (Glynn, 2000), because of locational variety (Foreman and Parent, 2008), and because of mergers and acquisitions (de Bernardis and Giustiniano, 2015). This study additionally identifies the role of individual stakeholders' personal experiences and positions in the company. Understandings of locational diversity were also enriched by showing how locational characteristics or histories influence identity diversity. Notably, this study is among a few to identify multiple dimensions of organizational identity diversity in a single commercial organization. The study also identifies corporate identity diversity, or interpretation incoherence (Morsing and Kristensen, 2002). Consistent with Sheikh and Lim (2011) and Spry *et al.* (2018), communicating a uniform corporate identity with general corporate values may be seen as inauthentic by employees.

As a contribution to corporate branding literature, this study suggests that it may be beneficial for companies to portray a multifaceted corporate identity representing organizational identity diversity. Multiple professional identities may provide synergy for the company through co-operation and mutual learning. Additionally, locational identity diversity may bring value to customers and employees alike.

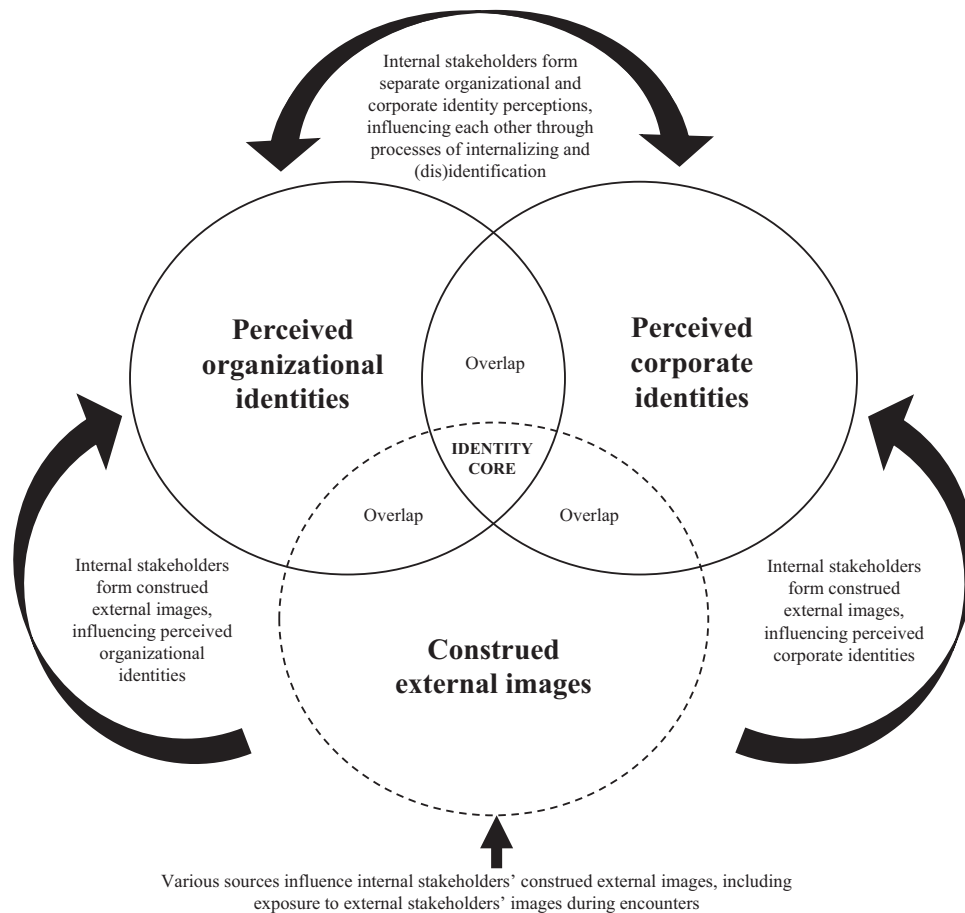
Contributing to internal branding literature, this study adds that approaches encouraging employees to “live the brand” (Ind, 2001; Foster *et al.*, 2010; Baumgarth, 2010) could focus not only on employees representing a uniform set of corporate values, but on embracing multiple professional or locational identities – and synergies between them – in stakeholder encounters.

Finally, this study contributes to co-creation research in branding, where previous studies have identified unharmonious outcomes (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Kristal *et al.*, 2018; Schmeltz and Kjeldsen, 2020) to the point of co-destruction (Lund *et al.*, 2019). Co-creation initiatives could benefit from being sensitive to organizational and stakeholder identities, and adjusting the goals of co-creation accordingly. Instead of seeking a unified corporate brand identity (Essamri *et al.*, 2019) or shared brand meaning (Berthon *et al.*, 2009), a goal could be to recognize multiple identities in pursuit of synergy and representation.

5.2 Implications for management

This study offers three main implications for branding practice.

First, this study explores the dynamics between corporate identities, organizational identities and construed external images. Understanding influencing mechanisms between these phenomena is relevant for managers, who could analyze when and how employees internalize the communicated corporate identity, and when not, for instance because of disidentification. Additionally, companies may benefit from mapping multiple perceived organizational identities and recognizing them in corporate identity development – including

Figure 3 The dynamics between perceived organizational identities, corporate identities and construed external images

mission, vision, corporate values and strategic formulation and implementation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012) – to nurture employee identification and motivate employees to participate in branding. The identified dimensions of diversity in this study may guide the process. As identities are in constant flux, this would be a continuous effort. Mapping external stakeholder influences to identities is important too, as customer-facing employees may hold valuable information about identity–image gaps.

Second, co-creation processes (i.e. internal workshops) could be used as a tool for identity mapping while being careful not to push employees toward consensus, which could discourage them from sharing diverse views (Schmeltz and Kjeldsen, 2020). Management could then assess what aspects of identity diversity are beneficial to emphasize in different contexts. Different professional and locational identities would be conveyed toward different stakeholders as a form of segmentation, which could attract new customers and potential employees who identify with less prominent identities in the firm. However, some types of identity diversity may be less relevant, such as diversity between hierarchical positions as seen in this study. Companies may thus strive to support the co-existence of multiple identities if conflicts arise.

Third, identity diversity could be recognized in internal branding processes. Through brand leadership and brand communication (Saleem and Iglesias, 2020), employees could

be encouraged to represent their professional and locational identities in stakeholder encounters. Furthermore, internal brand communities (Saleem and Iglesias, 2020) could nurture an identity diversity-based approach to internal branding.

5.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

This study is limited by its empirical context, its focus on a single case company and the interview method, as informants' statements are not naturally occurring, but prompted.

In line with the qualitative approach, data quality was evaluated based on the framework by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as extended by Wallendorf and Belk (1989). Data credibility was pursued by selecting a wide variety of informants, including members at different hierarchical levels and of varying experience. Multiple locations were included to increase transferability and dependability. The empirical context was revisited three years after the initial study to increase the stability of the conclusions. As this study focuses on a B2B service context, future studies could explore organizational and corporate identity diversity across different contexts. The potential transferability to other contexts should be evaluated case by case. For integrity purposes, this study pursued a reflexive approach to interviews (Alvesson, 2003). The data categorization method used to identify perceived

organizational and corporate identities is limited to the researcher's interpretation of informants' statements.

While this study takes interest in problematizing coherence across stakeholders and consistency over time in corporate identity, coherence is in focus while temporality plays a minor role. Future studies could explore dimensions of organizational identity consistency vs change.

Furthermore, future studies could explore construed identity–image gaps by comparing construed vs actual stakeholder images, and construed vs actual identity–image gaps.

Practical applications of a diversity-based approach to corporate identity could be explored, such as different ways to map multiple organizational identities and involve employees in branding processes. Research could also explore how co-creation processes could support the recognition of multiple identities in branding initiatives. While this study discussed corporate and internal branding, future studies could explore implications for other branding areas.

Finally, as this study focuses on a single corporate brand, the role of brand architectures in corporate identity management could be explored in B2B and consumer settings alike.

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Further reading

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Appendix 1

Table A1 Interview data

Informant category	Index	Locations (n)	Engineering services (n)	Documentation services (n)	Software services (n)	Duration (min)	Experience in company (years)	Interviews in 2015 (n)	Interviews in 2019 (n)	Face-to-face (n)	Phone (n)
Senior managers n = 3	TopM 1–3	2	3	3	3	32–60 min (x = 46)	5–11 years (x = 8)	3	0	2	1
Middle managers n = 15	MidM 1–15	11	11	5	3	29–66 min (x = 47)	2–25 years (x = 9)	8	7	13	2
Team leaders n = 10	TLen 1–5 TLdoc 1–3 TLsw 1–2	7	5	3	2	20–68 min (x = 39)	0–16 years (x = 8)	5	5	9	1
Specialists n = 31	En 1–24 Doc 1–5 Sw 1–2	13	25	6	2	17–80 min (x = 36)	0–27 years (x = 5)	21	11	29	2
59 interviews in total		13 locations in 2 countries	75% engineering services	29% documentation services	17% software-related services	39 h in total; x = 40 min per interview	0–27 years; x = 7.5 years	36 interviews in 2015	23 interviews in 2019	90% face-to-face	10% over phone

Appendix 2

Table A2 Interviewed informants' perceptions of the company

Category	Sub-category	Example quotes from data
Organizational identity	Defining organizational characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size (e.g. large/small) and scope (e.g. international): "I think this firm is big and international" (Doc1) • Geographical spread (i.e. multiple locations): "We are present in multiple different locations" (En16) • Nationality of ownership: "Speaking with customers, you often have to draw the parallel that we are like [competitor] but with ownership in [country A]" (En12) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchical structure (e.g. low hierarchy): "[We do not have] many levels of hierarchy" (MidM2) • Consultancy business: "This is a consultancy company in the technical industry" (En12)
	Organizational history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of growth: "This company has historically consisted of multiple separate units, some of which have been established following an outsourcing agreement. . .some have been part of [the company] from the start and grown organically" (MidM7) "the company has grown through M&As" (En4)
	Organizational behavior and principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ways of working (e.g. collaborative and structured): "We work and think together. . .people are not alone here, and they get support from management and colleagues alike" (Doc5) "Here things are more structured and planned [than elsewhere]" (En17)
	Personnel's characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist competences: "We have specialist competences" (En13) • Leadership styles (e.g. attentive managers): "We have good managers. . .you feel trust for the manager. . . they listen and show they listen" (En1) • Multidisciplinarity: "We [have] a broad scope and multidisciplinarity. . .many different areas of engineering" (Doc2) • Broad client base: "We have a broad client base. . .projects and competences are broad" (MidM9)
Corporate identity	Organizational network	
	Differentiating and favorable organizational characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size (e.g. large with scale benefits or small and flexible): "It is a fairly large company, and I believe we are trustworthy compared to smaller companies with only a few employees, we have resources" (En23) "Our strength is that we are smaller, we can be more flexible, we have shorter decision-making routes so we can be a bit bolder than competitors can" (MidM5)
	Market position and nature of core business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market leader: "The company wants to be a leader, wants to grow, and wants to be competitive" (En2) • Multiple service foci: "The clear advantage of this company is. . .that it has multiple competences so it can offer a broad range of services" (Doc5)
	Corporate values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer orientation as a value: "What I find important [in the brand] is customer orientation, and adding value to the customers. . .that we seek to solve customers' problems" (MidM9)
Construed external image	Value propositions for various stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value proposition for customers (e.g. packaged solutions and local presence): "We seek to differentiate by offering complete solutions to customers" (MidM9) "One of our biggest strengths. . .is that we have local presence [in multiple locations]" (MidM1) • Value proposition for employees (e.g. caring about employees and wide range of projects): "[This company] cares about its personnel, they want to keep together like a family" (En1) "This company offers to pick the raisins out of the bun, from our wide range of projects" (MidM1)
	Communication and visual identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fun and modern promotional materials: "I think [the promotional materials] look fun and young, they create a young modern look for the firm" (En24)
	Organizational characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size (e.g. large or small): "We are seen as a big player on the market" (En10) • Nationality: "We are still perceived falsely as a company from [country X] . . .because of our presence [in social media] . . .managed in [that country]." (MidM8)
	Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness among general public and customers: "Among people in this industry the company is known, but a normal person on the streets might not know about it" (En24) • Awareness among potential employees: "[In this area, the company] is unknown. . .last week I represented the company at [a fair] . . .still, four out of ten come and ask me, 'what is [company name]?''" (En16) • Awareness among investors: "We have done a lot of work among small investors. . .we have reached a completely different level of awareness compared to a few years ago" (TopM2)

(continued)

Table A2

Category	Sub-category	Example quotes from data
	Emotional associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive: "Customers probably have a positive image of us" (TLEn2) • Neutral: "The company's image is neutral in that it doesn't involve any stereotypical associations, either in a good or bad sense" (En24)
	Personnel's characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustworthiness: "This company is a trustworthy and wanted partner" (Doc3) • Strong competences: "[This company] is surely known for its competences" (En23)
	Market position and nature of core business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engineering as core focus: "Some customers still unfortunately perceive us only as a large mechanical engineering firm" (MidM9)
	Relationship characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful, flexible co-operation: "We are seen as flexible and co-operative partner" (TLdoc1)
	Service characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and ways of working: "We are appreciated through our way of working and quality" (MidM8) • Problem-solving: "We are a wanted partner since we solve our customers' problems" (Doc3) • Broad range of offerings: "We are perceived positively in that we have multiple services to offer" (MidM8)

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