



# Remodelling the corporate visual identity construct

Corporate  
visual  
identity

## A reference to the sensory and auditory dimension

53

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Despite a well-established corporate identity construct there is still ambiguity and disorientation regarding the corporate visual identity (CVI) construct. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the inconsistent use of terminologies such as “symbolism” and “corporate design” as well as pointing towards an insufficient conceptualisation of the corporate identity and visual identity construct *vis-à-vis* other sensory dimensions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A review of existing categorisations and conceptualisations of the corporate identity and visual identity construct is provided.

**Findings** – The paper presents a remodelled (CVI) construct that takes a holistic sensory perspective and proposes the corporate sensory identity construct as a more adequate and flexible reflection of current business reality.

**Practical implications** – The paper offers fundamental guidance for managers regarding the integrated and holistic utilisation of a set of sensory communication activities as part of their corporate identity management.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the further understanding of the complexity of corporate identity management by addressing additional sensory dimensions apart from visual identity management. Moreover, by stressing the particular relevance of music and sound, this paper stimulates the integration of the auditory dimension as additional facet of a communication tool kit.

**Keywords** Corporate identity, Visual perception, Sensory perception, Hearing

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

### Introduction

The corporate identity construct has been widely discussed in academic literature and a numerous definitions have been put forward by various authors (Abratt, 1989; Alessandri, 2001; Birkigt and Stadler, 1986; Margulies, 1977; Markwick and Fill, 1997; Suvatjis and De Chernatony, 2004; van Rekom, 1997; van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Being aware of the differences of the various definitions, for the purpose of this paper corporate identity is defined as “the set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it” (author 1). With regard to the components that have been defined to constitute corporate identity, there is wide agreement that besides factors such as corporate communication, corporate behaviour, corporate culture, corporate structure, industry identity and corporate



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strategy (author 1; Suvatjis and De Chernatony, 2005), the visual component is one of the most dominant factors. In detail, corporate visual identity (CVI) has been defined as “the most tangible facet of corporate identity” (Simões *et al.*, 2005, p. 158), including five elements (company name, symbol and/or logotype, typography, colour and slogan) (author 1) that “reflect the company culture and values and that create physical recognition for the organisation” (Simões *et al.*, 2005, p. 158). Nevertheless, despite a rather clear categorisation of the key components of the visual dimension of corporate identity, there is still a lack of consistent terminology with regard to visual identity. Various terms are still used inconsistently and interchangeably. This is a significant obstacle for a clear and coherent communication between academics. In addition, this insufficient terminological consensus makes it difficult for practitioners to gain from and apply outcome from academic research.

In addition, based on in-depth examination of the various components of corporate identity, the question emerged whether “name” and “slogan” as key elements of CVI should be categorised as part of the generic group of visual elements. The two elements “name” and “slogan” are not exclusively visual but can also be seen as audible cues.

Furthermore, academics have been giving little consideration, so far, to newly emerged elements that project the identity of an organisation. Developments such as the usage of scent or the creation of acoustic environments, including audio logos, have not been taken into account regarding the conceptualisation of the corporate identity construct.

The next section will examine these three dilemmas of the identity construct (i.e. terminology, nature of CVI elements and newly emerged elements) in more detail. In addition, further elaboration towards a reconfigured corporate identity construct is provided, leading to the presentation of the corporate sensory identity construct. Next, corporate auditory identity is proposed as a relevant focal construct for subsequent research and a definition of auditory identity is presented. Finally, this paper concludes by presenting implications and conclusions.

### **Dilemmas of the CVI construct**

#### *Issue 1: variety and inconsistency of terminology*

Based on a broad literature review, a lack of consistency regarding the terminology referring to the visual aspects of corporate identity emerges. That is, terms have been used inconsistently and interchangeably among academics. Balmer (1995, p. 26) for example uses the term “visual identification” when referring to the visual elements of corporate identity: “Visual identification: This refers to the way in which an organisation uses logos, type styles, nomenclature, architecture and interior design, etc. in order to communicate its corporate philosophy and personality”. Other terminology as used by van den Bosch *et al.* (2005, p. 18) is “corporate visual identity”. “A corporate visual identity (CVI) consists of a name, a symbol and/or logo, typography, colour, a slogan and – very often – additional graphical elements”.

The term “corporate identity” used by Dowling (1994, p. 8), represents a further expression when referring to the visual cues of the identity of an organisation: “Corporate identity: the symbols (such as logos, colour scheme) an organisation uses to identify itself to people”. Here, the author apparently equates the identity of an organisation with the organisation’s visual appearance. This perspective reflects a very traditional trait of the corporate identity concept, which is rooted in the idea of a strong,

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visually dominated identity, and does not consider components such as behaviour or communication.

Terminology such as “corporate design” is used for instance by Gabrielsen *et al.* (2000), van den Bosch *et al.* (2005) and author 1. Author 1 stated that: “Corporate design is a term used to describe the vast number of visual cues that are associated with a specific organisation”. Moreover, author 1 use the terms “corporate design” and “visual identity” equally. They link corporate design to visual elements associated with an organisation and later define the organisation’s name, slogan, logotype/symbol, colour and typography as the five components of CVI. In their model of revised categorisation of corporate identity dimensions author 1 use the term “corporate design” and equate it with “visual identity” by putting this term in brackets. The ambiguous use of these two terms leads to inconsistent use of terminology, through insufficient differentiation between the two terms.

Finally, the term “symbolism” needs to be considered. Balmer (1998, p. 978) uses this term when pointing out that “[...] the concept is often used in connection with organisational symbolism (i.e. corporate logos and visual identification systems) where a large degree of consistency can be achieved”. For van Riel and Balmer (1997, p. 341), the corporate identity mix consists of symbolism, communications and behaviour. They point out that:

[...] the understanding of corporate identity has gradually broadened and is now taken to indicate the way in which an organisation’s identity is revealed through behaviour, communications, as well as through symbolism to internal and external audiences.

To sum up, a cornucopia of terms such as “visual identification”, “corporate visual identity”, “corporate identity”, “corporate design” and “symbolism” all find their use when referring to the visual cues of an organisation. This variety and inconsistency of terms provides an obvious obstacle for a clear and coherent communication between academics. It can generate confusion and may lead to unnecessary, ineffective and time-consuming debates. In addition, the diversity and incoherent use of terminologies makes it even more difficult for practitioners to understand and consequently to apply theoretical models and conclusions derived from academic research.

### *Issue 2: true nature of CVI elements*

Besides the variety and inconsistent use of terminology, it is also questionable whether all components commonly incorporated in the construct and covered by the term “corporate visual identity” or comparable terms referring to the visual cues of any organisation can be characterised as exclusively “visual”. The following elements have been defined by various authors as the components of CVI, namely name, logo, colour, typeface and slogan (author 1; Dowling, 1994; van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006).

By examining the two particular components “name” and “slogan”, it can be seen that they are not strictly visual. That is, “name” and “slogan” can equally and sometimes exclusively come in an audible shape. In radio advertising for instance, “names” and “slogans” initially arrive as an acoustic rather than a visual signal. Even, if the listener immediately connects both name and slogan to the visual version of the corporate name, in the form of a designed logo and tagline, name and slogan at the initial stage arrive as an acoustic rather than a visual signal. Hence, the terminological as well as the conceptual

classification expressed by the use of the term corporate “visual” identity has a restrictive and limited quality.

Not only terminology but also the entire prevailing concept of visibility exclusively implies the visual option, thus excluding all other options. Consequently, the term “visual identity” does not correctly reflect the possibilities of the different shapes in which the elements “name” and “slogan” can appear in and therefore needs to be reconsidered. Alternatively, if keeping the term “visual identity”, the two elements “name” and “slogan” need to be reassigned into another categorisation with a corresponding terminology, depending on their way of appearance.

The authors strongly believe that theoretical constructs need to be as precise and unambiguous as possible. The contradictions resulting from misleading categorisation can lead to confusion among academics and practitioners alike. What is more, the restrictive nature of the terminology inhibits future adaptation of the construct and therefore calls for modification.

Besides the variety of terminology and the question whether name and slogan can be considered compatible with a construct currently dominated by visual associations, the next section also provides further aspects that support the need for remodelling the CVI construct and consequently the need for a reconfigured corporate identity construct.

### *Issue 3: recently and increasingly considered components of corporate identity*

The increasing consideration of non-visual cues that project corporate identity gives further support for the need to adjust the current corporate identity construct. Non-visual cues based on senses such as hearing, smelling, touching and tasting have been widely ignored until now and academic literature addressing these issues only provides some limited examples.

For instance, Schmitt *et al.* (1995) provide the framework of the “four Ps of aesthetics management” including properties, products, presentations and publications, as key components of corporate image management. By including background music into the presentations category, Schmitt *et al.* (1995) directly link background music to the management of corporate image. Subsequently, Schmitt and Simonson (1997) see sound, mainly in form of background sounds and music, as an element that can create identity. In addition, based on their concept of marketing aesthetics, Schmitt and Simonson (1997) refer to the significance of touch and taste. With regard to touch, they argue that the materials of products as well as print communications, office exteriors and interiors and company uniforms are important sources of identity. Moreover, Balmer (2001, p. 267) for example argues that there is a visual dominance that “is clouding over the importance of the other senses of sound, scent, taste and touch”.

The next sections provide further rationale for including such sensory elements when conceptualising a revised corporate identity construct.

*Architecture.* Numerous design agencies deal with corporate architecture, interior design and shop design. For example, the London-based design agency “Jump Studios” extensively redesigned Nike’s London headquarters including offices and showrooms in 2003 (Architectural Record, 2007). So far, architecture and interior design in connection with identity have been considered only by a limited number of academics (Alessandri, 2001; Alessandri and Alessandri, 2004; Baker and Balmer, 1997; Balmer, 1995; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997). Nevertheless, architecture predominantly has been conceptualised

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as a visual component and therefore has been included into the category of visual identity.

However, this paper supports the view that architectural elements do not come on a simple two-dimensional level such as, for example, print advertising or brochures, but that any type of architectural environment provides a three-dimensional way of experiencing the organisation. Users or customers have the opportunity to walk through architectural objects such as shops, office buildings or showrooms. As a direct result one can, for instance, experience the structure of surfaces, sense the dimensions of a room or smell the particular scent of interior elements such as carpets or wooden furniture. Considering the multi-dimensionality of architecture, including the different ways of interaction with the tangible environment, it is obvious that additional stimuli, besides the visual ones, have to be taken into account.

*Scent.* Scent and fragrance are elements that have not been considered when conceptualising corporate identity and are not included in the established corporate identity models (author 1; Suvatjits and De Chernatony, 2005). Olfactory cues such as scent and fragrance play an increasing role, for example, in shops and on trade fairs, to create a more enjoyable environment and to positively influence customers and visitors (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg *et al.*, 1996). A large quantity of literature dealing with scent covers the area of consumer behaviour (Spangenberg *et al.*, 1996) or investigates the relations such as the link between visual and olfactory stimuli (Blackwell, 1995). However, there only has been limited literature regarding the role of scent as part of corporate identity or as one additional determinant of the corporate identity construct. The usage of scent and fragrance is still in an experimental stage in comparison to the predominant visual dimension. However, one could imagine that scent will be increasingly recognised in the future as an explicit component of the total set of elements that can shape a company's identity. Regardless of the frequency and intensity, it is clear, however, that the olfactory dimension of scent cannot be categorised by the terminology "visual identity" and has not been conceptualised as part of the corporate identity construct so far.

*Sound.* A further component that projects a company's identity, which can already be considered as a standard ingredient, is corporate sound. The Macmillan English Dictionary (2010) uses the analogous term "sonic branding" and defines it as "[...] the use of a special sound to identify and advertise products associated with a particular manufacturer". Various companies already try to communicate their brands in an acoustic way. One of the most evident examples is the well-known sound logo of the Intel Corporation. Intel as an ingredient brand has managed to get its sound logo played every time a commercial of an affiliated company is broadcasted.

Following the demand for corporate sounds or sonic branding, design agencies now provide the design of sound logos and some agencies have started to establish new expert units. MetaDesign, a leading German design agency for instance, has worked on the corporate sound for Siemens, Lufthansa and Allianz (MetaDesign, 2010). Regarding the terminology, MetaDesign uses the term "corporate design" on the one hand and the term "corporate sound" on the other hand. By not including the sound dimension into the traditional visual dimension the agency makes a clear distinction. Overall, the entire audible range including audio logos, corporate sounds or sonic branding already plays a significant role in the totality of elements that forms corporate identity on a design level.

To sum up, there are various reasons for the need of a reconfigured corporate identity construct. First, there is still diverse and inconsistent terminology referring to the visual cues projecting corporate identity. Second, the use of the categorisation “visual identity” for the two components “slogan” and “name”, which can indeed be visual as well as non-visual is questionable and can be misleading. Both issues are critical as they can cause confusion and ambiguity. Third, in practice design agencies and marketing departments already deal with additional elements such as scent and sound besides the dominant visual components that project identity, stressing the important role of these elements. As Balmer (2001, p. 267) pointed out: “[...] upon reflection it becomes apparent that the non-visual senses can be just as powerful in communicating the identity of a collective group”. To illustrate the power of these sensory elements Balmer (2001, p. 267) provides the example of the Catholic Church, where he argues that:

[...] the church’s distinctiveness is communicated through, among others, symbolism (vestments, church furnishings, architecture, posture of clergy and laity), sound (Latin, Gregorian chant and polyphony), smell (incense), touch (holy water) and taste (taking the sacrament).

Elements such as scent and sound cannot and have not been included into the visual sub-component (i.e. visual identity) of the existing corporate identity construct. Also, these components have not been considered as part of any other additional categorisation forming part of the corporate identity construct so far. Consequently, various sensory stimuli related to additional non-visual elements have to be considered, leading to the need for a reconfigured more holistic corporate identity construct. The next chapters provide a preliminary reconfigured construct based on the human senses theory.

### **Conceptualisation of the sensory identity construct**

Based on the variety of stimuli linked to the new elements involved (i.e. sound, scent, etc.), the human senses theory provides a flexible and open system with space for future development. According to Pines (2007), there are five traditional senses namely seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Senses such as pain, thermal sensitivity and position sense which are sometimes claimed to be additional senses, can be incorporated into the sense of touching (Pines, 2007). Consequently, in order to reconfigure the corporate identity construct based on the principle of human senses, the five commonly agreed senses are used in the following:

- (1) Visual perception might be the most apparent means of perception and is directly linked to all elements and applications covered by the categorisation of “corporate visual identity”. This domain comprises all the established visual elements of CVI such as logo, typeface and colour as well as the application of these elements (e.g. stationery, advertising, leaflets).
- (2) Auditory perception covers all signals that can be heard. This area includes basic elements such as corporate sound, audio logos and corporate music. This dimension can be extended by including further audible applications produced by sound designers and related to a company or its products such as the particular sound of car engines, music on telephone cues, music in a retail shop, etc.
- (3) Olfactory perception describes all impressions obtained by smelling. This way of perception can be linked to the various usages of scent and fragrance,

whether applied on an interior architectural level (e.g. retail store, trade fairs, etc.) or on a product level such as a designed scent of a new car.

- (4) Gustatory perception stands for the sensory recognition by tasting. Despite the fact that there are not many real applications so far, gustatory perception supporting gustatory identity could be an important way of distinction especially in the food industry (e.g. McDonalds vs Burger King).
- (5) *Tactile perception* covers recognition that is gained through touching. This way of perception includes stimuli, for example based on surfaces of products or architecture (e.g. surfaces of car interior, surfaces of furniture) or packaging design (e.g. stamping, Braille, etc.).

Based on these five human senses, Table I summarises:

- (1) type of perception;
- (2) human organ;
- (3) activity;
- (4) general examples; and
- (5) examples related to corporate identity.

#### *Definition and terminology of corporate sensory identity*

In order to reflect the underlying human senses theory with its various types of stimuli and ways of perception, the term “corporate sensory identity” is suggested as an appropriate expression for the construct. The term “corporate sensory identity” explicitly reveals the core principle of the five senses and, more important, provides vital space for future conceptual inclusion of emerging elements as well as applications. To some extent corporate sensory identity is originated in the construct of CVI, but overcomes the limited quality of this construct by expanding the dimensions to all possible channels of stimuli and human perception. Thus, corporate sensory identity comprises the overall components and applications of the five sensory dimensions and is located within the domain of corporate identity. Corporate sensory identity, therefore, is defined as “the totality of sensory cues by which an audience can recognise the company and distinguish it from others”.

Figure 1 shows the conceptualisation of the corporate sensory identity construct based on its five sensory dimensions.

#### *Implications of conceptualisation of sensory identity*

The implications of the conceptualisation of the sensory identity construct are multifaceted. First, the new corporate sensory identity construct provides an excellent

Type of perception	Organ	Activity	Examples	CI-related examples
Visual perception	Eye	See	Light, dark, coloured	Logo, colour, typeface
Auditory perception	Ear	Hear	Loud, quiet	Corporate sound, audio logo
Olfactory perception	Nose	Smell	Fruity, rotten	Shop-fragrance
Gustatory perception	Tongue	Taste	Sweet, sour, bitter	Taste of food
Tactile perception	Skin	Touch	Rough, smooth	Product surface

**Table I.**  
Types of perception and  
corporate identity-related  
examples

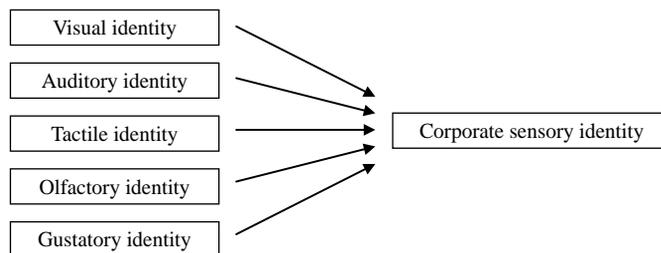
opportunity to overcome the misleading diversity and inconsistency of existing terminology, thus reducing ambiguity and confusion and increasing coherent communication among academics and practitioners alike. Second, elements such as “name” and “slogan”, which can occur in different ways, can be categorised in a more precise manner or, respectively, can be part of more than one-dimension, depending on their form of usage. Hence, conceptual errors of restrictive categorisation are eliminated and the reason for misinterpretation and confusion is reduced. Third, emerging components such as sound and scent can be conceptually included in a consistent and logical way, using the corporate sensory identity construct. Once again, the clear and unambiguous taxonomy of the construct reduces the likelihood of future confusing classifications of new elements and applications. Finally, the corporate sensory identity construct provides an excellent opportunity to synchronise the understanding on the topic of academics and practitioners alike, consequently attenuating confusion and ambiguity.

**Auditory identity – avenue for further investigation**

The proposed sensory identity construct is based on the human senses theory and consists of five-dimensions based on the five human senses. Consequently, the construct has to be considered as multi-dimensional. Looking at the five-dimensions, it becomes apparent that each of them can be considered as a full construct depending on the focus. In particular, CVI as one-dimension of corporate sensory identity already has been conceptualised and operationalised as an autonomous construct in the past (Based on author 1; Gabrielsen *et al.*, 2000). Accordingly, the other dimensions can be classified as sovereign constructs.

Subsequent to the process of conceptualisation of a construct, the next step in research generally is to operationalise it, i.e. to measure the construct. According to Gerbing and Anderson (1988, p. 186), the reason for measurement is to offer “empirical estimate of each theoretical construct of interest”. Technically, measuring a construct refers to “assigning numbers to objects to represent quantities of attributes” (Nunnally, 1967, p. 2). In order to assign such numbers, i.e. to measure the construct, valid and reliable measurement scales have to be developed (Churchill, 1979).

Regarding the process of operationalisation, it is important to consider that except for visual identity most of the other sensory means have only been applied on an experimental level by organisations so far. In particular, tactile identity, olfactory identity and gustatory identity are still in an experimental stage or applications are limited to a few companies and restricted to niche markets or niche products. For example, projecting identity by using gustatory stimuli could theoretically be an interesting idea for food manufacturers



**Figure 1.**  
The proposed corporate sensory identity construct

or the gastronomy sector. However, there are no widely established applications of gustatory identity hitherto in real life, compared to the numerous applications of CVI. In the same way, tactile cues as well as olfactory stimuli have not exceeded an experimental stage as a means to project the identity of an organisation so far.

However, for the construct of “corporate auditory identity” this is not the case. Auditory identity has already been applied by numerous companies and various well-known examples can be found such as the sound logos of Intel, Telekom or Windows XP (Lindstrom, 2005). Moreover, there are also agencies exclusively working with sound such as Cutting Edge Commercial from London (Cutting Edge Commercial, (2010)). Additionally, from a theoretical point of view the use of sound does not seem to be restricted by the type of company or industry. In general, almost every organisation can utilise sound in some way (e.g. web site, radio advertising, in-store audio, telephone voice, etc.). Based on the fact that corporate auditory identity can be widely found in real life already (Lindstrom, 2005), it can be considered as the second most developed dimension within the sensory identity construct, after CVI. A practical consequence of this prevalence is that it makes the development and application of measurement scales reasonable and feasible due to realistic accessibility of sample subjects. Based on these considerations, auditory identity is proposed in this paper as the most emerging focal construct for future research with regard to the overall research subject of sensory identity.

#### *Sound and music in the literature*

Academic literature in the area of auditory identity is sparse, as it has not been in the focus so far. However, sound and music in particular have been proved by various academics to have comprehensive impact in many areas (Bruner, 1990; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Milliman, 1982, 1986; North and Hargreaves, 1999; North *et al.*, 2004) such as purchasing behaviour (Herrington and Capella, 1996) and consumer behaviour (North *et al.*, 1999). For instance, Herrington and Capella (1996) provided evidence that shoppers’ preference for background music is affecting shopping behaviour. In detail, the study showed that shopping time as well as expenditures increased when favoured instead of disliked background music was played. McDonald *et al.* (2001, p. 346), for example, taking a more corporate perspective, mention the role of music as a way to make service brands more tangible, when they state that: “BA ensures that the perceptions of their consumers are affected in a consistent manner by taking a holistic approach to presenting their corporate brand: they use the same music from their television advertising while customers are put on hold on the phone”. In addition, anecdotal literature provides numerous examples of the auditory dimension on a corporate level (Jackson, 2003; Lindstrom, 2005; Treasure, 2007), thus demonstrating the significance of sound in the business environment.

#### *Corporate auditory identity – a definition*

From a conceptual perspective, the auditory identity construct is considered as a dimension of corporate sensory identity within the domain of corporate identity. Auditory identity can be considered as analogous to the construct of CVI, including all sensory dimensions based on auditory stimuli. That is, the corporate auditory identity construct as proposed in this paper comprises all components and applications based on auditory perception. Consequently, based on the proposed similarities of the two sensory dimensions of visual and auditory identity, and borrowing from visual identity

literature, corporate auditory identity is defined as “an assembly of auditory cues by which an audience can recognise the company and distinguish it from others” (Based on author 1).

### Conclusion

Over the last decades the marketing discipline has become more and more multifaceted due to the emergence of new concepts (e.g. the integrated communication paradigm, customer experience marketing or place marketing). As a result, managers not only have to evaluate but also to manage more and more dimensions of marketing. For that reason, offering precise definitions and categorisations of existing and new dimensions is crucial in order to manage such complexity on an academic as well as on a practitioner level. This paper addresses this issue by providing a definition of the sensory identity construct that represents a clear and explicit framework uniting all cues based on human sensory perception, which can be used for an organisation to project its identity.

Furthermore, the sensory identity framework and the provided definitions of sensory and auditory identity offer some guidance for practitioners such as marketing and brand managers when reviewing their current composition of cues of self-presentation and if they consider to add further elements such as sound.

Moreover, the sensory identity construct offers a chance to attenuate existing problems regarding misleading categorisation of elements of visual identity and to overcome the use of diverse and ambiguous terminology regarding the means for projecting identity.

In addition, this paper not only provides a general stimulation for future research in this area, but by offering a definition of sensory identity and auditory identity it facilitates subsequent steps of research such as the operationalisation (i.e. development of measurement scales) of the two constructs.

Overall, the investigation of sensory identity and auditory identity in particular will not only be relevant for practitioners who intend to influence their corporate image by sound or other sensory elements, but will also advance existing academic knowledge in the area of corporate identity and corporate image formation.

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