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Corporate identity anchors: a managerial cognition perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Previous studies on corporate identity (CI) suggest that different beholders view CI from different angles. For example, senior managers' angle can be different from those of employees or customers. The present study aims to explore the dimensions of managerial perceptions of CI.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers within three organisations in the British financial service sector.

Findings – Seven principal categories of corporate identity anchors were identified: ownership, vision and mission, values and beliefs, business, personality attributes, external image, and strategic performance.

Practical implications – The study suggests that CI anchors can be a starting point for CI program or corporate image management. Attention should be accorded to the diversity of the internal and managerial perceptions of CI and how such diversity can be translated into strong and persuasive messages to other stakeholders.

Originality/value – The findings contribute to the literature by identifying potential corporate attributes that are relevant to CI. These findings expand the traditional view of the CI mix and represent a significant progress toward the identification and mapping of the construct of CI.

Keywords Corporate marketing, Corporate identity, Strategic marketing, Corporate identity anchors, Corporate image, United Kingdom

Introduction

Corporate identity (CI) has become a major research topic in marketing and strategic management (see, e.g. Balmer, 2001, 2008; Balmer et al., 2009; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Brown et al., 2006; He, 2008; He and Balmer, 2007a; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). Recently, a stakeholder's approach to CI has proposed to substantiate CI in a more cognitive way (see, e.g. Brown et al., 2006; He and Balmer, 2007a). In other words, CI matters to strategic marketing due to its representation in the minds of stakeholders/beholders. Defining CI as a construct that represents the viewpoint of "who are we as an organisation?" raises an interesting question regarding the identities perceived by the beholders. Although CI beholders include both internal and external stakeholders, CI held by internal stakeholders, that consist of organisational members at different hierarchical levels or in different groups (especially senior management), has immediate implications for corporate strategy (Bouchikhi and Kimberly, 2003; He and Balmer, 2007b; He, 2008).

CI multiplicity has been well acknowledged in the literature (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Corley, 2004). One view of CI multiplicity is that different organisational members could develop their own viewpoints of CI that could be different from what senior managers intend to project. Following this line of thinking, it is also possible
that even among senior managers different versions of CI could co-exist. But still little is known on whether a pattern exists on managerial perception of CI.

The present paper presents an empirical study on how senior managers perceive CI. The key research question is: what types of organisational elements are more likely to be credited as CI by senior managers? Answering this question can have strong implications for exploring the sources and nature of CI multiplicity and CI management. The study finds that senior managers tended to make reference to the following seven organisational aspects:

1. ownership;
2. vision and mission;
3. values and beliefs;
4. business;
5. personality attributes;
6. external image; and
7. strategic performance.

It also finds that different senior managers anchor their perception of CI to different corporate elements; and even each senior manager could refer to multiple referents/categories as CI, thus have multiple anchors of CI him/herself. The study labels the individual senior managers’ answer to identity questions as “individual CI anchors”. At the organisational level, different organisations tend to have different collective orientations, thus it is labelled as “collective CI anchors”. For example, for one company, vision and mission tend to be the main reference point for most senior managers, while for another company strategic performance might be the major reference point for most senior managers. Finally, hierarchal comparative analysis was undertaken and found that managers at different levels of an organization tend to have different salient CI anchors. The following session discusses the relevance of CI to strategic marketing, presents a literature review of CI, and introduces the concept of CI anchors.

Conceptual background

CI and its strategic relevance

Corporate identity (CI) has become a significant strategic marketing concept, due to the escalating disclosure of its promising performance implications (e.g. favourable corporate reputation, customer loyalty, employee commitment, etc.) of effective CI management. Meanwhile, CI is characterised by its vague conceptual distinction from related concepts, e.g. image, reputation, etc. (Balmer, 2001; Cornelissen and Harris, 2001; Cornelissen et al., 2007; He and Balmer, 2007a). To clarify these similar concepts and accord a specific meaning to CI, Brown et al. (2006, p. 102) proposed CI to represent “who are we as an organisation?”, intended image to represent “what does the organisation want others to think about the organisation?”, construed image to refer to “what does the organisation believe others think of the organisation?”, and reputation to represent “what do stakeholders actually think of the organisation?”. This proposal is in alignment with development trend of identity studies across different disciplines, such as marketing, organisational behaviour and strategic management. For example,
in CI studies, as noted by He and Balmer (2007a) the conceptualization of CI has moved from visual identity and symbolic representation of corporate culture (e.g. van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Melewar et al., 2001) to distinctive and central elements of a company (e.g. Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Balmer, 2001; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Bhattacharyya and Sen, 2003). Therefore, CI is defined as the viewpoint of “who are we as an organisation?”

The relevance of CI for marketing strategy has been well noticed in the literature. Olins (1989) advocated that corporate identity addressed four questions: “who you are, what you do, how you do it and where you want to go” (p: 3). Although Olins views CI from an outsider/consulting perspective (“who you are”), it does not conflict with recent shift to insider perspective (“who we are”). The overarching implication remains that identity concerns not only the distinctive attributes of an organisation, but also the strategy of an organisation (“how you do it and where you want to go”). He signalled the importance of the study relating to the relationship between identity and marketing strategy. van Riel (1995) argued that the orchestration of corporate communications should be guided by the basic philosophy of “directing the company’s communications policies from within the corporate strategy-corporate identity-corporate image triangle.” (van Riel, 1995, p. 19) His advocacy of the strategy-identity-image triangle suggests a close relationship between CI and marketing strategy. Corporate identity/communication management, as argued by Balmer and Gray (2000), could also lead to competitive advantage of an organisation, since an effective corporate identity/communication programme can produce consistent, integrated, and positive corporate images. Consistent corporate identity and communication over time can mutually reinforcing to one another, and thus help the company build up a strategic corporate reputation. Melewar et al. (2005) found that many practitioners and academics believe the benefits of a strong and positive corporate identity could boost employee motivation, increase the ability of the organisation to recruit and retain high quality employees, provide a strong base for organisational culture in the event of mergers and acquisitions, increase transparency of business practices, bring competitive advantage, help to develop better relationships with other businesses and aid investment into the company. And recently, He and Balmer (2007b) observed strong interface between CI and strategy and discovered a phenomenon called CI/strategy dissonance. They found managers responded to CI/strategy dissonance by means of attributing (attributed strategic choice to external and thereby uncontrollable factors), self-legitimating (legitimating strategic choice by reference to CI), and adjusting their perceptions of the organisation’s identity and strategy.

CI: a cognitive perspective
So far, it has been established that CI:

- has strong relevance for strategic marketing;
- has stronger implications for marketing strategies through its perception by senior managers; and
- perception has the property of multiplicity.

Although it is suggested that an inductive methodological approach should be purely driven by the empirical data, others suggest that its effective and efficient implementation requires some fundamental theoretical foundation. We find the latter
approach particularly relevant to our study, since CI study is characterised by
co-existence of multiple divergent schools of thought. To answer the central question of
this study, that is the pattern of managerial perception of CI, a cognitive perspective is
of particular relevance and informing to address this question. Cognitive approach of
CI stresses that identity resides in the minds of the beholders/stakeholders. One
immediate implication of a cognitive approach of CI is the notion of CI multiplicity (or
multiple corporate identities) (Corley, 2004). Multiple CIs exist for many reasons. First,
some organizations intrinsically have multiple or hybrid identities, such as mutual
organizations (He and Balmer, 2007b). Second, CI can take different forms among
different groups of stakeholders (e.g. Balmer and Greyser, 2002). Cognitive approach to
CI manifests in Balmer’s ACID test (see, e.g. Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Balmer and
Greyser, 2002) where conceived CI is one major dimension of the multiple identities of
an organization. And finally, different people within the same stakeholder group can
develop different cognitions of CI. For example, organizational members differ in their
cognition of CI for the following reasons:

- they are having different interactions with the organization due to their work
duties, psychical space, managerial position, tenure, historical knowledge, and so
  on;
- people might compare the focal organisation with different organisations at
different time/occasions when they are either undertaking introspection on or
  asked about the questions of “who and what we are?”;
- people might refer to different organisational facets when they are either
  undertaking introspection on or asked about the questions of “who and what we
  are?”;
- different people might reach different conclusions or answers to the question of
  “who and what we are?” or the same people might have different answers at
different point of time.

Multiplicity of CI perception can be supported by the literature. For example, Corley
(2004) found that identity differentiation can be caused by the beholders’
(organisational members) formal positions held within the organisation. Thus the
disparity in terms of beholders’ role, responsibility, and exposure to organisational
information can lead to different interpretations and sense making of what the
organisation stands for (the identity of the organisation). Corley (2004) observed that
people at higher levels of organisational hierarchy tended to see identity in light of the
organisation’s strategy, whereas that people at lower levels of organisational hierarchy
tended to anchor identity on organisational culture.

By taking the assumption of multiple CI cognitions, it suggests that, in theory, the
answers to CI can be different by different people at different times. However, it is still
believed that certain organisational elements might be more likely to be attributed as
identity. Therefore, the questions are what corporate elements are more likely to be
credited as CI, especially by senior managers. Senior and middle managers are the
focus for the present study because senior managers are social agents with power and
knowledge to bring changes to organisation (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Giddens,
1984), and extant research on CI has repeatedly emphasized the significant role of
senior and middle managers in CI management process. Therefore it is reasonable to
argue that managers’ knowledge or perception of CI would have strong effect on CI management.

Method
Qualitative and inductive approach (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was used for the present study. Semi-structured interviews were the main sources of data for the present study, because asking open-ended questions is very appropriate to elicit opinion and attitude data from informants (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Sampling of this study covers two levels: organisational and individual. At the organisational level, the three organisations were selected based on the logic of purposeful sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The sampling of organisations was facilitated by extensive secondary data survey on the industry of British Building Societies and eight pilot interviews with industry experts. Size, geographic location, documented corporate strategy (e.g. diversification), etc. were used as major criteria in selecting the three organisations for case studies.

There were two major purposes for the pilot interviews: first, to understand the industry background and facilitate the choice of organisations for in-depth case studies; second, to test the validity of questions to be asked in the semi-structure interviews. Questions asked in the interviews are open-ended, such as, “what adjective words you’d like to use to describe your organisation?”; “What answers would you provide to the questions of what you are and who you are?”. Informants’ personal and career background information was also sought during the interviews.

There is a general guideline for the ideal number of cases: two to eight, however the actual number needed depends on the level of depth of analysis of each case, feasibility, and theoretical saturation (where any new data do not generate additional new insights). Since we were able to get excellent access to all senior managers of all societies, it is not necessary or practical to examine many cases. In addition, the case studies were conducted in an analytical and logical sequence with the former case analyses recommends and directs the selection of the next one. We stopped further case analyses after the third case, when it was found that little new insights could be gained, and the marginal value of investing more efforts in the field became really low.

“Conserve” was the first organisation selected as an opening case. Conserve was a relatively larger building societies based in the middle highly populated area of Britain. According to pilot interviews, Conserve has an external image of being traditional, focused, and major building society in the UK. Being traditional as a building society serves our study well, since one of the most salient issues of the recent British Building Societies movement is demutulisation (i.e. mutual organizations being converted into or taken over by PLCs) and modernization of mutual image (Hammond and Thwaites, 2000). Conserve’s loud public commitment to the traditional values of mutuality renders it an excellent case study of CI. At the individual level, sampling of interviewees within Conserve starts with marketing director and managers, with most direct and immediate contacts were made at the beginning of the field study. Eventually 24 interviews were conducted with almost all of the senior managers of Conserve and some middle managers who were from the major functional departments, e.g. finance, HR, and Marketing.

“Northern” was selected for the second case study. It was selected because of its location and size representing small building societies, and the recommendation by
some industry experts during the pilot interviews. Since Conserve is one of the largest societies in the UK, it serves our study’s objective well to select a relative smaller society. Choosing contrasting organizations enhance theory generation through the method of case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989). Size is also an important factor on how a company’s identity is perceived and how strategy and strategic choice. Twelve interviews were undertaken with most of the senior managers within Northern. “Midland” was the final organisation selected. It was selected because it represents a unique organisation within the British building societies sector. Its uniqueness lies in its widely public image of being a wider financial services organisation rather than a building society and its unique strategy of diversification. Midland services the purpose of this study in multiple ways. Its unique public image contrasts itself with many traditional building societies, especially with our chosen one: Conserve. A good selection of cases for case studies requires a balance of typical and untypical cases (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Conserve serves the typical criterion well; whilst Midland services the untypical criterion. A total of 12 senior managers were interviewed. Most of the interviews of the three case studies were guided by similar open-ended questions, as indicated earlier. Meanwhile questions were modified to fit specific organisations and informants to elicit more relevant and trustworthy data. This is because asking the same questions to different informants from different organizations would have required preparing general questions that could be understood by and relevant to all informants. But due to the significant differences in terms of managerial position, organizational tenure and intellectual and professional background, general questions could only lead to ambiguity of the questions and ambivalent answers. For example, since marketing managers/directors are more knowledgeable of the concept of corporate identity, the word of corporate identity appears often during the conversation (including the interview questions). For other managers in the areas of such as finance and operation, individualised wording was employed for specific managers when necessarily. Different organizations tend to have different collective view of CI; and even within the same company, different managers can have different individual opinions. Thus the specific contents of CI were incorporated into question asking during the interview. In addition, useful insights can be elicited from informants’ personal experience and involvement with the strategic management and corporate identity and brand management, therefore individualised questions need to be either pre-prepared or improvised during the interviews. Prompt questions were also asked during the interviews for more open discussion on certain significant emergent issues. For all the case studies, documentation data were sought before, during and after each visit to the organisations. Interviews and documentation data collection formed a spiral process of mutual guidance of next stage data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Data analysis followed the process of first-order and second-order coding process, and eventually themes were inductively generated via such process (Eisenhardt, 1989). First-order coding refers to the coding of the basic text data contained in interview transcripts, researchers’ research journals and memos, and documentation data. First, the transcripts and documents were read several times for a general feel of the data, whilst memos were taken during the reading process. Then data were coded by reading the data very carefully sentence by sentence, and first-order codes were generated as such. During the first-order coding, particular attention was given to subjective words,
the proxies for identity (the terms the informants used to represent identity, e.g. value, mission), and social referents (to whom the informants compare) used by the informants to answer the questions.

Question-asking, writing theoretical memos and constant comparison were the three major analytical supports used during the coding process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). They are useful in comparing the incidences (mainly sentences) to find their similarities and differences during the first-order coding. During the second-order coding, they are used to compare the first-order codes to search for similarities and differences among their incidences and properties. As a result, second-order codes were generated as the main categories that capture the senior managers’ answers to identity questions. Each case followed the same coding process, which then followed by a cross-case comparison. The cross-case comparison was done mainly by reference to the second-order categories. Such cross-case comparison generated two emergent themes:

(1) managerial identity orientation; and
(2) collective identity orientation.

Analysis and findings
This session presents the analysis and findings regarding identity cognitions case by case first, and then compares the findings from different cases. In addition, hierarchical comparison is also conducted. The key research question is what types of organisational elements are more likely to be credited as CI by senior managers. The key finding is that different organizational managers and different organizations tend to anchor their CI cognitions at different organizational aspects. In total, seven key CI anchors are identified:

(1) ownership;
(2) vision and mission;
(3) values and beliefs;
(4) business;
(5) symbolic attributes;
(6) external image;
(7) strategic performance.

The analyses are organised and will be presented in the following order: individual organizational analysis, cross-case comparison and hierarchical comparison.

Individual organizational analysis
Conserve. Table I presents some exemplar first-order codes and all the identity anchors generated from the case of Conserve.

Conserve’s managerial responses to the self-reflective questions can be categorized into seven OI anchors: ownership, vision and mission, values and beliefs, business, symbolic attributes, external image, strategic performance.

(1) Ownership. Building societies, unlike plc or banks, are constitutionally owned by their members (customers). Such ownership structure is unique in the financial service sectors. The concept of mutuality is highly embedded in the organisational culture. Being a mutual building society is seen as the most
important element of the identity of Conserve by its senior managers. All of the senior managers refer to mutuality and building society as its identity. The following codes demonstrate how important ownership is for Conserve’s identity:

- seen as demonstrating the principles of mutuality;
- staff is committed to mutuality; ID as mutual status;
- mutuality is given;

(2) Besides mutuality/ownership, when the senior managers reflected on identity, they often interpreted mutuality in a more meaningful way, for example, “running for the members”, and “fairness is fundamental to mutuality”.

(3) **Vision and mission.** Identity anchors consist of not only current aspects of identity, but also future-oriented aspects, such as vision and mission. Vision and mission were ubiquitously referred to by Conserve’s managers as its identity. All senior managers refer vision and mission to the organisation’s identity.

(4) **Values and beliefs.** Values and beliefs are also important sources/anchors to Conserve’s identity. The values and beliefs, according to its senior managers, are fairness, fun, passion, people working together, family culture, etc. By comparing values and beliefs with ownership/mutuality, there is a clear overlap between them. It is believed by Conserve’s senior managers that the ownership of mutuality is underpinned by its distinct values, e.g. fairness, members first.

(5) **Business.** Business scope is also an important anchor for identity. For example, some of Conserve’s senior managers refer to the business of building societies

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second-order categories</th>
<th>First-order codes (exemplar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Seen as demonstrating the principles of mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff is committed to mutuality; ID as mutual status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mutuality is given;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision and mission</td>
<td>The vision is “…….”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and beliefs</td>
<td>Fairness is in every decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In the end, everything is about fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun as value because we believe people would have more passion and loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Mortgage lending and personal savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attributes</td>
<td>We are quite honest, with good attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fair to staff and to customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are quite conservative and traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We are independent minded, analytical, and disciplined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External image</td>
<td>Seen as a solid mutual building society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen as a well managed organisation with little surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen by peer group as leader in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic performance</td>
<td>Quick in reacting to market shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One of the top 100 best companies to work for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost-efficient with low management ratio</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** “The vision is public information, thus disclosure of it herein would violate the promise of anonymity.”

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as mortgage lending and personal savings, as well as the original purpose of building societies as promoting UK residents’ house ownership. It is common for CI to be defined by business. For many organisation, business, as the most tangible and observable organisational aspect, can be immediately be referred to when managers are reflecting on “who/what we are?” This is also because the business of a company might be the most often spoken and thought language in the organisational life.

(6) **Personality attributes.** Most extant literature suggests that CI refers to the adjective description of an organisation by organisational members. This is also the case for Conserve. Attributes are found as a salient anchor of Conserve’s managerial perception of CI. The personality attributes described by Conserve’s managers include honest, fair, clever, analytic, swift, conservative, traditional, independent minded, disciplined, and cultural. Anchoring CI on personality attributes means that an organisation can be personalized by its members by ascribing personal traits into it.

(7) **External image.** Personality attributes refers to organisational members’ personal view of CI, whereas external image (or construed external image, see Dutton *et al.*, 1994) refers to organisational internal members’ belief of how the focal organisation is seen by external stakeholders. Interestingly, when being asked for their own perception of the identity of Conserve, many informants frequently refer to how they believe others perceive the society to form their perception of CI. In other words, external image can be an anchor of CI. And the sources of external image are mainly rating agencies, press coverage, opinion survey, informal conversation, and road-shows, etc.

(8) **Strategic performance.** Some managers of Conserve resort to the strategic action/behaviour and performance that they can recall, when they are reflecting on “what/who we are as an organisation?” In other words, they try to retrospectively make sense of what they’ve done to enact cognition of who they are. For example, in evaluating their strategic performance, they claim themselves as “quick in reacting to market shift”; “one of the top 100 best companies to work for”; and “cost-efficient with low management ratio”. Anchoring identity on strategic performance tends to be looking backward in comparison with anchoring identity on vision which looks more forward. However, it does not necessarily mean that anchoring identity on strategic performance will be less conducive to change, because selectively recalling positive and desirable past performance can help forge a more desirable corporate identity which again can reinforce self-esteem of the organisational members.

**Northern and Midland.** Tables II and III present some selected evidence (first-order coding), which supports the second-order categories of the construct of identity anchor from Northern and Midland organisations respectively. The categories of identity anchor are always the same between Northern and Midland. They are:

- ownership;
- vision and mission;
- values and beliefs;
However, “business” is not identified within Northern and Midland cases, in contrast to Conserve. On the other hand, the exact meanings of each category of identity anchor differ across organisations. For example, in terms of “strategic performance”, Conserve claims swiftness to change, whereas Northern claims innovation and diversification. In terms of “symbolic attributes”, although some generic traits (e.g. fairness and friendliness) are common for all three organisations, differences exist. For example, Midland claims being entrepreneurial whereas Conserve claims being conservative and traditional.

Cross-cases comparison. Case by case analysis suggests that different managers within the same organisation have different approaches to answer the identity questions. In general they can refer to seven different organisational aspects: ownership (incl. its interpretation), vision/mission, norms and values, business, symbolic attributes, external image and strategic performance, and evaluate them to define their personal view of

• symbolic attributes;
• external image; and
• strategic performance.

Table II.
Identity anchors and first order codes from Northern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second-order categories</th>
<th>First-order codes (exemplar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ownership               | Id as independent mutual building society  
                          | We are a building society is important  
                          | Our assumption is remaining a building society  
                          | If identity change, it means conversion  
                          | Push us as a mutual organisation  |
| Vision and mission      | “...aim to be a friendly, caring organisation that values customer loyalty, gives value for money and contributes to the current and future well-being of the community...”  |
| Values and beliefs      | “We believe we can best serve the interests of all three (stakeholders) by remaining a strong, dynamic and independent mutual building society”  |
| Symbolic attributes     | Fair  
                          | More proactive  
                          | Caring  
                          | Friendly  
                          | Innovative  
                          | Honest  
                          | Solid  
                          | Independent  
                          | Mutual  
                          | Trustworthy  |
| External image          | From staff as good, solid employer  
                          | From customer as espousing traditional value  
                          | From customer as innovative  
                          | Seen as a very solid, financially strong organisation  
                          | From customer as highly efficient, trustworthy, innovative, caring, friendly  |
| Strategic performance   | More innovative than traditional building societies due to our IT strategy  
                          | More diversified than traditional building societies  |
“who/what we are?”. It is labelled as “individual managerial identity orientation”, which defines the orientations of individual managers’ selection of organisational aspects for evaluation towards defining organisational identity.

Three issues emerge during the cross-cases comparison. First, not all organisations have the same categories of answers to identity questions. The first case’s senior managers refer to “business” when they were answering the identity questions. It suggests that the business it is in can define its identity. While this is not found in case two and case three. However, this finding is not surprising if we take a closer look at the strategic actions of the three organisations. Conserve is an organisation that adopts a very traditional approach to select the business and market. Being a building society lies at the heart of the organisation’s identity, plus building society is interpreted by Conserve’s senior managers as focusing on core business of mortgage lending and personal savings. In this sense, business, as is tightly coupled with its corporate form (mutuality), had been ascribed as identity-defining. On the other hand, Northern and Midland have different interpretation of building societies. For them building societies are no more than an ownership structure with little implications for business and strategy. In other words, business and ownership in these two organisations are loosely coupled. Moreover given the fact that both organisations are (intended to be)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second-order categories</th>
<th>First-order codes (exemplar)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Mutuality matters in identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Id as a mutual organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Innovative mutual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Modern mutual providing more than traditional services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision and mission</td>
<td>“...to be the best at what we do... part of this is our role as a modern mutual” (The mission statement is very vague, and does not specify the businesses of the society, which suggests that Midland is ready to go into any businesses which it believes are suitable and profitable. This statement matches the diversification strategy and opportunistic identity of the organisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value and beliefs</td>
<td>People-driven value to staff and customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attributes</td>
<td>Group id as innovative, progressive and entrepreneurial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Forward-thinking and entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendly and having fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safe and secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Innovative, Entrepreneurial, Opportunistic, Modern mutual, Safe and secure, Unusual and unique, Alien, Friendly, and Etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External image</td>
<td>Midland’s identity was exceptionally influenced by external image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews and observation suggest that most senior managers are not confident of “who we are” and “what we are”, but when answering the question of identity, often referred to how they believe outsiders see themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen as a financial services org instead of a building society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen as aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen as dynamic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seen as alien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic performance</td>
<td>Unique in terms of diversification strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunistic in terms of strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unusual and unique with subsidiaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Identity anchors and first order codes from Midland
diversified to a larger extent, business of these two organisations tend to be less stable or enduring, thus not powerful enough to define their identities.

The second issue arose by cross-cases comparison is that different organisation places different importance to the categories of identity orientation. For example, ownership, business, vision/mission, and values and norms are more often referred by senior managers of Conserve; while strategic performance is more emphasized by Northern and Midland. Personality attribute and external image are similarly important for all organisations under study. Vision is found to be non-existent for Midland.

Third, not only different organisations have different orientations toward organisational aspects in their roles of defining CI, but also the contents for different categories (i.e. personality attributes, external image) are quite different for different organisations. Such differences can be clearly seen in the tables presented earlier.

The implication of the three issues identified above is that organisations, though their senior managers might have different individual identity orientations, have distinguishable collective orientations towards defining organisational identity. This is called “collective identity orientation”. The seven categories of “individual managerial identity orientation” can also be seen as the properties of “collective identity orientation” in that there can be a collectively shared orientation to select certain single or combined organisational aspects for CI defining exercise.

Hierarchical comparison. Further analysis is conducted to assess the similarities and differences in CI anchoring between senior and middle managers. This analysis is relevant only to Conserve building society, since the other two’s informants were purely senior managers. To our surprise, in general, we find less than expected striking differences between senior and middle managers in how they anchoring the CI of Conserve. This can be explained by the investment in corporate branding by Converse not long before the time when the case study is conducted. Ownership (in terms of mutuality), values and beliefs, symbolic attributes and business are roughly equally referred to by both senior and middle managers. Such finding suggests that these two dimensions are of wider representation within Conserve building society and probably more salient CI anchors across different levels of an organization. In terms of differences, vision and mission and strategic performance are more often referred to by senior managers, while external image is more often mentioned by middle managers. In other words, it seems to suggest that senior managers are more concerned with the overall performance and future direction of an organization, whist middle managers cares more the external prestige of their work organization. Such finding seems to comply with past finding that construed external image/prestige is a major motivation for employees, and the senior managers are agents of organisational development and change.

The above finding suggests that CI anchor has an important property: “salience”. It clearly demonstrates that although the seven CI anchors are generally the major dimensions of how managers anchor their CI belief, different CI anchors have different levels of salience for different managers (also at different levels).

Discussion and conclusion
The present study is significant because it advances knowledge on:

- the construction of CI by the senior managers;
- the sources of CI multiplicity; and
- a general pattern of managerial cognitive representation of CI.
A great deal of effort has been invested in searching and identifying the right corporate elements/attributes that represent the identity of the focal company. Early attempts focused on the concept of CI mix and developed multiple versions of it (van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; and Balmer, 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). However, little attention has been accorded to another important question of CI: what corporate elements are more or less likely to be ascribed by senior managers as CI? Answering this question has strong implications for CI research and CI management. It suggests a strong claim for managerial intervention of CI, so that the perception of CI by other stakeholders can be more consistent. Moreover, given the fact that even among managers, CI might not be as consistent as expected, it is important to identify the specific meanings of CI in the minds of specific managers, otherwise, CI as a management language might be misleading and confusing.

Theoretical implications
This study contributes to CI literature by categorizing the senior managers’ possible cognitive schema of CI into a manageable number of categories. Such categorization suggests that first, different managers in the same company might ascribe CI to different anchors. For example, some tend to anchor their perception of CI based on vision and mission, some tend to anchor on strategic performance. Second, different organisations might have a collective tendency to anchor their identities on different organisational elements as identified by the present study. In terms of CI multiplicity, the present study implies that the existence of multiple identity anchors can be a source for multiple CI. For theoretical development, the categorization of CI into several anchors opens up new opportunities for expanding our understanding of CI multiplicity and the relationship between CI and various constructs, e.g. ownership, vision and mission, value, business, strategy, symbolism, and organisational image.

The metaphor of CI anchor is developed from the empirical data of this study to signify the multiplicity of CI and to distinguish it from CI perception. CI perception is well established in the literature of CI. Although CI has its root in graphic design, cognitive approach to CI is gaining increasing attention (He and Balmer, 2007a). Earlier conceptualisation of CI at the substance level (what an organization is?) serves its purpose well in promoting the strategic role of CI management (e.g. Balmer, 2001; Bick et al., 2003; Marwick and Fill, 1997). More recently, the concept of CI perception or cognition has been used to refer to “how stakeholders perceive the identity of a company”. CI perception goes beyond the substance level of CI by directly tackling the cognitive psychological process of stakeholders. Its significance lies on its readiness in predicting stakeholders’ attitudes and behaviour towards the focal companies. On the other hand, based on such cognitive approach of CI, this study develops the concept of CI anchor that has the following properties to distinguish it from CI perception. First CI anchor has a clear structure of categorisation of the most salient organizational elements that are most likely to be anchored as CI of a focal company by its internal members, especially managers. Second, CI anchor refers to the general categories of CI cognitions, and has no reference to the evaluative properties, such as favourability, strength, distinctiveness, etc. Third, CI perception seems to suggest a nature of static representation of reality, whilst CI anchor stresses the patterns of CI multiplicity. Based on the above differences, CI anchor is a preferred term to describe the major finding of this research, and encourages the search for the patterns of CI.
With regard to the specific CI anchors, it is novel to find that ownership can be an anchor for identity. Such a finding might be idiosyncratic for mutual organisations, due to the fact that ownership structure becomes a very salient issue recently for mutual organisations when they are facing public scepticism and managing legitimacy of the status of mutuality. Ownership might not be an important identity element when most organisations in questions are within the same ownership structure, which does not enable the organisations to be distinguished from their peers. However, ownership could be a salient identity anchor when organisations with competing ownership structures are compared or mutually referred to. Vision and mission and value and beliefs as CI anchors are not new to the literature (Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002). Most extant literature tends to associate vision, mission, value and beliefs with CI. However, the present study suggests that although they could be credited as identity, there is no one to one correspondence. First, vision and mission might not be existent for an organisation; and value and beliefs might not be explicitly represented by the organisational members (incl. senior managers). Second, even when they exist within the organisation, they might not be seen as distinctive or central enough to be credited as identity. Business and strategy are two important identity anchors, as suggested by extant literature (Marwick and Fill, 1997) or by anecdotal evidence. The most observable and often conversed organisational elements for managers probably are the organisation’s business and strategy. What kind of business the organisation is in, to a large extent, defines what kind of organisation it is. Managers make sense of “what/who they are” by referring to what they have done, e.g. strategic action and performance. Thus it is not surprising to find from the present study that business and strategic performance are two important identity anchors.

Personality attributes refers to the process of organisational members’ personalization of the organisation by ascribing abstract and humanised meaning to the organisation. Thus in some cases, organisational members employ individual personality traits to describe what the organisation is. Anchoring identity on symbolic attributes is consistent with one element of a traditional CI mix: symbolism (van Riel and Balmer, 1997). Finally, the finding of external image as an identity anchor is in contrary to conventional thinking. Traditionally, identity and image have been accorded a clear demarcating line, of which on one side is the internal organisational members’ own view, and on the other side is the external view or internal members’ view of external view (construed external image) (Dutton et al., 1994). However, the present study found that some organisational members are not always clear about “who/what they are?”. Under such ambiguity situation, they might resort to external image (how they believe how they are seen by others) in order to find a sense of themselves. This finding is resonant with the feedback loop of corporate image management process (Bick et al., 2003).

If different identity anchors are integrated, especially value and beliefs, external image, strategic performance/business, and vision, it is becoming clearer that identity has potentiality of trespassing both spatial (internal vs. external) and temporal (past vs. future) boundaries. Therefore it implies that setting prescriptive boundaries (either spatial or temporal) to identity is problematic, which in turn suggest that traditional defining features of CI, i.e. specificity, stability and coherence (Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997) are subject to re-consideration.
Managerial implications
The findings of this study raise two salient questions, the answers to which can shed some insights on CI management. The first question is how companies should respond to the fact that multiple CI anchors exist among its senior managers. And the second one is how acknowledgement of multiple CI anchors can enhance CI management and corporate branding. Regarding the first question, we suggest that the existence of multiple identity anchors within the senior management team might be a source of opportunities, rather than purely being threats, for re-examination of a desired identity for the company. For example companies with multiple identities can have the advantage of being able to deal with and adapt to complex organisational environment more effectively than mono identity organisations. It is important for organisations to find out why at the first place there exits such diversity of identity anchors, and how to deal with this diversity. The identity anchors audit can help explore the multiple identities and their different weight in the collective mind of senior management team. Regarding the second one, we recommend strategies should be established to manage such multiple CI anchors, before the organisation can design and communicate a new more shared and desired identity (or identities) to other stakeholders. Without a consensus on identity (identities) within the senior managers, it would be hard to manage identity (identities) in the minds of other beholders. Moreover, since extant research suggests that CI can exert huge influences on strategy, based on the same logic, CI anchors might also have implications for strategy. Therefore when managing multiple organisations, due attention should be channelled to the identification of its potential immediate or long-term effect on future strategic exercises. For example, anchoring CI on “business” might have a lethargic effect on detecting diversification opportunities in the future, meanwhile anchoring CI on “strategic performance” might hamper strategic renewal and innovation.

Future research
This study has some limitations which opens promising avenue for future research. First, the data of the present study came from only one sector, which has a unique characteristic of under the process of institutional transition. Although the findings can be transferred to other context with similar features, caution should be taken to generalize the findings. Future research should examine the pattern of identity anchors of senior managers in different sectors and difficult countries. Second, there are limitations for face-to-face interviews to elicit informants’ attitudes and evaluations. This is especially true when they are asked evaluative questions on fundamental and potentially sensitive organisational issues, such as identity. Therefore, it would be useful for further research to adopt a wider range of methods (e.g. cognitive mapping, subject diary) to elicit subjects’ cognition of CI. Third, middle managers and employees were not widely represented in the sample of the present study. Future study should examine the pattern of identity anchors at different levels of organisations. Further research needs to be undertaken to fully explore this newly emergent concept of identity anchor. For example, what are the antecedents and consequences of CI anchors? How does CI interact with other managerial cognitions, e.g. competition and market cognitions? Does such generic cognitive picture have implications for strategy? For example, what is the implication for strategy, if an organisation’s identity is mainly anchored on “external image” versus on “symbolic attributes”, on “vision and mission”
versus on “strategic performance”, on “value and beliefs” versus on “business”.
Another question is “can the construct of identity anchors have any link with
managerial performance and company performance, financial or social?”

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