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## **Corporate identity orientation and disorientation**

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# **Corporate identity orientation and disorientation: A complexity theory perspective**

## **Abstract**

The importance of corporate identity to organizations is increasing, which has led to the conceptualisation of corporate identity orientation. This paper challenges existing thinking by suggesting that if corporate identity orientation exists, so could corporate identity disorientation. Using a complexity theory perspective this conceptual paper explores how orientation/disorientation could emerge, and how the two could be related. The paper concludes that a combination of orientation and disorientation could be beneficial for corporate identity development, and that disorientation need not be wholly negative. This is relevant because the environment organizations find themselves in can increasingly cause identity disorientation, so exploring this further helps address this issue. As such, this opens new directions for researchers to look at corporate identity development, and also for practitioners to embrace elements of disorientation and how it may help unlock new opportunities.

**Keywords:** *Corporate identity, complexity theory, strategic orientation, corporate identity orientation, corporate identity disorientation,*

## **1. Introduction**

The role of identities within organizations is increasing in importance (Powell, 2011; Suvatjis et al., 2012; Brown, 2014). Corporate identity elements (e.g. values, purpose) are playing a bigger role within organizations and technological developments have allowed organizations to express themselves in many new ways (Devereux et al., 2017). It also has potential to drive the distinctiveness of organizations (Balmer 2012), which can in turn be a strong brand builder (Romaniuk 2007; Sharp 2010). The environment that organizations exist in is also rapidly changing and the management of such change has become increasingly important (Waddock et al., 2015). The aforementioned technological developments and an increasingly complex world (Olins, 2014; Nyuur, 2014) raise the potential for confusion regarding the organization's identity (Olins, 2014). Identity within the context of an organization therefore holds significant strategic potential (Balmer 2017). This is due to corporate identity being able to create "favourable corporate reputation, customer loyalty, employee commitment etc" (He 2012, p610). Melewar et al (2005) found that it boosts employee motivation aiding recruitment and staff retention, provides a strong base for organizational culture, increases transparency, brings competitive advantage, develops better relationships and aids investment in the company. Corporate identity has also been shown to aid differentiation (Balmer 1998) and distinctiveness (Balmer 2012). Distinctiveness has been shown to strongly impact on brand building (Romaniuk et al 2007; Sharp 2010). Further, corporate identity has

important relationships with areas such as corporate brand, image and reputation. Due to these numerous benefits and their foundational importance, corporate identity should be an important part of any business agenda. Whilst corporate identity has numerous associated constructs such as corporate personality, brand, image, and reputation, discussing these in depth is beyond the scope of this paper. We do, however, provide a background of how corporate identity is related to these constructs

Analysis of the existing research on corporate identity and strategic orientation reveals two gaps. Firstly, there has been little development of the corporate identity orientation construct. It was introduced by Balmer (2013), but has since received little attention. Second, inspired by the notion of dualism, it could be suggested that if a state of strategic orientation exists, so could a state of strategic disorientation. Expanding on this, we introduce the notion of corporate identity disorientation. and explore its relationship with orientation. These **gaps need to be explored** as they further highlight the strategic potential of corporate identity, as well as indicating an approach by which we may gain a stronger understanding of strategic disorientation and the role it plays within organizations. This opens up a new area of research for academics, but also highlights the potential benefits of being in a state of corporate identity disorientation. **This is needed,** as organizations and brands need to display dynamic capabilities in navigating an increasingly complex world (Brodie et al, 2016), and discussion on how organizations simultaneously maintain continuity and flexibility has been highlighted as an area in need of further research (Wohlgarth and Wenzel, 2016). Recent research also identifies that a lack of identity congruence could be beneficial, and that this also needs further exploration (Flint et al 2018).

The theoretical contributions generated by this paper contribute to our understanding of strategic disorientation, provide an exploration of the relationship between orientation and disorientation, and disentangle corporate identity disorientation and its potential outcomes. This culminates in a conceptual framework along with theoretical and managerial contributions. These contributions are needed as they help organizations navigate and capitalise on potential identity disorientation, a state that can increasingly be heightened by the complex environments they inhabit.

### *1.1. Objective*

This paper's objective is to explore corporate identity orientation and disorientation, with a focus on their relationship. In order to better understand the relationship between them we draw upon complexity theory. We ultimately view orientation/disorientation as states existing on the same continuum. This builds upon Cilliers' (2010) work on complexity and identity, by exploring further the applicability of complexity to identity. In exploring these areas, the paper also bridges the work on corporate identity orientation (Balmer 2013) and corporate identity congruence/incongruence (Flint et al. 2018), contributing in part to Flint et al's (2018) call for better understanding of how corporate identity incongruence could be beneficial.

Complexity theory is the study of complex systems. It has provided a useful perspective to study organizations and their environment (Anderson 1999; Houchin and MacLean 2005; Schneider and Somers 2006; Mason 2007; Chiva et al. 2010), particularly the complex world of marketing (Rand and Rust, 2011; Gummesson, 2006; Woodside et al., 2014; Woodside et al., 2018). Rand and Rust (2011) suggest that, "Marketing phenomena are often complex because they are the emergent result

of many individual agents (e.g., consumers, sellers, distributors) whose motivations and actions combine so that even simple behavioural rules can result in surprising patterns” (p.181). Complexity theory counteracts mechanistic views of organizations and considers the organization as a whole (Chiva et al., 2010). The world is complex and major crises highlight the lack of usefulness of prescriptive models (Stacey, 2011), showing a need to break free from this approach to strategic management and marketing. As such, it has repercussions on approaches to identity (Schneider and Somers, 2006; Cilliers, 2010) and strategy (Cunha and Cunha, 2006; Mason, 2007; Eisenhardt and Piezunka, 2011).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we give overviews of corporate identity and complexity theory, followed by a discussion of their conceptual similarities. We expand upon this by discussing the notion of disorientation in order to refine our conceptualization of strategic disorientation. This is then further explored by looking at corporate identity orientation and disorientation, respectively. The paper concludes with a summary of the main arguments as well as implications and further research areas.

## **2. Corporate identity**

All organizations, of any size, have a corporate identity (Olins, 1989; Balmer and Gray, 2003) and organizations can be any form of institution established to pursue a purpose (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015). This makes the concept of corporate identity one that can be widely applied. Corporate identity lacks any universally accepted definition (Leitch and Motion, 1999; Melewar, 2003; Kitchen et al., 2013). However, it has been variously described as ‘all corporate expressions’ (Cornelissen

and Harris, 2001, p.63), the strategic choices and corporate expression (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012) or what a ‘company’s “essence” is’ (Olins, 1979, p.65).

There have been multiple approaches taken to corporate identity, from the disciplines of management, marketing and corporate marketing. The table below highlights a selection of key literature of these viewpoints as well as their stance on corporate identity. This is inspired by the work of Simoes et al (2005), which explored the differing perspectives. However, we have added recent literature into the discussion.

### **INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

Adopting Balmer’s definition of corporate identity orientation as a starting point (and subsequently placing the paper within the corporate marketing approach) frames corporate identity as ‘the innate characteristics that define and differentiate an organization’ (Balmer 2013, p.725). However, the use of ‘innate’ is problematic in that it implies something is inborn, when in fact corporate identity can develop and evolve over time. This evolution over time is something that Balmer’s work (2012; 2017) suggests and has been discussed by other authors (Burmam et al. 2009). Balmer (2017) also sees constant “adaptation (and change)” (p1475) as an ongoing institutional characteristic. Therefore the innate characteristics alone do not define and differentiate an organization. We therefore feel that ‘characteristics that define and differentiate an organization’ would be a more apt approach. Balmer’s work into multiple identities (Balmer 2012) also shows a very complex view of identity, with multiple identities working in a network together. This lays the groundwork for identity being seen as complex.

#### *2.1 Associated Constructs*

Corporate identity has numerous peripheral constructs, which often cause confusion. To this end, we shall now explore these to help set the boundaries of the corporate identity discussion.

A key part of the discussion of corporate identity is corporate personality. It is thus considered as one of the earliest theories of identity (Cornelissen 2001). Identity is seen as the expression of the personality, i.e. the “set of essential features that gives individuality and differentiates the organisation” (Perez and Del Bosque 2014, p7). It follows that this expression approach is part and parcel of the identity views. Olins reminds us that “it is the identity that projects and reflects the reality of the corporate personality” (Olins 1978, p.212). This view has also been suggested by other authors in the field with corporate identity being based on corporate personality (Balmer 1998) or generated from the corporate personality (Melewar 2003). However, some literature suggests that personality is incorporated into elements of identity. “Corporate personality is a reflection of strategy and culture through mission and core values of an organisation. Therefore, personality dimension is implicitly incorporated in mission, vision and values” (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). This approach is the one adopted in this paper, where personality is an integral part of identity.

Organizational identity is an important part of the literature, especially if taking into account the internal aspects as supplied by the corporate marketing perspective. As corporate identity literature moved away from the external focus to incorporating the internal focus, it naturally made a connection with organizational identity (Cornelissen and Harris 2001). This was also suggested by Balmer (2001) and has been incorporated into recent models of corporate identity (Kitchen et al 2013). We take the view, as shown by Kitchen et al (2013), that organisational identity is part of corporate identity.



The relationship with these constructs is particularly important, and again highlights how corporate identity can provide a good foundation to build upon in other areas. The relationship here is that corporate identity overlaps with and informs the corporate brand (Balmer 1995; 2001; 2012; Abratt and Kleyn 2012; Kitchen et al 2013). There is then a similar relationship between corporate brand, image and reputation (Kitchen et al 2013), highlighting that corporate identity is something that starts within the organization.

Closely linked to this construct is the possibility of corporate identity disorientation. If Balmer's metaphor were extended, corporate identity disorientation would be the centrifugal force to his centripetal force of corporate identity orientation. It would therefore be a state of confusion around the corporate identity. Corporate identity disorientation is therefore an area for consideration and one that we shall develop in the subsequent sections. We believe that a complexity theory perspective could be useful to approach the development of corporate identity orientation and disorientation and their relationship. Corporate identity disorientation also links with the area of corporate identity incongruence put forward by Flint et al. (2018). We view corporate identity disorientation as a state that leads to corporate identity incongruence. The resulting incongruence could in turn create further identity disorientation, until the issue is alleviated.

### **3. Complexity theory**

In this section we introduce complexity theory and highlight the similarities it has with corporate identity. This will help lay the foundations for integrating complexity into the orientation/disorientation discussion.

Whilst a universal definition of complexity theory is lacking (Houchin and MacLean, 2005), at its heart it studies complex systems (Zhao, 2014) and the study of order within these disorderly, non-linear systems (McElroy, 2006). A complex system has been recently defined as a system comprising of “co-evolving multilayer networks” (Turner et al. 2018). Complexity theories are also “concerned with the emergence of order in dynamic non-linear systems operating at the edge of chaos” (Burnes 2005, p. 77). The non-linear behaviour in these dynamic systems is dependent on competition between positive and negative feedback loops, which reinforce and subdue the system’s stability (Blomme & Lintelo, 2012). It has changed how researchers approach the notion of stability and predictability (Boisot and Child, 1999). Some researchers suggest that complexity theory comprises a group of complexity theories that include chaos theory, dissipative structures theory and complex adaptive systems theory (Burnes 2005 citing Stacey et al. 2002). This focus on systems also highlights its initial grounding in systems theory (Smith and Graetz, 2006).

Complexity theory also argues that no single organism exists in isolation (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015) and that that the world is interconnected, with systems constantly in a process of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Boulton, Allen and Bowman 2015). The complex adaptive systems that it studies are acknowledged to consist of many interconnected and adaptive parts (Anderson, 1999; Waddock et al., 2015) and it is the relationships between these parts, or agents, that can create much of the complexity and emergence (Cilliers, 1998; Urry, 2005; Ng, 2013). Technological developments such as social networks and the Internet of Things highlight opportunities to develop complexity theory as the world becomes increasingly connected. This is especially so within the marketing environment,

which consists of complex networks of actors including suppliers, distributors, retailers and other stakeholders.

Complexity theory opposes reductionist, mechanistic approaches to science (Anderson et al., 2005; Houchin and MacLean, 2005) and the idea that stability is the natural state for organizations, making them predictable (Thietart and Forgues, 1995; VanderVen, 1997; Ng, 2013). “A complex system is not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but also by the intricate relationships between these components. In ‘cutting up’ a system, the analytical method destroys what it seeks to understand” (Cilliers, 1998, p. 2). It has been suggested that this mechanistic view is ‘trying to control a machine that does not exist’ (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015, p.6). Any system that can be fragmented and measured, as per this mechanistic view, is considered as one of complication rather than complexity (Tarride, 2013). It is in this respect that complex systems are different from ‘complicated’ systems (Cilliers, 1998; Sammut-Bonnici and Wensley, 2002; Tarride, 2013). The spontaneous instability that can occur within complex systems highlights this unpredictable nature (Blomme and Lintelo, 2012). This anti-reductionist approach has caused many debates around the role of management and leadership, with managers tending to be seen more as enablers than designers (Marion and Uhl Bien, 2011).

This marriage of order and disorder (Prigogine, 1984) is often associated with the concept of the ‘edge of chaos’. This view posits that the most creative part of a system is somewhere between order and chaos (Prigogine, 1984; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; McElroy, 2006). Kauffman (1995) describes these systems as poised systems and uses the analogy of water states (ice, liquid, gaseous) to describe the potential

effects on organizations, with liquid being the state allowing for the most adaptation, and the other states being too rigid or too chaotic. Too much consistency can be a source of rigidity (Cunha and Cunha, 2006) and it is in this state that the desirability of stability is questioned and the useful nature of instability is highlighted (Stacey, 2011). Similarly, a system that is too chaotic will also suffer (Waddock et al., 2015).

Not all systems can evolve, especially those that are highly chaotic, as they cannot maintain behaviours and have too few stable components (Schneider and Somers, 2006). The desire to avoid anxiety produces patterns of stability (Houchin and MacLean, 2005). This stability can be created by applying simple rules (Eisenhardt and Brown, 1997; Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015), or indeed the emergence of what is known in chaos theory as strange attractors (Mason, 2007; Waddock et al., 2015). Strange attractors are points at which initial conditions are drawn to (Mitchell, 2015), and can help describe the order that emerges from chaotic systems (Mason, 2007; Byrne, 2010; Waddock et al, 2015).

However, complexity theory's application to the real world has been questioned (Murray, 2003; Smith and Graetz, 2006; Chiva et al. 2010). Its lack of a universally agreed definition or approach can prove problematic (Houchin & MacLean, 2005) and it can be incorrectly interpreted (Stacey, 2011). The natural science comparisons also cause debate because systems from the natural world do not include human elements (Houchin and MacLean, 2005; Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015). It has also been accused of failing to escape the boundaries of metaphor (Burnes, 2005; Houchin and MacLean, 2005; Stacey 2011). However, this metaphorical perspective can prove useful for understanding organizations (Murray, 2003; Houchin and

MacLean, 2005; Chiva et al., 2010). The edge of chaos concept has also received scrutiny, as it may not have grounds in reality, and aiming for it may not be useful (Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015 citing Maclean and Macintosh, 2010). However, Boulton, Allen and Bowman (2015) do acknowledge that a mixture of control and loosening the grip of a modernist worldview, is beneficial.

Complexity theory has been used to view organizational identity (Schneider and Somers, 2006; Allen et al., 2007) but rarely explicitly corporate identity (Woermann, 2010), and we argue that it is a useful approach to further explore this field. Complexity theory has received much attention in the organizational change literature (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Styhre, 2002; Burnes, 2005; O'Shea et al., 2013). Gioia et al. (2000) and Koskinen (2015) discussed the notion of adaptive instability and unpredictable change, respectively, specifically by reference to organizational identity, albeit without mentioning the term 'complexity'.

Complexity theory has long been used to aid understanding of organizations (Anderson, 2008; Stacey, 2011; Mason, 2007), causing the reassessment of approaches to leadership (Schneider and Somers, 2006), strategy (Cunha and Cunha, 2006; Mason, 2007; Boulton, Bowman and Allen, 2015) and marketing (Gummesson, 2006). Complexity theory also suggests a change of mindset to business research and practice, particularly by reference to the efficacy of prediction and control (Boulton, Bowman and Allen 2015). In fact, the presence of chaos or complexity in a system implies that perfect prediction is impossible (Mitchell 2014).

Much focus in complexity theory is on the study of complex adaptive systems (Anderson, 1999; Morel and Ramanujam, 1999; Cunha and Cunha, 2006; Schneider and Somers, 2006; Mason, 2007; Boulton, Allen and Bowman, 2015). Complex adaptive systems can be seen as “social systems that are, diverse, non-linear, consisting of multiple interactive, interdependent and interconnected sub elements” (Waddock et al., 2015, p.996). They are characterized by non-linear, co-evolving and emergent dynamics that are inherently unpredictable (Waddock et al., 2015, p. 998). One approach to complex systems has been to see them as “comprised of both concrete elements that interact and more diffuse characteristics-such as mood or belief-which are less easy to measure and define” (Boulton, Allen and Bowman 2015, p.35). This definition has much in common with corporate identity approaches that consist of many concrete elements and diffuse characteristics (Melewar, 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Suvatjis et al., 2012; Kitchen et al., 2013). This approach therefore views an organization as a system, i.e., a whole comprised of many parts (Gummesson, 2006), and also one different from the sum of these parts (Waddock et al., 2015), making corporate identity essentially the emergent identity of the complex adaptive system under investigation.

This paper will now explore how applying this perspective to corporate identity and strategic orientation can help understand the relationship between orientation and disorientation.

### *3.1. Complexity theory and corporate identity*

In this section we highlight how corporate identity and complexity are related. If the focus of the strategic orientation (i.e. corporate identity) is complex, then it is conceivable to expect that the subsequent orientation should also be complex.

Identity has been explored from a complexity perspective (Cilliers, 2010), as has corporate identity (Woermann, 2010) although Woermann's work had a large focus on individuals and aspects of organizational identity. Cilliers argued that identity "should be stable, i.e., it should resist some external influences, but at the same time it should transform (deconstruct) in order to remain vital" (Cilliers, 2010, p 15). This approach is similar to how orientation and disorientation may be related. We build upon Woermann's (2010) and Cilliers (2010) work by consulting more in-depth the corporate identity literature. Table 2 displays the overlapping themes in the literature, which suggests the relationship between the two is worthy of further development.

**INSERT TABLE 2 HERE**

This relationship between corporate identity and complexity theory provides a foundation for further looking at orientation/disorientation. What is more, it suggests complexity theory may be a useful perspective for viewing the relationship between Flint et al's corporate identity congruence/incongruence.

The following section will now look to the literature and address the aforementioned research gaps.

#### **4. Corporate identity orientation**

We shall now briefly discuss corporate identity orientation, framing it as a foundation from which to discuss disorientation. It is the relationship between the two that is of predominant interest in this paper.

Corporate identity orientation is "the corporate identity as an organization's centripetal force based on an organization's innate characteristics that define and differentiate an entity" (Balmer, 2013, p. 725). At present, this is the only definition

of the corporate identity orientation construct. Empirical research regarding identity orientation in general is also seen to be lacking (Gonzalez and Chakraborty, 2012), although organizational identity orientation has received attention (Brickson, 2007).

Corporate identity orientation, with its focus on identity, could encourage stability in the organization. The coherence and congruence would separate it from being a purely chaotic system and would satiate the desire to avoid anxiety by producing patterns of stability (Houchin and MacLean, 2005), possibly through the process of negative feedback loops. Coherence is also at the very core of an organization (Olins, 1989) and such an orientation could encourage a form of ‘self-similarity’ (Schneider and Somers, 2006). Self-similarity in complexity theory is where parts of an entity “exhibit a quality of the entity’s whole” (Schneider and Somers, 2006, p.357). This could lead to the development of patterns and thus a coherent corporate identity. These patterns could be built around the mission, values, purpose or other related identity elements, or even the “symbols of loyalty” that Olins (1989, p.25) suggests. If the ‘strange attractors’ concept was adopted from chaos/complexity theory (Kauffman, 1995; Mason, 2007) it could encourage the development of recognisable characteristics that generate stability. This could also help contribute to creating Flint et al’s (2018) corporate identity congruence. This in turn may then help with the organization/brand more easily identified by stakeholders.

## **5. Strategic Disorientation**

Our approach to disorientation is inspired by a Heraclitian perspective of ‘unity of opposites’ (Garrison, 1985) and dualism (Fay, 1996; Smith and Graitz, 2006). These approaches imply that if a state of strategic orientation exists, then so must a state of



strategic disorientation. Disorientation itself can be defined as ‘the condition of having lost your bearings’ or a state of ‘confusion’ (Collins English Dictionary), ‘a usually transient state of confusion especially as to time, place, or identity often as a result of disease or drugs’ (Merriam-Webster) or ‘not knowing which direction we have come from/or are going’ (He and Baruch, 2009).

Disorientation has its roots in psychology literature where it is said to be similar, if not identical, to confusion (Eskey et al., 1957) and is usually attributed to spatial disorientation (Eskey et al., 1957; Waller and Hodgson, 2006), time (Eskey et al. 1957; Wang and Spelke, 2000; Littlefield et al., 2001) or identity/person (Eskey et al., 1957; He and Baruch, 2009). States of disorientation can lead to individuals making poor decisions as a result of the ‘disorientation effect’ (Waller and Hodgson, 2006). This disorientation effect could potentially transpose to organizations, and the decisions made whilst in a state of strategic disorientation. This state of disorientation could be similar to the chaotic states mentioned earlier with regard to complexity and chaos theories. However, as we shall argue later, the effects of disorientation may not be wholly negative.

We approach defining strategic disorientation by looking at the definitions of strategic orientation. Using the definitions of strategic orientation as “the guiding principles that influence a firm’s marketing and strategy-making activities” (Noble et al., 2002) or from the perspective of “orientation focuses resources to achieve a desired outcome” (Grawe et al., 2009), implies a lack of focus of said resources and principles or, as Balmer (2013) describes, an organization’s ‘cornerstone’. Therefore, when an organization lacks focus around its strategic elements, it could be seen to be in a state

of ‘strategic disorientation’. This fits with the evolution of a strategic orientation itself (Ruokonen and Saarenketo, 2009), as it could err into/fluctuate between a state of disorientation. This could also be approached from a complexity perspective. Then, it would be doing this naturally, or indeed represent when one strategic orientation takes precedence over another. Gejdalvic (2012) discusses a state where an organization lacks a strategic orientation. However, from a conceptual perspective, it could be argued that lacking an orientation and being confused about one are separate things.

Strategic disorientation could therefore occur if a lack of focus existed around the driving force of the organization. Table 3 summarises some potential strategic disorientations:

**INSERT TABLE 3 HERE**

With corporate identity being the area of interest, the notion of corporate identity disorientation will now be explored further, and then how it could be related to corporate identity orientation.

Specifically, as we consider orientation/disorientation as duality (see Figure 1.), we shall explore the nature of dualism. “Dualities reflect opposing forces that must be balanced-properties that seem contradictory or paradoxical, but which are in fact complementary” (Evans and Doz, 1992, p.85). There therefore must be a balance between these opposing forces, consisting of a minimal threshold of each (Smith and Graetz, 2006). Viewed through the lens of complexity theory, the two ends of the spectrum would push and pull against each other, creating a similar effect to that of the ‘edge of chaos’ (McElroy, 2006). Using dualities in this manner has been seen as

a potential method of operationalizing complexity theory (Smith and Graetz, 2006). The relationship between strategic orientation/disorientation could thus create a context within which to discuss complexity theory.

### **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

However, studies have shown that disorientation/confusion in individuals could exist on separate scales, as identity synthesis and identity confusion (Schwartz et al., 2009). Research on ideal values and counter ideal values (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2014) also adopted a similar approach and resulted in the conceptualization of two distinct forces. Similar research exists in the ambidexterity literature (He and Wong, 2004; Gedajlovic et al., 2012) on whether organizations can be exploratory or exploitative in equal measure or not. Therefore, the dualistic viewpoint is open for further debate. This dualistic perspective also highlights how corporate identity congruence and incongruence could be related.

## **6. Corporate identity disorientation**

Viewing corporate identity disorientation and orientation as a duality can aid in defining corporate identity disorientation. In his definition of corporate identity orientation, Balmer (2013) describes it as the centripetal force. To continue this metaphor, corporate identity disorientation could act as the centrifugal force, or reactive centrifugal force. Centrifugal force is often considered as a pseudo force (Sheremata, 2000) and is viewed by some to be the same force as centripetal, just with differing points of reference. This could again support a dualistic approach.

Of all of the aforementioned strategic disorientations, corporate identity disorientation is pertinent to investigate first, as ‘identity’ features in previous approaches to disorientation (Eskey et al., 1957; He and Baruch, 2009) and also in response to Flint et al’s (2018) recent call for more work into exploring the potential benefits of corporate identity incongruence. Identity disorientation has been explored in the realm of organizational identity by He and Barusch (2009) and was seen as a negative state in reaction to change. The other strategic orientations could be affected by corporate identity disorientation as a result of the relationship between corporate identity orientation and other strategic orientations due to corporate identity’s close link with strategy (Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Melewar, 2003; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Kitchen et al., 2013). The ebbing and flowing of corporate identity focus will therefore have numerous effects within the organization, due to corporate identity’s all-pervasive nature, again highlighting its complexity and importance to managers.

Corporate identity disorientation would imply a lack of focus around the corporate identity, to the point where it becomes confused, or disorientated. This could be confusion regarding the mission, values, vision or whatever it is that ‘defines and differentiates’ the organization. The negative effects of such a state have been described by Olins: “When companies lose sight of their individuality, their real purpose and strengths, they get deflected into making mistakes” (1989, p. 7). This could also contribute to corporate identity incongruence (Flint et al 2018) and also ambivalent identification of the organization (Balmer 2017).

The notion of identity confusion or crisis comes predominantly from the psychiatric/psychology literature, first mentioned by Erikson (1968). This has led to the idea of identity diffusion which implies uncertainty about who one is and what

one is to become (Huang, 2006) and depersonalisation (Stuart and Laraia, 2004). This echoes concepts from personal identity literature where corporate identity often draws inspiration.

This can also be related to organizational drift, which can occur when strategic intent is not clear (Cunha and Cunha, 2006). Drifting organizations are described by Cunha and Cunha (2006) as “those that act opportunistically without a common goal to unite their actions” (p.846). Therefore, it could be seen that ‘drift’ could be a result of strategic disorientation. However organizational drift has also been described as having drifted towards a different goal, so it is not always losing the goal, and could potentially mean a shift in focus as opposed to becoming confused.

In regards to causes of disorientation, there are a number of possibilities. Organizations currently exist in a world of crises (Heller and Darling, 2012; Olins 2014) and a crisis is potentially always on the horizon (Heller & Darling, 2012), which could cause a sense of disorientation. Also, in an era when organizations and industries face disruption, disorientation could be a more frequent and latent threat.

However, disorientation may not always be negative, and viewing it from a complexity viewpoint would imply that it is part of an organization’s existence. This furthers the work of (Flint et al. 2018) when they suggested that intentional corporate identity incongruence (which disorientation would influence) could be a useful strategy. Elements of this positive side have been discussed within the practitioner literature, drawing upon ideas such as the benefits of failure (Harford, 2011), the

exploitation of chaotic environments (Gutsche 2011) or being more disruptive with the brand (Kantar Millward Brown, 2018).

Organizations could experience fluctuating stages of orientation and disorientation, creating an example of order and disorder (Prigogine, 1984). Making sure there is the right combination of rigidity and chaos (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997), or indeed stability and instability (Cilliers, 2010) can be beneficial. This could be an example of how a system can stay ‘robust and adaptive at the same time’ (Turner et al., 2018). To go through a state of disorientation could lead to further understanding of the mission and values (or other defining characteristics), through emergence and reinforcing identity; it could act as an exploratory capability that allows the organization to get out of its comfort zone, aiding with the evolution and growth of the organization and its identity. Positive feedback loops of complexity could help forge new ground and fuel growth through more distinctive and differentiating attributes being created, thereby contributing to brand positioning.

Being comfortable with disorientation may also allow the organization to adapt to its environment more effectively, and not be shaken by external or internal factors that cause confusion. It could be argued that the organization needs to fluctuate between orientation and disorientation to avoid becoming stagnant. Peters (1987) suggests that “stability and inertia are the enemies of organizational prosperity.” (cited in Smith 2005). This could therefore aid with the notion of organizational improvisation (Hadida, Tarvainen and Rose, 2014) and highlight that change and crises can be opportunistic (Kovoor-Misra, 2009).

Complete and consistent disorientation of the corporate identity could lead to a state of complete chaos, however. A key debate here would be to what extent management could willingly cause disorientation in order to harvest its benefits.

To highlight the uniqueness of the present study, Table 4 shows how it fits within the existing literature. Rather than drawing from all literature, we have focussed on studies that have dealt in some way with confusion around identity. We have also included papers on strategy, which show the beginnings of these ideas. This table aids researchers who wish to explore this area further. The table suggests that these ideas appear to be growing amongst marketing researchers, whilst most of the papers in the earlier period came from the organizational identity perspective. The reason for this could potentially be down to industry trends of disruption and agile organizations.

**INSERT TABLE 4 HERE**

## **7. Conceptual Framework**

In the below framework, we highlight the notion of corporate identity orientation and disorientation along with potential outcomes these could have according to the current literature. This is all shown with a feedback loop into corporate identity.

**INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE**

The above framework synthesizes our analysis of the corporate identity literature and the strategic orientation/disorientation literature. In the following section, we discuss our conclusions and the theoretical and managerial implications of the study.

## **8. Conclusions and implications**

There is little research on corporate identity orientation, corporate identity disorientation and the relationship between the two. To help understand this relationship, and offer insight on the constructs themselves, this paper has drawn upon complexity theory. Complexity theory has yet to be explored in depth with regard to corporate identity, despite the literature streams sharing many similarities. We have also drawn upon the corporate identity and strategic orientation literature to build our arguments. Exploring beyond corporate identity i.e. corporate brand, corporate image and corporate reputation is beyond the scope of the present study.

### *8.1 Theoretical Contribution*

This paper offers three theoretical contributions, which shall now be discussed in turn. In order to highlight the theoretical contribution of this paper we have been inspired by the approaches to theoretical contributions given by Whetten (1989) and Corley and Gioia (2011).

The first theoretical contribution is introducing the notion of strategic disorientation. This contribution has impacts for both management and marketing scholars, especially those interested in strategic orientation. Whilst strategic orientation is a larger presence in management research than in marketing research, there are numerous strategic orientations that are of interest to marketing scholars, most notably market orientation. Strategic disorientation is different from current thinking, as in the strategic orientation literature the focus been on the orientation component, for example, market orientation or product orientation. This paper follows the line of



thought, inspired by dualism, that if orientation exists, so could disorientation. As such this paper introduces various strategic disorientations that could be explored in future research, namely market disorientation, competitor disorientation, corporate identity disorientation, corporate brand disorientation, product disorientation and organizational identity disorientation. Introducing this notion also helps portray a more complete picture of strategic orientation within organizations, as well as opening up disorientation as an area for future research. We have also drawn upon the strategic orientation literature to form a foundation upon which to define strategic disorientation. This contribution is timely, as increased disruption in various industries could cause disorientation across multiple areas of the organization; therefore increasing knowledge in this area will help organizations better prepare for this, and potentially capitalise on it.

The second contribution is the exploration of the relationship between orientation and disorientation. This again impacts the management and marketing fields, however, as we draw from a complexity theory perspective to develop the argument, this also impacts the area of complex systems. This is scientifically useful for scholars as it further develops the notion of strategic disorientation, building upon the introduction of this construct earlier in the paper. Being aware of strategic disorientation alone is not enough; being aware of how it relates to orientation is key to understanding its nature. Exploring this relationship highlights how doses of strategic disorientation could be useful, and this is discussed further in the section on our third contribution. To explore the relationship between the two constructs we drew from complexity theory and from dualism. Building in complexity theory also highlights how disorientation could be seen an emergent state and as such would be of particular

interest to those studying emergence. Through applying the above perspectives we conclude that orientation/disorientation exist on the same continuum and are emergent states that can spread through an organization. Organizations would fluctuate between the two states over time in the same manner as between order and disorder, stability and instability. We have built this relationship upon dualism, opting to look at this relationship on a continuum. This was also informed by the complexity literature on this area. Doing this helped build our conceptual framework on corporate identity disorientation. Whilst we suggest they exist on the same scale, we acknowledge that the opposite explanation (i.e. they are separate) is also worth exploring, however, this was beyond the scope of this paper. This contribution helps alter research practice by exploring further how disorientation and orientation could be related. In turn this contributes to understanding of how orientation itself works, building up a more nuanced picture than has hitherto been presented in the literature. Adopting a complexity theory perspective helps us understand how and why disorientation could, in doses, be positive for an organization; this is explored further under our next theoretical contribution. Disorientation could be positive for an organization because the benefits of disorientation will likely be specific to the particular strategic disorientation which is under discussion. This would require further discussion on each individual disorientation as it is likely each will have its own idiosyncratic benefits. This is timely contribution as to not only be aware of disorientation, but to know how it works in conjunction with orientation will help organizations better understand it. It also lays the foundations for looking at how strategic disorientations could have benefits.

The third contribution is developing a conceptualization of corporate identity disorientation, and its potential benefits. For example, disorientation could lead to discovering new aspects of the corporate identity, improving the organization's ability to adapt to its surroundings and could prevent the organization from being too rigid in regard to its identity, which could be restricting in the long term and limit growth. A conceptual framework is provided (see Figure 2) that summarises these potential outcomes of disorientation. This is also carried out for corporate identity orientation. Along with the table provided (see Table 4), the framework brings structure to the area for future researchers. The conceptual framework/table provided also helps provide structure to the burgeoning literature in this area. This structure is complemented by a table that summarises the literature, which can aid researchers in developing future questions in this area. This is of use to corporate identity scholars, as well as those looking at organizational identity, as the two share similarities and conceptual crossover. We also use a complex systems approach to explore the relationship with corporate identity orientation/disorientation, which would be of interest to those studying complex systems. As we viewed orientation/disorientation on a continuum, this helped us also build upon the orientation work by Balmer (2013), which was also an area in need of further development. This also contributes to overall understanding of corporate identity. As such this contribution has the scope to have impact across both management and marketing fields.

This paper states that disorientation is a precursor to incongruence, i.e., having an initial lack of focus about the corporate identity will result in incongruence. This incongruence could then lead to further disorientation. We frame disorientation as a precursor to Flint et al's (2018) incongruence amongst other potential outcomes, and

this forms part of the conceptual framework provided. The introduction of corporate identity disorientation is different than current corporate identity literature, which tends to look at the importance of consistency. However, there has been some recent work beginning to question this notion (Flint et al 2018; Gregersen and Johansen 2018). We built on this by exploring further the positives that can be gleaned from this seemingly counterintuitive idea. To do this we drew from the complexity theory literature and organizational identity literature, as well as the aforementioned corporate identity papers. This provides further avenues for researchers to explore corporate identity and its associated orientation/disorientation. The theoretical foundations of strategic orientation, complexity theory and corporate identity helped provide development of the arguments. We also drew upon the organizational identity literature as this has been shown to have a close relationship with corporate identity (Kitchen et al 2013). The table provided (see Table x) helps show the development of this particular idea, providing justification for the conceptual model. This builds on the literature in this area and includes fresh perspectives on how disorientation could be positive for a corporate identity. This table also helped inform the conceptual model that brought together orientation and disorientation outcomes, along with the points raised in our previous theoretical contributions. The table also states methodologies used, which serves as a useful resource for future researchers looking to carry out empirical work. Corporate identity disorientation is an important area to achieve greater understanding in. With the aforementioned increased risk of disruption, there is an increased risk of disorientation. However, the importance of being distinctive could be aided by discovering new aspects of identity. Therefore whilst inducing disorientation may sound counterproductive, it could be a way of creating more distinctive identifying attributes.

## *8.2 Managerial Contributions*

Firstly, this paper suggests that going through a state of corporate identity disorientation is potentially useful and can provide opportunities for the organization. Experiencing disorientation is a potential regular occurrence in the current business environment. For example, new external technology developments, or disruptive competitors could lead to a state of confusion around the identity. Therefore, managers should become comfortable with this state, and try and leverage benefits from it. Doing this could aid in the growth of the organization's identity, as it could lead to the discovery of new aspects that help define and differentiate the organization. Managers could achieve this either by inducing disorientation in their organizations or by embracing disorientation that may be forced upon them. Managers looking to induce disorientation could achieve this by experimenting with new technology, new internal communications, new ways of working, or even new industries. Building on this assertion, new 'defining and differentiating characteristics', an important part of identity, can potentially be discovered. However, they should be aware that too much disorientation may be detrimental, and a corporate identity orientation should not be lost altogether. For example, if disorientation were to lead to incongruent messages being communicated to external stakeholders, this could prove problematic. Similarly, if there was severe, continuous organization-wide disorientation this could cause issues. In this sense, it would be useful for managers to monitor that this emergent state doesn't become too dominant. Becoming familiar with this could aid in how the organization adapts to its environment and effectively deals with external challenges

The second recommendation to managers is to make sure that a balance is kept by still applying focus to a corporate identity orientation. Whilst this paper does advocate the benefits of disorientation, this is not to be at the complete expense of orientation. Building consistency within the identity is still important, and this can have multiple benefits, such as helping to build saliency amongst external stakeholders. Therefore, remembering to apply elements of corporate identity orientation will help to keep a crucial balance. As organizations are complex systems, perfect prediction and control is limited. However, this is not to say that the solution is ‘do nothing’. As mentioned previously, a complexity approach does not mean embracing a laissez-faire one. It is recommended that managers adopt the mindset of an enabler, rather than a designer as suggested by Marion and Uhl-Bien (2011). One approach is to adopt a simple rules approach rather than applying many rigid rules. This is especially so if a heavily co-creative approach to the organization is adopted. Managers could look at their current corporate identity and assess whether it is constraining them and forcing them to be too rigid, and question if this is causing them to miss out on opportunities. Whilst being consistent is important, in a rapidly changing environment too much consistency could cause unnecessary rigidity.

### *8.3 Implications for future research*

In the following section we suggest areas that could prove useful for future research and theoretical development.

#### *8.3.1. The components of corporate identity orientation/disorientation*

Further exploration of the components of corporate orientation/disorientation could be beneficial. This could take the approach of antecedents and consequences adopted by Kohli and Jaworski in their development of market orientation (1990; 1993). Whilst corporate identity orientation/disorientation development under a complexity theory perspective would be interesting, it could be approached from other epistemological/ontological approaches, in which case a linear approach to modeling the construct could be adopted. However, from the complexity viewpoint corporate identity orientation could be of particular benefit to enabling stability within the organization so research within the complexity field could be of interest. The creation of relatively stable patterns could also link with the literature on the replication of organizational routines (Friesl & Larty, 2013). Further to this, research on strategic orientations has suggested that they can be adopted when they are needed (Hakala, 2011), the very nature of when is the best time to adopt a corporate identity orientation could therefore be explored. Similarly, another area is exploring what orientations it can be used in conjunction with. This could be of interest, considering the importance of a market orientation in marketing. Examples of when this orientation could be useful to adopt are when first starting up, during mergers and acquisitions (Balmer and Dinnie, 1999; Oberg et al., 2011), mismanagement (Heller and Darling, 2012), new resources acquisition (Bruce and Solomon, 2013) and in industries and times of rapid change. Example questions could be: How does corporate identity orientation create self-similarity within the organization? What are the antecedents and consequences of corporate identity orientation and disorientation? When/why should a corporate identity orientation be adopted?

### *8.3.2. The nature of strategic disorientations*

In addition to corporate identity disorientation, other disorientations may emerge: market, organizational, product, corporate brand and competitor disorientations could also be researched in their respective fields. Another area of future research is exploring the areas of an organization that may be more susceptible to positive forms of disorientation than others. For example, with corporate identity disorientation, are the benefits only applicable to the internal aspects of corporate identity. I.e. should external messaging be confused? Example questions could be: How do other strategic disorientations manifest themselves? What elements of a corporate identity are more open to positive forms of disorientation? How is a healthy level of disorientation maintained?

### *8.3.3 Adoption of the corporate identity orientation*

A further area for future research is looking at who could adopt corporate identity orientation. Both internal and external stakeholders could potentially adopt this orientation. It is in this respect that stakeholder theory could provide a useful perspective, not to mention the boundaries of what exactly is included in the complex adaptive system under study. With co-creation/construction on the rise with external stakeholders (Ramaswamy, 2008; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Bruce and Solomon, 2013; Roser et al., 2013; Devereux et al., 2017), this highlights the possibility that external audiences could adopt corporate identity orientation. Stakeholders thus could have a vested interest in the existence and presentation of an organization, and help it flourish and create new forms of self-organization and emergence. Again, when there is the possibility of co-destruction (Ple and Caceres, 2010), it could be argued that for stakeholders to resist destruction could suggest some form of corporate identity orientation. This is perhaps also evident in the ‘fans’ of an organization (Dionisio et



al., 2008), who can defend the identity when it comes under attack, or contribute to any crowdfunding initiatives. Therefore, there could exist the idea of external stakeholder strategy. Another area could be how this idea would translate to national identities under the notion of national identity orientation, as there are already acknowledged similarities between national and corporate identities. Example questions could be: How do external stakeholders of an organization adopt a corporate identity orientation? What constitutes national identity orientation/disorientation?

#### *8.4 Conclusion*

This paper contributes to the research on corporate identity, complexity theory and strategic orientation by introducing the notion of corporate identity disorientation and discussing its relationship with corporate identity orientation, aiming to suggest further research avenues in this area. To help achieve this objective, the theoretical lens of complexity theory was used. Through this perspective we argue that disorientation need not be a negative state for an organization to experience, and in fact it would form part of the instability inherent in organizations. This paper suggests that the notion of orientation and disorientation should exist on the same continuum and both be included in the orientation process.

Firstly, it portrays the role of complexity theory in organizations, and the mindset that is associated with this perspective, i.e., to question the likelihood of predictability and the degree of control that practitioners have over corporate identity. This paper also highlights the usefulness of the corporate identity orientation and the stabilizing effect it can have in chaotic environment that organizations find themselves in. Also, by putting such a dynamic construct at the heart of the organization, it could help

organizations adapt in an ambidextrous manner, and improve improvisation. This paper also highlights that not all forms of disorientation are negative, and in fact a tight control over the identity may not allow the organization to evolve, adapt and develop as effectively as it could. However, being clear on the goals and purpose of the organization and its defining characteristics can help stabilize the organization out of a truly chaotic environment.

As shown in this paper, adopting a complexity theory perspective can introduce new ways in which to research corporate identity. By using complexity theory in this manner, this paper hopes that this view will be adopted further to expand corporate identity research. It also encourages the development of disorientation and further consideration of its potential benefits.

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