

Identity, Intended Image, Construed Image, and Reputation: An Interdisciplinary Framework and Suggested Terminology

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Many scholars across various academic disciplines are investigating the following questions: What do individuals know or believe about an organization? How does a focal organization (and/or other interested entity) develop, use, and/or change this information? and How do individuals respond to what they know or believe about an organization? Cross-disciplinary research that centers on these questions is desirable and could be enhanced if researchers identify and develop consistent terminology for framing these questions. The authors work toward that end by identifying four central "viewpoints" of an organization and proposing labels to represent each of these viewpoints: identity, intended image, construed image, and reputation.

Keywords: *identity; image; reputation; corporate associations*

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A growing number of researchers across a variety of disciplines, including organizational behavior, marketing, communications, sociology, advertising, public relations, and organizational strategy, find themselves addressing three common issues:

1. What do individuals (e.g., founders, senior managers, employees, customers, stockholders, shareholder activists, financial analysts, general public, governmental entities, competitors) know or believe about an organization?
2. How does a focal organization (and/or other interested entity) develop, use, and/or change this information?
3. How do individuals respond to what they know or believe about an organization?

Addressing these issues requires an understanding of a number of important concepts from both individual and organizational perspectives. From an individual perspective, understanding what individuals know or believe about an organization (i.e., "corporate associations"; Brown and Dacin 1997) becomes key, because such information can influence individuals' responses to the organi-

zation as well as how they come to define themselves in relation to the organization (i.e., organizational identification; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994). Taking an organizational perspective, research on understanding the effects of individuals' corporate associations, especially when multiple individuals or collectives are involved, has placed constructs such as "identity," "image," and "reputation" in key roles (e.g., Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000; Davies 2003; Fombrun 1996; Moingeon and Soenen 2002; Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen 2000; "Special Issue: Corporate Identity" 1997; Whetten and Godfrey 1998).

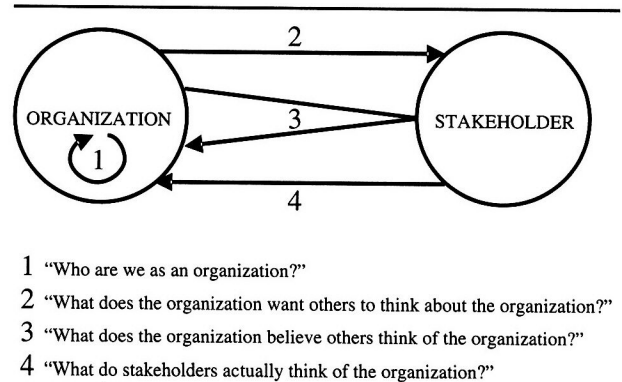
While our understanding of these issues and related concepts has been aided by extensive scholarship, our knowledge of them remains in its infancy, with much left to be investigated (see Dacin and Brown 2002). Interdisciplinary research on these questions is particularly desirable for several reasons. First, these concepts are central to the success of the organizational enterprise. Specifically, research has identified important relationships between organizational identity, image, and/or reputation and organizational performance (Orlitzky, Schmidt, and Rynes 2003; Roberts and Dowling 2002). Second, a comprehensive understanding of broad topics such as corporate associations and corporate identity is more likely if it is informed by insights from multiple academic disciplines.

While the potential contribution of interdisciplinary research in this area is very high, significant barriers exist, including divergent research interests across (and even within) disciplinary lines. To illustrate, the focus of much of organizational research is on determining or uncovering the defining aspects of an organization to its members. For communications researchers, the focus falls on the encoding of information about a company in corporate communication messages and the decoding of messages by observers. Finally, the focus of marketers typically is on understanding how customers respond to information about companies as they make decisions about product and service purchase and consumption.

As each discipline has pursued its respective focus, similarly defined concepts as well as discipline-specific terms have emerged. Consequently, as others have noted (Brown and Dacin 1997; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Pratt 2003; Pratt and Foreman 2000a; Whetten in press; Whetten and Mackey 2002), it is difficult to follow a threaded conversation within, and especially across, disciplinary sectors.

The purpose of this article is to offer a framework for synthesizing existing research and theory on key concepts related to identity, image, and reputation across different academic disciplines but in particular across marketing and organizational research. Specifically, we propose a framework encompassing most of the major concepts used by researchers in these disciplines and offer suggestions for a consistent terminology. Although we do not expect

FIGURE 1
Key Organizational Viewpoints



that all researchers will necessarily adopt our terms, our framework still offers a guide for understanding how different disciplines approach the subject matter.

FOUR VIEWPOINTS OF AN ORGANIZATION

A review of existing literature on how people view, manage, and respond to an organization reveals four dominant themes, characterized as "viewpoints" about the organization. Figure 1 operationalizes these four viewpoints in the form of questions. Each arrow in the diagram originates from an actor as a way of indicating that the question represents the actor's viewpoint. For example, Viewpoint 4, illustrated by the question, "What do stakeholders actually think of the organization?" features an external stakeholder as the actor and represents the stakeholder's view of a focal organization. The distinction between self and other highlighted in Figure 1 is particularly germane for scholarship related to the traditional concept of identity, defined as an individual's (or more generally, as an actor's) self-definition (Leary and Tangney 2003).

In Table 1, we offer a brief description of each viewpoint and provide examples of terms used to represent it. This table illustrates the challenges facing scholars studying these concepts and demonstrates the need for a common set of terms and definitions.

Having illustrated the problem, we now turn our attention to its solution. We use two dimensions to sort out the literature pertaining to the four views of organizations in Figure 1. The first dimension represents whether scholars studying these concepts refer to all aspects of an organization or just the subset of aspects that satisfy Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition of organizational identity: *central*, *enduring*, and *distinctive* (CED) aspects. The second dimension represents whether the level of analysis is individual or organizational. An illustration of these dimensions mapped onto the four viewpoints appears in

TABLE 1
Key Concepts and Existing Terminology

<i>Viewpoint</i>	<i>Brief Description</i>	<i>Illustrative Terms and Literature</i>
"Who are we as an organization?"	Mental associations about the organization held by organizational members	Collective identity (Pratt 2003) Corporate personality (Markwick and Fill 1997) Identity or organizational identity (Davies 2003; Gioia et al. 2000; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Pratt and Foreman 2000b; Whetten and Mackey 2002) Perceived organizational identity (Dutton et al. 1994)
"What does the organization want others to think about the organization?"	Mental associations about the organization that organization leaders want important audiences to hold	Corporate identity (Dacin and Brown 2002; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Markwick and Fill 1997; Whetten and Mackey 2002) Desired corporate identity (van Rekom 1997; van Riel and Balmer 1997) Desired future image (Gioia et al. 2000) Desired identity (van Riel 1997) Desired organizational image (Scott and Lane 2000) Image (Whetten 1997) Projected image (Gioia et al. 2000)
"What does the organization believe others think of the organization?"	Mental associations that organization members believe others outside the organization hold about the organization	Construed external image (Dutton et al. 1994; Gioia et al. 2000) Perceived external prestige (Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel 2001) Perceived organizational prestige (Bhattacharya et al. 1995; van Riel and Balmer 1997) Reflected stakeholder appraisals (Scott and Lane 2000)
"What do stakeholders actually think of the organization?"	Mental associations about the organization actually held by others outside the organization	Company evaluation (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001) Corporate associations (Berens et al. 2005; Brown 1998; Brown and Dacin 1997; Dacin and Brown 2002) Corporate evaluation (Brown and Dacin 1997) Corporate identity (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) Corporate image (Markwick and Fill 1997; van Rekom 1997) Image (Barich and Kotler 1991; Britt 1971; Davies et al. 2003; Dichter 1985; Enis 1967; Gronroos 1984) Organizational image (Hatch and Schultz 1997) Organizational reputation (Scott and Lane 2000) Reputation (Dacin and Brown 2002; Gioia et al. 2000; van Riel 1997; Whetten 1997) Transient impressions (Gioia et al. 2000)

Figure 2. It is our sense that all the concepts represented in Table 1 can be sorted into the cells of this classification scheme.

All Aspects Versus CED Aspects

Not all aspects of an organization are alike. By "all aspects," we mean the totality of all mental associations about the organization for that particular organizational viewpoint. For any constituency or stakeholder group, there may be any number of pieces of information about the organization available in memory. For example, some consumers of Coca-Cola-brand products may associate Santa Claus with the Coca-Cola organization because of its many famous holiday advertisements featuring "Santa drinking a Coke." However, some organizational associations represent what is most important, or central, about the organization to a member. Borrowing from Albert and Whetten (1985), some aspects or characteristics will represent what is CED about the organization. Using the Coca-Cola example, the association with Santa may be an

FIGURE 2
Dimensions of Corporate Identity, Image, and Reputation

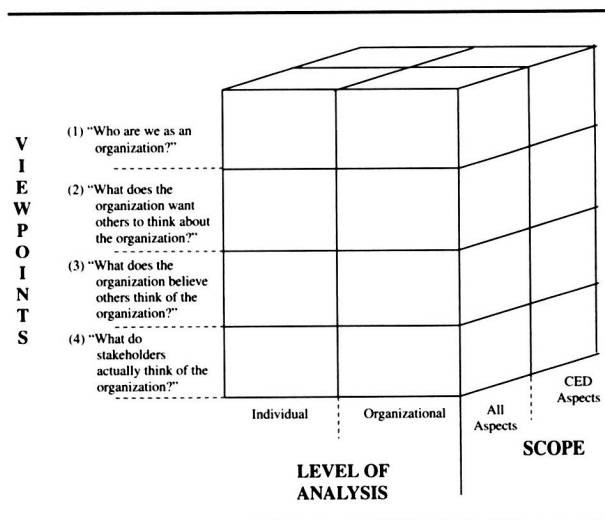


TABLE 2
Proposed Unifying Terminology

<i>Viewpoint</i>	<i>Brief Description</i>	<i>All Aspects</i>	<i>CED Aspects</i>
"Who are we as an organization?"	Mental associations about the organization held by organizational members	Member organizational associations	Identity
"What does the organization want others to think about the organization?"	Mental associations about the organization that organization leaders want important audiences to hold	Intended associations	Intended image
"What does the organization believe others think of the organization?"	Mental associations that organization members believe others outside the organization hold about the organization	Construed associations	Construed image
"What do stakeholders actually think of the organization?"	Mental associations about the organization actually held by others outside the organization	Corporate (organizational) associations	Reputation

NOTE: For each viewpoint, the proposed terminology applies to both the individual and organizational levels of analysis. CED = central, enduring, and distinctive.

organizational association, but it would not qualify as a CED organizational characteristic.

Individual Versus Organizational Analysis

At the individual level of analysis, the primary focus of each of the four viewpoints is how individuals view (or could view) an organization from their perspectives as employees, managers, owners, customers, regulators, activists, members of the general public, and so on. For individual analysis, we rely heavily on the notion of mental representations and associations commonly found in the cognitive psychology models of perception, learning, and memory (see Anderson 1983). These models provide a basis for understanding how individuals receive, interpret, store, and remember information about focal objects (i.e., organizations).

In contrast, a significant part of the existing work on the viewpoints we consider has been less concerned with specific individuals' responses, instead focusing on organizational information held more or less in common across members of one or more stakeholder groups. Theorists working at the organizational level of analysis tend to conceptualize organizational identity, image, or reputation as properties of the organization (e.g., "IBM's reputation") as opposed to mental associations possessed by individuals. When viewed from this perspective, specific organizational identities may signify institutionalized practices and binding organizational commitments (Whetten in press; Whetten and Mackey 2002).

Organization- or individual-level theory and analysis necessitate the use of concepts formulated at the corresponding level of analysis. Thus, a study of how third-party communications might influence a consumer's preference for a company's products (i.e., an individual-level

dependent variable) will make use of individual-level constructs, while a study on the influence of consumer boycotts on company performance (i.e., an organizational-level dependent variable) will rely on organizational-level constructs.

The distinction between organizational and individual levels is also important when one considers that what is CED about an organization to any individual may be different from what is considered CED by most individuals in any given stakeholder group or by individuals speaking on behalf of the organization. In fact, as we discuss below, some would argue that to talk about organizational identity from a CED perspective automatically assumes an organizational level of analysis.

In the following sections, we elaborate on our framework by discussing each of the organizational viewpoints in detail, referring to the dimensions to help us categorize the relevant literature. The purpose of this discussion is to provide some background for understanding the different concepts in each viewpoint, an understanding that allows us to propose common terminology for research on these concepts (see Table 2).

Viewpoint 1: Member Organizational Associations and Identity

The first category of conceptual thought and research indicated in Figure 1 concerns perceptions of an organization held by organizational insiders. Although it is possible to view the members of the organization simply as one of several stakeholder groups and categorize the responses of this group in Viewpoint 4, we recognize that organization members occupy a special position from which to view the organization, thereby justifying separate treatment (though see Cardador and Pratt's article in this issue

for a potential challenge to this notion). Furthermore, members embody the "organization" to those who are beyond the boundaries of the organization; they are part of the organization and thus should be distinguished from other types of stakeholder groups.

Individual organizational members can and do hold a variety of associations with respect to an organization. These *member organizational associations* serve as the reality of the organization for the individual holding them. Because each member's perspective, organizational role and experiences, life experiences, interactions with other constituencies, and so on are different, the set of organizational associations will differ across members. The range of possible member organizational associations is almost limitless.

Although a given organizational member may hold a great number of organizational associations, only a small portion of these associations will be central and enduring to the meaning of the organization for that individual. These aspects, once internalized as a basis for self-referential meaning, constitute an organizationally relevant, but individually held, *identity* for the member. It is also important to distinguish the notion of level of analysis from the level of abstraction. As Pratt (2003) noted, the level of abstraction is the size of the group that an individual sees as self-defining. Thus, an individual can have as self-referential what is CED about his or her work group or department (less abstract) or about his or her organization. This is different from *organizational identity* as defined by most organizational scholars. *Organizational identity* refers exclusively to a difference in level of analysis: it is the property of a social group rather than an individual.

Among organizational theorists, there is a paucity of work at the individual level in Viewpoint 1. One exception is the work of Dutton et al. (1994), which discusses the importance of "perceived organizational identity," or how any given individual sees an organization's identity. These perceptions are important in that they may influence members' identification with that organization (for reviews, see Ashforth and Johnson 2001; Ashforth and Mael 1989; Pratt 1998).

While individuals' organizationally relevant, but personally held, identities may be important in their own right, there need not be a one-to-one correspondence between what an individual believes is CED about an organization and the organization's (organizational-level) identity. Moreover, it is not yet clear how individual members' beliefs about what is CED about the organization relate to the organizational identity. Furthermore, while there is some consensus that organizational identity at the organizational level involves shared beliefs, it is not clear whether organizational identity involves an aggregation of individual beliefs (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich 1991), whether shared beliefs are shaped by institutionalized organizational practices (e.g., Whetten in press; Whetten

and Mackey 2002), or whether some other option, such as the formation of a "group mind," bridges these levels of analysis as they relate to identity (see Pratt 2003 for a review of some of these possibilities). However, it is safe to say that the bulk of research on organizational identity, from organizational behavior theorists, has tended to view organizational identity as a collective-level phenomenon (e.g., Gioia et al. 2000; Hatch and Schultz 1997; Pratt and Foreman 2000b; Whetten and Mackey 2002).

As noted in Table 1, the viewpoint of "who are we as an organization" has gone by a variety of terms in the literature. Still, the use of the term *identity* is fairly consistent with respect to this conceptual domain. As a result, we anticipate that theorists and researchers will find that communication across disciplines will become easier if they can constrain their use of the term *identity* to the characterization in Viewpoint 1. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the distinction between individuals and organizations is an important one that must be recognized. Consequently, we suggest that *organizational identity* refer to the organizational level and that terms such as *perceived organizational identity* or *organizational identity associations* refer to the individual level. Our more controversial choices lie in Viewpoints 2 to 4.

Viewpoint 2: Intended Associations and Intended Image

One of the most important strategic-level decisions that corporate managers make concerns the positioning of an organization in the minds of key stakeholder groups. That is, of all possible organizational attributes and characteristics, which of these should the organization attempt to communicate to important others? In essence, the underlying question here is which attributes and characteristics the organization wants representatives of various stakeholder groups to hold as strong associations. The complete set of associations that managers desire the members of a particular stakeholder group to hold we label *intended associations*. Managers will normally focus, however, on a more constrained set of organizational attributes that they want the members of the stakeholder group to view as most salient. This is the *intended image* of the organization for that stakeholder group.

Although conceivable, it is difficult to think of an organization's managers focusing their efforts on developing different intended images at the individual level. Instead, managers will attempt to develop an intended image that has the potential of becoming consistent across the members of a stakeholder group. The intended image promoted by the company will often differ across stakeholder groups, however. A company that promotes itself as customer centered and value oriented to consumers may at the same time be positioning itself as fiscally conservative and a good corporate citizen to another stakeholder group.

The choice of which attributes to communicate is up to an organization; the organization may even choose not to intentionally communicate a particular image to a particular group. In fact, it may attempt to “hide” the company per se from one or more stakeholder groups (e.g., a company with strong individual brands at the product or service level may be “hidden” to consumers) while expending considerable resources to communicate a particular message to other audiences (e.g., investors, creditors, suppliers). Over the long term, the organization cannot remain “mute” across all stakeholder groups. This is consistent with the collective-social-actor view of organizations, which holds that for effective collective action to occur, all actors so engaged must be identifiable (Whetten and Mackey 2002). Given that social intercourse is guided by shared prototypes, the organization must make it clear to all interacting parties what type of organization it is. Whereas habitual mistaken identity is annoying to individuals, it is deadly for organizations.

Theorists use a variety of names for this viewpoint, including both *identity* and *image*, often with the qualifier *desired* attached. It is our view that the term *identity* is best reserved for the concepts in Viewpoint 1. Accordingly, we suggest *intended image* as an appropriate term for reflecting management’s view of how it wants an organization to be perceived by important others.

Viewpoint 3: Construed Associations and Construed Image

The mental associations in Viewpoint 3 are those that organization members believe others outside the organization hold about the organization. Consequently, we propose labeling the collective of associations falling within this domain *construed associations*. Furthermore, those associations that members believe are treated as CED by individuals outside the organization we label the organization’s *construed image*.

Research suggests that members’ beliefs about how others view an organization play an important role in how the members themselves view and respond to the organization (e.g., Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn 1995; Dutton et al. 1994; Hatch and Schultz 2000), thus having an important influence on Viewpoint 1. Furthermore, given the interactions among various constituencies and between the various constituencies and the organization, it seems highly likely that organizational managers will attend to their perceptions of how important others view the organization as they make decisions and take actions with respect to communicating the intended image (Viewpoint 2). Given this foundational role for perceptions of how others view the organization, it is surprising to find relatively little research in any discipline on this important viewpoint.

Managers will normally think of construed associations and image at the organizational level (e.g., How does our chief supplier view us?) or at the stakeholder group level (e.g., How do consumers perceive us?). It is also possible, however, to think of construed image at the individual level, in particular when one or more individuals are especially influential within or across stakeholder groups (e.g., a particular consumer activist, political leader, or opinion leader in general).

Viewpoint 4: Corporate (Organizational) Associations and Reputation

A significant amount of academic work has examined how stakeholders view and respond to focal organizations. Much of the research in this viewpoint adopts an individual-level perspective to investigate what individuals might know or believe about an organization (e.g., Berens, van Riel, and van Bruggen 2005; Bolger 1959; Brown and Dacin 1997; Goldberg and Hartwick 1990).

For example, researchers have examined how prospective employees view companies they are considering for employment (e.g., Gatewood, Gowan, and Lautenschlager 1993; Schwoerer and Rosen 1989), how investors respond to announcements that a company is selling off a division (Guedes and Parayre 1997), how industrial buyers perceive suppliers (e.g., Hill 1962; Needle 1964), and how consumers perceive companies (e.g., Gurhan-Canli and Batra 2004; Keller and Aaker 1998; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001).

Brown and Dacin (1997:69) defined *corporate associations* as a “label for all the information about a company that a person holds,” and we use this term (or *organizational associations* where more appropriate) for the all-aspects dimension of Viewpoint 4. Consistent with the work of a number of theorists (e.g., Gioia et al. 2000; Markwick and Fill 1997; van Riel and Balmer 1997; Whetten and Mackey 2002), we suggest using the label *reputation* to capture the set of corporate associations that individuals outside an organization believe are CED to the organization. Although several writers (in particular those in the marketing discipline) have used the term *image* to represent this latter concept, it is important to draw a distinction between the content in Viewpoint 4 and that in Viewpoints 2 and 3, which assume the perspective of organizational members. Accordingly, image concerns what an organizational member wants others to know (or believes others know) about the organization, while reputation is a perception of the organization actually held by an external stakeholder.

Several aspects of Viewpoint 4 distinguish it from the other organizational viewpoints. Regardless of what a manager personally believes, chooses to communicate, or construes that stakeholders believe about a company, the

corporate associations formed and held in memory by an individual member or a stakeholder representative serve as the "reality" of the organization for that individual. Note that in Figure 1, the arrow representing Viewpoint 4 originates with the stakeholder; corporate associations belong to the stakeholder, not the organization. Furthermore, Figure 1 does not represent a closed system. Corporate associations and reputations may be influenced by a variety of outside sources (e.g., competitors, industry analysts, consumer activists, the media) in addition to communications from the company (Brown 1998; Rindova 1997). As a result, corporate associations in Viewpoint 4, while often instrumental in motivating individual behaviors, are not entirely manageable by the organization, though they may be indirectly affected through managerial choices and actions in Viewpoint 2.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this brief review and proposal is to offer a framework for synthesizing existing research and theory on identity, intended image, construed image, and reputation across different academic disciplines. We hope that this framework will facilitate further interdisciplinary scholarship on these concepts.

NOTE

1. The authors contributed equally to this article and are listed in alphabetical order.

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