



How to align organizational identity and external image in order to create strategic advantages: A case study of multiple business units of a firm in a rapid changing market

Master thesis

University of Twente

Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences

International Business Administration

Ronan Berendsen

s1002015

r.h.m.berendsen@student.utwente.nl

23-08-2018

First supervisor: Dr. Raymond Loohuis

Second supervisor: Dr. Martin Stienstra

Colofon

Title:	Aligning external image and organizational identity in the infrastructure sector
Client:	ReintenInfra B.V. Elsmorsweg 7 7575 PD Oldenzaal Postbus 315 7570 AH Oldenzaal www.reinteninfra.nl
Educational institution:	University of Twente Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social sciences (BMS) International Business Administration Postbus 217 7500 AE Enschede www.utwente.nl/bms
Author:	Ronan Berendsen s1002015 r.h.m.berendsen@student.utwente.nl
First supervisor:	Dr. Raymond Loohuis r.p.a.loohuis@utwente.nl
Second supervisor:	Dr. Martin Stienstra m.r.stienstra@utwente.nl
External supervisor:	Herman Reinten h.reinten@twi.nl
Place:	Enschede
Date:	23-08-2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is written as the final result of my Masters' study International Business Administration at the University of Twente. With this paper, my study time at the University has come to an end after an interesting, versatile journey. A journey which was not always easy and self-evident, but also a journey which brought me to where I am now: I know now that it's all about believing.

For almost ten years ago, I started my University life in Enschede and I have to admit that those years were truly amazing. A few highlights (amongst others) were my chairmanship of the ski trip committee of study association Inter-Actief, achieving the Best Paper Award in Human Resource Management, experiencing an turbulent time in a wonderful business during my Bachelorthesis and getting that Bachelorthesis rewarded with the SeederDeBoer Thesis Award in 2014.

But most of all, I cherish the friends I got to know during my study: besides all the nonsense, there was always time for a good chat about every conceivable topic. Without these friends, my time at the University would not have been this great and that is why I would to thank you for your indescribable overwhelming contribution.

I would also like to thank my parents and my sister Bodyl for always supporting me. In every choice I made, they were always there to have my back while maintaining a critical look to help me stay focused on the important things.

For this thesis, I would like to thank Dr. Raymond Loohuis for his valuable guidance and important directions while conducting this research and writing this thesis. He has been very helpful in handing me the tools to successfully finish this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Martin Stienstra for his supervision on this thesis, supporting me to this final version.

Furthermore, I also want to thank Herman Reinten and Karin Rog for giving me the chance to conduct my research under their supervision. They supported me through my research and created opportunities to successfully finish this thesis. Last, but not least, I would like to thank all respondents for their time and honest answers.

Ronan Berendsen
23-08-2018

Management summary

Due to quick and constant changing environments, many firms are struggling with keeping a proper alignment between their internal organizational identity and their external image. The synthesizing of these two elements can result in a better understanding of the market and the position of the firm in that market, creating strategic advantages in optimizing firm's performance. Since organizational identity ("that what we think we are") often differs from the perceived external image ("that others think we are"), this research aims to find out how to align the differences in a fast changing market, guided by a theoretical framework. By interviewing multiple external and internal partners of an ambitious, fast-growing firm in a rapidly changing market, called Infra Corporation, the thoughts on organizational identity and external image were mentioned and recognized. After comparing the data from the internal respondents with the data from the external respondents, the multi-factor gap between the both elements was discovered: first of all, the top management of the firm thinks in a different way about the firm than the lower level employees. Clients also stated that the distinctive factors of the firm are the main reason to work with the firm, which proves that a reliable and valid image could result in more and better collaboration between firm and client. And last, a firm with employees who are proud to work for the firm is recognized and respected by its clients, making the bond between the two partners even stronger. In the end, this research concludes that a well-defined identity, presented in a clear and obvious manner creates positive ideas amongst clients, minimalizing the discrepancy between the organizational identity and the external image. By synthesizing both elements, organizations can create a strategical advantage in their sector and therefore support their clients better. However, identity seems harder to change to overcome the minor differences between the two elements, whereas image is mostly a way of the right choice in the field of communication.

Keywords: organizational identity, external image, infrastructure sector

Table of contents

Colofon	1
Acknowledgements	2
Management summary	3
1. Introduction.....	6
1.1 Problem definition.....	6
2. Theoretical framework.....	8
2.1 Organizational identity.....	8
2.2 External image.....	8
2.3 Alignment between organizational identity and external image.....	10
2.4 Model of Gioia et al. (2000).....	11
3. Methodology	12
3.1 Research approach.....	12
3.3 Data	13
3.4 Data collection.....	13
3.5 Respondents.....	13
3.6 Procedure	14
3.7 Processing and analysis	15
4. Results	16
4.1 Internal findings – organizational identity	16
4.1.1 Business Unit 1	16
4.1.2 Business Unit 2	16
4.1.2 Business Unit 3	17
4.1.4 General organizational identity outcome	17
4.2 External findings – external image	18
4.2.1 Business Unit 1	18
4.2.2 Business Unit 2	19
4.2.3 Business Unit 3	19
4.2.4 General external image outcome.....	20
4.3 Synthesizing the findings – identity/image	20
4.3.1 Business Unit 1	20
4.3.2 Business Unit 2	20
4.3.4 Business Unit 3	21
4.3.5 General outcome.....	21
4.3.6 Additional findings.....	22
4.4 Summary of the findings	22

5. Conclusion and discussion	22
5.1 Conclusions.....	23
5.2 Discussion	23
5.3 Practical implications.....	24
5.4 Limitations and future research	25
References.....	26
Appendix A – Questions management.....	28
Appendix B – Questions clients	28

1. Introduction

Many firms are struggling to present themselves in a consistent way amongst stakeholders (Einwiller & Will, 2002). By the acquisition of multiple companies including their brands and cultures, it becomes more and more difficult to keep creating a coherent perception to the outside world, the so-called external image. A relevant development of an organizational identity could help a firm to stay relevant and could lead to strategic and competitive advantages (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

According to T. Melewar (2003), the existence of a clear organizational identity has several advantages. Besides motivating employees because of a clearer purpose and direction within the firm and the supporting function to integrate new cultures in case of a merger or acquisition, the most important advantage is that stakeholders such as customers and suppliers will become more aware of the capabilities of the organization. The organizational identity of a firm basically defines “who we are as an organization” (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) claim that a healthy alignment between organizational identity and external image results in strategical advantages. The discrepancy between identity and image can be solved in two ways: 1) change your identity, 2) change your image. However, this process is interrelated, as an outside view of the company affects the employees and thus the organizational identity whereas a change in identity can also influence the outside perspective.

Currently, there is a limited number of relevant studies in this field concerning firms in the b2b-market. Therefore, this study will aim to clear up any existing beliefs on the theme of identity development and identity creation and expand the current theory on these topics. The research will be conducted against the background of the infrastructure sector, where a firm is selected that deals with the problems of identity development and image creation because of multiple subsidiaries and is active in a sector that is rapidly changing. This study will therefore also contribute to the firm’s insights on their identity and image which can be used practically to gain strategical advantages.

1.1 Problem definition

The selected company is the central organization that houses several other firms in the road and water infrastructure industry. After the current CEO decided to find a new challenge in his field of work, he started acquiring regional family-managed firms that were experiencing (financial) difficulties. He was inspired by the opportunities he recognized in the infrastructure industry, restructured these firms and added them to the main company in order to create a successful synergy between them. The first business unit was acquired and shortly other firms followed. Nowadays, the main firm houses multiple business units which are all active in their own specific area of infrastructure. To ensure proper reading and understanding of this thesis while also respecting the privacy of the firm and her environment, the main organization will be called “Infra Corporation”.

The research focuses on the alignment of organizational identity and external image of the three most important, active and relevant business units of Infra Corporation that of the main firm Infra Corporation. These three subsidiaries were selected since these organizations could benefit the most from the results of this research. For the purpose of this research as mentioned before, the three subsidiaries will be called Business Unit 1, Business Unit 2 and Business Unit 3.

Infra Corporation mainly focuses is on soil and demolition activities, cultural engineering and road and water works. Infra Corporation carries out both governmental and private projects, for which more than 650 employees aim to realize a high-quality product and/or service.

In a recent interview with the CEO of Infra Corporation, it became clear that the industry is facing several challenges in general. He claims that the industry is still stuck in old-fashioned guidelines and incentives, even though they should have learned from the 'Bouwdiscussie'. In 2001, a Dutch channel broadcasted a documentary on how the Dutch infrastructure industry has been involved in a large scale fraud against the Dutch government (the so-called 'Bouwdiscussie') including price fixing, double-entry bookkeeping, slush funds, tax fraud and corruption (Bullock, Clarke, & Tilley, 2010).

Since then, the industry is trying to get itself back on its feet, but according to the CEO of the firm that process has not been very successfully so far. The CEO claims that the sector is still experiencing difficulties for what happened in the past. Because of the low profit margins in the industry, the majority of the organizations fight for what they are worth and try to acquire their clients in a soft- or hard-handed way.

The CEO of Infra Corporation believes that the industry should and can change, for the sake of common interest of the sector. By leading an honest, healthy and hard-working organization, the CEO tries to make Infra Corporation a sustainable, successful player. He claims that not only the people who are doing business with the organization are stakeholders, but also the next-door neighbor: everyone who hears, sees or discovers Infra Corporation has something to do with the firm and should be taken into account when making decisions on the strategy of the firm. This psychology proves to be a good mindset: the firm is one of the few companies in the sector that continues to realize a growing turnover and profit.

However, within the actual operational processes, Infra Corporation experiences various challenges which need proper identification and handling in order to help the firm in their goal of building towards a sustainable future. Because of the way Infra Corporation is originated, the company is hard to identify by its clients and suppliers since the firm exists of multiple independent companies. Every single company has had its own independent identity and image so far, but with every acquisition these components needed to change to fit within the central organization of Infra Corporation.

One of the current challenges of Infra Corporation is to identify and analyze the firm's current identity and the match with their image in the market. In these times, it is hard to keep a stable identity for a firm while successfully matching that with their image. Keeping both elements aligned correctly is very important, but not easy in these times where mergers and acquisitions are playing a big role. To help Infra Corporation understand this challenge, the following research question is derived:

"How could a firm in the infrastructure sector successfully align their organizational identity with their external image in order to gain a strategic advantage?"

This thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature, specifically in the field of discrepancy between organizational identity and external image. Furthermore, the implications of this research will contribute to the selected firm's strategical advantages in their sector. The organization will be able to analyze their current position on both elements and may use the recommendations from this research to improve their business activities.

This paper first explains the current opinions on organizational identity and external image in scientific literature, creating a sustainable theoretical background. After that, the methodology used in this research is clarified, followed by the results of the study and the conclusions and recommendations for the selected organization.

2. Theoretical framework

To answer the research question, it is important to know which constructs are used and in which way. Since this thesis will mainly focus on the relationship between organizational identity and external image, those concepts will be extensively described in this chapter in order to create a sustainable framework from which the field research can be conducted.

2.1 Organizational identity

According to Van Riel and Balmer (1997), there are currently three approaches to define organizational identity. The typical way to define an organizational identity was by analyzing the way a firm expresses itself to the outside world by logos, house style and other visual identifications, the graphic design paradigm. The role of symbolism has become bigger in this typical approach and has left its original purpose of increasing organizational visibility to achieve a new position where it is seen as a large influence in communicating corporate strategy. Secondly, the authors argue that graphic designers and marketers realized that consistency in formal corporate communication also fundamentally influences the organizational identity, resulting in the so-called integrated communication paradigm. It is stated that organizations should communicate effectively with all of their stakeholders since it is important towards a consistent organizational identity (Bernstein, 1984). An inconsistent organizational identity can only lead to confusion and misunderstandings amongst both internal and external stakeholders which influences the strategical advantages of the firm. Finally, the understanding of organizational identity has been broadened towards a multidisciplinary approach, the interdisciplinary paradigm. Olins (1978) stated that the organizational identity is defined by the way an organization behaves, communicates and through symbolism towards both internal and external audiences.

Since then, the definition organizational identity has been developed even more, resulting in several complementary ideas. Gioia et al. (2000) define organizational identity as “a consistent and targeted representation of the corporation emphasized through the management of corporate symbols and logos; strategically planned and operationally applied internal and external self-representation”. Van Riel (1995) defines an organizational identity as “the company-controlled communication to the outside world”. Another author describes organizational identity as “the strategically planned expressions of corporate personality via the cues given by its symbols, behavior and communications” (Stuart, 2001).

The overall commonality in all definitions is the construct of communication of presentation. Based on the definitions mentioned above, it is possible to derive a general definition which is used in this thesis. This definition can be found further in this thesis in Figure 1: Table of Constructs.

2.2 External image

There is a distinction between organizational identity and organizational, external image (Gioia et al., 2000). Where the identity is a more broad understanding of the features of a company that are central and relatively permanent and distinguishes it from other firms, the image of an organization is about the belief how others view the firm. It is important to mention that a single company does not hold an image, people create an individual image of a company (Dowling, 1986). Berg (1985) for example, specifies image as “the public’s perception or impression of an organization, usually associated with a given action or event.” Another author defines external image as “something that a communicator creates—constructs and projects or gives to other people—who often are called receivers.” (Grunig, 1993). Blythe (2009) describes image as “the overall impression a company or brand has in the eyes of its publics”.

Different approaches distinguish different definitions. For example, according to Hatch and Schultz (1997), “very few within the marketing literature consider internal organizational aspects when dealing with the concept of organizational image.” Organizational literature however, almost exclusively focuses on internal aspects where for example Dutton and Dukerich (1991) argue that image is mostly influenced and experienced by members of the firm instead of by members of external entities. In a later published paper, they define image a little different by stating that members from both internal and external entities experience and influence image (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) which is also confirmed in other literature (Gioia et al., 2000; Van Riel & Balmer, 1997). In the current literature, it is commonly accepted that external image differs from organizational identity: “Similar to a firm’s reputation or goodwill, it is the public perception of the firm rather than a reflection of its actual state or position.” (“Corporate Image - Business Dictionary,” 2017).

In earlier literature, Dowling (1986) describes the relation between the two processes in image creation. First of all, people form an image of a company based on how they think about the organization and its activities. Besides this first process, people will also see advertising and PR-activities of the company, which will of course try to highlight the positive sides of the company. The author states that “if this company controlled image is based on fact rather than figments of management’s imagination, both processes will complement rather than contradict each other.” (Dowling, 1986).

Cornelissen (2000) states in his study that the traditional model of corporate communication where organizational identity automatically results in an external image does not fully cover the process of image creation since other variables are also a key factor. He states that interactivities between stakeholders and multiple elements within the firm such as corporate communication and interpersonal behavior affects the external image either positively or negatively. Moreover, he confirms the findings of Shee and Abratt (1989): “This personality is projected by means of conscious cues which constitute an identity. The overall impression formed by these cues in the minds of audiences constitutes an image”.

To cover the central beliefs on the definition of image, this thesis will use the definition which is found in Figure 1: Table of Constructs. It may be clear that any object can have an image (such as stores, products, countries and more) but since this thesis will only focus on the image of an organization in a business context, the definition is specifically corrected for this theme.

The following table (Figure 1: Table of Constructs) summarizes the definitions of the most important constructs in this research:

Table of Constructs	
<i>Construct</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Organizational Identity	The distinctive, enduring, strategical representation of a company through symbols, behavior and communication towards internal and external stakeholders.
External Image	The perception of the organizational identity of a company by internal and external stakeholders.

Figure 1: Table of Constructs

2.3 Alignment between organizational identity and external image

Chajet and Shachtman (1991) state the following in their paper: “Many chairmen still believe that a new identity can cover systematic faults. Nothing could be further from the truth. Conjuring a new identity to respond to mismanagement is never, never, never a solution. Good image-making marries the reality with the image, and bad image-making deliberately distorts the image in order to mask, protect, or otherwise prevent the accurate understanding of the underlying reality.” According to Christensen and Askegaard (2001), an external image is created through “the total sum of signs that stand for an organization’s identity”. Organizational identity thus has an effect on the external image of a firm, but does not totally cover the subject since the expression of this identity influences the perceived image. Expressions which can not be controlled by the firm, such as media coverage and clients experiences with the firm, also influence the image perceived by stakeholders (T. C. Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

A fitting alignment between organizational identity and external image could have a positive influence on the way stakeholders see the position of the organization (Nguyen, 2006), and therefore creating strategic advantages. Especially customers and employees which are very closely related to the firm benefit from a fitting alignment. It has to be taken into account that identity is hard to change since it is affected by cultural elements within an organization and society as a whole. According to Hatch and Schultz (1997), “corporate identity can, therefore, never be wholly managed; in part, it too is a cultural product”. Only influencing identity, without taking into account that image should also be influenced in order to create an aligned construct, is not enough.

Therefore, by aligning organizational identity and external image, a firm would be able to better fit its stakeholders’ expectations. According to Raisch and Birkinshaw (2008), organizations should adapt to their market and clients: “long-term success requires an organizational balance between continuity and change”. This balance is defined by multiple constructs including an aligned organizational identity and external image.

Gioia et al. (2000) state that creating awareness amongst stakeholders (especially managers within a firm) on the topic of identity and image is a key factor in the sensemaking process. By identifying gaps between both elements, managers can become aware of their current position and deliberately influence the process in order to align these two factors. The relation between developing a successful organizational identity and creating a realistic external image is shown by this research and confirms the idea behind the model of Gioia et al. (2000). This model (as shown in Figure 2 on the next page) explains how organizational identity and external image are related.

2.4 Model of Gioia et al. (2000)

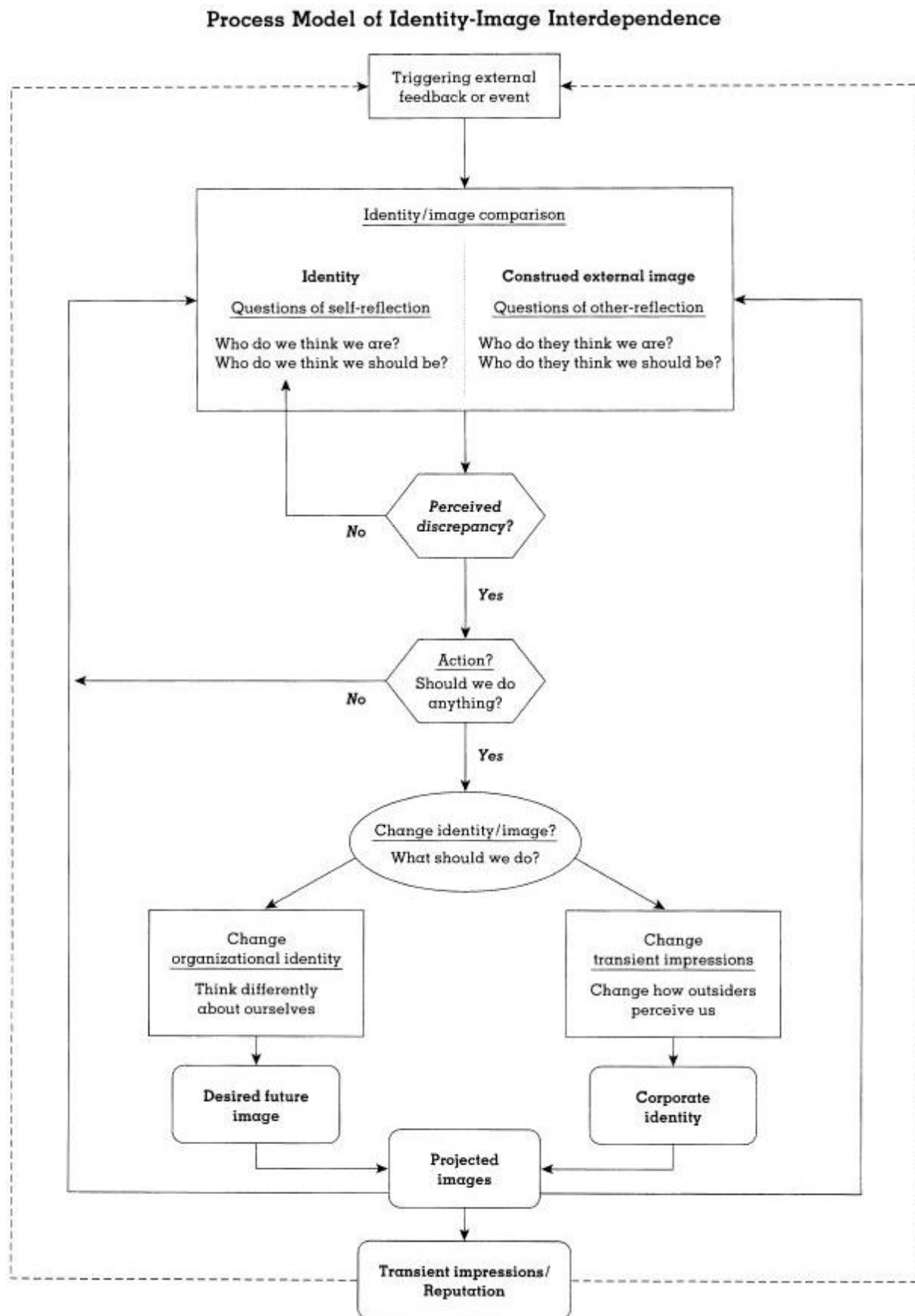


Figure 2: Process Model of Identity-Image Interdependence

3. Methodology

To find out what the current status of identity and image is within the main firm, an explorative, qualitative research design is set up. In the end, the data obtained through this explorative, qualitative study will be analyzed with the theoretical framework based on the model of Gioia et al. (2000).

To find out which ideas about organizational identity and external image are currently alive amongst the employees within the main firm and its business units, multiple employees will be asked about their opinions on the current activities related to this theme. In order to gather as much relevant information as possible, interviews are conducted amongst the employees which allowed them to share their thoughts about these topics in a comfortable setting. The interviews leave room for more contextual information which might improve the reliability and extent application purposes.

Since the organization mostly serves governmental partners, it does not have a large customer base. Therefore, quantitative research methods will not sufficiently handle the relevant topics within this research whereas interviews leaves room for clients to better express their thoughts and ideas.

3.1 Research approach

First of all, explorative semi-structured interviews will form the base of the research. These interviews will be focusing on the current organizational identity perception amongst relevant employees within the organization, the so-called internal part. By interviewing the general directors of the three business units, it will become clear which main perception is currently applicable and most of all, which identity these directors strive to achieve. In addition, the founder and owner of the main firm will be interviewed in order to find out which purpose and direction he desires for his organization. Besides interviewing employees in management positions, so-called 'UTA'-employees (executive, technical and administrative) will also be interviewed to understand the current challenges in the field. The final results of all interviews will be summarized to recognize the essence of the current identity of the firm and the desired identity from the internal perspective.

The next step will be the conduction of semi-structured interviews amongst multiple governmental clients to find out how they perceive the company's image, the so-called external part. Since governmental projects almost fully define the core business of the firm, the research will fully focus on these group of clients. Besides asking the clients which current image they perceive of the firm, these people are also asked whether this image is a fitting one, and which elements of this image can be improved by the firm.

In the end, both results are taken into account to discover the differences and commonalities between the outcomes of the internal part and the outcomes of the external part. First of all, these results can be used to find a gap in the current literature, moreover in the model of Gioia et al. (2000). Secondly, the results will show multiple differences and/or commonalities between the current organizational identity and the current external image. It might be that there are absolutely no differences between the respondents answers. In that case, it can be concluded that the firm currently succeeds in matching organizational identity and external image. However, if that is not the case, the model describes that the main firm or one or more of the business units should change their identity, the perceived image or both in order to better match both elements. It could be that that means that just a few adjustments need to be made, or that a whole new organizational identity needs to be developed for one or more parts of the organization: the final recommendation will capture all options and provide the organization with a realizable target in order to develop their current activities towards a fitting organizational identity and external image.

3.3 Data

The theoretical framework will be expanded with more relevant literature derived from the university library, Google Scholar and/or Web of Science. The central topic of this theoretical framework will come down to the match between positive effect of the development of organizational identity on strategic advantage.

This research will then be conducted with several sources of data: First of all, several internal documents will be used to find out more about the current structure within the firm, in order to set up a relevant framework to scope the research. Second, interviews with the director of the organization and the Director Customer & Market will illustrate the organization and emphasis of the research, and will contribute to the research by narrowing down the scope of the study. Third, the aforementioned interviews will result into relevant data for the analyzing part of this research.

The difference in data sources will strengthen the research in its validity as it measures the same constructs in different environments. In addition, the data sources will be checked on their reliability, although it can be assumed that close stakeholders such as involved clients and members of the management team can provide a reliable reproduction of their perception of the current business activities of the organization. Outliers or contradictions in the data are removed or not taken into account. It is important that the research could be reproduced to improve its reliability (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013). Therefore, the complete data collection method is described and explained to maintain future reliability.

3.4 Data collection

The organization set up a list of internal and external relevant respondents. Within the firm, the owner and founder of the firm is interviewed to derive his relevant view on this topic. Secondly, the managers of respectively Business Unit 1, Business Unit 2 and Business Unit 3 are interviewed. To finalize the internal part, so-called 'UTA'-employees are interviewed since they are employees seen by relevant stakeholders and might have an interesting contribution to the outcomes of the interviews of the directors.

For the external part, almost all clients are covered which strengthens the internal validity of the research since the client sample is not quite large: there is just not a large amount of governmental clients available. The semi-structured interviews that are conducted amongst employees of the firm are based on the questions shown in appendix A. Appendix B shows the interview questions used in the interviews with several governmental clients. All interviews are recorded with the written permission of the respondents and later written out to minimize errors, in case of further research and to ease the analysis. The interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the respondent which in all cases concerned their own work environment and took between 30 – 60 minutes per interview.

3.5 Respondents

A total of 25 interviews are conducted with 13 respondents from within the firm and 12 relevant respondents from clients. The respondents are selected based on their position within the organization and their involvement. To distinguish the difference between the three main departments within the organization (Business Unit 1, Business Unit 2 and Business Unit 3), multiple clients are interviewed which are doing business with one or more departments of the organization. To ensure the privacy of the respondents, the governmental organization they work for has been renamed. The table in Figure 3 on the next page shows which positions the respondents respectively have within their organization.

Respondent number	Focus	Position within the firm/client
1.1	Internal	Regional manager Business Unit 3
1.2	Internal	Project manager Business Unit 2
1.3	Internal	Project manager Business Unit 2
1.4	Internal	Project manager Business Unit 3
1.5	Internal	Project manager Business Unit 1
1.6	Internal	Project manager Business Unit 3
1.7	Internal	Branch manager Business Unit 3
1.8	Internal	Regional manager Business Unit 3
1.9	Internal	Director Business Unit 2
1.10	Internal	Rayon leader Business Unit 3
1.11	Internal	Director Business Unit 1
1.12	Internal	Site manager Business Unit 1
1.13	Internal	Director Infra Corporation
2.1	External	Executive/supervisor Bastille
2.2	External	Policy officer Cubicus
2.3	External	Project manager Vrijhof
2.4	External	Executive/supervisor Waaier
2.5	External	Project manager Zilverling
2.6	External	Program manager infrastructure Horst
2.7	External	Project manager Spiegel
2.8	External	Head of city engineers Ravelijn
2.9	External	Head procurement Citadel
2.10	External	Project manager Carré
2.11	External	Executive/supervisor Hogeekamp
2.12	External	Project manager Charlie

Figure 3: List of internal and external respondents

3.6 Procedure

Due to the nature of this research, the best way to obtain the most valuable, reliable and valid data is through interviews. In-depth, open-ended interviews will realize the best results since this method can reveal surprising discoveries (Babbie, 2010). Since the topic of this research could be sensitive for either respondents because of their level of involvement within the firm, open interviews could help to find these hints and discover more relevant data.

All respondents are interviewed in their own work environment in order to make the respondents feel relaxed and comfortable. In order to retrieve relevant, honest and spontaneous answers, the researcher decided to inform the respondents about the topic of the research but the respondents do not receive the actual interview questions beforehand. Although there are many possibilities to interview someone, the researcher chooses to conduct face-to-face interviews instead of by phone, email or other media. According to Opdenakker (2006), face-to-face interviews are the best way to take its advantage of social cues and answers will be more spontaneous since respondents do not have time for reflection. Again, spontaneous answers and social cues could help discovering underlying motives which might contribute to the research.

In order to obtain as much relevant and applicable data as possible, the interview questions were set up with help of scientific literature. For example, Leech (2002) explains multiple guidelines on how to phrase questions in such a way that they are appealing to answer for the respondent, which was taken into account during the actual interview. More than once the concepts of grand tour questions and floating prompts are being used in order to receive more in-depth responses (Leech, 2002).

The main goal of the interviews is to find out whether the identity of the three firms (Business Unit 1, Business Unit 2 and Business Unit 3) and of the overall firm (Infra Corporation) aligns with their respective image. Those two main constructs are two common thread through the research and therefore also through the interviews. Since internal employees can relate to the daily business of (one of) the firm(s), they can better oversee the complete picture within the organization. Therefore, the internal part of the research was mainly focused on the identity of the main firm and the three business units during the interviews. Basically, the respondents are asked to describe one or more of the firms, depending on their relation with the organization. Roughly the same set up was used in the external part of the research: however, instead of questions about organizational identity of the firm(s), these respondents were asked about the image of the organization since they are on the external side and can therefore better deduct an external image.

The interview questions can be roughly divided in two segments: first, the constructs are measured in a structured way, both in the internal and external interviews. Respondents are first asked which keywords came in mind related to the regarding firm(s), after which the respondent narrows his earlier mentioned keywords down to a maximum of four per firm. By setting up four central keywords per firm, it is possible to find out whether gaps or similarities between the views of the respondents. Second, the following interview questions are concentrated around topics that define organizational identity and external image such as communication, distinctiveness, symbolism, and behavior. By taking these topics into the open, respondents are forced to think about the underlying parts of the development of identity and image. This results in a better, more substantiated opinion about the two constructs. In addition, these questions invites the respondent to tell more about his arguments and impressions related to the firm(s) which better contextualizes the respondents' answers.

Besides these measurements, the other interview questions were set up to ensure that no data was left behind, and to deduct as much relevant information as possible. Not only the explorative side of this study was taken into account, but also the reasoning behind responses of the respondents in order to create a complete, reliable and valid set of data. To ensure that as less mistakes as possible are made during the interview, all interviews have been recorded. Furthermore, the researcher made annotations during all interviews in case of malfunctioning equipment, emphasizing statements or noting 'off-the-record'-quotes which are not suitable for recording but could still contribute to the research.

3.7 Processing and analysis

As mentioned before, all interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents. Next, the interviews were transcribed. This data in combination with the annotations of the researcher is used as a main source of information. The two segments are also visible here: first of all, the determination of the keywords for both the identity and image can be found through comparing the results of this first segment. The second segment of the interview adds value to the keywords and can be used to find background information for the earlier mentioned keywords. For the data to be applicable in this research, the most important and relevant parts were translated into English.

4. Results

Analyzing the data results in a overview of the current state of the identity of the firm and her business units and the current state of the image amongst (governmental) clients. The discovered gap between both areas is worth further investigating.

4.1 Internal findings – organizational identity

In general, all internal respondents show a certain pride to work in the firm. None of the respondents shows signs of a lack of satisfaction while working and taking responsibility, and some of them even get upset when the researcher confronts them with debatable questions and topics about the firm.

4.1.1 Business Unit 1

Business Unit 1 is described by the respondents as 'reliable', 'regional', 'righteous' and 'decent'. Some respondents also mentioned 'communicative' and 'hard-working', but these keywords are more relevant to the practical side of the business activities. In total, the respondents came up with 13 keywords that fit the organizational identity. The historical character of the firm together with it's current culture affect the mentioned keywords: the traditional way of working makes that none of the respondents came up with words such as 'sustainable'. The respondents are all satisfied with the way the company expresses itself, by investing in highly recognizable equipment and uniforms. One respondent mentions the fact that the organization can almost do everything itself: "If we can do something ourselves, we do it ourselves." That shows the way the organization thinks about autonomous management and how problems are solved within the firm: first, the employees look at what they can do different in order to find a solution before looking at other organizations (for example hiring people). The respondents also confess that they are not always aware of the fact that they are being watched by their environment, and therefore sometimes fail to express themselves in the way they would like to that. One respondent claims that it is important to keep the culture and identity in the firm stable, and that it might be good to also select the right people in the hiring phase. Nowadays, the firm tries to hire the best candidate for the job, without looking at personal traits that might influence the organizational identity. By also checking if a person fits the organizational culture, the identity might become stronger visible within and outside the firm.

It is remarkable to see that the general manager do not think that the business unit is customer-oriented, something that is also not mentioned by other respondents. The manager believes that "we need to become more customer-oriented instead of production-oriented". Such a belief is shared by other respondents, the organization is still focusing too much on what they can and can not do, instead of focusing on the wishes or problems of the customer. Basically, a client demands a solution to his problem and the organization has to take care of that, therefore performing better and thus creating a more sustainable base for collaboration in the future.

4.1.2 Business Unit 2

The respondents come up with 15 different keywords, such as 'flexible', 'proud', 'transparent' and 'reliable'. This large amount of indecisive keywords might be a result of the composition of the (relatively small) target group since it exists of people from all layers of the organization. However, the main value that seems to be important is the value 'customer oriented': the company tries to think with its customers during the whole process instead of just delivering a product. Other values that distinguish the firm from other firms in the sector are 'small-scale', 'flexible' and 'traditional'. The respondents also think that these values are the values that customers seek in the organization and that clients rate these key values in an organization highly. One of the respondents claims that "clients do not normally come to our company because of our key values, but they are definitely staying with us because of them."

It is also believed that the firm's management would also like to see these values at Business Unit 2. The respondents think that the success of the organization is a product of the current strategy, which is of course a result of a well-functioning collaboration between management and so-called 'UTA'-employees. Furthermore, the respondents agree that more collaboration with the firm's partners (Business Unit 1 & Business Unit 3) could improve their level of mutual synergy, and therefore improve firm's performance. After all, the respondents believe that firm performance is one of the most important factors in external image creation amongst clients.

Respondents also emphasize the regional characteristics of the organization. They imply that clients are pleased to see familiar employees to work with, which makes communication more transparent, shorter and easier according to the respondents. Some say that Business Unit 2 needs to improve their visibility in order to gain more access to interesting assignments. However, all respondents agree that the current marketing strategy is on the right path. They emphasize the positive style of the company in both (online/social) media and working environments. The company also invests a relatively large amount in recognizable visibility, for example in own constructions equipment, own signings and own company outfits, all clearly equipped with the company logo. Although the respondents are satisfied with this strategy and often receive positive feedback, they sometimes feel that the general marketing director is too much personally involved. They are slightly afraid that clients could be too impressed, with a possible negative effect on the company's image.

4.1.2 Business Unit 3

According to the respondents, Business Unit 3 differs from the other organizations. All respondents mention the inventive strategy of the company of focusing on building team construction work ('bouwteamwerken'), some of them stating that this way of working might be the future within the infrastructure sector. Inherent to this approach is the need of trust between client and the executive organization. A respondent stated that "trust is the cornerstone of future building projects since specific knowledge is slowly disappearing". The key values, defining the identity of the organization, are quite clear according to the respondents. They agree on the key values 'reliable', 'down-to-earth', 'customer-oriented', 'relational'.

The respondents also state that it is hard to get rid of their old image, when they were not so much in construction and infrastructure work as they are right now: they think that a lot of their (potential) clients think that their main focus is still on the old activities instead of their current activities. They agree that it takes time and hard work to change this idea amongst people and are satisfied with the way the company is working on that theme at the moment.

Two respondents state that their business unit is not treated equally compared to other business units. They sometimes feel left out and not taken seriously, also because of the current location of their business activities. According to them, the perspective amongst clients could be influenced by their social media activities, for which they claim that this presented image does not fit the organization. If Infra Corporation wants to keep multiple different firms with diverse identities, the firm should also show that in their communication.

4.1.4 General organizational identity outcome

The respondents mostly agree on their identity and are all proud of the company they work for. They often tell the researcher that their company does not know a so-called '9-to-5-mentality' which shows the involvement of the people working for the firm. They agree that the firms differ from each other, but are having troubles to actually pinpoint what the difference is. Most reactions are based on impressions and knowledge from the past, before Infra Corporation took over the firms. All respondents agree on the fact that there is room for improvement concerning working together.

Sometimes it is possible to solve a problem by looking into the whole organization instead of just looking at their own firm. However, the respondents also claim that they are open for more collaboration and they agree that it would be a good cause to aim for earning money for Infra Corporation in general instead of just for their own firm. However, it is stated that every independent firm within the main organization is responsible for their own financial results, resulting sometimes in finding a cheaper solution in an other external firm instead of in a internal partner. Overall, the respondents agree that Infra Corporation is an organization that can be defined by the following keywords: 'reliable', 'customer-oriented', 'down-to-earth' and 'relational'. The respondents emphasize that the main organization is still a 'family company', making it easy to communicate and strengthening the family-feeling that improves involvement and positive thinking.

All respondents agree that creating one large firm of the current independent organizations is a bad idea as they all think that the companies should keep their own identity. It is said that the difference in identity is easier for the outside world to recognize the strengths of the firm. Clients are believed to appreciate the small, down-to-earth approach the firms pursue and the respondents are slightly afraid that would change if the organizations are combined into one largescale organization. One respondent stated that "our main strength is the 'us-feeling' we all have in the organization".

It is also worth mentioning that there is a remarkable difference between the responses of the general management or the so-called 'UTA'-employees. The general managers are more focused on strategy and future, also mentioning words such as 'innovative', 'proud' and 'robust' whereas 'UTA'-employees mention key values such as 'hardworking', 'righteous' and 'reliable'. The difference can be explained by the way they execute their job: your activities, vision and environment influences your opinion on these matters. In the end, there is one main thing that all internal respondents have in common: the pride to work for (one of the business units of) Infra Corporation, which is highly visible when interacting with the employees.

Some respondents think that the Director Customer & Market could have a negative influence on the perceived image amongst (potential) clients. The presence and the way of communication could maybe not be appreciated by these clients, resulting in a negative perception of the organization.

4.2 External findings – external image

All interviewed governmental clients are satisfied in general with the company they work with. It is remarkable to see how every governmental client has developed its own way of signing organizations to work for them: some work with a list, others randomly decide, and a few use data to select a company based on past performance. Every method has its strengths and flaws and is mostly based on political decisions. That makes a centralized approach towards these governmental clients difficult, as they all need their specific tactic to satisfy them.

4.2.1 Business Unit 1

The respondents agree on the key values 'involved', 'reliable', 'family company', 'complete'. In total, a total of 15 key values has been mentioned by the respondents. The large amount of different key values could be explained by the fact that almost every respondents states that the image of the organization is mostly perceived through the employees they met and work with. A sentence often said by respondents is "the guy makes the organization" (original Dutch response: "de vent maakt de tent"). Therefore, if people are that important in the collaboration between the client and company, it is possible that different people leave a different impression while still doing their work in a way that is aimed for by the organization.

The respondents are satisfied with the way the organization performs and agree that the firm has become more professional since the takeover in both its performance and communication. Multiple respondents praise the way Infra Corporation let the firms keep their own identity and think the external presentation is worth the investment. One respondent states that “the way the company presents itself is so much better than some companies abroad do that”, pointing out the recognizable equipment and personnel. Some of the respondents see the difference in the way Business Unit 1 presents itself before and after the takeover by Infra Corporation. Most of them agree that the takeover has a positive effect on the relationship. However, they also state that it is hard to let go of the image of the business unit from the past. A few respondents do not see the changes the firm went through, and therefore are not aware of the current way of working: “Business Unit 1 is still a fighting contractor, using low prices to get in”, a respondent states.

4.2.2 Business Unit 2

In general, the clients are satisfied with the performance of the business unit. The main key values according to the respondents are ‘small-scale’, ‘competent’, ‘reliable’ and ‘relational’. One of the respondents state that the organization “exactly knows what we want and need”. It is mentioned by multiple respondents that the regional character of the company influences the relation positively, since the mentality corresponds between both parties. They also state that it is important to send the right people to the right clients, since people with the correct mentality and attitude are an important part of the relationship. One respondent claims that the collaboration is on such a high level that they sometimes ask for honest advice on certain topics when they do not possess enough knowledge of that topic. However, other clients state that the business unit is still working in an old-fashioned way and illustrate that by claiming that the only thing the company can actually do, is producing and delivering asphalt. The respondents believe that the firm is changing since the takeover, but they have not seen that much alterations and therefore share this perception. One respondent stated that the image of Business Unit 2 is not that important, since there are not many firms within the region that could handle the projects that the organization is handling at the moment: “In this conservative sector, clients do not look at image, they just want the company to do what they are asked to do”.

4.2.3 Business Unit 3

The respondents agree on the keywords ‘reliable’, ‘customer-oriented’, ‘transparent’ and ‘flexible’. Most of the keywords are related to the building team, something the governmental clients highly appreciate. One respondents state that the so-called building team construction work are unburdening his job: “when collaborating with a building team, you will get exactly what you need”. Most of the respondents agree that the knowledge in the field is slowly vanishing and therefore recognize the value of this relatively new approach.

Some respondents claim that it would not be a good idea to rename Business Unit 3 into Infra Corporation, together with the other firms. “Business Unit 3 has such a good name in our region, it would be a shame to let that name go to waste”, one respondent states. The positive reputation of the organization is a reason for some respondents to invite them more often for a construction project, whereas others do not work that way and state that past performance is much more important. The difference between those approaches is mainly about whether or not a client uses a so-called gros list to meet the public tender law from 2012. In the end, the respondents agree that using such a system or not mostly depends on the motivation: why would a small municipality with only a handful of contractors invest in setting up a list of contractors, when there are not even enough contractors to fill such a list? On the other hand, a gros list can be used to show transparency towards civilians and contractors, since it minimalizes subjective behavior amongst governments.

4.2.4 General external image outcome

Some of the respondents explicitly mention the role of the Director Customer & Market within Infra Corporation: they mention that the way this manager expresses the companies is too direct and aggressive in their opinion, which influences the perceived external image negatively. Some respondents state that they honestly do not appreciate the outspoken presence of the Director Customer & Market. Another respondent states that this actually is appreciated, “it keeps you motivated and shows the involvement of the Director”.

All respondents state that sustainability is not an important issue at the moment. Although they understand the value of sustainability, they do not use that as a criterium to select organizations for projects. Some of the respondents see how the business units try to adjust to the public opinion on sustainability, but question the motivation behind this transformation: “The change to a more sustainable business model should come from within, not because the government demands that”, a respondent claims.

4.3 Synthesizing the findings – identity/image

Since the results of both the internal and external parties have been discussed, it is possible to draw up the balance sheet. The following section describes the overall gaps and similarities between the responses to find out what is not aligned between the current organizational identity and external image.

4.3.1 Business Unit 1

Although the organization has been through some changes, it is still sometimes hard to recognize by external partners. Internal respondents are aware of the change and encourage this transformation, but external respondents seem to have a hard time forgetting the old image: some of them still see the old fighting contractor that does a lot of work under the accepted market price. That difference is the most important gap for Business Unit 1 to overcome, since that is also the reason why the firm is sometimes not invited for projects. Overall, the internal and external respondents agree that the communication is well-organized, both within the firm as well towards the clients. Sometimes clients would like to see more information, for example through online newsletters or a theme day to show current projects and innovations. A newsletter improves visibility even when not read, and a theme day could not only be important concerning the specific information provided, but also because of the possibility to meet other governmental clients to share experiences and expectations.

Based on the mentioned key values, both kinds of respondents agree on the fact that the firm is highly reliable. Other key values mentioned both internal and external are ‘involved’, ‘regional’ and ‘family corporation’. Especially the last key value is something the CEO of Infra Corporation tries to achieve, and based on the results is also perceived by both parties.

4.3.2 Business Unit 2

Business Unit 2 is still seen as an organization that is well-organized, but old-fashioned. According to both internal as external respondents, the takeover has a positive effect on their current position within the market, but still needs some time to get used to. Clients often still think that the firm is only good at projects with asphalt, but do not know that the firm is investing in other approaches as well. The main challenge for Business Unit 2 is to perform well in their current projects, in order to achieve growth and visibility in the region to convince (mostly potential) clients of their skills. Internal respondents agree with the external respondents about the correct mentality the firm has acquired. The employees are trustworthy according to the governmental clients, and the firm does a good job so far. It lacks a bit of professionalism, which is sometimes experienced as annoying amongst clients.

When summarizing the key values, the main values are ‘small-scaled’, ‘competent’, ‘reliable’ and ‘relational’. According to the CEO of Infra Corporation and the general manager of Business Unit 2, those key values are also important within the firm and is something to keep in mind when performing activities. External respondents value the fact that it is not hard to get in touch with the right person within the firm to solve problems quickly, something which is also mentioned as important amongst employees of the firm.

4.3.4 Business Unit 3

The firm is slowly getting used to the way Infra Corporation works, adapting its identity bit by bit. Since the firm (partly) came from a different market, the respondents still need to get used to the new business. Internal respondents are remarkably proud of their business model, where building teams are the main focus for the future. After some problematic financial years, the firm is slowly getting back on its feet which is also recognized by the governmental clients.

This business unit is also described as ‘reliable’, ‘customer-oriented’, ‘transparent’ and ‘flexible’. Especially ‘reliable’ and ‘transparent’ is something the organization wishes to express. Both internal and external respondents agree that the current name of the firm is an important asset of the organization that must not be forgotten: the organization has quite a positive reputation in its region and according to the interviewed governmental clients, that reputation results in more invitations for construction projects.

However, the firm is still not widely known for its construction capabilities. The current image amongst external parties does not totally fit the internal identity, but that is recognized internally. The current path the firm decided to take is appreciated and firmly encouraged within the organization amongst employees.

4.3.5 General outcome

To better express the overall findings concerning the key values, the mentioned values are presented in a clear way (see figure 3, 4 and 5). First of all, the mentioned internal values are drawn, followed by the mentioned external key values. To summarize and synthesize the findings, all key values are summed up and presented in figure 5.

Internal	Key value 1	Key value 2	Key value 3	Key value 4
Business Unit 1	Reliable	Regional	Righteous	Decent
Business Unit 2	Customer-oriented	Small-scaled	Flexible	Traditional
Business Unit 3	Reliable	Down-to-earth	Customer-oriented	Relational
Total	Reliable	Customer-oriented	Down-to-earth	Relational

Figure 3: Mentioned internal key values

External	Key value 1	Key value 2	Key value 3	Key value 4
Business Unit 1	Involved	Reliable	Family corporation	Complete
Business Unit 2	Small-scaled	Competent	Reliable	Relational
Business Unit 3	Customer-oriented	Reliable	Flexible	Transparent
Total	Reliable	Customer-oriented	Involved	Competent

Figure 4: Mentioned external key values

Synthesized	Key value 1	Key value 2	Key value 3	Key value 4
Business Unit 1	Reliable	Involved	Regional	Family corporation
Business Unit 2	Small-scaled	Competent	Reliable	Relational
Business Unit 3	Reliable	Customer-oriented	Transparent	Flexible
Total	Reliable	Customer-oriented	Transparent	Competent

Figure 5: Mentioned synthesized key values

It has to be mentioned that the total outcome can differ from the individual results: it shows the independence between the business units, as well as the overall common key value between them. For example, the business units are described as 'flexible', 'relational' and 'flexible' in figure 5, but the overall commonality between them is the key value 'competent'.

4.3.6 Additional findings

It is remarkable to find that the differences between policies of governmental clients are as large as stated by the respondents. Every client has its own policy which has its influence on the way the organization gets the job. Some clients invite all parties to a construction work offer since they believe that the three business units are independent organizations, whereas other clients believe that the three business units are part of the main organization and therefore should not be invited together for the same kind of work. Some clients argue that such a invitation policy can be seen as cartel formation, which is highly unwanted – not only because it is legally not allowed but also because of the public opinion on this subject.

Employees of the firms also state that the topic of this research is hard for them to combine with their daily activities: they are willing to think about identity and image, and how to control or influence those elements, but because of pressure and normal day-to-day activities they are just not challenged to think this over. However, it is worth mentioning the willingness to participate in this research by both internal and external respondents: it shows the involvement both kinds of stakeholders experience with (one or more of the business units of) Infra Corporation. All respondents showed enthusiasm to work towards a better future for both parties.

4.4 Summary of the findings

In general, the organizational identity of the business units overall align with the external image. Business Unit 1 is mostly recognized as a reliable and regional firm which gives the firm a clear positioning in the market. Business Unit 2 differs from Business Unit 1 and 3 and is mostly recognized because of its small-scaled, reliable and relational approach. Business Unit 3 is mostly known because of the customer-oriented and competent approach, both internal and external. These values overall correspond with the desired values stated by the respondents. All Business Units are valued positively amongst internal respondents and also have a rather positive image amongst external clients.

5. Conclusion and discussion

After analyzing the findings of the research, this section presents the main conclusions based on the collected information. It also draws how this research contributes to the existing scientific literature on organizational identity and external image. Furthermore, the practical implications and limitations of the research are discussed.

5.1 Conclusions

When trying to answer the research question (“How could a firm in the infrastructure sector successfully align their organizational identity with their external image in order to gain a strategic advantage?”), it is possible to conclude that it is important for a firm in this setting to create an overall idea of the identity amongst employees and management that should be shared with external stakeholders to prevent creating wrong expectations. When generating the right expectations amongst (potential) customers, it is easier to meet those expectations and thus perform better. Clients might select the organization more quickly to perform a construction project (depending on the tender policy) which affects the organization’s strategic position in the sector.

Creating a common idea of the organizational identity is the first step in closing the gap between identity and image, which can be achieved by communicating clear relevant values within the firm. Each employee should know which values are important in the firm and why those values are important. After that, this identity should be communicated with external stakeholders such as clients, in order to create a fitting image. Also here, effective communication is key through all layers of the firm. Embracing the right employees is an important factor in this process.

Based on the model of Gioia et al. (2000), the organization perceived discrepancy is minimal: the organization has been doing a good job on developing a sustainable identity and expressing that towards external stakeholders. That does not mean that the company could not improve: both identity and image need some adjustments to create a better alignment between those two elements. The model describes that in that case the desired future image and the corporate identity together form the projected image, something that can support the organization in future strategic choices.

5.2 Discussion

In general, the key values mentioned by the respondents overall correspond with each other, which is a good sign for Infra Corporation. It means that the alignment between their organizational identity and the perceived external image is sufficient enough to be seen by both internal as external stakeholders. Obviously, there are some minor differences, but in general the company expresses itself in the correct manner. That means that external parties understand what the company stands for, and the clients also confirm that the identity of the business units differ enough to recognize those differences. The main key values mentioned both internal and external are ‘reliable’ and ‘customer-oriented’. According to the CEO of Infra Corporation, these values are highly appreciated within the firm and are necessary to serve clients accordingly and to perform well in the sector.

In the current literature, it is often stated that symbols and overall communication are an important factor in aligning organizational identity and external image (Gioia et al., 2000; Stuart, 2001; Van Riel, 1995). This research showed that the right employees in the right spot make a bigger difference than those other elements. The impact of relevant, involved employees on creating an external image – through the firm’s identity – is not to be misunderstood and can make a huge difference in the perceived image; both negatively and positively. Other authors describe the creation of an external image as a process that is mostly done through communication by the company itself (Dowling, 1986). However, not only official communication from the organization influences this process, but also the stakeholders idea about the identity. Both clients and employees, the most important relevant stakeholders experience image not only through official channels, but also through internal processes and external, off the record communication. Being visible, not only through communication but also through actively present yourself at the scene is shown an important factor in the development of a positive external image.

Hatch and Schultz (1997) claim that “corporate identity can... - ...never be wholly managed: in part, it too is a cultural product”. This thesis shows that the culture within a firm is indeed an important factor as it influences the employees which actually make a huge difference in communicating this identity towards clients. However, it also shows that differences in cultural elements within the firm are not necessarily a negative effect: culture within a firm can differ from business unit to business unit. By creating the right culture in the right business unit and making sure that all employees are aware of that culture – and therefore identity – could result in the right, personal approach clients need in their perception.

5.3 Practical implications

In order to gain strategical advantages, the organization should firstly invest in reaching out to its employees: it is important to convince all employees of the current identity and the desired identity. If the organization is able to achieve that, it is clear which way the organization is going and what clients can expect from the organization. It has to be taken into account that one generalized identity without considering clients’ wishes and demands can be a failed approach: since every governmental organization has its own policies, the company should be able to shift within the boundaries of its identity to serve its clients in the best way possible. However, it should be emphasized that letting go of the identity in order to serve as much clients as possible can turn out negative. Sometimes (governmental) clients do not fit with the organizational identity or expect different things based on their perception.

After defining the desired identity, it is important to find the right people to fit the culture and adapt the identity. Since both internal and external stakeholders confirm the effect of the right person on the right job, employees should fit the firm’s view. Currently, the firm does not actively pursue this in their application procedure.

Furthermore, the identity should be communicated correctly through both communication and business activities. Writing a plan for a project, informing residents about construction projects and actually performing a construction, all elements should carry out the identity of the firm. By aligning communication and business activities, the organization can actually show their identity, making sure that expectations are met and creating a better fit with the client in order to receive more invitations for a project.

In general, firms (in the infrastructure sector) can aim to align organizational identity and external image through multiple key factors:

First of all, clear communication (both internal and external) is an important part: by creating an overall sense within the firm on the organizational identity, it is easier to express this identity towards the most important stakeholders, such as clients. Social media expressions can have an impact on the perceived external image, but might not always have a positive effect.

Secondly, different identities amongst different business units does not necessarily have a negative impact. It might be wise to deliberately develop diverse identities to better fit the market: some clients expect and need a different handling than other, depending on region, type of client and type of people.

Third, employees are the most important asset of a firm to express the organizational identity. By hiring people who fit your organizational culture and therefore match the desired identity, a more homogenous identity will be carried out towards relevant stakeholders.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This research knows a few limitations, which might affect the general outcome. First of all, it is hard to generalize the conclusions and apply them to other firms (in other sectors). The selected organization is performing in a unique way in its sector, and therefore other rules apply to their business activities than other (traditional) organizations in their sector. The method the selected company applies to perform well in their sector differs on such crucial elements compared to other firms that the research can hardly be reconstructed for other, more traditional firms. Moreover, the infrastructure sector is a relatively outdated sector, where innovative organizational business activities are not common.

The way the governmental clients organize their policy on inviting infrastructure organizations for a building project is too diverse to create a sustainable, general approach within the firm. Some clients are impressed by expressive statements of presentation such as recognizable equipment or social media communication, whereas other clients rather appreciate to have a cup of coffee with one of the contractors. This difference between these strategies is remarkable, since it is expected that governmental agencies all use the same policy to create more transparency.

Additionally, the researcher was only able to interview a relatively small amount of clients. The list of selected respondents was set up in collaboration with Infra Corporation, but might be developed too subjective to actually find the true perception of clients. Currently, it is not clear if only positive or negative clients are approached, or a mixture of both worlds. For further research in this case study, the researcher advises to interview all clients of the organization, either through qualitative research or quantitative methods. Using a quantitative method such as a questionnaire might influence the results of the research because respondents have more time to answer questions accordingly. However, it must be said that the selected research method resulted in an extensive amount of data, which can be used again to reproduce the research.

Furthermore, the research was done in a time period in which many alterations within the firm occurred: shortly before the research was conducted, the general manager of Business Unit 1 has retired and was replaced by an external manager. At the time of the interviews, some respondents did not meet the current general director yet, making it hard to find experiences with this new manager. It has also been mentioned that while conducting the study, more organizations have been taken over by Infra Corporation, making the firm quite larger than it was at the start of the study. Within a few weeks, the general organization went from 360 employees to 650 employees, which might influence the strategy of the general firm and its subsidiaries.

In future research, it might be wise to take into account that regional differences can affect the perceived external image. In the researched field, multiple people from multiple regions were part of the research which differ in their mentality and culture because of their origin. It is also relevant to take into account that this research was conducted in a market where the classic seller-customer-relationship is not present because of the mixture of pragmatic and political considerations amongst both clients and business units. It might therefore be interesting to conduct this research in other markets to see if the alignment between organizational identity and external image is just as important and relevant as in this research.

References

- Albert, S., & Whetten, D. A. (1985). Organizational identity. *Research in organizational behavior*, 7, 263-295.
- Babbie, R. (2010). *The Practice of Social Research*: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Berg, P.-O. (1985). Organization change as a symbolic transformation process. *Organizational culture*, 281-299.
- Bernstein, D. (1984). *Company image and reality: A critique of corporate communications*: Taylor & Francis.
- Blythe, J. (2009). *Principles and Practice of Marketing* (C. Loveridge Ed. Second Edition ed.). Hampshire, United Kingdom: Cengage Learning.
- Bullock, K., Clarke, R. V. G., & Tilley, N. (2010). *Situational prevention of organised crimes*: Taylor & Francis.
- Campbell, J. L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J., & Pedersen, O. K. (2013). Coding in-depth semistructured interviews: Problems of unitization and intercoder reliability and agreement. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 42(3), 294-320.
- Chajet, C., & Shachtman, T. (1991). *Image by Design: For Corporate Vision to Business Reality*: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Christensen, L. T., & Askegaard, S. (2001). Corporate identity and corporate image revisited-A semiotic perspective. *European Journal of marketing*, 35(3/4), 292-315.
- Cornelissen, J. (2000). Corporate image: an audience centred model. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 5(2), 119-125.
- Corporate Image - Business Dictionary. (2017).
- Dowling, G. R. (1986). Managing your corporate images. *Industrial marketing management*, 15(2), 109-115.
- Dutton, J. E., & Dukerich, J. M. (1991). Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of management Journal*, 34(3), 517-554.
- Einwiller, S., & Will, M. (2002). Towards an integrated approach to corporate branding—an empirical study. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 7(2), 100-109.
- Fombrun, C., & Shanley, M. (1990). What's in a name? Reputation building and corporate strategy. *Academy of management Journal*, 33(2), 233-258.
- Gioia, D. A., Schultz, M., & Corley, K. G. (2000). Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability. *Academy of management Review*, 25(1), 63-81.
- Grunig, J. E. (1993). Image and substance: From symbolic to behavioral relationships. *Public relations review*, 19(2), 121-139.

- Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (1997). Relations between organizational culture, identity and image. *European Journal of marketing*, 31(5/6), 356-365.
- Leech, B. L. (2002). Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 665-668.
- Melewar, T. (2003). Determinants of the corporate identity construct: a review of the literature. *Journal of marketing Communications*, 9(4), 195-220.
- Melewar, T. C., & Karaosmanoglu, E. (2006). Seven dimensions of corporate identity: A categorisation from the practitioners' perspectives. *European Journal of marketing*, 40(7/8), 846-869.
- Nguyen, N. (2006). The collective impact of service workers and servicescape on the corporate image formation. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 25(2), 227-244.
- Olins, W. (1978). *The corporate personality: An inquiry into the nature of corporate identity*: Mayflower Books.
- Opdenakker, R. (2006). *Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research*. Paper presented at the Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research.
- Raisch, S., & Birkinshaw, J. (2008). Organizational ambidexterity: Antecedents, outcomes, and moderators. *Journal of management*, 34(3), 375-409.
- Shee, P., & Abratt, R. (1989). A new approach to the corporate image management process. *Journal of marketing management*, 5(1), 63-76.
- Stuart, H. J. (2001). *Moments of Truth: Exploring the Corporate Identity/corporate Image Interface*. University of New England,
- Van Riel, C. B. (1995). *Principles of corporate communication*: Prentice Hall.
- Van Riel, C. B., & Balmer, J. M. (1997). Corporate identity: the concept, its measurement and management. *European Journal of marketing*, 31(5/6), 340-355.

Appendix A – Questions management

1. Describe in your own words the identity of the company.
2. When describing the company in four key values, which words would you use?
3. To what extent do you think that these four key values correspond with the four key values the company would like to express?
4. To what extent do you think stakeholders such as clients agree with your mentioned four key values?
5. To what extent do you think the company expresses itself in the correct way through for example publications, company activities, internal/external communication?
6. To what extent do you think the company uses the right opportunities to express their key values? Think of publications, company activities, internal/external communication.
7. Which keywords would you like to see in this company? If these keywords differ from the earlier mentioned keywords, why do you think these keywords are more relevant and important for this company than the earlier mentioned keywords?

Appendix B – Questions clients

1. Describe your involvement with the company.
2. Describe in your own words the identity of the company.
3. When describing the company in four key values, which words would you use?
4. To what extent do you think that these four key values correspond with the four key values the company would like to express?
5. To what extent do you think management agrees with your mentioned four key values?
6. To what extent do you think the company expresses itself in the correct way through for example publications, company activities and internal/external communication?
7. Which four keywords would you like to see in this company? If these keywords differ from the earlier mentioned keywords, why do you think these keywords are more relevant and important for this company than the earlier mentioned keywords?
8. Did you recently see or hear anything about the company in the media in general? If so, what did you think of that expression?