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Corporate Image Vacuum

Nature, Characteristics and Implications for the Organization

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A good corporate image is important to organizations (Benoit & Pang, 2008). Even then, some organizations do not have one (Bernstein, 1984/1989; Walker, 2010). Arguably the first study to explicate the notion of corporate image vacuum through the development of the Corporate Image Grid Framework, this study examines how an image vacuum is generated and what organizations can do to fill it. The framework offers a systematic way of assessing an organization's image to heighten practitioners' awareness of image management of their organizations. Four organizations drawn from Fortune 2011 list of 50 most admired organizations are studied: Singapore Airlines, Google, Nike and Toyota. Findings suggest that corporate image formation constitutes the interplay of organization-constructed and audience-interpreted image. These determine the locus of image control and image valence. When the image valence is weak and the locus of control is external, an image vacuum is generated.

The notion of corporate image had existed long before the various disciplines from which it is believed to have originated from, such as marketing, public relations (PR), organizational behavior and social psychology as we know them today, took root (Balmer & Greyser, 2004). Furman (2010) suggested that the concept of corporate image was applied as early as 19th Century in England during which an architect's firm was recognized by people for its distinct interior design and decorating style. This quality, which set the firm apart from its competitors, is what Furman (2010) maintained is an antecedent for corporate image.

Today, a strong corporate image is widely-accepted by both the academic and business communities as an important corporate asset. There is extensive literature on the effects of corporate image on business sustainability and competitive advantage (Cheverton, 2006; Cornelissen, 2011; Dowling, 1994; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Kahuni et al, 2009; Lemmink et al, 2003; Vella & Melewar, 2008) business legitimacy (Cornelissen, 2011; Massey, 2004) and consumer buying behaviour (Andreassen & Lindestad, 1998; Barich & Kotler, 1991; Zeithaml et al, 1996). This is also matched by popular literature on how millions of dollars are spent by organizations large and small on the research, creation, dissemination, protection and repair of an organization's corporate image (Dowling, 2002; Melewar, 2008; Miller & Muir, 2004).

Given the long-standing history and well-established status of corporate image, it is therefore intriguing that some organizations may exist without one. Bernstein (1984 & 1989) alluded to the notion of a corporate void; a situation in which the organization image is neither good nor bad, but that it has no image whatsoever. Walker (2010) too suggested the possibility of an organization not having a corporate image. The question therefore arises – can an organization really not have a corporate image i.e. can they exist in a corporate image vacuum? Anchored on selected key frameworks on image creation and image management, this paper aims to do the following:

1. Propose a Corporate Image Grid Framework to analyse corporate image dimensions and hence introduce the notion of corporate image vacuum; and

2. Explicate the notion of corporate image vacuum, its nature, its characteristics and how it is formed.

Significance of Study

As mentioned in the preceding section, while there is extensive material on the concept of corporate image and the importance and benefits of having a strong or positive corporate image, the same cannot be said about corporate image vacuum. Save for Bernstein's (1984 & 1989) and Walker's (2010) allusions to the possibility of organizations not having a corporate image, not much else has been proffered about the notion of corporate image void or vacuum. Neither have details of such a corporate phenomenon been extensively discussed.

This paper is therefore significant as it is arguably the first to attempt to flesh out the notion of corporate image vacuum as alluded to by Bernstein (1984 & 1989) and Walker (2010). The paper will first attempt to define the concept and offer an explanation of the nature, characteristics, occurrence and implications of a corporate image vacuum. Second, beyond exploring existing frameworks of image creation and image management, this paper aims to introduce a systematic way of assessing if and when an organization exists in a corporate image vacuum. Third, beyond established theories of repairing images during or after a crisis as posited by Benoit & Pang's (2008) image repair theory, this paper suggests that the corporate image framework can be used as a check to determine if a corporate image vacuum exists.

On a theoretical level, this paper hopes to make inroads into a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the notion of corporate image vacuum. On a practical level, this paper offers insights to practitioners on what a corporate image vacuum is and how it can impact an organization's credibility and ultimate success. An understanding of the notion, it is hoped, may afford better management of the phenomenon.

Literature Review

Literature abounds with various corporate concepts such as corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate image and corporate reputation. Each individual concept has been collectively borne out of scholarly thought, empirical research and principles derived from practice. Unfortunately, according to Balmer & Greyser (2004), this has also brought about fragmentation, dilution and even confusion due to countless causes such as the divide between practitioners and scholars, the existence of disciplinary silos and monomania a period during which one concept is considered more popular than others.

Defining the key corporate constructs

While there are various definitions, corporate identity can be defined as the embodiment of the organization, its distinct attributes which differentiate it from other organizations and which can be communicated via a collection of symbols and the organizational behaviour (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Balmer, 1998; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Barnett et al, 2006; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Corporate identity, in part, contributes to the formation of the corporate image.

Corporate branding on the other hand can be defined as a covenant, promise, or contract between a firm and its stakeholders (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Balmer & Greyser, 2003; Interbrand, 2007) and is in part, projected via the organization's corporate identity (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

Corporate reputation is generally defined as the perceptions held by an organization's stakeholders which are established over time and can inherently be positive or negative (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Cornelissen, 2011; Walker, 2010). Where corporate image is formulated from a single point in time, corporate reputation is aggregated through the various corporate images held over a period of time.

What then of corporate image? Notwithstanding its long and established history, its wide acceptance as a concept and the various corporate constructs which influence it, one would remain hard-pressed to find a definitive definition for the concept of corporate image.

The concept of corporate image

Generally, literature suggests that corporate image is a subjective and values-based belief, impression, interpretation or perception of an organization (Aaker & Myers, 1975; Barich & Kotler, 1991; Barnett et al., 2006; Bayton, 1959; Chun, 2005; Davies et al, 2001; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fombrun, 1990; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Kahuni, et al., 2009; Margulies, 1977; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Moffitt, 1994; Scott & Lane, 2000),

Beyond this however, different perspectives exist on its genesis and the responsibility of creating and interpreting corporate image. Some scholars believe it to be the sole responsibility of the organization (Bromley, 2000; Brown et al, 2006; Lewellyn, 2002; Whetten & Mackey, 2002), while others feel it to be the sole responsibility of the organization's external stakeholders (Barnett et al, 2006; Davies et al, 2001; Gray & Balmer, 1998). Still others feel that corporate image is a shared or collaborative construct involving both the organization and its external stakeholders (Benoit & Pang, 2008; Christensen & Askegaard, 2001; Ginzler et al, 1993; Massey, 2005; Moffitt, 1994; Scott & Lane, 2000).

A working definition of the concept therefore, would need to minimally include two things; firstly the notion of corporate image as a subjective perception and secondly the party or parties involved in and responsible for its formation and interpretation.

Dimensions of corporate image

Various postulations prevail about the dimensions of corporate image. Some image theorists scrutinize the formation and management of corporate image from the dimension of locus of control. This dimension focuses on whether the corporate image is cultivated internally and communicated mostly by the organization i.e. organization-constructed and communicated (Bernstein, 1984; Kennedy, 1977) or ascribed mostly and externally by the various publics of the organization i.e. audience-interpreted (Barich & Kotler, 1991; Barnett et al, 2006; Boulding, 1977; Cornelissen, 2011; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Margulies, 1977; Schuler, 2004). Implicit in the internal-cultivated versus external-ascribed dichotomy is not only the zero-sum nature of corporate image formation, but also whether the corporate image represents the image desired or projected by the organization versus the perceived or interpreted image by the organization's publics (Walker, 2010).

Another dimension proffered by image theorists has to do with the valence of corporate image i.e. positive vs. negative vs. neutral corporate images or strong vs. weak. Haedrich (1993) suggested that people's valence of opinion or image of an object (or what he termed 'object opinion') is formed based on both their emotional and objective assessments of it.

Formation of corporate image

Frameworks on the interplay of corporate constructs are useful to gain insights into how corporate image is formed. For instance, Kennedy (1977), Abratt (1989) and Dowling (1994) all suggested that the organization image, in part, stems from the organization itself. For instance, Abratt (1989) suggested that an organization's corporate philosophy, constituting its core values, organization culture, organization policies, corporate mission and vision and business objectives all contribute to the formation of its corporate image. In other words, one half of the corporate image formation equation stems from the corporate DNA and involves the internal construction of an image by the organization itself i.e. the organization-constructed image.

In all three frameworks too, there exists another element in the image formation process i.e. the interpretation of the organization-constructed image by its publics. Kennedy (1977) suggested that the corporate image is derived from the direct and indirect experiences the organization's external publics have with the organization. Abratt (1989) referred to an image interface which exists between the organization and its publics alluding to the processing which needs to occur before a corporate image is derived. Dowling (1994) suggested that a corporate image is formed through both interpersonal communication as well as the organization's marketing efforts targeted at its external publics. From these, we gather that, while the organization might construct its corporate image, this image still needs to be received, negotiated and interpreted by its external stakeholders or publics. This is the other half of the corporate image formation equation- the audience-interpreted image.

Defining corporate image

Based on the preceding sections and the literature studied, a working definition of corporate image could therefore be proposed as follows:

Corporate image is one of many corporate constructs a company has to manage. A corporate image is a subjective and value-laden construct in a given context and is therefore mutable. The formation of corporate image involves both an audience-interpreted image (conceived image) and a company constructed and projected image (communicated image) the interplay of which will determine the locus of image control and the strength or valence of the corporate image.

Corporate image vacuum

Walker (2010) suggested that corporate image can be described as an internal picture projected to an external audience. The assumption here is that organizations actively try to project an image. Those that do not do so would still have a corporate identity and reputation, but not a corporate image. This allusion to an organization not having a corporate image, even if it did have a corporate identity and corporate reputation, is fascinating. Thus far, we have been told that it is impossible for an organization not to have an image given that corporate image is either cultivated by the organization itself, ascribed by the organization's audiences or co-constructed by both the organization and its audiences. Is it really therefore possible for an organization to exist in a corporate image vacuum?

Bernstein (1984 & 1989) suggested that an organization exists in a corporate void when it neglects its responsibility to engage in effective and on-going corporate communication. While Bernstein did not believe that an organization can exist without an image whatsoever, he

maintained that the responsibility of creating, cultivating and communicating a corporate image to its audiences lies squarely on the organization (p.1):

“...the impressions we create are important. If they get it wrong, it is not their fault but ours. Communication is the responsibility of the communicator. Misconceptions are the fault of the transmitter, not the receiver.”

Based on the postulations above, two key ideas present themselves vis-a-vis the lack of corporate image. Firstly that the organization is responsible for its corporate image, without which a void occurs that will most likely be filled by the public. Secondly, that corporate image cannot exist without the organization's effort in projecting or communicating it to its publics. It is therefore posited that a corporate image vacuum can arise under two circumstances. The first circumstance is brought about by a lack of conscious effort in creating, cultivating and communicating the corporate image (corporate image formation process). The second circumstance presents itself when an organization either refuses or is unable to fill the corporate void (corporate image management process). These two notions will be further explicated in the remaining sections of this paper.

The Corporate Image Grid: A Proposed Framework

In order to introduce and expound the concept of a corporate image vacuum, a framework is thus presented. This framework, termed the corporate image grid, is represented in Figure 1 below and will also be the basis to discover the typologies of corporate images an organization might have before, during and after a crisis. The grid focuses on two key dimensions of corporate image, namely where the locus of corporate image formation is located (locus of corporate image control) and the nature of the corporate image formed (valence of corporate image).

	STRONG (On-target)	WEAK (Off-target)
INTERNAL (Cultivated)	Quadrant 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image is extensively cultivated • Internal locus of image control • Strong image [On-target] 	Quadrant 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image is cultivated • Internal locus of image control • Medium-strength image [Off-target]
EXTERNAL (Ascribed)	Quadrant 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image is ascribed • External locus of control • Medium-strength image [Incidental] 	Quadrant 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image is mostly ascribed • External locus of control] • Weak image [Image vacuum]

FIGURE 1: Corporate Image Grid

The first dimension proposed, locus of corporate image control, is built on one of the most widely studied personality concepts (Matsumoto, 2008 in Lam and Mizerski, 2005) first advanced by Rotter (1954, 1966 in Lam and Mizerski, 2005) and subsequently adopted by many studies including the area of crisis communication (Coombs, 2004). Rotter's original construct proposed that generally, people differed in terms of the amount of control they believed they have over their behavior and environment (Lefcourt, 1966; Rotter, 1966; Levenson, 1974 in Lam and Mizerski, 2005). Those with a high internal locus of control believe they have control over their own behaviour and environment and can therefore considerably influence the outcomes in their

lives. Conversely, those with a high external locus of control believe they are dominated by external forces such as fate, luck or powerful others factors that are beyond their control (Lam and Mizerski, 2005).

Adapting this notion, it is posited that when the locus of image control of an organization is located internally, the organization proactively and consciously cultivates and projects a desired corporate image to its various audiences. An internal locus of image control is achieved when an organization consciously engineers and influences the way its audiences view it. Such organizations would be placed in quadrants 1 and 2 of the corporate image grid. Conversely, organizations with an external locus of image control allow, either consciously or sub-consciously, their various audiences to ascribe or assign a corporate image to the organization. Organizations with high external locus of image control either do little or nothing or do so in an ineffective manner to manage the ascribed corporate image. These organizations would be located in quadrants 3 and 4 of the corporate image grid.

The second dimension proposed for the corporate image grid is that of Image Valence. The notion of valence of corporate image is derived from the AC²ID Test™ framework (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). In this framework, the authors posited that an organization has multiple identities i.e. actual, communicated, conceived, ideal and desired and that these are derived from multidisciplinary perspectives. Actual identity, the authors argued, constitutes the current organizational attributes and is made up of what earlier scholars (as discussed in the preceding sections) term the corporate philosophy. Communicated identity, as its name suggests, is the identity which is manifested through corporate communication and includes things such as advertisements, PR and even word of mouth. Conceived identity refers to the perceived impressions formed by the organization's stakeholders. Ideal identity is the optimum positioning of the organization in any given context. Lastly, desired identity is what the authors deemed as the vision of the organization's corporate leaders.

As discussed in the earlier sections, corporate identity gives rise to corporate image. We can therefore extrapolate that the concepts of actual, conceived, communicated, ideal and desired corporate identities should also inform corporate image. Actual image is thus taken to mean the image arising from the organization's corporate philosophy i.e. its mission, vision and organizational structure. This may or may not be communicated to the organization's stakeholders. Only corporate images (be they desired, ideal, or actual) which are consciously communicated and transmitted via corporate communication should be deemed as communicated images which in turn gives rise to the organization-constructed image. Conceived image, which are impressions or perceptions formed by an organization's external stakeholders gives rise to the notion of ascribed corporate image.

The valence of corporate image dimension in the corporate image grid therefore describes the nature of the corporate image formed: whether the corporate image is strong because it is on-target or weak as it is off-target. Implicit in this dimension of corporate image is whether the image projected by the organization (communicated image) is matched by the image accepted or ascribed by the organization's publics (conceived image). Organizations with strong and on-target valence would be placed in quadrant 1. The corporate image formed by such organizations is considered on-target. Organizations with strong and on-target valence but had little to do with the corporate image formed (external locus of control) would be placed in quadrant 3. It is proposed that such corporate images are incidental in nature given that there was no conscious effort by the organization to create or manage it.

Organizations whose efforts in cultivating its corporate image are not matched by the weak and off-target image attributed by their publics would find themselves in quadrant 2. It is proposed that such images are off-target given that the desired or ideal image is not matched by

the conceived public image. Lastly, organizations which make no conscious effort to cultivate, manage or defend their corporate image effectively exist in a corporate image vacuum. In doing so, they allow their publics to fill the corporate image void with negative images of itself. Such organizations would be placed in quadrant 4. According to Bernstein (1984), the consequence of such organizations existing in a corporate image vacuum is that:

If an organization chooses to transmit few messages of its own, the public will choose to construct messages for it, utilising any generalisation, hearsay, fragment of 'information' to complete a pattern, no matter how distorted (p. 1).

Based on the corporate image grid, this study posits the following questions:

RQ1: What is corporate image vacuum; its definition, nature, key characteristics and occurrence?

RQ2: What types of corporate image can an organization have before, during and after a crisis?

RQ3: How can practitioners assess if an organization is in a corporate image vacuum and what can they do about it?

Method

The case study approach

The use of case studies is the primary research method proposed for this study. Berg (2009, p. 317) defines case study as “a method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions”. The case study approach allows for and enables discoveries to be made (Shaughnessy et al 2008 in Berg, 2009). And while the case study approach is sometimes criticized as being less rigorous and systematic among the social sciences methods, Berg, (2009) contended that case studies in fact offer objectivity and generalizability to the research undertaken – two valuable qualities most researchers strive for.

Using Yin's (2009) case study protocol, a comparative case study approach was used. A set of multiple case studies were identified for the purpose of cross unit comparison. The units to be compared across the four selected case studies are the dimensions proposed in the preceding section i.e. valence of corporate image and locus of corporate image control.

Selecting the cases

In selecting the cases for this study, three primary criteria were set, the first of which is for the organization featured to be a multi-national corporation (MNC). An MNC, also known as multinational enterprise, multinational organization, transnational corporation or international corporation, is defined as an organization that has direct investments in more than one (usually many) different countries. Such organizations are typically large in terms of market value, sales, profits and return on equity (Campbell & Craig, 2005; Cherunilam, 2008; Paul, 2010). MNCs were selected as they have globally familiar images which will aid the reader in understanding the cases better.

The second criterion is for the MNC to have been involved in a crisis which put the organization's corporate image to a test. Pang (2011) argued that organizations that experience crises would have to undertake image work to recover from them. Wan and Schell (2007) argued that few studies have examined how corporate image can help an organization survive after the

crisis is over. Specifically, these crises should allow for the corporate image dimensions of corporate image valence and locus of corporate image control to be identified and assessed.

The third criterion is for the organization and their corresponding crises to have received wide news media coverage either due to the nature of the crisis and its impact to a large number of people and/or the stature of the MNC in question. Such extensive news media coverage would aid in the process of discovering the organization's image cultivation and management efforts during the crisis and provide a stronger basis for the resultant corporate image proposed.

Based on the three criteria identified, a useful platform from which the organizations for the case studies could be selected was Fortune Magazine's 2011 annual list of 50 Most Admired global organizations. Fortune Magazine surveys thousands of high-ranking business executives annually to get a sense of the corporate reputations of the most admired global organizations (Brown & Turner, 2008). Organizations are assessed on criteria such as innovation, people management, use of corporate assets, social responsibility, global competitiveness, quality of management, financial soundness, long-term investment and product / services quality ("World's Most Admired", 2012). Given that corporate image is how people perceive an organization and that this perception informs and shapes an organization's corporate reputation, this list therefore forms a strong basis to analyse the corporate images of the organizations shortlisted for the case studies.

Apart from Fortune's 2011 World's 50 Most Admired List, other artifacts analysed for the case studies include organization profile reports, corporate websites, media articles, journal articles and books pertaining to the identified organizations. Specifically, the types of content sourced from these include the organization's history or background, its corporate image creation or cultivation efforts, the resultant corporate image from these efforts and a crisis event which put the organization's corporate image to the test.

From the list of World's 50 Most Admired organizations in 2011, four organizations were then identified as matching the primary criteria. The four organizations are Singapore Airlines (SIA), Nike, Google and Toyota. Apart from matching the primary criteria, the corporate images of these organizations were also assessable on the dimensions set out in the corporate image grid i.e. locus of corporate image control and corporate image valence. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Case Study Analysis

Case study 1: Singapore Airlines (SIA) SQ006 crash

On 31 October 2000, SIA's 2-year old Boeing 747-400 arrived in Taipei from Singapore en route to Los Angeles. Despite the bad weather conditions, the plane was given clearance to take off from Chiang Kai-Shek Airport. Soon after clearance was given however, the plane crashed and killed 82 people. Given that this was SIA's first major accident which threatened its stellar image, the organization ranked 18th on Fortune's 2011 list of most admired organizations ("World's Most Admired", 2012), is therefore a suitable case study for analysis.

Case study 2: Nike's use of sweatshops and child labour in manufacturing

Nike's foothold as the world's leading brand of athletic footwear, apparel, equipment and accessories is entrenched, in part, in its ability to achieve low-cost manufacturing (Frisch, 2009; "Nike", 2012). As early as the 1970s, Nike had set up manufacturing factories in third-world countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam and China (Frisch, 2009; Jenkins, 2003). In November 1996

however, CBS' documentary '48 Hours' detailed the dire working conditions of workers and even children hired by Nike's third-party contractors in these factories (Frisch, 2009; Jenkins, 2003). Given Nike's positive image built prior to the crisis, the organization's corporate image was now incongruous with the image it had thus far cultivated. This discordance therefore makes Nike, ranked 24th on Fortune's 2011 list of most admired organizations ("World's Most Admired", 2012), a suitable candidate for study.

Case study 3: Google's print library project

In 2002, Google unveiled its grand plan of making all the books in the world's greatest libraries available to anyone, anywhere with an Internet connection (Stromberg et al, 2011). While some people viewed this as Google's liberating vision to unlock the knowledge of humankind for the benefit of all, others saw it as copyright infringement on a world wide web scale. Critics deemed Google's project as ethically unsound and publishers labelled them unfair and opportunistic. Hence in 2005, a group of publishers sued Google for copyright infringement in New York (Stromberg et al, 2011). Although the organization is ranked 2nd on Fortune's list ("World's Most Admired", 2012), it is comparatively un-noteworthy in terms of its image cultivation efforts. This therefore makes them an interesting study.

Case study 4: Toyota's massive global recall of faulty car parts

January 2010 marked the beginning of Toyota's recall woes which in the end saw a staggering 2.3 million cars taken off the global market (Thomaselli & Greimel, 2010), untold numbers of negative media coverage worldwide and consumer confidence at an all-time low. The organization was admittedly in its worst crisis ever. The brand which had hitherto been synonymous with reliability now had its very core value questioned, scrutinised and rendered no longer credible with claims of its cars' faulty parts being responsible for road deaths in the US. Toyota's previously impeccable image of reliability and quality was now discordant with the cacophony of criticisms and complaints levelled at it. This mismatch in pre-crisis and crisis images makes Toyota a suitable case study.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1: Defining corporate image vacuum

The fourth type of corporate image found in Q4 of the corporate image grid, provides a starting point for introducing the concept of corporate image vacuum. From the case studies, we understand that a corporate image void or vacuum arises when an organization places its locus of image control externally and/or when its image valence is weak.

Some possibilities for why the locus is located externally include the organization's refusal or inability to fill the void which we saw in the cases of Toyota and Nike respectively. The locus is also deemed to be located externally if there is an imbalance in control in which the external control of image is greater than the internal control of image. This can occur if the organization's efforts to fill the corporate image vacuum are considered either ineffective (like Nike's insistence that it is a responsible corporate citizen during the crisis) or belated (as was Nike's official response and Toyota's apology).

Weak image valence on the other hand occurs when the organization's communicated image does not match the image held by the publics i.e. conceived image. This situation can

present itself if the image is deemed incongruent i.e. when the organization's actions are not matched by its rhetoric, past or present (as was the case for Nike and Toyota) or when the organization's image cultivation efforts are considered off-target. Off-target image cultivation efforts arise when an organization's efforts are deemed not credible, ineffective or as not addressing the crux of the issue at hand.

In other words, a corporate image vacuum presents itself when an organization's image formation effort is either weak or non-existent and/or when its image management efforts are weak or non-existent. Based on the above discussion, the following is posited as a definition of corporate image vacuum:

A corporate image vacuum is a void which organizations, inadvertently or otherwise, allow its external publics to fill due to a lack of or poor image formation and/or cultivation and/or management processes before, during or after a crisis.

RQ2: Types of corporate image before, during and after a crisis

Based on the corporate image grid framework proposed and the case studies analyzed, it is apparent that an organization can have different images before, during and after a crisis i.e. within different contexts and in different situations. The typology of corporate image vis-à-vis the different stages of a crisis is based on the dimensions of corporate image valence and locus of corporate image control. The findings summarized in Table 1 here denote where each organization was located in the Corporate Image Grid before, during and after their respective crises.

Organization	Pre-Crisis	Crisis	Post-Crisis
SIA	Q1	Q1	Q1
Nike	Q1	Q2 + Q4	Q1
Google	Q3	Q4	Q3
Toyota	Q1	Q4	Q1

TABLE 1: Case study analysis of organizations' corporate images before, during and after crisis.

Quadrant 1: Strong-Internal

The type of corporate image found in Quadrant 1 of the corporate image grid (Q1) is considered both on-target (communicated image = conceived image) and cultivated. Organizations which display the strong-internal corporate image make a conscious and deliberate effort to create, shape, manage and even defend their corporate image. Such a corporate image is also deemed effective and on target as the organization's aimed-for image is received and accepted by the publics it is intended for.

Of the four organizations studied, only SIA was located in Q1 before, during and after the crisis. This is primarily due to SIA's commitment to and heavy investment in image cultivation before the crisis (Heracleous et al, 2006), its well-managed and compassionate handling of the affected passengers' next-of-kin during the crisis (Henderson, 2003; "SIA's handling", 2000), and its continued strong reputation eleven years after the crisis ("World's Most Admired", 2012; "Singapore Airlines", 2012).

Nike and Toyota too were located in Q1 before and after the crisis. Nike's extensive and aggressive image cultivation efforts saw it become the most popular sports shoe in the US (Frisch, 2009) before its sweatshop crisis. Nike's extensive corporate social responsibility (CSR)

efforts since the crisis has seen it regain its popularity today (“Nike”, 2012; “Corporate Responsibility”; 2012).

Quadrant 2: Weak-Internal

The type of corporate image found in Quadrant 2 of the corporate image grid (Q2) is considered off-target. Even though there is some effort made by the organization to cultivate and project a corporate image, it is discordant with the image held by the organization’s publics.

Nike, in the early stages of the crisis displayed this type of corporate image. Before sweatshop claims against Nike became widespread and systematically indisputable, Nike had initially clung on to its cultivated corporate image of being a supporter of societal well-being (Christensen et al, 2008). This was obviously a mismatch with the ascribed image held by the public, thereby rendering Nike’s image off-target and affecting the organization’s credibility.

Quadrant 3: Strong-External

Organizations located in Quadrant 3 of the corporate image grid (Q3) will find that even though their corporate image is considered favourable, it is incidental. This is because the organization engaged in no apparent image cultivation efforts. Its locus of image control is located primarily outside the organization i.e. ascribed image.

Based on the case studies analysed, only Google displayed this type of corporate image before and after its crisis. Prior to Google’s print library crisis, it was already enjoying a strong and positive corporate image, commanding 48% of all internet searches in 2006 compared to its closest rival Yahoo which only drew 22% (Vise, 2006). All this even though Google is not known to engage in extensive image cultivation efforts as did SIA and Nike. Post-crisis, the Google name continues to hold significant brand equity (“Google Inc”, 2011). Its corporate image cultivation efforts however, remain unseen and its locus of image control remains located externally because of this. While its image valence post-crisis is positive and strong, its image is mostly ascribed.

Quadrant 4: Weak-External

The fourth type of corporate image describes organizations in Quadrant 4 of the corporate image grid (Q4). Such organizations do not have a habit of cultivating and managing its corporate image thereby placing its locus of image control externally. In so doing, the organization creates a corporate image void or vacuum which can and is usually filled by the organization’s external publics.

We saw this with Nike in the latter part of its crisis when it took nearly two years to officially respond to charges of running sweatshops (Bullert, 2000; Jenkins, 2003) and in Toyota’s crisis when it similarly seemed to shy away from providing an official response at the height of the massive global recalls (Rechtin, 2011). Google too, during the crisis was not apparently engaged in any image repair efforts. Perhaps because of this, the media, the publishing industry and the general public filled the corporate image void themselves and labelled Google as monopolistic and ethically unsound (Stromberg et al, 2011).

RQ3: Assessing and managing the corporate image vacuum

From the case studies, key learning points were gleaned from which the following checklist is proposed. Given that corporate image formation is dialogic (Cornelissen, 2011; Dowling, 1994; Massey, 2004) and that generally managing an organization's own corporate image efforts affords it more control than compared to managing how the public perceives it, the following checklist is intended more as a prompt for practitioners to reflect on their company's corporate image efforts and preparedness for a crisis as opposed to a comprehensive to-do list.

Informed by Kennedy's (1977) and Dowling's (1994) proposed corporate image formation processes, Abratt's (1989) corporate image management process and Hatch and Schultz's toolkit (in Cornelissen, 2011), answering the questions in the list below will offer insights into how the corporate image vacuum can be managed.

- *Image Cultivation:* Is there currently proactive corporate image cultivation efforts being undertaken?
- *Image Management:* In a crisis, is the corporate image vacuum effectively & proactively filled or managed?
- *Image Matching:* In a crisis, does the communicated image match the public's perceived image of the company?
- *Locus of Image Control:* Was the locus of image control during crisis located within the company?

Conclusion

This study has attempted to crystallise existing varied strands of understandings pertaining to corporate image. It is concluded that corporate image, as one of a few corporate constructs managed by an organization, is important given the impact and implications it has on an organization's credibility, legitimacy and success as demonstrated in the case studies.

Because it is a mutable concept, corporate image can be managed by managing the two dimensions which affect it i.e. image valence and locus of image control. Given that it is easier to control what is within our means, the study places slightly more emphasis on the organization's role in creating, managing and protecting its corporate image (organization-constructed image) in order to affect the other part of the corporate image equation (audience-ascribed image).

Failure to place the locus the image control within the organization and/or ensuring a strong image valence might lead the organization to enter a corporate image vacuum. Such a vacuum is typically and usually filled by external publics disadvantageously.

While the dimensions of image valence and locus of image control are proposed here as key dimensions in the formation and management of corporate image, the fact that corporate image is contextual also suggests that there can be other dimensions which may have a bearing on corporate image. While this study does not take into account these other factors, a possible future study could look into how other dimensions such as culture, might affect how corporate image is formed and managed. Some scholars have suggested for instance, that the way Toyota handled the crisis is fundamentally founded on the Japanese culture of not admitting mistakes publicly. How does culture shape a company's corporate image? And how is this image managed vis-à-vis a crisis?

Also, in discussing the dimension of locus of image control, the company's external public is assumed to be a monolithic entity which it usually and realistically is not. This is

admittedly another limitation of this study which at the same time presents the opportunity for future studies in this area i.e. stakeholder management in relation to corporate image formation and management. Just as some scholars suggest that a company can have multiple corporate personalities, can a company have multiple corporate images for its various stakeholders? Does it need such multiplicity? What are the challenges and how can these be managed?

Some other possible areas for future studies also include new media and how it hampers or aids in corporate image management and the interplay between the concepts of corporate image vacuum and information vacuum (Pang, 2010) and how the two notions can be dovetailed for better crisis communication management.

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