CORPORATE IDENTITY VS. CORPORATE IMAGE IN THE EYES OF PROFESSIONALS: AN INTERVIEW-BASED STUDY

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Abstract. Contrary to subsequent studies focused on the construction of corporate identity, this article aims to examine the stakeholder's perception of corporate identity projected to the public through language and visual manifestations on corporate "About us" pages. A qualitative, data-driven approach has been taken in the study. The results, based on data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty professionals, demonstrate the interviewees' deep scepticism towards corporate narrations, which are interpreted as persuasive and serving corporate ends. Thus, online projections of corporate identities do always match actual images held by stakeholders. The interviewees have emerged as critical readers of corporate communications and active constructors of corporate image.

Key words: corporate identity, corporate image, corporate reputation, perception of corporate identity

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to identify professionals' perceptions of corporate identity, projected by companies on their corporate "About us" pages. The lion's share of previous research has focused on investigating how companies present themselves to their stakeholders in cyberspace, often ignoring the interpretation of cautiously prepared self-praising narrations by the target audiences (see Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017). Thus, addressing a certain lacuna in subsequent research, the study discussed in this paper takes the recipient's perspective in order to illustrate the assumed discrepancy between corporate identity and corporate image. The recipient is viewed as a critical reader of corporate narrations, who actively participates in the process of meaning-making and co-constructs corporate image. Moreover, following the assumption that

all types of discourse are "inherently ideological" (Garzone and Sarangi, 2007: 20), the current paper explores the ideological underpinning of specialised discourse, narrowed to corporate discourse of company "About us" pages, and challenges its presumed objectivity, neutrality, impersonality and non-involvement (cf. Gotti, 2003: 33-37). In the context of the undertaken study, the ideological underpinning of corporate discourse is narrowed to the declared corporate values and corporate sustainability.

2. The definitional landscape

The key notions discussed in the present paper, i.e. **corporate identity**, **image** and **reputation**, are often used interchangeably and inconsistently across disciplines (Barnett et al., 2006; Gilpin, 2010; Brown et al., 2006; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). For this reason, it seems well-substantiated to sketch a definitional landscape for further discussion.

First and foremost, the notion of **corporate identity** should be contrasted with a seemingly similar term of **organisational identity**. Following Hatch and Schultz (2000: 12), corporate identity, addressing the phenomenological question of "Who we are as an organization", is of marketing provenience, while organisational identity has arisen from organisational studies. In this respect, corporate identity primarily concerns a company's self-expression and distinguishing it from rival organisations as well as its presentation to internal and external stakeholders, in contrast to organisational identity mainly related to the perception and interpretation of a given organisation by its members (Hatch and Schultz, 2000: 12-15).

The distinction between the notions of organisational identity and corporate identity on the basis of their provenience, originating, respectively, in organisational and marketing literature, has been clearly illustrated in Hatch and Schultz's (1997) definitions cited below:

> **Organizational identity** refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics.

> **Corporate identity** differs from organizational identity in the degree to which it is conceptualized as a function of leadership and by its focus on the visual (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1995; Olins, 1989). Although both concepts build on an idea of what the organization is (Balmer, 1995: 2), strong links with company vision and strategy (e.g. Abratt, 1989; Dowling, 1993) emphasize the explicit role of top management in the formulation of corporate identity. (Hatch and Schultz, 1997: 357)

Moreover, organisational identity is considered unmediated and direct, in contrast to corporate identity which is often mediated (Hatch and Schultz, 2000: 19).

The mediated channels include television, the press, video and the Internet and they are typically used to communicate with external stakeholders. Organisational communication is experienced in everyday interactions and behaviour of organisational members – most often employees (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 80-82).

A clear distinction should be also made between two often confused terms, i.e. **corporate identity** and **corporate image**. Wood (2004) defines these two terms from the communicological perspective, positioning them at two different ends of the process of communication. Namely, corporate identity is what an organisation – a source of communication – communicates about itself, either intentionally or unintentionally, via different communication channels. Corporate identity stands for the expression of what a company is, how it works and what makes it unique and different from other organisations (Balmer and Gray, 2003; Chun, 2005). Corporate image, on the other hand, stands for the perception of this identity on the part of the receiver – the public who interprets "an identity in a wider context with broader frames of reference" (Wood, 2004: 96).

Apparently, the self-perception of companies, articulated in corporate identity, and their real perceptions by the public do not always match. Yet, despite the fact that companies are incapable of determining their image directly, a number of scholars (e.g. Cornelissen et al., 2007; Melewar et al., 2005) position corporate identity as a starting point in the process of image formation by the public. Corporate identity is projected with "all forms of communication" (Cornelissen, 2008: 11), by means of a variety of verbal and visual cues (Marwick and Fill, 1997; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Hatch and Schultz, 2000). Consequently, companies are nowadays expected to present "well-crafted identities" to their stakeholders (Christensen and Cheney, 2000: 246) and mark their presence online (Cheney et al., 2004: 356-357; Boardman 2005: 21). In fact, Cheney et al. (2004: 107) point to the growing involvement of companies in addressing "the question of who they 'are' and how their different audiences perceive them".

This reflection of meticulously crafted corporate identity, created in the minds of the public, based on their impressions and experiences, stands for corporate image (Vos and Schoemaker, 2006: 53-57; Gray and Balmer, 1998: 696-699; Bernstein, 1985: 25). In other words, companies might pursuit a desired image by selecting certain cues concerning their identity, embedded in their communications, but corporate image is finally formed by the receiver not the transmitter. Thus, the relation between corporate identity and image might be best summarised by Bernstein's (1985: 25) words: "identity provides the information from which the receiver gauges the personality of the transmitter". Additionally, Bernstein's (1985: 13) statement that "image is determined by performance" suggests that the overall perception of an organisation is not only based on the projection of desired identity in corporate communication but also concerns all aspects of corporate activity, which in turn affect both corporate image and reputation.

The notions of **corporate reputation** and **corporate image** are closely related and, due to their seeming similarity, often confused. They are both the receiver's rather than the transmitter's projections. Image is seen as a fleeting, instant impression whereas reputation is defined as a more permanent and stable assessment constructed over time on the basis of a company's past and future performance (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 89-90). According to Carroll (2013: 4), corporate reputation is "a widely circulated, oft-repeated message of minimal variation about an organisation revealing something about an organization's nature" (ibidem). Moreover, Wilkins and Huisman (2014: 2225) view corporate image as an individual's instant impression of an organization, in contrast to corporate reputation, which emerges from stakeholders' consistent corporate images, maintained over time on the basis of prior experiences. Corporate image appears less stable and more prone to potential changes.

Wood and Somerville (2016) point to the evaluative character of reputation and its historical dimension as well as its durability and consistency compared to image. Moreover, positive corporate reputation has a more tangible dimension, which translates into profits for the company. As Fombrun (1996: 81) explains:

> Corporate reputations have bottom line effects. A good reputation enhances profitability because it attracts customers to the company's products, investors to its securities, and employees to its jobs. In turn, esteem inflates the price at which a public company's securities trade. The economic value of a corporate reputation can therefore be gauged by the excess market value of its securities.

Except for tangible monetary gains, the congruity of projected corporate identity and reputation is essential for the company's existence since any possible loss of corporate reputation might negatively affect stakeholders' (e.g. shareholders, investors, consumers, employees, job candidates, etc.) decisions concerning their investments, careers or consumer choices, posing potential risks to the company's future (Melewar, 2003: 195). In fact, a number of scholars point to the importance of "alignment" or "transparency" at multiple levels for an organisation's development and well-being (e.g. Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Fombrun and Rindova, 2000; Simoes, Dibb and Fisk, 2005). Following the definition of Fombrun and Rindova (2000: 94), transparency is "a state in which the internal identity of the firm reflects positively the expectations of key stakeholders and the beliefs of these stakeholders about the firm reflect accurately the internally held identity". As evidenced by research, successful functioning of an organisation is to a large extent regulated by the fine-tuning of all aspects of identity, namely, organisational identity expressed by the management, corporate identity and corporate reputation. The disintegration of these three elements negatively affects or even denigrates an organisation, since it decreases both the employees' commitment and customers' satisfaction (Cornelissen et al., 2007; Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2002).

It might be concluded that organisations are not the sole architects of their image as the very context of the reception, interpretation and understanding of their communications is in the hands, or rather minds, of their stakeholders. Nevertheless, a clearly constructed and effectively managed corporate identity might significantly contribute to a positive perception of an organisation while "a failure to control communications results in a confused image" (Ind, 1990: 21). Thus, specifying congruent corporate identity and communicating it effectively are the first steps to ensure the congruence between corporate projections and stakeholders' perceptions.

3. The projection of corporate identity on corporate websites

Nowadays, the most important tools applied in corporate impression management are company websites, which might be interpreted as "'public representations' that, in a more or less faithful way, resemble the thoughts or assumptions that the author intends to manifest" (Yus, 2011: 47). Corporate websites originated in the mid 1990s when they became "multimedia manifestations for corporate communication" (Goodman, 1998: 1-2). Over the next decades, corporate websites have practically replaced traditional printed materials formerly used in public relations practice, such as brochures or leaflets. As far as their content is concerned, the text is mostly expository since it provides information about the company and its products or services and publicises advertisements (Shepherd and Watters, 1998). Acting as the most "upfront", visible and accessible representatives of the company in cyberspace, corporate websites play the role similar to the shop window in the real world, which attracts the attention of potential customers and enables them to form their first, but often lasting, impressions (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 135). Importantly, this contact is direct, unmediated by the press or television, as in the case of advertising (Breeze, 2013: 148). Yet, the visual attractiveness of the website as well as its content, layout and navigation shape the user's general impressions of the company, as evidenced in a number of studies (e.g. Pollach, 2005; Heinze and Qu, 2006; Winter et al., 2003; van der Heijden and Verhagen, 2004).

As suggested by van Duyne et al. (2007: 392), visitors to corporate websites are motivated by the following three questions: who the company is, what it does and whether it should be trusted. The answers to these questions might be easily found on the "About us" page that provides assorted information on the company that is tailored to their stakeholder's needs and interests. In other words, the section tells a corporate story that might be categorised as:

> [a] comprehensive narrative about the whole organisation, its origins, its vision, its mission. However, the emotionally formulated core story is much more than just a vision or mission statement. By incorporating elements such as competencies, fundamental beliefs

and values, it mirrors something deep within the organisation and provides a simple yet effective framework guiding the organisation in all its actions. (Larsen, 2000: 197)

In fact, the "About us" page, which plays the role analogous to that of printed company brochures, seems to be the most relevant for corporate identity research. Available on most corporate websites, it aims to present the company to the general public, provides potential clients with some practical information and enables them to become familiarised with the company in a more personal way (Lam, 2009). For this reason, this section is viewed as a tool to build trust and loyalty towards the company and distinguish it from competitors (Tan, 2013).

A valuable contribution to the study of "About us" pages has been provided by Breeze (2013) who has scrutinised the FTSE top-100 companies. Despite certain differences across industries, these pages contain a number of common themes, including a company history, current developments, mission statements, senior staff profile or references to social responsibility issues. As far as their discursive features are concerned, these sections often use numerical data, usually presented in a visually attractive form, in order to build a positive self-image. Another frequently applied method to strengthen positive auto-presentations involves references to external sources, such as rankings or awards that legitimise a company's high self-evaluation. Additionally, in order to authenticate the external validation, hyperlinks to adequate sources are provided.

As Breeze (2013: 156) further holds, certain aspects of "About us" pages might be categorised as dialogic because they are intended to deflect any potential criticism and play a legitimising function. For example, in 2012 – a year of global crisis – companies tended to use economic discourse by making references to efficiency, profitability, investments in order to validate their economic performance. Yet, another visible concern involves social and environmental issues grouped under the umbrella term "sustainability" that dominate not only in "About us" pages, but might also be exposed in separate sizeable sections. In fact, "sustainability" has become the keyword in corporate discourse on the web that has to a large extent forced out "corporate social responsibility".

As far as the layout of "About us" pages is concerned, it might take the form of a single text presenting the company (Casań-Pitarch, 2015: 71) or be organised into separate sections under different headings. For example, Lam (2009) proposes ten sections, dubbed "moves", which might be contained in "About us" pages: organisational profile, contact information, disclaimers and legal information, customers and partners, employment opportunities, public relations, the annual report and investor relations, community involvement, FAQs (frequently asked questions) and site credits. The list proposed by Lam (2009) is dictated by the specific needs of a particular company.

For example, based on his genre analysis of "About us" pages of 64 banks, Casań-Pitarch (2015) found out that not all ten moves were always present in the

corpus under study. To the best of my knowledge, Casań-Pitarch (2015) was the first to categorise the "About us" page as a separate genre. The scholar has dubbed the subsequent sections of the genre "moves", referring to the terminology proposed by Bhatia (1993; 1995; 1997; 2004). Moves are further composed of steps, which might be either obligatory (those identified in more than 50% of the analysed pages or optional – present in 30% to 49.99% of the analysed pages). Obligatory moves embrace, respectively, the following sections: "Presentation", "History", "Corporate Governance", "Board of Directors and Managers", "Community Involvement", "Contact", "Locations", "Social Networks, "News", "Investors Relations". Optional moves include "Group Members", "Sponsorship", "Awards", "Products and Services", "Suppliers", "Social Networks". This list is by no means exhaustive, since the final form and content of the "About us" genre depends on specific needs of a given company. Similar results have been obtained in the analysis of corporate "About us" pages of 132 companies conducted by Wąsikiewicz-Firlej (2017: 233), which has shown that the headings of particular moves overlap with those specified by Lam (2009) and Casań-Pitarch (2015), yet their distribution and frequency is slightly different.

In sum, creating a visually and verbally attractive as well as a user-friendly corporate website, which projects effectively consistent corporate identity, appears to be one of the major challenges for PR executives. Acting as companies' front doors, corporate websites play a significant role in forming first impressions by the visitors and contribute substantially to the overall corporate image. The next section will, however, attempt to look behind the neatly constructed corporate facades and point to the ideological aspects of corporate identity discourse.

4. Ideological aspects of corporate identity discourse

The most reknown CDA scholars, namely Fairclough, van Dijk and Wodak, argue that discourse cannot be classified as either "ideological" or "non-ideological" since ideology underlies all types of discourse (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 174). The potential ideological orientation of discourse is also advanced by Lemke (1995) and Hodge and Kress (1993). What might, however, differ particular discourses is the degree of ideological manifestations (cf. Garzone and Sarangi, 2007: 18). Accordingly, accepting the inherently ideological nature of the notions of discourse and language challenges the idea of neutrality of communication (Garzone and Sarangi, 2007: 20).

Following the assumption that all types of discourse are inherently ideological should naturally lead to the conclusion that discourse narrowed to professional domains, referred to herein as specialised discourse, is also underpinned by a certain ideology or ideologies. Yet, such an assumption does, in fact, oppose the common

presumption concerning the objectivity, neutrality, impersonality and non-involvement signalled by Gotti (2003: 33-37). For the sake of clarification, it must be mentioned that the notion of specialised discourse has been adapted from Gotti (2003: 24) who defines it as "the specialized use of language in contexts that are typical of a specialized community stretching across the academic, the professional, the technical and the occupational areas of knowledge and practice". However, another competitive term, i.e. "professional discourse" is widely used by some scholars (e.g. Gunnarson, 2009; Kong, 2014) in reference to the use of discourse in broadly understood "professional domains". Such areas embrace a wide array of professional domains related to medicine, law, academia, science and social welfare that are characterised by "a unique set of cognitive needs, social conditions and relationships with society at large" (Gunnarson, 2009: 5). Kong (2014: 2), however, points to the fact that the notion of professional discourse is also used in a narrow sense, when applied to legal and medical contexts. In the present paper the term "specialized discourse" is used in a sense similar to that of "professional discourse", understood as any use of language in broad professional contexts, including communication between laymen and professionals (cf. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 174).

At the lexical level, such discourse is characterised by monoreferentiality, lack of emotion, precision, transparency, conciseness, and conservatism (Gotti, 2008: 33-41). As far as the syntactic options are concerned, it involves the frequent use of the passive voice, depersonalisation, omission of phrasal elements, expressive conciseness, premodification, nominalisation, lexical density, complex and lengthy sentences (Gotti, 2008: 67-101).

Garzone and Sarangi (2007: 23) observe, however, that in recent years linguistic research has revealed that these linguistic choices are also accompanied by a range of more sophisticated covert or less frequent overt strategies intended to modify the author's commitment, control the audience's reaction and identify the author's attitude towards the content of their own discourse. Thus, the scholars (ibidem) point to specific ideological dimensions of specialised discourse, which reflect values and norms shared or rejected by a particular group in society or a wider cultural circle into discourse (cf. Wasikiewicz-Firlej, 2017: 174).

As far as ideological underpinning of corporate identity discourse is concerned, the major discernible trend might be deemed "greening of corporations", which "has reached near surreal lengths" (Alexander, 2009: 67). This shift is particularly visible in the over-lexicalisation of corporate discourse with environmental terms, dubbed by Fill (1998: 12) "surface ecologization" of discourse. Accordingly, as evidenced in the study of a nearly two million word corpus of corporate identity discourse (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017), the current keywords in corporate discourse are "environmental", "sustainability", "diversity", "communities", "commitment", "environment", "sustainable" or "ethics". Superficially, corporate discourse and its underlying ideology promote sustainable development and silence neoliberal agenda.

The newly-emerged corporate social and environmental commitment might be interpreted as an attempt to win social support and legitimisation, necessary to attain real, yet often obscured, corporate aims which include profit-making and capital accumulation. For this reason, confronting corporate auto-narrations with stakeholders' perceptions seems to be well-substantiated to understand the dynamics of corporate image formation.

5. Research design

In the present study, I will examine how corporate identity, projected through language and visual manifestations on corporate "About us" pages, is perceived by professionals, acting both as external and internal stakeholders. The majority of subsequent studies have focused on analysing how companies project themselves to their audiences rather than how they are perceived by their stakeholders (see Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2017). In order to bridge this gap in research, the present study takes the recipient's perspective. It has been assumed that the recipient is a critical reader who actively participates in the process of meaning-making and in the context of the undertaken research co-constructs corporate image.

The study aims to:
1) specify general trends in the use of corporate websites (narrowed to "About us" pages) by professionals;
2) identify the recipient's perception of corporate identity, as projected online on corporate "About us" pages, in reference to its credibility and ideological underpinning, with a special focus on values and corporate sustainability.

The study is of an exploratory character and has been designed to provide some preliminary insights for the construction of a research instrument for further analysis. A qualitative, data-driven approach has been taken in the study. The data has been obtained from in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted individually with each participant in their workplace. In order to ensure the replicability of the study, the interviewer (the author of the current paper) has asked the main questions contained in the interview outline as well as numerous follow-up and probing questions. The data collection process started in October 2015 and it is still ongoing since the sample has not been saturated. The following study analyses the data from twenty interviews conducted in the period of 1.10. 2015-31.12.2017. Each interview lasted c. 30-60 minutes and was audio-recorded and thematically analysed. The most illustrative excerpts were transcribed using the transcription conventions developed by Boje (1991).

20 professionals holding managerial positions in international companies have taken part in the study (12 females and 8 males). The identities of the participants and the companies they represent remain anonymous. The respondents have been

coded as 'R' and assigned a number from 1 to 20. Table 1 specifies the areas of respondents' professional activity in the companies they were working for at the time of being interviewed.

Table 1. The areas of respondents' professional activity

Professional area	Respondents
Sales	R3, R4, R14, R16
Marketing/public relations	R5, R9, R15, R18, R19
Quality control	R1, R10
Production	R11, R12, R20
Finance and accounting	R6, R7, R8, R17
Transport and logistics	R2, R13

The interviews were conducted in English as a part of in-company courses in business English. All participants held a Master's degree and their level of English ranged from B2 to C1 according to CEFR.

6. Results and discussion

The current analysis takes the bird's perspective and focuses on the general trends that have emerged from the data, providing some preliminary reflections on the perception of corporate identity projected on corporate websites.

6.1 Corporate websites: patterns of use and perceived credibility

All respondents have declared to visit corporate websites occasionally. However, only 8 were able to specify the last website they actually visited. The extract below presents a typical response:

Extract 1.
I: Do you ever visit corporate websites?
R4: Yes, of course.
I: When did you last visit a corporate website?
R4: Erm... Actually, I don't know... OK. I think I hardly ever visit them, really...

When asked about the motivation to visit corporate websites, the respondents primarily mentioned professional reasons, which included finding some practical information, such as checking the client's contact data or profile of their activity,

tracking competitors' line of products, updating news on their activity or browsing job-offers. Marketing and PR managers also frequented their competitors' or top companies' websites in order to track their design and identify the dominating trends in the industry. According to one of the respondents (R15): "(...) it is some kind of voyeurism. We must know what everyone is up to. (...) we simply imitate the best and follow the latest trends". Only 8 respondents were able to recall a case of visiting a corporate webpage for private use, which was usually motivated by the need of acquiring additional information about a product they intended to buy.

The frequency of visiting the websites of the companies the respondents worked for was even lower. The majority of the study participants (80%) treated the corporate website as a source of information about the company for external rather than internal stakeholders. Employees as internal stakeholders were typically informed about the latest corporate developments by means of the intranet, newsletters or communicators with restricted external access. More than half of the respondents pointed to the importance of social media in corporate communication and considered the traditional website a rather static and obsolete tool. The use of corporate websites for private use was reported to be very low.

When asked about the content and structure of "About us" pages of corporate websites, the respondents were able to identify from 3 to 6 of their moves (mission, values, history, awards, profile, products). Yet, the "identity" pages were, in fact, hardly ever consulted by the interviewees and treated as a conventionalised PR genre. As one of the participants expressed it, "they must be present due to certain expectations and conventions but nobody really believes them or reads their content" (R9). The interviewed professionals considered them as an obligatory element of corporate communication, the presence of which is taken for granted but practically ignored. The respondents maintained that "About us" sections should, by definition, extol the company and present it in a positive light. As regards the form and content of identity pages, the adherence to widely used conventions rather than originality is expected. The interviewees remained highly sceptical of the truthfulness and credibility of corporate declarations, yet they would not negate or challenge them openly. As one of the respondents (R15) expressed it: "it's all about our commitment, excellence, competitive advantage and that kind of stuff... gibberish... nobody takes it seriously (...) it is more or less the same for all companies".

The rare circumstance attracting the respondents to become familiarised with corporate website identity sections was a job interview, which required obtaining information about a potential employer. Most respondents considered it as obligatory "homework" that should be done before a job interview, demonstrating the candidate's minimal effort and involvement in the recruitment process as well as a vested interest in the company. A successful candidate should be well informed about the company's issues and the corporate website seems the most obvious source of such information. "About us" pages were perceived by the majority of respondents (55%)

as part of an employer branding strategy – especially the subsections targeting employees or job candidates, i.e. "Our employees" or "Careers". Nevertheless, the respondents remained highly sceptical of self-praising contents and self-positioning of the companies as ideal employers, offering competitive earnings and benefits as well as infinite opportunities for professional development. When confronted with the contents of their employers' websites ("Careers" subsections), all respondents admitted that corporate declarations are a far cry from reality. Some of the comments were, in fact, bitter or sarcastic, as exemplified in the following extracts:

> Extract 2.
> R14: Are you sure this is ***** [the name of the company] website? Oh, I didn't know I was working for such a great company." [laughter]

> Extract 3.
> R12: (...) blah, blah, blah... you can write whatever you want. (…) I must show it to my boss.

> Extract 4.
> R20: No comment, please. I still want to work here, anyway" [laughter]

The respondents concluded that corporate narrations are part of a meticulously designed employer branding strategy and should not be treated as reliable sources of information about the company. As job-seekers the respondents take into consideration the overall reputation of the company, built over the years, and rely on external sources such as the media, the company's present of former employees, real earnings, and information provided by third parties rather than the company itself.

6.2 Consumer decisions

Similar strategies are followed while taking consumer decisions. The respondents hardly ever consult corporate "About us" pages before purchasing any product or service, since they find their content unreliable, promotional and persuasive. Several respondents (5) pointed to the fact that the information about their products provided by corporations tends to be superficial and untrustworthy. The extracts below illustrate general trends that have emerged from the data:

> Extract 5.
> R17: "The companies create the content of the websites by themselves, so you can't trust their description of the products".

> Extract 6.
> R14: These pages are persuasive just like advertising but the strategies used here are more subtle (...) [they] pretend to be objective (...) language is less emotional. They simply present the company from the best perspective".

In sum, similarly to job-seekers, consumers value third party opinions about products or services and avoid consulting corporate websites or any other company publications. Instead, their preferable sources of information about the company include internet forums, social media or networks of informal contacts. Product descriptions published by companies are interpreted as camouflaged advertising rather than reliable product specifications.

6.3 Ideological underpinning

As concerns the identification with corporate values, the vast majority of respondents (85%) were unable to specify exactly even the core values fostered by their employers in "About us" sections. In a similar vein, the respondents failed to paraphrase or render the gist of the mission statement of their companies. As one of them expressed it (R6): "they [mission statements] are all the same (...) they are all about 'pursuit of excellence' or 'top quality of our products or services' (...) who takes them seriously?". Most respondents admitted that the rare occasions of getting familiarised with the content of corporate "About us" pages pertained to preparations for the job interview or corporate new employee welcoming and onboarding programmes. Companies' ethical orientations do not seem to guide the respondents' consumer decisions but they might, to a certain extent, influence their employment decision, as maintained by one third of the respondents.

A similar attitude is taken towards corporate sustainability, considered to be part of corporate communication strategy imposed by the public opinion rather than an expression of true involvement in and dedication to green issues. In fact, almost half of the respondents perceived corporate sustainability as "greenwashing" or "PR strategy", aimed to meet corporate goals. The "greening" of companies is seen as an effective way of profit making since "green products sell better" (R5). The vast majority of respondents (70%) considered both ethical and ecological appeals rather unimportant while taking consumer decisions, guided mostly by product price and quality. As suggested by three marketing and PR managers, eco-themes were less popular in Poland due to the immaturity of the Polish market and the dominating role of pricing policy, motivating primarily purchasing decisions. Nevertheless, one third of the respondents pointed to some positive aspects of corporate sustainability, contributing to greater social awareness of ecological issues and "absolving corporate sins", as expressed by one of the respondents (R14).

Despite the fact that the self-referential website content did not seem to motivate consumer choices that were informed by external sources and private recommendations, one third of the participants revealed that a company's ethical and ecological orientation played a certain role in accepting it as a potential employer. In other words, corporate identity, at least at the declarative level, did not seem to exert any

significant influence on consumer choices but did resonate with personal identities and value systems. This study has delineated directions for further research that will bend towards the perception of organisational identities and, hopefully, pave the way to its pedagogical applications aimed at developing critical language awareness, especially towards persuasive specialised discourse.

7. Conclusions

The findings of the study based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected participants from Poland, indicate scepticism and reservation of consumers towards corporate narrations treated as "corporate talk" or "PR wind-up" aimed at creating a particular, overwhelmingly positive image, and challenge the deeply-engrained myth concerning the neutrality of specialised discourse. Corporate websites were, in fact, seldom consulted by the interviewees and their content was perceived as conventionalised, persuasive and self- serving. Notably, even seemingly neutral contents, such as product or career descriptions, were found unreliable and interpreted as camouflaged advertising or employer-branding. Moreover, the newly-emerged corporate environmentalism, is approached with a dose of sound criticism rather than enthusiasm. The interviewees interpreted corporate engagement in sustainability issues as a part of corporate communication enforced by the binding regulations or simply as a strategy to win customers' support. The study has shown that despite the efforts of corporations to position themselves as leaders of sustainability, the interpretation of their messages by target audiences does not really meet corporate intentions. Thus, it might be concluded that projections of corporate identities do not always resonate with corporate images. The interviewees have turned out to be critical readers of corporate narrations, sensitive to their ideological underpinning, and active constructors of corporate image, who do not rely on the statements contained in corporate communications but verify their truthfulness by consulting other sources of information and third party opinions.

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