Coherence of marketing communication with corporate identity for effective communication

Coerência da comunicação de marketing com a identidade corporativa para uma comunicação efetiva

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the corporate identity construct after a literature review followed by the construction of the hypothesis (H1): marketing communication is perceived as more coherent when grounded in corporate identity. The theoretical framework allowed the researcher to find bounds and contradictions regarding the construct. A quasi-experiment was made inside a company of the healthcare sector in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, to test H1. Data collection was performed based upon the metaphorical analysis system and, consecutively, a quantitative data collection which was supported by nonparametric tests. The findings of the work were that marketing communications which do not take into account attributes of corporate identity receive more diffuse impressions from its audience, which confirms H1.

KEYWORDS: Corporate identity; Marketing communication; Corporate image.

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RESUMO

Este artigo procurou explorar o construto de identidade corporativa fazendo uma revisão teórica para, em sequência, desenvolver uma hipótese (H$_1$): a comunicação de marketing é percebida como mais coerente quando pautada na identidade corporativa. O arcabouço teórico permitiu identificar nuances e fronteiras a respeito do construto. Foi realizado um quase-experimento em uma empresa do setor hospitalar da Região Metropolitana de Belo Horizonte para o teste, que consistiu em uma pesquisa de delineamento qualitativo baseada em metáforas e, em um segundo momento, em uma pesquisa quantitativa que passou por testes não paramétricos para a análise dos dados coletados. Como resultado, identificou-se que comunicações de marketing não pautadas nos atributos da identidade corporativa obtém avaliações mais dispersas por parte do público, o que corrobora H$_1$.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade corporativa; Comunicação de marketing; Imagem corporativa.

1 INTRODUCTION

Research on corporate identity has been gaining ground since the 1990s, primarily drawing European authors' attention (He & Balmer, 2013). In this regard, the *European Journal of Marketing* plays a predominant role. However, there is a certain diffusion of constructs in literature that qualify the term identity. Some authors treat it as *organizational*, others call it *corporate*. Despite the diffusion, there is a certain consensus about meanings, in practical and theoretical applications of the terms. This study carried out a bibliographical review beforehand so that, later, it could select the concepts that the bibliography produced and narrow them to create solid constructs for a hypothesis test.

In general, according to the bibliography reviewed, corporate identity may be defined as what the company is. Moreover, this research showed that marketing communications should be based on corporate identity for being effective (Almeida, 2005; Fascioni, 2010; He & Balmer, 2013; Riel & Balmer, 1997). At that point, a research problem emerges: What's the importance of corporate identity for the organization*?*

The overall objective of this article was, therefore, to investigate the importance of corporate identity for the marketing communication of the organization, and the specific goals were: 1) to analyze, separately, the qualitative and quantitative data regarding the identity of the company which was studied; 2) to triangulate the collected data, verifying the importance of corporate identity for the marketing communication.

In the following section, the theoretical framework will distinguish between two similar terms (corporate identity and organization identity), highlighting the contrasts of the field of knowledge so at the end of the literature review, a well-defined construct can be built for the hypothesis test. Next, the methodology of the study and the analysis of the data will be presented so that conclusions can be drawn as well as further considerations made.

2 WHAT IS CORPORATE IDENTITY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The term corporate identity presents a complex literature, with different approaches, from: (a) one more concerned with organizational issues (e.g. culture, strategy, and skills), (b) another concerning corporate image, to (c) an approach more concerned with the field of communication and branding (Gupta, 2016). Hatch e Schultz (1997), who are references in the subject, observe that the concept of *organizational identity* derives from the organizational literature, while the one of *corporate identity* is more commonly used in the marketing field. Thus, for the authors, *organizational* identity is what the members of the organization think about it and how they perceive it; on the other hand, *corporate* identity is conceptualized as a function of leadership with a certain visual focus. Nonetheless, both concepts are related in a way which can identify *who the organization is* (Almeida, 2005; Balmer, 2017; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Burgi & Oliver, 2005; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). As a whole, whereas the organizational literature focuses on the relation between employees and their organization, the marketing one refers to the term identity as the way in which management expresses its idea to external audiences, through products, communications, behavior, and environment. (Hatch & Schultz, 1997).

In an article which Riel and Balmer (1997) deal with the concept of *corporate identity* (and which does not mention the word *organizational*)*,* they present some differences in the construct of the term regarding its areas of origin:

- Graphic design paradigm: the term was originated in the area of design as a means to create visual identification. However, the approach has been broadening into the fields of organizational strategies;
- Integrated communication paradigm: the authors of this approach are in favor of consistency in communication (built with identity) used with the stakeholders;

- Interdisciplinary paradigm: is the concept which the authors being study within this article, among others, defend. It refers to corporate identity as an organization's unique characteristics which are rooted in the behavior of members of the organization. In this manner, managing corporate identity may have strategic importance.

There are certain differences between the constructs referred to by Hatch e Schultz (1997) and Riel and Balmer (1997). While for the former, in the present article, *corporate* identity has a more practical and visual character (because it has been appropriated by marketing), for the latter, *corporate* identity sounds like the personality of the organization. Despite the differences, there is one point in common: the term identity refers to something inherent in organizations and that can identify and differentiate them. Balmer and Gray (2003: 979), hold that corporate identity "refers to distinctive attributes of an organization and that answer the questions 'what are we?' and 'who are we?'"

In that article of Riel and Balmer (1997), there are quotes on the mix of corporate identity, which is the mixture of communication, symbolism, and behavior in the organization. By explaining some methods for discovering and managing corporate identity and their dissonances, the authors imply that corporate identity can be managed. This view is also found in Balmer (2017), but this malleable view on corporate identity is not shared by the Brazilian, Fascioni (2010). Following the writing of her doctoral thesis and a lot of research on corporate identity, the author argues on the whole that identity is a very permanent thing within an organization, and concludes that it is much easier to work on the positive identity attributes (for the ones inside the organization) than trying to change some possibly negative attribute (at the risk of not succeeding to do so).

Burgi and Oliver (2005) carried out a research in which, through a case study, it was made clear how identity affects every strategic decision that companies must make. For the authors, the *organizational* identity is seen as an important source from which the strategy must feed from to be implemented. In the same work, the authors, through the discovery of the identity of independent sectors of the company analyzed, were able not only to see flaws in the strategies drawn, but also to come up with corrections that could bring good future results (which, according to company reports, they did). For the authors, *organizational* identity has always been understood as what members of the organization think about it, but recent studies have broadened the meaning of the construct to the way the organization performs in its environment.

Regarding a more aesthetic perspective, Argenti (2006) states that, in addition to factors such as company history, products and services, managers 'behavior, social and cultural programs, employees' attitudes, advertising, visual composition, colors used in communication pieces and environments, the architecture of buildings, events etc., also build the identity of a company. Bartholmé and Melewar (2011), call attention to an aesthetic perspective as well: the audio part of corporate identity. And Heller (2016) highlights the role of corporate identity in the construction of iconic brands through a historical perspective, which brings to light the historicity of corporate identity.

To conclude this initial understanding, two definitions of Brazilian authors are relevant: Torquato (1986) understands by *organizational* identity the values, characteristics, and what the organization does to be noticed by their target audience. For Kunsch (2003, p. 172) the *corporate* identity "reflects on and projects the real personality of the organization". The author also states that it is part of the identity of an organization its self-portrait, the sum of its attributes, its expressions and all its communication.

By creating an inflection point, this article highlights Hatch and Schultz (2002), who contributed with a new approach to the concept of identity (the authors used the term *organizational* identity), spotting an interdisciplinary point with the psychology and Mead's constructs. For the authors, identity is a dynamic and interactive process that encounters itself between organizational culture and image. In order to propose this model, the authors sought in the literature the possibility of a parallel between the 'self' of the individual psychological theory and the organizational identity. According to Mead's theory, the 'self' is composed of the 'I' and the 'me,' as will be shown in Figure 1. Having reached that parallel and being able to transpose the constructs of individual psychology into the

social field of organizations (or into a collective psychology), it was possible to identify that the corporate image corresponds to the 'me', since the image is understood in the organizational literature as the impression of the others (stakeholders) kept by the members of the company. Meanwhile, 'I' corresponds to the organizational culture, where the company's attitudes towards the environment are stored. As well as in individual psychology, in which the 'self', therefore, would be a relation between the 'I' and the 'me', in organizational studies the identity would be the relation between the organizational culture and the image.
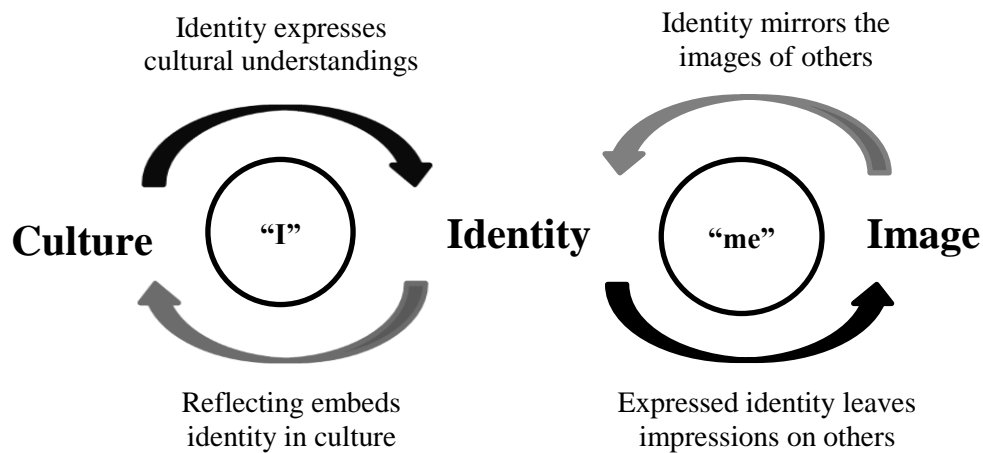

Figure 1 – Relation between culture, identity, and image
Source: Hatch e Schultz, 2002, p. 995.

However, this approach brought into discussion the concept of *organizational* identity, the same covered by Hatch and Schultz (2002), which is very close to what is understood as *corporate* identity by other authors (Balmer, 2017, Apolo, Baez, Pauker, & Pasquel, 2017, Balmer & Gray, 2003, Fascioni, 2010, He & Balmer, 2013, Riel & Balmer, 1997). This similarity becomes clear once it is observed that organizational identity (as presented in the model) represents, to some extent, who the company is (self). This model contradicts what Cornelissen (2000, p. 120) reports as "a traditional corporate model 'from the inside out'" (Figure 2). What this author questions is that, contrary to what the traditional model implies, the image formed by the dynamics of identity in the mind of the external public interferes directly in their attitude towards the organization, through a very similar process to the mirroring, proposed by Hatch and Schultz (2002). The perception that facets of identity affect how the public interacts with the organization is corroborated by Karaosmanoglu, Altinigne, and Isiksal (2016) in their study on one of the facets of corporate identity: the corporate ethical identity.

Figure 2 – Traditional model of corporate communication and image formation
Source: Cornelissen, 2000, p. 121.

The dividing line between organizational / corporate qualifiers becomes diffuse and fine in view of the proposed approach. The understanding of organizational identity as relational and flexible, along with the conceptual closeness with corporate identity, challenges the notion of the latter's immutability, as Fascioni (2010) most warmly advocated.

Therefore, in the literature, many concepts are blurry, and some attributes of definitions for *organizational* identity are also present in definitions for *corporate* identity, as well as the opposite. An example of this conceptual mix is a certain notion that identity (corporate or organizational) produces an image (what is seen and interpreted by the public outside the organization). When Hatch and Schultz (2002) approached identity as *organizational*, they treated the identity construct basically

the same way that Fascioni (2010), Balmer and Gray (2003) and Riel and Balmer (1997) addressed the *corporate* identity construct.

Another example of the overlapping in the definitions of constructs is demonstrated when Hatch and Schultz (1997) define as facets of *organizational* identity the distinctive and central characteristics of organizations. Interestingly, this concept is very similar to the concept of *corporate* identity advocated by other authors, when they say that the *corporate* identity is about *what the company is*, as is the case of Fascioni (2010), who criticized the overlapping and misuse of the constructs. In general, a fine line can be drawn between the constructs, as shown in Figure 3.

Corporate Identity	Organizational Identity
Represents the personality of the organization and the way it interacts with its environment. It concerns *who the company is*.	Concerns the members' understanding of the company.
It is more commonly used in the marketing literature. The design field appropriated it to define visual facets, which are common in the organizations.	It is more commonly used in the organizational literature.

Figure 3 – Difference between the concepts of corporate and organizational identity
Source: Created by the author.

The attempt to create a clearer and denser dividing line between the constructs can be innocuous, since methods designed to extract the *corporate* identity (what the company is) will have to go through what the members of the company think about it (*organizational* identity). This method was proposed by Fascioni (2010), who seeks to extract the corporate identity from the induction of metaphors produced by the members of the company. A similar method was also created and applied by Burgi and Oliver (2005). In addition, there are indications that it is of great managerial importance to understand the aspects of identity and, therefore, the need to extract it (He, 2012; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006).

In general, several authors (Almeida, 2005; Balmer 2017; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Burgi & Oliver, 2005; Fascioni, 2010; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Riel, 1997; Riel & Balmer, 1997) argue that *corporate* identity serves as the basis for the *corporate* image (understood as a set of perceptions and mental associations of the public), which feeds on facets launched by the former. This correlation is like the model proposed by Hatch and Schultz (2002) in which they demonstrate facets of the organizational culture (I) generating impression in the stakeholders (me). For Cornelissen (2000), the traditional model of corporate communication shown in Figure 2 may lead one to understand that the image can be constructed deliberately, ignoring the interactivity between the stakeholders and the organization. The author, thus, proposed a model that symbolizes the process of corporate image formation, as seen in Figure 4.
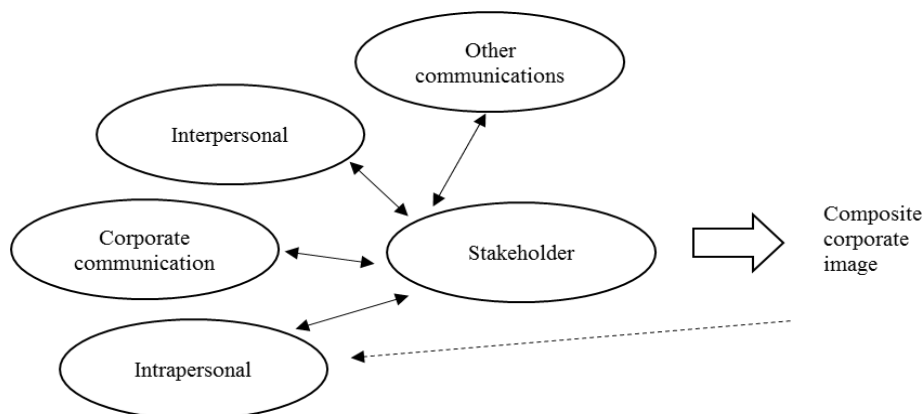

Figure 4 – Model of corporate image formation
Source: Cornelissen, 2000, p. 121.

It must also be emphasized that later this study will establish a delimitation of its own identity construct to use it in a purified way in the proposed hypothesis test. As shown previously, the dividing line between corporate and organizational identity is so tenuous that even Hatch and Schultz (2002), while working with the *organizational* term, had to also approach the construct of *corporate* identity (accepting that the image is also owned by the external audience of the organization) to be able to operationalize it in its dynamic identity model.

Cornelissen (2002), nevertheless, criticizes the use of the term *organizational* identity by social researchers and even suggests its supplantation. Considering the understanding that the term *identity* is a metaphor for an organizational phenomenon, the author criticizes its little systematized use. Hence, he argues that the construction of metaphors, in general, is important for science, as its use helps to bring out concepts and phenomena succinctly by associations, in addition to raising hypotheses and derivative works. Following the analysis of the importance of the metaphor for science and its applicability, parameters for the use in scientific works were identified once many researchers ignore the need to use minimally safe metaphorical terms. In order to create an applicable metaphor to science or to test its validity, Cornelissen (2002), based on the work of Montuschi (1995), argues that it is necessary to follow four steps:

1) Identify a minimum similarity between terms derived from each field of knowledge (primary and secondary concept), this item being extremely necessary to establish a metaphor in the scientific field;
2) Verify that the metaphor allows the derivation of future hypotheses and the interconnection between the fields of knowledge involved;
3) Principle of correction. It regards to identifying if the metaphor accepts corrections or future additions made by researchers;
4) Testing. Finally, after criticism and testing the metaphor will be able to take the place of the initial term, thus becoming a *dead metaphor.*

Analyzing the term *organizational* identity under those four aspects, Cornelissen (2002) understands that its application in the organizational environment is weak, since, as the concept of identity originates from social psychology that analyzes identity as an individual characteristic, it is impossible to use this term to designate a kind of group identity, as is the case with organizations. Thus, the metaphor of identity in the organizational scope does not fulfil the first and fundamental requirement for its use: the similarity of the term to be used in both, social psychology, and organizational theories. The author also opines that the use of the term identity in the context of organizations can be deliberately used by the managers as a tool of control:

Considering the 'organizational identity' metaphor, managers might reduce this metaphor to the single extension of 'a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, which, when conceived in that way, can then be used as a rhetorical and political device, as matter of managerial manipulation, venturing delicately to put people together in a bundle. In such a managerial translation of 'organizational identity' metaphor, an overarching set of values and beliefs is presumed to exist and to transcend individual members of the organization, perhaps from such a managerialist perspective with the aim of giving them some sense of porpoise and directing their creative energies towards the realization of corporate objectives. (Cornelissen, 2002, p. 266)

Contrary to some scholars' opposition to the use of the term identity, Hatch and Schultz (2002) have overcome this barrier between distinct fields of knowledge in order to propose their organizational identity model (formerly discussed). The present study, therefore, agrees with this last view, which understands that a social group (as well as organizations) possess identity. By the already consolidated use of the term, hence, Cornelissen's (2002) proposition to find another metaphor to replace the metaphor of identity will be abandoned.

Despite the nuances found in the field of knowledge, this article sought to raise six main ideas regarding the construct of corporate identity:

1) Corporate identity is the sum of communication, symbolism, and behavior within the organization, thus, the internal public is the great pillar that supports the identity. (Apolo et al., 2017; Balmer 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Riel, 1997; Riel & Balmer, 1997);
2) It is composed of negative and positive attributes, it is natural, and it exists regardless of whether it is managed or not (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Fascioni, 2010);
3) It tends to be stable over the life of the organization, so it is easier to accept any negative characteristic of identity than to try to modify it (Heller, 2016; Fascioni, 2010);
4) It reflects across the organization, including sectoral and strategic decisions (Jukić, 2017; Staub, Kaynak, & Gok, 2016; Goldring, 2015; Burgi & Oliver, 2005; Fascioni, 2010; He, 2012; He & Balmer, 2013);
5) For the application in marketing or branding, the term corporate identity is more appropriate (Apolo et al., 2017; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Fascioni, 2010; Riel & Balmer, 1997);
6) Although it tends to be stable (Fascioni, 2010), identity can suffer interference from the external (image) and internal (culture) environment, gradually changing itself (Balmer, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Considering this literature review, therefore, it is possible to raise the hypothesis that an effective marketing communication should take into account the corporate identity, which is the essence of the company. Marketing managers may err when, deliberately, "lying" about the attributes of the company in the communication pieces. Marketing communication, in this way, tends to be understood as more coherent when grounded in the attributes of identity.

3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Firstly, a bibliographic research was carried out, including Brazilian and foreign authors who deal with the concept of marketing and corporate identity, not necessarily relating them. All the approaches of the bibliographical research were confronted so that H1 could emerge: *marketing communication is perceived as more coherent when grounded in corporate identity*. To test H1, qualitative and quantitative designs were performed in a company of the healthcare sector in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, thus characterizing a quasi-experimental design, according to the definitions of Gil (2008).

An excerpt from the method based on the use of metaphors proposed by Fascioni (2010) was used to extract attributes from the corporate identity of the company. This was the qualitative step of the research that has the use of metaphors as a parameter. As defined by Zaltman (2003), metaphor is an important method to get the individual to bring to the level of consciousness what was hidden on subconscious levels. The test was performed with 24 employees from various sectors of the company in a training room. These employees were nominated by their respective leaders, who allocated them under the pretext of conducting a climate assessment proposed annually by HR. The participants spontaneously gathered into four groups and each one was stimulated with the question: if this company was a famous person, who would it be? After the answers from each group, the groups were motivated to discuss briefly about the results and reach a consensus.

Once the attributes were extracted from the previous qualitative stage, after five years - considering the argument that the identity tends to be stable with the passage of time, as stated in the reference - a quantitative delineation research was carried out. This temporal gap - the time gap between qualitative and quantitative research - is intended to ensure that the first stage of research has no influence on the outcome of the second.

The attributes obtained from the qualitative stage were the basis for the construction of two models of folders containing an institutional advertisement of the company. The first one (folder 1) was grounded in the attributes found in the qualitative research, and the second (folder 2) was constructed

in a way it would diverge from the first one. The folders were validated by a communication agency in the region, which was the referee used to define whether the material was graphically in accordance with the identity attributes obtained. It should be emphasized that both pieces had same image size and that the colors of the company were predominant in them. The only differences in the pieces were the characters, typography, and text. Both had the quality to potentially be used, according to the agency's assessment.

A questionnaire of two items was distributed among employees who had email or access to the research link - therefore, a non-probabilistic sampling for accessibility, as defined by Gil (2008). The questionnaire showed the two pieces created and asked that, on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, the collaborators surveyed assessed which one was more appropriate to the.

The quantitative research yielded 85 respondents. The responses were analyzed using the SPSS program, first running the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests, to verify the normality of the data distribution. The results of the tests recommended rejecting the normal distribution for the data and, after this result, the nonparametric signal test and the Levene test were run. The first one aims to verify the acceptability of the difference between the average of the two paired samples, and the second, to analyze the acceptability of the difference between the variances (Malhotra, Rocha, Laudisio, Altheman, & Borges, 2005).

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Below, as follows, the data collected in the research, beginning with the qualitative stage, which gives support to the subsequent quantitative stage.

4.1 Qualitative stage

The result of the metaphor dynamics, which guided employees to choose a famous character who represented the company, obtained the following result:

- Group 1: Geraldo Magela. A blind comedian, TV and radio presenter from Minas Gerais. Chosen due to the following attributes: he is unfunny and jokes with serious matters;
- Group 2: Fausto Silva. TV Globo presenter. He is boring, old-fashioned and a chatterer. Also, he is always interrupting the show guests;
- Group 3: Luciano Huck. TV Globo presenter. He is popular. Everybody likes him, and he always helps people;
- Group 4: Also chose Luciano Huck for the same reasons as Group 3.

After being encouraged to reach a consensus on the famous people listed above, the participants decided that the company related to presenter Fausto Silva, of Globo Network, the most. According to the employees, after being questioned by the marketing manager, their choice was due to the fact the presenter is conservative, repetitive, old-fashioned, popular, and because he does not listen to the interlocutors.

Those attributes, as previously mentioned, were used as a reference in the construction of an institutional advertisement, which was defined as *folder* 1. *Folder* 2 was constructed in contrast to the first one. A questionnaire was launched to test understanding on the coherence of the images according to the company's identity on the sample. The outcome of the quantitative research stage is next.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample. The median of the results between the two folders were the same (Md = 4.0). In addition, the means were very similar (M = 3.82 for *folder* 1 and M = 3.42 for *folder* 2). However, the greatest discrepancy can is seen when the variance was

analyzed (Var = 0.861 for *folder* 1 and Var = 1,342 for *folder* 2) and the standard deviation (Sd = 0.928 for *folder* 1 and Sd = 1,159 for *folder* 2).

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of the sample

	Mean	Variance	Standard deviation	Standard Error	Median
Folder 1	3,82	0,861	0,928	0,101	4,00
Folder 2	3,42	1,342	1,159	0.126	4,00

Source: Research data.

4.3 Nonparametric tests

In the consecutive step, the performance and result of the Sign Test allows the acceptance of the difference between the answers of the research while analyzing *folder* 1 and *folder* 2 (value-p =, 008). Hence, the H1 test achieved the expected success, with *folder* 2 (not coherent with corporate identity) showing a lower mean.

However, the choice to perform a nonparametric test, which focuses in the variance of the samples, was made due to the presence of greater discrepancy in the data dispersion. For that, the Levene test was run, whose result allows to accept difference in the variance between the samples (p-value <, 000). One possible proposition is that greater data dispersion may indicate greater cognitive work - and possibly, confusion - of the individuals in evaluating *folder* 2.

It is observed that through bibliographical review, qualitative and quantitative delineation research, and data analysis, one can reach results that confirm H1 (*marketing communication is perceived as more coherent when grounded in corporate identity*). Although the mean and median paired sample differences are very small, it is possible to observe that the dispersion of the responses regarding *folder* 2 is greater, which may reflect on a confusion of the respondent due to the non-connection with the corporate identity.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The literature on corporate identity leads to the solid conclusion that this construct refers to the personality of the company, that is, what it is like it and how it performs in the environment. Furthermore, the understanding of corporate identity may have managerial utility. And it is at that point that the problem of this research and the formulation of the following hypothesis are based on: *marketing communication is perceived as more coherent when grounded in corporate identity*. The H1 test achieved the expected success, corroborating the theories and raising awareness of the marketers to their managerial activities and an important point: how could an advertising campaign, an internal newspaper or a point-of-sale design dispense with the attributes of corporate identity? The brief results found in this empirical study indicate a new path to follow.

The statistical analysis of the data collected in this research indicates that marketing communications that do not consider the attributes of corporate identity can lead to greater confusion and lack of adherence from its audience. Therefore, marketers must, before idealizing their campaigns, seek the attributes of the identity of the companies they work for, and to do so, there are tools that can be found in the literature (Burgess & Oliver, 2005; Fascioni, 2010; Zaltman, 2003). The communication materials, as well as the design of the offices and sales outlets of the company, among others, should be grounded in the corporate identity. For professionals to always have these attributes available and to be able to apply them in a more structured way, Fascioni (2010) presents a managerial tool with good functionality.

The present article has limitations, as well as convenience sampling and the number of questionnaires which were answered. In addition, the participant company did not have a structured communication material for comparison with the pieces created. It is recommended for future research, approaches to confirm the identity through the company's own products and services, as

well as through audiovisual materials. Another possible recommendation would be to compare the perception of the owners and managers of the company with the corporate identity, which is more heavily guarded by employees at the operational levels.

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