IDENTITY IN COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper targets the issue of multi-identities of companies in collaboration. Companies may participate in collaboration for various reasons and may also perceive the collaboration in different ways. What is more; companies in collaboration may to various extents regard themselves as, and be regarded as, individual companies or as part of the collaboration. Their views may in turn be reflected in how business partners of the collaborating companies perceive the collaboration. This paper builds on various actors' perception of companies in collaboration. The paper uses the identity concept to capture the multi-identities of companies in collaboration. The purpose of the paper is to describe and discuss various actors' perception in multi-identity settings.

Research method: The paper is built on a case study describing three levels of identity: a company level, the level of a collaboration taking the form of a joint venture, and a contractual collaboration. These are in turn described from involved parties' and their business partners' perspectives.

Research findings: The paper shows that pre-collaboration history greatly reflects the identity ascribed to the companies. This was the case both for the companies in the collaboration and their business partners' perceptions. The more structured the collaboration, the more probable that a separate collaboration identity was established. A collaboration based on contracts merely meant that the company's identity was affected by connections to collaboration parties, while a separate identity was not established.

Main contribution: The paper contributes to literature on corporate identity through discussing them in relation to collaboration. It also contributes to research on perception in business relationships through pointing at differences in perception between parties, where this paper connects this to actor and relationship history along with the collaboration structure.

Keywords: Identity, collaboration, perception, marketing agency

INTRODUCTION

Increased interest has been directed at understanding why companies act as they do, what notions they pursue and how perceptions can be affected (Sigismund Huff, 1990). In the corporate marketing literature, identity is used as concept to capture how companies define themselves and are defined by others (Balmer, 2009; Tsai, 2008). As a prolonging of that, research on business relationships and networks, refers to network identity (Anderson, Håkansson & Johanson, 1994; Huemer, 2004; Öberg, Grundström & Jönsson, 2011) to reflect how companies' identities (and understanding of themselves) are formed in their interaction with external parties (Gadde, Huemer & Håkansson, 2003). But while taking the complexity of the shaping of identity into account, and while considering the self-understanding (Blombäck & Brunninge, 2009) as well as external parties' perception of the company (Soenen & Moingeon, 2002), less is known about multi-identities of firms. Multi-identity refers to how a company carries several simultaneous identities and should thus be separated from that a company may be perceived differently by various actors (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Stuart & Kerr, 1999). A multi-identity may result from how the company for instance engages in collaborations that also becomes an identity level, yet at the same time is perceived as an own entity. Multi-identities could be expected to be overlapping, affect one another, but also possibly be conflicting and preferred over one another. The purpose of the paper is to describe and discuss various actors' perception in multi-identity settings.

In the paper multi-identities are discussed related to collaboration. Companies participate in collaboration for various reasons (Alter & Hage, 1993; Bengtsson, Holmqvist & Larsson, 1998; Doz & Hamel, 1998) and collaborations may take various forms; from business-like relationships to strictly regulated joint ventures (Bergquist, Betwee & Meuel, 1985; Doz & Hamel, 1998; Dwyer, Schurr & Oh, 1987; Kogut, 1988). This is referred to as how structured the collaboration is. The form of collaboration at least partly reflects involved parties intention with the collaboration, where Bengtsson et al (1998) describe collaboration in dimensions of risk avoidance and flexibility, for instance. In addition to the company level identity, the paper compares a collaboration based on joint ownership with one based on a contractual agreement. The paper theoretical contribution relates to the field of corporate identity through its focus on multi-identity. In relation to network identity, it shows that identities may well be affected by, but also shared among collaborating actors and understood on the level of the collaboration.

The paper is structured as follows: The following section describes collaboration and identity. These areas create the theoretical point of departure for the paper. The two concepts are combined in a discussion on multi-identities. Following from the theory section is the research method. The empirical part of the paper is based on a single case study describing companies and collaborations in the marketing and advertisement sector. Data was captured through observations, secondary data and interviews with involved companies and their business partners. The case is described. In the analysis section, the case is analyzed based on how involved parties and business partners considered the various identity levels. The paper ends with conclusions, managerial implications and ideas for further research.

THEORY

This section describes the theoretical point of departure: collaborations and identity. Based on these, multi-identity is discussed and research questions formed.

Business relationships and collaborations

Companies engage in long-term relationships (Håkansson & Johanson, 1992), where the companies adjust to each other and often share resources (Gadde, 2004). The relationships may be underpinned by contracts, take the form of pure business relationships based on repeated business transactions, or be collaboration agreements with shared ownership, for instance (Bengtsson et al., 1998). Strategic alliances and joint ventures suggest that companies shape shared units and possibly compete on the level of the alliance or joint venture, rather than on a company-to-company basis (Achrol & Kotler, 1999; Doz & Hamel, 1998; Gomes-Casseres, 1996). Collaborations often aim to strengthen the individual companies' market positions and thereby increase their competiveness (Shenkar & Reuer, 2006). This in turn suggests that synergic values are added to companies based on their collaboration. Risk aversion may further be one reason for companies to participate in highly structured collaborations. The more structured (e.g., a joint venture) a collaboration, the less flexible (Bengtsson et al., 1998). Collaborations built on shared ownership in several aspects resemble the structure of a company. This potentially also suggests that other companies consider the collaboration as a single entity with an own identity. More transaction-based collaborations have the advantage of being more flexible. Expectedly, such collaborations may not be as long-lasting as collaborations based on shared ownership, and individual parties and the collaboration may more easily adjust to new circumstances.

Identity

Identity refers to a unique set of features that distinguishes a party from other ones (Woodward, 1997). Albert and Whetten (1985) describe identity in terms of centrality, distinction and endurance of features. This suggests that identity is not only what separates the carrier of the identity from others, but also are features that are important in the understanding of the carrier and that lasts over time. The carrier of the identity may be a private person (Mirzoeff, 1998), a company (Blau & Scott, 1962), or, as discussed in this paper: a set of companies. Identity can be understood from the perspective of the carrier of the identity (Bonner, Kim & Cavusgil, 2005; Brunninge, 2005), or expresses how other parties perceive the carrier. Soenen and Moingeon (2002) refer to identities as professed, projected, experienced, manifested and attributed, thus underlining that identity is shaped by the carrier as well as projected at it based on other parties' perception. Network identity (Anderson et al., 1994) broadens this to include how relationships to business partners shape the identity of a company (cf. social identity of a person, Woodward, 1997).

Identity from the carrier's perspective is for companies often described as organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), while corporate identity refers to how the company wishes to be perceived by external parties (Balmer, 1998; Balmer & Gray, 2000). This in turn carries resemblances with corporate brands (Fiedler & Kirchgeorg, 2007; Morsing & Kristensen, 2001), yet such brands are often stated as only being one dimension of corporate identity (Balmer, 2008; Hinn & Rossling, 1994). In corporate marketing literature, a distinction is further made between identity and image, where image refers to how a company is actually perceived by external parties (Balmer, 2008; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). But while image, organizational and corporate identity, and also reputation (Bromley, 2001; Fiedler & Kirchgeorg, 2007; Gray & Balmer, 1998; Worcester, 2009), are ways to distinguish

between various perspectives of identities, scholars use somewhat different terminology and put various emphasis on the different terms (see Balmer, 1998 for a review on various concepts related to corporate identity and marketing, and their evolvement over time). The important message set across is however that various actors may not share the same understanding of a company, and what is more: this may result from how the parties relate to the carrier of the identity. Furthermore, identity is built on deliberate ways of presenting a company (or collaboration) in terms of corporate brands, for instance, and on parties' perception beyond the control of individual actors (Öberg et al., 2011). Identity is in the paper used as an umbrella concept that entails both how a party perceives itself and how it is perceived by others (Anderson et al., 1994; Bonner et al., 2005; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).

Conflicts may occur between how the carrier wishes to be perceived and how it is actually perceived, but based on the corporate marketing idea, the carrier can at least partly affect how it is perceived, yet does not control its identity entirely. What is more, various actors may perceive the identity in different ways, and also, based on the idea of network identity (Anderson et al., 1994; Huemer, Becerra & Lunnan, 2002), may impact the identity of a company. Balmer & Greyser (2002) describe the actual, communicated, conceived, ideal and desired identities of a company to indicate that the same carrier may have several identities. Stuart & Kerr (1999), Morsing & Kristensen (2001) and Fiedler & Kirchgeorg (2007) similarly refer to differences among identities (or corporate brands). Yet, these do so with a single entity in mind – the company. The differences in identities refer to various dimensions of a single company or how various parties may perceive the company in different ways. This may apply to business partners or differences between self-understanding and external parties' perception. Less is however known about the coexistence of various identities. This paper describes various levels of identity that simultaneously are attributed to a party based on the party and its participation in collaboration and that are perceived as identity differences by the same actor. This is referred to as multi-identities.

Multi-identities

According to the network identity concept, business partners affect a single company's identity by means of their relationships with the company. The network identity concept is however also used to describe identity on a network level (Bonner et al., 2005), where network in this latter sense refers to collaboration parties in strategic alliances and the like. This paper brings together the perspectives of identity on a collaboration level and identities of companies to describe and discuss various actors' perception in multi-identity settings. This suggests that various identity levels may exist simultaneously and also to various degrees be perceived as such by the carrier of the identity and external parties. According to Uggla (2006), two effects become viable through companies acting together: co-branding and spill-over effects. Uggla (2006) specifically refers to how brands are used by collaborating parties, but similar effects could be expected for identity. Co-branding effects refers to synergic effects based on companies acting together, that is, new values are added on the collaboration level. Spill-over effects means that individual actors affect each other, that is, identity becomes colored by interacting parties (cf. network identity, Anderson et al., 1994).

This paper specifically focuses on the identity of a company and of collaboration as joint ventures versus as a contractual agreement, and describes these from the involved parties and external (business partners) perspectives. Table 1 outlines the various perspectives and dimension described in the paper.

Table 1: Perspectives and identity dimensions addressed

	As perceived by involved parties	As perceived by external parties
Company level identity		
Collaboration level identity (collaboration as joint venture)		
Collaboration level identity (collaboration as contractual agreement)		

Based on the network identity concept (Anderson et al., 1994) it would be expected that various levels of identity affect one another. Through bringing together the perspectives of identities and collaborations, the paper asks whether various collaboration forms affect identity differently and also how the company not only affects the collaboration identity, but also whether differences are seen between various companies in a collaboration. Thus the following questions are addressed in the paper.

- How do various levels of identity affect one another?

- How do the parties involved affect whether and how identity is foremost considered on a company or collaboration level?

- How does the form of collaboration affect whether and how identity is foremost considered on a company or collaboration level?

- What differences are there between how multi-level identities are perceived by companies involved and their external business partners?

METHOD

The paper is based on a single case study. The reason for choosing a case study approach is its capacity to capture actors and events in a context, rather than separated from the context (Dul & Hak, 2008). The case study approach further allows for the researcher to be explorative in the data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This in turn means that additional aspects may be found based on data collected, yet without being part of an initial research agenda. In case study research, the case may have different positions for the research: it may provide illustrating examples or create the foundation for the research, for instance. The case in this paper aims to illustrate (Siggelkow, 2007) various actors' perception in multi-identity settings. Criticism is often directed at case studies in general and single case studies in particular. The critics refer to limitations in generalization of findings. However, findings in a case study such as the one presented in this paper, would presumably be transferable to other cases and similar situations, thus providing a contribution to the research area.

The single case study of this paper focuses on companies working in the marketing and advertisement sector, with a collaboration called Marketing Collaboration in focus. The case of Marketing Collaboration was chosen as it represents a collaboration that in turn consists of several companies (WebCompany, Graphics, 3D and MediaCoordinator) and also participates in a contractual collaboration with Traditional Marketing. This allowed for the comparison between the company and collaboration level, and between two different forms of collaboration.

Data collection

Data was collected through observations, interviews and secondary data sources. Secondary data primarily consisted of internal company documentation and marketing material used by the companies to market themselves and/or the collaborations.

In total, nineteen interviews were performed between 2009 and 2010. Interviewees consisted of representatives for the companies of Marketing Collaboration: WebCompany, Graphics, 3D and MediaCoordinator, representatives of Traditional Marketing and customers to Marketing Collaboration. In the case of Marketing Collaboration, all persons working at the companies (these persons are also the owners or co-owners of the four companies) were interviewed. Representatives of Traditional Marketing consisted of one of the owners of Traditional Marketing (also active in the company) and the CEO. The author of this paper also participated in finance and board meetings of Traditional Marketing. Customers consisted of both small and large organizations, including private companies as well as public ones. A total of eleven customers were interviewed. Some of these were also customers to Traditional Marketing, or had worked with one or several of the companies of Marketing Collaboration for several years. The choice of customers aimed to reflect the customer base of Marketing Collaboration in terms of size and types of companies. It also meant to capture companies that had started to work with Marketing Collaboration at various times, so as to see whether customers that previously worked with the individual companies of Marketing Collaboration or only learnt about the companies once they had become Marketing Collaboration, would view the collaboration differently. Three of the customers had also collaborated with companies of Marketing Collaboration in jointly performed projects, meaning that the companies had temporarily acted as suppliers in common projects with external customer companies. Table 2 summarizes the interviews performed for the paper.

Table 2: Interviews performed for the paper

Type of company	Interviewees	Number of interviews
Representatives of Marketing Collaboration	All owners of the four companies. The companies had no other employees, making this everyone who worked at Graphics, WebCompany, 3D and MediaCoordinator.	6
Representatives of collaboration partner Traditional Marketing	One of the owners (also active in the company) and the CEO of Traditional Marketing	2
Previous collaboration partners, or customers to individual companies of Marketing Collaboration	Representatives of three different customer companies.	3
Customers of Marketing Collaboration (seven of which also customers of Traditional Marketing)	Representatives of eight different customer companies.	8

A semi-structured question approach was used (Sarantakos, 1998). This aimed to capture certain predefined areas, yet also allowed for complementary questions throughout the interviews. The interviews covered, without being restricted to, the following areas: each company's development from foundation to today's date, reasons for and perception of the collaboration in Marketing Collaboration, and with Traditional Marketing, and how they thought that external business partners viewed the collaborations. For customers, key focus

was on their business relationship or collaboration with Marketing Collaboration, their perception of the individual companies, Marketing Collaboration, and the Traditional Marketing collaboration.

Data analysis

In the analysis procedure, interviews were codified using a first and second hand coding (Pratt, 2009). The first hand coding aimed at summarizing individual interviews in terms of how they referred to the various companies and collaborations. Transcripts of interviews, along with secondary data and notes from observations were coded with regards to their contents. In the second hand coding, explorative data analyses were combined with theoretical reflections, thus moving between empirical findings and theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Kirkeby, 1994). An axial coding was used (Ragin, 1992) to structure the data based on perspectives and identity dimensions. Analysis was performed in several cycles, moving between empirical data and theoretical ideas (Barnes, Bloor & Henry, 1996).

In the analysis, interviewees are seen as representatives of their respective companies and collaborations. This means that their relation to the case collaborations was considered, as well as what part of the case collaborations they represented. Expressions were seen as statements made by the various companies or collaborations based on how the interviewees presented themselves and specific activities.

THE CASE OF MARKETING COLLABORATION

Marketing Collaboration consists of four companies, each of which with competences in marketing or media production. The collaboration was formed in 2007 as a separate company owned by the companies. Prior to that, the name Marketing Collaboration had been used by three of the companies since 2005 when they acted together, yet without it being a legal entity. Marketing Collaboration also acts together with Traditional Marketing since 2008, when the collaboration and Traditional Marketing decided to share office premises. This section describes the interacting companies and the collaboration of Marketing Collaboration as well as the collaboration with Traditional Marketing. The section starts off with a short introduction on the changing roles among companies working in the marketing and advertisement sector, which forms a background to the strategic decisions to collaborate among the companies.

A changing industrial context

Companies working with marketing for the sake of other companies, have experienced major changes during the past years. From having mainly served traditional companies in marketing campaigns with a focus on printed and later media commercials, internet and various forms of viral marketing has changed the marketing arena. For marketing agencies, this has drawn attention to the development of new competences. Web design and new marketing channels meant that marketing agencies shifted from traditional ways of marketing to visualization, 3D techniques and the like. This development included that several agencies employed staff with new competences, or started collaborating with firms specialized in the areas. What also happened was that web companies that had not traditionally been seen as actors in the marketing arena, suddenly became part of it and started competing with traditional marketing agencies. Thus, the development with new media and ways of marketing has changed the competitive landscape in a radical way, including both the introduction of new actors and activities.

The individual companies of Marketing Collaboration and the start of the collaboration

In late 2005, three companies with somewhat overlapping competences yet different core competences decided to start cooperating. These companies were WebCompany, Graphics and 3D. WebCompany was a web agency focused on developing websites for companies. Graphics was similar to a traditional marketing agency, with its core focus on graphic design for printed material. 3D worked with visualization and 3D technique. WebCompany had made some work for Graphics and the companies saw the potential of working closer together. Through personal relationships, they also came in contact with what was to be 3D. WebCompany and Graphics had established themselves on the market prior to the collaboration, while 3D was founded at the time that the collaboration with the other parties was started. This also meant that Graphics and WebCompany had established customer relationships before the start of the collaboration. For Graphics, this included building a company identity with the Graphics name:

> Graphics soon became known here. I and my companion worked hard to be seen and be heard of. We made a lot of fuss on the name Graphics, and became "the girls of Graphics" by people in the industry.

> Co-owner I, Graphics

The individual companies had somewhat different customer bases. Graphics mainly worked for small, local companies. WebCompany worked on a national basis with middle-sized companies. While Graphics could supply customer companies with designing ideas and produce printed marketing material, WebCompany found it more difficult to interact directly with customers. Few customer companies wanted separate web solutions for their marketing at that time, but saw this as a complementary marketing channel. Therefore, it was the marketing agencies that provided contacts with web companies, and these in turn only collaborated through the marketing agencies. Similar to WebCompany, 3D's business mainly fitted into working with marketing and web agencies, thus seldom contracting the customer directly.

The initial cooperation between Graphics, WebCompany and 3D only meant that they used each others' competences in individual projects, but soon they decided to form a collaboration that meant that they appeared as one entity and also shared projects. From then on, the companies called themselves Marketing Collaboration, yet this was only a name of the collaboration, not a separate company. The companies involved saw the advantage of working as a collaboration yet maintaining their individual companies:

> Marketing Collaboration being a small network and not a company has its advantages in communication. We have the closeness to each others' competences, yet also separate customers that we position ourselves to. Above that, we do not have to get irritated on each others for having different working hours or whether someone puts more efforts to the job than anyone else, or if salaries are fair. We also have more people to discuss creative ideas with. If one of us is to start a project, that company may rent someone else of us for brainstorming to add perspectives.

> Textual description from Marketing Collaboration

The aim was to be regarded as a production agency rather than a marketing agency, although the companies' industrial belonging and competitors were found in the marketing and advertisement sector. A production agency mainly focuses on actually designing and producing marketing material, while not as much working with overall marketing strategies.

Marketing Collaboration enabled the various companies to together take on larger projects. The stated aim of the collaboration was also to use the collaboration label in communication to customers and other business partners. Thus, the companies increasingly aimed to appear as one entity in customer interaction. To customers, those that established contacts with Marketing Collaboration since it was established, saw it as one company, while previous customers considered them as separate ones:

> They are good at what they do. Young. Creative. Three different companies, that could be considered somewhat naive business wise.
>
> Early customer company

Customers primarily working with Graphics referred to them as "the girls of Graphics" also following the establishment of the collaboration and emphasized them as being a separate company rather than a part of a collaboration. Apart from core customers being different between the companies, the way of approaching customers also differed. The small customers of Graphics were mainly met through social events, and the visibility of Graphics on the local arena therefore became a key concern for the company. This in turn had little to do with the customer work of the other companies or of the collaboration, and further brought about that the identity of the collaboration was perceived differently between those meeting Graphics on the local market and other customers.

New party joining the collaboration and the collaboration becoming a company

In 2007, a forth company joined Marketing Collaboration: MediaCoordinator. Media-Coordinator worked with business development and media coordination to companies. It had not previously been a company, meaning that it joined the collaboration and founded its own company at about the same time. The owner of MediaCoordinator had however done business with Marketing Collaboration before he joined the collaboration. As an employee at Marketing Group, he came across Marketing Collaboration and liked what he saw. This also meant that the founder of MediaCoordinator had been a customer to Marketing Collaboration, and this colored how MediaCoordinator viewed the collaboration. MediaCoordinator thought of Marketing Collaboration more as a business relationship, and less as a collaboration that it itself was part of. This is seen in how MediaCoordinator chose individual projects to participate in and also in how it borrowed competences on a project-to-project basis rather than integrating more fully in the work of Marketing Collaboration.

At about that time, the company Marketing Collaboration was also created. The reasons for recreating Marketing Collaboration to a company were mainly a result of confusion among customers and to ease the administration between the companies in the collaboration. It was believed that acting as a single company would make contracts with external parties easier, as they would not have to regulate who-did-what-for-whom among the companies or who was the contractual party to customers or external collaboration parties. The four companies each came to hold a forth of the company that was named Marketing Collaboration. The shaping of the company Marketing Collaboration could be described as evolving where the company was shaped through projects involving all owning companies, but where the intentions with Marketing Collaboration somewhat differed between the collaborating parties. A contract was written between the companies, to clarify the role of the joint company and also how the various co-owners of Marketing Collaboration would act towards each other and in the jointly owned company.

> We decided that as Marketing Collaboration we would debit customers the same cost per hour regardless of who among us owners did the work. ... It is a value for customers to not have to work with several companies. ... But for those only wanting the web solutions, for those, it is a little strange.

<div align="right">Co-owner I, WebCompany</div>

The main message concerning how to interact with external parties, was that this would be done through the representation of Marketing Collaboration, rather than each company acting on its own:

> At occasions, it may be an advantage to present the own company, but mostly, Marketing Collaboration and all its different business areas is what should be presented. ... If you give out your business card, it must clearly state that it is a business card of Marketing Collaboration.

<div align="right">Textual description from Marketing Collaboration</div>

It was important for the collaboration to shape a strong identity and be perceived as one company, at the same time as the individual companies kept their company names. One of the main ideas with the collaboration was that the individual companies' customers would be transferred to Marketing Collaboration. The company benefitting the most from joining the customer bases was Graphics. Although the company was the one with the strongest business relationships before the collaboration, these customers were not easily transferred to the other companies. The business of Graphics fitted small customers, while these seldom requested advanced web solutions. WebCompany and 3D were also considered too expensive for these small companies. For Graphics, the collaboration enabled the company to take on larger projects, thus also allowed it to become part of projects that would otherwise only had involved WebCompany or 3D. For WebCompany, and partly also 3D, the moving of customer bases was considered somewhat problematic. In addition to the individual companies approaching customers in various ways (see above), it also became increasingly evident that the designer skills and perception of how things should look were too diverse among the companies. Thus, while committing into joint project under the Marketing Collaboration company name, the solutions offered were not coherent.

> Some express that they only want to work with 3D, whereas Graphics' quality is inferior. But it may also be the other way around. A customer may receive a graphic design from Graphics that the customer is truly happy with. And then, when it comes to the web, WebCompany's style is much more minimalistic, and the customer does not become satisfied at all.

<div align="right">Co-owner II, WebCompany</div>

The unification of customer bases and the launch of the collaboration as a company, aimed to strengthen the identity of the collaboration. Although Marketing Collaboration worked hard to establish its identity, to many, the company remained unknown. What is more, for those knowing about the company, it was still perceived as separate units if the customer had previously worked with either of the companies in the collaboration. WebCompany and especially Graphics, had created identities in the eyes of customers and other companies in the industry:

> We were a strong brand before. And it has been difficult to change customers' view. Most of them know us as "the girls of Graphics".

<div align="right">Co-owner II, Graphics</div>

Also among the companies of Marketing Collaboration, the collaboration was not perceived to have a clear or strong identity. This was particularly the case for the companies (WebCompany and Graphics) that existed prior to the collaboration. They saw the dissimilarities in levels of skills and furthermore, those companies that existed before the collaboration continued to emphasize the networking and the individual companies in their description of Marketing Collaboration:

> Marketing Collaboration is owned and managed by four companies. We link different types of media together and have a broad offering. And we emphasize that we work in a network. That makes us different from others.

> Co-owner I, Graphics

For WebCompany, it was part of the owners' intention with Marketing Collaboration to be part of the collaboration, yet market the company WebCompany also following the foundation of Marketing Collaboration.

> I feel somewhat stronger for WebCompany. It is closest to my heart. I would choose WebCompany above Marketing Collaboration and I think my companion [in WebComany] feels the same way, while the other companies feel different in the matter.

> Co-owner I, WebCompany

What is also obvious is that those companies that existed before the collaboration saw the collaboration as something temporary, and that the participating actors may change over time. Possibly also, they consider dissolving the collaboration in the future. For 3D, that was founded to become part of Marketing Collaboration, the collaboration was the foremost identity and the owner of 3D did not consider it important to launch its own identity.

> My idea was never to market my company. ... My priority has always been to build the Marketing Collaboration identity.

> Owner, 3D

MediaCoordinator, lastly, continued to see its part of Marketing Collaboration as a business agreement, rather than as a collaboration. However, with the company not having existed before the collaboration with the other companies was started, little efforts were placed on actually marketing itself as a separate unit.

Collaboration with Traditional Marketing

Traditional Marketing is a marketing agency situated in the same town as Marketing Collaboration. The company was founded in the late 1980s by two men that had previously worked together at various marketing agencies. In 2005, the founders withdrew from the company and six employees took over the company. The company has since grown and now has fifteen employees. With a business focus on traditional marketing, the agency realized that it needed to add competences to match the development in the industry. It came across Marketing Collaboration while working with some shared customer projects, and started looking into the competences of Marketing Collaboration, to realize that this was a potential for Traditional Marketing to reach skills that was increasingly emphasized by the industry. The companies met to discuss the potential of the companies collaborating

> This was the right time for Traditional Marketing. We had considered web and film production and wanted a partner.
>
> CEO, Traditional Marketing

For Marketing Collaboration, the potential of collaboration with Traditional Marketing was to complement Marketing Collaboration with more strategy-oriented work. Traditional Marketing also held a customer base that was attractive for Marketing Collaboration to reach. A collaboration was also considered as something that would give Marketing Collaboration a trustworthiness.

> Together we are a young 25 year old with 25 years of experience. A great combination.
>
> Co-owner, Marketing Collaboration

A letter of intent was written between the companies, Marketing Collaboration and Traditional Marketing. At the end of 2008 Marketing Collaboration moved to Traditional Marketing's office premises. To inform the market that the companies were now collaborating, the companies threw an engagement party, and also announced the collaboration as an engagement in the media. This means that while continuing as Marketing Collaboration, the company also launched itself as being part of a collaboration with Traditional Marketing. To other companies, the launch of the collaboration as an engagement marked an exclusivity agreement, and these other companies withdrew from closer collaboration with Marketing Collaboration. To exemplify, Strategizing, a communication agency that had previously worked with companies in Marketing Collaboration on different projects, now considered the joint collaboration of Marketing Collaboration and Traditional Marketing as constituting too big a group. Furthermore, while Strategizing was keen on using the web knowledge specifically of WebCompany, it felt that these competences were now exclusive to use by Traditional Marketing and the companies in Marketing Collaboration. Thus, Strategizing resisted from further collaboration with Marketing Collaboration.

For the individual companies of Marketing Collaboration, collaborating with Traditional Marketing raised questions on internal competition. Graphics, and partly also MediaCoordinator, had similar competences as did Traditional Marketing.

> Graphics and MediaCoordinator do not get as much out of the collaboration with Traditional Marketing. Their competences are already available through Traditional Marketing. They get in contact with people, but do not get as much work as one might wish.
>
> Owner, 3D

> At start it was not that good. My business areas are sales and project management. It felt as if we created the collaboration with Traditional Marketing only because the company had started to realize the importance of web and film.
>
> Owner, MediaCoordinator

Among all parties of Marketing Collaboration, there was the shared thought that the collaboration with Traditional Marketing did not bring as much advantages as could be the case. Marketing Collaboration would prefer a closer contact between the companies and also that Marketing Collaboration would be more involved at early stages of individual projects. As it is now, Marketing Collaboration often gets involved first since a project is started.

From Traditional Marketing's perspective, the reason for the collaboration was indeed to reach the web competences, and prior to its collaboration with Marketing Collaboration discussions were held about acquiring that part of Marketing Collaboration, or possibly dissolve the relationships with Graphics as part of Marketing Collaboration. Marketing Collaboration being a separate company and the contract between the parties of Marketing Collaboration, however disabled such moves. But, in line with its initial intentions, Traditional Marketing launched the collaboration with Marketing Collaboration as a collaboration to reach web competences. This meant that in Traditional Marketing's communication to customers, Marketing Collaboration was positioned as a web company, rather than as a company that had all those competences previously marketed by Marketing Collaboration and its companies.

> To me, Marketing Collaboration is synonymous with 'digital'. To us, the interactive is what matters.
>
> CEO, Traditional Marketing

For Traditional Marketing this was also a means to handle the internal competition; it did not talk about Marketing Collaboration as having competences in graphic design and the like. Since Traditional Marketing held a stronger position on the local market, and since customer contacts primarily meant that Marketing Collaboration were involved in Traditional Marketing's business relationships, this also came to color how customers perceived Marketing Collaboration. Also for Traditional Marketing, the collaboration with Marketing Collaboration was however perceived to have its weaknesses. The development in the industry, which was what originally brought Traditional Marketing to collaborate with Marketing Collaboration, brought additional changes to the collaboration. The agreement between Marketing Collaboration and Traditional Marketing meant that Traditional Marketing would not be able to build competences in areas that competed with Marketing Collaboration. As web solutions became increasingly stressed, Traditional Marketing became increasingly interested in building web competences inhouse and expand that part of the business beyond the capabilities of WebCompany and 3D. This was however constrained by the collaboration with Marketing Collaboration.

ANALYSIS

The case of Marketing Collaboration draws attention to how companies in collaboration may aim to establish multi-identities and how business partners of these companies also to various extents perceive the company and collaboration as complementary identities. Uggla (2006) described brands as having spill-over and co-branding effects. Spill-over effects would be similar to how a company or collaboration identity is affected by collaboration parties, in turn similar to network identity according to Anderson et al. (1994). Co-branding effects suggest that dimensions of identities are added through collaboration, and would thus imply that a separate identity is shaped on the collaboration level.

Identities refer to unique features that distinguish the identity carrier from other persons, companies (or collaborations) (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Woodward, 1997). If looking at the various actors in the Marketing Collaboration case, Graphics built much of its identity on the persons representing (and owning) the company ("the girls of Graphics"). WebCompany that had not previously acted with customer companies directly had not put as much efforts on launching a corporate identity, yet was perceived as a young web-design company with minimalistic style. 3D and MediaCoordinator were established to become part of Marketing Collaboration, and therefore did not establish individual identities, neither in the eyes of the

company owners, nor in the eyes of customers. Among the collaboration parties in Marketing Collaboration, the characteristics of 3D and MediaCoordinator were much connected to the individual owners of these two companies, and when, in terms of time related to when Marketing Collaboration was founded, they entered the collaboration. 3D was seen as a forefront developer with regards to 3D design solutions and was also seen as the party most devoted to Marketing Collaboration, while MediaCoordinator, that joined the collaboration at a later stage, was referred to as a more distant actor. MediaCoordinator also kept this distance to the other collaboration parties and perceived the collaboration and its participation as more of a business-like arrangement than a joint venture.

Marketing Collaboration was established as a separate company to more strongly manifest the collaboration towards customers and other external parties. Much efforts were placed on launching the collaboration as a company, with a distinct identity: that of being a young production agency. Still, the companies involved regarded the collaboration in different ways. Graphics and WebCompany were the companies that continued to emphasize the multi-identity also once the collaboration company was established, while 3D did not see itself as a separate company. To customers, those that had previously worked with either of the companies of Marketing Collaboration, continued to see Marketing Collaboration as (four) separate companies and the identities they projected on the collaboration were those of the individual companies. Customers that started working with Marketing Collaboration once the company was established had a notion on the collaboration as one company, yet the idea of what was the collaboration identity was not strong. The involved parties increasingly emphasized the collaboration as a separate unit following the establishment of the joint venture and this along with the rising awareness of the company as the market for web solutions rose, did positively impact the perspective of the collaboration as a separate unit.

Traditional Marketing had been in the marketing field for nearly thirty years and held a strong position on the regional market. Much of its identity had been shaped through the original owners, but the company had also subsequently established a graphic and copy style that made it well known among customers. The shift of ownership of Traditional Marketing had pushed its identity in the direction to be perceived as a young company, yet many of its previous values remained (cf. Albert & Whetten, 1985). Traditional Marketing had known about the Marketing Collaboration companies prior to its collaboration with Marketing Collaboration. Therefore and through close cooperation during individual projects prior to the collaboration, Traditional Marketing had learnt about the individual competences of the Marketing Collaboration companies. However, the Marketing Collaboration joint venture did disable Traditional Marketing from only establishing collaborations with those parties it wanted to collaborate with: WebCompany and 3D. Thus, in that sense, Marketing Collaboration was perceived as one company. Once Traditional Marketing had started collaborating with Marketing Collaboration, it launched Marketing Collaboration as a web company, and this was also how Traditional Marketing perceived Marketing Collaboration: as a web company. Thus the competences foremost needed from the collaboration were what shaped the perception of the company.

Previous external collaboration parties to Marketing Collaboration saw their relationship with Marketing Collaboration being affected by its collaboration with Traditional Marketing. This made some of them distance themselves from Marketing Collaboration based on the perceived exclusivity arrangement. As for Marketing Collaboration, the collaboration with Traditional Marketing was seen as a business arrangement that would provide additional

customers, while Traditional Marketing perceived the collaboration as a partial internalization of web competences.

Taken together, the various identities were partly affected by one another or became coexistent. The coexistence relate to how various parties perceived collaborations or companies as the core identity carriers (Stuart & Kerr, 1999), but also to how one individual party perceived simultaneous multi-identities at various levels. Based on the case it seems that the one collaboration that was given a separate and coexisting identity was the joint venture Marketing Collaboration, while other constellations affected one another without being separate identities. The collaboration between Traditional Marketing and Marketing Collaboration did not create a separate identity, yet affected how the parties involved were viewed. This suggests that the more structured a collaboration, the more probable that it is perceived as a separate identity.

In addition, the closer the party that perceives the identity is to the individual parties, the more probable that it manages to separate various identities. Often external parties either saw the identity on the company *or* the collaboration level. Several simultaneous levels of identities were foremost perceived by parties close to the identity carriers or those being the identity carriers or part of them. Table 3 summarizes the various perspectives and dimensions of identities.

Table 3: Perspectives and identity dimensions addressed – case findings

	As perceived by involved parties	As perceived by external parties
Company level identity	As individual companies.	As individual companies.
Collaboration level identity (collaboration as joint venture)	For companies existing prior to the collaboration: as part of the collaboration, yet individual identities persisted. For newly established companies, the collaboration identity was the only identity.	The identity of the collaboration was not very strong, but new customers saw the collaboration as the one identity, while previous relationships saw it as consisting of separate companies.
Collaboration level identity (collaboration as contractual agreement)	As individual companies/joint ventures, yet affected by the collaboration.	As an exclusivity agreement and as communicated by the party the external party had a relationship with.

As can be read from the table, there were separate and affected identities on various levels. There were also coherence between involved parties' and external parties' perception of the identities. Differences mainly occurred based on how the parties affected one another and in how close parties (particularly those involved) found it easier to capture multi-identities, while more distant business partners perceived either the company *or* collaboration identity.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper described and discussed various actors' perception in multi-identity settings. Based on the paper it can be concluded that various identity levels may coexist and create multi-identities. A distinction can further be made between separate and affected identities in collaboration and on company levels. History of companies and relationships, and how structured the collaboration is, affect what identities are foremost perceived, how they affect one another and when separate identities are created. The theory section raised four questions. These are discussed below.

How do various levels of identity affect one another?

With regards to how various identity levels affect one another, two different routes are evident: Either one identity becomes part of the other, or one affects the other. The identity becoming part of the other is similar to co-branding effects (Uggla, 2006) and means that several parties interacting may form a new identity (cf. Bonner et al., 2005). While Uggla (2006) refers to the synergic effects of such identities, the identity may also have negative effects on the parties involved.

One party affecting the other resemble spill-over effects of brands (Uggla, 2006) and also the network identity (Anderson et al., 1994) in how external parties affect the identity of a company. As for one identity affecting the other, there is a direction that indicates that the more familiar of two identity carriers affect the other. What is more, the possible negative effects of the more familiar party spill over to the other, while the other direction is not as prevalent.

How do the parties involved affect whether and how identity is foremost considered on a company or collaboration level?

Among parties involved and their business relationships, one identity often becomes more prevalent than the other. The more distant the actor, the larger the risk that only one identity was processed, while involved parties and close business partners often managed to deal with multi-identities. The history of the company and relationship was the deciding reason for whether a company or a collaboration was considered as the foremost identity. Companies that had existed prior to a collaboration did see themselves foremost as the company level, while companies established for the collaboration often saw the collaboration identity as the stronger identity. External parties that had previous relationships with the individual companies saw the company as the primary carrier of identity, while those that started collaborating once the collaboration was established foremost considered the collaboration.

How does the form of collaboration affect whether and how identity is foremost considered on a company or collaboration level?

The form of collaboration affected whether and how identities were perceived on a collaboration level. The more structured the collaboration, the more probable that it formed a separate identity, and also that there was competition between identity levels. Contractual, business-like arrangements did not establish a separate identity, but meant that involved parties affected one another through the collaboration (cf. Anderson et al., 1994).

What differences are there between how multi-level identities are perceived by companies involved and their external business partners?

The identities as perceived by various actors relate to when they first learnt about the other party and to the distance to the identity carrier. For parties that learnt about another company (or established itself as a company) prior to the collaboration, the company level would be seen as the foremost identity. As for closeness and distance, the stronger awareness of the other actor, the more levels of identity could be handled. Distanced parties either saw the collaboration or the company identity, while close parties also knowing the history of the collaboration or company often referred to them in multi-identity terms. Particularly, this latter is the case for companies involved.

Taken together, multi-identities of firms related to collaboration can be explained by companies having and sharing a pre-collaboration history, actors being close and

collaboration being structured. In cases where companies do not share a history before the collaboration, the collaboration becomes the only identity-carrier. And, in collaboration being built on business-like terms, identities are affected by one another, yet do not create separate identities.

Managerial implications

For managers of collaborating firms, it is important to consider how collaborations affect the company and reverse. Identities as a description of how the company, collaboration parties and external business partners perceive a company or collaboration expectedly affect how they act. Thus, identities need to be carefully considered in the choices of collaboration form and interaction parties. It is also imperative to consider how the launch of a collaboration is perceived by business partners, and whether and how the building of identities also suggests to business partners that there are exclusivity settlements between companies, for instance.

Identities are partially impacted by how they are launched by parties involved, partly formed without the control of those actors. For managers, it therefore becomes important to work on how to project the company or collaboration identity so as external parties perceive those values intended by the manager, rather than develop their own ideas on the companies or collaborations.

Further research

This paper was based on a single case study. For further research, it would be of interest to perform additional studies so as to see whether and how findings in this paper are replicatable for other collaboration forms, industries and sizes of companies, for instance. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study the formation of identities in collaboration over time to see whether additional identities are developed, how they affect one another or whether they coincide into one identity, for instance.

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