# A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANIZATIONAL IMAGE AND IDENTITY: STUDY UPON A ROMANIAN RUGBY TEAM

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**Abstract:** *There is a huge gap in the current PR literature concerning the balance between an assumed identity and a received image of an organization. To little is discussed upon the transfer of identity to a targeted public, and a certain amount of PR strategies are concerned more about "how it should be done" (the event or the campaign), than about "why it should be done" in this particular manner. More and more, the world of sport branding is gaining interest in the PR research field, as the sports industry is booming like never before. Sports are now a global business that is on the cutting-edge of entertainment, new media technology, communication and marketing synergies. And the industry will only continue to grow by leaps and bounds into the foreseeable future. When debating on image-identity formation with regards to sport fans, the current PR literature base does not adequately address the creation of fan's brand image or fan's decision to foster a team or another. Therefore, we will try, in our presentation, to identify the challenges facing today's sport branding and advocate for a rigorous attention on the transition between identity and image in organizational communication. We will also propose a methodology to qualitatively measuring an organizational image profile, and offer a study case on developing a brand image for a Romanian local rugby team.*

**Keywords:** *PR, identity, image, online branding, rugby*

## 1. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES

More and more, authors like Jonathan E. Schroeder or Miriam Salzer Morling propose *a cultural approach of the brands* by pointing out the tendency of this field towards the cultural, sociological and theoretical research. The anthropologists, the historians and the sociologists have recently spoken about brands from a cultural perspective, by comprehending their importance at the social level and by recognizing at the same time their economical and psychological links (Bentley, 2008; Koehn, 2001; Lury, 2004).

Starting from Al Reis book (The 11 Immutable Laws of Internet Branding), **The Law of Either/Or** asserts that the Internet should be viewed as an entirely new business, starting from scratch, not just a new medium through which an existing business will be communicating a content. On the other hand, brands have become more important to the upcoming generations. Brands are used by people to define their identities. You are *a Pepsi drinker*, *a Volvo driver*, *a user*, *a TiVo devotee*, *a Madonna fan, a New York Times Journal reader*, etc. In addition, the Internet is having a greater influence on people's daily lives and the speed at which information can be shared. The question is how a brand identity manages to become a mirrored image of a specific community, transforming itself from an abstract to a social level? Does a product/ company/organizational identity manage to remain intact along with the highly influence of the user generated content in social media? The debates are still on even at a theoretical level.

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## 2. OUR APPROACH

Our work is going to support the approach of branding phenomenon from a cultural perspective, analyzing it contextually and dynamically according to contemporary researches. We will approach a qualitative research method focusing on a comprehensive perspective without quantification, seeking more for an integrated approach on the branding phenomenon. Starting from Ernst Cassirer's "symbolic forms" (1997, 1975), we propose a qualitative method of "the symbolic function of an image" as a complementary analysis.

We defined the symbolic functions of the organizational image according to its *iconic* components (organizational identity, desirable image, received image). From this perspective, the symbolic function of an organizational image can be comprehended in three main forms:

1) *The expressive function* that transforms an organizational identity in a "proposed image" (by using identity expressions and symbols such as logo, representative colours, values, an organizational mission and vision) – the level of *expressions.*

2) *The representational function* that transforms a "desired image" into a "received image" in a two –way action: a) Putting expressions into action (all the exterior manifestations of a brand) and b) Interpreting and filtering expressions at a public's level (including media level) – the level of *representations.*

3) *The significant function* of an organization that creates attitudes and transforms an organization's image into a "*motivational*" abstraction for the targeted audience, a brand, so to say. – the level of *significances.*

In this sense, the concept of "brand culture" refers to the *cultural* codes developed by the brands at a significant level (history, images, myths, art, communities, beliefs), that influence the comprehension and the value of a brand on the market, especially on the contextual-social praxis level. From this outlook, the study of this phenomenon often supposes the comprehension of regional cultures, of cultural spheres and brands implications as social active "symbolic forms".

## 3. CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

**3.1 What are images?** Despite the existence of many diverse researches on image theory, despite imagery's important role over time (paintings, drawings, symbolic representations, visual or textual representations etc.), the study of *image* still presents a great deal of issues regarding its definition and use. Moreover, we can acknowledge the fact that it is hard to define such a broad domain, without framing delimitations. We consider though that these demarcations not rigorously operated, thus the concept of *image* is used excessively, without having an explanation for the direction of its use. The reasons for these omissions often derive from the fact that the term "image" has several meanings used both in specialized language and in common language. Consequently, many of these meanings intertwine inside the same speech.

And yet, an image designates not only a visual content, as a text is far from lacking iconicity or an *imagological* experience (Mitchell, 1986). It is, therefore, imperative to operate a reassessment of the critical equipment concerning the methodology applied in the study of images from the Communication Sciences' point of view. We advocate for this approach merely because, as we will try to point out, most of the corporate image campaigns are formed in the praxis of a highly symbolized cultural context that includes visual images, texts, sounds, myths, symbolic interactions of an audience. (Bratosin, 2007).

Two observations can be made regarding any attempt to take into consideration the assembly of imagery phenomena. First of all, as noticed above, there is a variety of situations in which the term "*image*" is used: we talk about *visual* image, but we also use the term when we describe optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, shows, projections, literary works, patterns, memories,

ideas, organizations, people, etc. The absolute diversity of this list seems to make any systematic understanding impossible to unify. Second, the mere use of the same term in different fields cannot lead us to the conclusion that it means the same thing. If we take into consideration a closer look over the fields in which the term is used, and not over a universal definition of the term, as Mitchell noted (ibid), we could obtain a family tree of its associated senses, and automatically of their current use.

| IMAGES | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| GRAPHICAL | OPTICAL | PERCEPTUAL | MENTAL | VERBAL |
| Visual images | Mirrors | Sensorial Data | dreams | metaphors/ figures of speech |
| Sculptures | Projections | "categories/ concepts" | memories | descriptions |
| Design | appearances | creative ideas/ inspiration | fantasies/ hallucinations | |

Fig.1 Visual imagery family tree according to W.J.T. Mitchell (1995)

We strengthen in this way our position according to which imagery constructions (visual image, discourse text, imago-text) operate with symbolic forms proper to a practiced context, in such manner that they end up by building significance for a receiver. In this sense, an image does not open but it delimitates an interpretation *frame* for the observer, interpretation which is itself symbolically mediated by a context. Ernest Cassirer (1994) asserted that this concept of "symbolic forms" covers all phenomena that determine, no matter the way, the fulfilment of a meaning in a symbol and all contexts in which a *datum* is sensitive. Through this mediation the individual builds himself universes of perception and discourses.

In the present paper we will define the *image* as a mean through which visual information (real or mental) is communicated, through shape, as well as through content. The image holds an entire field of iconicity (Mitchell, Picture Theory, 1995). *The imago-text* is in this case the "evocative" text of images through representation.

**3.2 Organizational identity and image.** We define *identity* from the perspective given by Professor Montserrat Guibemau (1997), according to which identity means *culture, language, symbols, values, traditions, lifestyles, and especially the desire to form around these a community with a specific set of properties.* Thus, identity is also a polyvalent concept; it includes from tangible elements, such as historical proofs (historical identities) or artistic trends (artistic identities), to intangible elements, such as quality or reputation. In this respect, more recent authors such as Juan Costa (2007), Eines (2007) or Akerlof, (2010) approach identity as having its roots in the lifestyles of communities strongly symbolically and socio-culturally defined. These perspectives claim the existence of even more evidence regarding lifestyles, related not only to individual decisions, but also to patterns of collective action (emergent from a certain national identity). Thus the identity-culture-image triangle is formed. If we accept the fact that an organizational identity is an assumed symbolic discursive form, we will be able to analyze the connection between it and images, in terms of iconicity, cohesion and delimitation of defined communities.

*Organizational identity* generally refers more to what members perceive, feel, and think about their organization/institution. It's supposed to be a "collective agreement" upon the values and distinct characteristics of the organization, starting from an internal environment. Albert and Whetten (1985) offer

such a definition of the organizational identity as representing *what is essential, durable, and regarding the distinctive character of an organization*. The theoretical basis of this perspective concentrates on the theory of social identity and on the theory of auto-classification. Albert and Whetten consider the organizational identity as being a distinct form of social identity, concept analyzed in the '70s by scholars, such as Tajfel (1978), G. Vignaux or Serj Moscovici (1994). Thus the identity is defined as "the acknowledgement that the individual belongs to certain social groups, to which values and emotional significances which he associates as a group member are added" (Tajfel, 1972:292).In other words, an individual is defined by adhering to social groups that are relevant and make sense to that individual.

*Corporate identity*, on the other hand, is an *exteriorization* of organizational values and beliefs to another audience that the one created by the employees; however the accent on a symbolic identity is preserved. It differs from the organizational identity, as it is conceived as a symbolic communication process with emphasis on the *visual* identity of the organization. Corporate identity has been conceptualized especially in the corporate branding studies that have pointed out the relationship between organizations and their communication context in the process of a strategic communication. (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1995; Olins, 2008). In this respect, the corporate identity is communicated through the representations of its valuable contents. Although both organizational and corporate communications are built on "what the organization *is*" (Balmer, 1995, p. 25), the strong connection of the latter with iconicity emphasizes explicitly the representation function of the corporate identity.

*The organizational image* is, therefore, defined as a construct through which a phenomenal representation is communicated. This representation has a meaning generator function and is significant for a targeted audience. Regarding the *organizational image*, this is often confused with corporate identity

and identified only with the visual elements of an organization (logo, visual signs, the representative colours, mascots, etc.). Although the visual identity remains an important component o the corporate identity, this is without doubt only a form of symbolic representation of an organizational identity, the organizational image representing an assembly of symbolic forms through which an identity is communicated in various ways.

Taking the definition of professor Guibernau as starting point, we shall consider in the present paper that an organization′s public image is an abstract construct upon an identity that serves as a recognition symbol for a target audience. We shall distinguish between: a) *the desired image (*what the organization proposes to transmit*)* and b) *the received image* (the filtered discursive form that is received by the audience). *A brand image* will be defined as a mean through which iconicity (Mitchell, 1995) and the significant function are communicated, through shape, action and interpreted content.

Most often, the *desirable image* is represented in accordance with the organizational identity and sent to be received by the targeted audience. We could even say that the desirable image, built by the organization/institution, is nothing else but a representation of an organizational identity. The whole set of graphic, perceptual, mental or verbal elements proposed under the form of messages or symbolic representations must be decoded at the audience level. This hermeneutics is realized through media and contextual filters. This conceptual-value mediation transforms the image "support" (banner, spot, portfolio, online campaign, website, or a team) in significant elements. They transmit representations of an identity enforced by a communication strategy that has the power to transform a desirable image into a received image.

It is interesting to underline here also that field practitioners do not step away too much from the academic theorizations of the image. They may "dilute" the ideational content by proposing a functional, practiced form of it,

but use the same meaning. For example: according to Ernst Cassirer's (1972), Wunnenburger's (1998) and Bratosin's (2007) theories, symbols are integrated parts of our existence which interfere as screens between reality and our representations. For Cassirer (1996), the father of "symbolic forms", it is not the content of mythical representations that must be explained, but "the meanings that they develop on the human consciousness and the spiritual force that it unleashes on it". In a more practical perspective, Bernstein (1986) states that in order to communicate an organizational image, not the symbol but what it represents has value for the receiver. This function of representing symbols (like the apple from "Apple") marks the importance of a visual identity for the entire corporative image.

*The received image* represents a filtered form of an image by contexts, supports and communication channels. Authors from the marketing field, like Bernstein (quoted by Abratt, 1989, p. 68), state that "the image is not even far what the company thinks it is, but the feelings and beliefs about it that are in the mind of the auditorium". This perspective emphasizes on the external character of image formation and the important role of the consumer to define it. And so, the organizational image becomes a global and alive "impression" held by an individual or a target-public over an organization and it is the result of the meaning created between the group and the communication of a projected image and manufactured by an organization (Alvesson, 1990, p. 376). And so, the received image of an organization approaches more and more the form of the generated *myth* under the form of representation.

## 4. ANALYSING THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS OF AN IMAGE

The power of branding process transforms the perceptual content of an organization in a symbolic one. At an organizational level, the mediation between corporative identity and brand image is being realized through symbol.

This mediation appears as *action* or *activity*, always functional at a social level as a meaning creator! Any concept (like "creativity" for Apple Company) is a step in the formation of a meaningful symbol. In this sense, organizational concepts are tied, in a universal yet mobile manner, to what they produce for their public. This symbolization marks a functional relation between individuals and the real world. In our case, this boundary is marked between the identity of an organization and its public.

Starting with Cassirer's theorizations presented above (1997, 1975) we have tried to define the symbolic functions of the organizational image connecting them to an organization's immaterial components (identity, desired image, received image); the symbolic function stands out through three main qualities:

*Expressive* – "defining the manner in which an object or product sensibly exists". In the case of an organization, the expressive function generates the production and reproduction of its visual image and all of the characteristics of a corporative image. *Expressions* are symbolic forms through which the corporate identity is being made visible: the visual identity, the mission, the vision and the company's profile, the characteristics through which it stands out, the set of assumed values, the core target's profile etc.

*Representative* – the set of perceptive representations about the company, object/product, context or environment. The representative function deals with the *actions* that a company/corporation/organization/group establishes at a social level. *Representations* nominate an associated content that is not necessarily directly linked to expressions; organizational features indirectly linked to external characteristics or qualities. It is a descriptive function which exemplifies both through *interaction* and *action* at a social level: events, campaigns, social media, fan clubs, CSR campaigns, communication and PR with the public and the media.

*Significant* – It offers a distinct signification to these perceptions

(representations) through which it differentiates them from competition and sets them in a practiced context. The Significant function includes a detachment from the main activity of the organization and the situation of the iconicity on a symbolic level. More precisely, we are dealing with all the abstract representations, comparisons, metaphors, indirect associations generated by the image of an organization (for example: Apple's products are for "creative people", the Montpellier's rugby team "represents The South-Eastern France"). The significant function is at the same time both identity-related and informative. The *significances* of a corporative image are the result of the simultaneous action of the other two functions with great accent on the reputation-notoriety couple. The communication activities that are mainly aimed towards the positive generation of significations are also the ones that transform the image of an organization/corporation/company into brand image because at this level distinctive "signs" of an identity are being built.
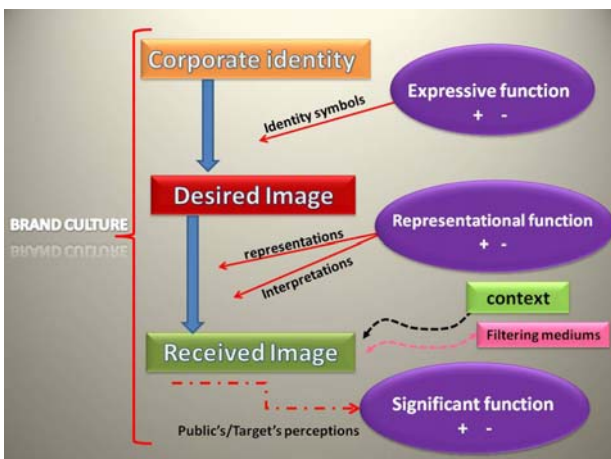


Fig.2 Symbolic functions and organizational levels

## 5. ANALYSING THE ONLINE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF IMAGES

So, how can we analyse the symbolic function of images in the online medium? Starting from the observation that the web is highly imagistic, we will briefly analyse the use of expressions and representations in an organisation's social media activity (Facebook page) and illustrate the action of the significant function, starting from the "fans" generated content. These emerging images are able to tie us to the way social communication is changing and growing. It is important that we recognize these images as representations of an identity. The Internet and other mediums of global communication are not just tools to help us communicate and access information, but also have a significant function. They are dynamic metaphors of a worldwide interconnectedness that create intercultural communities. As symbols they express a deeper meaning and purpose than their interactive function.

In order to exemplify this, our framework will focus on sport branding and how a sport team is interacting symbolically with its fans on a social media platform (Facebook). We have chosen sport, mainly because it is a complex growing industry and supporters/fandom engagement involves a special type of interaction.

1. As we stated above, the expressive function of a sport team is being used at the assumed organizational identity level: in the mission declaration, vision and the company's values. These are easy to recognize in the "about section" and the "profile picture"

- The expressive function can be deducted also by analyzing its corporate identity.
- Expressions are highly underlined in motivational or campaign slogans. Ex. Rugby Club Timisoara has a slogan that links rugby to Timisoara and the regional identity "For rugby and for Timisoara". The Montpellier team is oriented more on the "wow effect" of a slogan, often using hyperbolas in order to attract fans' attention" faire quelque chose d'extraordinaire". These slogans are acting like driving forces for the targeted public (in terms of representations):
o For Timisoara's rugby fans, regional culture and regional history has a positive impact activating what Garry

Crawford (*Consuming Sports*, Routledge, 2004) calls "a special form of pride, the exceptional forms of support, the myriad of ways in which sport can be experienced and consumed in everyday life".

o For Montpellier's fans, expressions are also fan oriented and often linked with the regional specificity. Calling themselves "the representative rugby team of South-East of France", their message is more accurate and socio-cultural oriented.

2. The representational function of a sport brand can be deduced from the organisation's communication and promoting actions. Facebook activity, content management and fans engagement are signs of its action. It can be quantitatively measured with Facebook insights, especially with likes per content analysis, engaged users and total reach.

- The representational function must be consistent with the company's expressions, while "putting in action", so to say, the expressive function. This is a very important step taking into consideration that it gives fluidity to the communicational process, but also opens ways of interpretation.

- On the other hand, like any other setting into action, the representational function marks versions of interpretation of the expressive function, grounded in promotional campaigns, social campaigns or CSR. We will exemplify on our charts what kind of content is significant for the use of representational function.

The significant function of the company is noticeable in the feedback given to these messages and in the further abstract meanings associated with the brand. It can be quantitatively researched by likes, comments, true reach, evolution results charts etc.
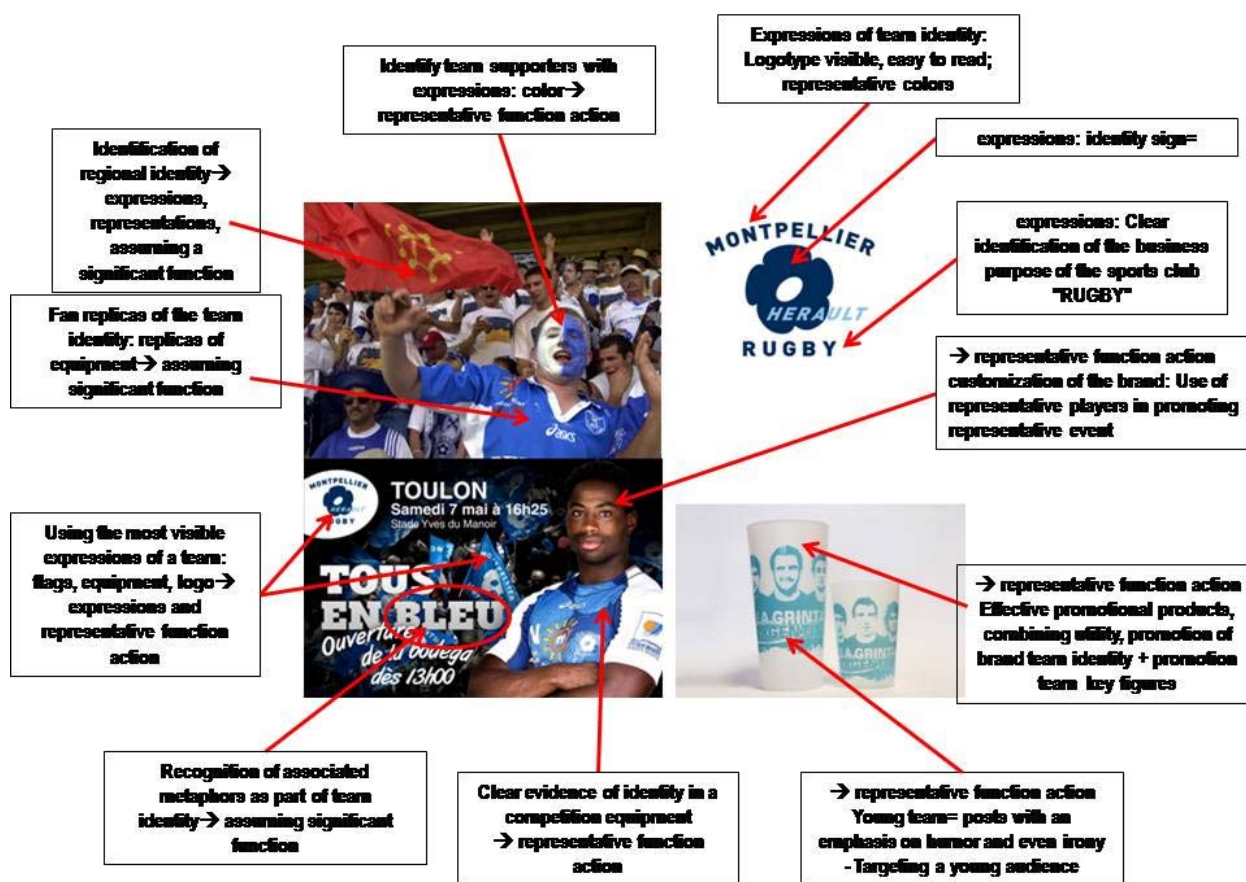
Fig.3 Comparative Timeline analysis



Fig.3 Online elements analysis

## 6. ANALYSIS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

As we can notice, the expressive function, carrier of all symbols (expressions) of corporative identity, makes the construction of a desirable image possible that proposes itself towards public recognition. But in most of the cases, this image is just the ipothese for what it is going to be received by the public. The representation function (representative) acts like a "set into action" of organization expressions, being at the same time both action (being represented by all of the actions of the organization) but also by interpretation of the expressions of an organization (the miting is a active interpretation form of some values, the supporters of a team are the interpreters of some positive representations of their favourite team etc).More precisely, the expressive function, in which these context accompanies the desirable image of a rugby team, will be determined (influenced) by the representation of this team in real life: from the match played on the field, to the attitude manifested by the supporters, the involvement at community level and ending with the filtered representations through different environments like the written press. Untill now, nothing new! Our observations state that the team representations are not at all enough. In most of the times, the received image is strongly influenced by the **context** of representations (field, competition, website, involvement at community level, official statements) but also through the filtering methods (the teams representation in media, newspaper articles, rumors, buzz activities, for example)**.** In a very

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small manner, an organization has control over the way in which its image will be received. Just as we will see in the following paragraphs, the desirable image and expressive function are often eroded thorugh the use of false representations of filtering environments. Filtering the representative function automatically leads to the erodation of the received image and the significand function that accompanies it.

Another interesting situation for our disqution is represented by the association of some representations that are very strong spread apart or that have no direct connection one with the expressions or the identity of an organization. But they are parts taken out of context of some certain situations and their transformation, through interpretation, in representations generated among the entire organization. For example, because of the "show" aspect of the spor, it is often mistaken with "entertainment", and the informations (representations) associated with the activity of a sports club, have often taken the form of tabloid articles. The representatives of a sports club were often taken as a representative standard for the entire context. And so they are equivalated falsely with the club's identity, through the great accent that is being put on "entertainment". It's no wonder that, the majority of sports news, do not present real results of that certain sport, but extra-ordinary situations, in which the club's identity was involved (fights between supporters, unappropriate declarations of some player, taking out of context certain situations, club members activity outside context, like a seaside family roadtrip etc.). For a very long time, were offered informations not about the club itself but and the marked results, but about the financial status of a famous sports club, about the unfortunate "adventures" of some team members or about their love affairs in which they were involved. The association of this kind of representation of desirable image, makes the received image to be a very widely spread apart from the assumed identity of the sports club, but even further spreaded

apart from their activity domain that involves: results, victories, performance and fairplay.

We notice, that once the significant function is affected by the interpretations at representative level, the whole image of the organization has to suffer, no matter how positive the offered representations are. A clear administration of the representative function is required at the same time both at company level and also at filtering environments to ensure a glide towards the formation of positive significations associated with the company.

We exemplified in this paper a positive use of the symbolic forms of an organizational image. However, starting from expressions, this methodological analysis can be also used to underline image communication errors or propose suggestions for an image crisis. Our observations state, for example, that corporate representations are not enough in order to assure a correct transfer between a desired image and a coherent received one. The received image can be strongly influenced by the context of representations (socio-cultural contexts, competition, social level involvement, official statements etc.) but also by various filtering mediums such as: representation in media, recommendations, rumours, buzz activities, online activities etc.

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