Paper for consideration for the special issue of
Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal

Questionnaire Design: A Weak Link in Corporate Identity?

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to questionnaires as a corporate touch point, and their relationship with corporate identity (CI).

Design/methodology/approach – Following observational research, the paper presents a review of published work, including journals, textbooks and industry articles that consider qualitative aspects of questionnaire design. Primary data was collected via existential phenomenological interviews to understand the experiences of employees who engage with questionnaires from external companies within the industrial B2B industry.

Findings – A lack of practical advice around aesthetic appearance of questionnaires in both journal articles and research design textbooks is identified, suggesting limited awareness of visual aspects of questionnaire design, even for those with formal training. Through interviews, it is suggested that poor design is forgiven through the understanding of the practical nature of the document, the idea that CI is a performance that is unnecessary at particular points of the B2B relationship, and that a more powerful company need not spend time on CI if collecting data from a stakeholder that is perhaps perceived as less important than other stakeholders. The findings indicate that organisations should consider questionnaires as a vehicle to promote CI, as stakeholders to consider the document in terms of their relationship with the issuing company.

Research implications – We propose qualitative inquiry is required to further determine how questionnaires are understood as a corporate touch point by stakeholders.

Originality/value – This paper considers the relationship between questionnaire appearance and stakeholder perceptions in the context of CI.

(Word count: 245)

Keywords - Corporate identity, corporate touch point, questionnaire design, aesthetics.

Paper type - Research paper

Questionnaire Design: A Weak Link in Corporate Identity?

Introduction

Corporate identity (CI) is a strategic organisational tool (Olins, 1990; Balmer and Gray, 1999; Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, Melewar et al., 2018). Corporate communications with stakeholders, or touch points, are identified as a core component of CI that requires careful planning and control (Balmer and Gray, 1999; Melewar, Karaosmanoglu and Paterson, 2005).

One touch point that appears to be overlooked is the questionnaire. As part of an audit of marketing activity within several B2B SMEs, engagement with external questionnaires was observed. Observational research is encouraged as a practical and holistic method of identifying research opportunities (Seymour, 2006; Webster, Seymour and Daellenbach, 2010). Within the SMEs, questionnaires from a variety of stakeholders were regularly received, with completion often being a contractual requirement. Staff completing these documents often found them unpleasant to complete due to poor design. Moreover, the researcher observed questionnaires as a seemingly neglected document amongst the myriad of other carefully crafted corporate communications designed by the external companies. Although questionnaires were regularly utilised for data collection, they did not appear to be considered as a CI vehicle, even as a direct corporate touchpoint. Interestingly, little attention has been given to questionnaires as a corporate document within the literature. In our broader searches of the literature, we discovered little in the way of practical aesthetic or design advice around questionnaire design, further than considering 'attractiveness' to increase completion rates (e.g. Webb, 2000; Saunders et al., 2012; Clow and James, 2014; Gray, 2014).

Using a qualitative approach, the purpose of this paper is to draw attention to questionnaires as a corporate touch point, and their relationship with CI. Our aims to achieve this include:

1) Consideration of CI in the literature, in particular CVI, and its application to corporate documents

2) Exploration of the existing literature on questionnaire appearance, with specific focus on advice around design and aesthetics

3) Explore the importance of the questionnaire as a corporate document and how it is subsequently perceived by stakeholders through qualitative primary research

Given the aim of the paper, the focus will be on questionnaires designed from scratch, rather than using pre-designed computer-assisted questionnaire programmes such as Survey Monkey or Qualtrics. Many computer-assisted questionnaire programmes remove or significantly restrict the creative ability to design and consider appearance, which is the remit of this paper.

The contribution of this paper lies in raising awareness of questionnaires as a corporate document to which, in theory, CVI should be applied. However, as observed, within B2B SMEs, application of CVI here is often overlooked, so we explore how this affects the recipients in terms of their understanding of CI.

The paper is formatted as follows. First, we conducted a literature review around CI and questionnaire design to discover the extent of consideration given to visual aspects of questionnaire design. This is followed by our methodology and data analysis. Then, we present and critically discuss our findings. Finally, we conclude with implications for theory and practice, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

A subjective approach has been taken, based on a qualitative analysis of the literature (e.g. Melewar, 2003; He and Balmer, 2007). The literature review gives an overview of CI, then focuses on how aesthetics of questionnaire design is historically discussed in industry articles and academic journals, and in popular, contemporary research textbooks. This was followed by a set of interviews with employees of B2B SMEs, designed to gain insights into people's experiences of external questionnaires, and if CI is considered within this context, and if any links between CI and questionnaires could be ascertained.

CI and touch points

Melewar (2003, p.195) defined CI as: '*the set of meanings by which a company allows itself to be known and through which it allows people to describe, remember and relate to it*'. Melewar *et al.*, (2018) identified a CI taxonomy of seven core components; corporate communication, corporate culture, corporate design, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity and corporate strategy.

CI involves two entities; the organisation, who try to control how CI is performed, and the stakeholders, who perceive the CI performance. Tran et al., (2015, p.103) suggest that ideally, corporate image performance should '*a memorable and consistent experience'* in order to instigate positive feelings amongst stakeholders. These experiences are enabled through internal and external communication channels arranged by companies to communicate a deliberate message to stakeholder groups (Van Riel, 1995; Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012).

Over time, the interaction between the stakeholders and the organisation results in the formation of reputation (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004; Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007, p.343). The reputation of a company can create a competitive advantage, and should be viewed as a strategic resource (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, p.1059).

Corporate reputation also encompasses visual elements; Van den Bosch, de Jong and Elving (2005, p.115) state that corporate visual identity (CVI) *"…not only represents an organisation, its products and services, but it's also a visual expression that can be associated with reputation*". CVI and the application of CVI form one of the seven core components of the CI taxonomy; corporate design (Melewar et al., 2018). Melewar et al., (2018) state that CVI involves tactical elements such as name, typeface, colour etc., and the application of CVI occurs over key touchpoints. Touch points are the various contact points in which customers come into contact - through appearance and experience - with a business (Spengler and Wirt, 2009; Kotler *et al*., 2012). The touch points encountered by stakeholders are where they perceive the CVI effort. They can include; website, stationary, interiors, promotions and so forth (Melewar et al., 2018). Indeed, "*it's making sure those touch points have a consistent look and feel with your brand throughout the entire enterprise*" (Graham, quoted in Beasty, 2005, p. 20). The goal of CI is to strive for a consistent, positive experience at each touch point. The touchpoint of particular interest to this paper is the corporate questionnaire.

Typically CI is managed in large organisations by various departments', e.g. marketing, top management or corporate communications, or by a more localised source in SMEs such as the entrepreneur/founder/owner (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007).

In thinking about the target of CI and communications, Oliver and Riley's (1996, p. 17) investigation of the management processes and perceptions of corporate communications in small businesses, observed this view:

> "*In identifying "stakeholders" the managers studied generally thought little further than the immediate customer. Employees and suppliers were sometimes mentioned during the interview stage – but often almost as an after-thought. It is quite reasonable for the main focus of attention of a small (or large) business to be on the customer, but as the managers themselves agreed during the final stage of the interview, insufficient regards was given to stakeholder groups*."

Indeed, studies in corporate image often focus on certain, preferred, stakeholder groups, e.g. customers, public, employees and investors (Fatt *et al*., 2000). This somewhat excludes other stakeholder recipients of questionnaires, who can be buyers, suppliers, logistics hauliers etc., (which are represented in our Table 1 sample). Perhaps this starts to explain why questionnaires are overlooked in the context of CI.

Questionnaires: more than a data collection tool?

As Webb (2000, p.198) states, '*A major problem with questionnaires is that too many think that it is merely a case of typing out a list of questions; this is not the case*'. Questionnaires are a staple method in quantitative primary data collection. Burns, Veeck and Bush (2017, p.216) describe a questionnaire as '*…the vehicle used to present the questions the researcher desires respondents to answer'*. The word 'questionnaire' is a '*…general term including all data collection techniques in which each person is asked to respond to the same set of questions in a predetermined order*' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p.679). In this context we focus specifically on the self-completed questionnaire, which is a questionnaire '*…that the respondent answers without the aid of an interviewer. Sometimes called a 'self-administered questionnaire'* (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.728).

Most organisations will have issued or received a questionnaire. They are frequently used in areas such as product research, or supplier feedback. Questionnaires are information seeking documents issued to a stakeholder so the organisation can gain useful information. Burns, Veeck and Bush (2017, p.216) identify six functions of a questionnaire; (1) To translate research objectives into specific questions that are posed to the respondents, (2) To standardise questions and response categories for every respondent (identical stimuli), (3) To foster respondent cooperation/motivation through wording, question flow, and appearance, (4) To serve as a permanent record of the research, (5) To speed up data analysis, depending on type e.g. online, print scanning, and (6) For purposes of reliability and quality control.

We then searched for literature that identified design and appearance advice for creating questionnaires, and to identify linkages between the questionnaire and CI.

Aesthetic appearance of questionnaire design

The concept of 'aesthetics' is ambiguous (Pratt, 1961). Indeed, Ogden (1933, p.500) quotes the foreword to E.F Carritt's *Philosophies of Beauty*, which suggests aesthetics is:

> "…[a subject-matter of] *such wavering and deceptive stuff as dreams are made of; its method is neither logical nor scientific, nor quite whole-heartedly and empirically matter of fact; and its results are an unhappy jargon ... No wonder it is shunned and a little feared."*

Definitions tend to settle on the idea of a fusion of form and content, relating to perceptions of beauty. Aesthetics and general product design has received considerable attention from academia. For example, Wrigley's (2013) Visceral Hedonic Rhetoric Framework outlines how visual influences (stereotypes, similar products, analogy, characters, connections and clichés) align with consumer responses. Wrigley further extends the function of "aesthetics" to incorporate aspects of "visceral" (or gut reaction) nature, in order to allow for influences beyond the strictly visual. The product design attributes incorporated in Wrigley's model are: geometry, dimensions, textures, materials, colours, graphics and details, some of which, as we will see below, are represented in questionnaire design suggestions from textbooks, albeit at a basic level.

The visual aspect of questionnaire design and layout is often depicted in an equally elusive manner to aesthetics. For example, In Clow and James' Essentials of Marketing Research textbook (2014, p.205) they recognise that '*…For self-administered surveys, the way the questions and answers are visually presented is critical. A poorly laid out questionnaire may confuse participants and result in unanswered questions. It may also confuse the data entry clerk and lead to input errors and faulty results*'. This draws attention to the issue, but barely advises in terms of how to physically achieve appropriate visual presentation. In the specialised text 'Design, Evaluation, and Analysis of Questionnaires for Survey Research', Saris and Gallhofer (2014, p.9) admit this shortcoming of advice in the final stages of designing a questionnaire:

> *"Another issue is that the final layout of the questionnaire has to be decided on. This holds equally for both the paper-and-pencil approach and for questionnaires designed for computer-assisted data collection. However, research has only started on the effects of the layout on quality of the responses."*

There is a notable lack of attention towards the visual design of questionnaires used in practice and academia. An assortment of issues regarding the appearance of the questionnaire are discussed in the literature (Table 1), in relation to their impact on topics such as response rate, response quality, price of production and ease of coding, amongst others. Although this exists, there is a dearth of practical guidance regarding how to create and design visually, user-friendly questionnaires.

Insert here>> Table 1: Discussions of the aspects of 'appearance' regarding questionnaires

Although this literature exists, on a practical level, the majority of individuals constructing questionnaires in industry are unlikely to have reviewed many of these sources. It is assumed that some will have sought advice from more conventional research textbooks. In view of this, we reviewed several mainstream, business-focused texts and summarised the design advice suggested (Table 2).

Insert here>> Table 2: Summary of design considerations regarding questionnaires in a selection of mainstream research textbook

To summarise the reviewed literature, the consensus is that presentation, layout, appearance – aesthetics – is important and can be detrimental to a questionnaire's potency if poorly applied, but there is limited actual design advice available to resolve this problem. Most of these issues are around the practicality of the design from the perspective of the user, but design in the scope of CI is not well considered. A striking theme identified during this review is the frequent use of the word 'attractive'.

Attractive

Numerous texts advised making the questionnaire 'attractive' (see Fig. 2), but all fail to define such subjective terminology. Several quotes are chronologically presented to highlight this collective, yet ambiguous use of the word 'attractive':

> *"Questionnaires that are to be used in a mail survey or in self-administered form should also be* ***attractive*** *as there will be no interviewer present to argue their case. A badly presented, messily printed questionnaire is just as likely to cause non-response or measurement error as badly constructed questions."* (Webb, 2000, p.213)

Webb associates attractiveness with response rates; an attractive design is more likely to motivate a response, with bad presentation and messy printing identified as the main culprits of non-response. Other texts link attractiveness with response rates (Saunders *et al*., 2012; Clow and James, 2014). Gray (2014, p.367) expands on issues that might demotivate respondents, linking attractiveness to rate of response, providing some guidance towards question and answer layout, paper choice, and spacing of the questionnaire, with a focus on not making it 'cramped', an issue also discussed by Bryman and Bell (2015).

Ekinci focuses less on response rate, and more on how to ensure respondents can clearly navigate the questionnaire. He notes the importance of attractiveness, and introduces the ideas of being interesting, trustworthy, important looking and easy to complete as interconnected terms. This is one of the closest texts identified linking perceptions of image, and therefore CI at the design stage, but in a rather implied fashion, rather than a direct assertion. There are also some suggestions towards areas for consideration when designing the questionnaire such as using '*…good quality paper, colour and contrast to make it* ***attractive***' (Ekinci, 2015, p.121).

Although some of these authors offer one or two ideas towards what can be considered 'attractive', there is no clear, practical advice provided for a prospective questionnaire designer to adhere. One of the earliest publications reviewed that proposes 'attractive' as a solution to response rate in questionnaire design is Ford's 1968 paper in the Journal of Advertising Research, which states:

> "*Common sense dictates certain practices about the design of the mail questionnaire. The mail questionnaire should be **attractive**, easy to fill out, have adequate space for response, be legible. A neat, well-organised, **attractive** questionnaire should increase the response rate. This assumes people associate appearance with quality and are more willing to complete and return the form. Conversely, a sloppy, crowded, or poorly reproduced questionnaire will have an adverse effect on response rates*." (Ford, 1968, p. 43).

An intriguing point of this quote is the notion of 'common sense', advocated as an almost intrinsic value that human beings are expected to possess. However, constructors of questionnaires cannot be expected to have this inherent design knowledge, when they have not been given the design training with which to execute it. The notion is similarly discussed by Straker, Wrigley and Rosemann (2014).

CI and questionnaire design

In considering Melewar et al's (2018) CI Taxonomy, questionnaires would be classified under *Forms (electronic/paper forms)* which are linked to *Application of CVI*, and then *Corporate design*, which is a core component of *CI*. However, there is little detail regarding the practical application of CVI.

As discussed, several texts have alluded to the perceptions of quality and reputation. For example, the questionnaire should be '*neat, well-organised*' (Ford, 1968, p.43) '*trustworthy* [and] *important looking*' (Ekinci, 2015, p.121), and '*have a professional appearance'* (Malholtra, 2004, p.300). Dillman (2009) suggested the use of a neutral graphic illustration or logo would add interest and make a questionnaire stand out. Kelly (2000, p.147) also discussed the idea of differentiating the document:

> "*For Census 2000, the questionnaire package was mailed in an envelope that looks official and displays the Census 2000 logo. The envelope was designed to stand out from the crowd of junk mail*."

This implies a corporate feel, but the discussion of CI is never realised. Consideration towards the questionnaire as a corporate communication tool that should adhere to a CI appears to be overlooked. Questionnaire design and formatting can be considered an art, rather than a science (Malhotra, 2010; Ekinci, 2015). Webb (2000, p.217) supports this notion, but highlights more restricting practical constraints:

> '*Questionnaire design is the art of the practical not of the perfect. With specific reference to the topic of the design process there are many limiting factors which have to be considered. General considerations to be borne in mind include the overall objectives of the research, the types of data analysis that are to be used, the budget and time constraints; the design of the questionnaire has to fit in with all of these*'.

We posit taking this idea of questionnaire design being a qualitative issue. The questionnaire has the potential to communicate as much about a company as a poster or any medium of designed communication. Too often, the questionnaire creators give little thought to aesthetics, but the visual design of a questionnaire can influence respondents' experience of the questionnaire, their perceptions of the professionalism of the research, the quality of responses and participation levels, amongst other aspects. Van den Bosch, de Jong and Elving (2005, p.110), discuss the idea of how strong perceptions are formed in the minds of the public, through the use of visual elements:

> *"…CVI on trucks in poor condition not only draws attention to the organisation behind the truck, but also to the way the organisation is apparently taking care of its fleet and personnel. The logo provides visibility, but the condition of the carrier, such as buildings and its surroundings of the fleet also has an impact on its image."*

A poorly designed questionnaire has the potential to have the same impact as the dilapidated truck. However, it is unlikely that a questionnaire was created without care. More likely, the designer of the questionnaire may not have the required design skills. Indeed, many industry practitioners can be classified as 'silent designers' (Gorb and Dumas, 1987); usually performing design duties without recognised training or fully understanding the design process. Recognising one's self as a 'silent designer' may help to overcome some of the intimidating aspects of visual aesthetics, and how to realise the questionnaire as a strategic tool, integrated into a wider CI. It is apparent from our extensive review of the literature, that there is a lack of consideration towards the aesthetics or appearance of the questionnaire and CI. Indeed, must focus is allocated to the practicality of what a questionnaire does, but there appears to be limited consideration to what a questionnaire is; a branded document that interacts with the organisation's key stakeholders.

Methodology

To explore our previous industry observations further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from eleven different SMEs (summarised in Table 3), to gain in-depth qualitative data from which to construct our framework (Logie-MacIver et al., 2012).

Telephone interviews were conducted to enable a wider geographical reach, economic benefits, and offer an element of anonymity (Sweet, 2002; Sturges and Harahan, 2004; Mealer and Jones, 2014). Several researchers have identified problems building rapport over the telephone (Chapple, 1999; Shuy, 2003, Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury, 2012). However, we found that we were able to establish a good rapport with respondents over the telephone, likely because respondents were all in roles where they were dealing with external stakeholders (and therefore their questionnaires), so telephone usage is a part of their everyday job role.

Insert here >> Table 3: Summary of SMEs representatives, ranked by estimated percentage of completed paper based, self-administered questionnaires per department.

Each interview lasted between ten and thirty minutes, aligning with guidance on tolerated time frames via the telephone (Gillham, 2005). Our aim was to phenomenologically explore actual experiences of external questionnaires taking an emic approach, and allow participants to describe their personal reactions and constructed understandings of these documents (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Participants were asked to comment on questionnaires they had experienced, rather than hypothetical or simulated designs. Understanding was thereby enabled via direct, first person descriptions from an experiencer of a phenomenon (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008; Gallagher and Zahavi, 2012). Notes were made on the questionnaire originators.

The telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers for a deeper familiarisation with the transcripts (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Belk et al., 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013). A thematic analysis was then applied to the transcripts, with identified codes being reviewed, and organised into thematic maps following an iterative and reflexive process (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

We identified three key themes emerging from the interviews; 'Practicality', 'Performance', and 'Power', represented in the thematic map (Fig. 2). Often these themes had strong intersects, and were difficult to separate from each other. Within these themes, 'practicality' and 'performance' discussions seemed to have an underlying notion of 'partnership', whereby the recipient understood the practical nature of the questionnaire, and appreciating the almost comradery angle of the performance aspect of CI. However, in exploring the 'power' theme, the 'partnership' dynamic shifted, revealing that the recipient of the questionnaire often felt the company issuing the questionnaire was in the more powerful position, particularly if the questionnaire was issued by a large buyer. The discussions around this often excused poor application of CI, as the smaller partner felt they were not an audience to which the larger company needed to perform. The shift from comradery to a more weighted power balance in favour of the issuer (non-partnership) was notable under the three themes. Each theme will now be considered in turn.

Insert here >> Figure 1: Thematic map of participant views on external questionnaires

Practicality

At the forefront of all the interviews, was the intrinsic understanding that questionnaire are primarily a practical document. For example, Graham was sympathetic to the designer of the questionnaire, suggesting that they were perhaps produced as part of a mandatory fact finding exercise, with little consideration given to the recipient:

> *"I think they have to do them; like a standards thing? There'll be a really bored exec knocking these off just to tick corporate boxes."*

- Graham, Software Designer for a security company

Dionne had a similar perspective; understanding the practical purpose of the questionnaire:

> *"It's just to find out if everything is running smoothly. I've not given it much more thought than that."*

- Dionne, General Assistant in a catering company

Bernard also agreed, but alluded to the idea that CI is almost 'façade'; with a forward facing identity, and a 'behind-the-scenes' identity that was less polished.

He suggested it was likely a financial decision not to spend too much money on CI at that end of the business:

> "*As long as [the questionnaire does] the job, it's probably not too important what they look like? I think you find that for our sector [engineering] quite a lot of the behind the curtain stuff is practical. We don't see the front that customers see – but we're all aware of that and it's okay. It's cheaper, we know the money is spent at the front end… we're all in on it in that respect.*"

- Bernard, Lead Buyer in an engineering company

This implies that there is an awareness of a façade that is performed for certain stakeholders, but isn't required for others, but that stakeholders were 'in' on the situation, as a partner. This theme was recurrent in several transcripts, which lead to the second key theme, 'Performance'.

Performance

Often, firms deploying these questionnaires were well known, global companies, renowned for significant spending on slick and glossy end-consumer marketing campaigns. Respondents found that questionnaire documents were frequently poorly designed, and lacked any real corporate feel. The overall impression from an internal perspective was that the SME stakeholder (e.g. not the end consumer) was deemed insignificant:

> *"With the amount of money they spend on advertising to customers, you'd think they could spend a little making [their questionnaires] tidy. Not that I won't fill it in – we need them to keep buying from us, so I'll say everything's fine... you do feel a bit overlooked, especially after seeing how much cash they throw at trade shows and things."*

- Bernard, Lead Buyer in an engineering company

Questionnaire recipients noticed discrepancies in the company's overall image, feeling that as a 'behind the scenes' stakeholder, they were not worth the extra effort that goes into customer facing image. However, even though the questionnaire is poor, Bernard will still positively complete it, as the business is important to Bernard's company. Similarly, Andy discussed how generation loss impacted the honesty and accuracy of his answer, as he was also reluctant to upset the stakeholder:

> *"We fill out lots from suppliers and our buyers. Quite often [due to severe generation loss] I can't read them, especially the faxed ones. If I can't read them I'll just tick "good" to "very good" to keep everyone happy."*

- Andy, Purchasing Assistant in an engineering company

Andy also noticed inconsistencies in the overall CI:

> *"Often [the questionnaire is] really old and chewed looking. It seems weird when, you know, their sales guys have to wear Armani suits and drive flashy company cars... Then there's this blurry, shoddy looking survey… I dunno. Superficial isn't it?"*

- Andy, Purchasing Assistant in an engineering company

Although this notion of front/back facing CI was discussed, there was an element of inclusivity, as if everyone behind-the-scenes was aware of this discrepancy, and understood as not out of the ordinary. However, although an empathetic angle of the partnership was revealed in terms of understanding how the CI is presented, a third key theme emerged, which had a much more severe impact on how people understood their relationship with the external companies, particularly where the company issuing the questionnaire was considered more powerful (e.g. an important customer), and how this relationship was communicated through questionnaire design.

Power

Kelly commented on how the questionnaire was almost like an afterthought in how it was presented, but like Bernard and Andy, would not make an issue of it as it originates from a key buyer:

> *"I don't think they put much effort in to them, no. [We're] probably not that much of a priority. They can always find other suppliers, so I wouldn't say "Hey, this document is sh*t!". That said, I do make sure the ones we send out are decent quality, easy to complete and have our logo on."*

- Kelly, Head of HR in an engineering company

Enthusiasm, or lack of it within the document, was something that was discussed by several interviewees, including Chris:

> *"The insurance companies are the worst. I won't start [their questionnaires] without a fresh coffee and a full iPod; they're that bad. I dread that package arriving in the post. It's a big, A4 card envelope, with their ugly logo franked on the front. Urgh. 26 pages of soul destroying tediousness. Their TV adverts and website are quite amusing. I think they've given up by the time they get to the questionnaires. Luckily it's*

only a twice a year job, and they are one of our major partners - I can't skive it."

- Chris, Account Manager for a corporate travel company

The two previous quotes also imply an element of the issuing company not needing to perform their CI, perhaps as they do not feel need to impress or reinforce their CI at that point in the relationship, and equally, the recipient company do not feel that CI is a critical part of the partnership after initial contact is made. This could be interpreted as power issue, as there is nothing at stake in this situation, particularly with regards to the consumer stakeholders, if they do not apply CI, perhaps. However, CI was still identified as an issue in other situations, which emerged when participants were asked to comment on their opinions questionnaires with a poor visual appearance:

"If it's a company I'm not already doing business with, yes, I make judgements."

- Ian, Managing Director of a recruitment company

Ian suggests that the appearance negatively influences his opinion of a company, particularly if it is an unknown company. Interestingly, Fiona, who works for a much smaller SME, focused on the power relationship on that of the questionnaire originator, and took quite a subservient view on her own company's stance:

"They're not professional looking. But I don't think they [multi-million pound company] care much what I think. We're nobodies, in the grand scheme."

- Fiona, Assistant to the Managing Director for a medical company.

This suggests that questionnaires do make an impression on a variety of stakeholders, particularly in how the originator might perceive the recipient. The influence of these documents on recipients is worth acknowledging and exploring.

Discussion

During the study, several themes emerged in investigating people's views on external questionnaires: practicality, performance and power, all three of which were underpinned by the themes of partnership or non-partnership.

The first theme, practicality, strongly aligns with both industry and academic literature in identifying the questionnaire as an inherently functional document (e.g. Ford, 1968; Ekinci, 2015; Burns, Veeck and Bush, 2017). This is the principal purpose of the document, to collect data that can be usefully used by the collecting company. This can be evidenced in the practical focus of much of the advice on how to create a questionnaire (see Table 1), although not in relation to aesthetics and design. The functionality of the document was also at the forefront of the themes emerging from the interviews, suggesting that this is how the document was primarily understood by respondents and that issues of CI were of less importance.

The second theme, performance, shed light on an aspect of CI that was not particularly present in the CI literature, whereby non-front end of a channel – the behind-the-scenes companies – seem to acknowledge that CI is a performance that companies spend resources on in order to pursue and attract new customers or existing customers who need to see that performance of identity as a trust or reassurance activity. There was suggestion of an unofficial understanding that once companies were working together in the supply chain, this performance of the CI was less necessary. We were unable to locate literature that considers the variance in CI performance, and that CI might not be as important in some stages of supply chain relationships, and that in industry, less effort appears to be expended on CI particularly at the upper levels.

Thirdly, power emerged as an important theme, particularly if a document comes from a larger company who is a key customer/buyer of the smaller company. In this instance, the smaller company accepts that performance of CI is less important, as the larger company is in the position of power, and therefore does not need to perform CI to impress or woo the smaller company, who may be very dependent on the larger. In this case, the need for CI is almost shrugged off, although the respondents who mentioned this were aware of their position being that of 'the little guy', and therefore not an important enough stakeholder for the more powerful company to spend resources performing to. However, this overlapped with 'performance' and 'practicality', in that CI was acknowledged as a performance meant for certain stakeholders, and that a questionnaire was primarily a functional document, so the lack of consideration towards CI was not important to the smaller company. We were also unable to locate literature that considered the performance of CI and how this would be interpreted by different stakeholders. In the literature, an overriding idea is that CI is a competitive advantage and used for commercial gain tool (Olins, 1990; Balmer and Gray, 1999; Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012, Melewar et al., 2018), but the importance of CI and the different levels of stakeholders is less explored.

A theme of partnership underpinned all three of the emerging themes. In this instance, there were examples of where the partnership was understood as an almost intimate relationship, whereby the receiving company understood the logic behind non-performance of CI within the documentation, as partners understand the 'behind-the-scenes' happenings of the company, and therefore do not require a

CI performance to maintain the desired image. This contrasted with the partnership talk that emerged alongside the 'power' discussion, whereby the recipient's considered that when the relationship is already established, particularly if the sender was the company that was less reliant (such as a big customer who could work with other suppliers), that they did not need to spend time and effort performing CI, as they were not trying to 'woo' the smaller company. The smaller company therefore understood that by not being important in a particular way, the larger company would not expend the resources on maintaining the polished CI image for their benefit. We are unable to identify literature that considers CI in the context of questionnaires, and its subsequent effect on how companies understand their relationship as part of a working partnership.

We believe this is a contribution to the CVI literature which does not currently link the notion of practicality, performance, power and/or partnership to the CVI concept.

Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that the questionnaire design in the context of CI tends to be overlooked, even though the questionnaire is a corporate document. If there is general agreement among scholars that *"corporate image is a process formed by impression"* (Tran et al, 2015, p.100) then neglect of the questionnaire as a communications tool that can impact on impressions of corporate image can be potentially detrimental. As Bessant (2002, p.3) declares: '*Design matters'*. Questionnaires are perhaps unique among other forms of corporate documentation in that they require direct engagement and interaction with the user or recipient. For this reason, we posit that it is important that they be designed as a strategic communication tool, a vehicle of CI. Resulting from our study, we make the following observations and recommendations for consideration by academics, managers and organisations.

Theoretical and methodological implications

Some basic conclusions as regards questionnaire design principles can be derived from the literature review and data collection. Theoretical and methodological implications are included together here, as these issues are intrinsically linked, given the aim of the paper. In particular, the following methodological and theoretical implications could be considered crucial with regards questionnaire design:

- Attractiveness or general visual appeal: Although subjective and not well defined in the literature, the need for questionnaire design to be visually attractive is linked to maximisation of response rates and ease of use on the part of the respondent (e.g. Bryman and Bell, 2015; Clow and James, 2014; Kolb, 2014). The challenge appears to be in how marketers should be educated around visual appeal and CI, which is currently poorly accommodated. Wrigley's (2013) Visceral Hedonic Rhetoric Framework could help guide questionnaire designers towards achieving greater impact, by emphasising other design attributes than those that are strictly visual (e.g. texture, materials, etc). From the collected data, respondents do take notice of questionnaire appearance, although the extent of which would benefit from further exploration.

- Professional appearance: Several authors (e.g. Ford, 1968; Malhotra; 2004 and Ekinci, 2015) argue that questionnaire design should establish an image of quality and professionalism on the part of the provider. This was also highlighted by respondents who said that, especially when judging a company, they had little or no existing involvement, the professional appearance of a questionnaire would influence their opinions of the company. Conversely, our study suggested that if an imbalance of power exists, the appearance of the questionnaire becomes less important, especially if it is completed as a contractual obligation, or for the benefit of the more powerful, issuing company.
- Awareness of what the document communicates: although the literature advocates the application of CI on corporate documentation, there is limited specific consideration given to its application on questionnaires, and the subsequent understanding of the respondents, particularly in a B2B situation. This research suggests themes communicated include issues like power, partnership and performance of CI, all of which would benefit from greater exploration.
- Consideration of individual parts of the CI: This research focuses on the questionnaire as a corporate document. However, most research in this area considers a broader approach in ensuring consistency in CI, rather than consideration of individual components. This could be why some components, like questionnaires, are overlooked, but other components have been more scrutinised, like logos (Foroudi, Hafeez and Foroudi, 2017) or adverts (Pomering and Johnson, 2009). There is scant literature available in terms of practical information around application of CVI to these components.
- There is scope for textbooks be revised in the interest of covering the weakness of questionnaire appearance, focusing particularly on CI and developing the notion of 'attractiveness'. A move to recognise silent design, and actively encourage design education in business schools, to equip students (the future business employees) with the necessary design skills to create such documents is encouraged. This is perhaps a wider issue in CI overall, but design education in higher business education may improve identity communication across corporate documents.

Managerial implications

In this research, we have uncovered potential relationships in areas not previously well linked to the application of CVI and document design in questionnaires. These factors are important for companies to consider in developing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders, as every touchpoint interaction works towards the formation of an opinion of a company.

In particular, it is worth noting that although there is an element of collaboration and camaraderie in the B2B sector, stakeholders also note how the issuing company prioritise the relationship through their questionnaire design. Although this is unlikely to make or break a relationship in the broader sense, it is an overlooked touch point that could be more fully considered without major financial and time investment. This would go some way to improving relationships and improving the impression left in the minds of the stakeholders', particularly when the completion of the document is a contractual obligation.

Managers could focus on two key aspects:

1) The appearance of the questionnaire; its design, presentation, and layout to ensure ease of completion, and communicate competency and effort in the creation of the document as a data collection tool.
2) The application of CVI; how this is applied influences the understanding of the company's CI, and subsequent relationship balance with the company. It changes perceptions of the stakeholders' when they receive a document, which fails in the continuity of the other, more polished marketing elements where CI is carefully considered and executed.

Directions for future qualitative research

Little research currently exists regarding the significance of questionnaires within the context of CI. Future qualitative methodologies that might be considered include using multiple questionnaires with varying designs to explore how these documents support (or harm) the CI, and other issues like response quality or completion rates. Our respondents indicate links between design and honesty of answers, and how important the questionnaire originator deems the recipient. These areas would benefit from more thorough exploration. Presently, there are no studies that explore questionnaires potential to impact on perceptions of CI from the participants, who are often outside the stakeholder groups CI typically targets (customers, employees, investors). Other stakeholders, such as buyers, suppliers, or other partners, are also engaged with a company's CI, and any documents they engage with should be considered a strategic communications tool.

Accordingly, a move away from considering questionnaires as simply data collection tools is recommended. As a key stakeholder touch point and therefore a communication object, recipients do form opinions when interacting with the document. However, the extent of this in relation to CI needs further exploration. In B2B, sometimes the CI aspect is shrugged off as an unnecessary performance, but non-performance can communicate a lack of priority given to the questionnaire recipient.

Further exploration of the importance of good CVI and clarity in document design around the key areas developed in the framework (practicality, performance, power, partnership) is recommended.

Although not the focus of this paper, pre-designed questionnaire programmes are a popular option for both academics and practitioners. This raises several questions regarding digital implications that align with our existing suggestions. Our experience is that students and SMEs often make use of free (or affordable), pre-formatted online surveys, which removes the potential to integrate CI or personalised design. Exploration into the impact of this type of questionnaire in regard to CI is needed.

We encourage academics and practitioners to explore these issues to produce usable, practical questionnaires that work with a strategic CI. Questionnaires should be seen as part of the corporate brand; image building devices, and a means to construct identity (Knox and Bickerton, 2003), and as part of the corporate brand (Balmer, Liao & Wang, 2010); they are too important to ignore.

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Word count (8,667) inc. references

Table 1: Discussions of the aspects of 'appearance' regarding questionnaires

Aspect	**Authors**
Questionnaire length	Banas and Rohan, 1971; Adams and Gale, 1983; Roszkowski and Bean, 1990; Dillman *et al*., 1993; Webb, 2000; Subar et al., 2001; Baker, 2003; Johnson and Turner, 2003; Saunders *et al*., 2012; Rowley, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015; Ekinci, 2015.
Visual appearance e.g. use of boxes, shading, typeface	Carroll, 1994; Webb, 2000; Baker, 2003; Clow and James, 2014; Ekinci, 2015
Attractiveness	Ford, 1968; Dillman, 1978; Webb, 2000; de Rada, 2005; Gill and Johnson, 2005; Saunders *et al.,* 2012; Clow and James, 2014; Gray, 2014; Kolb, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015, Ekinci, 2015
Form	e.g. folder-type questionnaires vs. mimeographed, stapled questionnaires (Ford, 1968), booklet format (Dillman, 1978; Malholtra, Nunan and Birks, 2017), booklet, micro v roster (Dillman *et al*., 1993), avoiding unconventional design (Dillman, 2007)
Size/dimensions	Hartley *et al*., 1977; Dillman, 1978; Jansen, 1985; Webb, 2000; de Rada, 2005
Spacing	Ford, 1968; Sheatsley, 1983; Baker, 2003; Saunders *et al.,* 2012; Clow and James, 2014; Gray, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015, Ekinci, 2015
Use of illustrations and colour	Robinson, 1952, Etcheverry, 1954, Erdos, 1957; Scott, 1961; Carroll, 1994; Webb, 2000; de Rada, 2005, Dillman, 2009; Ekinci, 2015; Malholtra, Nunan and Birks, 2017
Paper colour	Scott, 1961; Webb, 2000; de Rada, 2005
Paper quality	Webb, 2000, Gray, 2014; Ekinci, 2015; Malholtra, Nunan and Birks, 2017
Phraseology	Ford, 1968; Webb, 2000; Baker, 2003; Gill and Johnson, 2005; Lietz, 2010; Burns and Bush, 2014; Clow and James, 2014; Gray, 2014; Ekinci, 2015
Question length	Oppenheim, 1992; Webb, 2000; Holbrook *et al*., 2006; Lietz, 2010; Rowley, 2014
Ease of completion	Dillman, 1978, Webb, 2000
Question alignment	Hartley et al., 1977, Webb, 2000, Bryman and Bell, 2015, Ekinci, 2015
Use of cover pages	Dillman, 1978; de Rada, 2005; Dillman, 2009; Saunders *et al*., 2012; Clow and James, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015

Table 2: Summary of design considerations regarding questionnaires in a selection of mainstream research textbook

Textbook authors	**Content relating to aesthetic questionnaire design**
Bryman and Bell, 2015	Avoid cramping the presentation, aim for a clear presentation, consider horizontal and vertical layout of questions, clear instructions, keep questions and answers together.
Burns and Bush, 2014	No mention of aesthetics or appearance.
Burns, Veeck and Bush, 2017	Discussion of visual scales '*to counter monotony and boredom often suffered by respondents as they see page after page of matrix-type scales*' (p. 213) Considers computer-assisted questionnaire design: "*Often the appearance can be modified to the designer's preferences for font, background, color, and more, including mobile device layouts*" (p. 227).
Clow and James, 2014	Ensuring sufficient 'white space' via margins and spacing, differentiating the font of question instructions using bold, bold italic or a different font, not caps or underlines.
Gray, 2014	Make it attractive, consider general layout, choice of paper, line spacing, consistent answering directions. Avoid unconventional designs.
Kolb, 2014	Make it attractive, consider visual impact of '*margins, spacing and font size*' (p. 205). Keep it as short as possible, but use white space, even if it results in a longer survey.
Kotler et al., 2012	No mention of aesthetics or appearance
Saunders et al., 2012	Use an attractive layout, give consideration to length, paper colour, consistency in shading, colour, font size, spacing and formatting.
Malholtra, 2004; 2010	"…*questionnaire design* [is] *an art rather than a science*". (2010, p.335) "*For example, if the questionnaire is produced on poor-quality paper or is otherwise shabby in appearance, the respondents will think the project is unimportant and the quality of response will be adversely affected. Therefore, the questionnaire should be reproduced on good-quality paper and have a professional appearance.*" (2004, p.300)
Malholtra, Nunan and Birks, 2017	Considers mainly the format of digital questionnaires, stating that they should be designed to "…*give participants the most engaging experience*" (p.397). Notes given about paper quality and booklet format for offline questionnaires, and how colour can help navigation. Type should be "…*large and clear. Reading the questionnaire should not impose a strain*"

	(p.398).
Gill and Johnson, 2005	"*The quality of the overall presentation of the questionnaire, its conciseness and attractiveness of the design are also of importance in ensuring a high completion rate, as is a suitable covering letter and a stamped, addressed envelope for its return*." (p.120)
Johnson and Turner, 2003	Write in a clear, precise and simple manner, develop the questionnaire to be user-friendly, must be kept short.

Table 3: Summary of SMEs representatives, ranked by estimated percentage of completed paper based, self-administered questionnaires per department.

Alias	**Job title**	**Industry**	**Av. number of questionnaires completed per month**	**Typical Originator of Questionnaires**
Graham	Software Designer	Security	2	Consultancy firms, clients, prospective clients, the council.
Chris	Account Manager	Corporate Travel Agent	4-5	Travel providers e.g. package companies, airlines, hoteliers, insurance companies. Internal surveys.
Dionne	General Assistant	Catering	1-2	Mainly customers and potential customers, food and equipment suppliers.
Ian	Managing Director	Recruitment	8-10	Potential customers, current customers.
Jack	Owner and Manager	Catering	5	Market research companies, health and safety regulatory bodies. Customers.
Andy	Purchasing Assistant	Engineering	More than 10, less than 20.	Buyers, potential buyers. Insurance companies.
Harry	Sales Advisor	Automotive	5	New and prospective clients.
Eddy	Junior Engineer	Engineering	5 or 6	Universities, customers (particularly from their engineering or R&D departments), suppliers. Market research companies.
Fiona	Assistant to the Managing Director	Medical	5-10	Regulating bodies, market research companies, suppliers, internal audits.
Bernard	Lead Buyer	Engineering	10-15	Existing suppliers and buyers.
Kelly	Head of Human Resources	Engineering	10+	Recruitment companies, internal auditors, internal finance, regulatory bodies, universities, occasionally customers.

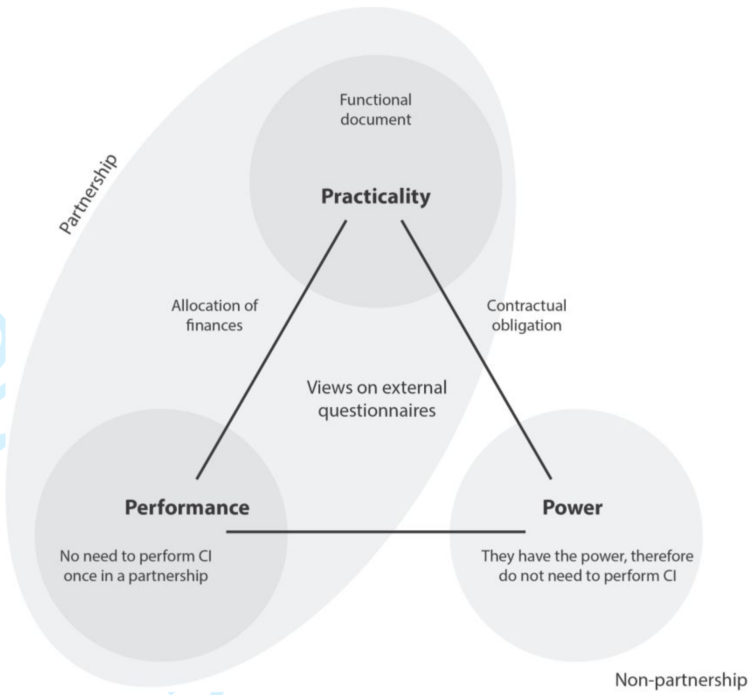

Fig. 1: Thematic map of participant views on external questionnaires