Constructing a Cyber-Corporate Identity:
How Global Organizations Are Taking Advantage of the Web

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Abstract

This study reports the content analysis of 152 randomly selected Web sites from the 2000 *Fortune* 500 Global list of companies, to examine organizational identity, audiences, and the two-way symmetric model. The priority audiences addressed by Web site home pages are investors, media, and customers. This study tested the feedback features to determine the level of two-way symmetric communication. The rate of response by global organizations was surprisingly high (46.5%). This finding is an optimistic sign for a great potential of dialogic communication between global organizations and their audiences by using the Web.

Keywords: Corporate identity, corporate image, *Fortune 500* global companies, two-way symmetric communication, marketing communication, public relations online

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Theoretically, public relations should be a discipline that aims to establish communication, understanding, and strong ties between an organization and its public (Grunig, 1992). To better accomplish this, public relations should work primarily with two related concepts, identity and image (Meza, 1997; Moffitt, 1994; Selame, 1997; Thomsen, 1996). Identity is content, and image is form. Each organization has a personality, which has been constructed by a specific identity, knowledge, and essence (Meza, 1998; Olins, 1996; Selame, 1997). When this personality or identity is projected, individuals and the public form a mental image of this organization. Image, therefore, is the picture in the individual's mind (Moffitt, 1994). The closer this image is to the organizational identity, the better the understanding and the possibility of communication will be.

Comment: APA List in alphabetical order by first author—p.172.

Background

Long before there was an Internet, organizations worked at constructing their identity and projecting it to their different audiences. Originally, corporations created their identity by thinking in terms of local markets. Pre-cyberspace media struggled mightily to expand the coverage, but it took the emergence of the Web to provide the opportunity for improving both the speed and the scope of information-spreading worldwide. However, the projection of information does not necessarily assure the effectiveness of communicating an identity.

Purpose of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which global corporations are using the Web for constructing and projecting their identity, and improving the effectiveness of their public relations. This paper analyzes Web sites of global organizations, specifically *Fortune Global 500* companies. *Fortune's* list was selected because it is representative of the largest corporations in the world.

This study describes and analyzes the different identity elements that global corporations currently project through the Web—as well as the public that the

corporations address, and the different features they use to communicate and interact with the public.

Statement of the Problem

This study researches the ways in which global corporations use the Web to communicate and project their identity. The construction and projection of an organizational identity is crucial for an effective communication and public relationship with a varying public.

The working conception of this investigation is two-fold: to take advantage of the Web as a new medium for the projection of an organizational identity, and to see how the Web might contribute in improving relationships with the public—thus, making possible an effective communication process between an organization and its public.

This research considers six concepts that are crucial for understanding corporate identity and its relationship to public relations:

1. Organizational identity: the essence, content, substance, knowledge, culture, and mentality that distinguish an organization from others. Organizational identity is the way an organization manifests itself to its public (Meza, 1997; Olins, 1996; Selame, 1997).
2. Organizational identity elements: Each organization uses certain components in a particular way. A varied public and audience perceive the organizational identity through those components to define the essence and personality of a particular organization (Meza, 1997; Olins, 1996; Selame, 1997). These identity elements define an organizational culture (Meza, 1992). One of the most important identity elements is the mission. This paper describes ten identity elements on the Web: name; business definition; mission; objectives and/or goals; strategies, history; organizational structure; values; logo-icon; and institutional color. The corporate mission is a guide to build and manage the organizational identity; all other identity elements should follow the mission's guide (Meza, 1998).
3. Public: The word "public" refers to the people as a whole, the populace. In this paper, it is sometimes combined with, sometimes used instead of the word

"audience(s)." In either case, it refers to the specific recipients that an organization focuses on when constructing its messages—"the group of persons within an audience who share a knowledge, attitude, behavior or image" (Moffitt, 1994, p. 168). In this study, the *public* includes ten groups—community, customers, dealers, employees, environmentalist groups, investors, mass media, prospective employees, retailers, and suppliers.

4. One-way models: Grunig and Hunt define press agentry and public information as one-way models of public relations. A one-way model implies that an organization sends information to a certain public with no intention of obtaining feedback. This one-way model may be motivated by persuasive (press agentry/publicity) or just informative (public information) purposes (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This study considers two interactive features on the Web: e-mail and e-form. These two features permit a recipient to send information back to the company. Those sites that do not use interactive features of feedback—in this case e-mails or e-forms—for obtaining information from their public— represent these one-way models.
5. Two-way asymmetrical communication: This form of communication occurs when an organization employs some tools for obtaining information from its public, not by dialoguing per se, but rather by aiming at a specific public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). As mentioned before, this study considers two interactive features on the Web: e-mail and e-form. On the Web, those sites that have these interactive features, but are not intercommunicating with their public, may have online features that permit only the sending of information without receiving an answer: this would constitute an example of a two-asymmetric communication.
6. Two-way symmetrical communication: This public relations model indicates a two-way communication between an organization and its public. This model implies a balanced dialogue and an adjusted relationship between the organization and its publics (Grunig, 1992). This model has been called the preferred form of public relations. On the WWW, the model would be effective or ineffective, depending on the interactive features used by a site (Kent & Taylor, 1998). This study considers the interactive features, such as e-mail and e-form, as effective

when an organization answers a request from an individual through the Web site. This case would constitute an example of a two-way symmetrical communication.

7. Communicational features: These are those technical elements that a Web site contains in order to facilitate its use (navigational features), interact with users, enhance communication, or collect data. These features establish the potential for improving communication (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). This study considers ten communicational features: corporate site links, e-mail links, e-forms, search engines, site maps, video, audio, animated multimedia, map services, and online surveys. The more effective these features are, the more communicative potential the Web site offers.

To address the problem stated above, this study primarily uses descriptive and analytical methodology. This study identifies the identity elements and interactive features used by corporations on the Web, as well as by the public the corporations have addressed. This study then analyzes how well the communication has been accomplished via the two-symmetric model of public relations.

One of the principal functions of public relations practitioners is to help organizations improve their external communication using the mass media as a principal tool of their communication campaigns aimed at the public. With the development of the Internet, organizations have found a new and dynamic medium by which to share all kinds of information for different purposes.

Businesses and technology are changing rapidly, and so are public relations practices. To improve the communication process is part of the public relations practitioner's mission. However, the use of the Internet changes these public relation practices, and corporations are still uncertain of how to take advantage of the new medium. To improve their identity projection and take advantage of the digital era, global corporations must first be capable of creating their own cyber identity effectively, in order to have the best effect on audiences' perceptions.

Rationale for the Study

Any organization must be wary of its reputation and image. Audiences may have a certain image of an organization, and this perception might affect the way they react to it. Because reputation may have a tremendous impact on the organization's relationships with a diverse public, an organization should establish a strategy to learn what people think about it (Young, 1995-1996). This is why the analysis of the projection of corporate identity online is important for public relations.

No longer bound by such traditional barriers as time and space, the media we now have access to—the Internet—brings a new opportunity for organizations' use in reaching its public, establishing new channels and having a more high-performance effective communication than what they had with conventional media of the past (Dorf, 1995; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Newland & White, 2000; Pinkham, 1998). The older, conventional media have given organizations the chance to project their identity but not necessarily to have an effective communication with their external audiences (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed the four models of public relations: press agentry/publicity; public information; two-way asymmetric communication; and two-way symmetric communication. Large organizations have almost always used conventional mass media for disseminating information, with or without commercial purposes. However, a balanced two-way communication has been almost nonexistent. Now the Web provides an opportunity for establishing an effective two-way symmetric communication between organizations and their public, an opportunity that traditional media (e.g., newspapers and television) have almost never been able to provide. However, there is reason to hypothesize that the incipient management of global corporations' public relations in cyberspace has failed in reaching this effective level of two-way communication with their public.

Some articles, surveys, and studies related to the use of technology in public relations have found that practitioners are increasingly paying more attention to communication with an internal and an external public through diverse online tools (Dorf, 1995; Major, 1995; Pinkham, 1998). The impact that the Internet already has on the public relations

profession has surpassed the initial estimate of skeptics among some professionals (Bobbitt, 1995; Bovet, 1995).

The use of the Web by public relations practitioners may constitute a potent tool for communicating with a diverse public, although this has not been richly exploited (Newland & White, 2000). Until now, large organizations have used the Web mostly for disseminating information rather than for interaction, which means that those companies are not making full use of the new communication tool, but are using the Web as a traditional medium (Aikat, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Esrock & Leichty 1998).

In fact, public relations practitioners around the world have been learning about the diversity of capabilities the Internet brings to new professionals (Neff, 1998). More important, the Web's increasing ubiquity is bringing new challenges to practitioners for achieving dialogic communication with a diverse public (Kent & Taylor, 1998). It is obvious that public relations practitioners must become more skilled in the use of the Web (Kent & Taylor).

Negativity re cyberspace. Researchers and professionals have explored the negative aspects of cyberspace and the possible actions public relations practitioners might take. At least one such researcher has said that silent voices should be heard, and that we do not have to let the Web dictate the direction of the net for corporations' interests (Mickey, 1998). A serious problem is the (presently uncontrolled) dissemination of libelous information; this can affect corporate public relations adversely and must be prevented by practitioners (Marken, 1998; Strenski, 1995).

Corporate identity, image building. The issues of corporate identity or image building have not been deeply analyzed, although there are some studies that show the first approach to this interesting area. One study found that practitioners perceived the Web as an image builder (Newland & White, 2000). Another study found that many large corporations did not have a clear objective of corporate identity when they set up their Web sites, and that their attempts simply aim to promote sales (Aikat, 2000).

An article by Major (1995) pointed out that the most important use of the Internet and the Web is not the diverse technical tools that they present but the possibility of enhancing the credibility and trust of the organization. A study by Esrock and Leichty

(1998) addressed the issue of social responsibility of corporations and its impact on image building.

The study of the cyberspace issues in public relations has been focused more on the use of some technical tools (Bobbitt, 1995; Bovet, 1995; Neff, 1998; Newland & White, 2000; Ross, 1995; Thomsen, 1995), or the impact of some on-line practices (Thomsen, 1996) than on the exploration of the type of communication or public relations models implemented for a diverse public (Dorf, 1995; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Pinkham, 1998).

Related to the analysis of a diverse public on corporate Web pages, there are two studies (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 1999). According to Esrock and Leichty (2000), "the typical corporate Web site acknowledges the importance of a multiple public or multiple audiences in the organization of content on its front page." These authors pointed out that the front page also needs to feature e-mail links and navigational features. Esrock and Leichty discovered that the public most addressed by *Fortune 500* companies were investors, customers, and media, in this order.

The use of the Web may lead to a dialogic communication between an organization and its public, which would have a strong impact on organizational communication and research (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The Web represents an opportunity for public relations practitioners, because of its potential of immediate two-way communications, which had been almost nonexistent with traditional media (Marken, 1998). New technologies and globalization have allowed organizations to reformulate the way they deal with their public (Pinkham, 1998).

In "Social Responsibility and Corporate Web Pages: Self-Presentation or Agenda-Setting?," Esrock and Leichty (1998) analyzed a 100 random sample of *Fortune 500* companies. The companies were examined for social responsibility content and interactive features in their Web sites. Results showed that 90% of those companies had Web sites, and 82% had messages on social responsibility items. About the interactive features, "the researchers found that relatively few companies used their Web sites as a research and communication tool to proactively correspond with public, and even fewer used the medium as a tool to advance their positions on policy issues." Esrock and Leichty (1998) also concluded:

> The Internet and the World Wide Web are developing communication tools that offer public relations professional extraordinary new opportunities. But despite claims about how the medium will change the nature of interaction between a corporation and its publics, this study suggests that Web pages are primarily utilized to disseminate corporate social responsibility information in much the same way as other traditional one-way corporate communication vehicles. With several notable exceptions, companies appear content to use Web pages to show that they are meeting public expectations for social responsibility (image building). (p.318).

Focus on two-way symmetric communication. This study has taken into account the results of Esrock and Leichty's studies (1998, 1999, 2000) and aims to expand the analysis of the communication process, focusing on the two-way symmetric model originally devised by Grunig and Hunt. Moreover, this study has taken into consideration the suggestion of Kent and Taylor (1998) in analyzing the dialogic potential of the Web. This study has also taken into consideration Aikat's suggestion for analyzing international organizations (Aikat, 2000).

Most studies have covered the impact of some technical tools, the on-line practices in the traditional one-way communication, and the content of public relations information,. However, it appears that only one study of dialogic communication has been presented, and it did not cover the importance of organizational identity. Thus it seems timely—perhaps even urgent—to take this opportunity to explore the use of the Web in constructing an organizational identity and improving external communication of global companies.

Theory

Previous research has revealed that the study of dialogic communication needs to be taken into account in order to understand and analyze symmetrical communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998). However, the study of how an organizational identity is constructed in the Web has a connection with the public's adoptions of symbols and social meanings. People construct identity and, thus, reality by social processes (Berger & Luckman, 1984).

Because this study has the purpose of exploring how global corporations are using the Web to construct their identity and to improve the effectiveness of their public

relationships, this study considers dialogic communication, and organizational construction of identity as a theoretical framework.

This investigation has taken into consideration the following concepts: reality, identity, signs, symmetrical communication and dialogic communication. The study of how an organizational identity is constructed in the Web has a connection with the public's adoptions of symbols and social meanings. People construct identity and, thus, reality by social processes (Berger & Luckman, 1984). The notions of reality follow the operationalizing assumption that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman). This theory has been translated into the language of organizational identity. The assumption is that the meaning of organizational identity is constructed socially. This is the importance of studying how organizations construct and project their identity.

The conception of the two-way symmetric model has been framed by the definition of dialog as a mediated interchange of ideas and opinions (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Four questions. From the literature review, four questions have emerged: (a). How are international organizations using the Web (Aikat, 2000); (b) How are organizations using the Web for *differentiation* (content) purposes (Esrock & Leichty, 2000);(c) How are organizations using the Web for *complexity* (structure) purposes (Esrock & Leichty, 2000); and what are the public or audience priorities for corporate Web sites (Esrock & Leichty, 2000); and (d) Is a *dialog* or an effective two-way symmetric communication between an organization and its publics a possibility (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Research Questions

My research questions constitute a response to the four research questions that emerged from the literature review, considering international organizations, identity content (*differentiation*), structure features (*complexity*), and dialogic communication:

1. To what extent do Fortune Global 500 companies construct and project their identity online, applying the concept of *Web site differentiation*? The concept of *differentiation* has emerged from the literature review (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Web site differentiation will be determined by the content of organizational

identity online. Organizational identity can be demarcated by analyzing the different corporate identity elements (Selame, 1997; Meza 1997, Olins, 1996) projected online. This study considers the analysis of international organizations on Web as recommended by an author in the literature review (Aikat, 2000).

2. What global-companies' Web sites are priorities, applying the concept of *Web site complexity*? The concept of *complexity* has emerged from the literature review (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Esrock and Leichty have analyzed this topic on the American *Fortune 500* list, which appears to concentrate more on addressing investors, customers, and media than on addressing any other public group (Esrock & Leichty, 2000).
3. To what extent do global corporations take advantage of technological tools on the Web to create relationships with diverse audiences for potential dialogic public relations? Kent and Taylor (1998) offered some "guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic public relations and the World Wide Web." These guidelines include the use of feedback features (e.g., e-mail links) and navigational features (e.g., site links, site maps, and search engines). The more effective these technical tools are, the more dynamic and potential in dialogic communication the Web site is.
4. To what extent do global corporations use the Web reflecting a *dialog* or an effective two-way symmetric communication between an organization and its public? This question has also emerged from the literature review (Kent & Taylor, 1998). A Web site not only needs to include a feedback feature (e.g., e-mail or e-form), but it also must respond to its messages and be committed to relationships with its public (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Justification

Increasing the literature. This project should prove worthy because there appear to be no studies that address the analysis of the construction of identity on the Web. At this writing (May 2001), there is a paucity of research on interactivity and two-way communication on the Internet.

Providing practical help for Internet users. A most important problem that this paper addresses is the question of whether or not the Web is being used as efficiently as possible, to correct the inability of the traditional media to dialog between organizations and the public. The new technologies—and especially the Web—now present the organizations with an opportunity to establish a new relationship of communication with their public, an achievement that would be beneficial for both of them.

Much work is needed in this area. New information-technologies are burgeoning, with such great speed, it is difficult to "master" their use before new ones emerge. Each additional technological refinement serves to increase the velocity of communicational transactions. The speed of dissemination of information, access, and feedback through the Internet is having an impact on public relations practices. Although the Web itself is a relatively new medium, it is necessary for organizations to harness its incredible potential for constructing and projecting organizational identity. All organizations must become aware of this and learn how to take advantage of this new reality in order to maintain and improve their global positions. Disregarding this fact could be disastrous for their future.

Providing research findings for scholars. In addition to this paper's being of interest to public relations practitioners and the organizations they represent, this paper may be especially important for scholars—principally scholars in the areas of public relations, but also scholars in the areas of marketing and organizational management.

Method

This study content has analyzed a sample of international-companies Web sites. The following steps have been taken into account, in order to secure the needed information for this project:

1. Definition of the sampling frame: This study used the *Fortune Global 500* list 2000.[1] The *Fortune's* list presents the companies in order of their revenues. This list was used as a sampling frame, as several other studies have used the similar American list (Aikat, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 1999;

[1] See http://www.fortune.com/fortune/global500/

Esrock & Leichty, 1998; McMahan & Woodman, 1992; Palmer & Griffith, 1998; Perry & Bodkin, 2000; Petravick & Gillett, 1996; Wilson, 1994). The *Fortune Global 500* list was selected for four reasons: (a) it is representative of the largest companies in the world; (b) these large organizations are the most likely to be taking advantage of the Web; (c) the Web list is friendly and updated; and (d) the access to this list is free of any charge.

2. Definition of the sample: The *Fortune Global 500* list represents a finite number of all the units (companies) in the working universe. This presents an opportunity to calculate confidence and tolerance limits (Smith, 1981). This study took a random systematic sample of 152 (out of 500, or 30.4 % of the universe) companies from that list, selecting every third case after a random start.
3. Search of the Web site: After selecting the sample, a search was performed for the company's Web site. The first step was to type the correspondent company's name or initials into the browser (www.NAMEORINITIALSOFCOMPANY.com). If this procedure led to the Web page, the coder continued with the data collection. If this step did not work, the coder proceeded to the list's name provided by the *Fortune Global 500* Web page. Clicking on the name of the company site listed displayed financial information and other options. The column with the name "Capsule" contained the phrase "company overview." Upon clicking on that phrase, the site displayed general information about the company and its Web page address. After finding the company Web address, the coder continued with the data collection. In cases in which these first two steps did not lead to the company's Web site for any reason, coders followed a third step: they used Alta Vista <http://www.altavista.com/> or Google < http://www.google.com/ > to find the Web site. If none of the previous steps worked or if the official Web page did not exist at the moment of this research for any reason, the company was "dismissed" and counted as "Not found."
4. Definition of data collection and coding: This research had a timeframe of a two-week period. The first week was used for general coding. The second week was used for the evaluation of the effectiveness in responses of two structural features:

e-mails and e-forms. The general coding started on Monday, April 2, 2001. and finished on Friday, April 6, 2001. The evaluation of the responses lasted until Friday, April 13, 2001.

5. Determination of units of analysis and the matrix construction: This study considered the "home page" or the initial screen of each of the selected Web sites as the context unit. For coding, this research contemplated two units: content categories and structural features. One of the content categories analyzed the feasibility of general access to the Web site; if the company Web page existed, the degree of accessibility ("not simple" or "simple") was determined. The rest of the content categories analyzed presence, absence, and, if presented, the degree of elaboration (low or medium-high) of the following elements: (a) corporate identity elements, such as name, definition, mission, objectives, organizational structure, history, values, logo-icon, institutional color, and other identity elements, if any more identified; and (b) identification for a specific public's access. The structural features may be used to identify email links, electronic forms for feedback, search engines and/or any other mechanism that permits communicational interactions. Aikat (2000) described these features as "interactive content." Whenever these structural features are presented, this study will have measured the effectiveness and time of response.
6. Training of the coders: Before the data collection started, two coders were trained in coding procedures, variables, and the coding instrument. Both of the coders coded two pre-test and two post-test sites, which were different from the sample sites. The first coder coded all 152 Web sites. The second coder independently cross-checked 61 sites (40%).
7. Formulation of reliability: According to Smith (1981), the sampling size of 152 units represents 98% of precision in its confidence and tolerant limits. Additionally, the calculation of intercoder reliability, following the Perreault and Leigh's method, ranged from .85 to .98 for the examined variables (median = .92).

Results, Data Analysis, and Discussion

As a general finding, this study found that 93% of global companies have a Web page. This percentage is slightly above the 88-90%that some studies have found for American companies' Web sites (e.g., Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Of the 152 companies studied at the time of this research in April of 2001, 141 had Web sites.

Besides identifying the existence of the companies' Web sites, this study developed an initial typology, by evaluating the feasibility of Web sites' access: companies with *difficult* access and companies with *simple* access to their Web sites. Companies without Web sites were coded as *0,* and have not been included in this initial typology (see matrix of coding in Appendix A). Companies with *difficult* access were coded as *1*, and companies with *simple* access were coded as *2*. When the Web site was found by typing the correspondent company's name or initials into the browser, it was considered *simple*. When it was necessary to use the *Fortune's* Web site index or a Web search engine (as Alta Vista or Google), the access to the site was considered *difficult*. Thus, of the 141 visited, 68.1% of the sites were of *simple* access, and 31.9% were of *difficult* access. These numbers mean that about two thirds of global corporations have decided to use a name for their Web address that is easily accessible and easily remembered. Ease of access should facilitate the public's ability to visit the site for the first time and perhaps even for subsequent times as well.

Next, this study examined the presence and degree of elaboration, access, or effectiveness of corporate identity elements, public, and communicational features. Each of these elements will be discussed in sequential order of the correspondent research question. Only results that are statistically significant are reported in these sections.

Results that address the first research question. To evaluate the projection of large organizations' organizational identity on the Web, this study analyzed ten different identity elements. Each element was defined as having a *low* or *medium/high* degree of elaboration in the coding procedure (see Appendix B, section 2). In determining the degree of elaboration, these elements were coded with three different values: *0*, *1*, and *2*. Elements that were not found were coded as *0*. Elements with a low degree of

construction or elaboration were coded as *1*. Elements with a medium or high degree of elaboration were coded as *2* (see the matrix in Appendix A).

Table # 1 (see below) presents the presence of identity elements on global companies' Web sites. The most frequently projected identity elements are: name (98.4 %), logo-icon (98.4 %), institutional color (96.8 %), business definition (81.7 %), history (68.3 %), and structure (50 %); less frequently projected identity items were: mission (35 %), values (31.7 %), objectives (18.3 %), and strategies (13.3 %). The interesting finding here is that, although the *mission* is one of the most important identity elements, it was found not well projected online in these global organizations. Another surprising finding was the fact that two Web sites did not present their corporate name in the first page—the name being the most evident characteristic that every site must show. We should say that, nevertheless, the presence of these identity elements surpassed the most optimistic initial expectations.

Table 1.
Presence of Identity Elements in Web Sites (n=152) of Fortune Global 500

Identity Element	*Presence* (Frequency and Percentage)
1. Name	139 (98.4 %)
2. Logo-icon	138 (98.4 %)
3. Color	137 (96.8 %)
4. Definition	112 (81.7 %)
5. History	94 (68.3 %)
6. Structure	69 (50 %)
7. Mission	48 (35 %)
8. Values	43 (31.7 %)
9. Objectives	25 (18.3 %)
10. Strategies	18 (13.3 %)

Table # 2 (see below) presents the evaluation of the degree of elaboration of those identity elements online. For these calculations, only the number of found sites was

considered. Thus, the number of the sample varies, because initially 11 sites were not found, and 4 Web sites were not in an English, Spanish, French, or Italian version, the languages managed by the two coders. Nevertheless, it was possible for the coders to analyze certain identity elements for these sites, elements such as name, institutional color, and logo-icon. We should say that rarely was the Web site not in an English version. Those sites with elements with no elaboration were determined as low in degree, and coded as *1*; the degree of medium/high was determined when the site offered only a sufficient elaboration of the concept and was coded as *2*. Thus, there were five identity elements with a combined presence and higher degree of elaboration online of the total sample (sites without an English, Spanish, French, or Italian version were not considered): name (90.5%), color (88.9%), logo-icon (71.4%), definition (68.3%), and history (65%). The other five elements were structure (45%), mission (26.7%), values (25%), objectives (10%), and strategies (8.3%).

In the scale 1-2, where 2 is the highest level of elaboration, the mean of evaluation was obtained just considering those sites with the presence of the individual element. This evaluation changed the order of elaboration of identity elements online: history (1.95), name (1.92), institutional color (1.92), structure (1.9), definition (1.84), values (1.79), mission (1.76), logo-icon (1.73), strategies (1.63), and objectives (1. 55). Again, the element mission appears in an unfortunate placement.

Table 2.
Elaboration of Identity Elements in Web Sites of Fortune Global 500

Identity Element	N	Medium or High Degree of Elaboration (Frequency and Percentage)	Evaluation
1. Name	141	128 (90.5 %)	1.92
2. Color	141	125 (88.9 %)	1.92
3. Logo-icon	141	101 (71.4 %)	1.73
4. Definition	137	94 (68.3 %)	1.84
5. History	137	89 (65 %)	1.95
6. Structure	137	62 (45 %)	1.9

7. Mission	137	37 (26.7 %)	1.76
8. Values	137	34 (25 %)	1.79
9. Objectives	137	14 (10 %)	1.55
10. Strategies	137	11 (8.3 %)	1.63

In a scale of 0-2, where 2 is the highest level, the mean of construction of corporate identity elements online was 1.07, which means that in this arbitrary scale the construction of identity elements on the Web is roughly 50%. My first research question sought the extent to which *Fortune Global 500* companies project their identity online, applying the concept of differentiation. With these results, it becomes obvious that these organizations have made only partial use of the Web in the projection of their organizational identity, thus forgoing an immense opportunity. (But of course, to fulfill this gap, *Global 500* corporations may still have more chances to enhance their identity online and differentiate themselves from others.)

Results that address the second research question. My second research question established the inquiry of a priority public for global companies on the Web. Results of this study of the prominent public are somewhat similar to findings in other studies that apply to American corporate sites (e.g., Esrock & Leichty, 2000). The category of investors/media/customers/prospective-employees was the public combination most frequently addressed by global corporations on the Web. Table # 3 (see below) presents the presence of the public in Web sites of global corporations. The order is as follows: investors (95%), media (95%), customers (71.7%), prospective employees (68.3%), environmentalists (48.3%), community (40%), dealers (16.7%), retailers (15%), suppliers (8.3%), and employees (3.3%).

Table # 4 (see below) presents the relevance of contact with the global corporations sites. It is quite intriguing to notice that the Web shows the least relevance to contact with employees (3.3%). Some may argue that corporation have other more effective communication channels to address this particular internal public. Nevertheless, these corporations are the biggest in the world, and it is likely that most of them have employees worldwide. This is an opportunity for international companies to take

advantage of this medium and improve the channels of communication with their current employees.

Table 3.
Presence of Publics in Web Sites (n=152) of Fortune Global 500

Public	*Presence* (Frequency and Percentage)
1. Investors	130 (95 %)
2. Media	130 (95 %)
3. Customers	98 (71.7 %)
4. Prospective employees	94 (68.3 %)
5. Environmentalists	66 (48.3 %)
6. Community	55 (40 %)
7. Dealers	23 (16.7%)
8. Retailers	20 (15 %)
9. Suppliers	11 (8.3 %)
10. Employees	5 (3.3 %

Another relevant informational item is the difference in frequency of two public groups' communication with the global corporations. Two groups (investors, 95%, and media, 95%) are figure most prominently among the public groups addressed by these global corporations' sites. Surprisingly, customers (71.7 %) are not even very close to the investors and media. In previous studies about American cases, customers have been, if not the first, at least the second public addressed by corporate sites. On the other hand, prospective employees (68.3 %) have a relevant fourth place among the first public groups addressed by international corporations' Web sites. Environmentalists (48.3 %) and community (40 %) also have a significant presence on these sites.

Table 4.
Presence and Relevance of Publics in Web Sites of Fortune Global 500

Investors	*Prospective*	*Current*	*Customers*	*Media*	*Dealers*	*Retailers*	*Environment*	*Community*	*Suppliers*
137	137	137	140	137	137	137	137	137	137
7	43	132	39	7	114	116	71	82	126
0	5	5	7	0	5	2	7	5	0
130	89	0	91	130	18	18	59	50	11
137	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*	*137*
5.00%	31.67%	96.67%	28.30%	5.00%	83.33%	85.00%	51.67%	60.00%	91.67%
0.00%	3.33%	3.33%	5.00%	0.00%	3.33%	1.67%	5.00%	3.33%	0.00%
95.00%	65.00%	0.00%	66.70%	95.00%	13.33%	13.33%	43.33%	36.67%	8.33%
95.00%	**68.33%**	**3.33%**	**71.70%**	**95.00%**	**16.67%**	**15.00%**	**48.33%**	**40.00%**	**8.33%**

Results that address the third research question. Research question number three addressed: the extent to which global corporations take advantage of technological tools on the web to create relationships with diverse audiences for potential dialogic public relations. Results of this study present different technological features that global corporations are using on their Web pages. Table 5 (see below) shows four features most used: in corporate sites: links (76.7%), feedback—e-mail/e-form—(71.7%), search engines (65%), and site maps (48.3%). The rest are far from being used widely: video (11.7%), audio (5.1%), animated multimedia (3.6%), surveys (3.6%), and map service (3.6%).

Table 5.
Presence and Effectiveness of Technological Features in Web Sites (n=137) of Fortune Global 500

Feature	Presence	Effectiveness
1. Corporate site links	105 (76.7 %)	89.1 %
2. Feedback—e-mail/e-form	99 (71.7 %)	46.5 %
3. Search engine	89 (65 %)	64.1 %
4. Site map	66 (48.3 %)	89.7 %
5. Video	16 (11.7 %)	85.7 %

6. Audio	7 (5.1 %)	85.7 %
7. Animated multimedia	5 (3.6 %)	80 %
8. Surveys	5 (3.6 %)	80 %
9. Map service	5 (3.6 %)	80 %

The effectiveness of each feature was obtained after determining if the tool worked or not. For example, if the site had a video, and it ran well when it was activated, then this feature was coded as effective. Thus, the order was as follows: site map (89.7%), corporate site links (89.1%), video (85.7%), audio (85.7%), animated multimedia (80%), surveys (80%), map service (80%), search engine (64.1%), and feedback (46.5%). There do not seem to be great problems with these features for having potentiality for communicative relationships, with the exception of the last two: search engine and feedback (the last to be analyzed in the following section). The effectiveness of most of these features reveals a great potential for dialogic public relationships.

Results that address the fourth research question. My fourth and last research question was established to analyze the extent to which global corporations use the Web for dialogic or an effective two-way symmetric communication between an organization and its public. As shown above, in table # 6, the effectiveness of the feedback of global corporations is a surprising 46.5%. This means that almost half of the global corporations do answer their e-mails or give responses to their electronic forms. Paraphrasing Kent and Taylor: it is a sign of dialogic communication to have published electronic mail addresses for organizational members and respond to their messages, and being "committed to or capable of negotiating relationships with their public" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p.321).

From the original 152-sample list, only 141 Web sites were found. Among these sites, four sites were not in an English/Spanish/French/or Italian version, so that only 137 Web sites were considered for these feedback features. From the 137 sites, 39 did not contain a link—from the first page—to electronic mail or electronic form. Thus, it was not possible to send a message to the specific corporation. Ninety-nine Web sites did present a link to an e-mail or an e-form, so that it was possible to send a request to those specific corporations. From these 99 organizations, we received a surprising 46 answers

(46.5 % rate of response), and in some cases more messages were interchanged, and in addition, in consequence, corporate material was sent by conventional mail. These findings determine that the Web is already capable and partially well-used by global organizations for establishing a dialogic or two-way symmetrical communication with the public.

Conclusion

This study presents a clear picture of how global organizations are constructing and projecting their identity through the Web, as well as how well they are taking advantage of the developing of a two-way symmetric communication for improving the effectiveness of their public relations. As shown in the response to our research questions, we examined four central points: the extension to which those organizations create and project their identity online (*Web site differentiation*); the priority of the public groups they address on the Web (*Web site complexity*); their use of technological cyber-tools for potential dialogic relationships; and their extension of effective two-way symmetric communication online.

Web pages. General findings showed that 93% of global companies have a Web page.

Web site differentiation. Global organizations have progressed only about halfway in using the Web comprehensively in creating and projecting their identity online. We have differentiated between projection and creation. Referring to *projection*, the analysis tells us only the presence of the identity element on the Web page. The *creation* refers more specifically to the level of elaboration (low, and medium/high, as stated in the method). Considering the ten identity elements studied, four are the most projected: name (98.4%), logo-icon (94.4%), institutional color (96.8%), and business definition (81.7%). When the analysis continues on to the level of elaboration of those identity elements, the creation in a medium/high level gives us different numbers: name (90.5%), logo-icon (71.4%), institutional color (88.9%), and business definition (68.3%). The remaining elements are those with the least presence and have similar variation in projection and level of construction: history (68.3% and 65%, respectively), structure (50% and 45 %), mission (35% and 26.7%), values (31.7% and 25%), objectives (18.3%

and 10%), and strategies (13.3% and 8.3%). Interestingly, the three identity elements with most presence and elaboration—name, logo-icon, and institutional color—constitute those of just form or image building, while the rest—business definition, history, structure, mission, values, objectives, and strategies—represent more substance or content of the organizational identity. Considering the mean of the total presence of the ten identity elements together, the global organization projection was 59.2%. Narrowing this number to the level of creation—medium/high—shows that 49.1% of global organizations differentiate themselves extensively from others.

Findings suggest that the Web has been used only partially in the projection of organizational identity. This means that global organizations, by more elaborating of their construction of identity elements online, could expect to have a greater degree of differentiation on the Web, which would be beneficial for their organizational identity. This study confirms the hypothesis that there is still an immense opportunity to lessen this gap. International corporations can improve their global positioning by the public by enhancing their identity online and differentiating themselves more from others.

Web site complexity. Global corporations especially address four public groups online: investors (95%), media (95%), customers (71.7%), and prospective employees (68.3%), followed by environmentalists (48.3%) and community (40%). Dealers (16.7%), retailers (15%), and suppliers (8.3%) are symbolically considered, while employees (3.3 %) are almost not addressed at all by global corporations. The attention paid to investors and the media, which is greater than the attention paid to customers may suggest that global organizations have been using their corporate Web page primarily for non-commercial reasons. However, the focus of complexity in the corporate Web sites' structure, are shown paying more attention to customers than to the remaining audiences, which shows that global companies still do consider the Web as a commercial medium.

Technological cyber-tools. The Web presents a great variety of technical tools for potential dialogic public relations. The use of corporate Web sites links (76.6%) permits global corporations to direct audiences toward their business network online, which must be a logical path. There is no reason to ignore this tool, although 23.4% of global organizations have not understood this yet. We should point out that although the majority (105) of Web sites had corporate links, there were some (11) that did not work,

which might have been because the server was down or for other structural reasons. This situation resulted in an effective use of 89.1%. Search engines were used by 89 out of 137 (or 65%) of the organizations, with an effective use of 64.1% (or 57 sites that use effectively this feature). Sixty-six (48.3%) Web pages presented site maps with an effective rate of 89.7 %. Video was presented in only 16 sites with an effective use of 85.7%. Just seven (5.1%) of the Web sites used audio, with an effective use of 85.7%. Multimedia, surveys and map-services were each used in five Web pages, with an effective use of 80%). In general, it appears that global organizations have been poorly used technological features, although the potential effective use appears to be high, which means that the use of the Web as a one-way communication tool may seem successful. There is evidence of effectiveness in the use of technological features, which may eventually steer the technological use to a potential dialogic communication.

Two-way symmetric communication. These companies maintained an interesting level of dialogic communication when the feature of feedback was tested. Features of feedback—e-mails and/or e-forms—were presented in 71.7% of the Web sites. In this study, a message was sent to all those sites (99) that presented the feedback features. The rate of response of those global corporations was surprisingly high (46.5%), which means that almost half of those organizations reflect a dialog or an effective two-way symmetric communication—at least in a basic form. This finding is an optimistic sign of the potential effectiveness the Web may provide to organizations when practicing public relations. If organizations use these features more effectively, their public relationships and two-way symmetric communication with audiences should definitely show signs of improvement.

Limitations and caveats. This study has several limitations and caveats for future researchers to consider. First, as other studies using the *Fortune 500* list have pointed out, this sampling frame is limited and responds only to the corporate world (Esrock & Leichty, 2000), which can hardly be generalized to other types of organizations (Aikat, 2000). Future research should consider other types and sizes of organizations. Second, although this study considers organizations from other countries, the world representativeness is not necessarily effective, because it is limited to just the 2000 *Fortune Global 500* list. A future qualitative study using a purposive sample would add

some light to this aspect. And third, this study is addressing just a general aspect of communication online, but does not cover the different aspects of organizational communication.

In the same manner, the analysis of organizational identity covers just the creation and projection, but not the audience perception and response. Future research may carry out studies about how a specific public perceives that projected organizational identity, and how individuals respond to it. Moreover, it would be valuable to conduct research about the perception, use, and response of technical features by individuals or specific audiences.

A positive view. The results of this study have shed some light on the way companies and organizations in general can improve their external communication with the same resources they have now. An effective organizational communication requires the establishment of adequate channels, so that messages can have a better reception. An increase in a more updated selective use of the Web for creating a two-way symmetric communication will greatly improve the practice of public relations between global organizations and their public. In addition, the Web represents a great opportunity for enhancing all intercommunication—for organizations' relationships, and in fact, for human relationships across-the-board.

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