

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

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MODULARITY AS A STRATEGIC DRIVER OF CORPORATE BRAND IDENTITY IN GLOBAL EXHIBITIONS

Corporate brand identity represents the strategic articulation of who an organization is, what it values, and how it engages with diverse stakeholders across markets [1; 2]. While traditionally expressed through symbols, communication, and behavior, CBI increasingly relies on tangible practices that make identity credible and consistent. Among these, modularity has gained prominence over the recent years and became a popular emerging phenomenon in the business world. Defined as the division of complex systems into interchangeable and reusable components, modularity initially emerged as a principle of design and production efficiency. Nevertheless, in contemporary contexts, modularity also carries strategic and symbolic significance for MNEs.

This transformation is particularly visible in the market of international exhibitions: high-visibility arenas where corporate identity is simultaneously displayed, negotiated, and judged, often on a large international scale. Here, modular solutions allow companies to balance global uniformity with local adaptation, while visibly demonstrating commitments to sustainability and innovation. Far from being a purely operational tool, modularity has become a language of corporate identity, one that resonates with CSR imperatives, stakeholder expectations, and global competition.

The growing demand for corporate responsibility has expanded the meaning of modularity, which was classically defined as the decomposability of complex systems into semi-independent subsystems [3]. With time, in management studies the concept has evolved into a principle of design that enables flexibility and innovation by allowing components to evolve independently while functioning as part of a whole [4]. Once associated primarily with cost savings and logistical convenience, modularity today embodies a broader mindset shift towards sustainable design and manufacturing. Through the reusability of structures, reduction of material waste, and lower energy requirements, modular solutions operationalize CSR commitments and contribute directly to circular economy practices. This

reflects Carroll's (2016) [5] call to integrate responsibility not as an external obligation but as a structural principle within corporate behavior.

Exhibitions highlight this transformation particularly well, where stakeholders ranging from government organizers to contractors and visitors increasingly expect visible evidence of ecological and social responsibility. Modularity meets this expectation by making responsibility tangible: a modular stand is not merely a technical solution but a statement of alignment with global sustainability goals. In this sense, modularity contributes to stakeholder trust, reinforcing the perceived authenticity of CBI [6]. Without such authenticity, CSR risks being dismissed as symbolic rhetoric. With modularity, however, responsibility becomes embedded in material practice, strengthening the credibility of corporate identity.

Modularity also plays a central role in positioning companies as innovative and agile actors in global markets. Exhibitions require corporations to respond to diverse cultural, spatial, and regulatory conditions while maintaining brand coherence. Modularity enables this balancing act by allowing companies to adapt physical and symbolic expressions of identity without compromising consistency, which resonates with Mahdiraji et al.'s (2024) [7] observation that B2B companies face an enduring tension between global standardization and local responsiveness. Furthermore, very often modularity signals and is associated with agility – a trait that is increasingly valued by all the major groups of stakeholders. The capacity to construct, deconstruct, and reconfigure spaces in line with market dynamics reflects resilience and future-oriented thinking, while exhibitions, with their strict timelines and competitive intensity, magnify the importance of such agility. A corporation that adopts modular solutions communicates not only operational flexibility but also an innovative ethos that strengthens its overall brand identity. In this way, modularity serves as both a technological and cultural marker of innovation.

Over the last decades, international exhibitions gradually transformed from trade events into condensed arenas of international economic relations. They bring together multinational firms, local suppliers, policymakers, academic community, and global audiences, creating spaces where identity is negotiated and reputation is constructed. In these environments, modular solutions acquire a dual role: they facilitate efficiency and logistics while also acting as symbolic resources that project corporate values.

When an MNE invests in modular exhibition stands that demonstrate sustainability and adaptability, it sends a message that extends beyond design. Such practices can be interpreted as diplomatic gestures, aligning the corporation with broader cultural and ecological values. In Nye's (2004) [8] terms, these gestures contribute to corporate soft power, reinforcing the ability of firms to influence international perceptions not through coercion but through attraction and credibility. Modularity thus becomes an integral part of corporate diplomacy, enhancing both brand identity and reputational capital in global competition.

The contemporary debate around modularity underscores its significance as a strategic driver of CBI. Industry practitioners increasingly emphasize that modularity should not be reduced to technical or financial considerations.

While cost efficiency remains an advantage, the true strategic value of modularity lies in its capacity to embody circular economy thinking, to foster collaboration across supply networks, and to integrate responsibility into the visible corporate brand identity. Collaboration is particularly critical with this regard: designers, manufacturers, technology providers and PR masterminds must work together to ensure modular solutions are sustainable, aesthetically compelling and well understood by the customers (organizers, contractors, exhibitors, visitors and others). Without this alignment, modularity risks being perceived as functional but uninspired. When executed effectively, however, modularity becomes an aesthetic and strategic expression of identity that strengthens stakeholder relationships and enhances competitiveness.

At the moment, companies dedicated to fostering modularity are perceived as thought leaders, well positioned to disrupt the market. The future trajectory suggests, however, that modularity will increasingly become an industry standard rather than a niche practice. As exhibitions globalize further and sustainability expectations intensify, MNEs that fail to adopt modularity may face reputational disadvantages. Conversely, those who integrate modularity into their identity strategies will be positioned as leaders of innovation, responsibility, and agility.

Conclusion. The present paper advocates that modularity has become far more than a technical solution, increasingly serving as a strategic driver of corporate brand identity in multinational enterprises. By aligning CSR commitments with stakeholder expectations, signaling innovation and agility, and projecting responsibility in high-visibility contexts such as international exhibitions, modularity strengthens the authenticity and consistency of corporate brand identity. Exhibitions serve as exemplary spaces where modular practices visibly reinforce identity while advancing sustainability and cultural diplomacy.

For MNEs, the challenge is to recognize modularity not merely as an operational convenience but as a cornerstone of identity strategy in a turbulent global market. Modularity operationalizes the principles of responsibility, innovation, and adaptability, making them credible to stakeholders and meaningful in practice. As such, modularity deserves recognition not as an auxiliary feature but as an essential dimension of CSR-driven corporate brand identity in the twenty-first century.

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