

**The role of corporate identity management in the higher education sector: An  
exploratory case study**

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# **The role of corporate identity management in the higher education sector: an exploratory case study**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the corporate identity concept from a multidisciplinary perspective and presents an empirical test of Melewar's (2003) corporate identity model in creating competitive advantage in the context of the higher education sector. The various components of corporate identity are investigated and the results are presented in diagrammatic form in the proposed and updated corporate identity taxonomy. A qualitative exploratory approach was taken, comprising in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the implementation of corporate identity at a major UK university. The taxonomy illustrates communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry and strategy as the main components of corporate identity. The study also demonstrates how and where issues of corporate identity are discussed within an organization and how the results of these discussions are fed into management structure. As with any such exploratory case study, there are limits to the generalizability of the findings. Further research is required to ascertain whether the findings of this study also apply in other settings. The results will be helpful to communication professionals who deal with an organization's corporate identity, branding, and communication and who aim to enhance the consistency of messages both written and visual within their organization.

**Keywords:** Corporate identity management, corporate identity taxonomy, corporate communication, higher education sector

## **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of the concept of corporate identity is well established in the marketing and management literature (He and Balmer, 2007; Balmer and Greyser, 2003). Corporate identity (CI) refers “to the features, characteristics, traits or attributes of a company that are presumed to be central, distinctive and enduring” (Albert and Whetten, 1985; He and Mukherjee, 2009, p.2) and is the presentation of an organization to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organization unique and incorporates the organization’s communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry and strategy. However, previous studies raise significant questions about how a more balanced approach to corporate identity comes into play in global marketing, where elements besides corporate identity, should be considered along with the findings regarding the directing and enduring nature of corporate identity (Cornilissen, Haslam and Balmer 2007; Cornelissen and Elving 2003; Cornelissen 2011; Balmer 1995; 1998; 2001; 2011).

Focusing on a London-based institution of higher education, this study extends previous work by Melewar (2003) on corporate identity in a service context by describing the role of corporate identity in higher education from the perspective of internal stakeholders. Higher education institutions are “places shaped by conflicting professional and managerial work ideologies and organizing logics” (Winter, 2009, p.124). Higher education is now a global phenomenon, especially in the major English-speaking nations (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). The higher education sector now resembles an industry (Gumport, 2000; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Modern universities are more like a ‘stakeholder university’ than a ‘republic of scholars’ (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Universities and other institutions of higher education need to market themselves in a climate of international competition (Hemsley-Brown and

Oplatka, 2006) to attract high quality students and academic staff at an international level (Melewar and Akel, 2005). Higher education institutions have found it necessary to develop and implement corporate identity programmes as part of their strategic growth and development (Baker and Balmer, 1997; Melewar and Akel, 2005), as it has been demonstrated that the characteristics of an organization exert an impact on the organisation's corporate visual identity (van den Bosch et al., 2006). According to Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) "identity, and reputation has emerged in academia, making higher education organizations more aware of the link between what they 'stand for' in terms of values and characteristics, and how they are perceived" (p.449).

Important implications exist from the study of corporate identity in higher education. A consensus on values may provide a platform for higher education institutions to establish their brands and to generate internal commitment from faculty members who otherwise may be sceptical of attempts to encapsulate the institution in a coherent brand (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). Institutions of higher education are characterized by high levels of diversity amongst faculty members across different disciplines (Becher and Trowler, 2001) as well as by the well established concept of academic autonomy (Henkel, 2005). This presents a particular challenge in terms of establishing a consistent brand that encapsulates the complexity of a university.

This paper commences by summarising the discussion around a London-based university's corporate identity programme. Next, we apply Melewar's (2003) corporate identity model and examine the concepts in a higher education context by conducting in-depth interviews amongst 20 of the focal university's top managers. Based on the findings we address issues which the university needs to modify in its corporate identity and what were the motives for

these modifications. The findings are then presented and discussed. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are provided, along with a consideration of the limitations of the research and recommendations for future work.

## **METHOD AND ANALYSIS**

The dearth of theoretical knowledge concerning a university's corporate identity justifies an explorative, qualitative research design as a useful strategy for studying processes in organisations and for explanatory/exploratory investigations (Gummesson, 1991). To uncover patterns, themes, and categories in order to make judgments about "what is really significant and meaningful in the data" (Patton, 2001, p.406), the data were analysed using qualitative techniques outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and taking into account the need for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Hirschman, 1986; Riege, 2003). The investigation was based on an in-depth case study of a London-based University at the corporate level. The effectiveness of case study research has been affirmed by a number of prominent scholars (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009), as has the utility of relying on a single case study. We sought to explore corporate identity sub-constructs as part of a corporate identity's past, present, and future identity. Case study research facilitates this endeavour as it "allows the investigation of complex, fuzzy, and dynamic phenomena where context is essential, and there is no limit to the number of variables and links" (Urde et al., 2007, p.7).

Based on Yin's (2009) terminology, our approach can be characterised as an embedded single case study (Normann, 1970) and reported with a narrative approach. This case is the first rational of the case study characterizes a unique case. The rationale for a single case study is to

signify a critical case in examining a well-designed theory. In addition, the case study makes an important contribution to knowledge and theory building. Furthermore, the next rational of the case study is a revelatory case; where the observer has access to a phenomenon which was earlier unreachable. In addition, a case study helps to understand firm social phenomena (Yin, 2009, p. 61). The university studied in this case launched a new corporate visual identity programme in 2010 which included modification of the university logotype, typography and website. The object of this paper is to review the university's corporate identity and how it comes into play in global marketing besides elements of corporate identity.

At the corporate level of the university, 20 in-depth interviews were carried out. Respondents were senior managers in high-level positions, with various organisational titles and responsibilities who were involved and familiar with the university's identity management. The interview protocol was designed based on Foroudi et al.'s (2014, 2016) recommendation to conduct in-depth interview method as semi-structured by emerging qualitative protocol and design direct questions to discover crucial belief, motivation, feelings, and attitude towards the topic. The topics addressed such issues as, the state of relationships between university and corporate identity; corporate communication; corporate design; corporate culture; behaviour; brand structure; industry identity; and corporate strategy. Each interview lasted for approximately 70 minutes. The process of analysis/synthesis was both iterative and corroborative in nature. To examine the qualitative findings and improve the reliability and validity of the study, we followed Creswell and Miller's (2000) suggestions and employed triangulation in two stages. It followed the general protocol of qualitative research, wherein the collection, recording, transcription, analysis and interpretation of data took place simultaneously (Gummesson, 2005).

By addressing the research problem, research questions, and/or key constructs, we designed codes (Palmer and Gallagher, 2007). Afterward, NVivo software was employed for data administration, data storage, and retrieval. NVivo was used for interpretation the entire text and inter-relationships of the thematic ideas and codes, reviewing the themes and nodes for reliability, and proceeding through the qualitative data analysis. The data obtained from these interviews presents novel insights into the meaning, causes, and elements of a corporate identity in the higher education sector. Systematically this study explored associations between different indicators and core concepts in our approach to corporate identity.

## **RESULTS**

In this section, we present the results of the study. We also include in this section the specific construct definitions and questions (*italicised below*) related to each of the corporate identity constructs under investigation. The presentation of the results begins with the overarching concept of corporate identity and then proceeds to an analysis of the seven core components related to corporate identity (Melewar, 2003) as follows: corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity, and corporate strategy. Figure 1 illustrates Melewar's (2003) comprehensive framework that captured the components of the corporate identity construct.

**Insert Figure 1 about here**

## **CORPORATE IDENTITY**

Corporate identity is the presentation of an organisation to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organisation unique and it incorporates the organisation's communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry and strategy. It is thus intrinsically related to both the corporate personality and image (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). *What do the terms 'corporate identity' and 'corporate identity management' mean to your University?* This question elicited a range of responses as illustrated in the verbatim comments below.

"That's a hard question...That's an interesting question because I think that it has changed, and it is changing and it is developing and evolving into something quite different to what it has been before. We look different internationally than in the UK. So it's about building our reputation now in the UK as well as abroad".

"It's who we are what we do, what we specialise in".

"Well a corporate identity is effectively all encompassing if it's done well, if it's done properly. So I would say it is everything from the visual look and feel, both in terms of constructing a set of brand guidelines, design protocol that should permeate across the whole institution. But it is also the staff as brand advocates, so it's essentially how people understand what the institution is. Its vision, its goals and how they share that with other people".

*What are the benefits of corporate identity management?*

"I think it's critical because if you don't have a strong brand in your current environment, your customers cannot distinguish you from other providers. Because essentially, until you tell them differently, they see higher education as a brand in itself, and they don't necessarily find it easy to distinguish with that, apart from rankings. So what we try to do, is create an emotional connection with our audiences that differentiates us. So I think the big way you can do that now is to differentiate in the experience that you deliver".

"I think it's about providing, providing consistency from the student point of view so that when they come in and use my service, we should be, we should be, we should fit in and be aligned with what we are trying to do in the schools. Umm, we should be seen to be part of the same thing. Umm, so that the students feel, that there is, I



suppose we should be reinforcing the message that students are getting from schools, and other parts of the university. So it is about that sense of consistency”.

### **Implementation of corporate identity programmes**

The responses above illustrate the overarching nature of the corporate identity construct. Having ascertained perceptions of the corporate identity construct, we then shifted our questioning to the implementation of corporate identity programmes and. *How do you implement corporate identity programmes?*

“Well you have to have a very robust research phase. So you have to map the stakeholders that are important and you have to identify how they currently perceive your brand. How well aligned that is with your corporate vision, and your strategic plan, and then work out how to bridge that gap between how they currently perceive you and where you are now, and where you want to be. You also have to do a lot of internal consultation, and that is particularly challenging in higher education because the concept of brand is not only unfamiliar but possibly not widely liked within higher education. They don’t necessarily, academics don’t necessarily want to be defined by the parameters of the institutions within which they work, they want to be defined within their research areas of expertise or their academic specialisms”.

“I suppose in terms of, in terms of the way we present ourselves, through publications, web pages, through banners, etc. Umm, we’re trying to mirror and follow the corporate identity”.

*How do you differentiate the CI activities of the University amongst the various stakeholders, such as employees, students and suppliers?*

“You have to start with your stakeholder mapping, that’s the only way you can do it really. Identify you the key stakeholders are, work out how important they are and then quantify where you are now, and where you want to get to. And the only way you can get to do that is to do some form of brand and reputational tracking and insight work. Asking them who they compare us to, what they think of when they first think of us. Whether we would be an organisation that they would want to work with or collaborate with. And in order to do that well you need to understand what

motivates them, what their goals are and how well our goals are aligned to theirs. You've got to find points of shared goals with your stakeholders”.

### **Influencing employees**

Internal application of the corporate identity management programme is often an overlooked aspect because the concept is interpreted as an external communications tool. However, the internal aspect, relating to the influence of employees, is just as important. Hence, we asked the following questions: *To the best of your knowledge, to what extent does corporate identity act as a central force that motivates employees?*

“I think our university is actually doing quite well in the sense that everyone believes that we need a strong brand at the core that reflects who we are and where we want to go. Some of the difficulty at higher education is that kind of an inclination to deconstruct and define at different levels. So it would often be well yes, that is okay for the whole, but that doesn't apply to my school, my faculty, my department. It doesn't apply to the work I do, and actually you need to try and unpick that and find the common ground, and actually what are the pillars that everyone can buy into”.

“It's hard to tell. Umm. Because often its hard to tell what employees think”.

*To what extent do you think your University's corporate identity can help your organisation in area such as recruitment of staff and students?*

“In the outside world for staff there is a lot of people that have come recently, we've recruited because we are changing and people are recognising that. But there is still a lot of work to do outside and you have a lot of conversations with people and they don't realise our university has changed yet. So there is still a lot of work to be done in telling the world about what we are and what we've done. I think we're very quiet, and we don't sell ourselves”.

“Yes, it has to. If it's not doing that, it's not working. So for me, in terms of student recruitment it has to be a recognisable identity that stands for something. They could repeat to others, not just visually, but probably more importantly experientially. That

when they come here, it feels different. So the brand has to be compelling enough to create opportunities to interact with your customer groups. In terms of staff it has to, one of the metrics that's in my new strategic plan, is that we have to tangibly drive the number of people who apply to work here as academics or as professional services staff. That's critical for me, that there is a pride from within that is disseminated that other people pick up on, and then want to work here".

### **Competitive tool**

A key aspect of corporate identity is for it to act as a competitive differentiation tool, so that stakeholders can differentiate between the various propositions on the markets. Accordingly, we asked: *How do you think your University's corporate identity, as a tool to achieve competitive advantage, can influence stakeholders' perceptions of your University?*

"I think this university has a strong brand compared to other universities, you can see their posters on buses and tubes, the university stands out because of emphasising its employability and they pick people with really cool jobs and they say they got these cool jobs because they went to this university so it looks like if you want to be a creative mastermind go to this university".

"Overseas, corporate identity is often about creating awareness and I think our university can be quite good at that because of the overseas campuses the partnerships".

*To the best of your knowledge, to what extent can corporate identity be used to secure finance?*

"We do a lot of work with different universities across the globe. Not just universities but colleges, and professional bodies etc. Interestingly much of it comes to us, we don't go out seeking it. We have a lot of approaches, get approaches every day. And we say no to a lot, and then we try and choose the ones we want to work with. Internationally we've got an excellent reputation, and particularly lots of universities want to work with us."

"It has to support the financial goals of the organisation. How well it does that? It can only do that if it, if the promise matches with the reality. So you can't project a modern, customer friendly, dynamic environment unless the people that you interact with actually follow through on that promise. So it only works if it's all the way

through the DNA. Otherwise you get brand disconnects, and you'll get people feeling actually I've been overpromised, or that isn't what the organisation, or the impression I got from the literature, or the website, it has to be real. So otherwise it can't, but if it works well it definitely can."

"I find it hard to judge actually, I suppose finance will come from student recruitment so that's about recruitment. About research funding, my guess when it comes to research funding it's probably more about, it's more discipline specific."

Having investigated the core construct of corporate identity as well its implementation, we now move on to a consideration of the seven core components of corporate identity as follows: corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity, and corporate strategy.

## **CORPORATE COMMUNICATION**

Corporate communication is the aggregate of messages from both official and informal sources, through a variety of media, by which a company conveys its identity to its multiple audiences or stakeholders (Gray and Balmer, 1998; Melewar, 2003). *To what extent do you think the messages from both official and informal sources from the University can influence stakeholders' perceptions of the University?*

"Sometimes we don't say, were not saying anything. Sometimes we're too quiet. Not that what we're saying wrong, we just don't say it loudly enough".

"You've got to have a common platform about those points of pride, the facts that everyone shares about, and also the vision and mission of the institution. And you have to make sure everyone is sharing that. Because then you will get umm, a resonance, a brand recall because people will remember certain things about that institution".

"I suppose the unofficial things are things like Facebook, and umm. I don't know how much they influence students, but I'm sure they are influenced".

**Controlled corporate communication** - is the instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonised effectively and efficiently in order to create a favourable basis for relationships with the groups upon which the company is dependent (Melewar, 2003; Van Rekom, 1997). *To what extent do you think the internal and external communication have been harmonised in order to create a favourable relationship between the University and its stakeholders?*

“I don’t think we’re completely there yet. So I think we’re going through a process evolution where you’ve got to start with a communication framework that enables two-way dialogue. And then you’ve got to do a lot of listening, and then you’ve got to understand how people want to engage and interact. Then you’ve got to start pushing the messages out, once you understand how the audiences want to engage. So internal communication is key, in fact it’s got to start from within. You can’t construct it externally and then sell it internally, you’ve got to start internal and push it out”.

“I do think we try hard to do that. I think the university is trying hard to do it. Whether it’s always done it successfully I’m not so sure. But I think it tries hard to do that. And I suppose the fact that it comes under one executive lead brings things together. Because there is always a danger that the internal message to staff is different to the external message that goes out. I think there is a conscious effort to avoid that”.

**Management/organisational communication** - is the process of communicating the vision and mission of a company defined by its management in order to establish a favourable image and ultimately a good reputation amongst its internal and external stakeholders (Olins, 1989; Melewar, 2003). *To what extent do you think the top management of the University communicates the vision and mission of the organisation in order to establish a favourable image, and ultimately a good reputation, amongst its internal and external stakeholders?*

“Internally we have a very thorough communication plan around launching the vision. The vision more than the mission is part of the reconfigured corporate plan which was launched in 2012 and that was launched on back of, well simultaneously as that came out we then introduced the launch of the new logo for the university. So the vision itself has been communicated through a number of different channels and media over two years so we have done through face-to-face media, annually we run a staff conference so the first time we launch the corporate plan we introduced the brand logo to them and we continue to reiterate the vision at every opportunity we get and staff conferences we do, meet the exec, so the executive meet all the staff or staff are invited to come and meet us, whether you turn up it’s up to you”.

“I think they communicate well, they seem to have lots of emails and lots of meetings, things like that. So I think from an internal perspective that seems to go quite well. I am not sure about the external side as I haven’t really been involved in anything like that. Looking at press releases or looking at league tables it seems like it must be working, they must be doing something right because the university seems to be going up in the league tables”.

**Marketing communication** - is the forms of communication that support the sales of an organisation’s goods or services (Melewar, 2003; Van Riel, 1995). *To what extent do you think the marketing communication activities of the University help to attract students and build rewarding relationships with the various stakeholders?*

“With respect to stakeholders that’s a really good question, I would say that we are on the start of a very exciting journey with respect to stakeholders in the broader sense, from corporate point of view is that we have been focusing on getting and recruiting students as the key stakeholder right, but cascading from that are then layers of different octopus branches of stakeholder linked into the student bubble is parents as a stakeholder, their schools, their career advisors within their schools, students in the year above them, brothers and sisters are all stakeholders so we have done more significantly work with parents as opinion formers and with schools and colleges, we do a lot of work either going to schools and colleges or bring them in”.

“In respect to the other stakeholders those are linked in with recruitment then we have got a stakeholder mapping that we are running right now with respect to reputation and we have just commissioned that project with one of the team, so we

are looking at who the stakeholders are and the view of our reputation and that's goes from the local communities".

"I think we connect very well with our stakeholders, certainly from my perspective of being involved with smaller aspects like the entrepreneur element. I mean that's taken a life of its own and working with colleagues which seem to be doing a lot more with school a lot more with the local community and getting involved with a lot more with the local authority which is quite nice, that's helped raise our profiles".

**Uncontrolled communication** - is the communication of an organisation by sending signals that are not created deliberately or consciously (Melewar, 2003; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997).

*To what extent do you think the University's communications are created or could be created by other external parties?*

"In fact they are already. Co-created. But it's all about how you brief those external agencies to work with you. You have to have a very strong corporate vision and brand at the core and then you need to share that with them. Otherwise, in my experience they will come back with random ideas. And their creativity will run wild and it will take us off track. So essentially, the way that you work with them is only as good as the brief that you give them and the KPIs that you ask to be measured by".

## **CORPORATE DESIGN**

Corporate design is a design system that is specific to a company that includes the visual style of all manifestations and all the characteristic elements such as typographic style, colour and form (Melewar, 2003; Schmidt, 1995). *Could you please comment on the University's corporate design?* The responses in this section are related to corporate visual identity as detailed below.

**Corporate visual identity** - is an assembly of visual cues by which an audience can recognise the company and distinguish it from others (Bernstein, 1984; Melewar, 2003). *Do you like the University's visual identity?*

“It’s innocuous, it doesn’t do much. It does what it needs to do.”

“I do, because I helped develop it. Actually can I correct what I just said. Whether I like it or not is less important than whether I think it is appropriate. And whether it resonates with the audience”.

*Do you think the University’s visual identity is recognisable?*

“Yes, I think so. I think in physical artefacts yes. I like the logo in many aspects”.

“We’ve got the right ambitious angle, we’ve got the right colour palette. Have we got the right imagery? Have we got all the right photographs of the, that project ambition? I’m not sure we have yet. So, we’re on the right journey”.

“Recognisable externally, difficult to say because when you, when you see publicity for different universities, and you either on the tube and you see them for other universities, now our university will stand out for me, but then I work here, but how far it stands out for people externally I find a bit difficult to judge really”.

*Do you think the University’s visual identity is recalled easily?*

“You need to ask people with a more distant connection to the university. I find it hard to be objective on that one”.

*Do you think the University’s visual identity is memorable?*

“It’s probably a bit more memorable than the old one...It’s hard to say. I have been exposed to it for some time”.

Respondents were also asked to comment on the corporate name, slogan/strapline, typeface, logotype/symbol, and colour. Illustrative responses to these elements are provided below.



**Corporate name** - is the expression of the corporate uniqueness of the company in the mindset of the stakeholders, and an identity that is distinctive from its competitors (Foroudi et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2003). In addition, name is a word or phrase that constitutes the distinctive designation of a company (Dowling, 1994; Melewar, 2003).

“It works for us and against us. It doesn’t locate us very clearly in a physical, geographic space. Which can be a problem”.

**Slogan/strapline** - is a short sentence or statement that summarises the mission, purpose or positioning of an organisation or the products and services offered by it (Baker and Balmer, 1997; Melewar, 2003).

“What about it? We don’t have one. But I think people become obsessed with that. Because they try and find a statement that encapsulates everything and then people get that mixed up with the brand itself. So for me slogan and strapline can work for individual campaigns, how much value it brings when you try and apply it to everything I’m not sure”.

“Now you’ve got me. Because I’m struggling to see what the strapline is. So it’s obviously not that memorable. I think the logo is memorable, but in terms of the strapline, obviously not memorable”.

**Typeface** - is the style, size and arrangement of the letters in a piece of printing (Melewar, 2003) which is a key communication objective that is articulated through the corporate logo and espoused by the managers (Foroudi et al., 2014; Henderson et al., 2004; Shee and Abratt, 1989) and may have both a favourable and an unfavourable impact on consumers' attitudes toward the company and raise emotional responses from those consumers. A typeface can contribute to increasing a company's value (Hagtvedt, 2011).

“It’s fine...Nothing to talk about really.”

“It’s ok. It needs to work across digital and print. It needs to convey the brand values. It needs to be flexible enough to work in different design environments. You’ll probably be better of asking our designer than me, I think our typeface is appropriate yeah.”

**Logotype/symbol** - has been defined as the signature of a company with an essential communication and distinctiveness, which can reflect a company's image (Foroudi et al., 2014). In addition, logo is a specific visual presentation of an organisation’s name. It is sometimes used interchangeably with symbol, which actually means the sign or shape used for representing a company (Henrion and Parkin, 1967; Melewar, 2003).

“It looks like serious, because you know like when you listen to the name it’s like funny kind of, you know you go on the web page and you look at it’s very serious.”

“Until now I actually don’t know what the logo actually represents, so yeah it’s a little bit confusing.”

“I do like this one because it looks a bit more academic, it looks like a university logo as opposed to something from an arts centre.”

“There were like three logos in really short time, I don’t mind each one but pick one and stick to the logo, what’s the point of changing logos so often.”

**Colour** - is a constituent of corporate visual identity communicates the positioning of an organisation and is a medium of communication information and induces emotions and moods, expresses personality, influences on individual' perceptions and behaviour, and helps organisations position or differentiates themselves from competitors (Balmer and Gray, 1999; Foroudi et al., 2014; Tavassoli, 2001; Wheeler, 2003).

“I think the colour is interesting because culturally it is very bold in certain countries. The colour is quite full on. We’re not quite brash, but quite strong in our colour palette. It possibly lacks subtlety, but I think we are trying to make quite a bold ambitious statement. So I think it works for us”.

“I guess they are strong vibrant colours, and that is the impression we are trying to create”.

“It’s visual, bright, eye-catching”.

## **CORPORATE CULTURE**

Corporate culture is the system of shared core values and beliefs of an organisation that interacts with people, organisational structure and systems in order to produce norms (Melewar, 2003; Schein, 2010). *What is the University as an organisation?*

**Corporate philosophy, values, and mission** - Corporate philosophy is the core values and assumptions that constitute the corporate culture, business mission and values espoused by the management board or founder of the company (Abratt, 1989; Melewar, 2003). A corporate value is the dominant system of beliefs and moral principles that lie within the organisation that comprise everyday language, ideologies, rituals and beliefs of personnel (Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Melewar, 2003). Corporate mission is the company’s purpose, the reason for which a company exists and its objectives (De Witt and Meyer, 1998; Melewar, 2003). *What does the University stand for?, Why does the University exist?, and Where is the University going?*

**Corporate principles** - define the mission, targets and values of a company and forms the basis of and standards for all corporate actions (Melewar, 2003; Schmidt, 1995). *How does the University use its mission, targets and values in pursuing its corporate actions?*

“I think that it’s in the strategic planning operations. But I don’t think we’ve nailed it yet. So we’re trying to determine KPIs before we’ve got that bit, it’s a bit complex. There are long lead times to achieve some of those things. And if we achieve, the ones we can achieve earlier may not tell the whole story”.

“I suppose at one level, the mission vision and values should underpin its strategic direction. But I think a lot of the time we are driven as much by financial factors and umm, I suppose markets to some extent. And I think in that sense we are no different from any other university. So I think our mission and our values are important in a sense because that’s what how we see ourselves. So there are times when we have to go against that for one reason or another”.

### **Corporate guidelines**

Corporate guidelines refer to the articulation and interpretation of corporate principles for individual areas of business activity and functions to guide the behaviour of individuals in an organisation (Fritz, 1999; Melewar, 2003). *How do the University’s principles guide the behaviour of staff in the University?*

“I suppose if I think about ambitious, enterprising and global it drives the outlook the staff has and their ability to be agile and make decisions about how to move forward. I think it umm, permeates the whole culture. So my observation and the observation of others is that our university is quite fast moving. In some ways”.

“People will come here because they will see a job advertised, or there is an opportunity for research, they don’t really think about the principles. So I think in practice, we try and push principles and values. How far they actually drive behaviour its hard to say. But I suppose what they do, is they give us a reference point, so when you might have a conversation with a member of staff. You can say well these are the universities values, this is where you are, we need you to be here, and if you’re not here, then we need to have a conversation about how we can get you here, or whatever. So it’s a kind of reference point”.

### **Corporate history/The founder of the University**

Corporate history/The founder of the University is the person who brought the company into existence (Melewar, 2003). Information can be found from the companies' archival material.

**Country-of-origin** - is the picture, reputation and the stereotype that consumers attach to products of a specific country (Melewar, 2003; Varey, 1999). *To what extent do you think the academic programmes, and other related activities, in the different campuses of your University, is connected to the British system of education (pedagogy etc.)?*

“What gives the advantage for this university I believe is London. I am imagining that if this university was outside London or another city like Brighton maybe it would not have this shining image...because of London its says in the logo London I think it gives an advantage”.

“There are different ways of looking at it. I am sure there are people who see this as kind of colonial legacy, your colonial power and you still think you know best and have an education system that you still want to impose on people. I don't really buy that”.

“But I suppose in essence what we're doing is taking a British type of education, and I suppose that's what students why students are attracted. That's why they like coming to our university as opposed to going to a local university. Because that is seen as having some kind of value I guess”.

**Subcultures** - refer to the different cultures belonging to different divisions or departments in an organisation (Melewar, 2003; Van Maanen, 1991). *To what extent, do you think each separate campus, school and department has its own culture? and to what extent, do you think your University corporate culture cultivates good relationships with interdependent businesses, such as suppliers?*

“I would probably argue that by the very nature of us being a higher education institution that there are cultures and subcultures and that is probably what makes the

higher education institution brand, it's made up of lots of different cells so there are cultures and subcultures and that's a good thing".

"In respect to the campuses overseas it's a lot more difficult, all of the campuses we work with partners, so it's much more difficult to have only our brand culture feed in, because you have got a partner culture at some level and you have got another organism working with them so the brand is slightly more diluted, its less pure, so slightly more difficult to get the culture that you aspire for here over there and also because of the management structure".

"Oh yeah definitely. Which I think is one of our biggest challenges. If I look at schools first, their feeling is they have every different cultures".

## **BEHAVIOUR**

Behaviour refers to the nature of human interaction and conduct within them (Melewar, 2003). In this study we explore three facets of behaviour: corporate behaviour, employee behaviour, and management behaviour.

**Corporate behaviour** - is the sum total of those actions resulting from the corporate attitudes that influence the identity, either planned in line with the company culture or occurring by chance or arbitrarily (Melewar, 2003; Schmidt, 1995). *How does the University behave?*

"If you just said to me, how does the university behave. I'd say very well, in most aspects. I think there has always been a culture here that consists of being respectful to each other, kind to each other. Much more than other universities I've worked at. A lot of universities, there are very ambitious people, and there's a lot of backstabbing I'd call it. Here, there are ambitious people, but not to the detriment of their colleagues. And I think that's, I've always liked that, that's one of the reasons I'm still here".

"I think we are a very entrepreneurial university which is schizophrenic in some respects. No different to many organisations. In many respects we are risk averse. So we will, you know, do some amazing things and hugely innovative and whatever, and at other times we kind of go into our shell and say 'should we be really doing this'".

**Employee behaviour** - refers to the attitude – way of acting – of the company personnel in their daily work (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Melewar, 2003). *How do you feel about employees' behaviour and attitude in their daily work?*

“There is a huge range just like you were saying just because some people come from different backgrounds, some people clearly been here for a very long time and will be here for a long time and that's great but it does give them a certain freedom in their behaviour. It's just a huge range, some seem like they are on holiday to others working very hard”.

“Umm I think it's changed since I've been here. I was very shocked when I first joined about the lack of ownership you get in higher education environments. I came in as director of marketing I would phone someone and say I don't understand how this works, I've got this problem, this person wants to talk to someone about this, oh I'd get oh it's not my job I can't help you with that. So there wasn't a common sense of moving the organisation forward. I see that less and less these days. We've restructured and reshaped. We are much more focused on goals. And most of the people that work here share those goals and are very collaborative and very driven”.

**Management behaviour** - refers to the attitude – way of acting – of top management, which expresses the organisation's central idea to the internal and external audiences (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Melewar, 2003). *To what extent do you think the way that top management behave and act expresses the University's central idea to its stakeholders?*

“I think if you look at top management and the university executive. I think they all present the university very well outside, and I have been with them to many locations and places. And I think all of them do a very good job when they're outside and talking about us. Internally, it is slightly different. And I think that is largely because they don't talk to each other as much as they should. So, what you have is, each of them has their own little silo, and so they, talk down to us from their silo, but they don't talk across to each other”.

“I think over recent years that has improved a zillion per cent. I remember an era where, you know, the people over there, weren't even here, they were on another campus. And there was very little communication in terms of what we are about. But

there I think there is a not just a drip drip, but a constant series of communications, not just to senior staff, but to all staff”.

## **CORPORATE STRUCTURE**

We investigate two dimensions of corporate structure: brand structure and organisational structure, as follows.

**Brand structure** is the part of corporate structure that is concerned with the branding of the products, business units and the corporate umbrella and how they appear to an organisation’s audience. It is closely related to brand strategy, which refers to the way firms mix and match their corporate, house and individual brand names on their products (Gray and Smeltzer, 1985; Melewar, 2003). *How would you describe your University as a brand?*

“I am a UK student and I have lived in London my whole life so there are some things that are ground into you there is very much a difference between ex polytechnics and red brick universities that’s base level. And this is going back to a bit about what was said before a lot of them have kinda breached the gap now and this university seems to be the one that is furthest ahead in reaching more red brick status”.

“Our core mission is research excellence, without that we cannot teach the students and we cannot fulfil the students, without that we will not have an international reputation, hence the rebranding but in particular you can rebrand but you need something for that brand to rest on and what that brand needs to rest on is the quality of staff, quality of students, students achievements, staff achievements what we do with the ref and so on”.

“I think it’s a little bit confused at the moment. I think it’s quite confused at the moment. So if I was looking at our university, what are we selling ourselves as? I think the launch of the new brand might resolve that”.

“As a brand I think it is a fast evolving brand. I’m not sure that people are always keeping up with the speed of that change. And we’ve been through a massive



programme of change in the time that I've been here. And that is both an exciting thing and a risk if we don't bring everyone with us".

*To what extent do you follow a rigid structure or a more loose highly autonomous brand structure?*

"Okay, I think all the schools have their own different brand. Because all the subjects are so different. And I think the university, can't sell all in the same way and effect. I mean how can dance be anything like economics? So how do you bring that under one brand, I'm not sure how you would do that. But each school has its own personality doesn't it, so you kind of bring that family together, it's a difficult job. But the schools are so different from each other".

"I just don't think its uniform across all of our activities. We are branding ourselves as different things in each thing. And across countries, it is a nightmare for branding our different campuses".

"I think the way that we found through it, is we have an corporate identity which applies to everything. Then we have nuances within each school which are, enable them to reflect the diversity but aren't aligned with the overall brand".

*How do you feel about the services and the courses you provide to the students?*

"The programmes themselves are varying quality. Across the university. So I wouldn't see them as equal quality, although we tried to do that".

## **Organisational structure**

*How is the university organised in relation to communication, control and authority patterns?*

"Okay I think in terms of control, it is a control that is fairly centralised. Umm. So a lot of it is driven by the university executive and the degree of autonomy that is given to schools is less than in many universities. That is partly an aspect of new universities than old universities. But I think it's very much centrally driven".

"The control bit is central. But then again I believe it needs to be. Because if you have just a loose span of control, then you will have everyone doing different things. The idea was to try and bring everyone else together and then to loosen that control

by giving people toolkits and giving people opportunities, but staying within the brief as to what Middlesex is about”.

## **INDUSTRY IDENTITY**

Industry identity refers to the underlying economic and technical characteristics of an industry.

Industry size, growth patterns, rates of change, competitiveness and use of technology are some of the elements of these characteristics (Melewar, 2003; Olins, 1995). *How would you describe today’s higher education sector in the UK?*

“In turmoil. It’s in the worst position it’s ever been in. The politicians don’t love HE at the minute do they? So it’s very difficult world for anybody in HE in the UK. It doesn’t help with all the private colleges being allowed to open up, tis more competition. You’ve got even schools I know being allowed to deliver HE. The marketplace has become massive, but all different levels and all different kinds. So for a university like us we really need to become much more competitive in terms of distinguishing ourselves from all of those people that are coming into higher education”.

“Quite turbulent I think. I think we’re still thriving. And I think, and I think we have a strong positive future ahead of us. But it is still quite turbulent due to the extent of changes. And there is real uncertainty as to what the impact of those changes are going to be, in terms of changes to student numbers, umm, and I think as a sector it is still relatively conservative so it its almost hard to change quickly when you have people on three year programmes”.

*To what extent do you feel your University is keeping abreast of the changes and developments that are occurring within the University sector in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world?*

“I think we are. I think because of the concerns and threats that are coming”.

## **CORPORATE STRATEGY**

Corporate strategy is the master plan of a company that circumscribes the company’s products and market scope, its overall objectives and the policies through which it competes in its chosen

markets (Gray and Balmer, 1998; Melewar, 2003). *To what extent do you have a clear idea of the University's overall strategy?*

“Well the recent review published, and we've got a nice side of A4 now which is very clear. They're very proud they've got it onto one side of A4. But it is clear, if you look at it, it's this is what we're doing for research, this is what we're doing for business development, this is what we're doing for programmes. Is sort of the higher level, it's very clear. But if you try to boil down as to what they means to me personally you might struggle a little bit, but you can work it out”.

“Yes, I do. But there are tensions between what I do, and the main university strategy. In that it's not defined enough, so it's question of communicating it better. And at a level of detail. Which is again a contradiction, because strategy shouldn't have detail, but talking about building the brand and enhancing a, b, c and d. I also do things that are income-generating, so where does that fall? And I have that discussion daily with deans and heads of services”.

“The overall corporate strategy is encapsulated in the corporate plan. I would say that the corporate plan, we have never been clearer. As to what the direction of the university is and what the key issues are that we need to address. We have always implicitly known what was important, but this was the first time in many years that it has been encapsulated into one document”.

**Differentiation strategy** - is capitalising on the inherent capabilities that define the University in terms of its basic identity (Melewar, 2003; Simpson, 1988). *To remain competitive, how would you differentiate your University from the other universities in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world?*

“I have spent the last ten years trying to work out how we can be different from to other business schools. It is so difficult, all business school are the same. We all try to do the same thing so I have spent years and years developing new programs with people which are slightly different to somebody else's and occasionally very different, but then as soon as you do it, someone else invests in it as well. So from a business school perspective it's very hard to do”.

“I think we have a number of, umm, pockets of excellence which could potentially be the differentiator if you look at what the outside world sees, I don’t think we are necessarily differentiating ourselves enough, But if we dip below the surface in terms of how we do things and what we do, there is, there are differentiators. But it’s not something that we have managed to articulate as yet. But again there is a piece of work going on at the moment, in terms of narratives, both at university level and school level, as to what those differentiators are”.

**Positioning strategy** - is the process in which the company is assigned a clearly defined position, derived from its self-perception, in order to differentiate it from the competition (Melewar, 2003; Schmidt, 1995). *How do you define the University’s position in the market?*

“We always use league tables and statistics and benchmark against who we see as our competitors, we also benchmark against who we would like to be our competitors, which is slightly higher up the hierarchy”.

“I think we’re a market leader. We are premium priced. We offer a whole range of services. We have experience in doing this”.

*How do you see your University in the relation to the other universities in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world?*

“I think that as a university we have been really quick to change from all of the issues with student fees, and from now trying to become a leader in research, I think that we have been really quick to change and also we are starting to see that in the rankings and we are going up which is wonderful and brilliant. The only thing I would do is question how that’s been achieved and how much the student body is aware of that and also I think that if we neglect our teaching there will be dire consequences, especially to where our money comes from”.

“I received this email from the vice chancellor I don’t know who kind of congratulating the university for getting up on the ranking and being the one of the top 500 universities in the world and I think it was really positive to see that it’s not only the local ranking that counts but it is also the international ranking that counts because that gives me the sense that they are not only looking at the British situation but the international situation because the international ranking of the university also counts so I think that was something positive from that”.

“I think that this university needs to improve their marketing and communication strategy internationally to make people like the university and to those who are here it will make them proud including the students, the lecturers”.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The role of corporate identity management in the higher education sector is little understood. This study contributes to existing literature in three ways. (1) First, the study adds to our knowledge in this important area by applying Melewar’s (2003) taxonomy of corporate identity to a major UK university. Our results demonstrate that the seven core components of corporate identity that comprise the Melewar taxonomy are relevant and applicable to the higher education sector as well as to the business sector for which the taxonomy was originally created. (2) Second, the study provides new knowledge from a senior management perspective in the higher education sector. The senior executives highlighted in detail the critical corporate identity elements in higher education and acknowledged the significance of the seven core components of corporate identity management, which consist of corporate communication, corporate design, corporate culture, behaviour, corporate structure, industry identity, and corporate strategy. (3) Third, the study advances the existing corporate identity concept with an ‘extended corporate identity taxonomy’, as illustrated in Figure 2, that shows a nuanced view of three separate layers of corporate identity. This is the first study of its kind that considers such detailed view of corporate identity construct.

Several changes and updates have been made from the Melewar (2003) framework to the present study’s Corporate Identity Taxonomy (see Figure 2). These changes are mainly driven by the higher education context, which is a unique context in that it is a public sector, but has a

strong economic and performance driven culture. Some key context-specific adaptations of the corporate identity concept and differences are highlighted next:

**Insert Figure 2 about here**

The findings of this study illustrated that higher education corporate identity integrates intangible assets within the institution and can be defined as vision, goals, who we are, what we do, and what we specialize in. In addition, corporate identity enables the differentiation among the various competing universities and influence on the stakeholders' perceptions, motivates employees, and presents the university's personality and image to every stakeholder, including the public, students, employees and board members (e.g., Birkight and Stadler, 1980; Greyser and Balmer, 2003; Balmer, Johansen and Nielsen, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016).

This study demonstrates that a university's corporate communication can create a favourable relationship between the university and its stakeholders by establishing a positive image, and ultimately a good reputation amongst its stakeholders. The two components of corporate communication are controlled corporate communication and uncontrolled communication (Melewar, 2003). *Controlled corporate communication* is a two-way dialogue, which helps to attract students by projecting a university's core values to stakeholders, and influences stakeholders' perceptions towards the university. In contrast, *uncontrolled corporate communication* includes signals that are not created deliberately or consciously by the university, and could be created by other external parties to build rewarding relationships with the various stakeholders. For example, social and digital media is a key communication platform that allows

a university to communicate the right type and style of content to the stakeholders (controlled), but also to receive instant feedback from the communication among the students' themselves (uncontrolled), which in turn, can help the university to increase website traffic and search ranking.

A university's organisational culture helps to share core values and beliefs of the university to support the university's teaching and research, and differentiates a university from its competitors (Schein, 2010). The findings of this study provide support for the discussion about the six elements of corporate culture. (i) Corporate philosophy, values, and mission describe what the university stand for, why the university exist, and where the university is going, in terms of its ambition, enterprise, innovation, and global outlook, referring to the things it does to broadening future opportunities. (ii) Corporate history and (iii) Leadership (founder) have direct impacts on the university's corporate identity. (iv) Country-of-origin has a positive influence on a university's brand; it refers to the picture, reputation and the stereotype that students attach to a university's products and services, and reveals the values associated with the university's home country - a determinant of what the university stands for. (v) Subcultures, which align with the university's corporate identity, can be challenging, because there are so many different departments with different cultures. Hence, projecting an aligned university's brand to its stakeholders can be difficult. (vi) Examining the concept of diversity in higher education, the data shows that there is no discrimination on the basis of age, sex or ethnic origin although there is a concern with the rights of female and with the rights of disabled employees.

It was found that universities spend extensive time, research and money on developing a favourable design that reflects their organization's identity in order to mould its image in a

positive way. In this respect, their marketing aims to position the corporate design in the minds of internal and external stakeholders via corporate design, which is the visual style of the university's manifestations, reflecting its university identity, helping it differentiate itself from its competitors. The results illustrate two corporate design components that are important, namely, the corporate visual identity (CVIS) and the application of corporate visual identity. For example, CVIS helps the audience to distinguish the university from others through three main elements, namely, to be recognisable, easily recalled, and memorable (Foroudi et al., 2014).

The findings identify five main factors of CVIS: (i) Name of the university, often indicating its geographical location, is highly important in many higher education markets because it is unique, short and simple, memorable, easy to remember, and communicates the university's benefits and qualities. (ii) Corporate logotype and/or symbol gives an indication of the quality of the university and associations with a place or county and positive historical/heritage image. In addition, a logo is often distinctive, attractive, meaningful, memorable, and communicates the university's personality. (iii) The university's typeface should convey the brand values and create positive feelings towards the university. Hence, a typeface should be modern, artistic, and immediately readable. (iv) Colours used in a university's visual identity should be interesting because it should be bright and eye catching and communicate its traditions, even in international markets.

For example, an application of CVIS is the company's website. The finding of this study found that a well-designed website is not just how it looks or how it works. Rather, a website should be operational, functional and create a dynamic modern impression. Other applications of CVIS also exist, for example, with the stationary, forms (electronic/paper forms), and university



publications are all essential. In digital era, the importance of the email signage was acknowledged by the interviewees. A well-designed signage should tell a story and that story should be updated often. Staff and students ID cards are also a key badge of a university's identity. Regarding the promotions/give-away, the data illustrate that it directly influences on the university's brand recognition and reflect its personality by showing where students are from.

The university building architecture is important to attract students. Building architecture projects a university's identity so it should be well designed. The university brand needs to be rolled out across the physical environment. In addition, the university's interior design should be high quality and more strongly branded. It needs to be more tightly managed with an attractive interior decor and pleasant atmosphere. The university's landscape desires to be more student friendly, attractive, inviting, and suitable in accordance to the university's corporate identity.

Behaviour is another factor, which has direct impacts on corporate identity (Schmidt, 1995). The research finding shows that the universities should be hugely innovative in order to differentiate from other universities. The two components of behaviour are: corporate and employee behaviour and top management behaviour. *Corporate and employee behaviour* is fundamental and at the core of the university. Employees are the ambassadors of the university, and show great enthusiasm in communicating the core values to students. Staff should be loyal and caring; they are committed to what they do and committed to the student experience. However, sometimes, they feel uninformed. *Top management behaviour* expresses a university's central idea to its stakeholders and top management very connected into the environment and takes every chance to highlight the university's core values in public occasions. Such community engagement covers the notion of how well the university is integrating into the local community,

and could it be doing more in this respect. This was covered both in terms of helping the community, as well as marketing.

Corporate structure is concerned with the branding of the courses at the university, which in turn, is influenced by the university's audience (Gray and Smeltzer, 1985). Corporate structure is related to a university's brand strategy. Both brand structure and organizational structure have been found as the key two elements of corporate structure. *Brand structure* should be recognisable. For example, the unique courses can be part of a university's brand. *Organizational structure* is organized in relation to a university's communication and should also be recognizable and aligned with the university's corporate identity.

Another element of corporate identity is industry identity. A university's corporate identity should be aligned with its industry identity and should keep abreast of the changes and developments that are occurring within the university sector in the UK and the rest of the world.

Finally, a university's corporate strategy is encapsulated in the university's corporate plan, which concerns what the direction of the university is and what the key issues are that need to be addressed in order to achieve the objectives (Gray and Balmer, 1998). A university is now more customer-focused and three key elements of their strategy include: corporate ethics, corporate social responsibility, and differentiation strategy. A university should have high ethical standards in order to ensure the university's long-term profitability. Top managers may sometimes be perceived to engage in behaviours that may be considered being unethical, thus to project a positive image, the university should be more socially responsible and become concerned with the local community and improve stakeholders' benefits. A university is required to be different from other universities in UK and in the world, and a positioning strategy is thus

essential. The university should clearly define its position, deriving this from its university perception. To this end, the university needs to have a clear process in which the university is assigned a clearly defined position, derived from its self-perception, in order to differentiate it from the competition.

## **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Corporate identity is a constructive tool that can be successfully applied to the managing of a unique identity of any organization (Wilkinson and Balmer, 1996; Melewar, 2003). The results of this study will be helpful to communication professionals and academics who deal with an organization's corporate identity, branding, and communication with an aim to enhance the consistency of messages both written and visual within their organization. The results of this research have delivered actionable guidelines for managers and practitioners. This study suggests that managers should understand that the application of corporate visual identity as a complex phenomenon since it is determined by multiple factors including building architecture, interior design, landscape, website, stationary, forms, publications, vehicles, signage, ID card, and promotions. It suggests that managers should be cautious about designing and selecting the application of the university's corporate visual identity.

For example, in terms of corporate structure, organisational structure and brand structure remain a challenging issue. As institutions of higher education, universities are complex organisations which can potentially be branded at various levels: university level, school level, and departmental level. Ensuring the most effective brand architecture for an institution of higher education requires high-level strategic thinking on the part of top management. Corporate

strategy represents another challenge for managers, particularly with regard to the internationalisation process whereby partnerships must be established and nurtured with appropriate partners. Such partnerships must deliver value according to local stakeholder demands whilst simultaneously retaining the core values and quality levels of the home institution.

Future research could further our understanding of corporate identity management in the higher education sector by investigating the importance in this sector of issues such as diversity, ethics and social responsibility. Within the core component of corporate communication, more research is needed into the actual and potential effects of social media upon the multiple stakeholder audiences that are found in the higher education sector.

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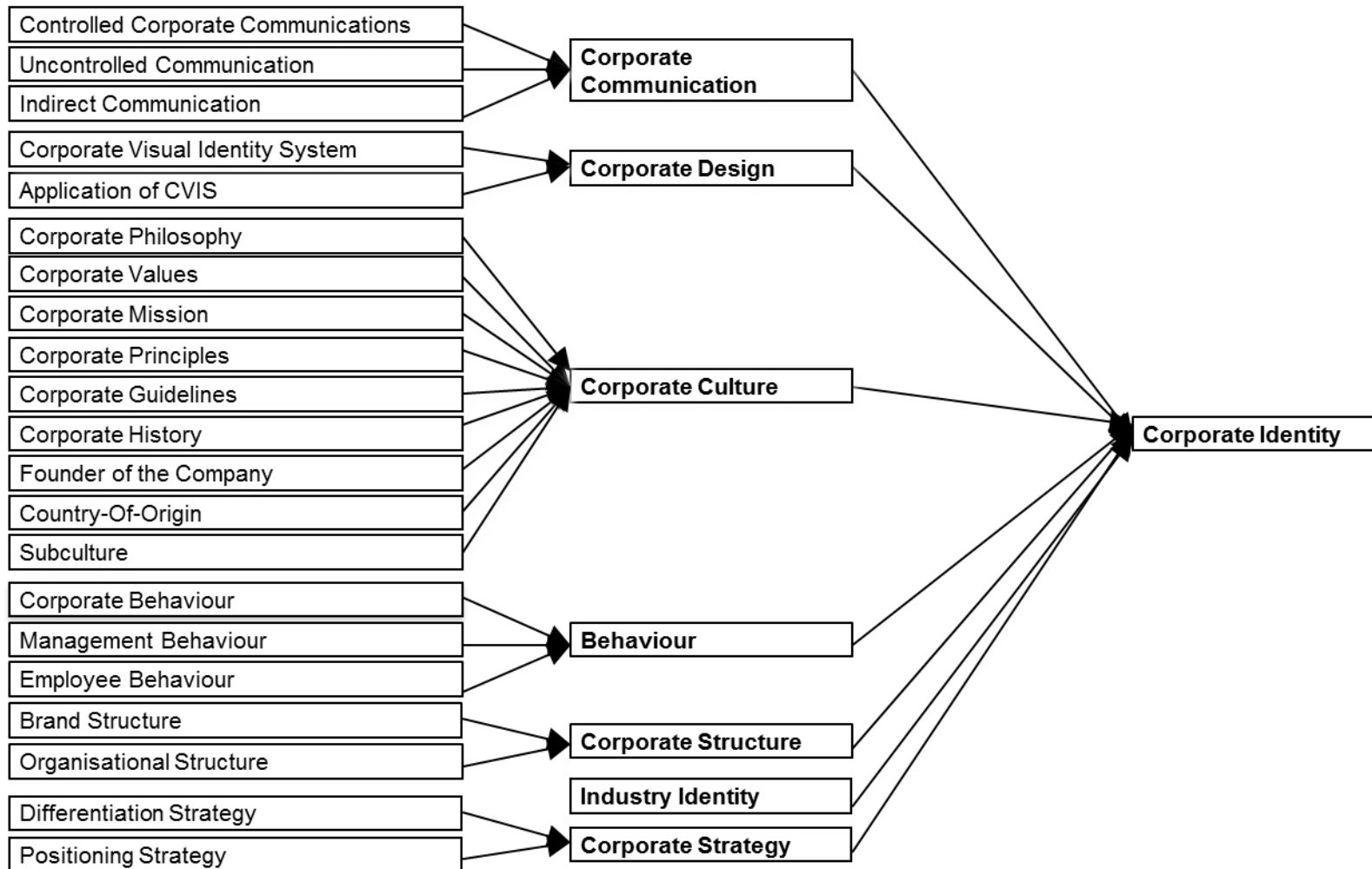
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**Figure 1: Corporate Identity Taxonomy (Melewar, 2003)**



**Figure 2: Corporate Identity Taxonomy (2016)**

