

A Model for University Identity and Reputation

Strategic Work

LARS STEINER, AGNETA C. SUNDSTRÖM AND KAISU SAMMALISTO

UNIVERSITY OF GAVLE

Abstract

This paper aims to outline a multi dimensional model of university identity and reputation work. The model includes Organizational identity that is employee and student attitudes, Symbolic identity that is influence from buildings and artifacts and Reputation, external actors' attitudes. A discussion is held what the symbolic role of building artefacts is on employees, students and external stakeholders. Finally, we discuss how reputation influences universities' organization identity. The multi dimensional model contributes to further understanding of the complex relations between identity and reputation.

KEYWORDS: University identity theory, Organization, Symbolic, Reputation

Autobiographies

Dr. Lars Steiner is assistant professor and head of the department for economy at the University of Gavle in Sweden. His teaching and research covers Real Estate management, organization theory and small business management. He has presented at several organizations theory conferences and published in the Corporate Reputation Review. He can be contacted by: Address: The University of Gavle, 80176, e-mail: lars.steiner@hig.se , phone: +46 73464091

Dr. Agneta Sundström is senior lecturer at the University of Gavle. She holds a PhD from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. Her main research interests are in the field of identity, CSR and sustainability related issues. Address: The University of Gavle, 80176 Gavle, Sweden, *e-mail:* awd@hig.se phone: +46 26648876

Dr. Kaisu Sammalisto areas of education and research are university sustainability, sustainable development, auditing and corporate social responsibility. She is heading the sustainable development work at the University of Gavle. Address: The University of Gavle, 80176, e-mail: kso@hig.se

1. Introduction

Universities, especially small and medium sized, encounter profound restructuring. This calls for a multi-faceted strategic approach with means transition from single to multiple identity organizations. Globalization with increased students and academics mobility has raised the pressure on universities to improve quality of education, research and society engagements in order to be more internationally attractive.¹ However, the increased mobility has also meant increased national university competition. For the individual university, and especially the newer ones, it has become more important than ever to build up distinct identity profiles and reputation that not only attract students but also are attractive in employment to comply with urgent competence requirements. To be legitimated in relation to other universities, they have to identify both internal and external qualification of succeeding. According to Yang (2004) this is a global trend subjecting universities to increasingly higher levels of external scrutiny.

According to the European Commission², universities are not fully using their potentials and need to modernize to be more effective by raising quality of education, research and innovation and to reinforce their societal roles. The reformation means that universities need to accept accountability for society at large for their results to be competitive (Kreysing, 2002, Ramsden, 2003). This movement towards market orientation is challenging traditional ideals of university integrity commonly being defended especially by old established universities.

Knowledge about how newer universities are coping with identity transition is limited, both in theory and in practice, and above all concentrated to single aspects. Recent research of

¹See Reform of the universities in the framework of the Lisbon strategy.
http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11078_en.htm
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² See COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, Brussels, 10.5.2006
COM(2006) 208 final http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1324_en.htm 20110404

academic identity has concentrated on internal changes in policies, staff autonomy and strategies (Henkel, 2005), changing ideals and practices of university research (Ylijoki, 2003), emulation in academia and how to balance structure and identity (Labianca et al, 2001), defining the essence of university branding and identity (Wearaas and Solbakk, 2009), and the need for openness to government in relation to markets efficiency requirements (Yang, 2004), to mention some examples.

Models of how to investigate employees and students attitudes of university transition are few and directed to how to consider reputation principles. Also campuses' social spaces, buildings, artifacts, teaching and research facilities are symbolic dimensions that need to be analyzed to know how universities adapt to new ways of communicating with physical and virtual meeting places. These demands of modernization should be met in the construction of buildings and premises, functionality and aesthetics of artifacts should be considered as well as modern information technology implications, social and cultural demands on the new university's identity and reputation. Together, all these dimensions constitute organizational identity both influencing and affecting university reformation work.

In the model of identity here developed different dimensions based on perceptions of identity are shown. To describe and analyze university identity for the use in strategy decisions we claim, these dimensions of identity are needed. Organizational identity perception: Organization members' values and attitudes (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Symbolic identity perception: affective perception of organizational attributes (Berg & Kreiner, 1990) and market identity perception which is students and external stakeholders' attitudes and values.

The paper aims to theoretically describe and discuss a multidimensional model making it possible to identify and analyze internal, as well as external factors, having influence on

university identity and reputation. There is also a practical goal that the model could be used for university identity and reputation strategic work.

In the model developed, we argue that multidimensional factors, besides external reputation and image constructs, need to be considered to understand the interconnectedness between university identity and reputation. Organizational identity and symbolic identity represent “*who the organization is*” (Schultz et al, 2005, p. 24). The model describes different dimensions of identity, organizational (Albert & Whetten, 1985), symbolic (Rafaeli and Pratt, 2004) and reputational (Rindova et al., 2005; 2010) and how these dimensions have influence on each other and universities’ identity. We propose that these internal and external attributes, as embedded in each other, are important for a university quality work to meet competition in a modernization process.

The following questions are discussed:

- What factors construct a model of university identity given a contextual situation of transition from government control by central decisions and rules to control by result assessment and external result oriented funding?
- What distinctions and interconnections could be made between identity, image and reputation as concepts?

The findings provide knowledge for making decisions at the university in practical reform work. By outlining a model, the theoretical contribution shows how different dimensions of university identity are interconnected. Especially, which is weakly discussed in literature before, we provide knowledge of how to include symbolic attributes in a identity and reputation development model.

2. Outlining dimensions of identity

2.1 Image, identity and reputation

Image and reputation are both considered to be largely the interpretation of perceptions of the company as seen from the outside, while identity is something developed within the organization (Margulies, 1977; Olins, 1978, 1989, 1995; Selame & Selame, 1988; Ind, 1992; Balmer, 1995; Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2000; Steiner, 2003). In the case of universities this thought is not binary, since employees in universities often are part time employees in the university and part time outside the university (Cheney & Christensen, 1999). Also students often are studying part time, especially when the university is offering Internet based education and campus education in evenings and week ends. Organizational identity translates into image through communication to the public (Riel, 1995, Argenti, 1998). Image is commonly considered as an immediate more short term stakeholder perception of identity built on impressions and attitudes of the organization's identity (Heding, 2009). The symbolic attributes of a university are a part of the university's identity, and they affect management, employees and students as well as external stakeholders.

2.2 Organizational identity

Employees, students and stakeholders in the surrounding society experience the embodied identity of the university and react on this. Organizational identity we consider as context dependent and being socially constructed by actors both within and outside of the organization. Organizational identity, therefore, is a process property rather than a structural one.

The identity of an organization is, according to Balmer & Wilson (1998), multidimensional, changing, and multifaceted which contrasts the traditional concept of identity having central, distinctive, and enduring features (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998, Downey, 1986; Abratt, 1989; Dowling, 1994). Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) early discussed how

different members can have different opinions of identity which early supported the need of multiple identity research. Cornelissen and Thorpe (2002) indicate that members of an organization can define identity in different ways depending on their focused perspective.

According to Hatch and Schultz (2004, p. 265) emerging themes in the research field focus on different aspects viewing the concept as both multiple as well as influenced by the need of governmental control and stability. Czarniawska (2000) has seen how identity can be affected by management and control. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) pay attention to how identity can be communicated. Gioia et al (2000) claim that identity can change as well as remain stable which moved research attention to identity as context dependent and socially constructed (Heding et al, 2009). In conclusion, identity as a concept has emerged from being seen as stable, to multiple or multidimensional.

To understand universities' organizational identity management, employees' and students' perceptions of and attitudes about themselves and the university in which they work are to be considered. Three factors of university organizational identity are below to be analyzed, strategic, structural and cultural.

2.2.1 The strategic factor of university organizational identity

Organizational identity plays a central role in the strategic management process of a university (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1995). The change process (implementation of strategy) of universities could be explained by several change management theories. For instance, to explain rationalities of change, Van de Ven and Poole (1995) use four theories of change: life cycle, evolutionary, teleological, and dialectical. In the teleological theory, the role of the manager is to shape the identity of the organization through vision, mission, and stated values, as well as through the careful and purposeful management of key symbols (Pfeffer, 1981; Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 139).

Strategies of a new university are shaped both from attributes inside the organization and from actions and circumstances in the surrounding society. Strategies could also emanate from ideas of certain guiding values. In the university such values need to be sustainable and constituted by a spectrum of social, economic and ecological values, health, ethics, culture, and engagement in society. The hypothesis in a behavioral approach of organizational identity is viewing strategies as something that the organization members hold as central, sustainable and distinctive attributes of the organization is then reasonable. This means that in organizational identity the history, contextual environment, and the members of the organization is part of affects the strategic process (Balmer, 2001).

According to Gioia and Thomas (1996) the strategic dimension of identity provides an image of the organization and what it wishes to represent. Strategies indicate how the organization relates to long-term plans and are guidelines for employees as well as general university environment to what areas attention is directed towards the future. This means that they provide indications of, what Albert and Whetten (1985) refer to, its pursuit for central identity characters. Strategies support guidance for university management to make long-term decisions (Labianca et al, 2001) which both affect, and reflect how the organization is managed towards a change. If the strategy is changed, it provides information for employees, students and external stakeholders regarding what the organization wants to achieve. In order to be successful, Gioia and Thomas (1996) claim that a strategy must be perceived as clear and meaningful for employees to follow. Strategies should encompass all visual representation of an organization (Heding et al, 2009) including object symbols (Olins, 1978, 1989, 1995; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997, referring to Trice and Beyer, 1993:86) like artifacts and buildings.

2.2.2 The structural factor of university organizational identity

Although the significance of structural parts of identity commonly is mentioned as important, there are few studies that pursue what is meant by "a structure". Hotho (2008), is referring to Giddens (1984) structuration theory and the dynamic duality between structure (scripts of performance) and those being a part of it. Employees are part of the structure (in plans, charts, regulations, professional roles) simultaneous reproducing the structures through their action. Studies of industrial change (Sundström, 2008) shows there is interconnectedness between strategic change based on competitive pressure and how work is structured by management and presented in different scripts for employees to follow. According to Barley (1986) management response on change depends on the degree of institutionalization. These arguments show that external changes (competition), concepts (scripts), management (organizational leadership) and institutional circumstances (degree of institutionalization) have impact on how organizations respond on change.

Changing strategies in university management because of new decentralized ways for government to control university activities and the widened influence on university work from stakeholders of different kinds mentioned in the beginning of this paper, force universities to reorganize. New organization structures affect management, employees and students in different ways.

2.2.3 The cultural factor of university organizational identity

The university culture includes employees and students perception of work, working environment and relationships with one another. Since identity as a concept is based on an organization's collective values of "who we are", the concept is close to what is defined as culture. Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organizational identity includes what employees perceive, feel and think about their organization, while organizational culture is associated with what the organization does and performs. Culture is often related to the founders, stories,

critical incidents and so on. According to Alvesson & Willmott (2002) these concepts differ from one another so that identity as a concept is weaker, more flexible to change and that it lacks the necessary attributes to be used as a disciplinary basis.

We can accept that there is an identity without necessarily being part of a culture. Similarly, we can resist a change of identity if it conflicts with cultural values and institutionalized beliefs about how things are. Increased rate of change in society has, according to Alvesson & Willmott (2002), influenced cultures and made people increasingly receptive to how we want to be seen, our image. This reflects the organization's identity from an external perspective. This means that there is an interaction between identity and culture in which they affect each other so it can be difficult to identify something as culture or identity. The traditional view of identity is that it is socially constructed and created by human interaction (Henkel, 2005, Alvesson & Willmott 2002). How we see ourselves as part of the organization puts a label on the "who we are."

2.3 Reputation

According to Rindova et al (2010, p. 614) scholars from all disciplines tend to define reputation as referring to social cognitions and that these reside over time in the minds of external stakeholders. As mentioned in the introduction, reputation plays a significant role as prompter for university reformation and development work. Reputation can be studied in different ways, as in resource-based theory (Grant, 1991) as a dependent variable, in strategic alliances theory (Dollinger, Golden and Saxton, 1997), and in game theory as suggested by Weigelt and Cammerer (1988). Although commonly seen as an external third party and long-term evaluation concept (Heding et al, 2009) we claim that reputation has impact on how organizations work with internal activities. In the industry, for instance, corporate managers increasingly work with reputation building activities through social responsibility

engagements to look good for the public. These engagements need both inside and outside organizational acceptance to be reliable in society (Sundström, 2008).

The main reason for the interest in reputation studies in business administration is that reputation could be used to measure organizational effectiveness ((Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Universities are, as in business, increasingly exposed to external evaluations and even if these commonly are criticized for indistinct measures, they have impact on reputation and quality work. Positive media coverage can improve reputation (Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Wartick, 1992) while low ranking in measures decrease the attractiveness of the university. Reputation as perceived by employees and students in contact with external stakeholders, are influenced and affected by values and attitudes external to them. This means that reputation, either built up and institutionalized by a collective high status third party *or* by stakeholders' evaluations (Rindova et al, 2005), has impact on employees of the university and their perceptions.

3. Symbolic identity

3.1 Architecture and artifacts

Organizational symbols and representations, in addition to making impressions outside the organization, often serve as important vehicles of identification, motivation, and culture within the organization as well. In the field corporate architecture, the concepts interior design, visual identity and corporate/product design are used (Berg & Kreiner, 1990). Interior design concerns the internal design of buildings and premises, space layout, choice of furniture, colors etc. Visual design concerns all kind of visual material that is associated with an organization, logos, office design, sales office design, uniforms, and choice of colors. Many of these attributes are designed over time and thus become part of the organizational identity. Design becomes an activity that strongly affects the attractiveness of an organization and therefore is a part of the identity-reputation change management activity.

One hypothesis is that identity, reality comprehension and meaning construction among employees, teachers, students and external stakeholders are affected by the culture that is communicated, and that this culture strongly depends on buildings and building parts' aesthetics and function. Another hypothesis is that building premises and artifacts might influence, depending of the situation to enhance or obstruct teaching and learning activities, student motivation, creativity and abilities to act. Becker & Steele (1995) developed this thought and meant that design perceptions affect organizational health and the organizational member's ability to fulfill their work in a satisfying way.

Symbols can be regarded as indicators of culture, they describe culture. The way an artifact influence on behavior is a controlling function. The artifact does also have a system keeping function, which is how the artifact affects organizational identity. This way of analyzing artifacts can be used when analyzing organizational identity processes. The model catches functional values, efficiency factors, control factors and symbolic affective factors.

3.2 From military symbolic communication to the communication of knowledge

Artifacts play an important role on employee, student and stakeholder immediate image and in the long run also on reputation. The university in this narrative is situated in buildings that once were built for an infantry regiment. In the beginning of the last century the army of employed soldiers was replaced by an army of compulsory military service. Buildings and facilities for education of all these new soldiers were built. As important was the symbolic architectural meaning of defense will and a strong power of defense. These buildings' and facilities' images were discipline and hierarchy. The Swedish military barracks are six floor brick buildings with a lot of windows, corridors and chair cases. Their costs of maintenance are low and they are generic in their usage.

The military barracks have shown to function excellent for university education purposes and have also resourcefully been rebuilt to offices when the military found these

barracks not suitable and needed. Technically and functionally to transform the military regiment's one hundred years old buildings to a modern university could be done successfully, but how could it be possible to align academic scientific work and free thinking culture with the military look and image? The architect designing the university choose to emphasize the universal applicability and constructed new buildings in functionalistic spirit linked together with eloquently subordinated connecting glassed buildings. The old military yard, earlier graveled, now got grass and trees along the sides. Also a new building fro the natural sciences was raised, in the same style as the old barracks. This made the yard to be even more enclosed and uniform than during the time of the military.

Students interviewed described a feeling of being watched and controlled from all the windows. They did not want to stay on the grass, except for very hot days in the summer. The new building rather strengthened the military purpose, with discipline, hierarchy and control rather than the academic culture of education, knowledge, research and sustainable work life.

A couple of years later the library needed more space. The number of students had increased with twenty years each year during the 1990s and there were especially need for more study and group rooms. An architect competition was won by another architects firm than the one that constructed the last building. They presented a futuristic building that as a space ship landed on the grass in front of the barracks. This library was to be a very nice place for students and employees to meet and study. Also the new library draws a sharp line between the new academic and the old to be forgotten military culture. Also the new building uses grass as roof coverage and environmentally friendly material in the construction, thus communicating sustainable work life to employees, students and stakeholders in contact with the university. The earlier restricted and disciplined military culture does no more dominate artifacts and building space allowing an academic image to the premises.



Picture 1: The new library that liberated the university from the symbols that were inherited from the military organization culture. In the background left the military barracks and a new square building, to the right the new building for natural sciences.

4 Model discussion

The transition of Swedish universities from a situation of growth, built on traditions and historically derived identity, to a situation which almost could be described as market driven, needs an analyses that carefully consider how the “market” perceive the university and what expectations there are from the surrounding society on university education and research.

The identity of a university might be studied by the four dimensions Organizational identity, Symbolic identity, Image and Reputation. Internal to the organization are a) organization identity, culture, strategic processes and structures and b) symbolic identity, perceptions of building spaces and artifacts. External to the organization are a) image, aesthetic impressions of all attributes that are connected to the organization, its communication, building space and artifacts, and its products and b) reputation, which in contrast to image as it takes longer time to build and could be measured by stakeholders’ perceptions about an organization’s ability to create value relative to competitors (Rindova et al, 2005).

To describe and analyze university identity for the use in strategy decisions in new universities, three perceptions of identity are needed. Organizational identity perception: Organization members' values and attitudes (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Symbolic identity perception: affective perception of organizational attributes (Berg & Kreiner, 1990) and market identity perception (reputation) which is students and external stakeholders' attitudes and values.

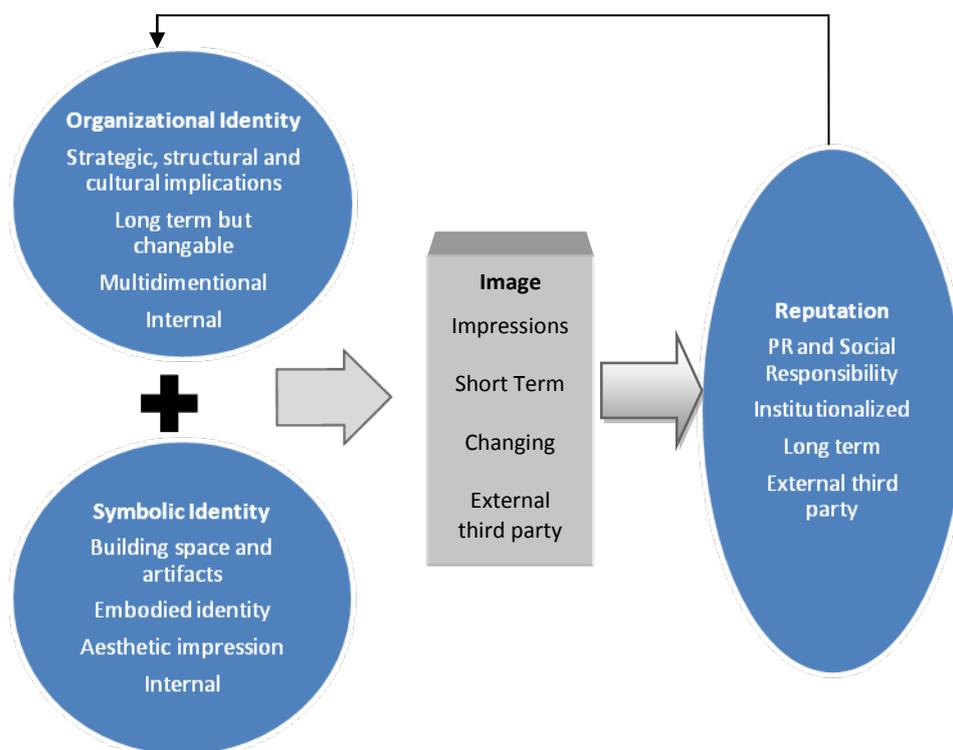


Figure 1: The model of University identity

The figure 2 above captures the theoretical characteristics of the identity-reputation dimensions mentioned before. From the dimension organizational identity we claim that university identity is affected by employee and students interaction with external stakeholders as they take part of activities in society and reputation building, in the short run as impressions on university image. In the long run, and especially if repeated, the reputation

becomes institutionalized as “facts” which, through socialization, have influence on organizational identity. This discussion follows how we socially construct reality by socialization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

5. Conclusion

Reputation has also a second feature as it puts pressure on universities to change and plays a significant role as prompter for university reformation and development work. Beyond this discussion lies an economic idea of university modernization and competition. As for the university to handle increased number of evaluations there is a need for universities to communicate impressions on society to legitimize and institutionalize its existence as a reliable and necessary part of society delivering high quality education and research as well as being a partner in the modernization of industry and society.

Social engagements and partnerships with stakeholders in society are no longer a question about if to engage but how to do it. To be legitimated, universities need both inside and outside engagements (Sundström, 2008). Changing strategies in university management because of new decentralized ways for government to control university activities and the widened influence and interest on university work from stakeholders of different kinds mentioned in the beginning of this paper, force universities to reorganize. New organization structures affect management, employees and students in different ways.

These arguments imply that external changes such as international competition and new government control procedures, new scripts such as internal organizational rules, management ideas and institutional circumstances (degree of institutionalization), reputation have impact on how organizations respond on change. By viewing identity according to the model here presented increased management knowledge of new universities’ transition to higher levels of efficiency and engagement in industry and society affairs might be achieved, also a) enhance decision making data for strategic priority work in new universities, b) enhanced decision

making data for building premises and artifact design, c) improved working environment for employees and students, d) improved quality in teachers work and students learning, e) scientific contribution to theories about organizational identity, especially concerning how to deal with fragmented identities in new universities' strategic work, f) improved knowledge about new university reputation and how reputation by distinctive acts in order to strengthen organizational image, identity and reputation might be undertaken.

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