



# Student corporate brand identification: an exploratory case study

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate student corporate brand identification towards three closely-linked corporate brands: a UK university, a leading UK business school and an overseas collaborative partner institute in Asia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses a theory-building case study within the phenomenological/qualitative research tradition.

**Findings** – The strength of student identification with a corporate brand is predicated on awareness, knowledge and experience of a brand. The data revealed three types of corporate brand identification. This reflected different modes of student affiliation with the three institutional brands. These student relationships were categorised as follows: brand member (a contractual/legal corporate brand relationship); brand supporter (a trusting corporate brand relationship); and brand owner (a proprietorial corporate brand relationship). In explaining the above, the above states are viewed in terms of a corporate brand identification management hierarchy which reflects different approaches to the management of corporate brands. These are categorised as legalisation, realisation and, finally, (brand) actualisation. Senior managers should strive for brand actualisation.

**Research limitations/implications** – The insights from a single, exploratory, case study might not be generalisable.

**Practical implications** – The paper conceptualises that a bureaucratic/product approach to corporate brand management is more likely to result in low brand identification (legalisation); that a diplomatic/communications management approach is more likely to result in moderate brand identification (realisation) and, finally, that a custodial/brand values and promise management approach is more likely to result in high brand identification (brand actualisation). These categorisations can have a utility in ascertaining the effectiveness and philosophical underpinnings of corporate brand management.

**Originality/value** – The paper examines multiple student identification (towards a university, business school and a non degree-awarding overseas institute).

**Keywords** Business schools, Corporate branding, Brand identity, Franchising, Higher education, Universities

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Aesop's fable of the dispute between the North Wind and the Sun as to which was the strongest provides a salutary reminder that soft power can match, as well as surpass, hard power. You may remember that it was the sun's heat that caused the traveller to

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remove his coat rather than the brute force of the wind's power. There are lessons here for contemporary organisations which might fail to recognise the strength and strategic importance of their corporate brand and the importance of customer, employee and stakeholder (corporate brand) identification. This is especially the case in higher education (HE) where student identification with a corporate brand/identity appears to be of considerable importance and, sometimes, high emotional involvement. As the recent student riot at Shengda Management College in the People's Republic of China demonstrates, student corporate brand identification can be a highly inflammatory issue. When the college decided that the word "Shengda" would appear on degree parchments from Zhengzhou University students felt that this drew unwanted attention to the fact that their degree was not quite "the real thing" (*The Economist*, 2006).

It is sometimes forgotten that the award of a degree accords a student life-long membership of a University and can give an individual an important sense of identification with the corporate brand and as a means of defining the self even well beyond graduation. For instance, graduates of "Oxbridge" in the UK, the "Ivy league" in the USA and the *Grande Ecole* in France have strong life-long affiliation to their alma mater beyond their University years with graduates from such institutions forming a cultural elite and occupying positions of prominence within government and business: graduates of the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* in Paris exemplify this perspective.

Our examination of the relationship between student and institution through the lens of corporate brand identity has led us to the conclusion that students are not so much customers but are; moreover, life-long organisational members of a corporate brand community. As such, the compact between a university or business school corporate brand and its student is a very special one. We believe our examination of student identification with a university/business school and overseas partner institute is one of the first empirical studies of its kind.

Recently, an identity-based perspective has informed our comprehension of corporate brands (Balmer, 2001a, b, 2005; Kapferer, 2002) along with that of corporate marketing (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Moreover, issues of corporate identification from employee (Dutton *et al.*, 1994) and consumer (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) perspectives have emerged as significant strands of thought within both the marketing and organisational behaviour literatures on identity. Not surprisingly, stakeholder corporate identification has been recognised as an important facet of the nascent area of corporate marketing by scholars (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). However, it appears that little in the way of empirical research has taken place in relation to customer identification with corporate brands *per se*, especially in a HE context. Of note, is Mael and Ashforth's (1992) study on alumni identification. However, their article focuses on institutional identity rather than on corporate brand identity.

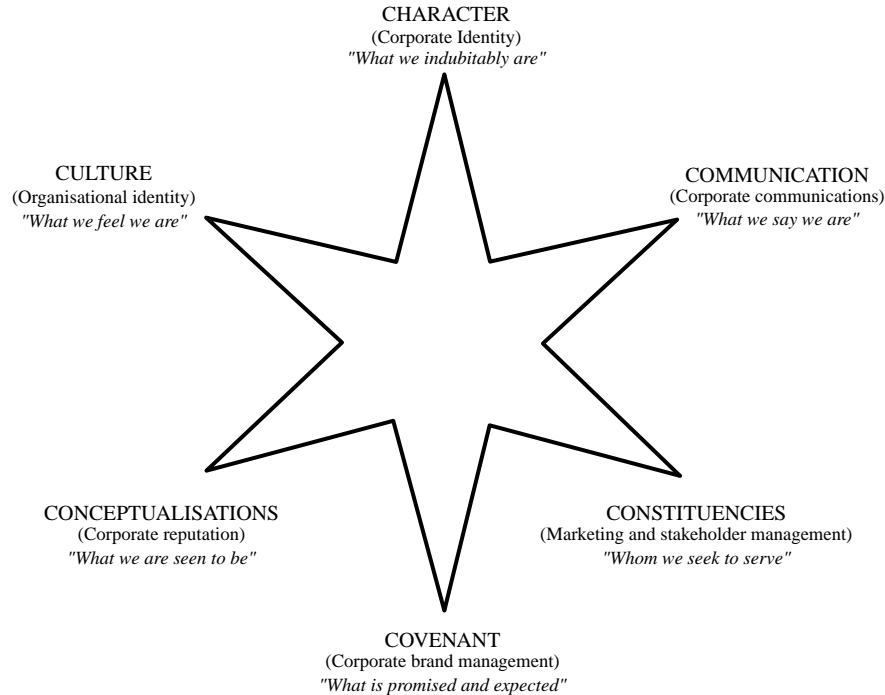
From our scrutiny of the HE sector, it would seem that senior managers are beginning to examine their institutions through a corporate branding lens. However, the degree of importance attached to corporate branding varies between institutions as it does between countries. For instance, corporate brand building appears to be higher up the food chain among North American Universities – especially Business Schools – in contrast to many (but by no means all) of their European counterparts where scepticism often abounds *vis-à-vis* the utility of corporate brand management. From our experience, it would appear

that such ambivalence sometimes manifests itself towards other dimensions of corporate marketing[1] (Balmer, 1998, 2006; Balmer and Greyser, 2002) such as corporate communications (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2001; Goodman, 2001; Karaosmanoglu and Melewar, 2006; Varey and White, 2000; Yamauchi, 2001; Van Riel, 1995).

Taking a broader perspective, it has been argued that corporate level concepts (corporate brands, corporate identity, corporate communications, corporate reputation, etc.) should not be seen, or managed, in isolation of each other but, rather, should be viewed as part of a broader gestalt and organisational philosophy: that of corporate marketing (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). Figure 1 shows Balmer's (2006) corporate marketing mix and shows the prominence of corporate branding and corporate communications within a corporate marketing context. What does appear to be the case is that increased competition within the HE sector has resulted in vice chancellors of leading universities and deans of top business schools acknowledging the strategic importance of having strong corporate brands. As the Dean of RSM Erasmus University Rotterdam, Professor van Dissel, noted:

Because of Bologna [the Bologna Accord], we realised we were operating in a market that would move from product branding to institutional branding ... We have to brand our institution, which is far more effective than branding the MBA (*Financial Times*, 2006, p. 8).

This shift towards a corporate brand management (and by inference increased importance to corporate communications and taking a broader perspective, corporate marketing)



**Figure 1.**  
The 6cs of the corporate  
marketing

**Source:** Balmer (2006)

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has resulted, it seems to us, to a more student and stakeholder-oriented approach within the HE sector. As such, stakeholder identification with HE brands is likely to be a corollary concern on the part of senior managers.

Our research examines student identification at the level of the corporate brand and provides some preliminary insights into this somewhat under-explored area. We focus on undergraduates reading for business studies degrees at one UK university (including those undergraduates studying at an overseas collaborative partner institution). We investigate three different groups of students:

- (1) studying in UK home programme;
- (2) studying in overseas collaborative programme; and
- (3) who started their degree in overseas collaborative programme and who have now transferred to the UK home programme.

A distinctive feature of our study is that we examine student identification at three levels: with the degree awarding UK University; the UK service provider and lastly, the overseas local provider.

### **Corporate brand franchising in UK universities**

Progressively, universities “export” their degree courses to overseas countries by entering into franchise partnerships with locally-based institutions. This, of course, mirrors the increased incidence and importance of franchising in the contemporary global environment (Holly and Stanworth, 2002). The value of franchising activities in HE has grown exponentially during the last decade as HE institutions, as well as governments, have increasingly recognised the enormous potential of overseas markets for UK universities. Franchising arrangements are indicative of the increased importance of corporate branding within the British HE sector. Recently, it was estimated that the above activities are worth £3.6 billion to the UK economy (Universities UK, 2006). Furthermore, HE collaborative programmes offer distinctive benefits to five, distinct, groupings namely, the UK and overseas governments; UK universities; overseas partner institutions and, finally, students.

The British Government recognises the important economic and cultural influence of these programmes whilst overseas governments appreciate their significance in terms of knowledge transfer and moreover the economic benefits that flows from having a highly educated workforce. UK universities derive financial benefits from income streams generated through franchising and (by working with local providers) affords such institutions a relatively easy means of entering overseas markets. Overseas partner institutions benefit from marshalling the “corporate brand” power of established, and well-regarded, UK universities. In addition, they benefit from the generic industry-wide corporate brand that encompasses the UK university sector. This accords them benefits in terms of corporate brand prestige, market differentiation and a widening of their service portfolio. Finally, for students, there are benefits in taking a degree from a respected UK university whilst studying locally in a culturally-familiar setting, where costs are lower. Such degree programmes often lead to enhanced employment opportunities (Fallshaw, 2003).

The management literature on the HE sector has primarily focussed on problems associated with operational issues relating to internationalisation (Yu, 1996; Teichler, 1999; Dobson and Holttä, 2001; Altbach, 2004), the effectiveness of advertising and the

use of promotional material (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Gray *et al.*, 2003), study relating to alumni use of affinity cards (Worthington and Horne's, 1995), the competitive advantages and success factors of the marketing of universities (Mazzarol, 1998; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999) and, more recently, issues of quality assurance and control within the HE sector (Lloyd and Wiser, 2006; Fallshaw, 2003). Again, we wish to reiterate that we were unable to find a study that examined student identification with a HE corporate brand.

For the main, we found that the general marketing literature conceives students, in conventional terms, as customers (Kotler and Fox, 1995; Siu and Wilson, 1998; Armstrong, 2003). However, it has been argued that student should be seen as partners (Ferris, 2002, 2003). We go further. For us, a student is not only a consumer/customer/client of a university but is also a life long member/co-owner of the institution's corporate brand.

### **Corporate branding: corporate identity perspectives**

In recent years, branding scholarship has gradually widened to encompass, products, services and corporations. Even arcane institutions such as the British Monarchy are now viewed through the lens of corporate branding (Balmer *et al.*, 2006). Scholarly interest in corporate brand has burgeoned since the mid-1990s and an extensive literature now characterises the area (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Aaker, 2004; Balmer, 1995; Balmer and Gray, 2003; de Chernatony, 2002; de Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2002; Schultz and de Chernatony, 2002; Gylling and Lindberg-Repor, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Kapferer, 2002; Keller and Lehmann, 2005; Knox and Bickerton, 2003; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006; Uggla, 2006). Although certain features of branding theory are broadly applicable across all three branding categories, there are notable differences among them (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1993). Within the literature (Balmer and Gray, 2003; de Chernatony, 2002, 2006; Hatch and Schultz, 2001) a consensus has emerged as to some of the distinctive differences between corporate brands and product brands. For example, the CEO is the corporate brand manager, and all personnel are seen to be corporate brand spokespersons. The distinction, however, between corporate and service brands is not always so clear and can lead to schisms between those who take a monolithic approach to branding theory in contrast to those who adopt a more bespoke view (Abimbola, 2006).

Just as an identity-based perspective has informed the general comprehension of product brands the same is true with regard to corporate brands (Balmer, 2001a, b, 2005; Simoes and Dibb, 2001; Kapferer, 2002; de Chernatony, 2002). As such, our discussion of corporate brands, and the general understanding of them, has been informed by the literature on corporate identity and identification (Abratt, 1989; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Balmer, 1995, 2001a, b; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Balmer and Wilkinson, 1991; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Bick *et al.*, 2003; Brønn *et al.*, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2006; Cardador and Pratt, 2006; Melewar, 2001; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Melewar *et al.*, 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Simoes *et al.*, 2005; Stuart, 1999; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997).

Within the marketing literature, three principal schools of thought tend to characterise research and scholarship on corporate identity and identification. Of course, it should be realised that broader perspectives on the area can be found within the literature (Balmer, 1995; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2007;

He and Balmer, 2005, 2007). These three schools of thought are broadly analogous to the different ways in which corporate brands can be understood and researched. The three schools of thought are as follows:

- (1) visual corporate brand identification;
- (2) corporate brand identity; and
- (3) customer and stakeholder corporate brand identification.

Of course, the three schools of thought cited here should not necessarily be conceived to be mutually exclusive. From the authors' standpoint we believe that all three schools are germane to our comprehension of the corporate branding territory as elaborated in this paper.

#### *Visual corporate brand identification*

Just as corporate identity was originally conceptualised in terms of visual identification (Margulies, 1977; Napoles, 1988; Olins, 1978; Pilditch, 1971; Selame and Selame, 1975) the same is true of branding with the brand-mark having an important role as an identifying mark/mark of ownership (de Chernatony and McDonald, 1993; de Chernatony, 2006). Visual identification remains an important aspect of corporate branding/corporate identity scholarship (Abratt, 1989; Foo and Lowe, 2001; Melewar, 2001; Schroeder, 2005; Stuart, 1999; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006; Van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Westcott Alessandri, 2001). It also characterises some of the more recent work emanating from the USA (Brown *et al.*, 2006). Broadly speaking, the above school emphasises the important role of projecting a single image to a corporate brand community via symbolism/visual identity and has the objective of creating a stereotype and positive image of the corporate brand among stakeholder groups.

#### *Corporate brand identity*

Just as corporate identity scholarship (Balmer, 1995, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2002; Simoes *et al.*, 2005; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Westcott Alessandri, 2001) has, increasingly, focussed on the defining characteristics of an organisation (corporate identity) so have the defining characteristics of corporate brand been stressed in the literature. Whereas corporate identity scholarship emphasises the centrality of strategy, structure and culture of corporate identity (Balmer, 2001a, b, 2002; Melewar and Jenkins, 2002; Bick *et al.*, 2003) the literature on corporate branding emphasises the importance of corporate values, coordinated corporate communications and consistency in corporate brand promise (Balmer, 2001a, b; de Chernatony, 2002; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Kapferer, 2002; Urde, 2003; Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2006).

#### *Customer and stakeholder corporate brand identification*

Customer and stakeholder identification, broadly speaking, relates to the degree to which an individual's, or groups, affinity with an organisation mirrors the distinctive characteristics of an organisation (Dutton *et al.*, 1994). It is not difficult to see how this perspective is applicable to corporate brands. For instance, it has been shown that employee identification towards an organisation is stronger where the organisation is associated with high quality attributes. Such association accords an individual or a group prestige (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Dukerich *et al.*, 2002; Pratt, 1998). Marketing scholars such as Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) have drawn on this scholarship in



order to examine customer-company identification. However, little work has been undertaken with regard to corporate brand identification *per se*.

One relevant, and recent, stream of research highlights the importance of brand communities (Cova and Pace, 2006; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002) and the related notion of brand tribes (Arnauld *et al.*, 2002; Solomon, 2003). For the main, the above research focuses around cult brands but little (if anything) appears to be related to corporate brands, especially those relating to HE.

In reflecting of the above, we believe that our research is distinctive in that it:

- focuses on corporate brand identification;
- examines student identification within HE both in UK and Asian contexts; and
- examines student identification towards three HE institutions (a UK university; a UK business and an Overseas Partner Educational Institute operating in Asia).

### Objectives and methodology

The research settings for our investigation were:

- a well-established UK business school based at;
- an established UK university sited in an English Cathedral city; and
- a Collaborative Partner Institution operating in Asia (which delivers degree programmes from the university/business school).

Our exploratory case study research investigates the nature of student identification among three, distinct, categories of undergraduate students reading for a business degree from a single, UK university. It has an explicit internal/institutional, foci in that we examine student identification towards:

- (1) the degree awarding university in the UK;
- (2) its business school; and
- (3) an overseas collaborative partner education institute in Asia.

A qualitative approach was assumed for this study since our objectives were to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world (Van Maanen, 1988). A theory building case study methodology was deemed appropriate since this approach is most appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon (student identification towards competing corporate brands) and where in consequence there can be little reliance on the literature (Gill and Johnson, 1991, p. 119). In addition, case study research is a useful strategy for studying processes in organisations and for explanatory/exploratory investigations (Gummesson, 1991). The efficacy of case study research has been made by a number of prominent scholars (Stake, 1987; Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989) as has the utility of relying on a single case study (Normann, 1970). A recent example of the above methodological approach in relation to branding can be found in the study by Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006).

Data collection was undertaken via focus group discussions with students both in the UK and Asia. As such, students voiced their responses to our questions relating to their type and strength of identification to the three corporate brands under scrutiny. An interview topic guide was used to frame focus group discussions. All interviews

were recorded and transcribed and followed a three stage coding process that is common in qualitative research namely, open-coding/axial-coding/selective coding (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002). Data were coded by hand rather than by using computer software. In terms of the triangulation of data this was achieved *via* the three sources of information that was generated during the focus group discussions, namely:

- (1) data given in direct response to a question;
- (2) data given in response to a pertinent question not given in the topic guide; and
- (3) unsolicited-additional information provided by one or more students.

The process of analysis/synthesis was both iterative and corroborative in nature. Frequent and long meetings were held between both researchers which fostered a greater in-depth, and critical, understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Following the general protocol of qualitative research, our collection, analysis and interpretation of data took place simultaneously (Gummesson, 2005).

### Findings

Our research results provide two categories of findings. The first finding revealed there to be three types of student identification which we characterise as brand member, brand supporter and brand owner. The second finding suggested that when an overtly managerial perspective is adopted three approaches appear to characterise the management of corporate brand identification which we call legalisation, realisation and actualisation. As such legalisation is more likely to lead to students seeing themselves as brand members whereas realisation leads to students viewing themselves as brand supporters and actualisation leads to students regarding themselves as brand owners.

#### *Categories of corporate brand identification*

The category of brand member defined the purely contractual and legal relationship that undergraduates at the collaborative partner institution in Asia had with the British university. The category of brand supporter reflected the trusting corporate brand relationship that students (originally from the collaborative partner institution but now studying in the UK) had with the business school. Finally, the category of brand “owner” reflected the emotional ownership/relationship that UK undergraduates had with the business school.

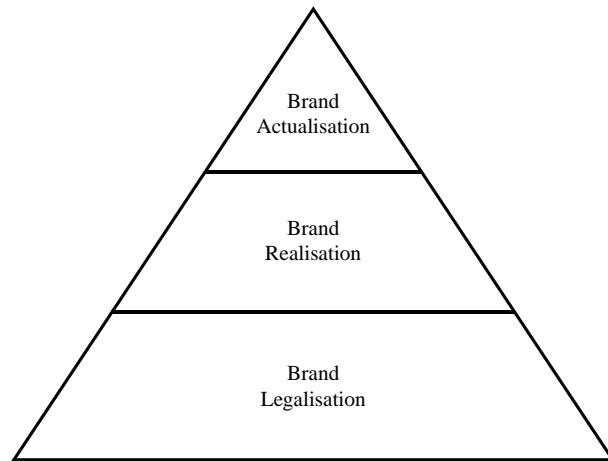
#### *Categories of corporate brand management*

In explaining the above, we view this as a corporate brand identification management hierarchy which we label legalisation, realisation and, finally, (brand) actualisation (Figure 2). Legalisation is where both corporate brand manifestations and student identification with the corporate brand are low and appears to characterise an institutional concern with financial, functional and legal concerns. Realisation is where both corporate brand manifestations and student identification with the corporate brand are moderate in degree and appears to characterise an institutional concern with the symbolic and the promotional management of corporate brands. Actualisation is where both corporate brand manifestations and student identification with the corporate brand are high and where undergraduates have a proprietorial/emotional relationship with the brand. Institutionally, there appears to be a concern with brand values and “the corporate brand promise”. Senior managers should, we conclude, strive for brand actualisation.



**Figure 2.**  
Hierarchy of corporate  
brand identification

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The data suggests that the three categories of student identification cited above are not mutually exclusive. As such, this strongly suggests that student identification with a corporate brand is a complex one. Although, “Actualisation” might best describe a given situation there might still be elements of the brand relationship that can best be described as “Legalisation” (for instance, where corporate communication and behaviour focus on contractual/legal institutional concerns rather than on the compact with stakeholders that underpins a corporate brand). This aspect of our finding merits even further exploration and explication.

Figure 2 shows our hierarchy of corporate brand identification.

Data from our study revealed that the strength of student identification with a corporate brand (as indicated in our corporate brand identification hierarchy) was found to be linked to the following facets:

- Corporate brand reputation and prestige (students were conscious of the reputation and prestige of higher educational brands: they frequently mentioned this point and often made reference to the ranking lists of business schools).
- Corporate brand community (belonging to a distinct brand community was often cited to be of importance by students).
- Corporate ethos and identity (the corporate ethos and the identity traits of a school were found to be of material importance to students).
- Member associations and physical evidence (undergraduates were conscious of the academic quality of fellow students and found the academic standing and professionalism of MBA students to be inspiring).
- Corporate brand differentiation (students often defined their identification with a HE brand by referring to other brands which they regarded to be of inferior quality and which they had weaker identification with).

We found the corollary also to be true, namely that the absence of the above could result in unrequited identification (seeking identification with the university brand on the part

of students in Asia) and non-identification (ignorance of the prestige associated with the business school brand: again from undergraduate students in Asia).

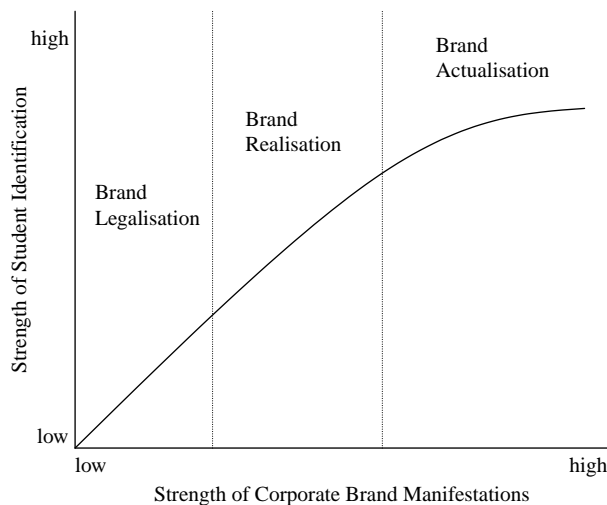
However, it would seem that the above is predicated on a student's awareness, knowledge and experience of a brand. For instance, whereas students studying in the UK had a strong and positive affinity with the business school brand (and a lower affinity to the university brand) undergraduates studying at the overseas partner institute only associate with the University brand. Figure 3 shows our interpretation of the relationship between the strength of student identification and the strength of corporate brand manifestations.

The following section outlines the nature of the findings in more detail relating to the three types of identification articulated above.

#### *Brand member – undergraduates studying at the Asian Partner Institute*

The dominant type of identification at the above was with the group of students at the institute rather than the institute *per se*. At the institutional level, undergraduate's primary identification was, by default rather than by desire, with the collaborative partner institution. However, these students sought to have a strong identification with the University which they understood to be the most prestigious of the HE brands with which they had an association (rather than with the business school). However, incidents of brand manifestations were low or not existent (unlike the above). Their knowledge of the business school was even slighter and may, in several cases, be almost non-existent. In quasi-legal terms these students had a life-long relationship with the school (through the award for life of a degree qualification). This was not the case with the partner institution where membership is terminated upon graduation.

Unlike home undergraduates who, focused on the brand reputation of the business school, these students focussed on the reputation of the university (and perhaps the generic brand reputation of UK universities).



**Figure 3.**  
A conceptual model of the  
relationship between  
student identification and  
corporate brand  
manifestations

*Brand supporter – undergraduates from the API now studying in the UK*

Over time these students shifted their primary affiliation from the collaborative partner institution to the business school's corporate brand. This is interesting since there was an absence of association with the business school's corporate brand prior to their move to the UK. Also, they demonstrated a higher affinity with the business school than with the university. This shift in identification is clearly explained in terms of knowledge, awareness and experience of the business school brand which was absent whilst they were in the collaborative partner institute. We have characterised these groups of undergraduates as brand supporters rather than brand owners.

*Brand owner – undergraduates permanently resident in the UK*

These undergraduates demonstrated a strong emotional and proprietorial attachment to the business school's brand. They noted the importance of the prestige/reputation of the business school brand as being key factors in their decision to apply to study there and they believed it would give them a degree of leverage in the job market. These students had a strong loyalty to the business school's corporate brand and its attendant corporate brand community. Membership of this corporate brand community, it appeared, entailed certain obligations and responsibilities such as meeting certain standards of work and setting an example to the first year undergraduates. Post graduation they wished to be linked to the corporate brand community of the school as well as to the university. In the focus group interview, they communicated that the school had a clear corporate brand ethos and identity. The symbolic manifestations of the corporate brand (distinctive "posh" architecture) and the professional behaviour of MBA students were (to them) clear manifestations of the quality and prestige of the brand. Comparisons were made with the prestige of the university at large whose brand was perceived to be good but of an inferior quality *vis-à-vis* the business school's brand.

## **Management implications**

*Corporate brand management generally*

From our interpretation of the above we believe there to be three, broad, approaches to the management of corporate brands in the institutions examined here (legalisation, realisation and actualisation). These approaches are, perhaps, analogous to the product, sales and marketing/corporate marketing evolutionary stages that characterises the marketing discipline (Balmer and Greyser, 2006). We also go on to make some general observations in terms of the important role of corporate communicators *vis-à-vis* corporate brand management in the section that follows.

As a means of assisting those managers having responsibility for the corporate brands of business schools we characterise each of the above modes by a series of questions/explanations. We conclude that approach 1 (a bureaucratic/product emphasis to corporate brand management) is to be avoided; that approach 2 (a diplomatic/communications approach) represents a considerable improvement but should be viewed as an interim stage to 3. A custodial/brand values approach should be seen as the ideal approach to be followed in managing a corporate brand in the HE sector.

### **Approach 1 "legalisation"**

*Question.* Do you see your obligations to the management of corporate brand identification in legal terms? Is little/no importance accorded to corporate

communications/symbolic management? Do you take little/no account of the elements comprising the corporate marketing mix?

If the answer is “yes” to the above then it would appear that your institution has adopted a bureaucratic/product management approach to its corporate brand and is likely to result in low brand identification on the part of students (student regarding their status as being that of brand members: see earlier discussion). Your approach is, essentially, a legalistic one and you should make a strategic move towards 2 and 3 outlined below.

### **Approach 2 “realisation”**

*Question.* In addition to your legal obligations towards students do you see the management of corporate brand identification primarily in terms of effective corporate communications/symbolic management? Do you marshal only part of the corporate marketing mix?

If the answer is “yes” to the above then it would appear that your institution has adopted a diplomatic/communications approach to its corporate brand and is likely to result in a moderate degree of brand identification on the part of students (students regarding their status as being that of brand supporters: see earlier discussion).

### **Approach 3 “actualisation”**

*Question.* Do you adopt a custodial/brand values approach to the management of corporate brand identification and ensure that there is alignment between brand promise and corporate identity? In addition to your legal obligations towards students and the care taken in terms of corporate communications/symbolic management do you see ownership of the corporate brand as residing with students? Do you marshal all elements of the corporate marketing mix?

If the answer is “yes” to the above then-broadly speaking-a custodial/brand values approach has been adopted by your institution and this is likely to result in a high degree of brand identification on the part of students (students regarding their status as being that of brand owners: see earlier discussion).

### *Corporate brand managers and the role of corporate communicators*

We wish to make several, very general, observations in terms of the important role of corporate communicators *vis-à-vis* the management of corporate brand identification within business school contexts. From our research it would appear that for students studying overseas a greater reliance needs to be placed on corporate communications/symbolic management in instilling a sense of identification with the business school brand. The importance of the above is of especial importance owing to the spatial void where there is no exposure to an organisational setting. For this reason, identification from the institution (in terms of corporate communications) appears to be an important pre-requisite in terms of identification with the corporate brand on the part of students. Moreover, the absence of effective corporate communications/symbolic management may create an identification vacuum that is likely to be filled by the local service provider. Of course, the notion that communication fosters knowledge and awareness is hardly a new finding but our study confirms the importance of this and of corporate communications in corporate branding contexts. There are, now, many approaches and frameworks that can foster

effective corporate communications strategies (Scholes and Clutterbuck, 1988; Van Riel, 1995).

Figure 4 shows on the findings and managerial implications from this research in a diagrammatic form that illustrates the relationship between corporate brand identification, status, relationships and management styles and emphasis.

**Further research**

The next stage of our inquiry will be to empirically test the insights derived from this case study. As such, we will examine issues of student identification with corporate identities/corporate brands in a variety of institutional settings. This next stage of inquiry has the potential to clarify the findings outlined here and will, almost certainly, provide new insights.

Other possibilities for research could include a longitudinal study which tracks the nature of undergraduate identification throughout their time at a university/business school. Research which investigates the relative strength of identification among high performing students, as opposed to weaker ones, would also represent a potentially rich strand of inquiry. Other types of corporate brand identification would also merit scrutiny from researchers, for instance:

- Departmental/university identification (for instance, the Department of Music at York *vis-à-vis* the University of York).
- College/university identification (the collegiate Universities of Cambridge, Durham and Oxford being cases in point. For instance, the relative strength and type of student identification with the brand of constituent colleges or of university).

CASE STUDY INSIGHTS		FURTHER RESEARCH (RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS)	
CORPORATE BRAND IDENTIFICATION		MANAGEMENT	
STATUS	RELATIONSHIP	MANAGEMENT STYLE	MANAGEMENT EMPHASIS
Member	Legal	Bureaucratic	Product Management (financial & functional)
Supporter	Trusting	Diplomatic	Communication Management (promotional & symbolic)
Owner	Emotional	Custodial	Brand Management (values & promise)

**Figure 4.**  
Case study insights and  
further research  
proposition

- College/university identification in federated institutions (the University of London being a case in point for example identification with Royal Holloway College/the University of London).
- The impact of national/cultural identification on Universities identification (the impact of country of origin and generic identity in terms of a stakeholder's identification with a university/business school brand, for instance, the relative strength of identification towards Australian, British, Chinese, French, Swiss, Swedish and USA brands among stakeholders. In addition, the degree to which country of origin is aligned to strength of suitability for certain subject areas including marketing, medicine, meta physics, micro biology, music and so on).
- Strength of identification among holders of bachelor, and postgraduate degrees in different institutions. (What are the causes for an alumnus primary affinity to shift from one institution to another?)
- Differences in culture and their effect on identification (Souiden *et al.*, 2006) (extant research by Souiden *et al.* (2006) has shown that differences of culture can effect corporate brand identification and this line of scholarship could, usefully, be applied to the HE sector).

Other possibilities for academic inquiry include the preference (in national, cultural and international contexts) of organisational symbolism as indicators of esteem and prestige. For instance, the prestige that prospective students, employers, etc. associate with certain symbolic forms such as a heraldry and typeface; the importance attached to university ritual and rites of passage (such as matriculation and graduation ceremonies) and the wearing of academic dress. There was evidence from our study, that overseas students accord importance to the presence of such symbolism associated with corporate brand heritage.

In non-further education contexts issues of customer identification could be examined in relation to, for instance, customer identification to organisations/organisational alliances and generic (industry-wide) identities and corporate brands (for instance the degree of affinity to an airline; an airline alliance and airlines generally). From an employee perspective an investigation into the various types of identification that characterise franchise arrangement are likely to be revelatory (for instance, an examination of employee identification towards the franchisee and franchisor holders: such as a company holding a franchising license from a hotel brand such as Hilton). Issues of identification are likely to be germane for other stakeholder groups such as shareholders, suppliers, governments, local communities and so on. A further, and potentially rich source of investigation, could be to examine issues of identification from the perspective of faculty members, and would be employees.

## Conclusion

In bringing our paper to a close it is clear that issues of student corporate brand identification represent a significant but under-researched area of scholarship that merits further explication. The distinguished Harvard academic, Professor Joseph Nye (2006) coined the phrase “soft power” to denote the influence a nation acquires when others are drawn to its culture and ideas. We believe that much the same can be said of overseas students who are drawn to those universities and business schools whose corporate brands are held in high regard and whose degree are increasingly



offered by overseas collaborative partner institutions. As this modest theory-building case study on corporate brands and identities has revealed that which appears to be “soft” can also be immensely strong: very much like the Sun in Aesop’s fable and very much like the latent power of corporate brands. The competitive leverage afforded by corporate brands is something that policy advisors within universities, business schools and other HE institutions, might wish to ponder on as part of their strategic deliberations.

#### Note

1. The elements of the corporate marketing mix have undergone several reiterations. Balmer’s most recent version of the corporate marketing mix (the 6Cs of corporate marketing) encompasses: character, communication, constituencies, covenant, conceptualisation and culture.

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**Further reading**

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