390 University identity: statutes and architectures

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Abstract

Drawing on Baudrillard's work on simulacra, this study aims to contribute to the OI literature by examining the statements and symbols of university identities. In a competitive environment, isomorphic processes challenge autonomy and standardise cultural processes. The well-established OI literature reflects a growing interest in organisational dynamics and is mainly limited to entrepreneurial organisations. While logos and slogans have been studied, statutes and architectures have been less explored. This research focuses on two Italian private universities. The results show that university identity is embodied in core values shared by the community. University culture is expressed through identity statements in the statutes, thus revealing the cultural matrix. The representation of identity through buildings, symbolic artefacts and location leaves impressions on stakeholders. Finally, statutes and architecture function as signs when they are not so far from the core values due to isomorphism. A new model of identity tools is proposed.

Full paper

This research investigates the role of statutes and architectures in shaping the organisational identity (OI) of universities. In a competitive environment, distinctive identity traits become crucial to strengthen the ranks of a quantitatively growing and qualitatively evolving community caused by isomorphic processes that challenge autonomy and standardise cultural processes in a neo-liberal vision. Current OI literature reflects a growing interest in organisational dynamics and is extensive and well-established. However, studies are confined mainly to entrepreneurial organisations; the literature on university identity is relatively new in higher education research. This study aims to contribute to the OI literature by examining the statements and symbols of university identities. If branding processes have been deeply studied with their tools being examined in depth (trademarks, slogans etc.), in contrast, statutes (statements) and architectures (symbols) appear to have been less explored. My fundamental research question (RQ) aims at exploring this gap: how universities shape their identity through statutes and architectures. From my central RQ, I investigate three additional sub-questions: RQ1 How do the core values shape a university's identity? RQ2 How do the statements of identity shape a university's image? RQ3 How do a university's identity and image shape its reputation?

To analyse these concepts, this research will focus on a sample of two Italian private universities and adopt a dual case study approach. The dual case approach allowed to highlight analogies and differences: both are niche universities but different in core mission and location. The research method combined semi-structured interviews and visual prompts. The data sources consisted of semi-structured interviews with governance members, faculty members, managers, students, and other stakeholders; the corpus of internal laws; the maps of the campuses and tiers, and photos of the buildings. The data analysis offers a cloud of words and a triptych of photos.

Informed by Baudrillard's work on simulation and simulacra, the literature of organisational identity dynamics theories and higher education studies are combined, highlighting how the role of statutes and architectures interplay between organisational identity, image and culture in a university's identity representation. My work analysed the expressing and impressing shifts of identity dynamics emerging from Hatch and Schultz's seminal work (2002) and Ravasi's revision (2016), moving from core values to identity statements, from identity statements to desired image, from desired image to reputation. The literature analysis highlights the relationship between the organisational dynamics and the four phases of Baudrillard's (2009) decomposition of the image: starting from the "sacramental order", where the sign represents proof of identity, and advancing to the "hyper-reality", where the sign is a pure simulacrum having no relationship to reality.

The findings reveal that the university's identity is embodied in the core values shared by the academic, student and managerial community. The sense of belonging cements the community's bricks, consisting of professors, staff, and students, until after graduation. This feeling also boosts the defensive force of the members against attacks on the university's reputation. Second, the university culture manifests itself through identity statements reported in statutes; these represent the university community's cultural background. To reduce the risk of identity dilution, the legal documents that report identity claims need to more correspondent to the institution's core values. The identity representation provided by buildings, symbolic artefacts, and localisation leaves impressions on community members and stakeholders. Finally, statutes and architectures function as signs if they are not taken so far from the institution's core values as to lose a connection with reality by the mimetic, normative and coercive isomorphism effect. The findings suggest that identity tools such as statutes and architectures must be linked to identity management if there is a desire to minimise dissonance between the university's core values and its representations and avoid misrepresentations that could create false impressions in stakeholders.

This research is relevant from a university governance perspective: preserving a distinctive identity by ensuring coherence between the different expressions of core values. To improve governance processes can be suggested: expressing the identity of the university community in statements can help to highlight core values. The internal regulation system, controlled by the intermediary's agency, must more directly reflect the values pursued. The omissions, probably due to controls, lead to unintended removals. The external physical constraints must be used and valorised as opportunities for cultural links.

References

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