

The University Identity: Communication of Identity Themes

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Abstract

Earlier research has brought organizational identity to the fore as an institutional response to the developments in higher education field. Following literature, this study aims to examine the organizational identity of universities through an analysis of themes communicated at their websites. The study findings reveal that participant universities communicate five common identity themes institutionalized by higher education field. Among these themes, social values presented to the society for belongingness and capacity for enriching main university functions are found out to be most communicated themes. The findings also show that each university communicates distinct themes that still fall under these five common themes. Therefore, the study presents that distinct themes symbolizing the uniqueness claim of the university identity emerge within the pre-determined theme categories in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

The recent trend of internationalization has increased the competition in higher education field and led to the dominance of business-like management (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Stensaker, 2015). Further, the increase in privately-owned or foundation-based universities has completely changed characteristics and development of higher education. As a consequence, the understanding of university experience as a 'commodity' to be marketed and sold has never been as explicit as it is today. Alongside this shift, there is an increasingly relentless race between universities to acquire high quality staff, students, and administrators together with substantial donations that can create a difference in value. In other words, while trying to maintain academic quality and integrity, universities also compete for public and private financial support. Consequently, all of these changes have created a more competitive and dynamic environment for universities.

Specifically, the construction of a strong organizational identity is proposed as a tool to gain competitive advantage and to meet expectations of various internal and external stakeholders of the university (MacDonald, 2013). Thereby representing the character of the university, identity acts not only as a cultural tool but also as a strategic element for positioning in the market (Stensaker, 2015).

Besides, an organizational identity creates a common shared language functioning as the "glue" that binds the organization and stakeholders together. The shared language also plays an important role as the basis for "social processes and interactions required for identity formation" (Postmes, 2003: 11), and becomes one of the "central variables for determining an organization's identity" (Aust, 2004: 516).

Literature provides various studies on the process of identity construction (Czarniawska and Wolff, 1998; Gioia et al., 2010) and on the role of identity in times of change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; MacDonald, 2013). Based on previous researches, this study analyses the identity themes communicated in reflecting the university identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Identity

The commonly used definition of organizational identity refers to the perception that an organization has "central, distinctive and enduring characteristics" (Albert and Whetten, 1985:265). Although the organization is distinct in certain ways, it still shares certain features with others in its field. Further, the organizational identity relies on its members' agreement that "the organization has certain distinctive features, that it differs from others in certain respects over time, and that its distinctive features characterize the organization in different situations and across various themes, such as decisions, actions, and policies" (Alvesson and Empson, 2008: 2). Accordingly, the distinctiveness and continuity of an identity's features are crucial both for individuals and organizations (Whetten and Mackey, 2002). Who we are as an organization should include what the organization was yesterday; similarly from yesterday to today, an organization's identity features should also distinguish it from other organizations. Whereas identity at the individual level is determined by many characteristics that are inherent to the individual, organizational identity refers to "a set of categorical identity claims in reference to a specified set of institutionally standardized social categories" (Whetten and Mackey, 2002: 397).

In both sociological and organizational studies, the identity construction process has caught the attention of many researchers. As an early example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) highlight the role of social processes on identity formation. For Berger and Luckmann (1966), identity is affected by social structure and social interchanges. As well as discussions on the social processes of identity formation, the literature addresses two other lines of enquiry. The first involves industry norms and

other organizational forms in that given industry. The second brings the founder of the organization to the fore suggesting that an organization's identity is mainly shaped by the founders, their vision and values (Gioia et al., 2010). To this view, values of the founder have the main impact on shaping and constructing the organizational identity.

The formation and dissemination of organizational identity through organizational communication requires special attention in order to understand the concept of organizational identity. In this context, the significance of organizational communication is based on its role in explaining organizational identity and in reflecting its distinctiveness and similarities compared to others in the field.

In this context, the language used when expressing organizational identity can be a tool for identity analyses based on the premise that "identities are socially constructed through language" (Fiol, 2002: 653). The discourse used to communicate identity is also critical as the 'self-other' discourse defines what the organization stands for (Gioia et al., 2010). In other words, for claimed distinction, the communicating themes of that given discourse is of significant importance to emphasize differentiation of "the organization from the others in general and in specific comparisons" (Whetten and Mackey, 2002: 396). Moreover, dialogue with reference groups is another contributing factor for constructing or developing the identity (Välimaa, 1998) and can also be the expression of belonging to a certain type of organizational form. The impact of dialogue can also be seen in the transmission of organizational messages that express organizational values for public acceptance (Bostdorff and Vibbert 1994).

Correspondingly, identity themes can be communicated "in any content generated by the organization, such as its website content, its newsletters, published speeches, social media posts, news releases, and so on" (Huang-Horowitz and Freberg, 2016: 199). Thereby based on the previous research, the current study aims to examine the concept of university identity through analyzing the identity themes reflected in their websites.

The University Identity

University identity is a multidimensional concept (Balmer and Wilson, 1998; Steiner et al., 2013) because the university has to address diverse audiences. As well as being multi-layered, the university also has to offer some unique features that will distinguish it from other competing peers. In line with this view, MacDonald (2013: 154) defined university identity as "the central and ongoing representations of a university that suggest shared beliefs, values, and its organizational culture, which over time create metaphors for its unique qualities".

As mentioned in the previous section, the development of identity is a dialogue-based process with other parties in the environment (Välimaa, 1998). From this perspective, universities are like other organizations in communicating their shared features and their uniqueness within the academia. However, this is particularly challenging for the newly-established universities as they are expected to be able to adequately answer questions such as "who they are" and "what they offer to attract both prospective students and the academic staff" (Steiner et al., 2013: 405).

Also when communicating the university identity, both historical and strategic layers have to be taken into consideration (Steiner et al., 2013). That's to say, the university's history, culture and strategies have to be analysed to have a profound understanding of the identity development (Van den Bosch et al., 2005; Steiner et al., 2013). In addition, nostalgia and shared storylines have been shown to be important elements in understanding the construction process of organizational identities (Brown and Humphreys, 2002). Stories and other socio-cultural narratives are elements that symbolize historically-enduring and socially-unique features of an identity (Clark, 1972; Martin et al., 1983; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Similarly, narrations of a university's history are among the main contributors of identity formation. One of the earliest examples of research in this area is

Clark's (1972) study analysing the enduring features of three liberal arts institutions' identities through narrative analysis. Clark's study (1972) underlines the importance of historical events in the institutions' identity formation and how these events affected organizational members' perceptions of organizational identity.

Buildings, logos, and advertising are other facets of organizational communication that present the identity of a university and differentiate it from its counterparts (Cornelissen et al., 2007). As well as such physical artefacts; rhetorical frames, devices and strategies are also employed to construct and display the organizational identity (Moufahim, 2015). Further communication means can be mission statements, pamphlets, brochures and websites for the university identity representations. For instance, a recent study by Kosmützky and Krücken (2015) provide empirical evidence that universities communicate their differences through their mission statements. For the authors, mission statements' role of transforming the generic features of what is expected from a university, and the role of emphasizing the differences between them and other competing universities place mission statements firmly within the university identity construction process. Another contribution made by Lowrie (2007) highlights the role of communication in reflecting the university identity to diverse audiences through the discourses used in marketing activities. His findings (2007) illustrate that in the development process of a university identity, the logic of a plurality of identities should be considered because of the necessity for addressing to diverse audiences. Lowrie (2007) comes to the conclusion that this multi-faced feature of identity offers richness as well as a challenge in the identity construction.

In addition to the studies mentioned above, Stensaker and Norgård (2001) discuss that universities have to respond to strong pressures both from academic circles for research excellence and from international educational circles for standardization. Studying a Norwegian university from 1969 to 1999, Stensaker and Norgård (2001) demonstrate that the organizational identity of the university can be a tool for overcoming these pressures coming from the external environment. However, to the authors, trying to reconcile their historical, taken-for-granted institutional routines with regulations required for standardization has made it difficult for universities to create dynamic identities. The analysis by O'Kane et al. (2015) of how Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) build legitimacy through communicating values, and shape identity alongside university academics and management, is another study about the role of communication on identity formation and acceptance. Their findings confirm that communication is an important tool for TTOs to acquire legitimacy and establish their own identity in the university.

Identity Communication through Websites

The construction of an organizational identity is a dynamic process that takes place in the communication between insiders and outsiders (Coupland and Brown, 2004; Gioia et al., 2010). As a form of communication, the website is a channel that is chosen for interactive communication, information-sharing, and the gaining of public attention. Besides, the official website acts as an identity card representing an online presence (Simões et al., 2015) that is in line with the strategic aims of organizational communication.

The website also differs from other communication channels as it presents the organization with "a multiplicity of its facets" (Esrock and Leichty, 2000: 330). That's to say, an organization's mission and vision statements, core values, founders, leaders, managerial and administrative staff along with its physical and non-physical features are all presented in the website for various publics. Further, the organization introduces not only its present status but also its historical heritage through its website. Additionally, the organization's archives and the narratives related to its history are visualized and expressed on the websites.

As a communication platform, the website is also noteworthy for being unique, simple, accessible, and versatile; especially useful for introducing an organizational identity. Considered from this aspect, the website is generally the “first contact and the reference to have” for the public (Simões et al., 2015: 2), and is available 24/7 for gathering information on any kind of organization. For an interpretive analysis, official websites provide a “considerable amount of interesting and relevant text-based information” (Sillince and Brown, 2009: 1836).

A university’s website aims to address as many different audiences as possible with its various pages, including faculty, students and parents, researchers, and donors. Therefore, an analysis of the official university websites offers an opportunity to investigate the communication of organizational identities to the public.

RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

For the study’s research concerns, the qualitative analysis method is adopted. Qualitative analysis offers valuable information as it enables researchers to gather distinct organizational elements to frame identity statements (Van Rekom, 1997). There are many studies in the literature that focus on organizational identity and utilize qualitative methodology, including secondary data analysis (Nag et al., 2007; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), and in-depth interviews (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Clark et al., 2010; Nag et al., 2007; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991).

Prior to the website analysis, the primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with public relations or marketing managers of the universities to provide an initial understanding of identity themes and to generate a coding scheme for the content analysis of the websites. The interview method is specifically used to capture the informants’ perspective and meaning system (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Also, due to their positions and representative roles within their respective organizations, managers are well-placed to grasp the structure of their organizations’ identity and they are more capable of using the language that reflects the shared values, beliefs and perceptions of the organization (Clegg et al., 2007).

It is argued that universities with effective identity representation and recognizable brands are more successful at attracting prospective students and faculty (Curtis et al., 2009) and such efforts are mostly carried out by public relations and marketing departments. Organizational communications through these units are directly related to how universities position themselves and project their identities to others (Van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Cornelissen et al., 2007). Correspondingly, interviews with public relations managers and marketing managers from Ivy League were initially planned as examining their identities would provide greater insight because of their historical and institutional backgrounds and their positions as elite universities. Three e-mails were sent to every public relations and marketing manager at these universities, explaining the study’s research rationale and methodology. No replies were received. The researchers then decided to e-mail every university in the US state of Illinois between December 2014 and March 2015 for requesting participation to the study. Five universities accepted the request.

The interview strategy involved a two-phased data collection process. During the first phase, the researchers conducted four interviews in person and one via Skype with the participant managers. The open-ended interview questions were designed to reveal the most frequently referred themes by the managers and they were encouraged to interrupt and talk about the issues and concepts they wished to emphasize. Before each interview began, a brief introduction was given explaining the rationale for the research. Each interview lasted between 24-48 minutes and was audio-recorded. The main topics explored in the interviews were the general and distinguishing characteristics of the universities’ identities.

The second phase involved asking a colleague of each manager to answer the interview questions in writing, so that the researchers could obtain a second opinion on the identity themes. Each informant was asked whether another member from their department could answer the research questions in writing. Two of the universities did not reply to the request, and one declared that the only person competent to answer the research questions had already participated in our study. The remaining two universities agreed to participate and further information collected sufficient to generate the coding scheme that will be used in content analysis of the websites. The coding scheme generated from the interviews is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. The coding scheme generated from the interviews

Coding Categories	Category Description	Generated Themes from Interviews
Core Function	The reason for existence and establishment. Main functions served by the university.	Education Research
Capacity	Represents the themes stressing the power, ability, and problem solving capacity. Themes reflect the ability in providing the core function.	Collaboration/ Partnership Competitiveness Experience Global Quality Technology-oriented/ Innovation
Social Values	Discretionary responsibilities of the institution. The values highlighted in order to form an attachment and belonging to the university.	Diversity Family Honesty Sense of belonging Serving community Tradition

The thematic content analysis of the interviews enabled the researchers to generate a different set of results identifying the distinctive themes that universities emphasize in their identity communication. The distinctive themes were generated by directly asking the participant managers, 'what are the distinctive identity elements of your university?'. Then, the interview texts were coded by identifying text blocks representing the university's identity elements. This initial coding by the researchers was conducted individually. Each researcher listed the identity themes from the primary data collected during interviews. Then, the researchers merged those identity theme lists and grouped them under main categories according to their meaning in the sentence. In addition researchers asked three other fellow researchers to generate theme categories for these themes. Following this individual coding processes, researchers of this study and the fellow researchers worked together on the theme categories they generated individually to reach an agreement on the coding scheme. The theme categories were generated in order to enable researchers to reduce and simplify the data to allow convenient interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Therefore in the study, the theme categories generated formed the basis for the website analysis by providing convenient coding and interpretation.

Website Analysis

The content analysis process of the secondary data collected from websites involved reading, indexing and coding according to the coding scheme generated from the conducted interviews. To minimize the risk of capturing only a narrow set of potentially biased interpretations, a content analysis of each university's website was conducted as it is "a research technique for making inferences systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within a text" (Stone et al. 1966: 5). The content analysis with pre-readings was also followed by detailed readings to determine the main and recurring themes.

The online information contains the language used in social interaction as a critical mean of constructing meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) through projecting the organizational cultural values (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). Therefore in order to identify the organizational identity themes, secondary data was collected from the Main Page, About Us, History, Vision and Mission, and Organizational Values sections of the official websites of the participant universities. This secondary data was then copied into separate files between April and June, 2015. Earlier research designs using qualitative analysis (Van Rekom, 1997; Ettredge et al., 2001; Bonsón-Ponte et al., 2008; Gallego-Alvarez et al., 2011) were drawn upon in this study involving content analysis of secondary data. Once the secondary data had been collected and stored, the main themes and ideas within them were determined through the pre-reading process. The dominant themes within the text blocks were identified following detailed readings by the study's researchers for having a systematic framework necessary for a content analysis as suggested by Krippendorff (2004). The researchers studied the main themes individually and after agreeing on theme categories, they coded the text blocks. Following the coding process, the researchers examined the discrepancies further and discussed each one until consensus was achieved.

Analysis Results

The thematic content analysis aimed to examine the university identity themes communicated by five US universities. Table 2 presents the identity themes grouped according to the coding categories revealed by the thematic content analysis of the website.

Table 2. Identity themes grouped according to the coding categories emerged from the thematic content analysis of the websites

Core Function	Capacity	Social Values	Future Orientation	Extensive Impact
Education	Communication	Citizenship	Development	Excellence
Research	Innovation	Community	Improvement	Leadership
	Interdisciplinary studies	engagement Culture		Reputation
	Integrity	Diversity		Success
	Partnership	Ethics		Sustainability
	Technology	Honesty		
	Urban	Responsibility		

Accordingly, the results of the website analysis reveal that universities communicate different sets of themes that represent elements of their identity. For further discussion, the weights of each identity theme were calculated in order to identify the relative importance of the themes for each university. The weight of each theme in terms of textual data was calculated by computing the percentage equivalent of each theme's frequency. The relative weights of each theme for each university are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Themes that emerged from the thematic content analysis of the websites

Themes*	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5
Citizenship	-	-	1.09	-	-
Communication	10.00	8.10	1.09	-	-
Community Engagement	10.00	16.22	9.79	14.29	5.26
Culture	5.00	-	5.44	-	3.51
Development	-	-	5.44	-	-
Diversity	15.00	2.70	14.12	14.29	5.26
Education	20.00	16.21	17.39	9.53	14.04
Ethics	-	2.70	-	-	1.75
Excellence	5.00	5.41	3.25	4.76	14.04
Global	-	-	3.25	14.29	7.02
Honesty	5.00	-	4.36	-	-
Improvement	-	10.81	2.18	4.76	8.78
Innovation	5.00	5.41	3.25	-	10.53
Integrity	5.00	-	2.18	-	-
Interdisciplinary Studies	-	-	-	-	1.75
Leadership	-	-	2.17	-	3.51
Partnership	-	8.10	2.18	-	-
Quality	-	-	4.35	9.52	1.75
Reputation	-	-	-	-	1.75
Research	10.00	5.41	3.25	9.52	12.28
Responsibility	10.00	5.41	2.17	-	1.75
Success	-	2.70	1.09	-	-
Sustainability	-	5.41	3.25	9.52	-
Technology	-	5.41	2.18	4.76	7.02
Urban	-	-	6.53	4.76	-
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

The results also reveal that every university in the study emphasizes community engagement, diversity, excellence, education, and research. It is also found out that although some distinctive identity themes come in sight such as interdisciplinary studies in the analysis, they still fall under one of the five common identity categories. These unique identity themes, associated theme categories, and theme category percentage values are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Distinctive identity themes emphasized by the universities on their websites.

Universities Analysed	Identity themes utilized by the universities	Coding category	Percentage value of the coding category	
U1	Community Engagement Diversity Responsibility	Culture Honesty	Social Values	35.00
	Education	Research	Core Function	30.00
	Communication Integrity	Innovation	Capacity	20.00
	Excellence		Extensive Impact	15.00
U2	Community Engagement Ethics	Diversity Responsibility	Social Values	27.03
	Communication Partnership	Innovation Technology	Capacity	27.02
	Education	Research	Core Function	21.62
	Excellence Sustainability	Success	Extensive Impact	13.52
	Improvement		Future Orientation	10.81
U3	Citizenship Engagement Diversity Responsibility	Community Culture Honesty	Social Values	36.97
	Communication Innovation Partnership Technology	Global Integrity Quality Urban	Capacity	25.01
	Education	Research	Core Function	20.64
	Excellence Sustainability	Success	Extensive Impact	9.76

	Development	Improvement	Future Orientation	7.62		
	Global Technology	Quality Urban	Capacity	33.33		
U4	Community Engagement	Diversity	Social Values	28.58		
	Education	Research	Core Function	19.05		
	Excellence	Sustainability	Extensive Impact	14.28		
		Improvement	Future Orientation	4.76		
	Global Interdisciplinary Studies Technology	Innovation Quality	Capacity	28.07		
U5	Education	Research	Core Function	26.32		
	Excellence	Reputation	Leadership	Extensive Impact	19.30	
	Community Engagement	Diversity	Responsibility	Culture Ethics	Social Values	17.53
		Improvement	Future Orientation	8.78		

Table 5 presents the relative percentage value of each theme category. The percentage values of each theme category were calculated by summing up all theme categories' values and then by calculating the each theme category's percentage value in the total theme category value. For instance, the value of social value theme category is calculated by computing the percentage equivalent of accumulative social value theme category values given for each university in Table 4. The percentage values of other theme categories were calculated accordingly.

Table 5. Relative percentage value of each theme category

Theme Categories	Total theme category value	Percentage value of each theme category
Social Value	145.11	30.13
Capacity	133.43	27.71
Core Function	117.63	24.43
Extensive Impact	71.86	14.92
Future Orientation	13.54	2.81
Total	481.57	100

The results presented at Table 5 indicate that participant universities use mostly social value and capacity identity themes. When the percentage value of each theme category derived within the total theme categories were calculated, social value (30.13%) is found out to be the most emphasized theme category. Three out of five universities predominantly emphasize identity themes related with social values such as community engagement, culture, or diversity. Following social values, capacity (27.71%) emerges as the second most emphasized theme category by the participant universities. Core function appears as the third most emphasized theme category followed by extensive impact theme category (14.92%). Finally, future orientation (2.81%) is found out to be the least emphasized theme category. Study results are further discussed in light of the related literature in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The ability to communicate the university character and the ways to express university identity become increasingly important for the competition between universities (Schultz, 2000). Besides, communication is a key element of social processes, and as the identity is socially constructed, the chosen means of communication is critical in reflecting aspects of the identity (Postmes, 2003). When taken into consideration the feature of being free from the restrictive boundaries of time and place, websites evidently provide a vast amount of information and serve as a communication channel between the university and its stakeholders.

In the current study, consistent with the theme categories generated from the interviews, the results of the thematic content analysis of the university websites reveal that all participant universities communicate five identity theme categories. These common theme categories are core function, capacity, social values, future orientation and extensive impact. Lowrie (2007) argued that the university identity has to reflect the plurality and richness of university experience addressing the expectations of diverse audiences. The emergence of five theme categories can be explained based on Lowrie's study referring to the difficulty of addressing diverse audiences. It can also be argued that in order to achieve social acceptance (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990) and construct a legitimate identity for multiple publics with complex expectations, universities base their identities on these five theme categories.

The most frequently communicated theme categories were found out as social values (30.13%), capacity (27.71%) and core function (24.43%) respectively in the study. These predominantly emphasized theme categories can be associated with the legitimacy types proposed by Suchman (1995). According to Schuman (1995), the pragmatic legitimacy reflects self-interests and calculations of the results, whereas moral legitimacy rests on value systems and the normative approval, and cognitive legitimacy refers to taken for grantedness and available cultural models. With this classification in mind, it could be proposed that universities communicate capacity theme category in order to gain pragmatic legitimacy; social values theme category to acquire moral legitimacy; and core function theme category to ensure social acceptance through comprehensibility (Suchman, 1995; Aldrich and Fiol, 1994).

Further to this, the study findings show that social values category instead of core function is found out to be the most communicated theme category by the participant universities. Social values category implies that universities undertake other responsibilities and have other functions besides their core function of education and research. In other words along with executing their core functions, universities have to embrace social values as these values are the references for the sense of belonging to an institution. An earlier work of Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) discusses that organizations aim to develop coherence between their activities' social value implications and the value system of the environment in which they operate. Heath and Ryan (1989: 21) also explain the importance of social value fit by showing how companies are under the pressure of compliance to

the ethical standards forced by the interest groups. A recent study of economists Hedblom et al. (2016) show evidence that companies which adopt social responsibility values will attract workers that are more productive, produce higher quality work, and have more highly valued leisure time. In this respect, a misfit between the socially accepted values of their environment and the university's represented social values would result in questioning the legitimacy of that given university. Concordantly, the individual identity themes under this category as citizenship, community engagement, and ethics can be interpreted as the direct representations of the participant university's efforts in complying with the social values. Universities special emphasis on communicating these themes can also be as a consequence of their search for significant resources as acknowledged academic and administrative staff, high quality students and high donations.

Following social values, the second mostly articulated identity theme was found out to be capacity (27.71%). Capacity refers to the ability of supporting core functions of a university. Technology, innovation, and communication are among the themes associated with this theme category. The given themes cover the important capabilities of a university, which are necessary to execute its core functions. Also, the quality of the capacity themes would have direct effects on the quality of core university functions. Therefore, these themes are of great importance to the universities' essential activities and they are the themes that create a difference in central activities. Thereby, they also come to the fore as the differentiation elements as in the example of innovation besides the generic identity themes of education and research. In his paper, Laredo (2007:4) argues that universities have taken a new role as the "knowledge producing agent" or the producer of innovation related developments such as "patenting and technology transfers" in their given societies starting with 80s. Along with this new mission, it can be stated that universities start to differentiate themselves and construct not only their identity but also their positioning based on their contributions to technological or innovative developments they can offer to the society.

The third mostly emphasized theme category by all universities analysed was core value, which basically represent the standard norms of the education field and lie at the core of a university's reason of being. Besides, the associated themes of education and research of this category are central to the question of who we are as a university. Therefore, the study findings support Stensaker and Norgård (2001), who argue that universities are under pressure to conform to the international academic standards. Moreover, the rationale of articulating these common themes can also be found in universities efforts in trying to "fit in with others similar to it" (McKenzie and King, 2016:165).

In addition to these theme categories, results indicate that universities communicate themes associated with extensive impact (14.92%) and future orientation (2.81%) theme categories. The identity theme of extensive impact is commonly articulated by all participant universities, which imply university's essential competence of high quality academic training and research. On the other hand, future orientation theme category found to be the least emphasized theme category. This can be explained as the identity themes under this category, development and improvement can be evaluated as generic themes expected from a university. Therefore, universities may prefer not to communicate too much about this category but rather choose to speak out their social value or capacity related themes that can have direct references to their uniqueness claim.

Further to all findings discussed earlier, it can be inferred that the five themes combine both some identity theme categories for similarity and some distinguishing themes for uniqueness. For instance, U3 differentiates itself through the themes of development and being urban. Themes of being urban or interdisciplinary don't represent the similarity with others but rather define the unique features of its self-view. In other words, the study results show that universities analysed communicate their identities through some university-specific themes that can be referred as their "claimed distinction" (Albert and Whetten 1985; Aust 2004). For instance, some themes are

communicated only by one of the universities. As an example, citizenship theme only appeared in the textual content of U3. Similarly, reputation theme appeared only in the content analysis of U5. Thereby, these findings echoed Whetten and Mackey (2002)'s argument that identity construction relies also on distinctive characteristics that differentiate organizations from each other.

CONCLUSION

Trends of globalization together with privatization increased the severity of the race between universities. Correspondingly being under normative and market pressures, current universities define and reveal their character underlying the disparities for value creating students, faculty and staff, and funding. Under these conditions, the identity of a university becomes a strategically critical dimension for sustainable success and high performance. In this context, themes utilized in university identity construction can create strategic advantages in the competition.

In this study, we found out that each participant university emphasizes sine qua non themes, such as education, research, excellence, community engagement, and diversity. The results of this study also reveal that those themes utilized by all of the universities analysed fall under the five main theme categories. Furthermore, the research findings indicate that as well as common themes, universities also emphasize distinct themes to differentiate themselves despite the fact that theme categories generated in this study include all the distinct themes. Consequently, it can be argued that universities construct their identities through utilizing five central theme categories and differentiate themselves within the boundary of these main categories although the weight of each theme category differs from university to university. Moreover, the universities analysed claim their uniqueness through communicating social values and capacity themes. Social values theme symbolizes the embrace of socially accepted values and the access to valuable resources. On the other hand, capacity theme refers to universities new identity as agents of knowledge producers. These two themes are not only the mostly communicated but also are the determinants of distinction among the participant universities.

Although the researchers in this study attempted to increase the number of cases analysed, due to time and availability constraints, only textual data collected from five prominent US universities were included in the study. Future studies could increase the number of universities, which would provide a deeper understanding. Future studies may also focus on revealing any differences in the themes emphasized by the different communication media used.

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