

Managing higher education brands with an emerging brand architecture: the role of shared values and competing brand identities

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Introduction

Increased competition in the Higher education (HE) sector and diminishing funds, highlight the growing importance of developing sustainable branding strategies (Chapleo 2015; Judson, Aurand, Gorchels & Gordon, 2008; Pinar, Trap, Girard, & Boyt, 2010). Therefore, how universities position themselves and how they are perceived by stakeholders is a strategic issue, particularly as the corporate brand is ‘the interface between the organisation’s stakeholders and its identity’ (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012, p. 1053). Thus, a strong corporate brand can for example, help recruit leading academics and attract students from underrepresented groups (Chapleo 2010; Croxford & Raffe, 2015; Pinar et al, 2010; Stephenson, Heckert & Yerger, 2015). However, communicating a consistent university brand to multiple stakeholders is problematic (Chapleo, 2011), not least because studies suggest that stakeholders can lack an emotional connection to a university (Chapleo, 2011; Clayton, 2012) and universities hold insufficient resources to implement brand strategies properly (Chapleo, 2015). Furthermore, the stakeholders that engage with a university can be both internal and external such as staff, students, employers, funders and professional bodies, as well as being regionally, nationally and internationally based. However, there is limited research that examines the role of external and internal stakeholders in the co-creation of university brand identities and how this might relate to the brand images of different departments, faculties and programmes in the same institution (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; He & Balmer, 2007; Iglesias, Ind & Alfaro, 2013). Thus, it is unclear whether universities have developed authentic, convincing brand identities that support the development of a consistent corporate brand and brand strategy.

As a way of understanding how universities manage their brand strategy, this paper adopts a novel approach by drawing on the notion of ‘brand architecture’.

Muzellec and Lambkin (2008) define this as a strategic approach that supports the management of multiple ‘brands’ in one organisation which Petromilli, Morrison and Million (2002) define as ‘the external face of business strategy...’ (p. 23). In essence, brand architecture refers to the organisation of a company’s brand portfolio (Gabrielli & Baghi, 2016; Strebinger, 2014) and the extent to which different brands drive the purchasing decision (Chapleo, 2015). To date, the brand architecture literature is sparse and focuses on large multi-national companies rather than Higher Education Institutes (HEI’s) (Gabrielli & Baghi, 2015; Strebinger, 2014). Indeed Chapleo (2015) has argued for more empirical research which explores brand architecture in universities while Melewar and Nguyen (2015) suggest that applying alternative branding theories [like brand architecture], could offer new insights into how university brands are developed and implemented.

The aim of this paper therefore, is to explore at a general level, how a HEI develops and manages their corporate brand identity and image and the extent to which stakeholders are involved in this co-creation process. In particular, the paper draws upon the notion of brand architecture as a way of offering insights into the management of the university brand strategy. Thus, the following research questions are addressed:

- 1) How is a corporate brand identity perceived in a university and in what way does it impact on corporate brand image?
- 2) To what extent are key stakeholders involved in the co-creation of the university’s brand identity?
- 3) To what extent does brand architecture support the development of a brand strategy in HE?

Literature overview

Brand architecture

Definitions of brand architecture vary, for example, Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) suggest brand strategy and brand architecture are used synonymously while Petromilli et al (2002) discuss different types of brand architecture that provide an external ‘face’ (p. 23) to the business strategy and organisational objectives. However, most authors agree that brand architecture is the way in which product brands and corporate brands relate (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008). By providing a structure to brand management, profitability and efficiency can thus be enhanced (Uggla, 2006). A number of authors highlight four key brand architecture strategies (Table 1) which Strebinger (2014) refers to as ‘ideal-types’ (p. 1783).

[Table 1 near here]

In reality, organisations rarely follow these ideal-type strategies and tend to use a ‘mix and match’ approach depending on ‘branding similarities’ between products and services (Strebinger, 2014, p. 1783). Generally, this tends to be a mix of the two extremes, branded house and house of brands. Likewise, Muzellec and Lambkin (2008) have suggested that organisations can adopt an integration strategy (similar to the branded house notion) or a separation strategy (similar to the house of brands idea). Devlin (2003) cites the key reason for adopting a separation strategy is being able to communicate distinctive competencies to different target markets. For example, when Guinness plc and Grand Metropolitan formed Diageo plc, Diageo emerged as the ‘Business Brand’ (see Figure 1), not visible to Guinness consumers, which shaped an image of social responsibility for its stakeholders. This allowed Guinness to nurture strong and differentiated relationships with its customers (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008; 2009).

[Figure 1 near here]

Whilst there are several brand architecture models in the literature, the application of these to different contexts remains limited. Chapleo (2015) claims that at a theoretical level, none of the brand architecture approaches appear to ‘fit’ with the characteristics of a HEI. However, this paper argues that the framework (Figure 1) could offer useful insights into HEI brand strategies recognising the complexities of multiple stakeholders and sub-cultures within a university’s brand.

University brand architecture

Universities, like other service organisations, have complex and intangible product offerings (Marquardt, Golicic & Davis, 2011). Dibb and Simkin (1993) argue that this is a challenge for universities as the ‘product’ can be the institution, the course, the experience or even the qualification, each of which may have a brand of their own. This suggests then, a university could potentially have many sub-brands to manage, particularly if colleges, faculties and departments are factored in (Hemsley-Brown & Gonnawardana, 2007). Indeed, Chapleo (2015) found that university departments often displayed qualities of sub-brands as their marketing activities targeted specific external stakeholders. However, a narrow view in the literature suggests that developing sub-brands in services is destined to fail (Rahman & Areni, 2014) as they are inherently less tangible, could confuse customers and lead to brand dilution (Devlin, 2003; Hsu et al, 2014). Universities moving towards ‘corporatization’ could mean departments are encouraged to align their identity with that of the university and hence lose their strong tradition of autonomy (Chapleo, 2015) and individual branding (Hemsley-Brown & Gonnawardana, 2007: 945); this may jeopardise the very source of differentiation that can ensure the success of a HE corporate brand. To date, however, no studies have

explored empirically the relationship between brands and sub-brands i.e. brand architecture in a university setting.

University identity and image

A key part of brand architecture is understanding how elements such as brand identity and image are developed and managed at the corporate and sub-brand levels. Brand identity refers to how the organisation is perceived internally (He & Balmer, 2007) and brand image concerns how the organisation is viewed externally, particularly in terms of distinctive attributes (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Ideally both elements should be aligned so that staff become ‘walking representatives of the brand’ (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2009: p. 452). Brand image is especially important for HEIs since they are increasingly operating in an uncertain and competitive environment where the pressure to differentiate and appeal to students is imperative (Anctil, 2008; Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Complexities arise when trying to develop consistencies between brand image and identity in universities. Internally, staff perceptions of the institution may reflect their job role (e.g. academic vs. non-academic), the different hierarchical level they work at (e.g. executive level) and the department they work in (e.g. discipline, central support function) suggesting that an institution’s identity is shaped by a mix of sub-cultures (Sujchaphong, Nguyen, Bang & Melewar, 2015; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Moreover, centralised corporate branding has played a less visible role in HE which has allowed different departments to develop strong sub-brand identities and even images of their own. Indeed, some university faculties do not see themselves as part of the university’s overall identity (Steiner, Sundström, & Sammalisto, 2013) and could even resist attempts to ‘market’ their offering (Brookes, 2003; Waeraas & Solbakk,

2008). Furthermore, staff may associate themselves with their faculty rather than the university (Chapleo, 2007). For example, Jevons (2006) cites the University of Cambridge where the identity of their colleges is much more distinct than the entire institution.

One way of addressing these brand inconsistencies, however, is to ensure that a brand identity and image is co-created with internal and external stakeholders (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). Romero and Molina (2011) define co-creation as ‘a cooperative process involving interactions between customers and organisations in all creative activities’ (p. 448). Research stresses the importance of engaging *multiple* stakeholders to ensure *multiple* opinions are involved in co-constructing values and meanings to inform the development of branding strategies (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Iglesias et al 2013). Gyrd-Jones & Kornum (2013) refer to this as ‘value complementarity’ (p.1486) where collectively, stakeholders generate more value than the sum of each partner creating values alone. By drawing on the views of multiple stakeholders, co-creation can also foster commitment and ownership of the branding strategy and ultimately demonstrate how distinctive attributes of an organisation are portrayed externally (O’Connell, Kickerson & Pillutla, 2011).

In summary, a review of the literature has found that universities have several challenges when developing a branding strategy. Universities invariably have sub-brands (departments, courses, colleges etc) consisting of multiple stakeholders with competing priorities, yet the pressure to differentiate is key to gaining a competitive advantage in an increasingly saturated market. However, research has failed to explore how universities develop and manage their branding strategy to ensure consistency between sub-brands, brand identities and images. A review of the limited brand architecture research suggests

that this may offer a way of defining the relationships between the multiple brands within a university.

Methodology and analysis

The study utilised a single revelatory case (Yin, 2009) as little is known about brand architecture and brand strategy in a HE context (Chapleo, 2015; Yin, 2009). Furthermore, as perceptions were sought from different groups of individuals, a case study is a useful means of exploring multiple perspectives ‘rooted in a particular context’ (Lewis & McNaughton-Nichols, 2014, p. 66).

The case was an education faculty within a UK university, both of which had strong global recognition and were well-established in the HE market. The teaching faculty was selected because it operated in a turbulent teacher education context where stakeholder interests are complex and multiple. For example, the faculty had numerous external partnerships with local schools and colleges, and courses were subject to ever-changing national teacher education priorities. Further, a key part of teacher education is maintaining professional values and standards (Education & Training Foundation, 2015).

The study used three approaches to data collection in order to triangulate the findings. Qualitative data was gathered through documentary evidence including, informal written feedback from external partners, the university’s strategic plan, mission and values and the Faculty of Education’s Review. Further data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key staff within the organisation and focus groups with students. Students were selected as these were considered to be the key primary external stakeholders to the Faculty.

Interviews

Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to their involvement with for example, students and other external stakeholders, marketing and strategy development (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Furthermore, it was important to gather views on the context and corporate branding from participants representing different groups of staff in the University and the Faculty (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Thus, in total, fourteen individual face-to-face interviews were conducted. This comprised four senior Faculty managers, two academic Faculty (middle) managers, six lecturers and two marketing managers in the University.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were held and involved seventeen teacher trainees who were drawn across those studying: primary (junior) school education (n=6); secondary (senior) school education (n=7); continuing education (n=4). Participants were self-selecting as an email was sent by the course leaders, on behalf of the research team, to all relevant courses inviting students to participate. In order to obtain in-depth, qualitative insights (Gillham, 2000; Yin, 2009) individual questions mirrored those posed to staff interviewed where possible.

The topics covered in both the individual interviews and focus groups were related to participants' perceptions of corporate branding and included: identity, strategy, image, vision, values and communications. Qualitative projective techniques were also incorporated as they helped participants to reveal hidden perceptions, particularly with more abstract topics like branding (Boddy, 2005; Pich & Dean, 2015). Arthur et al (2014) describes this technique as 'where individuals attribute some part of themselves, such as socially unacceptable feelings, to something external to themselves' (p.162).

Data analysis

All the interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. Detailed thematic analysis using manual coding and categorisation was undertaken using the full transcripts of the interviews and focus groups and copies of relevant documentary evidence. The research questions and the literature review guided the definition of the initial categories (Murdaugh, Russell & Sowell, 2000). The researchers coded independently and the themes compared, refined and combined to form meta clusters to enhance validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Comparisons were drawn across the focus groups, documentary evidence and interviews (Lewis & McNaughton-Nicholls, 2014) and the data were reduced and classified further by moving ‘from surface features of the data’ (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O’Connor & Barnard, 2014: p. 285) to more in-depth analysis. This involved examining the interrelatedness of themes by comparing data within each category (Flick, 2006). What emerged were themes that had undergone a ‘major transformation’ (Spencer et al, 2014, p. 285) including identification of complexities and nuances that appeared to explain their existence (Butler-Kisber, 2010), thus helping to generate new theory inductively.

Key findings

Four key findings emerged in this study: disconnect with the university identity and image; strong connect with the faculty identity and image; strong connect with the programme identities and images; and co-creation of the faculty identity and image.

Disconnect with the university identity and image

Both staff and students perceived the university's image as being stronger than that of the faculty but this perception was based upon visual elements such as the logo and facilities. However, participants struggled to articulate clearly what the university stood for and, as one staff member stated when asked to describe the university's corporate brand, *'I'd have to think about that long and hard'*. Further, there was some agreement when projecting the car analogy on to the university as it was compared to models perceived as *'reliable'* or *'mid-range'*. However, almost all the students were unclear as to the value of the university's offering and emphasised that it was the faculty that met their *'different traits and needs'*. In particular, the perception of the university's corporate brand was indistinct from competing institutions as one staff member described them as all being *'much of a muchness...trying to do everything for everybody'* and another as *'stuck in the middle'*. Further exploration revealed a notable cynicism and disconnect amongst staff towards the university's mission and values, all integral parts of the corporate brand, while some were not even sure what these were. One staff participant remarked *'It's [the mission] very annoying and slightly false and I don't know why but it's irritating'* and another staff participant went as far as commenting *'to me it's kind of that corporate bullshit that people sit down at meetings and come up with something just because we needed to, it's just horrible really'*. Others felt that the values were based on business imperatives that left staff feeling uncomfortable, as one participant stated, *'it's that horrible business language...which turns into mistrust'*.

Strong connect with the faculty identity and image

Both students and staff, however, felt the faculty had a far stronger identity and image than the university. Participants' comments suggested there were also consistencies in

how they described the faculty brand, for example, when projecting the car analogy on to the faculty brand it was reported as being *'powerful'* and *'a really sporty nice car'*. The strength of the faculty brand was a result of two specific factors: the connection staff and students had with programme identities and images; and the role of co-creation in developing the faculty's identity and image.

Strong connect with the programme identities and images

The clear and powerful faculty brand consisted of different sub-brands in the form of separate programme brands, brought about by targeting different student markets and ongoing changes in the education sector. These programme brands helped to support the faculty brand. One staff participant, drawing on the car analogy, described the faculty as being *'really complicated underneath the bonnet but on the surface, it all looks straightforward, the way we present it to the trainees'*. The findings suggest that the programmes delivered by the faculty had distinct identities and images of their own and a strong brand presence both internally and externally which had led to *'an unequalness'* of course profiles within the faculty, according to one member of staff. The teacher training programmes, in particular, had strong internal identities and external images as they had *'a long history associated with them'* and were perceived as the faculty's *'safety net'* and *'something sturdy...like a pick-up truck'*.

The teacher training programmes were rooted in strong, profound educational-related values that staff could identify with, rather than those associated with the university. The teacher training programme values included those associated with *'trust and approachability'* and *'a strong sense of justice and fairness'*. Thus, the programme values were described by one respondent as being underpinned by *'some quite complex philosophical stuff...deep rooted beliefs...tied up in political, social, economic thinking'*

and to train teachers meant the staff on these courses had *'a great sense of responsibility'*. These perspectives were mirrored by the student participants who generally felt far more valued by the faculty as they did not *'feel like a number'* and staff were perceived to be *'very knowledgeable and encouraging, enthusiastic'* leading to *'good relationships'* between staff and students.

Co-creation of the faculty identity and image

The strength of the faculty brand was based on shared values, that had been 'co-created' by staff in close conjunction with regional partner schools and colleges, who employed faculty placement students and graduates. The values underpinning the teacher training programmes' identity had been captured in the faculty's vision for a teacher strategy, which, according to one respondent, aimed to articulate the *'aspirations for what a good teacher should be'*. Staff recognised the importance of sending out well-equipped students to schools and colleges and realised that students who were *'ill-equipped, on a whole range of things is detrimental'* and that the faculty's students had to *'display a sense of professionalism'* at the start of programmes. Expectations on the students were therefore high and programmes had strict guidelines as trainee teachers had to be fully conversant with the National Curriculum, political issues and the *'wider philosophical and good solid educational arguments for thinking in a different way'*. Further, engagement in policy and document analysis helped endorse some of the comments received concerning contributions made by external partners. The result of this co-creation meant that the external partners, according to faculty staff, *'really rate our students'* and *'the students always hit the ground running'*. Moreover, some of the students interviewed were 'returners' to the faculty evidenced by one postgraduate student who found the experience of *'coming back a very personable one'*.

Discussion and conclusion

Whilst it is recognised that this study has limited generalisability for other teacher-education providers and HEIs, it does provide a number of important insights (Yin, 2009). The findings suggest that staff felt a disconnect towards the vision and the values that underpinned the university's identity, as they were regarded as lacking in integrity and grounded in business imperatives and marketing language, perhaps reflecting the 'marketisation' of the wider sector (Hemsley-Brown & Gonnawardana, 2007). It was evident from the enthusiasm displayed by staff that they attached more importance to the faculty, and indeed programmes, as opposed to the university (He & Balmer, 2007). The faculty brand was supported by strong identities and images associated with individual teacher training programmes. These programmes had at their foundation deep-rooted, *shared values* specific to teacher education and with which staff and external partners were strongly connected. These distinctive attributes or values were what staff viewed as important to them, partners and their students (He & Balmer, 2007). For many, a career in teaching may still be regarded as a vocation (Education & Training Foundation, 2015) and, as a result, the co-creation of shared values at course level is perhaps less problematic than other disciplines such as business, which have fewer regulations and governance.

The partnerships held with external stakeholders and their involvement in co-creation had led to a more convincing brand at faculty and programme level. This finding supports the work of Chapleo (2011) who argues that a clearly articulated vision is an important pre-requisite for a successful HE corporate brand and O'Connell et al (2011) who highlight the importance of a vision with transparent values. In our study, the role of shared values based on teacher education and the strong focus on partnerships within the faculty, had led to the emergence of different priorities and values to that of the university (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). This, in turn, had led to the evolvement of

differentiated programme/product brands with strong and coherent images (Hsu et al, 2014), operating in niche markets and targeting different student groups (Hemsley-Brown & Gonnawardana, 2007). The study confirms that it was only where *core* values were shared at the programme level by internal and external stakeholders that the brand identity and image were convincing, supporting the notion of ‘value complementarity’ amongst stakeholders (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2012).

Figure 2 demonstrates the complexity of a multi-stakeholder and multi-layered approach to brand co-creation in a HEI context. The figure indicates that, in contrast to the marketing literature, co-creation goes beyond the buyer/seller relationship (Romero & Molina, 2011). Crucially, co-creation in this study did not involve students, as the *primary* customer of the university/faculty. Rather, the co-creation process involved external partners who were a *secondary* customer of the faculty/university.

Framing these findings against the brand architecture literature, the model in Figure 2 adopts a ‘separation strategy’ (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008; 2009) as distance is present between the corporate (university) brand and that of the faculty and its programmes. For example, while the university was seen as the ‘corporate brand’ there was confusion as to what the brand stood for, leading to a weak university identity (internal stakeholders) and image (external stakeholders). In Muzellec and Lambkin’s (2008; 2009) separation strategy the corporate brand is low key and even invisible. In our study however, the university’s corporate brand is not entirely invisible as demonstrated by its global status, participants’ ability to recall visual cues of the university brand and strategy documents referring to related concepts such as mission and vision. Thus, our model puts forward a new, hybrid model that also draws on the ‘endorsed’ brand architecture strategy (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Strebinger, 2006) in that the university *endorses* the different specialisms and related programmes. This

leaves specialisms to visually project different identities to different stakeholders (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2008) thus reducing the risks associated with that of sub-brands (Hsu et al, 2015). This approach may provide the very source of competitive advantage required for new and emerging universities (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012).

[Figure 2 near here]

Whilst the proposed model has emerged from our findings, further work is required to explore the extent to which this branding model is adopted by other HEIs. As Chapleo (2011) highlights, HEIs can struggle to make meaningful connections with their stakeholders particularly universities that are shaped by a mix of sub-cultures (Sujchaphong et al, 2015) and with limited resources to implement branding strategies (Chapleo, 2015). Further, the model does not concern 'process' and 'who' would take responsibility for designing and implementing the approach. Nor does it take into account the powers and interests of individuals in these institutions who may be resistant to the marketisation and 'branding' of education (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

Theoretical contributions and managerial implications

This study extends the notion of brand strategy in a HE context, from universities and faculties/colleges to specific courses and programmes. This adds another level of branding to an already complicated picture of brand management in HE. The findings suggest that the programmes have their own identity and image, in a not too dissimilar way to a specific product or service in other industries; this level of branding for HEI's has not previously been considered. Further, this study makes a contribution to the literature as it pulls together different strands of brand architecture and co-creation of identity and image which, as far as the researchers are aware, has not been established in any other research. Although there are certain values that can permeate the entire

university, such as employability, this study proposes a more nuanced model of brand architecture, namely the ‘partial brand separation model’.

The results of this case study research suggest that the university does appear to have a brand strategy in place but is clearly more nuanced for vocational subjects where staff are guided by a strong vision and values that their students have come to expect. The partnerships held with external stakeholders and their involvement in the co-creation of the brand is a unique finding. This paper therefore highlights implications for professional practice as there is a disparity between the students’ views of the university and that of a faculty. Attention therefore needs to be paid to the uniqueness of different disciplines, the particular external environments in which they operate and the diversity and demands of both their programmes and students. Although generalisation was not the aim of this case study research, the ‘partial brand separation model’ developed could be applied to a different university setting [nationally or internationally] so as to further understand how corporate brand architecture might work in a similar context. This would be particularly useful for new or emerging universities where differentiation needs to be more than outstanding teaching and widening participation (Temple, 2006). However, for those universities that hold a ‘world-class brand’ both in the UK and beyond, success may lie with the university or individual departments rather than the programmes. Application of the framework to these institutions may offer insights into how the corporate brand might be enhanced through an appropriate brand architecture study as well as other universities and colleges seeking practical managerial support and guidance.

Limitations and directions for further research

This study has provided a number of insights concerning the co-creation of corporate identity in HEIs and the contribution this could make to developing brand architecture

strategies. It is acknowledged that data was obtained from one institution only and in the very specific context of teacher education. However, as the focus was on depth of understanding rather than breadth, this case study provides the opportunity to explore corporate branding in a context that has not previously been researched and a phenomenon was uncovered that is considered to be revelatory in nature (Yin, 2009). It is felt that further research with external partners (i.e. the schools and colleges) would provide a more holistic representation, as the original intention of the study was to consider, according to the literature, the two main buyer/seller stakeholders in the co-creation process. If this research were to be replicated, the researchers recommend application of similar research to other universities and colleges, training establishments and schools, and global public and service-sector organisations with a diversity of specialisms. In particular, this work could include a cross-comparative study in the under-researched area of brand architecture, utilising data collected through a mixed method approach to further clarify the model developed in this study.

Disclosure statement

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Table 1. Brand architecture strategies

Architecture	Features
Branded House	Single 'Master' brand Unites company and its business and products with a common identity (Uggla, 2006) Risk as entire company exposed (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008)
House of Brands	Distance between the corporate brand and the businesses and products (Petromilli et al, 2002) avoiding associations with corporate brand (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008) Effective when organisation highly diversified (Gabrielli & Baghi, 2015)
Endorsed Brands	Organisation's businesses and products endorsed by the corporate brand (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000) with common identity Reduced risk as 'Master' brand plays less dominant role than that of sub-brands (Hsu, Fournier & Srinivasan, 2015)
Sub-brands	Similar to endorsed brands stretching across products and markets with new and different offerings (Uggla, 2006) 'Master' brand more closely associated to sub-brands More risk as allows 'Master' brand to compete in markets than would otherwise be the case (Hsu et al, 2015)

Figure 1: Applied Diageo brand model
(recreated from: Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008, p. 295)

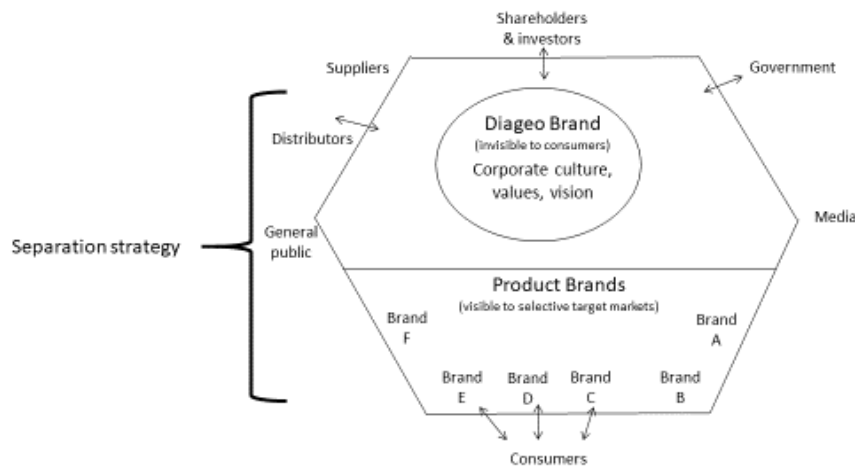


Figure 2: Partial brand separation strategy model (adapted: Muzellec and Lambkin, 2008, p. 295)

