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The Impact of Brand Identity Design on Internal Corporate Communication

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of brand identity design on internal corporate communication. While extant research has explored brand identity largely from an external market perspective, less attention has been paid to how visual and verbal identity elements influence internal stakeholders, workplace culture, employee engagement, and organisational communication flows. Using a qualitative, multiple-case study approach with semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis across three medium-to-large organisations, this research identifies how brand identity design (logo, typography, colour systems, tone of voice, and visual guidelines) shapes employee sensemaking, internal messaging coherence, leadership communication, and informal peer-to-peer exchanges. Thematic analysis reveals four primary mechanisms: alignment (shared meaning), enactment (behavioural modelling), translation (adapting brand cues for internal audiences), and friction (mismatch between identity and internal reality). The study contributes a theoretical model integrating organisational identity, sensemaking, and design communication and offers practical recommendations for managers and brand practitioners to leverage identity design for healthier internal communication.

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1. Introduction

Brand identity design has traditionally been framed as the visual and verbal articulation of a firm's promise to external stakeholders: customers, partners, and markets (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2008). Logos, colour palettes, typography, imagery, and tone of voice are tools used to create differentiation and recognition (Olins, 2008). However, organisations are social systems where internal stakeholders — employees, managers, and contractors — continually interpret and enact brand meanings (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Internal corporate communication constitutes the everyday processes through which these stakeholders receive, interpret, and enact organisational messages (Cornelissen, 2017). Brand identity design, while often produced for external consumption, inevitably circulates inside organisations and can materially affect how employees understand strategy, culture, and expectations.

Despite growing practitioner interest in “internal branding” and employee experience design, scholarly attention to the intersection of identity design and internal corporate communication remains limited (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). This study addresses this gap by exploring how brand identity design influences internal communication processes, drawing on qualitative data from multiple organisations to develop a theory of mechanisms and outcomes.

This paper proceeds as follows: a review of relevant literature, presentation of the theoretical framework grounding the study, description of research methodology, presentation of findings, discussion linking the findings to theory and practice, and concluding recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Brand Identity Design: Definitions and Components*

Brand identity design is a deliberate set of visual, verbal, and experiential elements that collectively express what an organisation stands for and how it wants to be perceived (Aaker, 1996; Olins, 2008). Components typically include logo, colour system, typography, imagery, iconography, layout systems, and tone of voice in copy and messaging (Keller, 2008). Identity design is distinct from brand image (perceptions held by stakeholders) and brand identity (the intentional set of attributes crafted by the organisation) (Kapferer, 2012).

Design scholars emphasise that identity systems are both symbolic and functional: they encode meaning while enabling efficient production of communications across touchpoints (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Visual identity systems, therefore, serve as semiotic frameworks that guide meaning-making processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

2.2 *Internal Corporate Communication*

Internal corporate communication refers to the flows, processes, and practices through which organisations share information, align actors, and co-construct meaning internally (Cornelissen, 2017). It includes formal channels (memos, newsletters, intranets, town halls) and informal channels (water-cooler talk, team chats, manager-employee conversations) (Tourish & Hargie, 2009). Effective internal communication supports strategic alignment, employee engagement, knowledge sharing, change management, and organisational culture (Men, 2014; Welch & Jackson, 2007).

2.3 Internal Branding and Employee Brand Engagement

Internal branding refers to managerial efforts to align employee attitudes and behaviours with brand values and promises (King & Grace, 2010). Research shows links between internal branding practices and employee brand commitment, role clarity, and service performance (Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri, Evanschitzky, & Wilson, 2009). Visual and symbolic artefacts — from office signage to branded merchandise — play a role in signalling expected behaviours (Miles & Mangold, 2004). Yet much internal branding literature treats design elements as background context rather than as active agents shaping communication dynamics.

2.4 Organisational Identity and Sensemaking

Organisational identity theory examines how members perceive central, enduring, and distinctive features of their organisation (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) explains how individuals interpret ambiguous cues to construct meaning. Brand identity design can serve as a cueing system that prompts specific interpretations and sensemaking processes among employees (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). The intersection of organisational identity and brand design suggests a feedback loop: design articulates identity; employees interpret and enact it; enacted behaviours reinforce or alter perceived identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

2.5 Design Communication and Visual Semiotics

Visual semiotics explores how images and design elements convey meaning (Barthes, 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Within corporate contexts, semiotic analysis helps show how logos, colours, and typographic

choices embody values (e.g., authority, warmth, innovation) and thereby influence employee perceptions (Henderson & Cote, 1998). Designers craft systems intended to generate consistent interpretations; however, recipients' cultural backgrounds, organisational roles, and prior experiences mediate interpretation (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).

2.6 Gaps in the Literature

While the above literatures suggest linkages between brand identity design and internal communication, systematic empirical studies that focus on design as an active influence on internal communication are sparse. Most existing research on internal branding examines training programs, leadership communication, and HR practices, with limited attention to how formal identity artefacts shape everyday communicative practices (Mosley, 2009; King & Grace, 2010). This study fills that gap by empirically investigating mechanisms through which brand identity design affects internal corporate communication.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three theoretical perspectives to explain how brand identity design impacts internal corporate communication: Organisational Identity Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Design Communication (Visual Semiotics). Together, they provide a multi-level framework linking artefacts (design), interpretation (sensemaking), and behaviour (communication practices).

3.1 Organisational Identity Theory

Organisational Identity Theory posits that members have cognitive and emotional beliefs about what their organisation fundamentally is (Albert & Whetten, 1985). These beliefs guide behaviour and

communication within the organisation. Brand identity design is a strategic attempt to symbolically represent facets of organisational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). When design aligns with members' perceptions of identity, it can strengthen internal coherence and facilitate more consistent internal messaging. Conversely, misalignment may lead to dissonance and contested communication.

3.2 Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking describes the process by which individuals give meaning to experiences — especially when confronted with ambiguity (Weick, 1995). Brand identity design offers cues that employees use during sensemaking: a dynamic, colourful new identity might cue change and innovation, while conservative typographic choices might cue stability. Sensemaking is social; communication networks within the company mediate how design cues are discussed, negotiated, and institutionalised (Gioia et al., 2000).

3.3 Design Communication and Visual Semiotics

Design communication theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) conceptualises visual artefacts as semiotic resources that carry culturally encoded meanings. Visual systems operate as shorthand for values and behavioural norms. In organisations, design systems provide templates for creating internal documents, presentations, and signage that embody brand tone and priorities. Semiotic potency varies with salience, frequency of use, and the stakes associated with the communicative act.

3.4 Integrated Model: Mechanisms Linking Brand Identity Design to Internal Communication

Drawing on the three perspectives above, the study proposes an integrated model

identifying four key mechanisms by which brand identity design influences internal corporate communication:

- **Alignment:** When design reflects and reinforces shared organisational identity, it facilitates coherent messaging across levels, reducing ambiguity and enabling unity in internal narratives (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).
- **Enactment:** Design affords scripts for behaviour; visible artefacts (office signage, branded templates) model appropriate behaviours and communication styles, encouraging employees to enact brand-consistent practices (Miles & Mangold, 2004).
- **Translation:** Internal communicators (HR, comms teams, managers) translate external-facing design into internal language and artefacts, adapting tone, imagery, and formats for different audiences (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).
- **Friction:** Where design and lived organisational reality diverge, or where design signals conflict with formal policies or leadership behaviours, friction occurs, prompting renegotiation of meaning, resistance, or cynicism (Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010).

This model foregrounds design as an active, mediating force in internal communication, operating through symbolic, practical, and social pathways.

4. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, multiple-case study design to explore the mechanisms through which brand identity design impacts internal corporate communication. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for exploratory, theory-building work and for

understanding complex social processes from participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

A multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) allows cross-case comparisons to identify patterns and contextual variations. Three organisations were purposively sampled to provide diversity in sector, size, and recency of brand redesign: a technology firm (TechCo), a financial services company (FinServ), and a national non-profit (NonProfit). These organisations had undergone brand identity changes within the previous 18 months, offering opportunities to observe internal responses to design interventions.

4.2 Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to include a range of roles (internal communications managers, brand/marketing staff, HR managers, frontline employees, and senior leaders). In total, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 14 at TechCo, 15 at FinServ, and 13 at NonProfit. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Three complementary data collection methods were used:

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Explored participants' perceptions of the brand identity design, internal communication practices, experiences during and after redesign, and perceived effects on behaviour and culture.
- **Participant observation:** Where possible, the researcher attended town halls, internal launch events, and observed office environments

(signage, artefacts) to note how design artefacts were used in situ.

- **Document analysis:** Internal communications materials (templates, intranet pages, newsletters), brand guidelines, and training materials were analysed to track how design systems were operationalised.

4.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial open-coding phase identified descriptive codes related to design elements, communication channels, perceived effects, and conflicts. Axial coding grouped codes into themes corresponding to the four theoretical mechanisms (alignment, enactment, translation, friction) while allowing for emergent themes. NVivo software supported data management and coding.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study used triangulation across methods and cases, member checking with selected participants, an audit trail of analytic decisions, and peer debriefing with two colleagues in organisational communication research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee. Participants provided informed consent; pseudonyms are used for organisations and participants. Confidential data (sensitive internal documents) was anonymised and stored securely.

5. Findings

Analysis revealed four primary themes corresponding to the theoretical mechanisms

proposed: Alignment, Enactment, Translation, and Friction. Each theme contains sub-themes and cross-case variations.

5.1 Alignment: Creating Shared Meaning

Across all three organisations, brand identity design functioned as a focal point for articulating strategic priorities. At TechCo, the new identity emphasised “speed and openness” with a bold, condensed logotype and a bright colour palette. Interviewees described the identity as a succinct representation of ongoing strategy changes: “When we rolled out the new brand, it gave people something tangible to talk about — it tied the product pivot to a visual story” (Internal Comms Manager, TechCo).

At FinServ, the redesign signified modernisation and trustworthiness. The conservative typographic choice, paired with a refreshed blue palette, was framed by leadership as necessary to attract younger clients while reassuring legacy stakeholders. Employees reported that the identity helped them explain strategic shifts to clients and to each other: “We now have a clearer sentence when someone asks ‘what’s different about us?’ — the brand helps us say it consistently” (Branch Manager, FinServ).

NonProfit used its identity redesign to signal renewed commitment to community engagement; colourful photography and human-centred layouts were intended to reframe organisational priorities. Staff said the visual identity served as an internal rallying symbol during fundraising drives.

Alignment was strongest when design rollouts were accompanied by narrative framing (leadership messages explaining the rationale) and participatory activities (workshops soliciting staff input). When employees perceived the design as

authentically reflecting organisational values, it became a shorthand for shared meaning.

5.2 Enactment: Modelling Behaviour through Artefacts

Design artefacts influenced everyday communicative behaviour. Branded templates for presentations, email signatures, and internal reports changed how staff produced messages. At FinServ, mandating a new slide template led to more consistent client-facing decks and spurred training on storytelling aligned with brand pillars: “Once the template was adopted, people started thinking about structure differently — it’s not just aesthetics, it’s what we say and how we say it” (Marketing Lead, FinServ).

At TechCo, environmental branding — large murals, meeting-room naming conventions, and colour-coded zones — signalled behavioural expectations such as collaboration and rapid ideation. Employees reported that these visible cues affected meeting behaviour and informal communication: teams in the “yellow zone” reported more open, casual conversations compared to teams in differently coded spaces.

However, enactment depended on ease of use. Where design systems were complex or required specialised software, uptake was lower — staff defaulted to legacy templates or made ad hoc adjustments, weakening the intended behavioural effects.

5.3 Translation: Internal Adaptation of External Assets

Communications teams acted as translators, adapting the external-facing identity for internal contexts. This included simplifying guidelines for non-design staff, creating localised templates, and developing an “internal tone of voice” separate from

marketing copy. At NonProfit, the comms team developed a ready-to-use intranet module to help program teams create branded volunteer materials. Participants appreciated this localised support: “We wouldn’t have used the brand if it was left to us — they made it usable for our context” (Program Manager, NonProfit).

Translation also involved rhetorical shifts: brand language aimed at customers was reframed into internal narratives about mission, roles, and day-to-day practices. Effective translation required both design competence and a deep understanding of operational realities; where comms teams lacked domain knowledge, translations sometimes missed the mark and were ignored.

5.4 Friction: Misalignment and Resistance

Friction emerged when design cues conflicted with lived realities or organisational priorities. At TechCo, while the new identity emphasised “speed,” some functional teams faced hiring freezes and process bottlenecks, creating cognitive dissonance: “It felt weird to have ‘move fast’ murals when our tickets were piling up” (Engineer, TechCo). This dissonance led to scepticism and sarcastic memes shared on internal chat channels — a form of communicative resistance that undermined intended coherence.

At FinServ, some long-tenured staff perceived the modernised identity as erasing institutional history. Resistance manifested in subtle communication choices: using old logos on internal documents, or privately criticising branding choices in team meetings. Leaders who failed to address these sentiments risked deeper disengagement.

Friction also arose from procedural constraints: strict brand governance

(approval workflows, asset access limitations) slowed internal communications teams and made them reluctant to use branded assets for time-sensitive internal messages.

5.5 Cross-Case Variations

Although core mechanisms were consistent across cases, contextual factors influenced outcomes. TechCo’s agile culture made it receptive to design that signalled change, but also made misalignments more visible. FinServ’s hierarchical structure required explicit leader endorsement for adoption. NonProfit’s resource constraints translated into support critical.

6. Discussion

The findings support and extend the integrated theoretical framework proposed earlier. Brand identity design operates within organisations not merely as a background aesthetic but as an active communicative force affecting alignment, enactment, translation, and friction. Below, I discuss theoretical contributions and practical implications.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Design as Communicative Agent. Prior research often treated design as a passive container for brand messages (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2008). This study highlights the design’s active role in prompting sensemaking and shaping communicative practices. Visual artefacts function as semiotic resources that interact with narratives and behaviours, supporting an agentic view of design communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Mechanisms Linking Identity and Internal Communication. The four mechanisms — alignment, enactment, translation, and friction — provide a mid-range theory for

how identity design influences internal processes. These mechanisms operationalise abstract constructs (organisational identity, sensemaking) and offer testable propositions for future quantitative research (e.g., “Higher perceived alignment between design and organisational reality predicts greater employee advocacy of brand messages”).

Agency of Internal Communicators. The role of communications and HR teams as translators underscores the social mediation required for design to influence practice. Translation processes suggest that design uptake is not automatic but requires organisational brokerage by internal actors (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

Tensions and Resistance. Friction highlights the limits of design power. When design contradicts operational reality, employees enact resistance through communicative channels, complicating managerial efforts. This resonates with scholarship on organisational hypocrisy and impression management (Brunsson, 1989; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

6.2 Practical Implications

Integrate Design into Change Management. Leaders should treat brand redesigns as organisational change events, aligning visual rollout with operational changes and leader narratives to avoid dissonance.

Support Translation Capacity. Invest in practical toolkits, templates, and training so that non-design staff can easily use identity systems. Internal comms teams need both design literacy and domain knowledge.

Balance Governance and Flexibility. Brand governance should ensure consistency without creating bottlenecks. A tiered approval system or decentralised asset

libraries can maintain quality while enabling timely internal use.

Monitor Friction and Employee Sentiment. Use internal feedback channels and social listening to detect resistance early and address authentic concerns rather than dismissing them as mere conservatism.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that brand identity design significantly impacts internal corporate communication through multiple mechanisms. When design aligns with organisational identity and is enacted through usable artefacts and effective translation, it strengthens coherence and supports strategic messaging. Conversely, a misaligned design can generate friction and resistance, undermining internal credibility.

For practitioners, the key takeaways include: integrate brand redesign with organisational change processes; empower internal communicators to translate and operationalise design; streamline governance to avoid bottlenecks; and solicit employee involvement to enhance authenticity.

7.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations typical of qualitative research. The purposive sample of three organisations limits generalizability. Future research could test the proposed mechanisms quantitatively across larger samples or adopt longitudinal designs to examine long-term effects. Additionally, exploring cross-cultural differences in design interpretation would be valuable, given semiotic variability.

7.2 Final Remarks

Brand identity design is more than marketing decoration — it is a strategic instrument that

shapes how people within organisations communicate, make sense, and behave. Recognising and designing for the internal communicative consequences of identity work can yield stronger organisations better aligned in word and deed.

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