



Color as a Visual Cultural Strategy in Corporate Identity Formation: Insights from Turkish Universities

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the role of color in shaping the corporate identities of public and private universities in Turkey. Corporate identity, as a reflection of an institution's values and mission, relies heavily on visual elements, with color being a key strategic tool.

The research compares color preferences between public and private universities, revealing distinct patterns. Public universities favor traditional colors like navy blue and red, while private institutions opt for modern tones such as burgundy and turquoise to project innovation. Findings indicate that color choices significantly influence perceptions of credibility, prestige, and institutional image.

The study concludes that strategic color selection is crucial for effective brand communication in higher education. These insights can guide universities in strengthening their visual identities and serve as a foundation for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question of existence, "Who am I?", plays a crucial role in the self-definition process of individuals, societies, and institutions. The answer to this question shapes not only personal identities but also the lifestyles and orientations of organizations and communities (Meral, 2011, p. 2; Emiroğlu & Aydın, 2003, pp. 469-470). Corporate identity serves as the foundation for institutional reputation and vision, with these concepts being interdependent and mutually reinforcing (Cravens, 2006; Türk, 2022, p. 210). A clearly articulated corporate identity is essential for an organization to differentiate itself and drive change (Okay, 2000, p. 39).

Corporate identity comprises visual elements such as logos, color palettes, and symbols, serving as a primary tool for an institution to express itself to society (Tuna & Tuna, 2007, pp. 6-7; Balmer, 1998). The selection of visual components, including colors and typography, is critical in crafting a cohesive identity (Tuna & Tuna, 2007, pp. 79; Bayırlı & Kılıç, 2022, p. 427). Visual communication is a fundamental principle of design (Becer, 2011, p. 75), and logos and emblems enhance institutional recognition (Bayraktaroğlu & Çalı, 2010). Through a well-defined visual identity, organizations communicate their mission, values, and aspirations to their target audiences (Okay, 2002, p. 122; Sezgin, 2013, pp. 63-64).

A logo visually represents an institution's name through typography while symbolizing its structure. An emblem, on the other hand, is a memorable symbol that complements the logo and fosters brand awareness. The logo's design must maintain coherence and accurately reflect the institution (Ak, 1998, p. 105; Kahraman, 2011, p. 111; Aktuğlu, 2011, p. 141).

Color, as a key communication tool, distinguishes organizations from competitors (Elliot & Maier, 2007, p. 250; Holtzchue, 2007, p. 2). Integrated into logos, colors reinforce brand perception and evoke subconscious associations (Madden, Hewett, & Roth, 2000, p. 91). Colors profoundly influence human psychology, conveying emotions and messages without words (Elliot & Maier, 2007, p. 250; Mehmeti, 2003, p. 116; Öztuna, 2007, p. 91).

Research shows that 62–90% of initial judgments about a person or product are based on color within the first 90 seconds (Singh, 2006). Thus, color not only differentiates brands but also shapes consumer attitudes and emotional responses. Given its psychological and behavioral effects, strategic color selection is vital for marketing and brand management (Singh, 2006). A well-chosen color palette enhances brand value and fosters loyalty (Bati, 2015, p. 19; Jin et al., 2019; Cunningham, 2017).

As a core element of visual identity, color directly influences how an institution presents itself to society. It reflects the organization's culture and goals, reinforcing clarity in corporate identity. Consistent application of a color scheme across all materials—from logos to advertisements—boosts recognition and memorability. This strategic coherence fosters trust and distinguishes the institution from competitors, solidifying brand equity.

This study examines the role of color in corporate identity, addressing the central question: *What is the significance of color in institutional branding?* By analyzing the logos and color schemes of selected public and private universities in Turkey, the research identifies patterns in color usage and its impact on institutional identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Öztürk's (2006) article titled *The Effect of Logo on Corporate Identity* examines the impact of logos, as a crucial element of corporate identity, on business image and consumer perception. The study reveals how consumers perceive logo changes and demonstrates the determining effect of these changes on corporate identity. Within the scope of the article, it is recommended that logo modifications should be implemented in a way that does not impair consumer memory perception.

Ustaoglu's (2012) thesis *A Study on Making Sense of Logo Design and Color Within the Framework of Corporate Identity* investigates the role of color usage in corporate identity formation and its contribution to corporate success. The research analyzes how colors are effective in establishing emotional connections with target audiences and gaining reputation in brand identity. In this context, the study concludes that colors have a strong impact in visual identity; they stand out as critical elements in terms of originality, trust, and memorability; and that organizations' selection of colors appropriate for their target audience positively affects brand recognition and long-term success. Based on the findings, it is recommended that color usage should be evaluated as a more effective tool in corporate identity. Organizations should select palettes appropriate for their target audience by considering the psychological and cultural meanings of colors, which will support consistency in corporate communication. The study suggests unique color combinations for competitive advantage and emphasizes the need for further research in this area.

The article *Corporate Identity: Associations of Logo and Color* by Bayçu & Ustaoglu (2015) examines the effects of colors on corporate identity and the contribution of color preferences to brand perception. Within the scope of the study, the cultural, psychological, and sectoral associations of colors are evaluated, and it is emphasized that organizations need to make conscious choices in color selection to establish effective communication with their target audiences. The analysis concludes that colors have a significant impact on customer loyalty, brand memorability, and perceived trust. Additionally, it is stated that incorrect use of colors may lead target audiences to develop negative perceptions about the organization. The article includes recommendations that organizations should support their color selection processes with detailed analysis, consider global and local meaning differences, and pay attention to consistent application of colors in long-term strategies.

Yüksel's (2023) article *Color Selection in Brand Management: A Color Clustering Model* aims to analyze the impact of color choices in the branding process and develop suggestions for a systematic color usage model. In this study, a database for the banking sector was created and the most frequently used colors were identified using the k-means clustering method. The results show that certain colors are effective in enhancing consumer perception and creating brand loyalty. The findings reveal that brands gain competitive advantage when they base color decisions on analytical data rather than randomness or personal taste. The model's applicability to marketing and brand management processes at low cost serves as a guide for brands across all sectors in creating color palettes appropriate for their target audiences. Future research proposes neuromarketing approaches to support this model for deeper understanding of consumer perceptions.

Demirdöğmez's (2021) study *Colors Used by Enterprises (Businesses) and Color Psychology in Marketing* examines the psychological and emotional effects of colors on people, revealing how enterprises use colors in their marketing strategies and the effects of this usage on consumer behavior. Within the scope of the study, the effects of colors on brand awareness, consumer perception, and purchasing decisions are discussed. The research results show that colors are not merely aesthetic elements but can also be used as strategic tools for enterprises to communicate effectively with their target audience and establish brand identity. The study draws attention to differences in psychological, cultural, and societal perceptions of colors and emphasizes that correct color selection is an important factor that distinguishes brands from competitors. Among the recommendations, it is stated that enterprises should adopt a professional approach to color selection by considering the cultural and psychological characteristics of their target audiences, and that these selections should be compatible with all communication materials.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of color usage in the corporate identity of Turkish universities and to analyze how these colors maintain consistency across corporate identity elements (logo, typography, and institutional materials). The research evaluates color's influence on conveying institutional values, communicating with target audiences, and strengthening university brand perception.

Research Scope

The study encompasses the color palettes used in logos and other institutional materials of both public and foundation universities in Turkey. The analysis focuses on the strategic importance of color in visual identity formation, while investigating its impact on institutional perception, sense of belonging, and brand image.

METHODOLOGY

Research Model

The study employed a descriptive analysis method. The use of colors in corporate identity was examined through university logos and other visual identity elements. Qualitative data were collected to emphasize the meanings of colors and their effects in an institutional context.

Research Questions

The research process consists of questions directed at the research findings. In this context, the questions for which answers are sought are listed below:

1. What are the prominent formal and symbolic elements in the design of university logos?
2. Which colors are predominantly used in the design of university logos?
3. Which colors are used in the university's brand design?
4. What is the usage status of logo colors in advertising graphics (posters, catalogs, social media, etc.)?
5. How effectively do the university's designated colors reflect institutional values?
6. To what extent do the colors used in material designs align with the institution's official colors?
7. How is the brand color used in various design levels (website design, official documents, social media, book and magazine designs, etc.)?

Limitations

The research is based solely on data obtained from universities' official websites, logos, and other institutional materials. The sample consists of 10% of universities in Turkey, and the findings only include inferences for this group. The study evaluated current corporate identity elements as of 2024 and did not address past or future changes.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data used in the research were collected through an evaluation checklist form developed using corporate identity guidelines from the official websites of randomly selected universities in the sample. The analysis was conducted through tabulation of the collected data.

Instrument Development

The evaluation checklist developed for this research consists of four main sections. The first section assesses the number and types of colors used in university logos. The second section analyzes the degree of alignment between these colors and the institution's mission and corporate identity. The third section examines color consistency across various platforms, including websites, social media, and printed materials. The final section incorporates expert-derived criteria for evaluating how colors influence target audience perception.

During the instrument development process, input was obtained from academics specializing in visual communication and brand management, along with graphic design and digital marketing professionals. These experts guided the selection of effective criteria for assessing the relationship between universities' corporate identity strategies and their color usage. The resulting instrument features a multidimensional structure that enables both qualitative and quantitative data collection, comprehensively evaluating the visual, aesthetic, and strategic functions of color in corporate identity.

Population and Sample

The research population comprises all 208 public and foundation universities in Turkey. A randomly selected sample representing 10% of this population was studied, consisting of 13 public universities and 8 foundation universities currently operating in Turkey's higher education system.

FINDINGS

General Information About Universities

Table 1 presents the distribution of public and foundation universities examined in this study according to their establishment years.

Table 1: University Establishment Years

| Establishment Year | Number |
|--------------------|-----------|
| Before 1980 | 4 |
| 1981 – 2000 | 5 |
| 2001 and later | 12 |
| Total | 21 |

Analysis of Table 1, which shows the establishment years of the evaluated universities, reveals that the majority of the examined institutions (12) were founded in 2001 or later. Additionally, 5 universities were established between 1981-2000, while only 4 universities predate 1980.

Analysis of University Logos

Within the scope of the identified problem, Table 2 presents information about the logo usage patterns of the examined public and foundation universities.

Table 2: Logo Usage in Universities

| University Type | Full Circle | Oval (Vertical) | Square | Rectangle | Multiple Forms | Total |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|
| Public | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 13 |
| Foundation | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 8 |
| Total | 7 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 21 |

Analysis of Table 2, which shows logo usage patterns of the examined universities, reveals that multiple forms (5) are the most preferred structure in public universities. In foundation universities, full circle (3) and rectangular (3) forms are more commonly used. Overall, the full circle form (7) was identified as the most widely used form. The second most used forms in logos were rectangle (5) and multiple forms (5). The least used form in logos was square (1).

Information about "Logo Usage Formats" of the universities examined within the research scope is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Logo Usage Formats

| University Type | Emblem Only | Emblem with Side Typography | Emblem with Bottom Typography | Multiple Usage | Total |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| Public | 2 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 13 |
| Foundation | 2 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 8 |
| Total | 4 | 4 | 1 | 12 | 21 |

When examining the logo usage formats in Table 3, multiple usage (6) ranks first in public universities, consistent with previous findings. Similarly, multiple usage (6) was found to be predominant in foundation universities. In public universities, emblem with side typography (4) ranks second, while in foundation universities, emblem-only usage (2) comes second. Overall, the highest concentration was found in multiple usage format (12). The format with typography below the emblem (1) was identified as the least used format.

Information regarding the geometric shapes used in the logos of universities examined within the research scope is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Geometric Shapes Used in the University Logo

| University Type | Circle | Triangle | Oval | Rectangle | Multiple Use | Non | Total |
|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|--------------|----------|-----------|
| Public | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 13 |
| Foundation | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| Total | 5 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 2 | 21 |

An analysis of the use of geometric shapes in university logos, as presented in Table 4, reveals distinct trends between public and foundation universities. In public universities, the **Multiple Use** approach (5 instances) emerges as the most preferred design strategy, a trend similarly observed in foundation universities (4 universities). This preference for multiple shapes allows logos to maintain flexibility across various platforms while fostering a more dynamic institutional identity. Additionally, the **Circle** (5 instances) is notably more prevalent in public universities, likely due to its symbolic associations with unity and integrity. In contrast, less common shapes such as the **Triangle** (2 university) and **Oval** (1 instance) suggest that these forms carry more specialized or niche design connotations. A further noteworthy observation is the absence of any geometric shape in the logos of two universities, indicating an alternative design approach in these cases.

Color Use Cases

Information showing the number of colors used in the logos of the universities examined within the scope of the study is given in Table 5.

Table 5: Number of Colors used in the University Logo

| University Type | 1 Color | 2 Color | 3 Color | Total |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Public | 1 | 7 | 5 | 13 |
| Foundation | 0 | 6 | 2 | 8 |
| Total | 1 | 13 | 7 | 21 |

Analysis of color quantity distribution in university logos (Table 5) demonstrates that two-color schemes (13 universities) are overwhelmingly predominant. While public universities show notable preference for both two-color (7 cases) and three-color (5 cases) combinations, foundation universities exhibit a similar pattern (two-color: 6 cases, three-color: 2 cases). The occurrence of monochromatic design in only one public university suggests that single-color logos may possess limited expressive capacity. The article further examines the specific color selections in both public and foundation university logos, with comprehensive results presented in Table 6. This investigation provides valuable insights into institutional color preferences and their potential symbolic significance in academic branding.

Table 6: Colors Used in the University Logo

| University Type | Navy Blue | Black | White | Turquoise | Yellow | Gray | Blue | Red | Gren | Other |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Public | 6 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Foundation | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 7 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 |

Analysis of color usage in university logos (Table 6) reveals navy blue (7 instances) and black (7 instances) as the most dominant colors. While navy blue is more prominently featured in public universities (6 cases), foundation universities demonstrate a stronger preference for black (4 cases). White (6) and blue (6) also emerge as commonly utilized colors, with turquoise (4), yellow (3), and green (3) appearing less frequently. Among the least preferred colors, public universities have adopted orange and gold tones, whereas foundation universities tend to favor burgundy.

The study further examines color application beyond logos, including those employed in broader brand designs and formally specified within institutional identity guidelines. The data reflecting color usage patterns across university brand designs are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Colors Used in the Design of the University Brand

| University Type | Navy Blue | Black | White | Turquoise | Yellow | Gray | Blue | Red | Green | Gold | other |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Public | 7 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Foundation | 1 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

The analysis of color usage in university branding reveals both similarities and distinctions between public and foundation institutions. Public universities predominantly employ navy blue (7 cases), gray (8 cases), and blue (5 cases), while foundation universities show greater preference for black (4 cases), gray (4 cases), and red (4 cases). Gray emerges as the most frequently used color overall (12 cases), serving as a common choice for both institution types to convey professionalism and gravitas.

Gold and other metallic tones appear more selectively. Gold (3 cases) is primarily utilized by foundation universities to emphasize prestige and luxury, whereas its adoption remains limited among public institutions. Other notable color variations include turquoise in public universities and burgundy/brown in foundation universities, each strategically employed to reinforce specific institutional values and identities. The study further examines how these color schemes translate into advertising graphics.

The research evaluates the application of university logo colors in promotional materials (posters, brochures, etc.) across institutional types (public vs. foundation). The resulting comparative data, presented in Table 8, demonstrates how color strategies extend from core branding to marketing collateral.

Table 8: Use of Logo Colors in Advertising Graphic Designs

| University Type | Yes | No | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| Public | 13 | 0 | 13 |
| Foundation | 8 | 0 | 8 |
| Total | 21 | 0 | 21 |

Analysis of color consistency in advertising materials (Table 8) reveals complete alignment with university logo colors. All examined institutions (21 universities) demonstrate effective utilization of their official palette across promotional materials, indicating strong brand identity implementation.

The study further investigates how these color schemes reflect institutional values, particularly in representing "Academic Excellence," "Innovation," "Cultural Diversity," "Social Responsibility," and "Scientific R&D." The resulting comparative data are presented in Table 9, illustrating the relationship between color choices and value representation.

Table 9: Reflection of the Institution Value of the Colors Used

| Organizational Values | Status | Yes | No |
|------------------------|------------|-----|----|
| Academic Excellence | Public | 10 | 3 |
| | Foundation | 8 | 0 |
| Innovation and Novelty | Public | 9 | 4 |
| | Foundation | 3 | 5 |
| Cultural Diversity | Public | 9 | 4 |
| | Foundation | 5 | 3 |
| Social Responsibility | Public | 7 | 6 |
| | Foundation | 4 | 4 |
| Scientific R&D | Public | 11 | 2 |
| | Foundation | 5 | 3 |

Analysis of how colors reflect institutional values (Table 9) reveals public universities demonstrate greater effectiveness in this domain. Scientific R&D (Public: 11, Foundation: 5) and Status (Public: 10, Foundation: 8) emerge as the most strongly represented values. Foundation universities, meanwhile, emphasize Status (8) and Cultural Diversity (5) more prominently. However, they lag significantly in representing Innovation (Public: 9, Foundation: 3). Public institutions also show stronger representation in other values like social responsibility and academic excellence, suggesting they emphasize institutional heritage and tradition, while foundation universities appear more focused on cultivating perceptions of status and modernity.

The study also evaluates color application across different design platforms - institutional websites, social media (Instagram), and stationery (letterheads, business cards etc.) - with scoring results detailed in Table 10. This comparative analysis provides insights into how consistently universities implement their color schemes across various media channels.

Table 10: Harmony between the Colors Used in Material Design and the Color of the Institution

| Areas | Status | 1-5 Points | 6-10 Points | Average |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|---------|
| Website | Public | 0 | 13 | 8,6 |
| | Foundation | 0 | 8 | 9,0 |
| Social Media (Instagram) | Foundation | 2 | 11 | 7,2 |
| | Foundation | 0 | 8 | 8,5 |
| Letterhead, Business Card etc. | Public | 0 | 13 | 9,5 |
| | Foundation | 0 | 8 | 9,3 |

The analysis of color consistency across material designs (Table 10) reveals generally successful alignment with institutional colors. Both website (Public: 8.6; Foundation: 9.0) and stationery (Public: 9.5; Foundation: 9.3) applications demonstrate high compatibility scores, with foundation universities showing marginally better performance. Notably, foundation institutions (8.5) achieve superior color consistency on social media platforms compared to their public counterparts (7.2), suggesting more effective visual brand management in digital spaces.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that color selection serves as a strategically vital tool in the institutional identity formation processes of both public and foundation universities in Turkey. The research reveals the multifaceted impact of color choices on institutional identity across various dimensions.

Empirical data indicates that colors employed in university logos and institutional materials function not merely as aesthetic elements, but as powerful visual symbols communicating institutional identity, values, and aspirations. The perceptual and emotional effects of colors constitute another critical consideration in academic branding strategies. As Singh's (2006) research established, 60-90% of consumers' initial product or brand assessments within the first 90 seconds are color-dependent. Similarly, color choices in university logos play a pivotal role in shaping target audiences' first impressions and emotional connections with academic institutions.

Public universities predominantly utilize traditional colors like navy blue, white, gray, and red to reflect their historical legacy and academic authority, while foundation universities favor burgundy, black, and turquoise to project modern, innovative, and dynamic institutional images. For instance, Istanbul University's yellow and green palette represents its historical and cultural heritage, whereas Akdeniz University's blue and white combination symbolizes both its coastal identity and academic continuity. Conversely, Yeditepe University's turquoise hue and triangular forms convey a modern global vision, while Koç University's red and navy combination reinforces academic leadership and strong brand perception.

Two-color schemes dominate institutional logos, maintaining visual simplicity while effectively emphasizing institutional identity. The relatively lower preference for three-color combinations may reflect concerns about design complexity. Overall, universities tend to favor simple yet impactful color combinations, consciously avoiding excessive visual clutter.

Color symbolism analysis reveals navy blue conveys trust, authority and professionalism; black represents power and elegance; white signifies purity and neutrality; while blue evokes trust and tranquility. These choices reflect universities' strategic efforts to communicate specific values through visual means. The limited use of attention-grabbing colors like red suggests a preference for more subdued, professional tones in academic branding, with color palettes generally reinforcing institutional gravitas and trustworthiness.

Notably, navy blue appears more frequently in public universities, while foundation institutions favor black to cultivate perceptions of sophistication and brand strength. Both university types utilize white and blue at comparable rates for their associations with purity, transparency and trust. This divergence in color strategies reflects each institution type's alignment with their target audiences and core values - public universities opting for more traditional, trust-inspiring palettes versus foundation universities selecting contemporary, prestige-enhancing hues.

The study also examined color consistency across institutional materials and digital platforms. Public universities maintain 95% color consistency on websites, though this drops to 85% on social media. Foundation universities show similar patterns. This generally high consistency rate indicates strong implementation of institutional identity strategies and adoption of coherent brand languages. Consistent color application across advertising graphics enhances brand memorability and recognition, while digital and print material consistency reinforces audience trust. The comparable performance of both institution types underscores the importance accorded to institutional design and brand management.

Particularly noteworthy is foundation universities' superior performance in digital media, suggesting greater focus and professionalism in this domain. The exceptionally high consistency rates in printed materials confirm strong brand representation in physical touchpoints.

These findings suggest Turkish universities should systematize their color strategies through several measures: updating institutional identity guidelines, ensuring effective color implementation across digital platforms, and increasing color consistency in scientific publications and academic documents. Future research could expand this analysis through comparative studies with international institutions, providing broader perspectives on academic color strategies.

Another key recommendation emphasizes the need for universities to more carefully consider the cultural and psychological dimensions of color. Colors represent not merely visual preferences but emotional and perceptual strategies. Institutions should therefore develop color strategies through comprehensive analysis of target audiences' cultural and psychological perceptions. While Akdeniz University successfully employs regional symbolism through its blue-white palette, some institutions lack equally meaningful color associations. More conscious utilization of colors' emotional impacts through targeted audience analysis would strengthen institutional branding.

In conclusion, while Turkish universities generally demonstrate strong, meaningful foundations in their color strategies, inconsistencies persist in digital implementation and academic materials. Addressing these gaps would significantly enhance institutional brand value and identity strength. Through more strategic application of colors' symbolic meanings, universities can forge stronger connections with target audiences and cultivate more robust brand perceptions both nationally and internationally. Future research could valuably extend these analyses through cross-cultural comparisons with international institutions, further advancing understanding of academic color strategies within global contexts.

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