



**LUND UNIVERSITY**  
School of Economics and Management

# **The Corporate Brand Identity in a Hybrid Workplace Model**

by

**Cornelia Borg & Caoimhe O'Sullivan**

**May 2021**

**Master's Programme in International Marketing and Brand Management**

Supervisor: Mats Urde  
Examiner: Veronika Tarnovskaya

# Abstract

**Title:** The Corporate Brand Identity in the Hybrid Workplace Model

**Date of Seminar:** 4th June 2021

**Course:** BUSN39 Degree Project in Global Marketing

**Authors:** Cornelia Borg & Caoimhe O’Sullivan

**Supervisor:** Mats Urde

**Keywords:** *Corporate Brand Identity, Hybrid Workplace Model, Organisational Change, Corporate Brand Management, COVID-19, Telework*

**Thesis purpose:** The purpose of our research is to examine the intersection of organisational change and the corporate brand identity in the hybrid workplace model. We explore the implications of the model on the corporate brand identity, how brand identity may be shaped in the model and the reasons why identity may change during the hybrid workplace model transformation.

**Theoretical perspective:** The study applies a theoretical framework that combines corporate brand identity and organisational change theory to address the research questions.

**Methodology:** A qualitative multiple case study was conducted with three Australian companies who have implemented a hybrid workplace model. The thesis follows a constructionist epistemology and an abductive reasoning approach.

**Empirical Material:** Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of employees. Interview transcripts were subject to a content analysis and provided the basis for our findings and analysis.

**Theoretical Findings:** The hybrid model transformation is linked to the corporate brand identity to varying degrees. Moreover, changes within the corporate brand identity occur across organisations which influence the level of change adopted by the organisation. Finally, the corporate brand identity is used as a tool to guide organisations through the hybrid transformation.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge and thank our supervisor, Mats Urde, for providing a constant source of wisdom and guidance throughout this thesis. Despite having only met through Zoom, his care and dedication has filtered through our computer screens and into the following pages. It has been a great pleasure learning from you.

Furthermore, this thesis would not have been possible if not for the enthusiastic participation from our interviewees who generously gave up their time to provide invaluable insights. Thank you for sharing your experiences and contributions to our research.

We would also like to extend our thanks to the teaching and professional staff of the Master's Program in International Marketing and Brand Management for their support throughout the course.

Finally, we wish to express our gratitude and deep appreciation for our friends and family who have never wavered in their belief in us. Their encouraging words have motivated us and their thoughtful gestures have lifted our spirits when we needed it most.



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Cornelia Borg

31st May 2021



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Caoimhe O'Sullivan

31st May 2021

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# 1. Introduction

*The first chapter introduces the reader to the topic of our research and provides valuable context for the subsequent chapters of this thesis. We put forward the research fields of corporate brand identity, organisation change and the hybrid model that form the basis of our research and the purpose of this thesis. We then present the guiding research questions and delimitations of our research before concluding with an outline of the thesis.*

## 1.1 Background

In a recent letter to Google employees, CEO Sundar Picha announced the imminent return of approximately 140, 000 employees to the office (Google, 2021). After almost a year of working-from-home, the return to the office marks a new era for the global company embracing the ‘hybrid approach’ to working. Picha appears to have learnt from Yahoo’s ex-CEO Marissa Mayer’s infamous 2013 memo, in which she announced the end to their flexible remote working policy (Carlson, 2013). After facing the ire of employees and an ensuing media storm, Mayer proclaimed that remote working just doesn’t work: *“people are more productive when they’re alone but they’re more collaborative and innovative when they’re together”* (Carlson, 2013). Eight years later and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work is more ubiquitous than ever before. As the age of the hybrid approach to work dawns, can organisations fuse the remote and physical office together without losing the essence of who they are?

The COVID-19 pandemic saw the overnight transformation of global workforces in May 2020. Amid lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, employees across industries were directed to work from home. The transition to remote working, while not possible for the majority of the global workforce, is more prominent in advanced economies such as the US, UK and Australia (McKinsey, 2020a). Furthermore, particular industries such as technology, finance and management are more suitable for remote work (McKinsey, 2020a). Government responses to the pandemic varied globally, with Australia closing its international borders on 20th March 2020 to contain the spread of the virus (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020). Subsequently, the level and duration of restrictions on day to day life has impacted the re-organisation of the workforce. Australia enforced lockdowns across its states with New South Wales mandating work-from-home measures on the 31st March 2020 (Mills Oakley, 2020). However, the low case numbers in Australia and the slow but gradually increasing availability of vaccines has meant companies began reentering the physical office from April 2021 (Varagur, 2021). Whilst the impact of the pandemic on organisations is complex and evolving, current research indicates that organisations are preparing for an eventual return to the office, albeit in a new hybrid format (McKinsey, 2020a). The hybrid model proposes combining remote working with traditional office based working. Although a universal definition for the term ‘hybrid’ is yet to appear, the model is characterised by the high degree of flexibility for the employee (King’s College London, 2021). Both employees and managers see benefits in adopting a hybrid model yet few have been able to implement this approach



(McKinsey, 2020a). However, Australia's relative containment of the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed organisations to begin the process of transitioning to the hybrid model.

The move to a hybrid model poses new challenges to organisations. In particular, the fragmentation of the workforce has resulted in heterogeneous employee experiences (King's College London, 2021). Some employees have thrived in the remote setting, others have reported fatigue and loss of connection to their organisation (Newman & Ford, 2020). The results of this mass remote work experiment are still to be seen, nevertheless, a distinct segmentation is occurring within organisations based upon employees office location preferences (King's College London, 2021). The employee experience in the hybrid format is an integral part of the transformation of organisations as they negotiate who the organisation will be as it emerges from the COVID-19 era.

## 1.2 Research Problem

The future of work has recently garnered more attention due to technological advancements, the shift to an information economy and a war for talent. Organisations have prioritised productivity, automation and re-skilling their workforces in the pursuit of innovation (Maitland & Thomson, 2011). In the same vein, the traditional office has become a mecca for collaboration and connectedness where corporate culture is carefully cultivated (Maitland & Thomson, 2011). Within this context, a small but growing contingent of workers had engaged in 'telework' practises prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). Unlike the hybrid model, telework practises have not been widely adopted among organisations (Potter, 2003). Telework research has seen a proliferation of terms including remote work, telecommuting, virtual work and distributed workforces (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). Despite the vastness of the field, telework studies have been restricted to employees who choose to engage in remote work to varying degrees. There has been significantly less research into the experience of those employees who exist in both remote and physical offices. The hybrid model that has emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic presents a departure from the dichotomous telework experience previously studied. As employees in a hybrid model access higher degrees of flexibility, there is a need to understand how digital and physical offices influence their experience of the organisation. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the future of work and teleworking practises presenting the hybrid model as a new organisational format that is yet to be examined in literature.

The transition to the hybrid model presents considerable organisational change, much of which is yet to be fully realised. In an increasingly competitive market, organisations must learn to navigate ambiguity in order to survive or risk being left behind (By, 2005). Organisational change is both necessary and inevitable but that does not guarantee it is always successful (Kotter, 1995). In fact, substantial literature has explored various processes for implementing change to ensure it is assimilated by its audience (Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1947). Change theorists have argued that crucial to the adoption of change is a clear vision for the future, however, within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic changes have

occurred under a cloud of uncertainty. The hybrid model is a fundamental change in the ways organisations work. However the nature and scale of this change has not been explored in organisation transformation literature. The impact of the pandemic among organisations in the emerging academic literature, has largely been examined from a reactionary standpoint. As such there are limited perspectives that examine how organisations are planning for further organisational change as they transform to the hybrid model. Furthermore, COVID-19 has instigated changes across organisations globally, but the extent and forms of change are not universal. Thus, there is a need to examine a diverse cross-section of organisations as they transition to the hybrid model.

During times of change, organisations reflect upon who they believe themselves to be and how they are seen (Greyser, 2009). For corporate brand managers, the question of ‘who are we as an organisation?’ brings the brand’s identity into clear view (Urde, 2013). The corporate brand has risen to prominence, not only from a competitive standpoint but as a unifying symbol of what the brand stands for (Roper & Fill, 2012). In recent years, the organisation behind the brand has come under increased scrutiny as the walls between the organisation and its stakeholders have diminished (Karapancheva, 2020). Consequently, corporate brand management literature has emphasised the importance of creating cohesion across the internal and external aspects of the brand, awarding consistency over time as a sign of brand strength (Aaker, 1996; Kay, 2006). The literature has predominantly argued that consistency is achieved through a process of strategic alignment and misalignments may temporarily occur when tensions emerge within the corporate brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Yet, less attention has been given to the transformation processes the corporate brand identity is subjected to in order for these tensions to come to the surface. The unprecedented scale of transformation that has occurred across organisations has brought the process of aligning the corporate brand identity during times of radical change into focus. As organisations enter the hybrid model, they must assess who they are and what they stand for post-lockdown. Thus, the transformation of the corporate brand identity during the COVID-19 pandemic is of great interest for brand practitioners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes to the global business landscape, the long-term effects of which are still to be seen. For organisations, a new appetite for remote work is accompanied by a desire to reimagine the way employees work. The hybrid model is developed as the new combination of the remote office and the physical office. A departure from previous telework practises, the hybrid model is embraced by the future-of-work movement. Yet at its crux, the hybrid model requires considerable organisational change that ultimately asks organisations to consider what they stand for. Corporate brand identity comes into clearer focus as organisations determine what the hybrid model means and to what extent they have transformed. The exploration of organisations’ transformation to the hybrid model and their corporate brand identity marks the beginnings of this thesis.

## 1.3 Research Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the intersection of organisational change and the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model. As such, the thesis investigates the relationship between organisation change processes and the corporate brand identity. The hybrid model is conceived of as the merging of remote work and on-site work that allows employees the freedom to choose where they wish to work and when (McKinsey, 2020b). In this context we examine the effects of the hybrid model on corporate brand identity in the setting of COVID-19. This study is therefore situated at the intersection of organisational change, corporate brand identity and the COVID-19 pandemic and considers the following research questions:

***RQ1: What are the implications, if any, of a hybrid model for the corporate brand identity?***

***RQ2: How is the corporate brand identity shaped, if at all, in a hybrid model?***

***RQ3: Why does the corporate brand identity change, if at all, during times of a hybrid model transformation?***

Building upon strategic brand management practises during organisational change, we examine the transformation of the corporate brand identity elements to varying degrees (Kotter, 1995). We aim to develop understanding of the relationship between organisational change and the corporate brand identity. We propose a framework that expands upon current brand management practises by examining the transformation process that may result in tensions or gaps emerging within the corporate brand identity. From a management perspective the framework measures the organisational change generated by the hybrid model alongside changes to the corporate brand identity during this time. Based on empirical data and subsequent findings, the framework is informed by current research in the fields of organisational change, corporate brand identity and COVID-19. To develop the framework, the thesis employs a qualitative case study of three Australian organisations at the initial stages of implementing the hybrid model, using semi-structured interviews with employees to provide insights into the theoretical and managerial implications.

## 1.4 Research Delimitations

The scope of this thesis is the examination of corporate brand identity and the hybrid model. However, we do not seek to assess the strength of the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model. For this reason, the thesis does not investigate the external perspective of the corporate brand but rather focuses on the internal brand identity process as the core of the corporate brand. As such the employee perspective is of paramount importance to the study. Furthermore, it is not possible to examine the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic within the constraints of this thesis. We subsequently focus our study on organisations in Australia that have begun implementing the hybrid model.

## 1.5 Outline of the Thesis

We conclude this introductory chapter by providing the reader with an overview of the following chapters included in this thesis that address the research questions presented. The first introductory chapter has provided background to the phenomenon of the hybrid model, the research problem and the guiding research questions of the thesis (RQ 1-3 as above). The second chapter reviews the academic literature regarding the transformation of work, telework and the current state of COVID-19 research. In addition we present the theoretical foundations of the study rooted in corporate brand management theory and organisational change theory. We further present the frameworks used in the investigation of the hybrid model. Our third chapter details the methodological approach, research philosophy, data collection and analysis and the overall quality of the study. The fourth chapter distills our empirical data, presenting our results and subsequent analysis of our findings. We discuss the broader implications of our study in relation to theory in the fifth chapter. Finally, we conclude this study with a summary of our findings and contributions as well as acknowledging the limitations of our research and suggestions for future studies.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

*The hybrid model of work has come to the forefront due to the societal efforts to urgently contain the COVID-19 pandemic. As such there is very little developed literature on this specific phenomenon. This literature review therefore focuses on research related to digital transformation, telework and the effect of COVID-19 on work. The concept of the hybrid model is now evolving as a consequence of remote work and considerations about how work should be in a post-COVID-19 era.*

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### 2.1.1 The Digital Transformation

Digitalisation has accelerated and grown rapidly over a few centuries (Colbert, Yee & George, 2016). The development of the internet, broadband, smartphones, computers and more has increased availability of diverse tools and an expectation of being able to do things anytime and anywhere. The ease of access has meant ‘un-plugging’ becomes more challenging which in turn affects human creativity, information management capacity, decision making and individual production output (Colbert, Yee & George, 2016). Colbert, Yee and George’s (2016) research focus on individual employees and the effects of digital elements implemented within organisations on their work practices. They recognised the ‘digital workforce’ and the competencies and digital tools organisations develop as a result. The digital workforce positively impacts the way work is structured, enabling easy access to information and increased geographical opportunities for employees and organisations (Colbert, Yee & George, 2016).

In contrast to the benefits of digital tools, organisations are also presented with new challenges such as data pervasiveness (Colbert, Yee & George, 2016). Specifically, the blurring of lines between home and work is attributed to the growth of smartphones that are used for both work and personal communication by employees (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). A 2008 study found that 83% of employees admitted to using digital tools at work for private uses (Cisco, 2008). According to Colbert, Yee and George (2016) this raises questions regarding employees' attention to work and overall productivity when private phone use is prevalent in the work day. However, the widespread availability of smartphones provides employees with the opportunity to answer emails and calls without being dependent on physical office space. Employees are able to take advantage of this flexibility by restructuring their work day and can positively affect output (Read, 2004). The long term effects of increased digital tools and flexibility in work have also been found to increase the risk employees will struggle to ‘un-plug’ from work which can reduce their autonomy overall (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013).

Digital collaboration tools have grown (e.g., Google Drive, Trello, Yammer and Slack) (Signorelli, 2021) particularly in the knowledge and information economy due to an increased focus on collaboration and innovation. Signorelli (2021) stresses the importance of research into best practises for using digital tools as effectively as possible, observing that some organisations only take advantage of these tools to a limited extent. Colbert, Yee and George (2016) agree that the possibilities and advantages offered by digital developments are only taken up by a fraction of organisations and there is scope to improve. Signorelli (2021) states that digital tools enhance the opportunities for virtual teams to grow and develop. However, there is also a need for these tools to be broadened and developed further to cultivate a sense of belonging among employees when they don't interact in physical office spaces. Signorelli (2021) argues, if developed further, digital transformation tools can be utilised to create a psychological experience of 'belonging to the team'. Other examples supporting the role of digital developments in increasing collaboration are Andal-Ancion, Cartwright and Yip's (2003) work outlining the opportunities for outsourcing competencies between organisations. Lanzolla and Anderson's (2010) support the use of digital tools in reducing distance and increasing collaboration between industries and companies.

Eden, Burton-Jones, Casey and Draheim (2019) state that there is limited research regarding the efforts between the digital transformation and workforce transformation, although the majority of leaders within organisations know these two are linked. To contribute to this missing element in research they found three practices that can be used to discover these two transformations: flexing, deepening and revitalising. They explain the importance of always returning to the deepening stage. Flexibility means using existing tools to adapt temporarily and enable flexibility over work (Eden et al., 2019). Revitalising means to formally change the different structures and roles (Eden et al., 2019). Deepening further rethinks the way of working and considers choices of how best to function (Eden et al., 2019). They also state that other researchers focus on the automation of certain job-roles within digital transformations, because there needs to be innovation and efficiency.

Eden et al (2019) further explains that organisations have to consider its processes and roles from the perspective of technology when undergoing digital transformation to enhance success. They however stress the importance of further investigation into the 'how' these two transformations should be linked. Eden et al (2019) state that there are two ways to implement a transformation: through recruitment or replacement also called 'changing the people' or by training and development called 'its people changing'. To succeed with the workforce transformation, they further established three areas to focus on: "*establish the culture for successful workforce transformation*", "*build ongoing digital/workforce transformation competence*", and "*manage transformation tensions across organizational levels*" (Eden et al., 2019).

Digital transformation is a central topic in the discourse around the 'future of work'. The focus on technological change presents challenges for companies considering the weight given to the contribution of 'the people'. Schneider (1987) emphasises that "the people within the company make the company" and organisational behaviour is the result of employees

rather than a result of structure and technology. He states that the people influence how an organisation looks, feels and behaves, drawing on organisational choice theory that supports the relationship between a person and their environment (Tom, 1971; Vroom, 1976). The individual preferences therefore impact organisations differently, however this is a less explored topic in the literature. Schneider (1987) argues that people choose which organisations they wish to contribute to, instead of people being assigned to corporations. The employees decision regarding the type of organisation they participate in thus contributes to the organisational behaviours and norms that are cultivated. The survival of the organisation is dependent on its ability to meet the demands of the internal and external environments which can only be achieved by employing people and establishing processes and structures (Schneider, 1987). Schneider (1987) argues that not everyone sees organisations as people, but they should. He believes that organisations should redirect their focus from changing structures and processes but instead focus on changing the people within the organisation, who in turn will eventually change the structures. Although change is slow and requires patience, it is beneficial to look to people for answers regarding how to transform, rather than simply focusing on producing results. Schineider's (1987) mantra 'the people make the place' has been extended to brands with 'the place also makes the brand' (Pritchard and Morgan, 1998), inferring that 'people make the brand' (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011).

Although there is a growing body of literature on digital transformations, studies connecting the digital transformation to the corporate brand are fairly limited. There is a growing need to research the impact of people within organisations during digital transformations.

### 2.1.2 Telework

Telework or telecommuting has existed for some time, first emerging in the 1970's in response to the oil crisis in the US (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Despite this long history, a lack of consensus regarding the definition of telework has made it difficult to compare studies across the area and fragmented the literature (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Teleworking studies vary greatly in terms of the occupations, organisations and formats examined which has contributed to the lack of a common understanding of the term 'telework'. Researchers frequently use 'yes' or 'no' metrics to discover telework practises within organisations, however most studies are non-experimental or cross-sectional, making it difficult to discover deeper insights and causality. Allen, Golden and Shockley (2015), provide the following definition of telework as telecommuting:

*“Telecommuting is a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace typically principally from home using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks.”*  
(Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015, p. 44)

By this definition, teleworking is limited to people who normally work at a physical office and therefore excludes employees who normally work from places other than a physical office.

In the 1970s when teleworking first became prominent, there was discussion about the possibilities and challenges of the growth of teleworking for business; until then the office was the central hub for organisations and teleworking constituted a major shift in this view (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). Despite controversy about the role of teleworking in society some researchers reported positive effects. Avery and Zabel (2001) argue that teleworking was first created to reduce the environmental impact of commuters, proposing to move 'the work to the workers' (rather 'the workers to the work'). The experiment was perceived positively and resulted in state funding projects to explore the possibility and effectiveness of future teleworking practises (Avery & Zabel, 2001). Some researchers advanced the possibility of more work opportunities as a result of employing telework practises for both employees and the organisation (West & Anderson, 2005). Studies on the 'new workplace' focused on the founding principles and ways to collaborate in the remote setting (Gruber, Leon, George, & Thompson, 2015). Specific emphasis is placed on the employee's need for emotional engagement in the workplace and the challenges posed to employees who are remote (Gruber et al., 2015). Kizza's (2013) study proposed that digital growth led to an increase in teleworking whilst decreasing the need for a physical office, relegating its purpose to facilitate the use of specialty equipment. He argues that more jobs have been able to take advantage of teleworking due to a shift from manufacturing to an information economy and employees will enjoy new career opportunities as technologies continue to develop. While Weeden (2005) found that individuals with higher-level jobs and higher incomes were the representative segment within teleworking, Potter (2003) reported teleworking is limited to certain industries and jobs. Thus the literature is lacking studies that expand the telework practises to a diverse range of employees and organisations across industries.

Golden (2006) found that teleworking had a positive impact on the organisational commitment which is supported by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) with their investigation into work satisfaction when teleworking (although the extent of telework was not stated). Golden (2006) reported that the amount of teleworking had a profound impact on the relationship between the employee and their supervisor and colleagues. These relationships were affected differently, noting the relationship with the supervisor had a positive change and the relationship towards the colleagues had a negative impact. Not all work or working environments are suited to telework. For example, Golden and Veiga (2005) noted that collaboration and coordination may be difficult when the physical office is needed to meet challenges in more divided workplaces. They emphasised the challenges for companies and industries that require a lot of communication and coordination. Teleworking alters an organisation's communication (Barry & Crant, 2000) which might also impact and decrease knowledge transfer (Taskin & Bridoux, 2010) and possibilities for innovation. Lister and Harnish (2011) reported that the nature of work affected the success of teleworking



opportunities and that not all job types are suited to it (e.g., nursing). They noted that tasks that can be done online are most suitable for teleworking.

Jackson and Van Der Wielen (1998) reported that the extent of teleworking varies across different employees and organisations. It is important to consider these factors in detail as output varies according to frequency of teleworking (e.g., 1 day per month compared to 4 days per week). The degree of teleworking has an effect on the productivity of employees with increased autonomy found to positively impact organisational outcomes (Gajendran, Harrison & Delaney-Klinger 2014). However, the opposite was reported by Rocco (1998) indicating that organisations with less teleworking have better outcomes compared to organisations that implement teleworking to a larger scale. Teleworking in most cases provides employees with more flexibility (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright & Neuman, 1999) which may be in the form of flexible schedules and tasks. This makes it possible for individual employees to manage work hours as they want and thereby improve their performance in the organisation (Golden, 2006).

Culture is an element that many organisations are aware of and want to protect. Companies that thrive on digital development, such as Google and Apple, have not traditionally encouraged their employees to embrace telework. Instead, they have designed their physical offices to facilitate a high degree of interaction, collaboration through a social office culture (Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014; Wasserman, 2014). Offstein, Morwick and Griffith (2009) provides support for the view that culture is affected by teleworking, emphasising the managers responsibility in ensuring culture among telework employees is cultivated for the benefits of both employees and the organisation.

Potter (2003) argues that telework will continue to grow, however he largely believes that this is due to an increased focus on safety in the workplace. His findings show that the terrorist attack on September 11 2001 raised concerns about workplace threats and left some employees feeling more comfortable working from home. He connects the growth of teleworking to pre-industrial society where the workforce was located in different places but connected through different physical networks. The growth of teleworking is a result of organisations returning to this more diverse and scattered way of working. There are benefits for both the employee and the employer within teleworking. The employee has the ability to combine work and private life to cater to their individual needs and specific preferences. Whilst employers believe telework improves morale, attracts new employees, helps retain current employees and increases productivity (Potter, 2003). Potter (2003) also raises concerns with teleworking, such as the increased dependence on individual employees. Employees that are extroverted and require social stimulation may struggle to succeed when teleworking. Managers are also required to place greater trust in employees as telework reduces their ability to supervise teams as they would in a physical office. The organisation's mission may be threatened when employees are seen not to be working 'as normal' (Potter, 2003). Reduced performance output and changes to the culture and relationships between employees and supervisors might not be for the better. Thus it is imperative that studies of

diverse organisations implementing telework practises examine the factors that influence the experience of telework employees.

### 2.1.3 The Effect of COVID-19 On Work

The literature surrounding the effect of COVID-19 on work is very new due to the outbreak commencing towards the end of 2019 and only coming to wider global attention at the beginning of 2020. The existing literature has mostly focused on digital transformation and telework which we view as highly relevant to managing the corporate brand beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 restrictions forced organisations to change their ways of operating (Savić, 2020). The physical office was no longer the main place of work. Instead ‘work from home’ became the ‘new normal’ for most people. Working from home led to rapid digital transformations to meet workers’ and organisations’ new needs and the pace of transformation is expected to continue (Savić, 2020). With the onset of COVID-19 the use of telework terminology faded away and ‘remote work’ terminology was used instead. Remote work is similar to telework although remote work refers to employees working away from the physical office on a larger scale (Savić, 2020).

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and impact on work has highlighted a need for more up-to-date studies as the circumstances and scope of previous studies may be less relevant to the COVID-19 era and beyond as suggested by Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2021). For example, telework or remote work might have been viewed as a choice prior to COVID-19 but during the pandemic it was clearly mandated. This forced change has had consequences for organisations and individuals. Wang et al. (2021) characterised the shift in emphasis that occurred during COVID-19 as being from for or against remote work, to how to make it as successful as possible. Remote work has been examined within different work designs (Wang et al., 2021), however COVID-19 has meant that more studies are needed to understand differences in approaches to success in various types of industries and job roles.

COVID-19 has had a large impact on social aspects for individuals in both their private and work contexts. It is important to acknowledge this and provide social support for remote workers. Social support has been shown to enhance employee performance and well-being (O’Neill, Hambley & Bercovich, 2014). Existing digital tools within organisations can assist this (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Ferreira, Pereira, Bianchi and Mira da Silva (2021) suggested the use of ‘cameras-on’ in virtual meetings but they acknowledge that all organisations have different rituals and ways of working and that it is important for each organisation to look at their own needs and what role digital tools might play in fulfilling those needs.

Autonomy is an important factor in human well being. It was thought that remote work might increase employee autonomy. However, autonomy in work and home life was worse than expected (based on previous studies and theories) in the remote setting after COVID-19

(Wang et al. 2021). The degree of autonomy experienced depends on the individual employee as well as the nature of their work (Wang et al. 2021). Chadee, Ren and Tang (2021) suggest that the specific context of remote work within the COVID-19 pandemic is why autonomy has not been experienced as expected. The change to remote work was forced overnight and employees and organisations had to transition very quickly and employees may not have had time to create new routines at home (Chadee, Ren & Tang, 2021). There is also continuing uncertainty about how long companies should work remotely. Therefore organisations and their employees don't know how, or to what extent, they should adjust their way of working for the long-term.

Peaks in the COVID-19 crises resulted in a fundamental shift to nearly all work being done remotely where possible. However, large scale returns to the physical office re-invokes the importance of telework which may require readjustments and phased integration. Ramsay (2020) observed that many people are waiting for the pandemic to end so that they can go back to 'normal' again. However, there might not be a 'normal' to go back to given the widespread transformation of societies and companies during the pandemic. The pandemic has forced changes that may have been unsuccessful previously. These changes have resulted in different ways of working, government restrictions, welfare payments and new technology (Ramsay, 2020). COVID-19 has thus accelerated developments in society and organisations years ahead of where they would be without the pandemic. Even though many companies see the physical office as 'normal', this may no longer be the case. However, there is a belief that the 'return to the office' will happen, albeit in different capacities (Ramsay, 2020). As the positive and negative outcomes of remote work during the pandemic are weighed, there is a belief that there will be a mixture of the physical office and the remote office. The combination of these office settings leads to the fairly new concept of the 'hybrid workplace' (Xie, Elangovan, Hu and Hrabluik, 2019).

The extent, and effect, of hybrid workplaces post-COVID-19 is unknown and needs to be analysed. However, a number of researchers predict that the hybrid model is the future of work, enabling companies to be flexible and take advantage of the positive elements of both the physical office and the remote office (Xie et al., 2019). The hybrid model sits within the field of telework due to the similarities in technology and people. Furthermore there is the potential that the challenges experienced in telework could be felt on a much larger scale if hybrid work is extended. If events occur as predicted, organisations will need to be conscious of how to manage the impact of the hybrid model on their corporate brand. Previous studies have not analysed the potential effects of hybrid work on the corporate brand and therefore presents a gap in studies that needs to be filled.

Richter (2020) reported that many people consider remote working has precluded people from meeting physically and building relationships in person. However, he attributes this to limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions, not by remote work per se and instead argues that the pandemic has highlighted the importance of social interaction among employees. The findings of Standaert, Muylle and Basu (2021) concur with this and suggest that face-to-face meetings are needed to build good relationships. However, hybrid work may reduce the

number of meetings requiring individuals to travel long distances from home, which may increase the efficiency of organisations. Hybrid work may affect how companies manage fluctuations in the location of employees as they may be in the office or geographically scattered (Standaert, Muylle & Basu, 2021).

The literature examines the role of digital transformation in enabling massive changes in work practices during COVID-19 and, conversely, the effect of the pandemic on accelerating digital transformation. It also examines the benefits and risks of digital transformation. It describes the evolution of hybrid work out of telework and the similarities, differences and the possible role of telework in future work. It informs readers about the needs of employees and organisations that have become apparent during COVID-19, about what post-COVID-19 work might look like under a hybrid model and about new studies that will be needed to understand, and ultimately manage the corporate brand in a world where hybrid work is likely to feature significantly. It shows that although there is not yet a developed literature on the hybrid work model, much can be learned and applied from the literature on other areas it is based on, such as digital transformation, telework and the effect of COVID-19 on work thus far.

## 2.2 Theoretical Foundations

### 2.2.1 The Corporate Brand

Corporate brand research could be considered a developing field of study when compared to the genesis of product branding literature, dating back centuries to livestock practises (Kochan, 1996). The dominance of product brand theory has produced a robust body of work over the years, however researchers attention has since been diverted to the brand behind the product, the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Olins, 2000; Roper & Fill, 2012).

There is some debate regarding when corporate branding first entered the literature and in what form. Kennedy's (1977) work examining the evolution of corporate images traces the origins of the corporate brand to Boulding's (1956) concept of an organisation constructing and communicating an image of itself. While Fetscherin and Usunier (2012) argue corporate brands emerged with Margulies's (1977) study of the relationship between corporate names and the corporate identity. Although there may not be consensus of the birth of corporate brand literature, there has been a consistent connection between the organisation and the way it is perceived by a variety of stakeholders (Aaker, 1996; Kay, 2006; Roper & Fill, 2012). As such, a mosaic of research and frameworks have proliferated under the umbrella of corporate branding with the aim of distilling its key components and managerial practises (Aaker, 1996; Abratt, 1989; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Roper & Fill, 2012; Urde, 2013)

The corporate brand has been developed as an all encompassing term that includes the whole organisation (Ind, 1997; Roper & Fill, 2012). A prevailing belief among corporate brand researchers is that every organisation has a corporate brand, regardless of whether this is

actively cultivated or not (Balmer, 2010; Kay, 2006; Roper & Fill, 2012). The organisation's role in the development of the corporate brand is evident in the expansion of the literature focusing on the brand as a source of competitive advantage (Aaker, 1996; Kay, 2006). Aaker (1996) argues that within an increasingly competitive market, the corporate brand becomes a strategic asset. This perspective is derivative of the brand as a differentiator in product brand literature (Kapferer, 2012). However, King (1991) argues that consumers focus on the intangible benefits of a product in saturated markets, leading to the 'company brand' as a source of competitive advantage. The literature has propagated the importance of the corporate brand within the service sector, due to the highly replicable nature of services as products (Balmer, 1995). As such, the corporate brand has continued to be developed as a strategic asset for organisations which consequently has resulted in various managerial frameworks in which the organisation plays a central role (Balmer, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Urde, 2013). Thus, it can be argued that studies of corporate brand management are linked to organisational strategies. We believe this link during the COVID-19 pandemic should be explored due to the considerable changes observed within a range of organisations and their potential impact on the corporate brand.

Corporate brand management has centered around the importance of developing cohesion across the brand and by extension the organisation. In order to create a single image of the organisation, the corporate brand must be relevant to a wider range of stakeholders than the traditional customer base (Ind, 1998). The corporate brand has also expanded the focus of its relevant stakeholders, including both internal actors such as employees alongside broader external stakeholders such as customers, government and media (Roper & Fill, 2012). The literature has subsequently promoted the corporate brand as a unifying symbol for a diverse range of stakeholders (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Internal actors such as employees are of critical importance in the development and implementation of the corporate brand as a symbol (Khan, 2009; King & Grace, 2008). The internal focus of the corporate brand is further substantiated by the incorporation of the intangible value adding elements in which the employee fosters internally and delivers externally (Foster, Punjaisri & Cheng, 2010). It is therefore necessary to take into account the employee experience of the corporate brand, particularly during times of organisational change.

The benefits of a unified and distinct corporate brand have been found to improve the efficiencies of corporate communication from a financial standpoint, whilst also generating critical sources of goodwill (Greyser, 2009; Roper & Fill, 2012). The corporate brand is of paramount importance as barriers between the organisation and its constituents have reduced substantially over time (Roper & Fill, 2012). Greyser (2009) and Jaques (2009) both argue that the corporate brand identity comes to the forefront during times of radical change. The overlap between the internal and external worlds of the organisation may increase with the shift to mass working-from-home for corporations. Thus, the corporate brand must have a clear vision in order to achieve consistency among its varied components especially within the era of COVID-19. According to Hart and Murphy (1998), the vision set out by an organisation's leadership is a core component of the corporate brand and its subsequent management. However, de Chernatony and Harris (2000) argue that leaders must promote a

culture within the organisation that is consistent with this vision in order to harness the strategic power of the corporate brand. The relationship between the organisation and its employees is essential to understanding and managing the corporate brand.

The field of corporate branding has propagated varying schools of thought which has resulted in a body of work that covers corporate brand image, reputation, identity and culture. Whilst the breadth of research indicates the complexity of the corporate brand, a delineation between the corporate brand and these derivative concepts is evident. Balmer (2012) argues that the corporate brand is the ‘face of the organisation’ that incorporates its various elements and communicates them to its stakeholders. It is therefore the responsibility of the organisation to shape, maintain and grow their corporate brands in such a way that coherently answers the question of ‘who is this organisation?’. As such, the corporate brand and the organisation are mutually dependent. Within this context, the research questions at hand require a closer examination of the corporate brand during times of change given its inextricable link to the organisation.

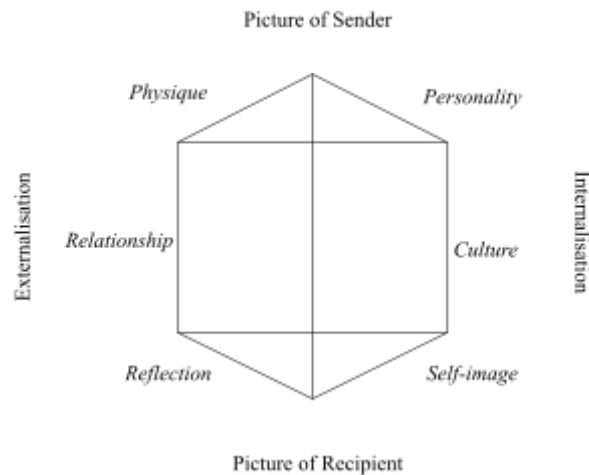
### 2.2.2 Corporate Brand Identity

Identity is a fundamental principle upon which both brand and organisational theory has developed. Corporate brand identity is both complex and central to the discourse surrounding corporate brand management and thus it is necessary to examine its development in relation to the broader corporate brand.

Corporate brand identity scholarship makes a clear distinction between the concepts of corporate identity and corporate brand identity to clarify the roles each plays in the nexus of management theory (Balmer, 2012; Kay, 2006). The distinguishing feature of the corporate identity is its internal focus of the organisation, including the strategy, leadership, culture and communication (Balmer, 2012). In contrast, the corporate brand identity emphasises the process of communicating the corporate identity in a purposeful manner to all stakeholders (Kay, 2006). From this perspective, the corporate identity provides the fertile ground from which a corporate brand identity is grown. Deeply rooted within the corporate identity are the intangible and tangible elements of the organisation (Balmer, 2012), thus fundamentally linking the organisation and the corporate brand identity.

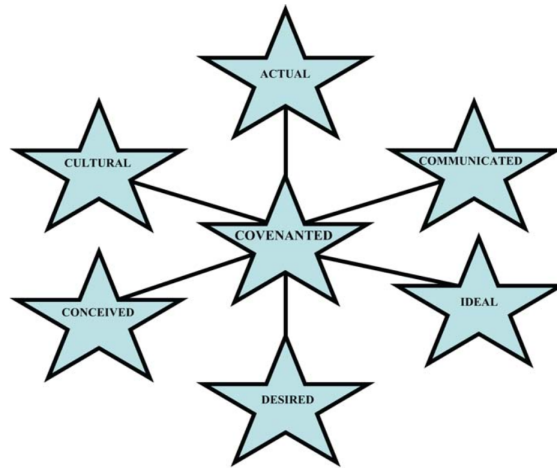
When discussing the corporate brand identity, it serves to mention Kapferer’s (2012) renowned brand identity prism. The framework (Figure 1) highlights brand identity as both an internal encoding process that is received and decoded externally (Kapferer, 2012). Kapferer (2012) argues that brand identity is thus the answer to questions about who the brand is and what makes it unique. This question underpins much of the literature that attempts to define the corporate brand identity. Discovering the answers to such questions requires the organisation to reflect upon the core values that shape its overarching vision (Hart & Murphy, 1998; Kapferer, 2012). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) further attest to the importance of the central tenets of the organisation in forming the brand’s essence. The brand essence, expanded upon by Urde (2003), consists of the values that are unique to the

organisation thus forming a distinct brand identity. It is evident that in order to create the corporate brand identity, the organisation and its foundational principles must be distilled to reveal the brand's core. Olins (1989), further ties the organisation to the corporate brand identity by presenting the monolithic, endorsed and branded identities that reflect the organisational structure.



*Figure 1. Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012)*

Balmer (2012) argues the relationship between the corporate identity and the corporate brand identity is not unilateral but is rather symbiotic. It is essential to consider the corporate brand identity as a continuous process in which the dynamism of the corporate identity produces multiple and simultaneous brand identities. Balmer (2012) captures this in the AC<sup>4</sup>ID Test presented in Figure 2, where he details seven corporate brand identities that form the overarching corporate brand. Whilst each identity within the model relates to an element of who the organisation is, Balmer (2012) places significance on the 'Covenanted Corporate Brand Identity' and the 'Actual Corporate Brand Identity'. The actual identity is underpinned by the corporate identity and draws further connection to organisational identity theory. Albert and Whetten (1985) posit organisational identity as the combination of the central, distinct and enduring aspects of the organisation. The Covenanted Corporate Brand Identity constitutes the promises made by the brand to its internal and external stakeholders and should be conceived of as the core of the brand (Balmer, 2012). The relationship between the Actual and Covenanted identities is influential across all other identity types, drawing an explicit link between the organisation's identity and the essence of the brand. Although the AC<sup>4</sup>ID Test is useful in assessing the alignment of multiple identities it is less clear in identifying the elements that constitute identity and thus identifying changes within these elements.



*Figure 2. The AC<sup>4</sup>ID test of corporate brand management (Balmer, 2012)*

The corporate brand identity is the inward examination of the organisation's values, which are then communicated outwardly (Caren & Anup, 2016; Davies & Chun, 2002). This inside-out method is consistent with a brand-oriented approach used to define the corporate brand (Urde, 1994). In contrast a market-orientated approach prioritises the brand image over the identity of the organisation (Urde, 1994). Thus the tug-of-war between identity and image is central to the corporate brand and can depend on the paradigm that is adopted by the organisation. It is important to recognise the terms corporate identity and image have been used interchangeably throughout the field of corporate branding. The corporate image should be distinguished from its identity (Kennedy, 1977) and we draw attention to Abratt's (1989) seminal work in defining the corporate image management process to expand the relationship between identity and image. Abratt (1989) regards identity as the communication of a corporate philosophy that translates the core values of the organisation. Comparatively, the corporate image articulates the unique corporate personality that is derived from the corporate philosophy (Abratt, 1989). It is evident that corporate image emanates from the corporate identity, further cementing the importance of identity in the examination of the corporate brand (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000). Davies and Chun (2002), reinforce the importance of the corporate brand identity as a strategic asset that is influential in shaping the image of the organisation. Caren and Anup (2016) extend upon this, arguing that changes in the corporate brand identity can impact changes in the corporate image and vice versa. However, both agree that managing the corporate brand identity is the key to ensuring a consistent corporate image. We cement our study in the theoretical discipline of corporate brand identity due to its position as an indispensable component of the organisation.

Kay (2006) argues that in order for a brand identity to generate strength, it must align the organisation's values with employees values. As such, the rooting of corporate identity internally demonstrates the need to focus on employees within the identity building process (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Kay, 2006; Kennedy, 1977). The inclusion of employees in the conversation of corporate brand identities is critical to understanding identity. The role of employees in the shaping of the corporate brand identity is perhaps best seen through the lens



of corporate culture (Schein, 2010). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to include a thorough explanation of corporate culture theory due to its own extensive body of literature (Goffee & Jones, 1996; Karapancheva, 2020; Parker & Bradley, 2000; Schein, 2010). However, we draw attention to this area to demonstrate the interconnectedness of identity theory and culture. A brief summation of Schein's (2010) corporate culture theory consists of three levels, artifacts and behaviours, espoused values and finally, assumptions. At the heart of corporate culture theory is the employee experience and interaction with the organisation's values that define its brand identity. Informed by Schien's (2010) theory, we perceive corporate culture to be both shaped by the corporate brand identity and the context in which identity is developed. This perspective is supported by Hatch and Schultz (1997) who endorse the further exploration of identity and culture of the corporate brand. Hatch and Schultz (2001) demonstrate an interlinking of the organisation's vision, culture and image in which identity acts as the linchpin of the corporate brand in the Corporate Brand Toolkit. The connection between culture and identity is further supported by Goffee and Jones (1996) who argue that without culture an organisation lacks 'values, direction, and purpose'. De Roeck, Maon and Lejeune (2013) expand this connection by stating the corporate culture embodies the values of the organisation that are expressed through the organisation's identity to internal members. The role of the employee is therefore central to the corporate brand identity as they influence the corporate culture during times of change (Karapancheva, 2020). However, culture is multidimensional and in a constant state of change (Parker & Bradley, 2000). Thus, the relationship between identity and culture is interdependent, posing challenges for its management during organisational transformation. For the purposes of this study, we advocate for the inclusion of culture as a core component of the corporate brand identity.

Corporate brand identity theory is the cornerstone of the corporate brand and thus must be examined in the study of organisational change. The corporate brand identity is entrenched in the organisation and its people, shaped by values that are essential for its continued existence. Corporate brand identity is the foundation from which the corporate image and culture are born and nurtured. As such, we assert that the corporate brand identity theory is crucial in exploring the practise of corporate brand management. Furthermore, we lay the foundation for examining the hybrid organisation through the use of identity based frameworks.

### 2.2.3 Corporate Brand Identity Matrix

Urde (2013) argues there is a need for a managerial framework that can account for both a brand-orientation and market-orientation that practitioners can utilise as a strategic tool. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Figure 3) fulfills this requirement whilst also consolidating the literature surrounding the key elements that create the corporate brand identity. Rooted in semiotic theory, the matrix presents the organisation as a sign that is encoded internally and decoded externally (Urde, 2013). As such the matrix is able to account for the internal, external and overlapping identity elements that are presented in three sections.

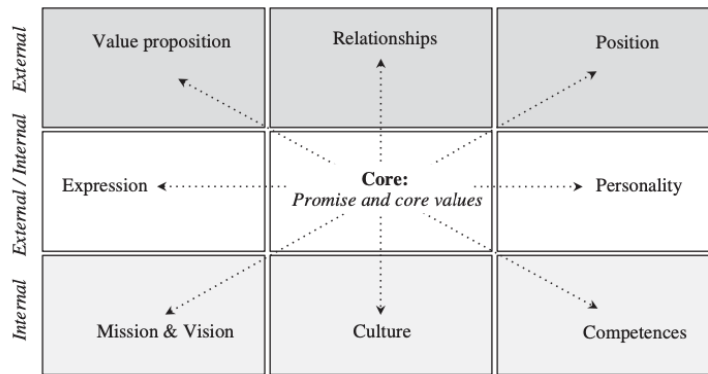


Figure 3. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2013)

The matrix emphasises the importance of the internal brand identity elements in the encoding process. The Mission describes the reason the organisation exists beyond its financial objectives (Collin & Porras, 1997). The Vision is the aspirational direction the organisation sets course for (de Chernatony, 2010). Together the Mission and Vision indicate the commitment and support for the organisation in its pursuit of these goals (Greyser, 2009). The Culture of an organisation includes the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of internal actors, such as employees (Schein, 2010). The final internal element is the Competencies of the organisation and its ability to achieve its goals. Competencies refer to the processes and capabilities of the organisation that provide resolute answers to ‘what is it that we are good at?’ (Urde, 2013).

The overlap that occurs between the internal and external elements of the corporate brand identity are defined within the matrix. Central to the discussion of the identity, is the brand’s Core. Urde (2013) echoes Balmer (2012) in his definition of the brand’s Core as the principal values that constitute the brand promise. The core values of the brand are reflected in the corresponding elements of the matrix, and are also reflections of these elements too. Thus, the core values play an integrative role in the brand identity, defining who the organisation is and what it stands for (Urde, 2013). The Personality of the organisation is described as the human characteristics and qualities of the organisation that is influenced by the personality traits of employees (Davies & Chun, 2002). The Expression of identity pertains to the visible features of the organisation including the logotype, tone of voice and style (Olins, 1989). Finally, the external components of the matrix are used to represent the organisation to its external audience. The Value proposition of the organisation considers the key offerings that are designed to appeal to stakeholders (Urde, 2013). This influences the next component in the matrix, the organisation's Relationships. The vast number of stakeholders for the corporate brand presents a challenge for managers in ensuring the interactions between the organisation and its stakeholders are consistent (Farquhar, 2005). The Position element refers to where the brand is located in the market as well as the mental and emotional space the brand occupies for its stakeholders (Keller, 2013).

The matrix thus presents the synergetic nature of the corporate brand identity. Urde and

Greyser (2016) argue that identity indicates the strategic intent of the organisation and as such its elements should be aligned to the pursuit of these objectives. The matrix subscribes to a similar belief that Kay (2006) described as the ‘consistency of logic’. Urde and Greyser (2015) argue that a strategic brand identity actively aligns its elements according to the brand core and elements that are perceived to be ‘misaligned’ must be managed to mitigate gaps or tensions emerging. The matrix enables the inherent fluidity of identity to be examined through the interconnectedness of each element. Furthermore, it encompasses both a market-orientation and brand-orientation allowing for its broad application across a section of organisations. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix presents a valid framework to assess the elements of corporate brand identity independently and as a whole. However, Urde’s (2013) research is limited in accounting for the interactions between these elements when changes within the organisation occur. As such, there is a need for further empirical studies to better understand how these elements adapt during times of change.

#### 2.2.4 Organisational Change Theory

The field of corporate brand management benefits from the additional perspectives of organisational theorists due to the prominent link between the organisation and the corporate brand as discussed previously. This is supported by the inclusion of Albert and Whetten’s (1985) organisational identity theory in discussions of the Actual Corporate Brand Identity (Balmer, 2012). Hatch and Schultz (1997) also argue for the further integration of organisational and marketing theory when examining the corporate brand identity and its management from a culture standpoint. Inspired by previous inclusions of organisational theory, we turn our attention to the established field of organisational change theory. As our purpose is to examine the intersection of organisation change and the corporate brand identity it is essential to understand the change process.

Organisational change can be considered the result of moving from one state of being to another (Burnes, 2012; Lewin, 1946). Lewin’s seminal change theory has laid the foundations for the development of the organisational behaviour discipline (Burnes, 2012). Lewin’s comprehensive work is understood as a progression of three distinct parts; Field theory, Action Research and the Three-Step model (Burnes, 2012). For the purposes of grounding our thesis within this field, we focus on the Three-Step model as it pertains to the current transformation process observed in the hybrid model. However, to appreciate the depth of the change process it serves to acknowledge the foundations of the model that are rooted in Lewin’s previous work.

Field theory states that group behaviours must be understood within the total context in which they occur and changes to individual behaviours are a result of changes in the group environment (Lewin, 1946). Lewin (1946) argues that the current state of being, referred to as the status-quo, is acted upon by forces that establish a new equilibrium. The importance of Field theory in relation to exploration of the hybrid model, draws on the concept that a field is considered the ‘totality of coexisting facts which are conceived of as mutually interdependent’ (Lewin, 1946). The COVID-19 pandemic field has resulted in considerable

forces acting upon organisations, particularly in relation to government restrictions and the availability of vaccinations (Richter, 2020). Thus, Field theory accounts for the external environment as a disruptor to the equilibrium of the organisation, yet is limited in its capacity to examine the process of transformation.

To further develop the relationship of the group and individual actors presented in Field theory, both Group Dynamic theory (Schein, 1988) and Action Research (Adelman, 1993) should be considered in the examination of organisational change. Group Dynamic theory defines the group as members who depend upon each other yet also influence the individuals behaviour through norms and actions (Schein, 1988). Organisations can be considered groups that influence the behaviours of employees. This is relevant to the study of organisational transformation to the hybrid model as the ways of working have introduced new behaviours and thus their adoption can be related to the prevailing culture (Pettigrew, 1992). Group dynamics should be acknowledged as influential when examining organisational change due to its emphasis on norms and behaviours which are also rooted in corporate culture (Schein, 2010). However, Group Dynamic theory is less appropriate for our investigation of the corporate brand identity during the change process.

Action Research theory emphasises the necessity of action to propel change (Adelman, 1993). This requires considering the potential outcomes and then carefully selecting the optimal course of action to take (Lewin, 1947). The individual must recognise that change is needed and thus begins an iterative process of research, planning and evaluation (Schein, 1996). Change as a learning process requires the engagement of the group in order to be successful (Burnes, 2012). Action theory provides the framework for understanding the antecedents for change within organisations, however, as a continuous process it is limited in measuring the level of change that is adopted. Thus while we consider Lewin's body of work as integral to the examination of change within organisations it is restricted in its applicability to the process of transformation that is undertaken by organisations. For these reasons, Lewin's Three-Step Change Model provides a viable theoretical framework for the purposes of answering our research questions surrounding the intersection of the hybrid model and the corporate brand identity.

#### 2.2.4.1 Three-Step Model

Change is a constant process, however in organisational terms its success is measured in the adoption and integration of change from a long-term perspective (Golembiewski, Billingsley & Yeager, 1976). The transformation of the workforce during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in the mass shift to remote working. Globally, organisations are now actively planning for the eventual return to the office (Ramsay, 2020). However, many organisations conceded that rather than reinstating the pre-COVID-19 office, further change is required, thus resulting in the hybrid model approach (Xie et al. 2019). Thus organisations are now undergoing a planned transformation as defined by Lewin's three-step change model (Lewin, 1947).

The first step in the Lewin's (1947) model requires the 'unfreezing' of the organisation. The status quo of the organisation must be destabilised in order for the organisation to be 'unfrozen' from its previous state. Schein (1996) contends that a psychological cycle occurs where the validity of the status quo is disproved, resulting in fears for survival and a desire for safety. Kotter (1995) interprets the first step in unfreezing is to generate a sense of urgency within the organisation, establishing leadership and clearly communicating a vision. This requires acknowledgement that change is of vital importance and must be acted upon. Bullock and Batten (1985) place more emphasis on building awareness of change within the organisation and then seeking out help externally. However, unfreezing requires identifying the need for change, motivating its purpose and reckoning with the loss of old behaviours to make way for a new reality (Lewin, 1947). Within the context of this study, the unfreezing process can be explicitly seen in the widespread adoption of remote work in the information economy. This further supports the integration of the Three-step model in examining the transformation of the hybrid model. It is important to note that Lewin (1947) states that unfreezing within organisations can occur in different ways. We cannot expect all organisations to have undergone the 'unfreezing' process in the same way, thus there is also a need to examine how this process has occurred across various organisations as they adopt hybrid models.

Once the organisation is 'unfrozen', it must then begin moving toward change. Lewin (1947) draws upon the iterative process of Action Research to describe this step. The variability of the forces that act upon an organisation at any one time, decrease the organisation's ability to control the outcomes of change. Thus a trial and error approach to determine the optimal course of action for change is proposed (Lewin, 1947). Bullock and Batten (1985) support this approach, however, they distinguish between the planning and action phases that are encompassed in this step. Compartmentally, Kotter (1995) places significant emphasis on communicating changes to key audiences, arguing without a substantial communication effort changes are less likely to be adopted. Further to this point, visible short term wins are vital in keeping momentum for change within the organisation (Kotter, 1995). There is consensus among researchers that changes must be reinforced in order to be absorbed by those within the organisation. Those leading the charge must recognise the risk of changes being lost and a return to old behaviors occurring if support is inadequate. Organisations are now negotiating the appropriate course of action to take as they emerge from the remote-office and into the hybrid model. With considerable changes in the dynamics of the employee and office relationship, there is a need for establishing a clear vision of the hybrid organisation (McKinsey, 2020a). It is therefore necessary to examine how organisations have changed and the level of support for these changes among employees. Furthermore, the Three-step change model is beneficial for examining how both the extent of change and the process of change varies among different organisations.

The final step in the model is the 're-freezing' of the organisation, where the new equilibrium point is accepted (Lewin, 1947). Here, new behaviours cultivated during the previous steps are incorporated into the norms of the organisation. Schein (1996) argues that for this to occur, new behaviours must be aligned with the organisation's environment or ultimately

dissolve. In Kotter's (1995) transformational approach, a link must be explicitly drawn between the new behaviours and the organisation's goals in order to successfully institutionalise change. This cements changes in the day-to-day activities of employees that constitute the norms of the corporate culture. Without penetrating the organisation, change is at risk of regressing (Nelson, 2003). Bullock and Batten (1985) support this level of absorption within the organisation as a means for change to become self-sustaining. Changes must reach a point of diffusion in order to be fully integrated. Regardless of the model utilised, the embedding of change is the final step in the successful implementation process. The hybrid model as it is being adopted in the workforce, presents an opportunity to examine the transformation process that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the three-step model is a useful tool to examine the hybrid model and its adoption among organisations in the COVID-19 environment.

Lewin's work has since been expanded and critiqued by those who call into question the static nature of the Three-step model (Dunphy & Stace, 1993; Nelson, 2003; Pettigrew, 1992). In particular Complexity theorists argue that change is more erratic and continuous than Lewin's model allows for (Nelson, 2003). Pettigrew (1992) supports this criticism as he describes change as more discontinuous than incremental. Dunphy and Stace (1993) argue that the model does not accommodate the variability of change and thus prefer a contingency change approach that is situational. However Burnes (2012) counters these criticisms, stating that much of the subsequent work on organisational change originates from Lewin's groundbreaking framework. Thus, there is considerable value in utilising the Three-step model as a foundation for organisational change studies. Burnes (2012), argues that viewing the Three-step model without regard for nuances of Lewin's body of work, ignores the fluidity of change that is inherent within the model. We have avoided this issue by providing an overview of Lewin's work to assist in our use of the Three-step model. Furthermore, Medley and Akan (2008) argue the model is an important tool for practitioners in assessing change strategies of organisations and call for its further use in studies across sectors. Given the evolving nature of change it is only fitting that the models and understanding of the topic should be subject to change itself. However, the Three-step model is an established framework that encapsulates the constancy of change, the volatility of the external environment and is applicable to a diverse set of organisations. Thus, it is of great benefit for the purposes of this thesis to utilise the Three-step model as it applies to the emergence of the hybrid model.

## 3. Methodology

*Fundamental to any form of research is a methodological approach that yields accurate, valid and trustworthy results. Outlined below is the approach adopted in answering the research questions posed to provide readers with a clear rationale for the choices made throughout this study. We emphasise the influence of our worldviews in shaping the underlying philosophy of the study. Firstly, through our ideological lens we detail the research design and data collection methods of the study. Secondly, we explain how the data has been analysed. Lastly, we conclude with a thorough examination of the quality of the study and reflect on our role as researchers to ensure credibility of our findings.*

### 3.1 Research Philosophy

The role of the researchers has been the subject of much academic debate, with the discourse centered around the differences in philosophical dispositions and approaches to data and theory (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Jaspersen, 2018). In particular, the way in which the conceptions of reality and truth inform our decisions about how to conduct research and consequently, how we produce knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

This study is primarily focused on the experiences of employees in hybrid work models. While the role of the employee has been examined in corporate brand research, the complexity of the employee experience during times of significant change deserves further attention. The experiences of the hybrid workplace model and how employees understand their organisation's brand identity during such times is of critical importance in the strategic management of the corporate brand. The unprecedented scale of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic provides this study with an unparalleled opportunity to investigate the complexities of this phenomenon. Given that experiences are specific to the individual, we must acknowledge the subjectivity of experience (Levers, 2013). Thus, perceptions of reality are informed by individual experience and therefore, each individual has a unique and valid reality. It is from this perspective that our study adopts a relativist ontology to pursue multiple truths in the study of the hybrid model (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018).

Our epistemological perspective is shaped by our worldview, informed by the relativistic philosophy, and the subsequent assumptions we employ in knowledge production. By exploring the multiple versions of the truth, we emphasise the employee's construction of the hybrid model (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, as researchers we interpret this construction of reality through our own world views that cannot be divorced from the observation process. Thus, the context of employees and us as researchers, plays an influencing factor in the social construction of reality and production of knowledge throughout this thesis. We subscribe to a constructionist epistemology to understand how employees make sense of hybrid organisational identities. Following this philosophy, it is essential to capture a diverse range of employee perspectives as they experience organisational change. Our research has been designed to encompass the complexity of the

hybrid model phenomenon, through the subjective experiences of employees as they construct the corporate brand identity.

### 3.1.1 Research Strategy and Approach

Accounting for our research philosophy, qualitative methods are an appropriate choice for the exploration of the employee experience of the corporate brand in the hybrid model. While a quantitative study would be useful in producing generalisable findings, it is limited in its ability to express the nuances of the lived experiences which are the central focus of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Directed by previous research into employee experiences, qualitative methods have produced rich accounts of the corporate brand that have not been captured through quantitative means (King & Grace, 2008; Urde, 2013). As this paper aims to understand the realities of employees within the hybrid model it necessitates a thorough investigation into the construction of reality. A qualitative study allows us to examine both the phenomenon of the hybrid work setting and the impact on the corporate brand identity from the employee experience.

There are two primary reasons for our decision not to undertake the quantitative study. As Allen, Golden and Shockley (2015) discusses, research into telework practises that utilise quantitative methods, fail to account for the extent telework practises are adopted. This is a key metric in understanding the impact telework has for both employees and the organisation. Thus, qualitative methods provide a suitable alternative to extract the nuances of telework from which we base our study of the hybrid model. Furthermore, workplaces have reported fatigue across a vast array of employee experience surveys circulated during the pandemic (McKinsey, 2020b). Surveys, while useful for measuring patterns and occurrence, are limited in their capacity to ask follow up questions, facilitate discussion and probe the respondent further (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The purpose of this thesis is to examine the intersection of the hybrid model transformation and the corporate brand identity through the perspective of employees. Thus, it is essential to delve into the employee experience to better understand how the corporate brand identity is understood within the hybrid model. As researchers, prioritisation of the collection of rich data must be balanced with access to the subject of investigation. For these purposes, the benefits of a qualitative approach are found in the nuances, flexibility and the depth of accounts that cannot be replicated through a survey (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Our thesis contributes to the emerging and highly anticipated field of COVID-19 research, by adding a qualitative study of the employee experience of the hybrid workplace model to the growing data.

We observe the shift to the hybrid model as a new phenomenon that is contextually specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this observation is also informed by theoretical discussions of the constancy of change and the practise of identity alignment within corporate brand management research. The iterative nature of identity and change in both theory and practise has resulted in the combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. This can be categorised as an abductive approach to the theory and empirical data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Deductive reasoning, often employed in quantitative studies, uses theory to postulate a



relevant hypothesis and tests this through data collection (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Whereas inductive reasoning is the result of an observation that generates theory and is more commonly found in qualitative studies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The observation of change in organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent emergence of the hybrid model, is the primary catalyst for our research, therefore we consider inductive reasoning as influential in our thesis. However, the complexity of change and identity observed relies on prior theoretical knowledge of these concepts. Drawing upon our knowledge of the importance of the organisation in corporate brand management, we also engage in deductive reasoning. Furthermore, we recognise that the ‘hybrid workplace model’, although a new concept, is closely linked to telework practises, which have been observed in organisations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

An abductive approach, allows us to go back-and-forth between our observations and theoretical frameworks in a systematic and continuous cycle (Dubois & Gade, 2002). In the current COVID-19 climate, change is both rapid and ceaseless, requiring a flexible research approach. Thus, to make sense of our observations we rely on what is already known and engage in a matching process to enhance our understanding (Dubois & Gade, 2002). Dubois and Gade (2002) argue that an evolving case, such as the hybrid workplace model, when examined from an abductive approach can be used as a tool to develop theory. The abductive approach allows us as researchers to continuously negotiate the demands of theory and the data through an iterative process. The ongoing nature of the hybrid model phenomenon requires continued observation in combination with established corporate brand identity theory. Abductive reasoning takes a non-linear approach to theory development and is fitting when examining the fluidity of identity and change. Moreover, Dubois and Gade (2002) assert that case studies benefit from an abductive approach that allows researchers to explore observations that do not neatly fit within current theory.

For the purposes of examining the *what*, *how* and *why* of the corporate brand identity during the hybrid model transformation, we conducted a qualitative case study of three organisations through semi-structured interviews with a range of employees. In line with abductive reasoning approaches, the study is designed to expand upon understandings of the hybrid model and corporate brand identity frameworks.

## 3.2 Research Design

Following the outline of our research philosophy, reasoning and subsequent decision to collect qualitative data, we further detail our research design to ensure the reader’s comprehension of the findings. Decisions regarding the collection of data include, the type of information required, the sources it will be gathered from and how it will be utilised for the purposes of analysis and discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2017). We first consider the research design, followed by selection of the sample and the interview procedures.

### 3.2.1 Case Study

Research designs are further reflections of the epistemological principles of the researchers. In this study, we considered strategies that best aligned with constructionist views. As such, depending on the research question a constructionist study may follow either a detached or involved methodology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The *what*, *why* and *how* research questions that guide this thesis aim to investigate the connection between the hybrid workforce model and the corporate brand identity. Thus, we have chosen to answer our research question by embarking on a multiple-case study. Yin (1984, p.23) supports the use of case studies as “...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. The specific nature and complexity of the hybrid model phenomenon requires us as researchers to take an in-depth approach that is set within the real-world context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A single case study approach is also beneficial for understanding abstract concepts and testing theory (Levy, 2008). However, the replicability of a single case limits the ability to produce generalisable findings due to their reliance on the interpretations of researchers (Bennett & Elman, 2006). Comparatively, multiple-case studies are applied to a select number of subjects from which a specific event may be analysed (Stake, 2006). The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is felt across a range of organisations. Utilising a multiple case study allows us to examine the hybrid model across a number of organisations to produce valid and generalisable findings (Yin, 2013). The in-depth analysis that is captured in a multiple-case study enables us to build upon current theory regarding the corporate brand identity (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The decision to employ a multiple-case study across a small number of organisations through in-depth interviews is also a reflection of our access to the subjects (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Although case studies occur over a sustained period of time, due to time constraints of this thesis the selection of a multiple case study is still an appropriate choice.

Criticisms of case studies are concerned with the validity and generalisability of findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). To counter these claims, proponents of case studies utilise a rigorous procedure of triangulation where diverse data sources are used to identify patterns (Yin, 2013). Yin (2013) also argues that case studies produce analytical generalisations, drawing out the abstract ideas from a case rather than attempting to create sample-to-population logic. Examining the hybrid workplace model from this perspective is optimal to better conceptualise the phenomenon. Furthermore, the variables in organisations and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic are vast and any attempts at making generalisations about the sample cases to the broader population would not be sufficient (Yin, 2013).

### 3.3 Sample Strategy

When conducting a multiple-case study it is important to demonstrate the rationale of the sample selected. A key criticism of case study design is that the sample is not representative of the population (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, when looking to build upon rather than test theory, a theoretical sample is more suitable than a random or stratified sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Theoretical sampling allows for the relationships between constructs to be examined and expanded upon (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As we seek to understand the phenomenon of the hybrid model and the relationship between organisational change and the corporate brand identity, theoretical sampling is an appropriate strategy. By having more than one case we are able to develop a broader understanding of the phenomenon and establish the credibility of our findings as the cases confirm each other (Eneoth, 1984). Having a multiple-case study ensures as many qualities as possible of the phenomenon are collected, improving the generalisability (Eneoth, 1984).

The sample for this study consists of three Australian based organisations across the education, technology and arts sectors. As one of the authors is Australian we had first hand knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia and pre and post-lockdown conditions. The observation of the hybrid model being actively implemented in Australia further informed our decision to focus on this market. The criteria for the case selection included that the organisation and its employees, prior to COVID-19, predominantly worked in a physical office. The organisations must have undergone remote work during the lockdown period. In the post-lockdown phase they must be engaged in both the remote office and the physical office, with employees being present in both formats. At the time of this study, they must be actively implementing a hybrid model to their organisation to a degree. Furthermore, the organisations must also have a corporate brand identity that was visible and distinct prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, we consciously sought out a diverse range of organisations who are engaged in different industries to get a better sense of the variations of the hybrid model. Below we outline each case organisation and provide the reader with an orientation as to their selection.

#### 3.3.1 Atlassian

Atlassian is an Australian based software company founded in 2002, with over 5000 employees globally (Atlassian, n.d). Prior to the pandemic Atlassian's Australian workforce was based in their Sydney headquarters with the majority of work taking place in their physical offices (Atlassian, n.d). In March 2020 Atlassian transitioned its global workforce to remote working in response to the unfolding pandemic. The organisation announced a 'remote from anywhere' approach in August 2020, allowing employees to choose to work remotely permanently from any location the organisation has an established entity (Business Insider, 2020). In April 2021, the organisation began to phase employees back into the physical office thus employing a hybrid model (Waters, 2021). Atlassian has a well defined corporate brand identity as evidenced by its regular features on the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For list. According to Roper and Fill (2012) ranking lists can be used as

indicators of the corporate brand's strength. Furthermore, Atlassian has a clearly defined set of corporate values that are a core aspect of its corporate brand identity (Atlassian, n.d).

### 3.3.2 University of Sydney

The University of Sydney is Australia's first university, dating back to 1852. As of 2019, the University has 73,000 enrolled students and 8100 staff members (The University of Sydney, n.d). Prior to COVID-19, the University of Sydney primarily conducted education, research and professional services from the main campus, located in Sydney (The University of Sydney, n.d). In March 2020, the University moved the majority of its teaching online, with students and staff asked to work-from-home and all University events cancelled (The University of Sydney, 2020). However from March 2021, the University of Sydney began allowing students and staff members to return to campus in a modified format that utilises both online and on-campus teaching. The University of Sydney is therefore engaged in a hybrid model. The University of Sydney has earned a reputation as one of Australia's top education institutions and ranked 60th in The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2020 (World University Rankings, 2020). It has a long history as a progressive institution that is evidenced in their commitment to providing education for all (The University of Sydney, n.d).

### 3.3.3 Sport For Jove Theatre Company

Sport for Jove Theatre Company is a theatre company, founded in 2009 (Sport for Jove, 2021). Based in Sydney, they are both a performance company and theatre education programme with ten permanent employees, not including paid actors that are also employed by the company (Sport for Jove, 2021). Prior to COVID-19, Sport for Jove conducted its education programmes at its Sydney based theatre whilst performances took place in both outdoor and indoor theatres across Sydney (Sport for Jove, 2021). In March 2020, Sport for Jove cancelled its performances for the season and transitioned its education programme online (Sport for Jove Theatre, 2020). However, the company returned to the physical theatre in March 2021 but have continued to conduct their education programme in both the digital format and physical format (Sport for Jove, 2021). The company does fall into the broad category of the hybrid model. Sport for Jove is considered a well established theatre production company having received accolades across its twelve years of productions (Sport for Jove, 2021). It is considered a leader in theatre education, engaging 35,500 students in 300 schools across Australia, further cementing its corporate brand in the education sector and theatre community.

### 3.3.4 Sample Respondents

Our case study aims to answer what, how and why the corporate brand identity is of importance when implementing a hybrid model. Central to this relationship is the experience of the employee as they navigate organisational change (Burnes, 2012) and make sense of the corporate brand identity (Kay, 2006). To better understand the relationship employees have with the hybrid model transformation we sought out a range of perspectives. After

establishing contact with the three case organisations, we began to apply a non-randomised purposive sample strategy to select employees that correspond with the theoretical sampling used in our case selection. Our connections to the organisation allowed us to obtain access to a range of employees and managers who were engaged in various departments across the organisations. Conscious of the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across organisations, we devised our selection criteria to capture the broad range of experiences across employees. We purposely categorise respondents under broad role titles, seen in Table 1, to focus on the diverse experiences across these groups. Employees who had been working with the organisation prior to COVID-19 at the physical office were approached to participate. Those who had worked remotely during the lockdown period and had returned to the physical office in some capacity were then asked if they would be willing to take part in our study.

We conducted a total of thirteen in-depth interviews with participants across all three case studies. The total sample size for qualitative studies is dependent upon the point of saturation achieved in the data (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Saturation is considered a key measure of quality in the data collection process and occurs when no additional information is found within the data, leading to informational redundancy (Saunders, 2018). However, saturation may also be achieved within the individual interviews conducted and thus influences the overall size of the sample required to extract information (Saunders, 2018). The sample of employees included in this thesis were probed until no further information from their accounts could be extracted. We interviewed participants from each organisation until the data collected contained a complete picture of the hybrid phenomenon in the respective organisation, thus achieving a satisfactory level of saturation.

We conducted five in-depth interviews with a selection of managers and employees at Atlassian who were engaged in client-facing roles. This provided us with sufficient information to understand the corporate brand identity from the perspective of those employees that interact with external stakeholders. A further five participants from the University of Sydney were included, primarily focusing on teaching and research staff of the organisation as we wanted to ensure we captured the perspective of employees who perform the education function of the organisation. This was further complimented by the inclusion of an interview with a professional staff member to provide insights into the commercial perspective of the University of Sydney. For Sport for Jove, our sample included three employees who are engaged in education and performance based roles. Due to the smaller size of the organisation, we were limited in our access to employees and thus employed a snowball sampling approach to seek out additional participants. Snowball sampling is effective when attempting to broaden the reach of the sample group by using connections to gain traction (Alvehus, 2016). We also consider that snowball sampling may inadvertently reduce the diversity of perspectives collected as it relies on a network of contacts (Alvehus, 2016). This issue is avoided given the sample size as a proportion of the total workforce is significant. Overall, the sample of respondents provided thorough accounts of the hybrid phenomenon and were knowledgeable sources for analysis of the corporate brand identity, providing a rich data set to answer the research question.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Position</b>
Respondent A	Atlassian	Manager
Respondent B	Atlassian	Employee
Respondent C	Atlassian	Employee
Respondent D	Atlassian	Employee
Respondent E	Atlassian	Manager
Respondent F	University of Sydney	Professional staff
Respondent G	University of Sydney	Teaching staff
Respondent H	University of Sydney	Teaching staff
Respondent I	University of Sydney	Teaching staff
Respondent J	University of Sydney	Teaching staff
Respondent K	Sport for Jove	Employee
Respondent L	Sport for Jove	Employee
Respondent M	Sport for Jove	Employee

*Table 1- List of the respondents and the positions in the organisations*

## 3.4 Data Collection

Qualitative case studies are designed to capture rich and thick descriptions of an event or phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Qualitative interviews provide researchers with a window into the world of respondents to better understand their experience and perspective (Kvale, 1994). The practise of conducting interviews is highly collaborative as both the interviewer and interviewee engage in the discovery of information and situate the discussion within the context of the interviewers worldview (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We outline the interview process conducted with our sample to illustrate our interactions with respondents and their contexts.

### 3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Both the hybrid model and the corporate brand identity are shaped by those within the organisation, thus it is essential to gather primary data pertaining to the employee experience. Interviews allow us to engage with employees directly to understand their perspectives and develop insights into the corporate brand's identity as it exists within the hybrid model. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and participants were not informed of

the research question prior to the interview so as to encourage open dialogue with participants and elicit authentic responses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Our study takes advantage of the semi-structured interview process to engage in an exploratory dialogue with participants. There is an inherent challenge in conducting semi-structured interviews so as to allow flexibility in the conversation whilst also working in a systematic manner for the comparison of responses. An interview topic guide (Appendix 1) was prepared to structure the conversation with participants according to key focus areas that were influenced by the chosen theory as well as the literature review. The focus areas were designed to capture how the organisation and the corporate brand has been affected by COVID-19 and the hybrid model. Our abductive approach meant interviews were not constrained by theory, rather theory enhanced the responses by ensuring relevant data was collected. The topic guide also enabled the interviews to remain on course which allowed for comparisons between responses in the data analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The topic guide consisted of broad categories to enable diverse perspectives to be collected from the participants and a free flowing dialogue to occur. When necessary, laddering up and laddering down techniques were employed during the interviews to gather further explanations from interviewees and produce contextualised understandings of their response (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). We then utilised the opportunity to probe the respondents further and expand upon details that we found to be interesting and relevant. This approach strengthened the richness of our data by encouraging a free flowing dialogue to occur and the discovery of areas that may not have otherwise come to light through a more structured approach.

Due to differences in geographical locations and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted through video telecommunication software, Zoom. Video interviews are suitable alternatives to face-to-face interviews as they can replicate the physical interview setting and facilitate a flexible conversation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). However, there has been debate regarding the effectiveness of remote interviews in observing social cues that add social context to a respondents answers (Opdenakker, 2006). There is growing support for the use of video interviews in qualitative research as they may reduce the pressure respondents may feel in a face-to-face format (Weller, 2017). In the COVID-19 era, the prevalence of video communication technologies and their use in the workplace increased the familiarity of respondents with conversing over this medium. Thus, we conducted our study within the familiar context of the hybrid model, contributing to the overall richness of the results. Furthermore, we as researchers have also gained a similar degree of familiarity with video communications as we have conducted our studies through the Zoom platform. We position ourselves to be highly skilled in conducting research through video communications and are aware of the best practises to develop dialogue through this format.

We conducted interviews using Google Hangouts or Zoom depending on the participants preferred platform. Each participant was sent a calendar invitation with an individual link to connect which ensured interview privacy. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the details of their participation, clearly outlining their voluntary participation could be withdrawn at any stage of the process and their right to request anonymity. Interviews were conducted for 30 to 60 minutes where one

researcher led the conversation with respondents, whilst the other researcher took field notes to cross check with audio transcriptions. We used the audio-to-text software *temi.com* to facilitate the transcription process. The software transcribes audio recordings into a file where we scrubbed the text to fix minor errors and ensure accuracy. This process enhanced our closeness with the data and allowed us to adjust our interview techniques as we progressed in order to gain additional depth in the data (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

### 3.5 Data Analysis

It is important to acknowledge that a constructionist approach enables data collection and analysis to co-produce knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In line with our abductive reasoning, data was collected and related to the frameworks discussed in the theory chapter through an iterative process. We utilise the empiric data to build upon the existing knowledge of corporate brand identity and organisational change, whilst also contributing to the developing area of the COVID-19 hybrid model phenomenon.

During the analysis phase of research, it is necessary to build an intimate knowledge of the data. This fosters a sense of closeness to the empiric material that benefits us as researchers in developing insights and thematizing the results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The rich descriptions of employee's experiences of the hybrid model produced detailed transcripts that we use for the basis of our analysis. Content analysis is suitable for interpreting qualitative data as it can be informed by the research questions and theory (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). As a starting point, the data must be examined in its entirety and then catalogued to produce relevant themes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This first involves structuring the data through a sorting process (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Sorting data according to codes relies on our prior understanding as researchers that are informed by our theoretical knowledge. Our initial coding process examined the data for evidence of change as interviewees made reference to three distinct periods; pre-pandemic, mid-lockdown and post-lockdown. The employee experiences were then labelled based on the period in which the organisation was described. When these descriptions designated a time period we labelled these as 'old', 'new' or 'mixed' in reference to the physical office, remote office and hybrid model. Specific features of each organisation were aggregated into general labels for example, tools like Slack or Zoom were categorized as digital communication. It should also be noted that two overarching codes were also utilised, 'personal' referring to mentions of the employees home life and 'professional' used when the employee refers to themselves within the business. The coding process is highly iterative and as we moved from our initial coding phase to a more selective coding phase, we reevaluated codes when patterns emerged and unexpected themes became apparent (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

The patterns and themes identified during the coding process are the basis of reducing the substantial amount of data. Within the constraints of this thesis it is not possible to present all findings. As such we combed through the themes produced in the coding stage to focus our findings on the categories that illustrated possible answers for our research questions. Our decision to reduce the data is also a reflection of our own interpretations as researchers



(Alvesson, 2003). We recognise that throughout the process of data collection and analysis our own experiences with the hybrid model influence the frames we use to represent our findings. However, we have attempted to distill these key themes in such a way that we can develop the concepts of the hybrid model, corporate brand identity and organisation change. In doing so we engage in the argumentation phase of data analysis, whereby the empirical data is linked to theory (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Theorizing requires researchers to think systematically and creatively to craft a cogent argument from the data. Alvehus (2016) supports the interpretation of data with the view to broaden theory. Our findings contribute to new perspectives of working by broadening the concepts of corporate brand identity and organisational change. Thus, our study argues for the conceptual development of the hybrid model that is explored throughout the thesis.

### 3.6 Validity and Reliability

Qualitative studies encounter issues of validity, reliability and generalisability due to its interpretive nature, leading to increased skepticism of the integrity of results (Kvale, 1994). The role of the researcher should therefore be reflected upon to acknowledge the consequences of their research choices. However the metrics used to measure the quality of qualitative research are contested by Kvale (1994) who argues that qualitative research can be considered valid, reliable and generalizable. Guba and Lincoln (1994, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2015) propose that trustworthiness and authenticity are two viable alternative measures for the quality of a qualitative study. Trustworthiness consists of four components; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Credibility relates to the multiple accounts of the reality that is being investigated, to ensure the researcher has understood this reality (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We established credibility within our study by collecting as many, diverse perspectives as possible and asking clarifying questions throughout the interview process. This provided respondents with the opportunity to re-confirm our understanding of what was being described. In terms of transferability, our study focused on three cases and the contextually specific nature of the employee experience. As such, we collected thick descriptions from respondents in order to provide a baseline from which others may be able to identify the transferability of the study. When conducting interviews, one researcher would record the interview whilst the other transcribed field notes. Following the interviews both researchers would review the audio and corresponding transcript to ensure accuracy of our data. We would then audit our field notes and confer regarding possible links to theory as a means of increasing the dependability of our findings. Although we cannot claim to be wholly objective in our study, we were conscious of the confirmability of our study. The auditing process undertaken during interviews, ensured that we as researchers were not influencing our findings based on preconceived beliefs. The trustworthiness of our study is of critical importance in our ability to meaningfully contribute to the development of theory and understanding of the hybrid model. The authenticity of our study also comes into view when considering the fairness of interview participants' treatment. In order to elicit authentic responses, interviewees were offered anonymity prior to the interview being conducted. This served to achieve a level of tactical authenticity that ensured

trustworthy responses were gathered and reduced concerns regarding publication of quotes for the interviewee (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Although this case study is limited in its total generalisability, it presents a reliable investigation of the ongoing phenomenon of the hybrid model from which future studies may draw from.

### 3.7 Limitations and Ethical Issues

This study does not concern itself with assessing the strength of corporate brand identities or the successful implementation of the hybrid model. It has been designed expressly to explore the experiences of employees within these settings. Thus, it is paramount to capture the richness of these unique circumstances through first hand accounts from employees themselves. It may be argued that ethnographic research provides fertile ground for discovery when observing a phenomenon (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003). However, the limitations imposed by COVID-19 and the nature of the study, precluded us from pursuing this as a viable method. In lieu of ethnographic research, in-depth interviews are a valid methodology to collect thick descriptions alongside observations of corporate brands in hybrid workplaces (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003). However, the restrictions on travel as well as the geographic differences between the sample and researchers prevented us from conducting face-to-face interviews. This was combated by utilising video communication software and accommodating our respondents preferred timezone requirements.

From an ethical standpoint, our research has been conducted in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Swedish Research Council (2017). Interviewees were provided with an outline of the study, its purpose and the terms of participation prior to arranging an interview. Participants were asked to provide consent to the use of the interview for the express purposes of the study and all subsequent data has been treated with confidentiality. Issues of privacy and confidentiality are pertinent to our study due to the personal nature of the interview setting. As participants were in the comfort of their own homes, or another preferred place, for the interviews they were able to speak freely without fear of being overheard. However, respondents requested anonymity to minimise personal risk as their experiences of transformation within the organisation were ongoing. For this reason we agreed to remove the names of all respondents and use 'Respondent X' as the primary designator. The decision to include the organisation names and the job category (employee, manager or teaching staff member) was approved by respondents prior to interviews being conducted. This does not hinder the quality of respondents accounts but should be considered as a relevant factor when analysing the data. We have conducted our study according to the principles of honesty and reliability whilst also adhering to safe data practises.

## 4. Empirical Findings and Analysis

*The findings produced from the data, reveal a number of key themes that are used to answer the research question. These themes emerged through a systematic process of coding and categorising the data and are informed by the Three-step change model (Lewin, 1947) and the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (Urde, 2013) presented throughout the study. The following section presents the empirical findings of the study alongside an analysis of theory.*

We have consciously incorporated the empirical findings and analysis so as to present a holistic picture of the case study to the reader in a comprehensive and informed manner. The benefit of examining the findings and their analysis together, provides the reader with a clear narrative of the data and its connection to theory. The first theme addresses RQ1 by presenting the hybrid workforce model. The second theme explores the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model addressing RQ2. The third and final theme examines the interplay between the corporate brand identity and the hybrid model through the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework and addressed RQ3.

### 4.1 What Does ‘Hybrid’ Mean?

The term ‘hybrid’ that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and its meaning is discussed in the following section. Employees have experienced the transition from the physical office to the online office and are currently navigating the combination of these formats. We examine the sense-making process of the hybrid model from the employee’s perspective and how it links to the corporate brand identity. These experiences contribute to emerging definitions of the hybrid model in the COVID-19 era.

#### 4.1.1 Hybrid is a Reaction to the External Environment

The meaning of ‘hybrid’ for employees is both dynamic and manifold, however it is contextually situated within the external environment. Respondents were asked to describe their experience of hybrid working within their organisations, and a diverse array of accounts was found. Overall, respondents grounded their understanding of ‘hybrid’ with an account of the organisation as it existed pre-lockdown, mid-lockdown and post-lockdown. When asked about their work arrangement, Respondent F stated that the transition to hybrid work was brought on specifically by the pandemic:

*“So prior to COVID, probably up until March of 2020, I was working in the office, on campus five days a week, nine to five, all my work would be done at a desk... we were then informed obviously things were starting to change as the pandemic increased. So we were told to start making arrangements to work from home. Now I’m only working two days from the campus office.” (Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

From this perspective, the hybrid organisation is perceived as a consequence of the pandemic that would otherwise not have been considered part of the organisation. The importance of

the external catalyst in the shift to hybrid working is evident even within organisations that had previous experience with remote working. As Respondent A described, remote working in the pre-lockdown and post-lockdown organisation has different structural characteristics:

*“One of my team members approached me and said they wanted to go remote and move away from Sydney. They were looking at whether or not Atlassian would support them in being remote or not, so I took it up the chain... I had to go through quite a lengthy process and put together a business case and there was a fair bit of back and forth but we ended up saying ok... three months later COVID threw a massive spanner in the works and everyone was remote instantly.” (Respondent A, Atlassian)*

Although remote working in the pre-lockdown context was possible, in the hybrid model Atlassian is structurally different due to the forced change.

Respondents commonly described ‘hybrid’ as an internal transformation that occurs as a direct result of scanning the external environment and adjusting accordingly (Kotter, 1995). As such, organisations assessed their ability to adapt to these conditions to determine their ‘hybrid’ composition. For example, as Respondent K explained, COVID-19 is seen as both the instigator of change and the set of conditions that determine how hybrid the organisation can become:

*“So in the beginning of the pandemic, when everything was closed we ended up discussing what we could do. It's really hard to do theatre online but we took some notes from other production companies and started doing productions entirely online.” (Respondent K, Sport for Jove)*

Employees are concerned about the on-going challenges of the pandemic which influences their understanding of the hybrid organisation. The adoption of a hybrid model is described as a tool for navigating the uncertainty of the external environment that has resulted in uncertainty within the organisation. Overall, respondents appeared to associate the hybrid model with risk, indicating its use as a mitigation strategy. In particular, Sport for Jove noted a heightened sense of risk-aversion to the pandemic that was balanced against perceived risks of the hybrid model as described by Respondent L:

*“...all these kinds of new regulations were coming through, so we were tossing up a lot of that as to whether we'd actually do the show. We just didn't want to become a COVID hotspot but again we just followed every regulation as closely as we could.” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*

The use of a hybrid model appears to also carry risk for the organisation. However, it is adopted on a case-by-case basis when the external risk is greater than the internal risk. Comparatively, Atlassian and the University of Sydney respondents described the hybrid organisation from a long-term perspective that has resulted in a more sustained period of remote work.

The speed at which the transition to the hybrid format occurred is also a key factor in employees' understanding of the hybrid model. Atlassian employees described the shift to hybrid as both rapid and smooth, largely attributed to the nature of work being predisposed to online formats. The ability to adjust quickly and with relative ease is a key factor in viewing the hybrid model as a wide scale change. For example, Respondent B recalled that:

*“It was just before things really started to lockdown and then the company became fully remote overnight.” (Respondent B, Atlassian)*

The University of Sydney employees also perceived that the speed at which organisations transformed to a hybrid model was a factor in determining the extent to which a hybrid model has been implemented. In contrast, the University of Sydney took a staggered approach as Respondent F described:

*“Professional staff were working from home but in terms of researchers you can't just stop so a lot of consultation went into phasing people online but then as more government advice came out everyone went into more remote work.” (Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

Employees related reaction speed to external forces with the degree of 'hybridness' adopted by the organisation. Thus, the hybrid model within each case can be understood as a transformation due to disruptions in the status-quo of the organisation (Lewin, 1947). The interviews revealed that the hybrid model was adopted to a greater extent in organisations that implemented changes quickly and where the changes aligned with the established norms of the organisation (Schein, 1996). Thus, when organisational change lacks urgency and is disruptive to the behaviours of employees it is difficult to secure these changes within the organisation (Kotter, 1995). This is particularly evident for Sport for Jove who implemented changes as a temporary measure due to the perceived incongruence of the hybrid model with the broader organisational culture and context of performance theatre. Furthermore, the change in organisational structures to support the hybrid model signals the COVID-19 pandemic's influence in forming the hybrid model. This leads us to believe that 'hybrid' is unlike telecommuting (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015) or remote work (Potter, 2003) as has been previously studied.

#### 4.1.2 Hybrid Is a Comparison of the Old and New

As an emerging phenomenon, the hybrid organisation is contrasted against the employees previous experience of the organisation in both physical and remote formats. According to employees the hybrid model merges the physical organisation and the remote organisation. The physical organisation is characterised by the office as the primary space in which the employee interacts with the organisation. Noticeably, all respondents contextualised their understanding of the organisation by referring to the physical organisation as the 'normal'

organisation. Respondent K makes the comparison between the organisation's physical and online existence:

*"It's really hard to do theatre online but we started doing productions on Zoom and I taught lessons on group Zoom meetings to properly, well not properly, but to try and teach standard things we would have in the normal drama class." (Respondent K, Sport for Jove)*

Thus, the remote organisation is considered an aberration from the normal experience for the employee. Rather than categorising the organisation in diametrically opposing terms, employees perceive the remote setting as a dilution of the physical organisation. However, the degree of dilution experienced varies across different organisations and employees. For example the University of Sydney employees reported that the remote organisation can enhance the physical organisation. As a member of the teaching staff described the remote classroom can amplify the content of the physical classroom:

*"I produced 30 or 40 short video segments for students and then my lecture slot turned into more of a Q&A and a chance to demo the material instead of going through a powerpoint in a lecture hall." (Respondent H, The University of Sydney)*

The respondent draws attention to the capabilities of the remote classroom compared to the physical classroom. In doing so, the physical University campus is used as a point of reference against which the remote organisation is compared. In contrast, another teaching staff member, Respondent G, described the difficulty of engaging students in the remote setting:

*"It's hard to gauge what they are picking up when they have their cameras off. Before I would be able to look at the class and tell if I need to go over a concept again." (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

Both employees above use their experience of the physical organisation as the yardstick for measuring the remote organisation. A further example of this measurement occurred when Respondent B described the experience of going back into the Atlassian office post-lockdown:

*"One of the best things about the office is the food. We used to have a buffet lunch so there was something for everyone. Now it's more limited because of the nature of COVID, I don't think it will ever be how it was." (Respondent B, Atlassian)*

The office is the primary space where employees come together to share experiences. The physical organisation is considered the epicenter of this shared experience. The extent to which employees experience the organisation can either be diminished or enhanced in the remote setting. This suggests that employees view the hybrid organisation as composed of both the physical and remote organisations. Further supporting this observation is the

measurement of distance between the employee and the physical office as an indicator of the extent to which a 'hybrid model' has been adopted. Respondents frequently used the number of days spent in a physical office, compared to the number of days spent working from home as a key indicator of the hybrid model. In doing so, 'hybrid' is measured by the employee through their interaction with the physical office. For example, Respondent B stated:

*"I used to be in the office full time but now I only go into the office twice a week. Mostly I go in if I feel like I need to show face or if I need to touch base with someone."  
(Respondent B, Atlassian)*

Across the organisation, employees understand the hybrid model as the collision of the old physical office and the new remote office. There is recognition that the equilibrium of organisations as they exist currently has been reset at a new level (Lewin, 1947). Thus it can be argued that organisations have undergone organisational change due to the observed changes in employee norms and behaviours that are reported in the hybrid model (Schein, 1996). The changes in the norms and behaviours support the view that the hybrid model transformation may alter the corporate brand identity, based on Balmer's (2012) view of the link between the corporate identity and the corporate brand identity.

#### 4.1.3 Hybrid Is Personalised for the Employee

The adoption of the hybrid model varies considerably across the cases and within organisations. When asked to assess their experience with hybrid work, respondents who referred to remote work in a positive manner, cited freedom and flexibility as the two main benefits to the hybrid model. This was particularly evident across Atlassian and University of Sydney respondents who reported increased autonomy and work-life balance as a new benefit. Employees reported gaining time in the hybrid model, allowing them to more easily manage personal commitments alongside work commitments. In the example of Respondent F, increased flexibility is linked to their ability to be productive in both professional and personal capacities:

*"The campus is massive so if I have a meeting at one end of the campus I can easily lose 40 minutes walking there and back. Whereas when I'm working from home, I can use that time to get my work done but then have a plumber visit or run an errand."  
(Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

The hybrid model promotes behaviour change by removing obstacles to productivity for employees and increasing their flexibility. In order for these new behaviors to be absorbed however, organisations have varied in their approaches to reinforcing these changes. Atlassian employees cited a company-wide stipend for employees that helped them create a home office space. The importance of being able to work comfortably from home increased their acceptance of the hybrid model. Although, employees also reported a greater sense of responsibility in setting individual boundaries between work and home life. Respondent C

stated they preferred working remotely but they also demonstrated concern regarding their change in preference:

*“I don’t think I could go back into the office full time again, I feel like I have Stockholm Syndrome with my apartment.” (Respondent C, Atlassian)*

The employee has adopted new behaviours in the hybrid model due to successful reinforcement from leadership (Kotter, 1995). The new ability to choose when and where to work is positively associated with the hybrid model for employees. However, this also emphasises the increasing value of trust between employees and the organisation (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). Trust is reported across all cases to be of paramount importance within the hybrid model and is required not only in the employee-to-manager role but among employee-to-employee relationships. In the case of Sport for Jove, trust within the hybrid model considerably impacts the degree of hybrid work that is deemed productive for the organisation, as indicated by Respondent L:

*“I think work relationships are a lot harder to achieve online. Especially in making theatre, you need to know the people, you need to know who’s reliable and who you can trust to deal with situations when things go wrong.” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*

The bonds of trust can be enhanced or diminished in the hybrid model. When trust is visible the acceptance of the hybrid model appears more likely. Meanwhile, if trust is not established, the organisation is likely to regress to the traditional physical organisation and limit the adoption of the hybrid model after external pressures are removed. It should be noted that limited regression has been observed within the cases studied here largely due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic. This may be due to employees' concerns about health and safety and these being better catered for in the hybrid model. Thus, the change to the hybrid model can be seen to promote the health and wellbeing of employees and stakeholders. In the case of the University of Sydney and Sport for Jove, employees are more concerned with health risks in the physical organisation. Respondent G highlights that varied levels of acceptance of the hybrid model are based on personal risk factors:

*“I do have some colleagues that are sixty-five or around that age, so it’s more of a risk for them and I can completely understand they prefer not to be on campus yet.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

The importance of the hybrid organisation from a health perspective is also echoed by Respondent L:

*“[Remote learning] does give kinds who otherwise wouldn’t be able to get to a performance like this a chance to get involved...but also there were students that had elderly family members or family members with chronic illness.” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*



However, important health concerns are also reported within the remote setting. For Atlassian employees the issue of mental health is also an increasing priority in the hybrid organisation. For example, Respondent A stated:

*“There is a higher risk of burnout with all the standard challenges around the pandemic, whether or not its life or work stuff like Zoom fatigue I think it just makes it more challenging.” (Respondent A, Atlassian)*

In summary, the acceptance of the hybrid model among employees is variable due to the shift in balance between work and home for individuals. It appears that employees have largely experienced an increase in autonomy that has not previously been felt within the physical organisation. Productivity within the remote organisation is heavily dependent on the individual employee and requires trust between the employee and organisation. Within the context of the on-going pandemic, employee preferences for the remote or physical office are the result of a risk assessment. The transformation to the hybrid model is continuous for all organisations, however, a need for flexibility is ingrained in the organisation due to the changes in employee behaviours.

## 4.2 How is Hybrid Seen in the Organisation?

The following section aims to expand upon the changes that occur within the organisation as it transitions to the hybrid model. It examines changes to elements of the organisation to illustrate the effects of adopting the hybrid model. The elements relate to the purpose, people, abilities, presentation and the brand core of the organisation.

### 4.2.1 The Purpose

Respondents across each case have described changes to the location of their work (i.e. the physical or the remote office) has influenced *why* they exist. When asked about the goals of the organisation, respondents indicated that minimal changes had occurred to the objectives of the organisation. Respondents from the University of Sydney and Sport for Jove drew a comparison between the consistency of the organisation's goals and mission even though the methods of delivery had changed. For example, Respondent F stated:

*“The University is always going to be a leader for good. It's always going to provide quality education, quality research. It's always going to help shape the future of this country. And I think all universities or educational institutions are not going to go away from what their mission statement is. I just think now it's a matter of new ways in trying to deliver that.” (Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

Whilst the mission remains steady, some employees reported changes in the vision of the organisation. Sport for Jove employees discuss the adoption of the hybrid model as a way to expand the organisation's aspirations to teach theatre to a wider range of clients. Employees state their mission is to help people discover the theatre and empower them to take part in the

arts. However, Respondent L states that by including remote work alongside the physical theatre Sport for Jove has been able to expand its vision:

*“I think just in terms of the industry in Sydney, it's very centralized and there's not a lot of outreach to kids who are unable to access it. And so it's either they do this online course or they do nothing like there's no in between for them. So it's really important I think for programs like this to stay around.” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*

Sport for Jove and The University of Sydney employees describe the mission and vision of their organisations as being reshaped due to the hybrid model. They do not believe the fundamental purpose of the organisation has changed but rather see the transition to a hybrid model as adding to their reason for existing. This is also noted by employees in relation to how their organisation is positioned externally due to the hybrid model. For the University of Sydney employees the importance of maintaining their position as a premier educational institution is evident in their decision to offer the same quality of education in both the physical and remote setting as described by Respondent G:

*“So we essentially have to have a system of two flavors for each course and so along with that, we have a mixture of remote learning and face to face.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

For Respondent F, a member of the teaching staff, the hybrid model enhances the position of the University in the minds of students:

*“For the vast majority of the feedback I got was very good. It was unlike anything I've ever had before. You know they really appreciated the effort, not just my course, but the efforts in general that was put into switching over to having the option to do things online.” (Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

Atlassian employees however, described significant changes occurring across their strategic elements. The mission of Atlassian as described by employees is seen as a natural fit with the hybrid model, as Respondent B stated:

*“You know this is kind of our bread and butter, helping teams work across locations. It makes total sense to me that we would be doing this too and if anything it just kind of reinforces what it is we are trying to achieve together” (Respondent B, Atlassian)*

Atlassian employees refer to the mission of the organisation as having expanded to help organisations work more collaboratively. However, the vision for Atlassian is described as having changed more significantly as described by Respondent E:

*“We've made such a big effort to do this and I would say we are one of the first to make the decision to go all in on remote working” (Respondent E, The University of Sydney)*

For Atlassian employees, the hybrid model has inspired a new direction for the organisation which is now looking to lead the way in successfully working across remote and physical offices. Employees also acknowledge that the changes in the vision are connected to their strategic position in the market. As a leading software company, employees see the shift to the hybrid model as a way of highlighting their mission externally.

According to Urde (2013), the mission, vision and position of the organisation are linked through the brand's core and constitute the purpose of the organisation. These elements are the strategic path for the organisation, encapsulating what the organisation wants to achieve and its future direction (Urde, 2013). As organisations adopt the hybrid model, the mission and vision appear to have undergone an expansion. As noted across the organisations, employees are aware of these elements and refer to them when considering the level of change they have experienced. However, the mission of the organisation at this stage has remained steady whilst it has reshaped its vision due to an increased focus on the future direction of the organisation (Urde, 2013). Although the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix presents the mission and vision as a singular element, it could be argued that during the transformation to the hybrid model, the vision undergoes an enhancement while the mission remains the same. Furthermore, the link between the mission and vision and the position of the organisation is clarified further. As organisations look to the future, they also consider how they are currently perceived in the hearts and minds of their customers (Urde, 2013). In the case of Atlassian, its position is enhanced by the reshaped vision to be seen as a leader in hybrid working. Comparatively, Sport for Jove extends its vision but its position is less agile as its mission is more constrained by the hybrid model. The University of Sydney experiences an enhancement of its position due to the alignment of its mission within the hybrid model. Thus, we draw attention to the extent that changes adopted in the organisation influence the strategic elements of the corporate brand identity.

#### 4.2.2 The People

The interviews found that across all organisations, respondents reported the most change in aspects of the organisation that involved their interactions with people. The culture of the organisation is repeatedly referenced by comparing the physical office and the remote office. For example, Respondent K emphasised a difference in their behaviours when working from home:

*“I think teaching online it almost seems surgical for us because normally you can be more casual and you don't have to think about if people are looking at other tabs on their computers or stuff like that. So it's different to teaching in person where you can build that family dynamic” (Respondent K, Sport for Jove)*

For Atlassian employees, the culture is closely tied with the physical office given the organisation has invested in infrastructure designed to encourage shared experiences. This is described by Respondent B:

*“We would have Friday drinks at the bar in the office or there would be a table for desserts every Wednesday. We actually had a roller rink to celebrate Mardi Gras and it was just a way of bringing everyone together.” (Respondent B, Atlassian)*

The shift to the hybrid model however, has also significantly reshaped the norms within Atlassian as a conscious shift to a remote-first mindset. Respondent A stated:

*“If you're in a team meeting and there's three people in the office, but there's one person remotely, each person still needs to join via their laptop and be on an individual screen to create a sense of inclusiveness within that team meeting. We don't want someone who's on Zoom to feel left out because of the fact that there's three people in the room and that's not going to allow for productive conversation or behaviors.” (Respondent A, Atlassian)*

The rituals surrounding meetings are connected to the organisation's culture that encourages collaboration and a sense of inclusiveness. Comparatively, The University of Sydney employees also describe a similar change in behaviour but establish a different norm based on their culture of tradition. Respondent G described:

*“I have had research meetings where I just put two people in a Zoom meeting on my laptop and then four people in my office. And then just, I turned the laptop to look at the whiteboard and then we just work together that way.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

Employees tend to describe culture differently depending on the setting they are working in. For this reason, employees describe culture in the physical office through a social lens, whilst the culture of the remote office focuses on productivity. This is commonly felt across all organisations. However, for Sport for Jove, the social culture of the physical office impacts the ability to be productive in the remote office. Respondent L stated:

*“Being online is fatiguing so we made sure to do more breaks and create games because they are a huge part of the in-person classes. But you're not exchanging that same energy with other people so it makes it harder to kind of achieve that level of interaction you need for rehearsals” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*

The experience of culture is also closely tied to employees' relationships with others within and outside of the organisation. Respondents reported considerable changes in relationships across the remote office and the physical office with increased reliance on digital tools to replicate face-to-face communication. For Respondent I the remote setting significantly reduces their ability to foster a relationship as they described a shift in mindset:

*“Regardless of whether the students turn on their videos or not, I'm not seeing any of them, they might be seeing each other but for me, I'm basically just talking to a laptop.” (Respondent I, The University of Sydney)*

For the external relationship with students, the remote setting exacerbates challenges experienced before the hybrid model. According to Respondent H:

*“The big problem is student engagement, how do you get people involved... in lectures there's always the few that'll put their hands up and the rest are, I don't know, maybe they're watching YouTube or something, but there's not a lot of engagement”*  
(Respondent H, The University of Sydney)

Engagement is a key issue for Sport for Jove, who acknowledged that their relationships are not as collaborative in the remote setting. Respondent L described it as:

*“It also feels like a video or a live stream where you're looking from the outside. You don't feel like you are a part of the theatre.”* (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)

The importance of developing relationships in Sport for Jove is critical to its ability to deliver its mission related to performance theatre. Thus, the hybrid model changes its ability to foster the relationships and culture that is central to the organisation. Atlassian employees however, are less concerned with engagement and instead focus on building broader relationships across many geographic locations. Respondent E explained that:

*“We've introduced this concept called team time zones which are four hour collaboration windows that you need to be online to work with your team”* (Respondent E, Atlassian)

We observed a change in the expectations of internal relationships due to the hybrid model in Atlassian. Employees have reconsidered how relationships are developed and maintained with emphasis placed on building relationships in the remote office.

The fragmentation of the workforce in the hybrid model is found to increase the variation in the way the brand is experienced. This poses potential challenges to the single image of the corporate brand that Ind (1998) advocates for. Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that organisational culture and the relationships of employees is critical to the corporate brand identity. Transition to the hybrid model changes the ways people within the organisation interact which leads to changes in behaviours and norms. Thus, culture and relationship elements of the corporate brand identity are altered. Culture change however, is difficult to achieve from managerial interventions (Parker & Bradley, 2000). Culture change has been observed to occur at the levels of artifacts, behaviours and espoused values (Schien, 2010). As employees draw comparisons between the remote office and the physical office, they designate roles to the different work settings. The remote office encourages productive behaviours that increase the value of efficiency across organisations. Although it should be noted that this is seen to varying degrees and is more prominent in Atlassian. Comparatively the physical office becomes a space for shared experiences that foster closeness among internal and external stakeholders. However, the hybrid model places greater emphasis on the

role of the employee in reshaping culture as they have a greater ability to engage or disengage with culture.

### 4.2.3 The Abilities

Each organisation has substantially altered *how* they work in the remote or physical office as a result of the hybrid model. The respondents identified changes occurring in their abilities to conduct their work in the same manner prior to the pandemic, although this varies across organisations. For Atlassian employees, working in the remote organisation presented the opportunity to strengthen their remote work practises. Atlassian employees recognise the ease at which they are able to ‘lift and shift’ their work into the remote office is connected with their core competency of collaboration software, as Respondent A described:

*“We kind of pride ourselves on the fact that we should be able to work remotely and do that asynchronously. Most companies had to scramble for four or five weeks trying to get remote set up. Whereas we just got on our laptops and we were already set up. So it was perfect.” (Respondent A, Atlassian)*

The mass remote work experiment imposed by COVID-19 enhances Atlassian employees' ability to do their roles across the remote and physical offices as they create products that cater to the hybrid model. For Atlassian employees their ability to conduct their work in the hybrid model has served to strengthen their value proposition by demonstrating the benefits of their software.

Comparatively, Sport for Jove employees feel restricted in their ability to do their work within a hybrid model. Its' employees frequently discussed creativity as key competence of the organisation that when translated to the remote office, is filtered by technology. Respondent K made an interesting point that:

*“Theatre is about connecting with people, which was quite difficult via Zoom. You don't have the same spontaneity, so we had to work around that and make the end results less about the connection and more about the technical applications of theatre.” (Respondent K, Sport for Jove)*

Thus, Sport for Jove employees perceived a change in their strengths within the hybrid model. The remote office diminishes their capacity to demonstrate the full extent of employees creativity due to technological barriers. Rather than attempting to demonstrate the strengths visible in the physical office, employees change their product offering depending on the setting:

*“In the beginning we definitely did try to recreate it, but we found that it was just vastly different and there are just some elements that can't be replicated into an online experience... Once restrictions started to lift we were able to do a proper production in person but we also decided to do an online one too on Zoom. And it was interesting, it was two very different experiences” (Respondent M, Sport for Jove)*

In this way, Sport for Jove employees create a new value proposition under the hybrid model that enhances their strengths depending on the remote or physical setting.

The University of Sydney employees reported changes to the way they work in the hybrid model. However, they noted their ability to deliver the high quality education they are known for has remained consistent. According to Respondent G, the competencies of the University is unchanged but the delivery mechanism has changed:

*“I'm not sure if it's actually changed what's on offer, but the way the units are run is definitely different. So now we are doing lectures on Zoom instead of physical classrooms.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

Interestingly, the same respondent described implementing a new course design for the remote setting. It was also noted by The University of Sydney employees that the remote setting changes the value proposition in ways that enhance the University’s appeal to a wider array of students. Respondent G found that:

*“For the course that I'm teaching at the moment that is close to a thousand students and we don't have a lot of lecture theatres that actually can fit that many people. But with Zoom this isn't so much of an issue, so more students can actually attend the course.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

The hybrid model changes the core competencies of organisations depending on the remote or physical setting. The nature of the task is an important factor in the level of change an organisation experiences. Atlassian is capable of thriving in the hybrid model as their strength is collaborating across locations, which ultimately makes their software more appealing. The University of Sydney likewise experiences advantages in delivering educational content but the extent of student engagement might be of concern in some instances. Meanwhile, Sport for Jove’s ability to be creative is limited in the remote setting, leading employees to reconsider what they can offer to stakeholders in the hybrid model. However, the hybrid model presents clear opportunities for all the organisations to expand what is on offer by developing their strengths across both the remote and physical settings.

#### 4.2.4 The Presentation

The hybrid model presents a new format and channels for the organisation to present itself to stakeholders. Across organisations respondents reported an increase in the digital tools used to communicate within a hybrid model. Atlassian employees describe the increased reliance on communication tools such as Slack and Zoom, and the company’s internal blog in the remote office. Respondents stated that although these were present within the organisation prior to the hybrid model, their use has been adapted to resemble communication in the physical office, as described by Respondent D:

*“We use Slack for most things and try to have a bit of banter in the team so it's not always about work stuff” (Respondent D, Atlassian)*

Atlassian has also moved their signature conference from a physical event to a virtual event where external stakeholders can join panel discussions, product demonstrations and workshops. Respondents also described a regular company wide meeting with the organisation’s founders as having changed from being in-person to remote. Respondent C explained that:

*“We still have our Town Halls but you just dial in if you want to. Normally our team would all go to them and have breakfast in the office and it was cool seeing the founders walking around. I don't always watch them online but it's a good way to hear about what's going on” (Respondent C, Atlassian)*

Sport for Jove utilised Zoom as their primary delivery tool for online classes. Respondents highlighted the use of Zoom backgrounds to achieve the atmosphere of the physical theatre in the remote setting as described by Respondent K:

*“We took advantage of Zoom backgrounds for rehearsing a scene so that students could get into character and set the scene. It actually worked really well because you could easily change the backgrounds so the production became a lot cleaner. But we still had issues with wifi connections so it was mixed.” (Respondent K, Sport for Jove)*

This is significant as throughout the interviews, Sport for Jove employees describe the creative limitations of the remote setting in creating the theatre experience. However, digital tools are also able to enhance the way the organisation expresses itself and communicates with students. The University of Sydney teaching staff also identified opportunities to enhance communication with students in the remote setting. Respondent G implemented an anonymous question and answer function in their Zoom lectures:

*“I got a special zoom webinar license that allowed me to run an anonymous Q&A on the site. And the students loved that for asking questions. It worked great because they weren't scared of being judged” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

Internal communication in the University was also adapted to the hybrid model to replicate informal conversations among employees, according to Respondent G:

*“We use Slack quite a bit to communicate with each other. If the person you want to talk to is not in their office you can just send a message in Slack and then they can respond. It's just a lot less formal than just sending someone an email.” (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

Communication tools play an increasingly important role in how the organisation expresses itself in the hybrid model. The implementation of digital tools requires employees to consider



how and when they choose to communicate. These tools can enhance the expression of the organisation in new ways that are not possible in the physical office.

The expression of the organisation is linked to the personality of the organisation. Each case has a distinct personality. However respondents tend to perceive minimal changes to the character of the organisation in the hybrid model. Atlassian employees describe the organisation as light-hearted and fun loving when it comes to work life balance. Employees, such as Respondent C drew the following conclusion when comparing the physical and remote personalities through the availability of employee initiatives:

*“We would have a few beers at the end of the week and actually enjoy spending time at work because of the people and the whole package. Now I think we still have the same approach but there's definitely more of an emphasis on switching off at the end of the week.” (Respondent C, Atlassian)*

Comparatively, the University of Sydney employees described the personality of the organisation prior to the hybrid model as rigid but acknowledged that this has started to relax. For teaching staff this was evident in the change from students and staff accommodating the University's preferences to the University prioritising the preferences of staff and students as described by Respondent F:

*“I would say that they were maybe, not quite strict, but definitely there was an expectation that if a meeting is set up, even without consulting with people about the time, if you had a prior engagement you would need to move the prior engagement instead of not attending the meeting. Now people try to be more accommodating” (Respondent F, The University of Sydney)*

According to employees, the personality of the University of Sydney seems to have changed within the hybrid model and they see a more human side of the organisation. The relaxation of the University's personality is seen internally and externally with the greater focus on flexibility.

In the case of Sport for Jove, respondents felt that the creativity and openness of theatre that constitutes its personality mostly remained steady. However, they noticed changes in the perception of external stakeholders in the hybrid model. This was attributed to a filtering effect of technology that occurs in the remote setting that limits the ability to interact with stakeholders in the same way as the physical theatre. Although employees stated that it is possible to have the same personality it just may require further change over time as suggested by Respondent L:

*“The whole crux of the final productions that we make is to make people feel welcome and a part of the family, because that's what makes the interactions of the people when they are acting all that more real. So, I think nurturing that over a longer period of time, so that they're comfortable with doing it online, would be something for the future” (Respondent L, Sport for Jove)*

#### 4.2.5 The Brand Core

Respondents across all organisations articulated the core values of the corporate brand identity when asked about the hybrid model. For employees, the core of who the organisation is within the hybrid model is mediated by the recency of the transformation. This is particularly evident in Sport for Jove as made clear in Respondent M's explanation of the importance of the physical theatre:

*“So much of a theatre is about being with a group of people and sitting in the audience beside a stranger and hearing their reactions. And when you're watching something on a screen, you're not feeling the energy of the actors. You're not dealing with the person who's coughing behind you in the audience. I guess it's such a holistic experience that just can't be captured online.” (Respondent M, Sport for Jove)*

Sport for Jove employees expressed a desire to ultimately return to the physical setting in order to deliver the organisation's promise of an immersive and sensory piece of creative work. Although employees believe they will continue with some remote aspects of theatre, the core values of comradery and uninhibited exploration for Sport for Jove are tied to the physical theatre.

However, Atlassian employees noted that changes to the organisation's structure and policies that allow all employees to work remotely on a permanent basis, have reshaped the organisation's core values. Respondent A stated that:

*“The impacts of the team anywhere policy in particular on whether or not Atlassian is now a remote first or remote equal company and trying to define what those two terms mean for us. I feel like I'm still adjusting to the whole remote first thing” (Respondent A, Atlassian)*

There is a greater sense that these changes are seen from a more permanent basis for employees that requires adjustment across both the physical and remote office. Respondent E considered that:

*“It's definitely a change and I think it's going to be a long term adjustment. It's not something that we just automatically like, yes, this is the way that we are now. It's a behavioral change and you need to actually make a concerted effort to put some of these practices in place.” (Respondent E, Atlassian)*

The converse was depicted in the response of the University of Sydney employees, who perceive that the core values of the University are embedded in the history and tradition of the physical institution. Respondent I described:

*“I think the university is one of the institutions that's just quite set in the way they do things...You do go to university for that experience of learning about new cultures or*

*challenging your ideas and I don't think that will change" (Respondent I, The University of Sydney)*

Respondents also acknowledged that the remote aspects of the hybrid model have challenged the core values of the University of Sydney and there is now a need for these values to be reconsidered to a degree. Respondent G stated:

*"Flexibility isn't how I would describe the University but I think if we didn't have remote work that would not be a good look for them because it shows they are only flexible when they are forced basically. And I think that everyone who works here would be pretty upset if we went back to the way it was before" (Respondent G, The University of Sydney)*

The hybrid model presents a recognition of the University's core values for employees who perceive change is necessary. However, they equally understand that radical change to the University's value is unlikely in the near to medium future.

The temporal changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the core values of each organisation. Whilst Atlassian sees the hybrid model as a permanent part of the organisation, their core values of collaboration and innovation have altered to accommodate a remote first promise. The core values of the University appear to have only diminished slightly in the way traditional core values are delivered as flexibility encourages the University to embrace the hybrid model. However, Sport for Jove reinforces the physical theatre as an inherent part of the organisation's core values and therefore remains stable in the hybrid model. The importance of the brand core in influencing the corporate brand identity is well established by Urde (2013) and Balmer (2012). Thus, we perceive changes in the brand core to reshape the corporate brand identity within the hybrid model.

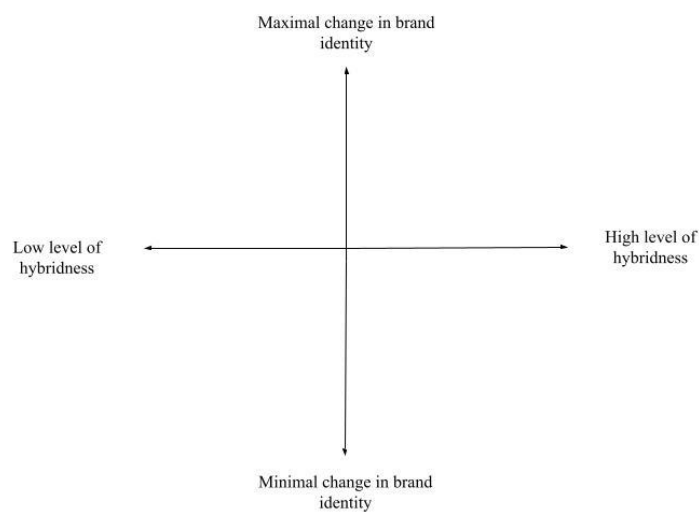
### 4.3 The Intersection of Change and Identity in the Hybrid Model

The empirical material presented through key themes, produces a framework that is grounded in organisational change theory and corporate brand identity theory. We explore the relationship between the corporate brand identity and organisation change through the hybrid model.

From an organisational change perspective, each organisation has undergone a transformation process resulting in a hybrid model. Although the external catalyst for change is shared across these organisations, the process of change has varied considerably. In this study the status-quo of all organisations has met with resistance due to the pandemic. Yet, the complexity of organisational change undertaken by each organisation has highlighted the iterative process of implementing and sustaining change (Lewin, 1947). Change crucially depends upon the ability of the organisation to communicate and reinforce suitable changes across the organisation effectively (Kotter, 1995). Considering these factors as variables in the successful adoption of long-term change, our case studies present varying scales of the hybrid transformation.

As the organisation undergoes this change process, questions regarding how change may impact the corporate brand identity are also examined. According to Urde (2013) each element of the brand identity echoes and shapes the core simultaneously. The consistency of the brand identity across each organisation appears to depend on the physical or remote setting. We observed the brand identity elements transforming within the hybrid model in ways that may not align across the physical and remote settings. Therefore we examine the degree to which the corporate brand identity changes within the hybrid model.

Thus, we present the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation Framework (Figure 4) in which the intersection of organisational change and corporate brand identity change are examined through the hybrid model. The horizontal axis presents the degree to which the organisation can be understood to have adopted the hybrid model. We consider the return to a predominantly physical office by organisations as regression of change, thus we perceive as the adoption of low hybridness. In contrast, the acceptance of the hybrid model as the new status-quo is seen in the refreezing of these changes. Thus, we consider the adoption of remote work permanently to be high hybridness. The vertical axis corresponds with the degree of change that has been observed within the corporate brand identity. Fundamental changes to the core of the brand identity are considered to exert a higher degree of change in identity. Whilst minimal change to the brand core results in a lesser degree of identity change. We base this on the importance both Urde (2013) and Balmer (2012) place on the core values and brand promise of the organisation in shaping the corporate brand identity.



*Figure 4. The Corporate Brand Identity Transformation Framework*

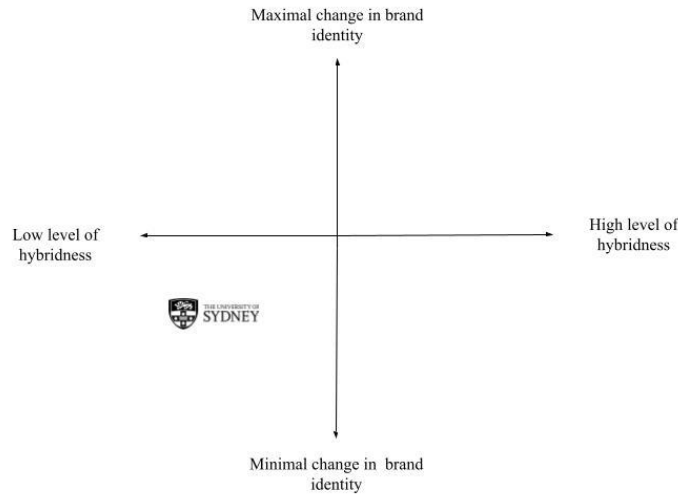
The framework is designed to plot the trajectories of the corporate brand identity in relation to the organisation’s adoption of the hybrid work setting. As such the framework demonstrates the journey of the organisation from its pre-lockdown form to its post-lockdown state. It is not our intention to compare identity elements and their influence on the success of

organisational change, instead we aim to examine how changes to the organisation impact the corporate brand identity. We subsequently apply the framework to each case within the study.

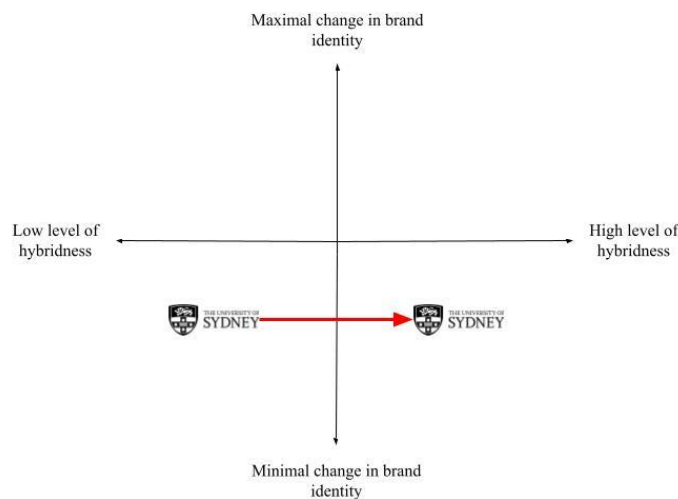
#### 4.3.1 The University of Sydney

The University of Sydney has adopted a relatively high level of organisational change in their hybrid work approach, yet has managed to minimise change in their corporate brand identity. Prior to COVID-19, The University of Sydney had cultivated a premier position in the Australian education landscape based on its recognition as a center for excellence. Employees identified with its values of innovative education, diverse thought and tradition. Part of this vision centered around the campus as a hub for students and teachers to engage. As such the remote element of the University of Sydney was limited to particular instances and was seen to be only a small part of the organisation. This is consistent with the teleworking practises prior to COVID-19 where a small subsection of the organisation engaged in remote work (Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015). The University of Sydney's corporate brand identity had been cultivated as an esteemed institution of academic success.

In the process of organisational change, the need for change must be understood across the organisation as a positive objective (Lewin, 1947). The University of Sydney's adoption of a hybrid model was necessary due to the pandemic but it was positively received by employees due to increased flexibility. The shift to the hybrid model resulted in adjusting the vision and mission of the organisation to achieve its goal of providing a premium education experience to all. This coincides with their position and value proposition to provide a globally renowned education. However, the most significant change to the brand's identity occurred within the relationships with students. As a key stakeholder, student relationships are a crucial element of ensuring the brand's core is intact. Through a process of reintegrating the student body onto campus while maintaining the flexibility of choice, the hybrid model is reinforced (Lewin, 1947). Although the culture in the remote setting has less visibility, employees compensate for this in the physical office emphasising the importance of rituals and norms in fostering connection to the University. However, the permanency of the hybrid model within the University is uncertain for employees. The University of Sydney's vision for the hybrid model has not been communicated with confidence although aspects of remote work such as conducting lectures online are likely to remain. Yet, the traditional core values of the University of Sydney and the engrained rituals present barriers to fundamental change. Thus, whilst the degree of hybriness has increased, the University of Sydney's brand core has remained fairly stable (See Figure 5 and Figure 6).



*Figure 5. The University of Sydney pre-lockdown*



*Figure 6. The University of Sydney post-lockdown*

### 4.3.2 Atlassian

In examining Atlassian’s transformation to the hybrid model, the brand’s core has seen considerable changes. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic Atlassian had integrated some remote work into the organisation’s structure due to its global network of employees and offices. The organisation thus had a coalition of support for remote work prior to the change occurring (Kotter, 1995). However, the brand’s identity has coalesced around the values of teamwork and collaboration. This cultivated the importance of relationships and a high degree of sociability among employees as they shared experiences within the office space. As such the degree of remoteness within the organisation was tempered by the brand’s personality of ‘mateship’ as it evolved within the physical office.

However, during the change process Atlassian’s competencies in enabling collaboration across teams were heightened as the nature of employee’s work lends itself to the hybrid model. As such, employees experienced the brand’s value proposition and position increase

as they reshaped the mission and vision to incorporate a hybrid model from a long-term perspective. The adoption of the ‘remote first’ vision for the organisation was supported by changes to the culture as rituals across the remote and physical offices were reimaged to promote the hybrid model. Thus, Atlassian was able to institutionalise changes by creating a clear vision for the future of the hybrid model and removing obstacles for employees to ensure new behaviours were encouraged (Kotter, 1995). A high degree of personalisation for employees shifted the importance of building and maintaining relationships. The physical office has been designated as a space for social connection among employees whilst relationships in the remote organisation take on a more task focused approach. The interdependence of the corporate brand identity elements are evident as changes occur at the internal and external levels (Urde, 2013). The brand’s core is also a reflection of these changes and is transformed in the hybrid model (Urde, 2013). The transition to the hybrid model has reshaped Atlassian’s core brand identity (See Figure 7 and Figure 8). The core values of teamwork and collaboration have been reformed under the remote-first principle that now guides the other aspects of the corporate brand identity. Thus, Atlassian’s identity evolves in tandem with the adoption of the hybrid model (See Figure 8).

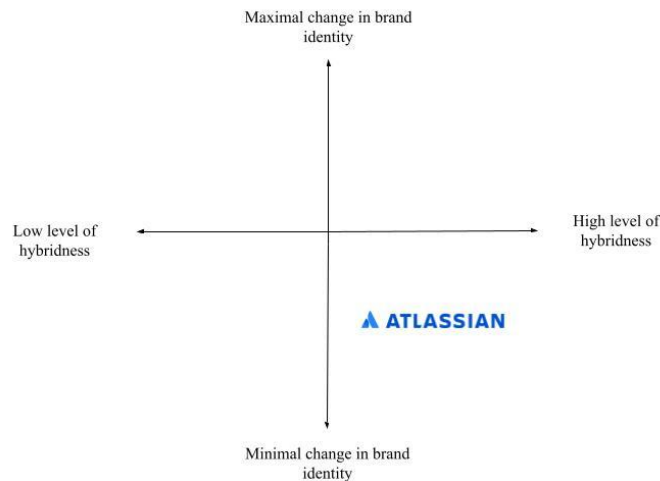


Figure 7. Atlassian pre-lockdown

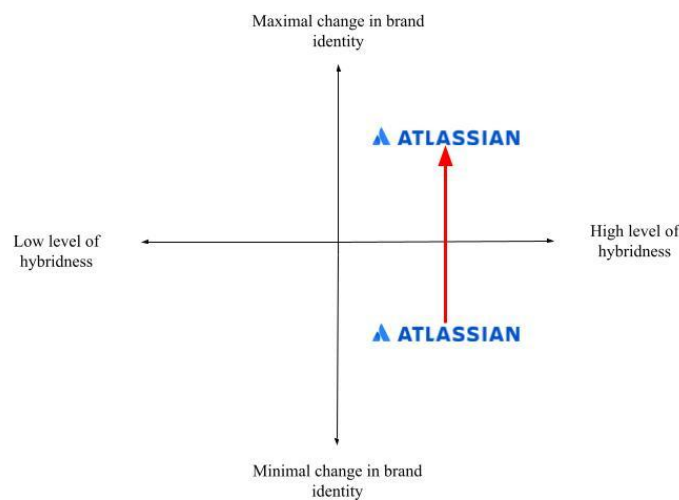


Figure 8. Atlassian post-lockdown

### 4.3.3 Sport For Jove

The case of Sport for Jove highlights the importance of the fluidity of brand identity (Balmer, 2012) and the on-going nature of change. Sport for Jove unfroze from their traditional theatre forms as the result of the pandemic. However, whilst this change was understood as necessary, it was communicated as a temporary response to changes in the external environment. As such any changes in the organisation were adopted with the understanding that they were a short term solution. This approach conflicts with Lewin's (1947) argument that organisations must integrate changes into the long-term vision in order to be successful. The resistance to change among Sport for Jove employees occurs due to the lack of a focused and desirable vision for the hybrid model (Kotter, 1995). Furthermore, the adoption of a hybrid model has been limited due to the lack of infrastructure to support the remote setting (Kotter, 1995). Although video communication software was utilised, employees reported technical issues hindered their ability to work effectively. Figure 9 presents Sport for Jove's position in the pre-COVID stage.

However, changing to the hybrid model has resulted in elements of the Sport for Jove's identity becoming misaligned with their core values. Misalignments occur across elements of the brand identity and can result in tensions within the brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). This became evident as the brand's competency and culture elements within the hybrid model changed. At the core of Sport for Jove is a holistic experience that ingratiates participants into the theatre. For employees it is not possible to fully deliver this brand promise in the remote setting due to the filtering of rituals, behaviours and relationships that occurs online. The culture of the theatre is of critical importance for employees, often described as a close-knit family in which there is a need for a high level of trust among members that is developed through physical performance. This supports Hatch and Schultz (1997) view that culture is the context in which the brand identity emerges. For Sport for Jove, the remote setting has created barriers to the norms and behaviours of employees. Thus the culture and relationships elements of their identity have resulted in an 'insider vs outsider' contrast that is felt more prominently by those within the organisation. This appears to be incongruent with the core values of inclusivity and the brand's promise of an immersion into the theatre. Consequently Sport for Jove's hybrid model resulted in significant changes to the corporate brand identity as presented in Figure 10.



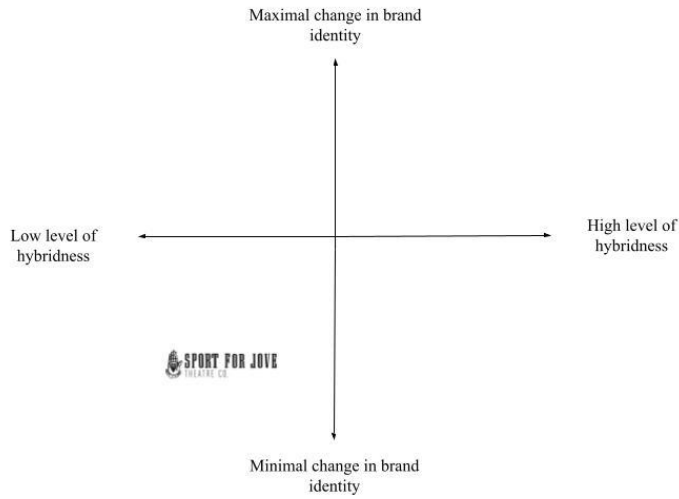


Figure 9. Sport for Jove pre-lockdown

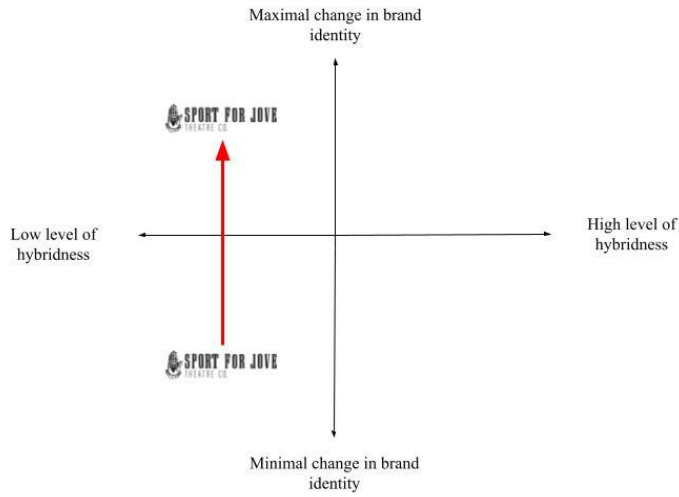


Figure 10. Sport for Jove mid-lockdown

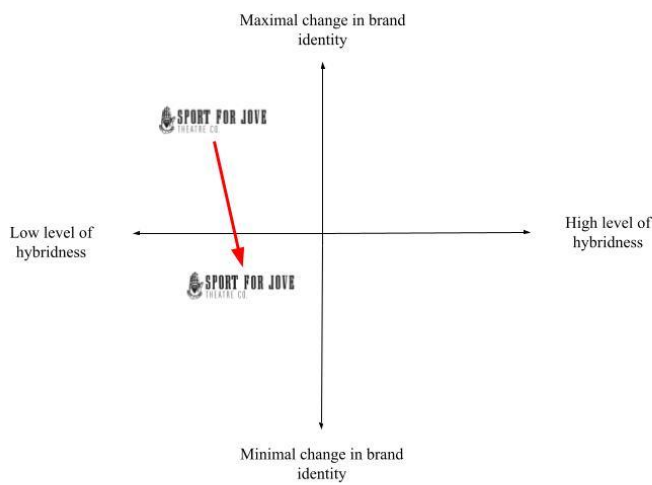


Figure 11. Sport for Jove post-lockdown

Sport for Jove's resistance to the hybrid model has led to the regression of change. Regression occurs when the organisation is unable to 're-freeze' in the new status quo (Lewin, 1947). This is presented in the trajectory of the organisation in Figure 11. As Sport for Jove navigates the hybrid model they have not implemented a long-term strategy to embrace the remote setting, instead they have expressed a desire to return to the physical setting. The tension between the remote and physical settings, highlights the misalignment of the brand's identity in the hybrid model. Sport for Jove's brand core is firmly cemented in the values of creative expression and human connection. However, the culture and competencies of the organisation that embody these values are considerably diminished in the hybrid model. As such the relationship and capabilities elements become disconnected from the brand core leading to the rejection of the hybrid model. However, that is not to say that Sport for Jove has not adopted any changes. The mission and position of the theatre has been recomposed to include digital channels to capture a broader audience. Yet, this is presented as a distinct addition to the theatre as they extend who they are through incremental change rather than embracing a new identity.

#### 4.3.4 Defining The Corporate Brand Identity Transformation Framework

As a result of our case study, we have created the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework (Figure 12). We have designed the framework to depict the intersection of the organisation change and the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model and is defined in the following section. The individual quadrants of the framework produce distinct categories in which the implications of transforming to the hybrid model are discussed in relation to changes in the corporate brand identity. It is important to note that the framework has been specifically designed to capture the transformation process of the corporate brand identity. As such the quadrants are used to determine the impact organisational change has on the corporate brand identity. The quadrants presented are not mutually exclusive, instead organisations may exist in multiple quadrants simultaneously. The quadrants represent the degree to which change has resulted in tensions within the corporate brand identity. Thus as brand identity undergoes the process of realignment, we argue that the optimum position in the matrix occurs when the brand identity has evolved. Comparatively, brands within the ejected quadrant experience brand identity misalignment and thus should seek to move from this position. The quadrants should be considered fluid, where alignment and misalignment may co-exist. However, the degree to which the brand core is enhanced or diminished determines the position within the framework. Based on previous literature regarding the future of work, we argue that the hybrid model presents a new era for organisation. Thus we use the adoption of the hybrid model to indicate the extent organisational transformation has occurred. As such the framework presents a tool for organisations to assess how the change process both impacts the corporate brand identity. Utilising the framework allows the organisation to consider their current brand identity trajectory and determine the path they wish to take. Thus this framework presents a practical conceptualisation of the fluidity of organisational change and the corporate brand identity and how they intersect.

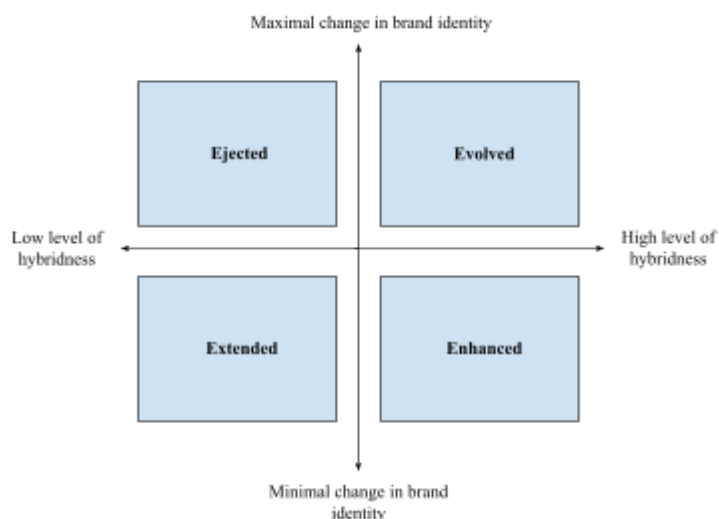


Figure 12. The defined Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework

### The Ejected Hybrid Identity (Top Left)

This quadrant describes the organisation’s adoption of the hybrid model as having been resisted and minimal changes institutionalised. The organisation’s equilibrium has been disrupted by an external force however whilst change is understood as necessary, it lacks support and a clear vision (Lewin, 1947). Kotter (1995) asserts that change must have a powerful coalition to communicate the long-term benefits of change and create short-term wins. However, the lack of support for change creates resistance within the organisation. As changes are resisted, tensions within the brand identity can emerge. The tensions may result in pressures on the brand's culture and competencies that diminish the visibility of the brand’s core. The brand’s core guides the organisation as it determines what it stands for (Balmer, 2012) in the hybrid model. As such when changes are resisted, misalignments between the brand’s core values and the ability of its people to deliver the brand promise are created. When this occurs the corporate brand identity is ‘ejected’ from the hybrid model in order to realign in accordance with their brand core. This is demonstrated in the trajectory of Sport for Jove in Figure 10. *Sport for Jove mid-lockdown.*

### The Evolved Hybrid Identity (Top Right)

This quadrant describes the organisation’s shift to the hybrid model which has resulted in support for widespread and fundamental change. A clear and long-term vision has been communicated to stakeholders and improvements are consolidated leading to the ‘refreezing’ of the status-quo (Lewin, 1947). The employees perceive change positively as the benefits of change are experienced, thus leading to the formation of new behaviours and norms. As such the culture of the organisation is transformed to correspond with the new vision and mission of the organisation. The ability of employees to deliver the brand’s promise is increased due to removal of barriers that change has enabled. This improves the overall competitiveness of

the corporate brand identity. The effect of substantial change across the identity elements can reshape the core brand values (Urde, 2013). Organisations that have institutionalised the hybrid model thus embed changes in the corporate brand identity. Consequently, the brand's core 'evolves', absorbing the changes in identity to realign accordingly. This is demonstrated in the trajectory of Atlassian in *Figure 8. Atlassian post-lockdown*.

### **The Extended (Bottom Left)**

This quadrant describes the organisation's transformation to the hybrid model has resulted in incremental change for the corporate brand. The need for change is understood throughout the organisation, but barriers persist which limit the institutionalization of new behaviours and norms (Kotter, 1995). However, changes that are accepted within the organisation are considered congruent with the established corporate culture. Thus, the hybrid model is adopted to the extent where minimal tension occurs in the brand's identity. Whilst the strategic elements of the corporate brand identity are changed, the culture and communication elements resist change. By limiting the adoption of the hybrid model, the core values of the organisation remain intact and the core of the brand is stable. However, the changes that are absorbed by the organisation 'extend' the corporate brand identity so that it is able to continue. This is demonstrated in the trajectory of Sport for Jove in *Figure 11. Sport for Jove post-lockdown*.

### **The Enhanced (Bottom Right)**

This quadrant describes the case in which the organisation embraces the hybrid model without substantially altering their identity. Support for change within the organisation is motivated by a clear vision, short-term wins and the consolidation of improvements (Kotter, 1995). The vision of the organisation is communicated by leadership and is compatible with the strategic path of the corporate brand identity. The hybrid model builds upon the brand identity by enhancing the competitive and strategic elements. It is crucial that the organisational change enables the delivery of the value proposition to be unhindered whilst the position of the organisation is strengthened by the change. The external elements of the corporate brand identity can change whilst the brand core of the organisation is insulated by the consistency of the values of the organisation. The organisation understands that changes must be responded to in order to maintain the alignment of the corporate brand identity. When the hybrid model is adopted, the corporate brand identity can be enhanced to strategically grow the organisation. This is demonstrated in the trajectory of the University of Sydney in *Figure 6. The University of Sydney post-lockdown*.

## 5. Discussion

*The following chapter discusses our empirical findings, in relation to previous research on corporate brand identity, organisation change and telework. We explore the effects of the hybrid model on the corporate brand identity further, drawing attention to similarities and differences in relation to previous research.*

This thesis examines the convergence of organisational change and the corporate brand identity in the development of the hybrid model. As the hybrid model is an emerging phenomenon, we have identified three key criteria that contribute to understanding the transformation process across organisations. The findings are consistent with studies that have addressed changes in organisations to incorporate telework practises. The influence of the hybrid model on the corporate brand identity has been demonstrated to varying degrees across organisations. We also draw parallels between the changes to the corporate brand identity and the opportunities and challenges noted in telework literature. The findings of the case study, provide insights into the hybrid model and illustrate the transformation process of the corporate brand identity.

The shift to the hybrid model for organisations marks a fundamental change in how the organisation operates (Xie et al., 2019). We demonstrate that the hybrid model has significantly changed organisations across industries. However the manner and extent of the hybrid model transformation is nuanced and specific to each corporate brand. The catalyst for change is found to be a significant factor in the degree of transformation that an organisation will adopt (Lewin, 1947). Organisation change studies have predominantly focused on the external field of the organisation in the unfreezing process (Brunes, 2012). However, we have found that when the individual's personal environment is also disrupted, the acceptance of organisation change is influenced. Within the context of COVID-19, the individual's experience of the pandemic shapes their acceptance of the 'new normal' according to Ramsay (2020). Our findings support the connection between the changes at the individual level and the acceptance of the hybrid model. Interestingly Potter (2003) found that after an external crisis, telework practises increased due to employee concerns regarding safety. Within the COVID-19 setting health and safety are defining criteria for the existence and continuation of the hybrid model across all organisations.

While employees consider the hybrid model to be the combination of the remote office and physical office, there is a tendency to view the physical office as the center of the organisation. Golden and Veiga (2005) note a similar occurrence when organisations engage in telework practises. According to Kotter (1995) the institutionalization of change takes place across years. Hence, whilst organisations may have adopted a hybrid model these changes are still being absorbed by employees. Instead our findings indicate that employees define the hybrid model by comparing the remote office to the physical office. In doing so they recognise changes in various aspects of the corporate brand identity. Organisations that view the remote office as a temporary solution, refer to the physical office as the true form of

the organisation that contains the brand's core. This finding supports Ramsay's (2020) claim that a significant cohort believes a return to pre-pandemic normalcy is possible. Although, we have noted that organisations tend to agree the physical office will not exist in the same manner as it did prior to the pandemic, there are those who see the remote office as a watered-down version of the organisation. In these cases, organisations have expressed a strong desire to return to the physical office and where possible, have regressed back to their physical format. However, despite the extent to which the organisation has adopted a hybrid model, the remote office is widely accepted as necessary for the future. Thus we consider the regression of change to be a move towards realigning the corporate brand identity whilst also accommodating misalignments.

We have found that the long-term view of the hybrid-model, determines the degree to which employees have changed behaviours. Both Kotter (1995) and Lewin (1947) argue that in order for a transformation to occur a clear vision for the organisation must be present and appealing. It appears that organisations such as Atlassian who have incorporated the hybrid model into the vision of the organisation, see a higher degree of acceptance among employees. The strategic and competitive benefits experienced by Atlassian have also led to the brand identity evolving to reflect the hybrid model. Comparatively, Sport for Jove has experienced more resistance to the hybrid model as new behaviours are viewed as interim modifications. In particular the challenges Sport for Jove has experienced in terms of their interactions and competencies has seen the hybrid model eject and extend the brand identity. Meanwhile, the University of Sydney has experienced a tempered acceptance of the hybrid model as changes challenge the organisation's norms. However, the competitive advantages of the hybrid model has resulted in the enhancement of the corporate brand identity. We have found that the hybrid model, leads organisations to reconsider their corporate brand identity and set a new course for its development.

The transformation to the hybrid organisation is largely influenced by the norms and behaviors of employees in both the remote and physical offices. This leads to our observation that the culture of the organisation differs within the remote office compared to the physical office. As Cairns (2013), describes the ability to translate cultural signals in the telework model is diminished. Employees perceive a loss of interaction and in some cases isolation from the organisation (Richter, 2020). Potter (2003) also discusses the issue of culture across distributed workforces resulting in the possibility of an 'insider vs outsider' culture. This is also of concern within the new hybrid model as employees report a filtering effect in the remote setting as old behaviours such as 'water cooler chat' are replaced by 'Zoom beers'. Contrary to the findings of Cairns (2013), we have found that the hybrid model enables employees to feel a greater sense of choice when participating in the culture of the organisation that may lead to increased engagement and connection to the brand identity.

The physical office has held the status as the hub for culture given the visibility of artifacts and behaviours (Schein, 2010). However, we find that organisations that have embraced the hybrid model have expanded their view of how culture is developed and thus also their brand identity. The cultural artifacts that may have been highly visible in the pre-COVID-19 office

are relegated in importance as new rituals appear. Instead the ability to share experiences among colleagues, whether in the remote or physical setting, is a stronger barometer of culture in the hybrid model. From the corporate brand perspective, Hatch and Schultz (1997) argue that identity is inextricably linked with culture and is the environment in which identity is developed and maintained. We find that transformations in identity elements that are related to employee interactions have a high degree of influence over the adoption of the hybrid model. In line with this we adhere to Drucker's (cited in Fernández-Aráoz, 2014) adage of 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. Thus we find that culture may not be lost in the hybrid model, rather it must be developed across remote and physical workforces as part of the brand's identity.

We observed a tendency for the hybrid model to emphasise the competencies of the brand in being able to deliver its promise. Moreover, specific activities are conducted in either the physical or remote office based on the level of interaction required to complete the task. Lister and Harnish (2011) found that the nature of work, specifically focusing on job roles, determined the success of teleworking practises. We support the consideration of the nature of work in the adoption of the hybrid model and subsequently the transformation of the brand identity. Organisations that are engaged in creative work, such as the arts, adapt a lower degree of hybridness due to key competencies being reduced in the remote setting. The converse of this is seen in organisations that regularly work across digital mediums, such as software developers, who embrace the hybrid model to a larger extent due to the congruence with their core competencies. However, we draw attention to the importance of the task in relation to *where* work is conducted in a hybrid model. Tasks that require a high degree of social interaction, such as networking are better suited to the physical office due to an enhanced sense of shared experience. Inversely, the remote office is best suited to tasks that are formulaic and autonomous, or tasks that involve travel. This is in line with Standaert, Muylle and Basu (2021) who have found meetings across locations may be better suited to the remote office from an efficiency perspective. Urde (2013) argues that competencies are a key aspect of corporate brand identity and increased attention should be paid to their competitive advantages. We find the nature of work and more specifically the task can either enhance or diminish the competencies of the brand and thus will impact the adoption of the hybrid model.

The productivity of both the employee and the organisation come into sharper focus in the hybrid model. Read (2004) finds the use of technology has allowed the digital workforce to restructure their work day with a greater degree of flexibility and enhances productivity. This is prominent within the hybrid model, however, we have found that the experience of working remotely has also influenced the employees' expectation for flexibility. As employees have found their personal and professional lives have collided within the digital transformation of work, concerns regarding the ability to 'unplug' from work are heightened (Colbert, Yee & George, 2016). The hybrid model presents an interesting dynamic regarding the blurring of personal and professional worlds. Employees believe the hybrid model improves work-life balance due a greater sense of autonomy. Roper and Fill (2012) argue that as the internal and external worlds collide, the brand identity is of increasing importance. We

support this view as the brand identity within the hybrid model is shaped by the employee. From a strategic perspective, there is greater impetus to consider the role of employees within the hybrid model. As our case study demonstrates, there is no one-size fits all approach to the hybrid model and is dependent upon the acceptance of change. In order for the transformation to be embedded, employees must understand the new vision and how it aligns with their understanding of the organisation. Thus, the employee's understanding of who the organisation is and what it stands for is of paramount importance. It is within this context that we draw a link between the organisation's change process and the corporate brand identity.

Much like the corporate brand identity, the transformation process of brand identity is dynamic and highly iterative. In contrast to Kotter's (1995) prescribed eight step model to successful transformation, we have found the brand identity transformation to be non-linear. We attribute this to the fact that the hybrid model allows employees to go between the physical and remote office with a higher degree of flexibility than telework practises (Jackson & Van Der Wielen, 1998). Depending on whether the employee works in the physical or digital office, some elements of the corporate brand identity are seen more prominently while others less so. The hybrid organisation therefore must acknowledge their brand identity becomes enhanced or diminished within the hybrid model. This is an important observation as it draws attention to the dynamism and fluidity of both identity and change and demonstrates the elasticity of the tangible and intangible aspects of the corporate brand identity. In the hybrid model, it therefore becomes more crucial for organisations to consider the employee experience in shaping the brand's identity.

Corporate brand literature has often discussed the importance of aligning the corporate brand identity as a source of strategy and strength (Aaker, 1996; Balmer, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kay, 2006). However, the frequent use of the terms alignment and misalignment have limited the exploration of the dynamism of the corporate brand identity. The transformational change brought about by the hybrid workplace model, presents a conundrum for brand managers; whilst allowing for the fluidity of identity, how should a brand maintain its consistency? We argue that 'aligned' or 'misaligned' are categorical states of being and thus cannot capture the fluidity of identity elements. Although this process is important for the management of the corporate brand identity we argue greater consideration should be given to the transformation process of identity. Our study demonstrates the process that occurs prior to elements becoming misaligned or aligned, instead capturing the elasticity of identity. Identity literature (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Balmer, 2012;) has discussed both the multiplicity and fluidity of identity, with organisations and brands moving from one state of being to another. Our study builds upon these theoretical foundations to examine this process from within the corporate brand identity. Thus, we argue that the corporate brand identity transformation is highly elastic, allowing for the ebb and flow of elements to be enhanced or diminished as organisations continue to negotiate the new normal that is the hybrid workplace model.



## 6. Conclusion

*The final chapter of this thesis provides a synopsis of our study and presents our final conclusions. Firstly, we review the objectives of our study and the fulfillment of our research purpose before expounding upon the satisfaction of our research questions. We then present our theoretical contributions and managerial implications that are developed throughout the thesis. Finally, we consider the limitations of our study and recommend future research possibilities.*

### 6.1 Research Purpose

The hybrid model phenomenon is the result of the mass remote work experiment that organisations embarked upon during the COVID-19 pandemic. As organisations undergo substantial change the question, *is the organisation still who they say they are*, in this new format arises. The purpose of this thesis was to explore the intersection of organisational change and the corporate brand identity in the emerging hybrid model. Whilst corporate brand literature draws from organisational theory, an examination of the relationship between the organisation during times of change and the corporate brand identity deserves further attention. Therefore, our thesis aimed to explore the influence of the organisational change process on the corporate brand identity. Further to our aim, the hybrid model presented the vehicle for organisation change and recognised the importance of digital transformation for the future of work. Based on this we identified a gap in corporate brand management literature regarding telework practises. The culmination of these objectives led to the formulation of the following research questions to guide our study:

***RQ1: What are the implications, if any, of a hybrid model for the corporate brand identity?***

***RQ2: How is the corporate brand identity shaped, if at all, in a hybrid model?***

***RQ3: Why does the corporate brand identity change, if at all, during times of a hybrid model transformation?***

In order to fulfil the purpose of the thesis and provide adequate answers to these questions, we undertook a qualitative multiple case study. We conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with employees at three Australian based organisations. The subsequent findings of our study has led to the creation of the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework. The application of the framework to our empirical findings has generated comprehensive and nuanced answers to each of the research questions that are expanded upon further.

**RQ1: What are the implications, if any, of a hybrid model for the corporate brand identity?**

The investigation of three organisations as they engage in both remote work and on-site work reveals the development of the hybrid model. Based on our empirical findings, we argue that the hybrid model is reactive and exists in a state of flux. Born out of the disturbance in the external environment, the hybrid model is understood as the response to the unfreezing of the organisation's status quo. As organisations are forced to change, employees make sense of the hybrid model in reference to the organisation as it existed prior to the change. By comparing the organisation as it exists in the post-lockdown phase to the pre-lockdown era, employees acknowledge that who they are as an organisation has changed. The tangible and intangible aspects of the organisation are evidently modified as they exist within a hybrid model. We argue that the transformation of the organisation is linked to the organisation's corporate identity and therefore also its brand identity. Our findings indicate the transformation to the hybrid model changes the norms and behaviours of the workforce at such a scale that tangible and intangible aspects of the organisation are evidently modified. Thus, we find that the hybrid model is linked to the corporate brand identity and thus leads us to examine this relationship further.

**RQ2: How is the corporate brand identity shaped, if at all, in a hybrid model?**

The examination of the hybrid model confirms that as the organisation transforms, the corporate brand identity is affected. As the hybrid model changes the way the organisation exists, elements of the corporate brand identity are adapted to these new conditions. Depending on the remote or physical setting, elements of the corporate brand identity are seen to either be enhanced or diminished. The extent to which the corporate brand identity interacts with the hybrid model is dependent upon the degree of change that occurs in the organisation. The corporate brand identity may be reshaped within the hybrid model as organisations seek to align changes across identity elements. Thus we argue that the transformation of the hybrid model, shapes the corporate brand identity. Consequently, the organisation must consider their core values and negotiate which elements of their identity can be reimagined and to what extent should the identity transform. The interaction between the hybrid model and the corporate brand identity arguably leads to the evolution of the organisation.

**RQ3: Why does the corporate brand identity change, if at all, during times of a hybrid model transformation?**

The hybrid model transformation has presented organisations with a new set of circumstances that they must navigate. Within this new environment, the corporate brand identity serves to not only differentiate the brand but solidify who the organisation is. Thus our findings indicate that as organisations transform, the corporate brand identity also changes. We argue this occurs due to the inherent fluidity of identity that enables elements of the corporate brand to be elastic during times of change. The elasticity of the corporate brand allows elements of

the identity to be enhanced and diminished depending on the environment. The degree to which the corporate brand identity changes is linked to the extent its core values are enhanced or diminished. This process ultimately leads to the alignment or misalignment of the corporate brand identity within the hybrid model. Thus, we find that the corporate brand identity does change in the hybrid model in accordance with the degree of organisational change.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the fields of corporate brand identity and the development of the hybrid workplace model in the future of work discourse. We present our main theoretical contributions as follows.

The first theoretical contribution of this thesis is the development of the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation Framework. The framework conceptualises the intersection of organisation change and corporate brand identity change in the hybrid workforce model. It presents four possible directions for the corporate brand identity's transformation; the ejected, evolved, extended and enhanced brand identity. We contribute to theoretical discourses regarding the corporate brand identity and its development (Urde, 2013) by expanding upon the metamorphosis of identity. We present the continuous transformation of the corporate brand identity by examining the enhancement and diminishment of its key elements during times of change. The framework extends upon the prevailing logic of consistency (Kay, 2006) by providing possible outcomes of the transformation of brand identity that allows for alignment and misalignment to coexist. To our knowledge the framework is the first of its kind to examine the relationship between the hybrid model and the corporate brand identity, progressing the fields of telework and corporate branding.

Our second theoretical contribution develops the discourse surrounding the corporate brand identity and its fluidity. Balmer (2012) argues that the corporate brand identity is made up of multiple identities that can exist simultaneously. The multiplicity and dynamism of the corporate brand identity results in a constant state of motion, whereby identity is fluid. Urde (2013) further argues the need to consider the fluidity of the corporate brand by depicting the interconnectedness of corporate brand identity elements. However, the concept of fluidity has predominantly been examined from an alignment perspective. Hatch and Schultz (2001) argue that the corporate brand identity must strategically align the vision, image and culture. Thus, whilst the fluidity of the corporate brand identity is acknowledged, the literature often seeks to curb this inherent feature due to the emphasis placed upon a single brand identity. We argue that this tends to focus on identity through the dichotomous terms 'aligned' or 'misaligned'. As such we argue for a shift in perspective regarding the fluidity of identity that explores its dynamisms. By embracing the fluctuations of identity, we reveal the corporate brand identity to be elastic. The elasticity of identity allows the corporate brand to expand and contract as changes occur. Our thesis, thus highlights the value of embracing the fluidity of identity by way of developing the corporate brand. Thus, we contribute to understanding

the fluidity of the corporate brand identity during times of change and assert the need to consider its elasticity.

Our third contribution is the link between organisation change and the transformation of the corporate brand identity. Whilst corporate brand researchers have drawn from organisational theory (Balmer, 2012; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Kay, 2006; Schein, 2010) authors have emphasized a need to bridge organisation and brand literature. We connect these fields in the development of the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework. Our examination of the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model examines the brand in its current state. Our thesis observes a link between the organisational change process and the corporate brand identity. We find that when the organisation transforms, the corporate brand identity also changes to a degree. As such we are able to draw links between organisational change theory and corporate brand identity theory. The conceptualisation of this relationship is presented in the trajectories of the three organisations as they adapt to the hybrid model. We demonstrate the influence of transforming to the hybrid model on the corporate brand identity and how changes in the organisation result in changes to the brand identity. This allows us to build upon Kotter's (1995) work regarding successful transformations as we present the degree of transformation in the respective quadrants of the framework. The framework itself is an original contribution to the field of corporate brand research as it is applied to the hybrid model. Hence, our thesis has strengthened the links between organisational theory and corporate brand identity theory by demonstrating their interconnectedness during times of change.

Our fourth theoretical contribution is related to the development of the hybrid workplace model. Xie et al. (2019) argues that the hybrid model is the future of work, however there needs to be further research regarding its effects. Our thesis contributes to the growing discourse surrounding the future of work in the post-lockdown COVID-19 era. Our investigation of three organisations as they engage in both remote work and on-site work reveals the development of the hybrid model. We argue that whilst the hybrid model has accelerated the digitalisation of the workforce, it emanates from the field of telework. By adopting this view we were able to build upon the emerging understandings of the hybrid model and identify three key characteristics; reactionary, relative and personalised. Our examination of the corporate brand identity within the hybrid model, raises further awareness of the need to explore the future of work from a corporate brand perspective. Thus, our thesis contributes to the expansion of telework literature through our investigation of the hybrid model.

### 6.3 Managerial Implications

In addition to our theoretical contributions, this thesis also presents the managerial implications of the corporate brand identity transformation in the hybrid model. The role of the corporate brand identity in guiding the organisation during times of change should be considered a strategic asset for brand managers. However, there is limited research regarding how to manage a corporate brand identity during times of significant change that has

occurred during the COVID-19 era. Our thesis identifies the potential challenges and opportunities for brand managers as they negotiate the hybrid model. We present the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation framework as a tool to consider the strategic implications of the transformation process on corporate brand management.

### **The office setting**

Our first managerial implication draws attention to the importance of the organisation setting. Depending on where the employee is situated, our research reveals that there are considerable differences in the corporate brand identity in the remote office as compared to the physical office. Our findings suggest that elements of the corporate brand identity are enhanced or diminished in the remote office and may influence the brand's core, however, this is also true of the physical office. Thus, there is a need to consider how the corporate brand identity exists in both settings. In particular we encourage corporate brand managers to rethink the status of the physical office as the hub of the corporate brand identity. We believe that the further digitalisation of the workforce will result in the remote office becoming more prominent as employees adapt to the hybrid model. As such we suggest an increased focus on how the corporate brand identity is experienced in the remote office is warranted.

### **Increased focus on people**

Our second managerial implication builds upon Kay's (2006) view that the corporate brand is only as strong externally as it is embedded internally. The fragmentation of the workforce in the hybrid model presents considerable challenges for the corporate brand manager. In particular the diverse range of employee experiences within the hybrid model has required organisations to increase the degree of flexibility. Coupled with the intertwining of personal and professional spheres, we argue that there is a greater need to focus on the culture and relationship identity elements in the hybrid model. This is largely due to the distance between the employee and the organisation which may present challenges to aligning the brand identity. Furthermore, the hybrid model allows the employee to personalise their experience of the organisation and requires the corporate brand to be elastic when needed. Our thesis emphasises the importance of the employee experience in accepting change within the corporate brand identity. We suggest that corporate brand practitioners engage with their internal stakeholders regularly to ensure a strong corporate brand identity. Finally, our thesis reinforces the importance of understanding the corporate culture in the hybrid model in order to develop a strategic brand identity.

### **Consider the type of transformation necessary**

Our thesis presents managers with a practical framework from which the transformation of the corporate brand identity can be assessed. Each quadrant within the framework, presents managers with a potential direction for the corporate brand identity to develop. Managers can utilise the framework to get an understanding of the current degree of change in the corporate brand identity as a result of the hybrid model. However, it can be utilised further to anticipate

how changes in the organisation may impact the corporate brand identity. As such the framework can be used to assist in predicting how the corporate brand identity may be influenced by changes to the organisation. This can empower managers to plan and adjust accordingly to achieve the desired outcome for the brand. The framework demonstrates four scenarios for change in the corporate brand identity and allows managers to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the different movements. The evaluation process gives the manager the opportunity to influence the change in a manner that moves the corporate brand identity towards the desired outcome for the brand. We argue this managerial implication solidifies the corporate brand identity transformation as a strategic maneuver.

## 6.4 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has explored the impact of mass organisational change on the corporate brand identity in the COVID-19 era. Our research focuses specifically on the hybrid model currently being implemented in the post-lockdown COVID-19 workforce. As the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, our thesis is limited in its ability to evaluate the long-term effects of the hybrid model on the corporate brand identity. Further research is needed to understand the full context in which the hybrid model has emerged globally. However, our study contributes to an early examination of the corporate brand identity in the emerging hybrid workplace and a new framework, the Corporate Brand Identity Transformation Framework, for assessing and managing changes.

The focus on three Australian companies limits our study geographically and therefore more research is needed to examine the hybrid model more broadly. Furthermore, we have questioned how elements of the brand identity change, or not, as organisations undergo the transformation process. We have proposed that these elements are enhanced or diminished within the hybrid model. However, the recency of the hybrid model implementation limits the ability to examine this process from a long-term perspective. Thus, a future study of the corporate brand identity in the hybrid model that examines the extent to which change has been institutionalised is of benefit.

This thesis takes a qualitative approach in order to gain depth of understanding the hybrid model at this stage. However, because of the scale of change we see potential opportunities for a quantitative approach in future research. Such studies would enable additional insights into multiple locations and organisations allowing for cross-border comparisons.

Finally, our research focuses on the first layer in the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix by Urde (2013). The Matrix however has two additional outer layers, the communication and positioning layer followed by the reputation layer (Urde & Greyser, 2015). These two layers should be studied in future research to enable a deeper understanding of the use of the Matrix and the impact on corporate brands. Our approach focuses solely on the corporate brand identity and the employee perspective (while acknowledging that the employee perspective is inextricably linked to the organisation perspective). However, hybrid models will also impact

key external stakeholders. Therefore a study of the brand's image during the time of COVID-19 may help to further examine how the hybrid model affects the organisation.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1- Interview Topic Guide

### **Background information**

- How long have you worked at the company?
- What is your position in the company?

### **Perspective on the differences between the physical office and the remote office**

- What would you say is the difference between the physical office and the remote office?
- What do you feel that you are missing in your day-to-day work life when working from home compared to in a physical office?
- How would you feel going back into a physical office would change your experience of the company?

### **The remote experience and the attitudes towards a hybrid workplace**

- What has been the impact of remote working on your workplace experience?
- What is your experience of remote/hybrid working?
- What are the pros and cons to remote working?

### **Perspective on the differences in the organisation and the brand caused by the organisational change**

- How has remote working affected your understanding of who the company is and what it stands for?
- How do you think others outside the organisation view the organisation in the hybrid setting?

### **Interpretations and understandings of the organisation as a brand in the physical office vs remote office**

- How would you describe your organisation and what it means to you?
- What are the key characteristics of your organisation?
- Do you feel like the organisation has the same goals now that it is hybrid?
- How has the hybrid setting changed the way you view the organisation, what it stands for and how it functions?
  - Do you think that external stakeholders see it this way as well?

### **Concluding question**

- How do you envision the future of the workplace?