Do universities have a distinctive brand personality? The case of ECIU Universities

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Abstract

Brands increasingly adopt human qualities as a way to attract consumers. Brands must be physically attractive, intellectually persuasive, socially involved, and emotionally appealing, all while demonstrating a strong personality and moral foundation. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are no exception, seeking their audiences through a distinctive and attractive brand personality. The main purpose of this paper is to identify the main brand personality traits of European universities, based on content analysis of institutional websites. Twelve universities from the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) were studied. The results indicate the existence of HEIs with distinctive brand personalities while others present weak personality dimensions. The main conclusions point to the need for a focus on strategic brand management that includes a robust identity definition. The brand personality, an integral part of the institution's identity, must be communicated consistently across all points of contact and communication channels.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions Marketing; Strategic Brand Management; Brand Personality; Communication; ECIU.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the ageing of populations and the consequent decrease in the number of prospective students has led Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to face a more competitive context in their efforts to attract new students. In the European context, the Bologna Process has brought profound changes in Higher Education: by facilitating the mobility of students between study cycles, higher education has become more attractive, accessible and inclusive, but also more competitive. Felgueira and Rodrigues (2015) argue that this movement of students, along with increasing budgetary constraints, made the environment in HEIs quite turbulent. The communication paradigm has also changed drastically, forcing HEIs to make an effort to adapt to a new reality, characterized by more complex communication processes. Universities are therefore required to have a new way of relating to their main public (their stakeholders) in a highly competitive context that is no longer limited to national borders.

Based on the assumption that a website of an HEI is a gateway to different stakeholders and allows establishing a relationship with them, it is important to understand how this communication channel projects the institution's image and identity. The main objective of this paper is to investigate how brand personality is communicated by HEIs, using Aaker's (1997) five brand personality dimensions - sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness - and Opoku et al., (2007) dictionary of terms. The main contribution of this research is to understand how HEIs are forming their brand personality through the language used in one of the main communication channels.

2. Theoretical background

Regarding the public of an HEI, Mainardes (2010) lists a broad set of players, mentioning, however, that the focus is still on some specific stakeholders, leaving in the shadows some groups that he considers critical. The most considered groups are students, faculty, management and administration, and accreditation agencies, while the least considered groups are the institution's employees, competitors, and the community, to name just a few. Prospective students are not passive "consumers"; on the contrary, to make the best choice about the course or institution they wish to attend, they seek to gather information about what each HEI has to offer. Knowing the reasons that lead candidates to make a certain choice is very important for the construction of an institutional positioning that meets these criteria of choice (Nicolescu, 2009).

Although Chapleo (2007) indicates that brand management in the higher education context has received limited academic attention, several subsequent studies have focused on best practices regarding the design and strategic management of branding in a variety of ways, such as brand value (Mourad et al., 2011), brand development (Garipağaoğlu, 2016), brand image formation (Wilkins & Huisman, 2014), and brand personality (R. Rutter et al., 2017).

According to Harris and De Chernatony (2001) , there is a greater demand for brand differentiation (of HEIs) through emotional factors rather than their functional characteristics. Importantly, the emotional value of the brand is perceived throughout the interactions with different stakeholders, either through personal contact or through what is communicated. Bulotaite (2003) states that university brands may have the potential to generate stronger feelings than most brands. From his perspective, the key to a successful branding process is the creation and communication of a unique identity. According to Kotler et al. (2017) more and, more brands are adopting human qualities as a way to attract consumers. Brands must be physically attractive, intellectually compelling, socially involved, and emotionally appealing, all while demonstrating a strong personality and moral foundation.

Regarding the concept of brand personality, the work of Aaker (1997) is widely recognized. According to the author, brand personality is the set of human characteristics that are associated with it. Considering that the existence of a brand with distinctive characteristics is a differentiation factor for HEIs, the strategy of analyzing how target audiences understand the brand will be very useful (Rutter et al., 2017; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013) and the same can be said about how it is being communicated.

It is safe to assume that today most companies and organizations have adopted an omnichannel digital communication strategy - a website and a varying number of social networks - through which they communicate with their audiences. According to Saichaie e Morphew (2016), HEI websites are a primary source of information for prospective students and it is through this channel that such institutions create their first impression. The message transmitted through the HEIs' websites is thus of utmost importance and should ensure that it is possible to infer their mission and what differentiates each institution (Schneider & Bruton, 2004).

3. Methodology

The study consisted on the content analysis of the websites of the twelve HEIs that were part of the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) at the time of this study. The choice of these HEIs was due to the growing importance that this network of universities assumes in the European context since they seek to build an innovative pedagogical model that they need to communicate in a very diverse cultural context. Also, there are no other studies known to date that focus on members of the ECIU in this context. The collection and processing of the analyzed content went through four stages: i) the delimitation of the contents to be collected; ii) the collection and storage of the Website's content; iii) the analysis of the collected texts which resulted in positioning graphs of the HEIs in the Brand Personality Dimensions according to Aaker (1997), and iv) the analysis of the obtained data.

After a first exploratory analysis, it was found that it would not be feasible to proceed with a full analysis of the websites and therefore a selection of topics was made, namely: general presentation of the HEI, presentation of the mission, vision and values of the HEI, strategic vision, pedagogical model, reasons for choosing the university and academic life. These were considered to be those that best expresses what the HEI says about itself, that is, what the institution communicates as being its identity. We then proceeded to cross-reference the text files obtained, based on the written discourse collected from the respective websites, with the dictionary of terms (Opoku et al., 2007) corresponding to each dimension of the brand personality, using the WordStat9 tool. This brand personality dictionary is currently the only method to quantitatively assess brand personality through text analysis within the five brand personality dimensions of Aaker (1997). The method is unique in that the analysis provides a frequency count of dimensional synonyms within a text, which shifts the focus from consumers' perception of brand personality to what organizations as brands are saying about themselves (Rutter et al., 2018).

4. Results

In the absence of classification scales for the obtained values, the researchers adopted the following classification: i) dominant dimensions were considered those with values equal to or greater than 50% (highlighted in blue), ii) very relevant dimensions were considered those with values between 45% and 49% (highlighted in orange), and iii) relevant dimensions were considered those with values up to 30% (marked in grey). Table 1 shows the percentage values calculated according to the number of occurrences of the terms associated with each dimension of brand personality. The results show that almost all HEIs present dominant, very relevant or relevant brand personality traits.

The three brand personality dimensions with the most dominant or relevant occurrences are Excitement, followed by Sincerity and Competence. The Excitement dimension involves brands that are perceived as being imaginative, up-to-date, inspiring, edgy and spirited (Moura, 2021). Seven of the twelve HEIs show distinctive values in this dimension. Although none of the HEIs present this as a dominant dimension, two HEIs position themselves with very relevant values - the University of Dublin (49%) and the University of Stavanger (47%). In this dimension, the University of Hamburg registers the lowest value (20.63%). The Excitement dimension conveys a youthful attitude that intends to provide a fun and engaging experience to the consumer. Thus, there seems to be an effort to approach students (i.e., one of the main stakeholders of the HEIs) in the HEIs' discourse.

The sincerity dimension includes brands that are seen as practical and trustworthy, frequently because they follow ethical practices or are committed to the community (Moura, 2021). This is also a dimension of brand personality that is evident in five of the twelve HEIs under study.

Table 1 - % distribution of HEIs by Brand Personality Dimensions

IES	Brand personality dimensions				
	Excitement	Sincerity	Competence	Ruggedness	Sophistication
Aalborg	27.59%	37.93%	17.24%	10.34%	6.90%
Aveiro	24.73%	35.48%	29.03%	5.38%	5.38%
Barcelona	43.75%	29.69%	14.06%	10.94%	1.56%
Dublin	49.06%	13.21%	26.42%	7.55%	3.77%
Hamburg	20.63%	49.21%	25.40%	3.17%	1.59%
INSA	36.51%	17.46%	31.75%	-	14.29%
Kaunas	25.49%	15.69%	52.94%	1.96%	3.92%
Linkoping	26.60%	24.47%	25.53%	14.89%	8.51%
Stavanger	47.00%	22.00%	11.00%	12.00%	8.00%
Tampere	36.76%	22.06%	28.68%	5.15%	7.35%
Trento	32.50%	34.38%	26.88%	3.13%	3.13%
Twente	34.81%	21.48%	31.85%	6.67%	5.19%

As institutions that provide a service to the community, it is important to show themselves as transparent and trustworthy organizations. In this dimension, the University of Hamburg presents the highest value, with 49.21% of the occurrences of associated terms.

Competent brands are mainly seen as being well-organized and efficient, perceptions often grounded on the organization behavior in society (Moura, 2021). Only two HEIs show relevant values in this brand personality dimension, which is somewhat surprising considering the higher education sector and the association with higher-level studies. The University of Kaunas presents a dominant brand personality trait communication, with a value of 52.94% in this dimension.

When it comes to the Sophistication and Ruggedness dimensions, the values are low in all the analyzed HEIs. Sophisticated brands are the ones perceived by consumers as upper class and stylish, commonly associated with luxury products or services. The Ruggedness dimension includes brands seen as adventurous and athletic (Moura, 2021).

Looking at each HEI individually, only one of the institutions has a dominant brand personality dimension. This is Kaunas University, whose dominant dimension is Competence. At the opposite pole, Linkoping University shows an even distribution of values, meaning that no dimension stands out in relation to the others.

5. Conclusions and Future Research

In this study, based on the HEIs website content analysis, it is possible to identify brands that have dominant, varied as well as a fragile brand personality. According to Guttmann (2019), the most robust brands tend to highlight one primary and optionally one secondary brand personality dimension. Put in other words, HEIs have to set a clear direction as to what they want to communicate as their brand, departing from the idea that they can be everything to everybody.

The main contribution of this work is that it offers HEIs indications for building a brand personality that meets the institution's identity. The first step is to know yourself and define a path to follow. Is what the institution communicating in fact what it was intended to communicate as a brand? This study may provide some clues with implications for the strategic brand management of HEIs since it allows a diagnostic process and the design of communication strategies that help strengthen the intended brand personality through the discourse used.

This study integrates a broader investigation that also seeks to understand the perception of the studied HEIs regarding the brand personality they are communicating on their websites. To this end, a questionnaire was applied to representatives of the communication offices of the universities of the ECIU consortium, in particular to their employees involved in the strategic management of their respective brands, in order to clarify which personality traits, they consider to be those that best describe their HEIs. In future studies, besides the view of internal stakeholders, it will be interesting to explore the perception of external stakeholders, particularly students. Is the communicated brand personality understood in the intended way? Does the emotional response produced have results that can be translated into attracting students?

Beyond what HEIs say about themselves on a specific channel (i.e., institutional website), there is much more to explore. Currently, HEIs bet on a multiplicity of channels to communicate with their different stakeholders. A more complete study would consist of a comparative analysis of the communication of the brand personality in the various communication channels used by the institution. Given the multiplicity of stakeholders, should HEIs communicate differently in each channel in order to produce an emotional response that meets each specific audience?

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