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Brand personality in higher education: anthropomorphized university marketing communications

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ABSTRACT
While the university prospectus is recognized as an important marketing communication tool for higher education recruitment strategies, it has become overlooked as many researchers have focused on other communication channels, such as social media and websites. Although focus has been placed upon Higher Education Institution (HEI) brand differentiation, little is known about the similarities and differences between institutional marketing communications utilized to build their brands. This research seeks to explore and analyze the prospectuses of the top 10 HEIs in the UK and to draw comparison between their relative positions using a brand personality lens. While the brand personality trait of sincerity was common for all of the HEIs, there was clear differentiation on the basis of other traits, demonstrating that brand personality deepens our understanding of HEI positioning. Two main brand personality groupings were evident among the top 10 institutions: excitement and competence.

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Introduction

Increasingly, students are viewing their higher education (HE) experience as a commercial transaction with a financial return expected in the future (Palfreyman, 2012). In the UK, for example, this expectation is accentuated with the introduction of tuition fees as institutions respond to a tightening of traditional financial resources. At the same time, universities offer many of the same degree programs, meaning that program offerings are diminished as a potential differentiator when a university is striving to attract students in a cluttered market space. Similarly to consumer confusion in a cluttered marketplace (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010), prospective students may find the decision-making process of selecting a university confusing.

In this context, Twitchell (2004) argues that universities should be managing their brands more proactively. Brands not only help managers achieve success in product-based organizations, but also in service-based organizations (Berry, 2000). There is much that can be learnt from the branding literature to deepen understanding of marketing in HE, and brand management is already applied in the HE sector. For example, at the macro level, the UK Government launched a global branding campaign in 2000 aimed at

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reinforcing the concept of a 'British Education'. At the micro level, individual universities are allocating more resources to improving their marketing communications to potential students and other stakeholders and to developing their brands (Chapleo, 2010). This allocation of resources seems to be working, as university brands have already been recognized as a highly differentiating factor (Qian, 2009) in terms of recruitment and retention of the best students and staff members (Florea, 2011).

Brands can play a vital role in influencing perceptions, and especially those of a major stakeholder group, such as a university's prospective and current students. Brand management techniques are used to develop strong and loyal relationships (Freling & Forbes, 2005, p. 406; Keller, 2001), to distinguish organizations and their product offers from competitors and to enhance performance (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003). A university's brand has become a crucial element in student decision-making, especially as the service choice tends to be complex and as competition between universities intensifies (Teh & Salleh, 2011). The student's decision is influenced by his or her perception of specific institutions, and therefore strong brands have been argued to be positively linked to recruitment performance (Salleh, 2009).

While HE marketing research was previously recognized as underdeveloped (Hankinson, 2004), more advanced branding concepts have been explored within the sector (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, & Savani, 2009), including: brand as a logo (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006), as an image (Chapleo, 2007), brand awareness and brand identity (Lynch, 2006), brand image differentiation (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010), brand meaning (Teh & Salleh, 2011), brand strength impact on satisfaction (Casidy & Wymer, 2015), brand consistency (Alessandri et al., 2006; Casey & Llewellyn, 2012), brand reputation (Finch, McDonald, & Staple, 2013; Suomi, 2014), points of brand interaction (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014) and branding challenges in HE (Chapleo, 2015).

An emerging stream of HE research is on brand personality (Opoku, 2005) and it may represent a powerful basis for differentiation between the many universities vying for student recruits. However, research has not explored brand personality specifically in traditional media and in the written text which comprises this promotional communication. At the same time, the importance of traditional media, like the university prospectus, to the promotional plans of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is clear (Bradley, 2013; Graham, 2013). There is a current opportunity to leverage the analytical approaches embraced in the study of new media to understand the potential for brand personality differentiation in traditional media for HEIs. New media studies have analyzed brand personality communicated through written text online (Rutter, Hanretty, & Lettice, 2015). This method can be applied in the same way to traditional HE marketing media. Therefore, this paper utilizes a lexical analysis of HEIs' communications from the textual content of the prospectus to analyze the differences in the brand personalities communicated by the top 10 universities in the UK.

A key aim and contribution of this paper is to investigate the brand personality being communicated by a HEI, using Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework and Opoku's (2006) dictionary-based brand personality tool. From this, we can assess similarities and differences in the communication of HEIs via the brand personality traits communicated in this key marketing channel. A second contribution is to provide greater insight into how HEIs are forming their brand personality through the language and context communicated.

Literature review

The study of brand personality in the communications of HEIs necessitates the review of existing literature on the notion of brand personality and communication in the sector. Certainly, HE branding is now considered a key factor for success (Almadhoun, Dominic, & Woon, 2011; Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016; Teh & Salleh, 2011). Within the context of HE, a brand has been defined as the 'commodification' of a university's qualities as differentiators, or its unique selling point (Iqbal, Rasli, & Hassan, 2012; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011, p. 80). In practical terms, a business management degree program in a prospectus can seem indistinguishable between institutions, in which case students look to other indicators of quality (for example, ranking or location) to differentiate between the offerings. The location of an HEI has been shown to influence the brand personality of the institution (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014). Brand personality may therefore provide a sound basis for differentiating a university from its competitors. The image of the university can change, as demonstrated in a study which explored the effects of a shift in management strategy on the institution's image (Melewar & Akel, 2005). So, communications play an important role in establishing and changing the perceived brand image of the university. While an argument has been made that brand differentiation is good for the HE sector (Chapleo, 2005), there has been no clear consensus on the dimensional basis for this differentiation (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). Indeed, there is pressure on organizations to also share a basis of similarity with others in the same market space. This force has been theorized as isomorphism and has been found to influence perceptions of legitimacy (Deephouse, 1996). Therefore, brands try to demonstrate that they belong within the specific market and this is accomplished by demonstrating that they comply with a minimum set of standards typical of a provider (King & Whetten, 2008). This results in a tension, or a balance, between the need to differentiate to compete and the need to reflect some shared meaning through isomorphism to portray legitimacy. Therefore, organizations should strive to communicate images which are 'as different as legitimately possible' (Deephouse, 1999, p. 148). In the context of HEIs, this may lead to the communication of some common attributes to demonstrate belonging in the space, and these common attributes may influence the portrayal of brand personality.

Before discussing the anthropomorphization of HEIs in their communication activities, it is important to understand the context of HE.

Higher education

'HE' is generally referred to as the educational experience following graduation from the K-12 system in the US and Canada or secondary education in the UK, which is delivered by both colleges and universities (Saunders, 2015). HE is complex, with 11 different types of experiences including student feedback, graduation, curriculum design, communication with service staff, rigor, grading, classroom behavior, classroom studies, individual studies, teaching methods and course design (Koris, Örtenblad, Kerem, & Ojala, 2015). The location of the institution relative to a prospective student's home is also quite important (Briggs, 2006; Vrontis, Thrassou, & Melanthiou, 2007). Complexity can also extend to the community-based experience of being a student on a particular campus (i.e. networking and friendships or the entertainment value of watching university sports teams).

Students are not simply purchasing a degree, but are engaging in a complex educational and social system.

The notion of a student as a consumer or customer of HE is contentious. Saunders (2015) argues that scholars need to re-examine this underlying assumption in HE research, based on finding that only a minority of students hold views consistent with a consumer orientation. However, Koris et al. (2015) did find that students held some expectation of being treated as a consumer for some aspects of the HE experience, in particular, as it pertains to student feedback and classroom studies. Either way, prospective students need to make a choice about which universities to submit applications to and to select their preferred university or college to attend. The brand management knowledge developed in the marketing field across a range of corporate sectors can help us to understand how choices are made within the HE sector.

Brand personality

Since King (1970) stated 'people choose their brands the same way they choose their friends. In addition to the skills and physical characteristics, they simply like them as people' (p. 14), there has been increasing interest in brands as anthropomorphic entities (Patterson, Khogeer, & Hodgson, 2013). Anthropomorphized brands enable easier recognition and interaction, which catalyzes a relationship (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004). For example, prospective students recognize a university, interact with the admissions process and then enroll. A strong brand personality, conveyed through different media, can increase brand equity and organizational performance (Opoku, 2006; Rutter et al., 2016). Malhotra (1981) built on earlier studies of consumer identity and products to advocate the need for brand personality scales, paving the way for Aaker's (1997) seminal work on brand personality. Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand, and a framework of brand personality was constructed using human dimensions of personality and by combining these measurement items with existing marketing scales. This research distilled and analyzed a range of traits to determine five brand personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness.

Aaker (1997) identified measures organized by facets for each of the five traits. Sincerity included four facets which reflect similar items, namely, down-to-earth (down-to-earth, family-oriented, small-town), honest (honest, sincere, real), wholesome (wholesome, original) and cheerful (cheerful, sentimental, friendly). Excitement also included four facets identified as daring (daring, trendy, exciting), spirited (spirited, cool, young), imaginative (imaginative, unique) and up-to-date (up-to-date, independent, contemporary). Competence has three facet groupings of measurement items including reliable (reliable, hard-working, secure), intelligent (intelligent, technical, corporate) and successful (successful, leader, confident). Sophistication had two facet groupings including upper class (upper class, glamorous, good looking) and charming (charming, feminine, smooth). The final brand personality trait, ruggedness, has two facets for the measurement items, namely, outdoorsy (outdoorsy, masculine, Western) and tough (tough, rugged).

Practitioners of branding are paying increasing attention to brand personality and its use as a strategic differentiator. Brand personality characterizes the brand as if it were a person (Aaker, 1997; Cappara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Grohmann, 2009; Phau & Lau,

2001), and is a way to maintain uniqueness by emphasizing psychological values beyond function. Brand personality is communicated through the way the organization speaks and behaves (Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2012) and through the messages delivered through various marketing channels. Brand personality can be an important link to other brand concepts such as brand trust and authenticity. Sung and Kim (2010) argued that the sincerity dimension of brand personality is a means to capture the perceived level of trust in a brand, while Godin (2005) suggested that the dimension is foundational where authenticity is critical for brands. Brand trust can be eroded if there are poor perceptions around authenticity (Beverland, 2009; Eggers, O'Dwyer, Kraus, Vallaster, & Güldenberg, 2013).

In the HE area, brand personality research is emerging to better understand the positions of institutions in their competitive context. Among the important findings is that brand personality is important. A study of business schools and their corporate brands found that brand personality was as important as their perceived service or educational attributes (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014). However, there appears to be an inconsistent application of brand personalities among universities. An investigation of online brand communication found that some universities clearly position their brand personalities in the marketplace while other universities do not (Opoku, Hultman, & Saheli-Sangari, 2008). At the same time, there does appear to be a dominant personality trait as conveyed by university logos. Research shows that the brand personality competence dimension is most closely associated with the academic logo (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). However, research is still limited and does not appear to have examined whether brand personality is being portrayed in traditional media, including the prospectuses sent out to prospective students.

Brand communication

The way a university manages its brand communications is an important element of the student experience, and signifies the level of brand promise fulfillment (Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2008). In particular, Ivy (2008) found that a strong brand image is of significant importance to student recruitment performance. Signaling theory helps to explain how universities communicate messages to establish legitimacy or brand differentiation to attract students. This theory focuses on three important aspects: the sender (source of the message), the receiver (the intended target of the message) and the signal (message encoding) (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Receivers evaluate signals and process their meaning which can diverge from the original intention of the sender (Connelly et al., 2011). Therefore, receivers of the signal indicate to the sender whether the signal was understood or not (Gulati & Higgins, 2003). The sender can re-evaluate the message construction and decide if a change is needed. In the university setting, this feedback can come indirectly through student choice statistics or through a more direct dialogue with potential students.

Previous studies suggest that stakeholders who experience one or more university brand messages (Lynch, 2006) form images of that university, regardless of whether this process is actively managed by universities. University brand communication literature centers on how the brand markets itself through communications both internally and externally (Chapleo, 2008). Some research suggests that university brand communications

take the form of 'relationship marketing', and that institutions are not marketing their products, but rather the brand associations that will be made (Shaw, Brain, Bridger, Foreman, & Reid, 2007). The brand promise, as communicated through marketing media, must be delivered to stakeholders in terms of values which they recognize in order for the brand to be successful. Universities communicate their brand through a multitude of marketing channels such as open days and face-to-face communications (Ivy, 2008), the perception of their varsity sports/league table positions (Hazelkorn, 2008), the prospectus and newer channels such as the website and social media (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012).

Research which measures basic university brand communications often examines universities' mission statements or slogans (Molesworth et al., 2011). Molesworth et al. (2011) summarized university brand communication as the effort to maintain a coherent and consistent message throughout the brand, in order to communicate to stakeholders what the institution stands for. Research on the perceived meaning of logos indicated that those perceived as more 'academic' were associated with competence (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Researchers concur that universities need to ensure that their prospective students receive brand communications which are harmonious with the overall brand of the university.

The importance of physical marketing media has diminished as more emphasis has been placed on online communication sources (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004). However, within the context of HE marketing, the change appears less pronounced. While a prospectus is often present in a digital version or represents content found on a university website, the university prospectus is still a very important communication medium in its own right (Brown & Sen, 2010; Ivy, 2008; Johnson, 2001), used by students and their parents to choose between universities. Some studies indicate that for some groups of students, the prospectus will be their only source of information (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005), and this has been found to be so especially within the European HE sector (Atfield & Purcell, 2009). A recent UK study suggests that the hardcopy prospectus was more important than an institution's online brand (Justin, 2013). Within the prospectus, brand content is communicated within the welcome text, course content, location information, requirements, and social, accommodation and general facilities (Whitby, 1992). The prospectus represents a risk reducer, and the text and vocabulary used reinforce culture and brand meaning (Johnson, 2001).

Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) examined the sense of belonging students felt after they had read university prospectuses. This was based upon looking at imagery and textual information, with the results concluding that young middle-class white males are the most represented within an institutional prospectus. International and mature students tended to feel that their needs were less provided for. Research by Graham (2013) attempted to measure changes over time within prospectus and website communications, concentrating on language used and tone communicated. It was concluded that universities communicated either a theme of 'elitism and quality' or a theme of 'accessibility'. She also showed that there had been a shift in emphasis within these communications between 2007 and 2011, with institutions moving to an emphasis on 'quality' over 'accessibility'. These studies indicate that there are both similarities and differences in the communication activities of HEIs.

Although it is recognized that the prospectus communicates a substantial brand position (Hammond, Harmon, & Webster, 2007; Hayes, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka,

2006), there has been little research to investigate what a prospectus is communicating in terms of a university's brand and brand personality. This research therefore aims to bridge this gap by studying and comparing the brand personality being communicated within 10 university prospectuses. This will provide a key contribution to HE research on branding, by considering the brand beyond the university's logo and mission statements. Specifically, this work seeks to answer three research questions – (1) *What brand personality words are used?* (2) *How do universities compare to each other in terms of the personalities portrayed?* (3) *What language is used to distinguish themselves from other universities?*

Method

The aim of this research is to explore whether distinct brand personalities are being projected through the university prospectus. We analyzed and compared the brand personalities of ten UK universities, as communicated within their prospectuses. First, quantitative content analysis was used to count the frequency of brand personality words used to answer our first research question (RQ1). Second, data were analyzed using multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) and plotted visually to demonstrate the relative position and relationships between HEIs (RQ2). Third, a qualitative analysis of the words and their context was used to explore a HEI's position and develop a theoretical understanding of how HEIs are able to distinguish themselves (RQ3).

Sample

High-ranking HEIs were chosen to try to minimize performance difference, given that they would then need to compete by differentiating themselves through their brand and brand personality. Using research performance data from the UK Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 2008), the top 10 UK universities were selected to be used in the study shown in Table 1.

Data collection

The undergraduate prospectus was the focus in this research, as it communicates a substantial brand position (Hammond et al., 2007; Hayes, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) and is used by prospective students to compare and contrast institutional offerings. Therefore, each university was telephoned to request their most up-to-date prospectus,

Table 1. The sample of HEIs used in this research.

Rank	HEI
1	Cambridge
2	LSE
3	Oxford University
4	Imperial College London
5	UCL
6	Manchester
7	Warwick
8	York
9	Essex
10	Edinburgh

relating to student entry in the 2011/2012 academic year. Upon arrival, each prospectus was digitally converted using an OCR (Optical Character Recognition) scanner. The OCR scanner was able to convert 60–70% of the prospectus documents into a digital format. Next, each page of each document was compared to the original text by hand, and the remaining 30–40% of data was entered manually. This task was carried out between June and December 2011.

Data analysis

Content analysis in the study of university brands has become common, particularly as a tool to analyze positioning statements (Morphew & Hartley, 2006) and words used (Chapleo, Durán, & Díaz, 2011). Opoku, Abratt, and Pitt (2006) created a dictionary of synonyms, based on Aaker's (1997) five dimensions of brand personality. The dictionary is comprised of 1625 words, each dimension containing a similar number of synonyms. As it stands, Aaker's model of five dimensions can only be quantifiably measured using Opoku's brand personality dictionary when assessing textual data. Examples of frequently found words relating to each of Aaker's five dimensions from Opoku's dictionary are highlighted in Table 2.

Content analysis was deployed on the corpora of textual data (Krippendorff, 2004) and the brand personality words were counted. Table 3 shows the word counts for each university by brand personality dimension and the individual prospectus word counts by university. The 10 prospectuses provided a total of 788,383 words for analysis, with a standard deviation of 27,041. Table 3 shows the percentage of words for each university by brand personality dimension. A chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 500.264$; df = 36; $p < .0001$) shows that the row (i.e. the brand personality dimensions) and the column (i.e. websites) variables are related.

In order to explore whether the HEIs were communicating a distinct brand personality through their prospectus, MCA was used to analyze the relationship between each university's brand personality and the five dimensions. Correspondence analysis is a powerful method of depicting the structure of data, and is often used within brand positioning and market segmentation analysis (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). MCA offered a distinct interpretation advantage over cross-tabulation of data, as the five dimensions could then be interpreted using a two-dimensional axis (Greenacre, 2010; Hoffman & Franke, 1986). Correspondence analysis is an ordination technique used to reduce multivariate data to lesser variables (in this case, theoretical) to better describe the differences in the data. The literature advocates that a two-dimensional axis assists interpretation and aids problems related to *x* and *y* axis spatial differences (Greenacre, 2010; Hoffman & Franke, 1986), and so two-dimensional correspondence plots are typically used (Opoku et al., 2006).

Table 2. Selected words from Opoku's brand personality dictionary.

Dimension	Selected words
Competence	Competent, outstanding, scientific, staunch, thorough, unfaltering
Excitement	Energizing, exciting, fresh, inventive, risky, young
Ruggedness	Challenge, dangerous, difficult, rigorous, tricky, unrestrained
Sincerity	Accurate, authentic, compassion, decent, modest, realistic
Sophistication	Charismatic, distinguished, graceful, magnificent

Table 3. Word count and word percentage by brand personality dimension.

Name	Competence	Excitement	Ruggedness	Sincerity	Sophistication	Total word count
Word count by brand personality dimension						
Cambridge	464	570	272	1065	164	98,596
LSE	270	318	147	407	44	52,817
Oxford	552	782	151	955	127	114,738
Imperial	231	165	41	196	67	29,935
UCL	328	450	100	471	120	66,217
Manchester	652	643	93	681	125	80,522
Warwick	341	405	69	467	114	59,799
York	570	595	117	770	97	95,245
Essex	538	950	204	881	135	111,070
Edinburgh	392	441	155	603	110	79,444
Word percentage by brand personality dimension						
Cambridge	18.30%	22.49%	10.73%	42.01%	6.47%	2.57%
LSE	22.77%	26.81%	12.39%	34.32%	3.71%	2.25%
Oxford	21.50%	30.46%	5.88%	37.20%	4.95%	2.24%
Imperial	33.00%	23.57%	5.86%	28.00%	9.57%	2.34%
UCL	22.33%	30.63%	6.81%	32.06%	8.17%	2.22%
Manchester	29.72%	29.31%	4.24%	31.04%	5.70%	2.72%
Warwick	24.43%	29.01%	4.94%	33.45%	8.17%	2.33%
York	26.52%	27.69%	5.44%	35.83%	4.51%	2.26%
Essex	19.87%	35.08%	7.53%	32.53%	4.99%	2.44%
Edinburgh	23.05%	25.93%	9.11%	35.45%	6.47%	2.14%

Finally, as suggested by Markus and Visser (1992), 95% confidence ellipses were calculated from the multinomial distribution with probabilities equal to the observed probabilities of words in each of the five brand personality categories. The degree of uncertainty surrounding the estimates of HEIs' positions allowed interpretation of the level of difference and similarity in the brand personality position.

Limitations in the methodology concerned data reliability (Krippendorff, 2004) and interpretation (Greenacre, 2010) and steps were taken to reduce bias. As content analysis is dependent upon the reliability of data collected (Krippendorff, 2004), the prospectuses were read to ensure that similar types of information were being communicated in all of the main sections, for example about the university, the courses and facilities. The contents page, index page and terms and conditions were not used, as they are not intended to convey brand personality. Analysis was then automated using Wordstat, and a second time using a small Perl script to maintain robustness. The results were similar; the only minor differences concerned the treatment of word stemming. As each university's prospectus differs in size, a larger prospectus may naturally have a larger number of brand personality words. Because of these inherent size differences, a valid comparison between these groups was achieved by expressing the response frequencies relative to their respective totals (Greenacre, 2010). For instance, if the proportion is the same, yet the number of total brand personality words varies wildly, in correspondence analysis the distance between the two would be zero. This enables valid comparison between HEI positions.

Results and interpretations

Figure 1(a) and 1(b) illustrates how the five dimensions of brand personality are interrelated. The plots were created using the dominant sources of variation in the five

dimensions of brand personality (based on Table 3) and reducing these into two dimensions. The two dimensions were then expressed over the *x* and *y* axis which accounted for 78.6% of the total variance in the original data. The eigenvalues explain portions 0.015 and 54.44% for the first dimension and 0.006 and 24.16% for the second dimension. Figure 1(b) highlights the differences between the HEIs' brand personalities whilst Figure 1(a) highlights the similarities and overlap.

Brand personality dimensions

The plot shows that Sophistication and Competence are within the same quadrant (upper left) and are quite closely related to each other. Ruggedness and Sincerity are also found in the same quadrant (upper right) and are similarly related upon the *y* axis, although not the *x* axis. Excitement is located in the lower left quadrant, indicating its disassociation with the other dimensions.

Figure 1(b) indicates two important tensions: between Excitement and Sophistication (*y* axis) and between Competence and Ruggedness (*x* axis). The latter is more significant, as it is related to the *x* axis which accounts for the most variability in brand personality word usage, ergo brand personality distinction. Thus, the top 10 UK universities are more Sophisticated at the expense of Excitement, and more Competent at the expense of Ruggedness.

Our findings show that the brand personality trait, Sincerity, is positioned relatively centrally and does little to distinguish between HEIs. This indicates that Sincerity is an underlying dimension for all 10 university prospectuses and that the remaining four brand personality dimensions are differential extensions from the base brand personality of Sincerity.

Based on our analysis, brand personality is revealed as a useful lens to understand how HEIs differentiate themselves. This is demonstrated both visually and nominally. For example, Cambridge is lower on the dimension of Excitement, but relatively higher in Ruggedness when compared to other leading institutions in the UK.

HEI brand personality

Figure 1(a) and 1(b) highlights three University categories. The first category consists of Imperial College London and Cambridge University which both have an individual and distinctive brand personality. Imperial was strongly associated with Sophistication, whilst Cambridge was most strongly associated with Ruggedness. The second category consists of distinctive, but similar, university groupings including the following: Oxford University and Essex University are most strongly associated with Excitement and Manchester, Warwick, York and UCL are most strongly associated with Competence. The third category consists of Edinburgh and LSE, which were relatively distinct, but communicate brand personality on the 'middle ground' and are most strongly associated with Sincerity.

Within the context of the HE sector, our findings indicate that university brands are communicating distinct and different brand personalities based on one-brand personality dimension. The findings from the correspondence analysis map indicate that most universities have distinct brand personalities, and two HEIs (Imperial College and Cambridge) are communicating stronger and more unique personalities.

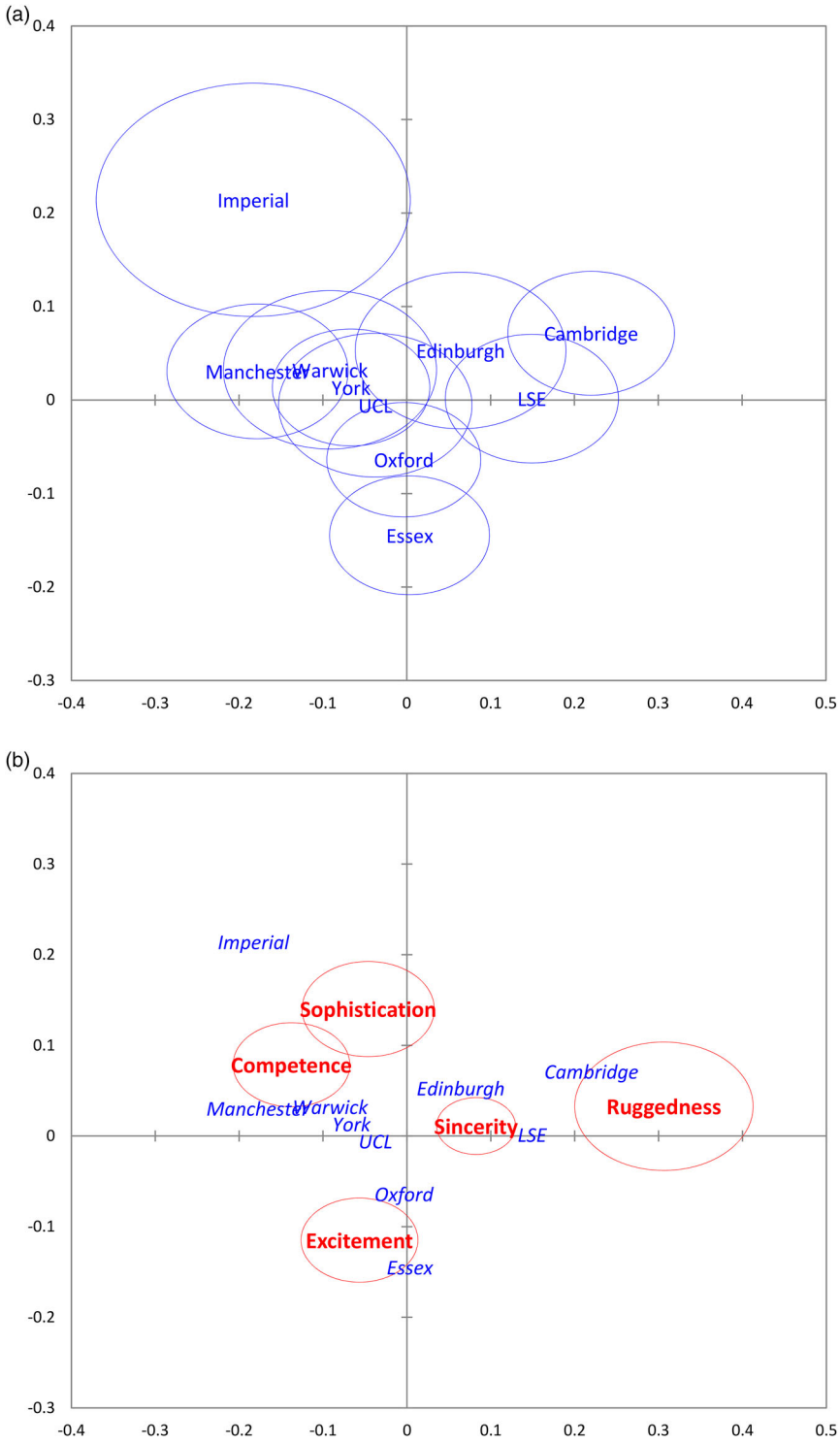

Figure 1. (a) HEI positions and (b) trait positions.

Referencing the different groupings of HEIs

This section examines the differences between the groupings of HEIs (their most dominant trait) and then differences and similarities within each group, using extracts from the HEIs' actual marketing media. Each statement for each HEI comes from their prospectus.

Trait 1: Sophistication

Imperial College London is just over 100 years old and is a science-based university, with Faculties of Engineering, Medicine, Natural Sciences and Business and Humanities. Imperial is Sophisticated and Competent in terms of brand personality. This may result from the university's specialization in engineering which contributes to a distinct personality to other institutions within the top 10. The university states that it is at the '*forefront* of learning and technology' and boasts very strong links between industry and staff who 'provide technical contributions to *prestigious* projects' and research in 'facilities [that] are *first class* – some being unique to the UK' and many 'used by *commercial* companies'.

Trait 2: Ruggedness

Cambridge University is one of the leading brands in the country and across all sectors (Dectech, 2014). It is also one of the world's oldest universities, having recently celebrated its 800th anniversary. It is a collegiate university, comprised of independent colleges that operate within an overall university structure. It offers courses in the Arts, Social Sciences, Sciences, Engineering and Medical Science. While at the forefront of scientific, technical and world-leading research, the city of Cambridge more closely resembles an agricultural market town. Cambridge University is more Rugged than the other universities in the sample, and within the prospectus they use phraseology such as '*work hard*, study *hard*, and get a *robust* university experience' and 'our courses offer a *tough challenge*, but one our students relish. We *demand* a lot'.

Trait 3: Excitement

Oxford and Essex University were predominantly characterized by Excitement, although Oxford tended more toward Sophistication as a secondary dimension.

Essex University is 50 years old and has three Faculties: Social Sciences for which it is well-known, Science and Health, and Humanities. Essex University scores highly on the brand personality dimension of Excitement. It describes itself as a 'stimulating and *exciting* environment in which to study' and achieved second place within the UK National Student Survey. Essex uses phrases such as '*awesome* lectures' and 'our *new colourful* accommodation' and promotes '*new* venues constantly popping up around town, which guarantee you never get bored'. This exciting brand personality may also be reinforced by a prominent reality television program ('The Only Way Is Essex') depicting university age individuals enjoying the county's activities, and particularly the nightlife, even though the program's reality stars do not attend Essex University.

Oxford University is the oldest university in the English-speaking world and, like Cambridge, is comprised of independent colleges. It offers courses within its Divisions of Humanities; Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences; Medical Sciences and Social Sciences. Oxford and Cambridge Universities are often grouped together and known as Oxbridge. Despite this collective term for the two universities, they do have different

brand personalities. Cambridge is Rugged, whilst Oxford scores more highly on Excitement. This is encapsulated within statements such as getting '*famous* Physicists in to speak' which helps students 'remember the *exciting*, real-world *cool* stuff' and providing the 'freedom to study the things that *excite* most'. The university's visual identity guidelines (Harris 2015) back this up as something that, '*enriches* international, national and regional communities in countless ways'. Oxford extends this onto a secondary dimension of Sophistication, stating that 'Oxford University is internationally renowned for academic *excellence*' which is 'set in the most *gorgeous* location imaginable'. The 'Philosophy Faculty is the largest in the UK, and one of the largest and most *prestigious* in the world' with its own '*magnificent* Old Library'. Along similar lines to Essex, Oxford's brand recognition cannot have been harmed by being the weekly focus of the TV program 'Lewis' (and before it, 'Inspector Morse').

Trait 4: Competence

The University of Manchester, University College London (UCL), Warwick University and York University communicate extremely similar brand personalities, with little differentiation. Significant overlap was identified in their brand personalities, as all claimed to be at the '*forefront*' of their discipline and offered a superior education to all other universities. Nuances did exist, predominantly between Excitement, Sophistication and Ruggedness as secondary dimensions.

The University of Manchester is nearly 200 years old, is the largest single site university in the UK and has Faculties of Engineering and Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, Medical and Human Sciences and Humanities. In 2004, Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell took over as vice chancellor and stated the university's aim was to be one of the top universities in the world and to 'establish it by 2015 among the 25 strongest research universities (…) on commonly accepted criteria of research *excellence* and performance' (University of Manchester, 2009). The prospectus talks about Manchester having a '*first-class* reputation' and 'staff who are at the *forefront* of research in their field', also offering 'the best and brightest people in the world (…) a rich and exciting *intellectual* environment'.

Similarly, UCL is also nearly 200 years old. UCL describes itself as meeting demand for '*outstanding* graduates'. It has Faculties of Arts and Humanities, Brain Sciences, Built Environment, Engineering, Law, Life Sciences, Mathematical and Physical Sciences, Medical Sciences, Population Health Sciences, and Social and Historical Sciences. Its visual identity has recently been revamped with an emphasis on communicating a clear identity to all stakeholders (Rodger, 2013). The UCL prospectus presents the institution to students with an emphasis on faculty competence: 'Taught by staff conducting original research at the *forefront* of their discipline'.

The positioning of brand personality is similar for the younger Warwick University. Warwick is approximately 50 years old and has Faculties of Arts, Medicine, Science and Social Sciences. Warwick's prospectus talks about 'providing a *superior* foundation', and similarly to Manchester, it states that 'the Warwick team are at the *forefront* of teaching and learning with Academic staff working at the *forefront* of their subjects'.

The University of York is a collegiate university and is 50 years old. York has been identified as a rising star, and is identified as the number one '*new*' university within the UK (Morgan, 2012). York also communicates competence, again reaffirming that 'at York

you will be taught by staff who are at the *forefront* of developments in their subject', also 'encouraging [graduates] to develop [their] professional *competence*'.

Trait 5: Sincerity (and as an underlying trait of all HEIs)

As well as the different groupings, the HEIs shared a common underlying dimension: Sincerity, which was relatively high within all HEIs. Sincerity is commonly communicated by offering a *warm* and *friendly* welcome and environment, epitomized by Edinburgh and LSE.

The University of Edinburgh is a long-established university which communicates Sincerity strongly. Edinburgh communicates Sincerity by describing their teaching staff as 'excellent and *down-to-earth*', '*approachable*, focused and enthusiastic' who look for '*genuine* spirit of enquiry'. Students will be part of a '*friendly* community' and given a '*warm* welcome'. Similarly, the London School of Economics (LSE) describes itself as an 'experience that will prove hugely *beneficial* in your future' and 'learning from people who are truly at the top in their fields is fascinating and *humbling*' and a chance to 'get to know many really interesting and *friendly* people'. LSE describe themselves as '*distinctive* in [their] strengths'. Given LSE's position in one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities, London, the brand has been able to emphasize this in domestic and international markets.

Differences exist for the dimensions of Sophistication (Edinburgh) and Ruggedness (LSE). Edinburgh's secondary dimension of Sophistication appears in the prospectus text as: 'Edinburgh [as] one of the UK's most historic and *prestigious*' institutions and with 'internationally renowned, research-led centres of *excellence*'. LSE focuses on the Rugged nature of their students' challenge, explaining that 'course(s) will actively *challenge* and force students to *work hard* on their own' and the need for 'self-study and *rigorous* intellectual skill'.

Discussion and conclusions

In an environment of increased competition characterized by choice, decreased differentiation and increased complexity of information, consumers can often find the process of choice confusing (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010). To increase their reputation, identifying and maintaining a more distinct relative market position has become important for HEIs, hence a brand and how it is communicated to potential students is now an important differentiator. It was the intention of this research to explore whether distinct brand personalities are being projected to the marketplace through the university prospectus. In particular, the study provides substantial insight into how universities are branding themselves, how institutions have positioned their brand on the basis of brand personality and the similarities and differences between 10 universities' brand personalities.

This research assessed the brand personality communicated through the prospectuses of 10 top universities within the UK. From our analysis, we found that Sincerity is common and strongly communicated by all of the universities, representing a core brand personality dimension for the HE sector. Most universities did not have singular brand personalities and were relatively close to two or more brand personality dimensions, which meant a primary dimension could be complemented by a second dimension to provide nuances between universities that were similar on their primary dimension. Tensions (Sophistication vs. Excitement and Competence vs. Ruggedness) as well as synergistic

(Sophistication and Competence) relationships were identified between four of the brand personality dimensions.

Three distinct groups of institutions were identified. Group 1 is most strongly associated with Ruggedness and includes LSE, Edinburgh and Cambridge, all of which occupy distinct positions within this cluster. Group 2 is most strongly associated with Excitement and includes Oxford University and Essex University, with Essex being closer to Excitement than Oxford. Within Group 3, Manchester and Warwick are very close to the Competence brand personality dimension, closely followed by York and then UCL. Specifically and relatively, Manchester, Warwick, York and UCL are placed very close to each other compared to the other universities and this indicates that they have similar brand personalities to one another. These findings indicate that the largest group, consisting of Manchester, Warwick, York and UCL (all of which communicated varying degrees of strong Competence), may need to address their market differentiation if they are trying to attract the same types of students. Group 4 is just Imperial College London. It has a very distinct and different brand personality and it is closest to the dimensions of Sophistication and Competence.

Implications for theory

This research provides empirical evidence showing that brand personality can be identified within the written text of traditional marketing media, using lexical analysis methods. This empirical contribution is based on the theories of brand differentiation and isomorphism enacted through signaling theory. Signaling theory involves a sender, a signal and a receiver (Connelly et al., 2011). In this research, the signal of brand personality is sent through the university prospectuses to prospective students. This finding represents a contribution because it shows that brand personality is an important signal in student recruitment activities. Certainly, the importance of a university prospectus in recruitment activities of HEIs (Bradley, 2013; Graham, 2013) reinforces this contribution, and this study extends previous HE brand communications research which has tended to focus on slogans and mission statements (Molesworth et al., 2011) or on the university logo (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Furthermore, this signaling activity of brand personality is used by the sender to provide a basis of brand differentiation from other providers but also as an isomorphic basis of similarity to build legitimacy among the target audience. While brand differentiation is about distinguishing one brand from competitors (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003), isomorphism represents the pressure on organizations to look similar in order to gain legitimacy in a particular sector (Deephouse, 1996). This research provides empirical evidence to show both are operating in the message signals of brand personality through the university prospectuses. Universities seem to be striving to provide a distinct brand personality while also offering enough shared aspects to communicate they are credible education providers. The challenge is finding a successful balance in this signaling. Future research should strive to investigate the use of these similarities and differences in brand personality signals by students in their university selection decision.

The brand personality trait of Sincerity was an underlying dimension for the majority of HEIs in this study. Previous studies have indicated that the trait of Sincerity within communications represents a measure of brand trust (Sung & Kim, 2010) and is particularly important for brands which need to be seen as authentic in the presence of varying consumer trust (Godin, 2005). If brands are perceived as being less authentic, brand trust can

be eroded (Beverland, 2009; Eggers et al., 2013). Our findings show that Sincerity was being used by all HEIs as an underlying trait, related to trust in the communications, whilst the remaining four brand personality dimensions were differential extensions. This alignment around the communication of Sincerity aligns with research that finds that brands need to have some shared meaning to demonstrate legitimacy and belonging to a sector or specific market (Deephouse, 1999; King & Whetten, 2008). Above this shared meaning, there is also the tension of being able to differentiate to compete (Deephouse, 1999) and in our sample, some universities were portraying stronger differences and a more distinct brand personality than others.

Previous research had identified the location of a university to be of high importance to student choice; typically, this has been the distance from a prospective student's home (Briggs, 2006; Vrontis et al., 2007). The findings of this research show that even for universities located in the same city (London), the brand personalities can be quite different and distinct. For example, the LSE is defined by *Ruggedness*, UCL by *Competence* and Imperial College London by *Sophistication* and *Competence*. These differences are likely to be a reflection of the different nature of their programs and the different brand identity of each university. This extends previous research which found that universities' brand personalities were being formed through references to their location (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014). Linking a brand personality to a location, as Essex University has done, could help to target a specific type of student and should be examined in future research. In this case, Essex portrays an *exciting* brand personality through their prospectus, based on their exciting and stimulating courses and with links to an exciting and vibrant nightlife. This is complimented by the portrayal of a lively nightlife in the popular youth reality TV program 'The Only Way Is Essex'.

Several HEIs formed their brand personality based upon descriptions of their teaching and research staff and graduate traits. Universities that communicated Competence did so by emphasizing the world-leading research competencies of their staff. Previous research had highlighted how 'academic' logos are perceived as the most competent (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013) and our findings show that supporting text which emphasizes Competence could help to reinforce this brand identity. Our findings suggest that older universities communicate Competence less than the younger universities in our sample. Perhaps those universities with less developed reputations need to emphasize their competence more than their longer established competitors. For example, the University of York is relatively young at about 50 years old and is performing well in league tables, but strongly communicates the competence of its research staff and their credentials. Conversely, Cambridge University, with a long and secure reputation, is defined by the brand personality trait of Ruggedness, mainly by emphasizing the tough challenges of both working and playing hard while studying at Cambridge. The effectiveness of this approach on student recruitment and retention should be evaluated in future research.

Implications for HE practice

Our use of a dictionary-based tool to assess brand personality opens up exciting new possibilities for branding and marketing in the HE sector. It allows marketing and communication teams within universities to assess whether or not the written prospectus text does, in fact, communicate a certain kind of brand personality. This approach can support

universities to test that their written communications are consistent with the brand personality they wish to portray for their organization. The tool can also assess the consistency of brand personality being communicated across different textual media, including printed brochures, websites and text-based social media channels (Rutter, Lettice, & Barnes, 2013). Where inconsistencies are identified, these can be reviewed and better aligned to the brand personality that the university wishes to communicate to its students and other key stakeholders.

University managers can therefore utilize these findings to strengthen, or even change, their brand personality. For example, in our sample, Edinburgh could look to redefine itself more clearly, as at present it does not appear to be communicating Ruggedness as strongly as other rugged HEIs. It could achieve this by emphasizing Ruggedness much more strongly, whilst maintaining its current level of Sincerity.

HEIs which did not link their brand personality to their location could consider this as an opportunity to leverage their location and further differentiate their brand, particularly if they are the main HEI in that location. For those sharing a location with other HEIs, they may consider differentiating on descriptions of their staff, students and facilities to position themselves differently from prospective students considering several HEIs in a single location.

Increasing computer power and data improves the ability to effectively monitor, evaluate and benchmark against the competition and to better understand the competitive landscape of HE. While other forms of marketing media, and in particular social media, are the subject of increased attention, this should not be to the detriment of the university prospectus and website, which are still important in student decision-making. This study shows that traditional media can be leveraged to create differentiated positions in the HE market. Therefore, prudency should be taken to ensure that institutions are successfully differentiating themselves through all of their marketing media options and that the messages across different media are consistent.

Limitations and further research

Our research has been based on an analysis of universities' communication via their prospectuses at a single point in time. The dictionary-based approach would allow researchers to assess changes in universities' communicated brand personalities over time. By assessing these changes over time, there is the potential to assess the impact of brand personality in a more longitudinal and detailed way.

Our research has focused on what the university is communicating about itself via its prospectus and not on how the brand personality is perceived by prospective students. This lexical analysis approach would also allow future research to compare between what is being communicated by a university and what is perceived by the students reading the text. Extending research to include both the written text analysis and students' perceptions based on what they have read will add to the understanding of whether communications are perceived as intended and where inconsistencies exist.

Our study includes just 10 UK universities. A more thorough analysis of the differences and similarities in a range of communications and between a range of universities across different countries can also be studied in future. In addition, it is not clear from this research whether or not HEIs are making a conscious decision to communicate their

brand personality within their prospectus. Studies that examine the process of prospectus construction are sparse, and further research could help to better understand this process and the decisions that underpin the content selection and words used.

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