

Vision, Culture, and Image: A Systematic Review of Higher Education Online Branding

by

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PROJECT REVIEW INFORMATION

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The Project was approved on March 10, 2022 by the following review committee:

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The above committee determined that the Project is acceptable in form and content and that a satisfactory knowledge of the field is covered by the work submitted. A copy of the Certificate of Approval is available from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

ABSTRACT

Guided by *The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA), the primary objective of this study was to gain insight into higher education online branding. An integrated mixed-method synthesis was used to summarize 76 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method, peer-reviewed empirical studies from 2011 to 2021. The *Vision-Culture-Image Alignment Model* and *Twelve Categories of Determinants of Selective Reporting* were recruited to limit and outline potential bias and conflicts. The results reflect insights from over 100 countries, 2,400 institutions, 13,000 participants, 800 websites, and seven social media platforms. This review indicated that institutional brands often align with history, geography, and employment industries. While institutions have scaffolded digital technologies to extend their ability to connect, they often rely on low-engagement activities rooted in broadcasting information. Students, in turn, seek out institutionally-mediated technology to gain personalized insights into technological capability and culture. They also connect online to form subcultures more readily, and enhance their educational experience.

Keywords: higher education; brand; online learning; university; marketing

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project consists of original work of which I have authored. This is a true copy of the work, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my committee.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page
VCI	Vision-Culture-Image Alignment Model	2, 3, 5, 20, 23

Vision, Culture, and Image: A Systematic Review of Higher Education Online Branding

1. Introduction

Congratulations! You've been accepted. An official acceptance into college or university, which often prominently displays institutional branding, is the end of one life stage and the start of another. Our motivations and behaviours will change throughout higher education, impacting our success and future path (Respondek et al., 2017). And, throughout our learning journey, we likely will experience changes to our mental and physical being in the presence of institutional symbols. Building on historical practices, we see institutional iconography everywhere—adorning apparel, hallways, signs, and our learning technology—strategically communicating the school's identity (Drori et al., 2016).

Architectural structures and symbols align, adding sensation to an institution's vision and culture - collectively encompassing their corporate brand (Drori et al., 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Lažetić, 2018; Styhre, 2010). Differentiating the unique—but aligned—concepts of product and corporate branding is also critical in the context of higher education. The corporate brand is influenced by its heritage and stakeholders, further characterized by activities, products, and services that require long-term planning (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). Whereas a product brand focuses on a singular or tightly aligned product or service, reflecting a constructed narrative and limited timeliness (Hatch & Schultz, 2008).

With their multifaceted organizational structures, higher education institutions are more aligned with a corporate brand than a single product (Chapleo, 2015). Admittedly, the concept of a *brand* in higher education is contentious due to concerns of marketization and fostering unhealthy competition (Chapleo, 2015). However, an organization's brand has emerged as a critical asset in a globalized world (Chapleo, 2015; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Sataøen, 2015). As international competition in education increases, institutional branding can guide reputation and relationship building (Chapleo, 2015; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2021). The Academy's staff,

educators, and students are considered the stakeholders aligned with its brand—which, when intertwined, shape institutional culture (Bangari & Chaubey, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2008).

1.1 Conceptual Model

To guide the process of providing insights that support rewarding organizational relationships, findings in this paper build on Hatch & Schultz's (2008) *Vision-Culture-Image Alignment Model* (VCI). The model recruits constructionist and symbolic perspectives to support the development of sustainable brands, building on the concept that organizational culture devoid of all stakeholders lacks critical context (Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Schultz & Hatch, 2005). Hatch and Schultz (2008) propose that a successful brand exhibits coherence between the vision of upper management, the known or believed culture from a stakeholder perspective, and its image perceived by the outside world. Cohesion between vision, culture, and imagery creates a stronger brand, while gaps hinder performance (Hatch & Schultz, 2008).

1.1.1 Vision

Vision—often conflated with mission statements (Kirkpatrick, 2017)—reflects an organization's goals, characteristics, and a description of the future (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). The outlined insights act as an aspect of operational maintenance that, ideally, can unify key stakeholders and attract new ones (Dominick et al., 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2017).

1.1.2 Culture

An institution's culture reflects its stakeholders' feelings as expressed through their attitudes, behaviours, and work-related values (Coates et al., 2016; Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Hofstede et al. (2010) define culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p.6).

1.1.3 Image

An institution's image encompasses the dynamic collection of internal and external stakeholders' actions and perceptions (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Beyond management, staff, educators, and students, the institutional image can also be shaped by the media and the

general public (Hatch & Schultz, 20010). As a concise representation of an *image*, visual artifacts can have a notable impact on connection and culture, often seen through the bonding capabilities of musical bands, social media, sport, and consumer product labels (Bertrand & Kamenica, 2018; Boer et al., 2011; Schein, 2019; Wann et al., 2017).

1.2 Research Questions

From the earliest days, institutions have invested in physical representations of their space in the world, acting as both a beacon to prospective students and an environmental haven (Rymarzak & Marmot, 2020). Now, institutions face unique challenges related to the increased global diffusion of education through online learning and changes in funding structures (Levine, 2021). While institutions are adapting to support infrastructure demands and contemporary skill sets with digital technologies (Johnson et al., 2019), education technology is big business (Adkins, 2020). Corporate technology giants have noticed the purposeful placement of icons that adorn our online learning spaces. As formal education evolves, institutions are embracing the tools of giants (Contact North, 2020), so where does that position the historical education brand in a digital world? Guided by the conceptual VCI (Hatch & Schultz, 2008), this paper explores *how higher education institutions express their organizational brand online?* Specifically:

1. How is higher education vision conveyed online?
2. How is institutional image experienced online?
3. What does digitally-mediated higher education cultural connection look like?

2. Method

2.1 Overview

Articles selected for review are guided by the *Preferred Reporting of Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020* (PRISMA) to ensure the reported findings are clear and transparent (Page et al., 2021). The search process was carefully documented, followed by articulating and applying article criteria. Once peer-reviewed articles were selected,

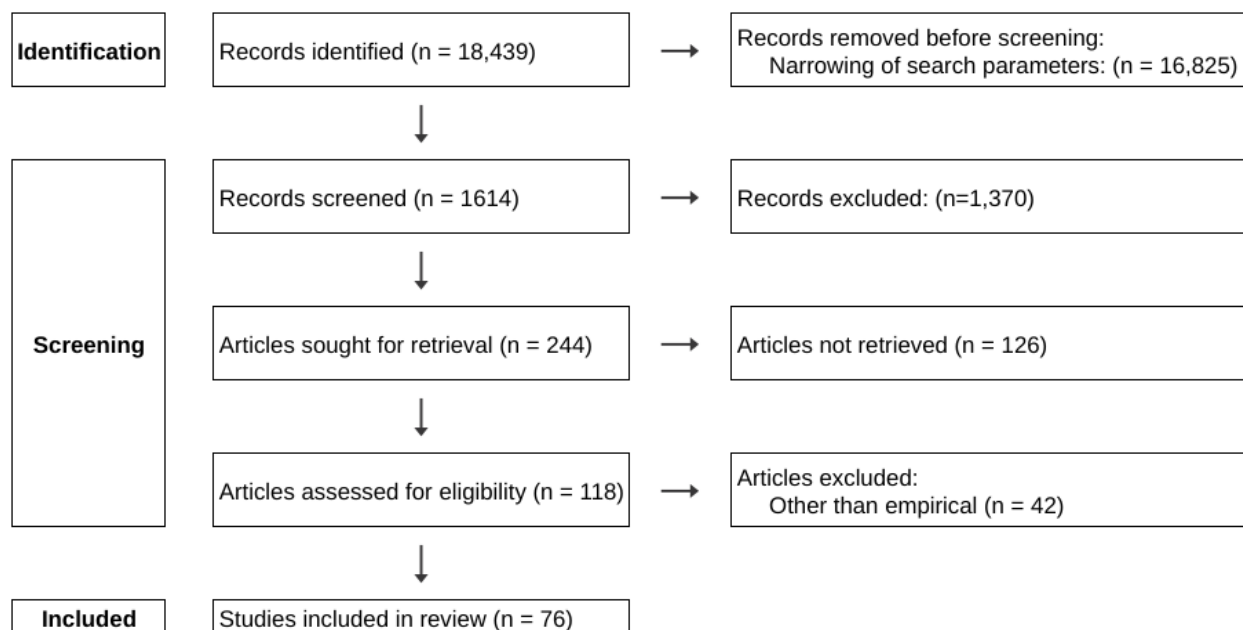
the synthesis process followed an integrated mixed-method approach to build insights while minimizing differences in method to produce findings that can be readily transformed into each other (Sandelowski et al., 2006). Guided by van der Steen et al.'s (2019) taxonomy of bias determinants (Appendix A), the author reports low potential bias regarding this review.

2.2 Search Process

Through the guiding questions, I conducted a systematic literature search using the paired information consortium Ontario Tech University Library with Omni Search, consisting of 393 databases. Initially, the search term *university branding online* presented 18,439 results leading to refined search parameters and four separate searches with 1,614 articles considered for the initial review. Each search contained the parameters of *library and Omni, available online, peer-reviewed journals, articles, English language, and 2011+*. Different terms associated with higher education resulted in refined searches, including *university and college*. The review flow is summarized in Figure 1 and produced of 76 articles. Summaries of each article are presented in Appendix B.

Figure 1.

PRISMA Flow Diagram



2.3 Inclusion Criteria

I selected peer-review articles from 2011 to 2021, a limiter reflecting technology diffusion over the decade (Auxier et al., 2019; Weber, 2016). All articles contained empirical studies that include some level of digital integration and dissemination.

2.4 Article Analysis

This review focused on the qualitative assimilation of insights instead of the configuration of findings (Sandelowski et al., 2006). Guided by the conceptual model and research questions, the findings come from an integrated synthesis design process to transform findings from qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies towards a collective phenomenon (Sandelowski et al., 2006). The analysis occurred in three steps, starting with providing article summaries. The summaries include the resource, location, purpose, and demographic or institutional variables. Variables included sample data, gender, age, study type, and design insights. The second step followed an integrated synthesis design (Sandelowski et al., 2006) with the VCI and the research questions guiding the primary theme coding. Finally, the synthesis of secondary and tertiary themes occur through emergent coding from thematic analysis (Popay et al., 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) consisting of a two-phase process. The first phase included exploring relationships between study characteristics within the primary themes, while the second phase assessed the robustness of quality and quantity in the emergent themes through concept mapping (Popay et al., 2006).

3. Results

The results seek to articulate *how higher education institutions express their organizational brand online?* First, I present the overall context of the reviewed studies. The following sections reflect each of the key questions:

1. How is higher education vision conveyed online?
2. How is institutional image experienced online?
3. What does digitally-mediated higher education cultural connection look like?

Insights are derived from 76 qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies articles focused on diverse insights into institutional branding experiences. Studies used in this analysis are not restricted by geography and provide a broad depth of insights to support the modern affordances and diffusion of digital technology in higher education environments.

3.1 Context of the Higher Education Studies

Insights in this section reflect on the contextual insights from the collected articles and include country, methods, and content analysis. The country theme builds on geographic locations of studies, while methods collect the primary insights used. Content analysis presents insights that are explicitly expressed regarding study content artifacts.

3.1.1 Country

Articles included for review draw from international insights of over one hundred countries, with studies by Idris et al. (2014), Drori et al. (2016), and Delmestri et al. (2015) recruiting data from 100, 22, and 20 countries respectively. In total, 26% (n=20) of the articles reference international insights from two or more nations, including six from the United Kingdom, a sovereign country consisting of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Articles with single-nation insights originate in the USA (n=18), Canada (n=5), Finland (n=4), India (n=3), Malaysia (n=3), Australia (n=2), and Italy (n=2). Other single-nation articles come from China, Croatia, Iran, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, and Turkey.

3.1.2 Methods Used

For data collection and analysis, 32 studies (42%) employed a quantitative approach, 22 studies (29%) followed a qualitative approach, and another 22 studies (29%) used a mixed-methods approach. Forty-seven percent of the studies used content analysis, 29% used surveys, and 27% used interviews. Thirty-one percent of the studies (n=24) conducted reliability analysis, 34% (n=26) addressed data validity, and 21% offered both reliability and a validity check.

3.1.3 Content Analysis

Fifty-nine percent (n=45) of the studies collected data from two or more institutions, with one article referencing data from 2,411 institutions (Kimmons et al., 2017), 13% (n=10) recruited data from 100 or more institutions, and 24% (n=18) from 10-100. The process of content analysis represents data from websites (n=11) and the social media platforms Facebook (n=10), Twitter (n=4), Instagram (n= 2), Pinterest (n=1), VKontakte (n=1), Weibo (n=1), and WeChat (n=1). There were 13,718 listed participants collectively.

3.2 How is Higher Education Vision Conveyed Online?

Gathering insights from 22 articles resulted in two themes reflecting online expressions of higher education vision: expressing vision through technology and online brand attributes. The first theme reflects on the dispersion of vision and second focuses on how perceptions of brand attributes shape the reality of institutional vision. The two themes are expanded upon below.

3.2.1 Expressing Vision Through Technology

An institution's vision often relates to students' intellectual pursuit and sense of fulfillment, socialization, identity expression, and self-realization (Buono et al., 2017). In addition, vision is related to reputation, progressiveness, professionalism, accessibility, and corporateness (Chapleo, 2012). As digital technology permeates most aspects of higher education, institutions can more readily share critical insights with their key stakeholders and the surrounding world (Bangari & Chaubey, 2017). Common strategies include sharing the institutional mission and brand personality through websites and connection to local geography (Aspara et al., 2014; Aula et al., 2015; Bangari & Chaubey, 2017; Chapleo, 2012); the latter signalling an institution's quality, building digital artifacts out of real-world environments (Chapleo, 2012).

Looking specifically at various institutions in Europe, Lažetić (2019) found that the expression of mission and vision statements partially depended on region. *About Us* institutional

web pages in England, Denmark, and Poland emphasized the statements—German ones did not (Lažetić, 2019). In the United States, private and land-grant interstate institutions readily adopted less streamlined approaches (Fay et al., 2016). Clearly outlined statements can guide institutional communication strategies, offering data to review messaging effectiveness (Bangari & Chaubey, 2017; Buono et al., 2017).

Institutional homogeneity can also influence the expression of vision. For instance, German institutions often had greater continuity between statements (Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016), as did North American Christian and American public inter-state institutions (Fay et al., 2016; Tolbert, 2013). The Christian schools focus on direct references to Christianity (Tolbert, 2013), while interstate schools mimicked regional values (Fay et al., 2016). Streamlining misrepresents or inhibits the effective expression of the underlying cultures (Bangari & Chaubey, 2017; Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016; Fay et al., 2016).

Often, institutions use branded technology such as web pages to align with cultures at national levels or through industry alignments related to future employment opportunities (Oeppen Hill, 2020). The well-executed use of technology conveys action, not just intent, fostering positive perceptions of intelligent resource use and leadership (Rahmani Manesh et al., 2019). Further, an awareness of the unique affordances of technology can support active learning and the development of new ideas, extending student motivation (Rahmani Manesh et al., 2019). However, technology implementation requires intent and enhanced decision-making workflows with interdisciplinary teams to sustainably implement digital resources (Buhler & Cataldo, 2016; Santiago & Ray, 2020).

3.2.2 Brand Attributes Through Technology

An institution's vision builds on stakeholders' perceptions of its attributes—the humanizing process of associating characteristics and personality to the brand—as cohesion between aspiration and reality fosters reality. Also, experiences with institutionally mediated technology can play a critical role in the student experience (Chaudhary et al., 2020; Neier &

Zayer, 2015; Simiyu et al., 2020). The overall insights that students learned online affected perceptions of quality and cost, which can be an integral part of a student's enrollment decision (Manzooer et al., 2020). For example, student attitudes towards official social media influence perceptions of institutional administrative processes, employee behaviours, and perceived education quality (Simiyu et al., 2020). At the same time, expressed values can inform prospective students of the institution's intentions and their ability to follow through (Manzooer et al., 2020).

Student psychological responses to online brand attributes shape their investment in their relationship with the institution. As an example, they believe that an institution's use of social media reflects its brand attributes—notably how exciting, transformative, trendy, or modern it is (Neier & Zayer, 2015). Further, intellectual stimulation and perceived institutional honesty were critical characteristics of online learning environments: notably in developing student trust and loyalty, enhancing the overall stakeholders' relationship (Dass et al., 2021; Rahmani Manesh et al., 2019). Dass et al. (2021) also found that favourable affective and sensory brand experiences enhance student brand love, while Casidy (2014) found that recruiting student feedback can enhance affinity. Building on digitally-mediated brand love and honesty, sincerity can result in greater loyalty and advocacy through an increased feeling of connection (Dass et al., 2021; Rahmani Manesh et al., 2019).

The online learning experiences themselves are also influential. Looking at student satisfaction with online learning, Chaudhary et al. (2020) found that positive perceptions of ICT service quality transfer to their overall perception of institutional characteristics. Similarly Ferrari et al. (2015) reported that high-quality digital materials can also influence student perceptions of quality and satisfaction.

However, an institution's expression, reception, and follow-through is a dynamic concept that requires stakeholder synergy (Aspara et al., 2014; Aula et al., 2015; Maduro et al., 2018). A disparity in outward expression and personal experiences by the staff and students may be

considered misleading, indicating that alignment is critical for success (Maduro et al., 2018). As such, senior management must attempt to ensure that institutional values are aligned with how the brand is represented by educators and students (Aspara et al., 2014; Aula et al., 2015; Maduro et al., 2018). Maduro et al. (2018) found that branding initiatives helmed by institutional management effectively spread to the outside world. However, it was less successful because these initiatives did not effectively link the benefits to staff, educators, or students (Maduro et al., 2018). Separate departments that tether similar messaging may help align internal and internal messaging (Dholakia, 2017; Maduro et al., 2018).

3.3 What Does Digitally-Mediated Higher Education Cultural Connection Look Like?

Insights from 39 articles revealed at least three components of institutional digitally-mediated cultural connection including student and institutional relationships, recruitment, and student interconnection. Student and institutional relationships are the foundation of an academic culture, and an understanding of the dynamics within it help to develop and implement recruitment strategies or enrollment decisions. Students' ability to develop alongside peers is often considered an integral part of their experiences in higher education, while simultaneously developing its own subculture. Each of these components will be discussed in turn.

3.3.1 Student and Institutional Relationship-Building

An institution's ability to digitally communicate its brand with and to its associated cultures can enhance connections with students. The process is integral to modern institutional brands as it is an important factor in relationship building and the enrollment decision-making process (Foroudi et al., 2017; Lansigan, 2019). Commonly, institutions will express their institutions with broader cultures, often through representations of local geography and the brand elements of colour, logo, and name—which can influence brand identity and brand-building capacity (Foroudi et al., 2017; Shields, 2016). Bayne et al. (2014) found that expressing the bounded institutional space as a representation of the culture was appreciated

by distance students: affording them an opportunity to feel like they were 'at' university. As learners are increasingly mobile, extending the cultural affordances of the institution into a digital world can be a critical part of educational practice (Bayne et al., 2014).

Building on the traditional use of websites as an online presence, social media has emerged as a common method for institutions looking to connect with students online. Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017) propose that social media increases awareness, liking, loyalty, and digital word-of-mouth communication. But as institutions and educators move beyond websites and adapt tools such as social media, effective relationship-building occurs by streamlining messaging goals, training, and support (Elsayed, 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2013). Also, with expansion, the unique affordances of different social media platforms offer unique opportunities for institutions to connect and model usage behaviours for students (Nord et al., 2014).

As the use of social media emerges, institutions are exploring effective use practices. Pringle and Fritz (2019) found that students can use social media to personalize and create authentic shared meaning. The ability to find shared meaning is a key aspect of developing an institution's underlying culture. To enhance potential communication opportunities, institutions benefit from identifying the demographic they wish to engage and then reflecting on post responses to ensure effectiveness (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013).

Further, social media provides institutions with opportunities to develop relationships through engagement. An example that Bolat and O'Sullivan (2017) found to be effective is the process of sharing student-generated social media content, which can enhance psychological engagement, enhancing students' institutionally-related experiences. Content-developers should note posts that have the potential for emotional engagement will foster greater impact (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Farhat et al., 2021). Similarly, multi-media posts that are visually attractive stimulate the most significant amount of engagement and afford prospective students the opportunity to visualize themselves at the institution (Maresova et al., 2020; Peruta & Shields, 2017; Valerio et al., 2015; Zhu, 2019). Focusing on Twitter, Veletsianos et al. (2017)

found that mentioning and hashtags were also effective engagement tools. For Instagram, institutionally specific images exhibited the most likes, while follower interaction generated the most comments (Stuart et al., 2017). However, institutions should consider the total volume of posts and the resulting engagement to better understand content effectiveness (Maresova et al., 2020; Peruta & Shields, 2017).

However, social media connection does not mean that a relationship occurs on its own—weak connection and limited discourse may limit effectiveness. A common method of institutional social media engagement often comes through post notifications and text-based posts regarding achievement (Pringle & Fritz, 2019). Studying international official Facebook accounts, Brech et al. (2017) found that large and reputable institutions had more significant followings. However, larger followings did not correlate with stronger student relationships (Brech et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2017). While the larger scope may accurately convey status, it can reduce the ability to connect with potential and former students, providing a false narrative about the strength of the institutional community (Brech et al., 2017).

Further, regardless of size or status, institutions are struggling to use social media as a form of communication rather than dictation (Kimmons et al., 2017; Pringle & Fritz, 2019; Linvill et al., 2015; Stuart et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2017). In studies exploring comments, followers, posts, and post likes on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest, researchers found that the platforms are used to disseminate information through one-sided deployment with limited discourse (Kimmons et al., 2017; Pringle & Fritz, 2019; Linvill et al., 2015; Stuart et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2017). Commonly, institutions post information about general activities or logos, limiting potential engagement or emotional investment (Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Farhat et al., 2021). Often there is no indication that content reflection occurs regarding what stimulates interaction as low-engagement content is used repeatedly, reducing the potential effectiveness and unique affordances of each platform (Farhat et al., 2021; Kimmons et al., 2017; Pringle & Fritz, 2019; Linvill et al., 2015; Stuart et al., 2017; Veletsianos et al., 2017).

3.3.2 Student Recruitment

The presence of institutions online is a critical factor in student enrollment, where platforms such as websites and social media act as asynchronous recruitment. For example, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were often used to communicate institutional insights and engage prospective students (Zhu, 2019). Prospective students are still commonly guided by family in enrollment decisions but are increasingly developing personalized insight and brand awareness through online platforms (Lansigan et al., 2016; Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Simiyu et al., 2020; Zhu, 2019). Often, their use of social media helped in gathering a holistic view of the institutional environment—often anonymously—with more diverse insights than those found in traditional fairs and promotional materials (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Shields & Peruta, 2019).

Cultural activities, while often in-person, can be shared online to develop connection beyond the time of the activity itself. An example is the use of shared sports experiences to facilitate connection (Biloš & Galić, 2016; Koldas et al., 2018). Rooted in a study focusing on a basketball team in North Cyprus, Koldas et al. (2018) propose that recruiting sport into online branding efforts can help extra-cultural communication. The process can help attract students who wouldn't be otherwise interested by conveying institutional values and stories through sport (Koldas et al., 2018).

While an online presence is common in higher education, communication focuses are different. Spurred by competition, institutions are seeking to keep up with the social media presence of highly-ranking global institutions (Valerio-Ureña et al., 2020). The resulting persistent and repetitive branding indicates that the institution is actively marketing itself, whereas more traditional institutions emphasize choosing the appropriate discipline and program of study (Kisiolek et al., 2021; Lažetić, 2019). In other words, lesser-known institutions appear desperate in contrast to the confidence exhibited by larger and more well-known ones.

As international recruitment has increased, cultural awareness and connection were critical for recruiting students (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Zhu, 2019). While global platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were used for their diverse insights and ability to convey visual attributes, regional—non-Western—platforms are critical assets for expressing an institutional brand (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020). The Russian platform VKontakte and Chinese-based Weibo and WeChat are assets in recruitment due to their respective familiar dialects (Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Zhu, 2019). The awareness and use of regional social media platforms can help prospective students gain insights that would not be available otherwise due to cultural and technological barriers (Zhu, 2019).

Further, as international recruitment has become a critical aspect of institutional sustainability, a connection may require an understanding and using geographically relevant platforms (Koldas et al., 2018; Rekhter & Hossler, 2020; Zhu, 2019). Understanding unique cultural preferences is integral to successful implementation. As an example, Zhu (2019) notes that Chinese students are more likely to follow institutional accounts that prioritize active communication.

With the process of digital communication and connection affording far-reaching connections, it is becoming increasingly more complex to sustain. As such, Kisiolek et al., (2021) have found that institutions must avoid understaffing and train under-qualified staff to ensure effective relationship-building between the institution and aspiring students. Similarly, government support initiatives—such as Thailand’s social responsibility metrics—should reflect on whether the information is considered relevant when intending to support the enrollment decision-making process (Plungpongpan et al., 2016).

3.3.3 Interconnection Among Students

Student interconnection reflects peer interaction which may extend to studies or socialization, supporting the development of subcultures within an institution. Institutional subcultures play a notable role in brand conveyance and perception, even if the process occurs

independent from the school itself (Dixon et al., 2015; Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2019; Tolbert, 2014). Institutionally branded social media affords students opportunities to connect with potential peers to gather insights into possible educational programs, processes, and extracurricular activities (Dixon et al., 2015; Koldas et al., 2018; Simiyu et al., 2020).

Once students are initially engaged and recruited through social media, the brand culture of a higher education develops through communication among peers. They often use social networking sites to connect with their peers, which can help the adjustment to college life, healthy activity, and learning (Dixon et al., 2015; Hou et al., 2021; Neier & Zayer, 2015; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2015). The ability to connect and engage through social media can extend from the adaptation to collegiate culture to enhanced academic success throughout the duration of their studies (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2015). Also, institutionally-mediated social media experiences related to behavioural, cognitive, and emotional peer engagement can enhance student perceptions of brand trust and loyalty (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017; Perera et al., 2020).

While students of diverse cultural backgrounds may collectively engage online, there is nuance. Attitudes towards the efficacy of social media in higher education learning experiences can differ with age, cultural background, and gender, with platform preferences for how students interact shifting with time and demographics (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017; Neier & Zayer, 2015). Regarding gender, Chinese and American students showed no significant difference in learning experiences; however, Polish females often used it to exchange information with peers, while those in Spain used social media more often for educational purposes. Considerable variation occurred in Turkey, where female students used social media more often than the males, who often used it to communicate with educators and make international acquaintances (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017). Age was not correlated with use in Poland or the United States, while 21-30 was the primary age in China, Spain, and Turkey (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017). Social media use for educational purposes was greater in undergraduate and graduate students

in American, Chinese, Polish, and Turkish groups than Ph.D. students (Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017).

3.4 How is Institutional Image Experienced Online?

Within this research question, three main themes emerged from 21 articles: image visualization, contextual differences, and branding reception. Image visualization refers to symbolic institutional representations. Contextual differences represent the role that region plays in a schools image development and branding reception includes the processes that affect changes to a formal brand image.

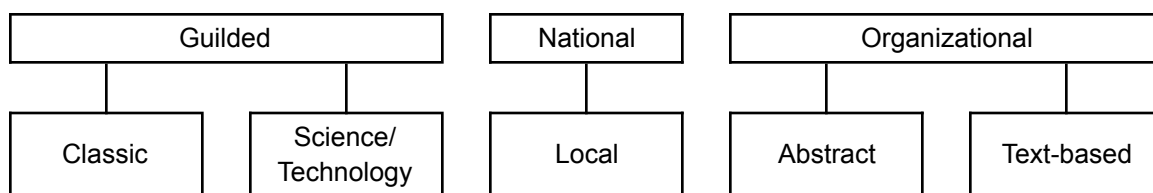
3.4.1 Image Visualization

Building on traditional representation practices, institutions often use visual self-representation such as crests, logos, and iconography to express their self-image online (Delmestri et al., 2015). Visual homogeneity in the use of name, logo, and theme on an institution's website is standard practice regardless of identity or location; however, some variances reflect geographic location and ranking (Lazetic, 2019). Lazetic (2019) notes that higher-ranked institutions are an exception, often having more significant differences in their branding practice across subpages than lower-ranked institutions. The imagery of historical architecture is also used to signal prestige and traditionalism in appealing to students (Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2019).

Visual self-representations such as icons or logos are often used as a metaphorical landmark to provide context for an institution and its underlying groups. In a review of institutional internet self-representation, Delmestri et al. (2015) found three primary visual icon types and five subtypes, illustrated in Figure 2. The visuals often represent an institution's perceived position within academia, industry, and reflect geographic-related norms in education (Delmestri et al., 2015).

Figure 2.

Self-representation typology.



The common visual image likeness often reflected alignments. For instance, geographically similar institutions in Canada, France, Germany, and the United States often convey matching identities and reflect corporate brand identities through abstract design and font-based logos (Delmestri et al., 2015; Milian, 2016). However, other highly developed nations such as Australia, Italy, and South Africa embrace differentiation and traditional imagery to relate higher education with scholarship and the truth (Delmestri et al., 2015). Similarly, Pizarro Milian and Rizk (2019) found that Canadian Christian institutions are also visually alike, often using religious iconography and symbols in place of text (e.g., replacing the letter 't' with a cross). Even though modern branding can enhance students' perceptions of institutional ranking, often, they prefer a traditional logo (Idris & Whitfield, 2014). The conflicting perceptions can be rooted in social constructs, with modern branding reflecting affluence and heraldry-based logos conveying historical meaningfulness (Idris & Whitfield, 2014).

While homogeneity is relatively common, minor symbolic variations were often used to illustrate differences. Looking at competitive American institutions, Luu and Metcalfe (2020) found that they regularly use numbers and visual symbols of social capital. The numbers and symbols often convey credibility through quality emblems of technical criterion such as accreditation, ranking, and research funding (Luu & Metcalfe, 2020). In contrast, institutions with more prestige and storied history are less overt in their use of metrics to convey their value to society and have a greater social media following (Luu & Metcalfe, 2020; Zhu, 2019). Often, prestigious and traditional public service institutional websites recruit more traditional

approaches and convey physical architecture and the sub-identities of faculties and departments on their websites (Lažetić, 2019; Milian, 2016). Looking within institutions, academic and sports logos often have similar roots to the institution but the sport-related images are seen as more energetic (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). The brand characteristics differed, with academic logos primarily reflecting competence, while athletic versions often conveyed excitement (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013).

As imagery appears to play a critical role in effective digital culture and connection, reflecting on use practices can support effectiveness. Blanco Ramírez and Palu-ay (2015) note that institutions often use photos to link student and institutional identity. However, if they are attempting to visualize their brand identity as ethnically diverse, creating false narratives of the current reality can be considered misleading and ethically ambiguous (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015). Also, institutions should consider reviewing their perspectives on student anonymity and overall ethical code before using student imagery in online branding activities (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015).

3.4.2 Contextual Differences

Higher education institutions will often recruit crests and logos of local imagery or unique landmarks to tie the institution to the local culture (Delmestri et al., 2015; Milian, 2016). Milian (2016) found institutional profiles and web pages regularly link themselves with geographically local communities and physical structures. Links to the community often focus on local industry and labour markets, while ~40% of the institutions tout their impressive physical structures to represent their identity (Milian, 2016). Students may find the reflection of local communities helpful in their decision-making process.

The image of the institutional region extends to other aspects of image perception as well. Rekettye and Pozsgai (2015) found that region and its associated culture are potentially mediating factors for student enrollment, specifically when considering its impact on the perceived student degree attainment and experiences. Building from local levels, national

culture plays an essential role in international students' decision-making process, which institutions need to digitally represent to foster awareness (Bamberger et al., 2020). However, embedding a national brand or culture should only occur with an awareness of subcultures and the implications of oversimplification to limit promoting falsehoods (Bamberger et al., 2020).

Developing and communicating an online brand image will differ, depending on cultural affordances. As an example, Mazurek et al. (2019) found that social media is often seen as a tool for the youth in Poland which resulted in limited institutional or academic use. In Africa, different institutions face digital infrastructures and funding challenges that don't afford technological integration aligned with culturally-relevant scenarios (Tan et al., 2020).

3.4.3 Branding Reception

New approaches or messaging relating to expressing an institutional brand may require time as stakeholders adjust to the identity. Reflecting on how attitudes towards a logo changed over seven years, Erjansola et al. (2021) found that a new logo originally had a negative student response. Yet, with time they eventually had a more positive attitude and the new logo eventually became accepted as a common symbol synonymous with the organization and its identity (Erjansola et al., 2021). Time in the context of reputation extends to open online courses as well, with credentials received from more established institutions holding higher regard (Laryea et al., 2021).

Further, the process of updating or developing a brand image can benefit from stakeholder involvement. The stakeholder integration can help generate mutual meaningfulness and reduce obstacles associated with the new values (Kuoppakangas et al., 2020). Yet, while stakeholder involvement is critical as forced involvement can hinder progress so communicating the need for change is important for change (Kuoppakangas et al., 2020). Taking a proactive rather than a reactive approach to digital transformation affords institutions a greater opportunity to enact a purposeful approach to using digital tools, enhancing the student experience and reducing tension (Casidy, 2014; Rof et al., 2020).

While universities may intend to develop and express universal values, some subcultures may not appreciate being subject to those that are management-mandated and resist change (Aspara et al., 2014; Aula et al., 2015; Rof et al., 2020). Also, stakeholders might be novices in the context of understanding brands, and the process might foster insecurity in the early stages of involvement (Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020). Management teams driving branding efforts should outline the goals and intent of branding as Idris and Whitfield (2014) found that the process might not produce statistically significant differences in perceptions of an institution. Goal identification can provide a metric to determine success and drive communication during implementation (Idris & Whitfield, 2014).

4. Conclusions

While an official acceptance into a college or university started this review, it is not the start of the journey into higher education. Before we get to the point of acceptance, we will have gone through schooling for many years and then started the process of determining next steps. Our decisions will be influenced by the desires of our family, friends, the media, extracurriculars, personal responsibilities, and geography, with the factors shaping our perceptions of the institution's vision, image, and cultures. Several institutions will grab our attention, one will be chosen at the start, and likely our perceptions will change over time. This discussion builds on findings from a systematic review of 76 articles and the research questions distilled from Hatch and Schultz's (2008) VCI.

4.1 How is Higher Education Vision Conveyed Online?

Traditionally, institutional vision is written in stone or on metal placards embedded in the physical architecture; often, something only experienced on campus while walking by. However, digital technology affords increased vision diffusion through digital technologies. Usually, it's embedded in 'about' web pages (Lažetić, 2019) and further expressed on various social media platforms. Students now have access to the explicit statements and opportunities to determine if the institution delivers on its intent. Without ever stepping onto campus, students now have

access to technologies that provide insights into administrative processes, attributes, industry alignments, and institutional culture (Ferrari et al., 2015; Neier & Zayer, 2015; Simiyu et al., 2020).

While the increased access to information is an asset for the enrollment decision-making process, institutional homogeneity is now also more apparent. The large-scale messaging also appears to be challenging, with more competitive institutions streamlining specific aspects of vision that may under-represent unique cultures (Bangari & Chaubey, 2017; Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016; Fay et al., 2016). More traditional or prestigious universities appear to express their diverse offerings more effectively, a process that newer institutions looking to stand out from their peers may want to consider in future planning. Overall, institutions are readily adapting to diverse platforms and opportunities. Yet, there is room for increased reflection of intent and unique challenges related to information access. Notably, students can now gather more personal insights with less direction from the institution itself.

4.2 What Does Digitally-Mediated Higher Education Cultural Connection Look Like?

Digital technology affords ease of connection and reaches beyond past institutional capabilities, increasing the ability to communicate unique icons, physical architecture, and regional characteristics with the world through a click or swipe (Delmestri et al., 2015; Milian, 2016; Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2019). Students, in turn, have the opportunity to imbue personal meaning from the content, connecting with insights that can enhance their relationship with aspects of institutional culture.

Psychological engagement with visually appealing online content that evokes positive emotion strengthens students' brand experiences and can enhance their relationship with the institution (Bolat & O'Sullivan, 2017; Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021; Farhat et al., 2021). Reflecting on the results section, institutions may enhance their online culture by what content receives desirable responses (e.g., views on a webpage and comments, likes, and reposts on social media), and adapt their messaging accordingly.

Recognizing that content effectiveness is dynamic, increased two-way communication can enhance relationships with stakeholders while also providing critical feedback on content. Similarly, characteristics associated with institutional vision may act as a guide and as variables. Guidance comes in offering an underlying message that is adaptable to diverse audiences and platforms. In turn, leaders can reflect on data from the content to better understand what they are portraying online. The processes mentioned here will require effective staff qualification and training, as a lack of either can limit effective implementation.

4.3 How is Institutional Image Experienced Online?

As vision, culture and image link dynamically (Hatch & Schultz, 2008), image expression reflects similar insights. Brand image is shaped and expressed through other factors such as extracurriculars, industry associations, ranking, region, religion, and physical architecture. The factors in turn influence visual representation, often through iconography such as logos that adorn apparel, social media, and websites (Delmestri et al., 2015). Or through photos or video, which shape

Over time, perceptions of an institution's image will change, shifting from something different to commonplace. The symbol that was once new becomes familiar and comfortable. Over time, perceptions of a brand can change, which is an essential insight as new rollouts are not always be received favourably, especially if it comes at a time of political unrest within the school(s). The process of effective brand image representation requires changemakers to recruit insight from various stakeholder groups. Effectively communicating the intention and goals behind a change may help stakeholders understand the intent of change and affect their desire to participate.

Developing a brand image can be costly and time-consuming, so ensuring that the change comes with purpose is integral to success. Key stakeholders in the decision-making process can support success through clearly defined goals and objectives while also considering the potentially thin line between ideal outcome and honest representation. A failure

to reflect existing realities can be regarded as misleading and raises ethical concerns (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015; Maduro et al., 2018), fostering negative emotions for those involved.

4.4 Limitation & Future Research

Even though the article review process was systematic, this paper is prone to bias due to a limited ability to quantify the information and the use of a single coder. Also, digital technology and online connectivity is rapidly changing which will impact affordances, required resources, and goals. Future research may benefit from a review focusing on behavioural tendencies of all higher education stakeholders in the context of age, regionality, and goals. In the context of individual papers, longitudinal studies exploring development, dissemination, review and adaptations would be beneficial to support the development of new or underserved institutions. Finally, building off of the insights from Tan et al. (2020), the education community should consider the long-term implications of global education diffusion. Specifically, in the context of technological inequalities and its impact on universities with less privilege or access.

4.5 Final Thoughts

This paper sought to articulate a broad array of insights regarding the question: *how do higher education institutions express their organizational brand online?* Following an integrated mixed-method systematic review of the literature, the VCI offers an opportunity to reflect. Expressing vision helps to guide the happenings related to an institution and simultaneously work to attract students. However, to enhance the overall experience, statements of intent and proposed values can be a form of communication and a metric that guides the qualitative and quantitative communication and review of digital branding efforts. The ability to continuously and cyclically express, monitor and review efforts that align with expressions and intentions appear critical for success. Institutions and students will benefit from purposeful branding with an awareness of the overt and embedded cultures, experiences, and positioning. Avoiding false narratives and providing quality digital experiences can enhance the image of trust and long-term connections with students. However, there is a notable gap that affects the reality of

vision, the development of culture, and an institution's image; with institutions continuously broadcasting information and sustained lack of awareness towards unique digital affordances. Competition is increasing, and the ability to connect is critical as it influences the student decision-making process, enhances student learning, impacts quality perceptions, and reflects how an institution is perceived.

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Appendix A

Twelve Categories of Determinants of Selective Reporting

Determinant Category	Author Description
A. Motivations: Low Potential	
Preference for particular findings	The study builds from observation regarding increased external organizational branding in eLearning environments. The author sought actionable insight, not a particular outcome.
Prejudice (belief)	
B. Means: Medium Potential	
Opportunities through poor or flexible study design	While there was a large volume of insights, there is potential for leeway in the interpretation of results.
Limitations in reporting and editorial practices	Some individuals may consider integrated synthesis less rigorous. Typical journal word count limits restricted potential expansion of some article insights.
C. Conflicts and balancing of interests: Low Potential	
Relationship and collaboration issues	Single author. No reports of internal conflict related to this study outcome.
Dependence upon sponsors	This study was not subject to sponsorship.
Doubts about reporting being worth the effort	The creation of this study was a delightful experience that enhanced personal academic resilience.
Lack of resources, including time	Time is limited and limitless at the same moment. There was no lack of resources or time restrictions associated with this study.
D. Pressures from science and society: Low Potential	
Academic publication system hurdles	If the process was easy, everyone would have a publication credit. I value the experience and challenge.
High-risk area and its development	Low risk potential. Exception: peer alienation by those self-identifying as anti neo-Liberalists.
Unfavourable geographical or regulatory environment	Limited risk
Potential harm	Limited risk

van der Steen, ter Riet, G., van den Bogert, C. A., & Bouter, L. M. (2019). Causes of reporting bias: A theoretical framework [version 2; peer review: 2 approved]. *F1000 Research*, 8, 280–280.
<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.18310.2>

Appendix B

Literature Review Article Summary

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Particip- ants	Institut-i ons	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Aspara et al., 2014	University branding online, universit*	Struggles in organizational attempts to adopt new branding logics: The case of a marketizing university	Markets and Culture	Finland	47	1		No	No	Qual.	Interpretive longitudinal case study Public documents, research reports.
Aula et al., 2015	University branding online, universit*	The university branding games: Players, interests, politics	International Studies of Management & Organization	Finland		1		No	No	Qual.	Case study Public documents, research reports.
Bamberger et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Marketing universities and targeting international students: A comparative analysis	Teaching in Higher Education	Israel		2	595	Yes	No	Qual.	Qualitative content analysis: inductive post coding Facebook
Bangari & Chaubey, 2017	Higher education branding online	Exploring indicators for branding higher educational institutions in India	Journal of Entrepreneurship Education	India	45	1		Yes	Yes	Qual.	Semi-structured Interview
Bartosik-Purgat et al., 2017	Brand Personality	Social media and higher education: An international perspective	Economics and Sociology	International	1376			Yes	Yes	Quant.	Deductive and exploratory quantitative analysis. Paper and pen interview Computer-assisted web interview
Bayne et al., 2014	Higher education branding online	Being "at" university: The social topologies of distance students	Higher Education	International	28	1		No	No	Qual.	Online synchronous interview Skype
Biloš & Galić, 2016	University branding online, universit*	The role of digital marketing in university sport: An overview study of higher education institution in Croatia	Ekonomski Vjesnik	Croatia	1,733	1		No	No	MM.	7-point online Likert scale Survey w/ open-ended questions. Interview

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015	Higher education branding online	"You don't look like your profile picture": The ethical implications of researching online identities in higher education	Educational Research and Evaluation	USA		16	100 photo	No	No	MM.	Content analysis
Bolat & O'Sullivan, 2017	Higher education branding online	Radicalising the marketing of higher education: Learning from student-generated social media data	Journal of Marketing Management	International	12			No	No	MM.	Netnographic analysis: descriptive, sentiment, and network Interview Facebook
Bonilla Quijada et al., 2021	Brand Personality	Engaging students through social media. Findings for the top five universities in the world	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	International		5	758	Yes	No	Quant.	Exploratory, non-experimental and cross-sectional. Systematic sampling. Instagram
Brech et al., 2017	Higher education branding online	Engaging fans and the community in social media: Interaction with institutions of higher education on Facebook	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	International		159	159 Facebook pages	No	Yes	Quant.	Content analysis Facebook
Buhler & Cataldo, 2016	University branding online, universit*	Identifying E-resources an exploratory study of university students	Library Resources & Technical Services	USA	765	1		No	No	Quant.	Survey Online library resources
Buono & Fortezza, 2017	University branding online, universit*	Universities' experience with brand. The role of design in managing university communication and branding	The Design Journal	Italy		1		No	No	MM.	Case study Reputation Survey Interview: students (varied), admin. personnel
Casidy, 2014	Higher education branding online	Brand orientation and service quality in online and offline environments: Empirical examination in higher education	Services Marketing Quarterly	Australia	476	1		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Case study 13 item NBO, 7-point scale Blackboard LMS

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Chapleo, 2012	University branding online, universit*	What is the secret of successful university brands?	International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing	UK	200	10		No	No	MM.	Case study Repertory grid Semi-structured interviews Questionnaire
Chaudhary et al., 2020	University branding online, universit*	Enhancing university's brand performance during the COVID-19 outbreak: The role of ICT orientation, perceived service quality, trust, and student's satisfaction.	Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences	Pakistan	417			Yes	Yes	Quant.	Questionnaire
Chauhan & Pillai, 2013	Higher education branding online	Role of content strategy in social media brand communities: A case of higher education institutes in India	The Journal of Product & Brand Management	India		10	1,449 posts	No	No	MM.	Case study Longitudinal netnography (one year) Facebook
Dass et al., 2021	Higher education branding online	Empirically examining the psychological mechanism of a loved and trusted business school brand	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	India	298	5		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Online survey, 7-point Likert scales: brand experience, brand trust, brand love, brand loyalty, brand advocacy.
Delmestri et al., 2015	University branding online, universit*	The unbearable lightness of university branding cross-national patterns	International Studies of Management & Organization	International		821	821 icons	No	No	Qual.	Netnography Icons from institutional website front pages 10 coders
Dholakia, 2017	University branding online, universit*	Internal stakeholders' claims on branding a state university	Services Marketing Quarterly	USA		1		No	No	MM.	Organizational ethnography Various stakeholders Qual.: Reports, interviews, meetings Quant.: Survey
Dickinson-Delaporte et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Engaging higher education learners with transmedia play	Journal of Marketing Education	Australia	22	1		No	No	Qual.	Case study, 6 weeks Interview @ conclusion of course, iterative coding processes

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Dixon et al., 2015	College branding online	Employing social media as a marketing strategy in college sport: An examination of perceived effectiveness in accomplishing organizational objectives	International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing	USA	158			No	No	Quant.	Survey (Laird's social media questionnaire)
Drori et al., 2016	University branding online, universit*	The iconography of universities as institutional narratives	Higher Education	International		826	826 icons	No	No	MM.	Netnography Icons from institutional website front pages 10 coders
Elsayed, 2017	Higher education branding online	Web content strategy in higher education institutions: The case of King Abdulaziz University	Information Development	Saudi Arabia	40	1		No	No	MM.	Two Surveys: 1 w/ open-ended q's), 2 questions related w/ SWOT analysis.
Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016	Brand Personality	Competition unleashed: Horizontal differentiation in German higher education	Tertiary Education and Management	Germany		259		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Content analysis, cross tabulation, contingency analysis, correspondence analysis, cluster analysis.
Erjansola et al., 2021	University branding online, universit*	From the brand logo to brand associations and the corporate identity: visual and identity-based logo associations in a university merger	The Journal of Brand Management	Finland	162	1		No	No	MM.	Longitudinal free-association (2009, 2011, 2016) Survey: Qual. term associated w/ logo, quant. of the terminology's tone.
Farhat et al., 2021	Higher education branding online	Role of brand experience and brand affect in creating brand engagement: A case of higher education institutions (HEIs)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Malaysia	254	15		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Questionnaire: 19 items, 5-point Likert
Fay et al., 2016	Brand Personality	Branding and isomorphism: The case of higher education	Public Administration Review	USA		72	180,000 events	No	No	Quant.	Longitudinal (~7 year) dyadic event history analyses

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Ferrari et al., 2015	University branding online, universit*	Designing MOOCs in Higher Education. Outcomes of an experimentation at the Catholic University of Milan	REM : Research on Education and Media	Italy	457	1		No	No	MM.	Case Study Content analysis, questionnaire (beginning & end) Blackboard LMS
Foroudi et al., 2017	Higher education branding online	IMC antecedents and the consequences of planned brand identity in higher education	European Journal of Marketing	UK	666	2		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Survey (multiple previously established scales in one) Structural equation modelling
Hou et al., 2021	University branding online, universit*	To WeChat or to more chat during learning? The relationship between WeChat and learning from the perspective of university students	Education and Information Technologies	China	719	1		Yes	No	MM.	Questionnaire: five-section Likert-scale and open-ended questions. WeChat: content analysis
Idris et al., 2014	University branding online, universit*	Swayed by the logo and name: does university branding work?	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	International	888	1				Quant.	Questionnaire: 9-point Likert-scale
Kimmons et al., 2017	Higher education branding online	Institutional uses of Twitter in U.S. higher education	Innovative Higher Education	USA		2,411	5.7 million tweets	No	No	Quant.	Data mining and quantitative analysis. Twitter
Kisiołek et al., 2021	Higher education branding online	The utilization of Internet marketing communication tools by higher education institutions (on the example of Poland and Ukraine)	International Journal of Educational Management	International	185	185		No	Yes	Quant.	Survey
Koldas et al., 2018	Higher education branding online	Branding and internationalization of higher education in an unrecognized state through sports: The women basketball team of Near East University in Northern Cyprus	Quality & Quantity	Turkey		1		No	No	Qual.	Narrative content analysis outlining the potential outreach volume of social media accounts.

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Komljenovic et al., 2016	Higher education branding online	The dynamics of "market-making" in higher education	Journal of Education Policy	UK	17	1		No	No	Qual.	Case study Semi-structured interviews
Kuoppakangas et al., 2020	University branding online, universit*	Dilemmas in re-branding a university -"Maybe people just don't like change": Linking meaningfulness and mutuality into reconciliation	Corporate Reputation Review	Canada	19	1		No	No	Qual.	Qualitative case study & holistic approach. Interviews with key informed stakeholders (staff and student). Four-phase data analysis.
Lansigan et al., 2016	University branding online, universit*	School choice considerations and the role of social media as perceived by computing students: Evidence from one University in Manila	Education and Information Technologies	Philippines	228	1		Yes	Yes	MM.	Descriptive study. Likert-5 Questionnaire. Two years.
Laryea et al., 2021	Higher education branding online	Ambiguous credentials: How learners use and make sense of Massively Open Online Courses	The Journal of Higher Education (Columbus)	USA	60	1		No	No	Qual.	Semi-structured digital interview w/ three interviewers over three months. Grounded and inductive analysis.
Lažetić, 2019	Higher education branding online	Students and university websites—consumers of corporate brands or novices in the academic community?	Higher Education	International		150		No	No	MM.	Content analysis of 150 higher education institution websites. 30 from each country, 15 from Ireland and Denmark. MANOVA analysis of website elements.
Linville et al., 2015	Higher education branding online	Academic Pinstitution: Higher education's use of Pinterest for relationship marketing	Journal of Relationship Marketing (Binghamton, N.Y.)	USA		20	3649	Yes	Yes	MM.	Exploratory study, content analysis Pinterest
Luu Blanco et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Visualizing quality: University online identities as organizational performativity in higher education	Review of Higher Education	North America		62		No	No	Qual.	Website content analysis through multimodal interpretation.

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Maduro et al., 2018	Brand Personality	Management design as a strategic lever to add value to corporate reputation competitiveness in higher education institutions	Competitiveness Review	Portugal	393			Yes	Yes	Quant.	SWOT analysis Website, visual identity, ads, environment Online questionnaire Corporate Character Scale
Manzoor et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Revisiting the “university image model” for higher education institutions’ sustainability.	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Malaysia	223	2			Yes	Quant.	Questionnaire, 7-item scale
Maresova et al., 2020	University branding online, universit*	Social media university branding	Education Sciences	International			10	No	No	Quant.	Content analysis of the number of fans, content, style, and post promotion over 1 year. Facebook
Mazurek et al., 2019	Higher education branding online	Social media in the marketing of higher education institutions in Poland: Preliminary empirical studies	Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review	Poland	50	50		No	No	Quant.	Questionnaire, marketing personnel
Milian, 2016	College branding online	Modern campuses, local connections and unconventional symbols: Promotional practises in the Canadian community college sector	Tertiary Education and Management	Canada		89	65,000 words 89 screenshots	No	No	MM.	Content analysis of promotional profiles and institutional web pages. Data scraping via ImportIO software. Textual analysis. Imagery coding.
Neier & Zayer, 2015	Brand Personality	Students’ perceptions and experiences of social media in higher education	Journal of Marketing Education	USA	276			No	No	MM.	Questionnaire: frequency & descriptive statistical analysis Interviews: thematic coding of transcript
Nord et al., 2014	Higher education branding online	Using social technologies for competitive advantage: Impact on organizations and higher education	The Journal of Computer Information Systems	USA	178	1		No	No	Qual.	Interview Descriptive statistical analysis. Over two terms.

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Oeppen Hill, 2020	Higher education branding online	Logos, ethos, pathos and the marketing of higher education	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	UK		16		No	No	Qual.	Rhetorical analysis of course pages.
Perera et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Social brand engagement and brand positioning for higher educational institutions: An empirical study in Sri Lanka	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Sri Lanka	384	4		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Descriptive statistical analysis. Survey, Likert-7 scale. Brand trust & co-creation. Institutional focus: researcher, teaching, regional, special interest.
Peruta & Shields, 2017	College branding online	Social media in higher education: Understanding how colleges and universities use Facebook	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	USA		66		No	No	Quant.	Descriptive statistical analysis Various school rankings/status Facebook: time, text, description, media type, characters, likes, comments, shares, tags, hashtags.
Pizarro Milian & Rizk, 2019	Higher education branding online	Marketing Christian higher education in Canada: A "nested" fields perspective	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Canada		93		Yes	Yes	MM.	Exploratory thematic analysis of web pages; Inductive-symbolic manual reading; Data scraping via import.io
Plungpongpan et al., 2016	University branding online, universit*	University social responsibility and brand image of private universities in Bangkok	International Journal of Educational Management	Thailand	18	6		No	No	Qual.	Qualitative in-depth interviews: executive & student groups
Pringle & Fritz, 2019	Higher education branding online	The university brand and social media: using data analytics to assess brand authenticity	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Canada		3		No	No	MM.	Case study Old and new institutions 3 months Netlytic social network analytics tool Twitter, Facebook
Raacke Bonds-Raacke, 2015	College branding online	Are students really connected? Predicting college adjustment from social network usage	Educational Psychology (Dorchester-on-Thames)	USA	264	2		Yes	No	Quant.	Survey: Likert-7 scale Facebook, MySpace

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Rahmani Manesh et al., 2019	Brand Personality	Analysis of brand personality components in higher education with emphasis on technology	Interdisciplinary Journal of Virtual Learning in Medical Sciences	Iran	373	32		Yes	Yes	MM.	Survey: 123-item based on qualitative thematic analysis Faculty
Rekettye & Pozsgai, 2015	University branding online, universit*	University and place branding: The case of universities located in ECC (European Capital of Culture) cities	Ekonomski Vjesnik	Europe	226	13		No	No	Quant.	Online questionnaire Focus on European Capitals of Culture
Rekhter & Hossler, 2020	University branding online, universit*	Russian students' use of social network sites for selecting universities abroad: Case study at the russian state university for the humanities	Journal of International Students	Russia	139	1		No	No	Qual.	Case study Survey: 139, of which 12 completed a semi-structured interview; Students from four different study-types/faculties. VKontakte, Facebook
Rith-Najarian et al., 2019	University branding online, universit*	What's in a name? Branding of online mental health programming for university students	Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	USA	718	1		No	Yes	Quant.	Data analysis of participant demographic variables. Of the 718 participants, 260 completed surveys providing further data.
Rof et al., 2020	Higher education branding online	Digital transformation for business model innovation in higher education: Overcoming the tensions	Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland)	Spain	6	1		No	No	Qual.	Exploratory case study Semi-structured interviews Key staff members
Samokhvalova, 2017	University branding online, universit*	Branding higher education: The case of Malaysian higher education promotion on the internet	Kajian Malaysia : Journal of Malaysian Studies	Malaysia				Yes	No	Qual.	Content analysis of two government-run higher education promotional sites which provide insights into Malaysian institutions.
Santiago & Ray, 2020	University branding online, universit*	Navigating support models for OER publishing: Case studies from the University of Houston and the University of Washington	Reference Services Review	USA		2		No	No	Qual.	Case study reflecting on implementation after a year of OER implementation.

Author(s)	Search Term	Title	Journal	Location	Participants	Institutions	Articles/ Posts	Reliab	Valid	Study Type	Design, Materials/Instruments
Shields & Peruta, 2019	University branding online, universit*	Social media and the university decision. Do prospective students really care?	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	USA	364	4		No	No	MM.	Scaled survey. Semi-structured interview. Small private university, private research university, large university, and other.
Shields, 2016	University branding online, universit*	Following the leader?: Network models of "world-class" universities on Twitter	Higher Education	International		221	276,133 followers 137,680 Tweets	No	Yes	Quant.	Social network analysis & exponential random graph modelling Twitter
Simiyu et al., 2020	Brand Personality	Social media and students' behavioral intentions to enroll in postgraduate studies in Kenya: A moderated mediation model of brand personality and attitude	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Kenya	504	4		Yes	No	Quant.	Exploratory research design Random sampling Likert-7 scale Questionnaire
Stuart et al., 2017	University branding online, universit*	An investigation of the online presence of UK universities on Instagram	Online Information Review	UK		51	11,398 images	Yes	No	Quant.	Image content analysis Official general Instagram accounts
Suomi et al., 2013	Brand Personality	The tension between a distinct brand identity and harmonisation – Findings from Finnish higher education	Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	Finland	11	2		No	Yes	Qual.	Intensive, single-case study Two phases separated by ~3 years. Semi-structured interviews
Tan et al., 2020	University branding online, universit*	The influence of digital globalisation on an East African university	International Journal of Education & Development Using Information & Communication Technology	Tanzania	12	1		No	No	Qual.	Case study Semi-structured interviews with administrators and staff.

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Tolbert, 2014	Brand Personality	An exploration of the use of branding to shape institutional image in the marketing activities of faith-based higher education institutions	Christian Higher Education (London, UK)	USA		112	112 websites	No	Yes	Quant.	Content analysis of marketing materials Analysis: websites, viewbooks, and admissions portals.
Valerio-Ur eña et al., 2020	University branding online, universit*	Analysis of the presence of most best-ranked universities on social networking sites	Informatics	Internation al		400		No	Yes	Quant.	Digital methods Web scraping Analysis of followers
Valerio et al., 2015	University branding online, universit*	The relationship between post formats and digital engagement: A study of the Facebook pages of Mexican universities	International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education	Mexico		28	31,590 content units	Yes	No	Quant.	Quantitative methodology data analysis Facebook likes, comments, shares; image, plain text, link, video.
Veletsiano s et al., 2013	Higher education branding online	Instructor experiences with a social networking site in a higher education setting: Expectations, frustrations, appropriation, and compartmentalization	Educational Technology Research and Development	USA	10	1		Yes	Yes	Qual.	Case study Semi-structured personal interviews Elgg platform
Veletsiano s et al., 2017	University branding online, universit*	Selective openness, branding, broadcasting, and promotion: Twitter use in Canada's public universities	Educational Media International	Canada		77	216614	No	Yes	MM.	Content analysis Web extraction, data mining Analysis: descriptive and inferential Thematic, narrative, visual analysis Twitter

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Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013	University branding online, universit*	Assessing university brand personality through logos: An analysis of the use of academics and athletics in university branding	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	USA	297	8		Yes	Yes	Quant.	Exploratory analysis Survey: Likert-5 scale Four total surveys, each containing insights into four unique institutional logos
Zhu, 2019	Higher education branding online	Social media engagement and Chinese international student recruitment: Understanding how UK HEIs use Weibo and WeChat	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	UK		163		No	Yes	Quant.	Longitudinal methodological design Analysis in 2012 & 2018 Content descriptive analysis of followers, photos, posts, frequency, interaction, verification. Weibo, WeChat