

Branding of UK higher education institutions: an integrated perspective on the content and style of welcome addresses

Abstract

The transformation to a more market-oriented steering approach in European higher education challenges universities and other higher education institutions to consider developing branding or image management activities. The existing literature focuses either on the content or the style, but we argue that an integrated perspective is needed to fully grasp the processes underlying branding. In a comparative case study of ten UK higher education institutions with varying reputations – five highly reputed versus five low(er) reputed institutions – we demonstrate how and why branding is deployed in welcome addresses of institutional leaders. Our findings indicate that isomorphic tendencies are visible, although brand differentiation could also be identified between highly and lowly reputed institutions. Our findings provide support for the competitive group perspective on branding activities.

Theoretical background

In European higher education, universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly pressured to transform to organizations that act as businesses in a competitive market. Traditionally, HEIs were embedded in a strongly institutionalized environment (Meek et al. 1996; Neave 1979). This implies that HEIs were government-led and their right to exist depended on their legitimacy, which they could manage by mimicking the highly reputed HEIs at the global level such as Harvard and Oxford, by so-called academic drift. In this context, HEIs received resources once they were able to gain and maintain

legitimacy. More recently, European higher education has been transforming into an environment in which HEIs are pressured to compete for resources (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion 2011). However, it should be noted that the transformation to a more market-oriented steering approach is not a radical shift in that both institutional and competitive pressures are tangible in contemporary European higher education (Gornitzka & Maassen 2000; Jungblut & Vukasovic 2013). From a new managerial logic (Trowler 2010) the underlying (although contested) rationale is that competition increases the efficiency and effectiveness of HEIs. The consequence is that HEIs are pressured to differentiate from competitors to reduce competition and get access to resources. Consequently, branding and image management activities that signal differentiation are becoming increasingly important (Brown & Mazzarol 2009; Chapleo 2010).

In line with the existing literature (e.g. Chapleo 2007), we define branding as augmenting the HEI (and its services) with organizational values (e.g. excellence, social justice) and presenting them to the external environment. Conceptualized in this way, branding is a symbolic strategy that does not necessarily represent the substantive, internal activities or, indeed, the identity of the HEI. Hence, branding is about image management. From this perspective, brands and images are related to the interactions between organizations and their external environment, whereas the concept of identity should rather be situated in the internal context of the organization (see also Balmer 2001). Identity in higher education is not unproblematic, for HEIs are often typified as highly complex organizations with rather intangible and unpredictable services (e.g. Jongbloed 2003) and, hence, a general absence of a clear and coherent identity. It has even been argued that, in this type of organization, image is

more important than substance (Alvesson 1990) or that 'looking good' is more important than 'being good' (Gioia & Corley 2002).

The higher education literature has started to explore how and why branding is deployed in HEIs. One stream of literature focuses on content-related processes underlying branding. There is a growing consensus that HEIs are pressured to balance strategically – building on the concept of 'strategic balance' (Deephouse 1999) – between being different from competitors and being the same to respond to the combination of institutional and competitive pressures (Kosmützky & Krücken forthcoming; Fumasoli & Huisman 2013; Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming). It has for instance been demonstrated that HEIs balance strategically by signaling compliance with widespread value clusters (e.g. excellence, social justice, internationalization, third mission, performance management) while at the same time differentiating by emphasizing certain value clusters and/or attaching organization-specific meanings to them (Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming). For instance, two competing HEIs may be the same in that they both signal compliance with notions of excellence and social justice to gain and maintain legitimacy. To reduce competition, they may be different in that excellence is the dominant value cluster in one HEI whereas social justice is dominant in the other HEI. They may also be different in that one HEI defines excellence as 'being the best at the global level' while the other stresses 'being the best at the local level'. This literature therefore suggests that brand differentiation is possible and necessary although it is also constrained because of the continuing embeddedness of HEIs in a strongly institutionalized environment (see also Waeraas & Solbakk 2009).

Another stream of literature focuses on style-related processes (e.g. D'Andrea, Stensaker & Allison 2007; Huisman & Mampaey under review). Here, the

argument is that HEIs are pressured to deploy a branding style that enhances their perceived legitimacy and attractiveness, for instance by developing well-designed logos, straplines and speech acts. Branding style is about the structure (or form) of communication, not the content. In the context of this paper, we especially focus on the concept of speech acts. Based on Searle's Speech Act Theory (1969, 1979), four types of speech acts have been identified in the context of higher education branding: assertives, directives, expressives and commissives (Huisman & Mampaey under review). Assertives commit HEIs to the truth of their value-laden statements, hence the organizational values are presented as objective facts (e.g. "the university conducts excellent research", "we provide internationally oriented education"). By using directives, HEIs attempt to make the listener/reader to change his/her behavior (e.g. "please visit our community", "join our wonderful institute"). Expressives denote the HEI's subjective, psychological state about the statement, which may present the organizational value as a subjective attribute in the eye of the beholder (e.g. "we believe that we provide outstanding services to society", "we are convinced that performance measurement is important"). Finally, commissives present an organizational value as a future fact (e.g. "we are committed to the third mission", "we will change into an internationally recognized institution"). It has been demonstrated that assertives are dominant in HEIs for this speech act has the highest performative function (Huisman & Mampaey under review). By deploying assertives, HEIs present their organizational values as objective facts and this contributes to their perceived legitimacy and attractiveness.

Some studies explore the antecedents of branding. There is preliminary evidence that reputation is important in that brand differentiation especially occurs between highly and lowly reputed groups of HEIs (Brown & Mazzarol 2009;

Huisman & Mampaey under review; Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming). For instance, it has been argued that brand differentiation is especially important for lowly reputed HEIs in that they need to develop unique brands to attract specific market segments, whereas highly reputed HEIs have no need to differentiate for they can build on their reputation (Brown & Mazzarol 2009; Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming). It has also been argued that brand differentiation is especially important in value clusters with a competitive edge (e.g. excellence, social justice) in contrast to value clusters that are just mentioned to comply with a coercive pressure from the government (e.g. academic orientation, performance measurement) (Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming).

At present, the different streams of literature on branding of HEIs co-exist without strong interaction and/or synergy. The goal of this paper is to analyze the branding of HEIs from a perspective that integrates the different streams by focusing on (the interaction between) content- and style-related processes. Our research question is: how and why do HEIs deploy branding activities? We aim to demonstrate that, compared to the existing literature, our integrated perspective can provide a more holistic approach to conceptualize and explain the branding of HEIs. In particular, we draw on the concepts of 'strategic balance' and 'speech acts' to analyze and interpret the branding of HEIs in the UK higher education system.

Methodology

Empirically, we analyze branding activities in a qualitative case study (Eisenhardt 1989) of ten HEIs in the UK higher education system. Such a research design

enables us to explore how- and why-questions in a real-life context from a theory-building perspective (see also Yin 2009). In particular, it enables us to identify and compare content- and style-related processes underlying branding as well as their antecedents. Welcome addresses are used as our unit of analysis. It has been argued that these welcome addresses are important tools in the branding activities of HEIs given their centrality on web sites, the involvement of top management in their development and the almost global access to the internet (Huisman & Mampaey under review). Also, welcome addresses are oriented to all kinds of stakeholders, whereas other texts (e.g. education vision and mission) are more focused on specific types of stakeholders (e.g. students). Finally, welcome addresses are communication tools that are widely used by different types of institutions independent of reputation (Huisman & Mampaey under review).

The UK higher education system has around 160 higher education providers, of which about 110 are universities (depending on the criteria one applies, see e.g. Tight, 2011). The institutions cater for 2.3 million students, of which 0.4 million are non-UK students. There are some differences between the four regions in the country due to devolvement of administrative powers (the most notable pertaining to student fees, very substantial for English students at English universities, practically non-existent for Scottish students at their home institutions), but overall the institutions are guided and steered by similar policies, regulations and funding arrangements.

The diversity of the system is generally acknowledged, pointing at considerable differences in size, research-intensiveness (e.g. longstanding and highly ranked universities with world-class status versus teaching-oriented institutions) and disciplinary focus (e.g. comprehensive universities versus specialized art

schools). Particularly the dimension of research intensity, as well as age and size correlate highly with institutional (global) reputation. As such, one can look at the collection of UK higher education institutions as highly diverse and stratified. That stratification is also visible in the fact that various groups of universities have set up lobby groups to defend their particular missions and objectives (e.g. the Russell Group of 24 major research-intensive universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, Edinburgh and Manchester).

Next to diversity and stratification, the third system characteristic is important for our study of branding. The system is very competitive and marked by a high level of marketization (Brown and Carasso, 2013). Universities compete heavily for domestic and international students and research funding (allocated on the basis of outcomes of Research Assessment Exercises, aiming to fund research in places with the best past performance). The system therefore provide a suitable context for our research: the diverse and stratified set of institutions of different reputations compete in a "real" market for resources to survive. In such a context, branding – as in image management (see also "theoretical background" above) – plays a major role.

Based on the principle of 'theoretical sampling' (Guba 1981), we compare two groups of HEIs: highly (labeled University A-E) and lowly reputed (labeled F-J) HEIs. Our measure of reputation is based on the quantity and quality of scientific publications (i.e. the product between the total number of publications normalized by their impact factor and divided by the number of academic staff), a measure that strongly correlates with other measures of reputation (Huisman & Mampaey under review). We checked whether the length of the welcome addresses was comparable and excluded HEIs with a relatively long welcome address. Data were gathered in August 2014. From our initial data-set of around

50 welcome addresses, we selected five representative of the high-reputation group of HEIs and five of the low-reputation group.

To code our data, we drew on the typology of organizational value clusters as developed by Mampaey, Huisman and Seeber (forthcoming) to derive the content of the utterances in the welcome addresses. Seven value clusters were identified in higher education: excellence (or quality), social justice (or diversity), third mission (or outreach), academic orientation, community (or collaboration), internationalization and performance measurement (or evaluation). We coded each utterance in the welcome addresses as presenting one or more of these value clusters. With regards to the coding of the style, we drew on the typology of Huisman and Mampaey (under review) that distinguishes between the four types of speech acts, discussed earlier: assertives, directives, expressives and commissives. Furthermore, Qualitative Content Analysis (Krippendorff 1980) was used to derive the institution-specific meaning of the value clusters. In the first phase of our analysis, we conducted a within-case analysis to derive the dominant contents (i.e. value clusters and meanings) and styles (i.e. speech acts) underlying the branding in each institution. In the second phase, a between-case analysis was deployed to compare the branding between institutions, identify patterns (i.e. relations between reputation, content and style) and build a coherent theory. To increase the reliability (Denzin 1970), the analysis was carried out by the two authors and discussed until consensus was reached.

Findings

We found that the differentiation mainly occurred between the two groups of HEIs (highly reputed versus lowly reputed). The within-group variation was rather small. We illustrate our analysis with an in-depth description of the content- and style-related processes underlying the branding of one highly reputed HEI (University A) and one lowly reputed HEI (University F). For these two cases, we include the entire welcome address and our coding of the organizational values and speech acts: see [organizational value 1 + organizational value 2 + ... / speech act 1 + speech act 2 + ...] in the welcome addresses. We do however exclude factual descriptions in the second welcome address to reduce its length. We briefly summarize findings from the analysis of the other eight HEIs.

The branding of highly reputed HEIs

The welcome address of the University A runs as follows:

Welcome to [University A]. People from all walks of life and all parts of the world have been visiting us for nine centuries and we are delighted that via this website you are joining that long tradition [international orientation + excellence / assertive + expressive]. [University A] was the first University in the English-speaking world [excellence / assertive]. Our aim is to remain at the forefront of centres of learning, teaching and research [excellence / assertive + commissive]. [University A's] remarkable global appeal continues to grow [international orientation + excellence / assertive]. Students from more than a hundred and forty countries and territories make up a student population of over twenty thousand [international orientation / assertive]. Over a third comes from outside the United

Kingdom [international orientation / assertive]. But it is not just longevity and global reach that mark [University A] out and give the University its special character [excellence / assertive]. There is also our distinctive college and tutorial system which underpins a culture of close academic supervision and careful personal support for our outstanding students [social justice + excellence / assertive]. Our colleges and halls of which there are more than forty also help to foster the intense interdisciplinary approach that inspires much of the outstanding research achievement of the University and makes [University A] a leader in so many fields [excellence / assertive]. It is an approach especially suited to confronting many of the hugely complex challenges that face us all [third mission / assertive]. That is why we believe that the greater we can make [University A], the greater its contribution to the well-being of the world you and I share [third mission / expressive].

There is a strong emphasis on the organizational value of excellence that is defined in terms of an outstanding (or leading) position at the global level, longevity, international orientation, social justice, an interdisciplinary approach and the third mission. The speech acts are mainly assertive which means that the organizational value of excellence is presented as an objective attribute of the university. In one speech act, the assertive is combined with a commissive. This combination indicates that the speaker presents excellence as part of the current and future profile of the institution, a strategy that further emphasizes the longevity of the organizational value. In another speech act, an expressive is used but this only occurs in the context of expressing pride and joy ("we are delighted"), hence in this case the organizational value of excellence is not

presented as a subjective attribute of the institution. In the second part of the welcome address, the speaker introduces social justice as part of the organization-specific definition of excellence. The “culture of close academic supervision and careful personal support” refers to social justice, but later in this speech act, social justice is limited to attention for outstanding students indicating a highly selective approach to social justice (see also Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming). In the last part of the welcome address, the organizational value of the third mission is presented as partly objective and partly subjective by combining an assertive and an expressive. In this context, the expressive does construct the third mission as a belief of the institution (“that is why we believe that”), hence downplaying the objectivity of the organizational value, and consequently, its importance in the university.

The branding of the other highly reputed institutions is quite similar. In University B, there is a strong emphasis on the organizational value of excellence that is defined in terms of an outstanding (or leading) position at the global level, longevity, the third mission and social justice. Also, the assertive is the dominant speech act to present the organizational value of excellence. For instance:

[University B] is one of the world’s leading universities with a distinguished history. [University B] is at the centre of a wide range of leading edge research and top quality teaching and learning.

Similar to University A, the only expressive we identified was a speech act to express pride:

Indeed, I am particularly proud that [University B] maintains its reputation for friendliness and inclusiveness [...].

Different from University A, there is however less emphasis on the international orientation and the interdisciplinary approach but more emphasis on the third mission and the community. In contrast to University A, the third mission is communicated with assertives, emphasizing its importance:

For over 180 years [University B] has made an extraordinary contribution to modern life, particularly in the areas of science, medicine, healthcare, social science, education, law and the arts. Pioneering research at the College continues to help shape the world in which we live.

Furthermore, the social justice approach appears to be less selective, for the institution mentions broad labels such as friendliness and inclusiveness without explicitly restricting it to an approach for outstanding students and it is communicated with an expressive (see above). The difference with regards to the social justice approach may however be interpreted as a strategy to differentiate from (and hence reduce competition with) the nearby University A in that University B presents itself as more open to all students, not only outstanding ones. Hence, although some important differences could be identified, we would argue that the similarities between the universities are stronger than the differences: the most dominant element of both welcome addresses is the emphasis on excellence defined as being outstanding at the global level and this organizational value is mainly presented with assertives.

In the other three highly reputed universities, the most dominant element is again the organizational value of excellence defined as being outstanding (or leading) at the global level, which is communicated with assertives and (some) commissives. Apparently, highly reputed HEIs tend to present their leading

position as an objective fact of the past, current and future situation. The leading position is further emphasized by referring to longevity. International orientation, social justice, the third mission and academic orientation are also stressed. Some subtle differences could be identified as well, for instance, Universities C and D also emphasize their dominant position at the national and local level, although this type of branding is rather typical of lowly reputed HEIs (see below):

[University C] is one of the UK's leading research-focused higher education institutions. With around 17,840 students, 4,000 staff and an annual turnover of £300m, we are one of the biggest University of [name of the city] colleges.

[University D] is one of the UK's top universities, consistently highly ranked in the UK league tables and established as a world player in research and teaching as reflected in our rising global league table position.

Upon comparison of the five highly reputed HEIs, we identified inter-institutional differences in the definition of social justice in that some HEIs reduce it to support for outstanding students, while others do not adopt this restrictive definition.

In sum, subtle inter-institutional differences could be identified in the content- and style-related processes underlying the branding of highly reputed HEIs, but isomorphic tendencies are more pronounced in that the most dominant element of the branding activities is the emphasis on excellence as being outstanding at the global level, an organizational value that is mainly presented with assertives and (some) commissives. Expressives are used as well, but only to express pride about the excellence of the institution.

The branding of lowly reputed HEIs

The welcome address of University F stresses:

Welcome to [University F] online. Our website will, we hope, give you a flavour of what makes our University special, in terms of our academic expertise and business connections [...] [excellence + academic orientation + third mission / expressive]. Our University has come a long way in a short amount of time and we currently have over 17,000 students of which 1,500 are international students from around 130 countries [excellence + international orientation / assertive]. We have a strong professional orientation with a focus on academic excellence and graduate employability [academic orientation + excellence + third mission / assertive]. By way of illustration, we are recognised as the only Centre for Excellence in Media Practice in the UK [...] [excellence / assertive]. Areas of research expertise include [...] [excellence / assertive]. [University F] is at the heart of the largest non-industrial conurbation in Europe [third mission / assertive]. It is in a wonderful location [...] [excellence / assertive]. [...] [University F] is world renowned as an international conference centre [...] [excellence + international orientation / assertive]. It also offers one of the largest exhibition and entertainment venues on the south coast [excellence / assertive]. The University is a powerful player in the economic and cultural life of South West England [third mission / assertive]. We are at the hub of a network of educational, business and local government partners and also played our part in the region's preparations for the 2012 Olympics [community + third mission /

assertive]. [University F] has an excellent reputation among students, their parents and staff in colleges and schools [excellence / assertive]. However, since my arrival in September 2005 we have been considering what [University F] should be like in the future, to ensure that we strengthen still further this reputation [excellence / commissive]. As a result many exciting changes are now in train [excellence / assertive]. In particular, we are building on our strengths while developing new professionally-relevant areas [excellence / assertive]; investing over £100M in staff and facilities and reorganising ourselves to ensure that we maintain our traditional focus on academic excellence [academic orientation + excellence / commissive].

Similar to the highly reputed institutions, in this welcome address there is a strong emphasis on excellence. However, excellence is presented in a radically different way. First, by deploying an expressive speech act (“we hope”) in the very first utterance, excellence is presented as a belief of the speaker instead of an objective attribute of the organisation. It should however be noted that the assertive is the dominant speech act in this institution as well, but the expressive in the very first utterance does however counterbalances the assertive style in the following utterances. Second, excellence is also defined in a radically different way. In most utterances, the institution does not refer to its outstanding position at the global level. Neither is there an emphasis on longevity. On the contrary, excellence is presented in abstract, ill-defined terms (e.g. “expertise”, “wonderful”) or in terms of progress (“the university has come a long way in a short amount of time”). In some utterances, the institution does communicate its outstanding position. However, in these utterances, standing out is associated

with the national or local level or very specific, intra-institutional niches (e.g. media studies) or intra-institutional services (e.g. international conferences), whereas highly reputed institutions define standing out mainly at the global and institutional level. Similar to the highly reputed institutions, excellence is also associated with other value clusters including international orientation, community, the third mission and academic orientation. Quite surprisingly, in this institution, there is no reference to social justice and the definition of the third mission is radically different as well. University F presents the third mission in terms of outreach to the local economy and culture (e.g. "a powerful player in the economic and cultural life of South West England"), whereas in the highly reputed HEIs, there is a tendency to define the third mission at the global (and rather abstract) level (e.g. "contribution to the well-being of the world").

The branding of the other institutions is similar to the branding of University F even though some subtle differences could be identified. The general pattern is that excellence is defined in abstract, ill-defined terms and the outstanding position is not mentioned or a more modest stance is developed, for instance by stressing the leading position at the national and/or local level. These quotes are illustrative:

This focus has taken us to a record number of students in 2013/14 and we are determined to provide everyone joining the [University G] family with the best experience possible, not just through education but socially and culturally, with your health and wellbeing always in mind.

We [University H] have achieved, and work hard to maintain, the highest educational standards, and are widely recognised for the

quality of our provision. In the Sunday Times University Guide we were named University College of the Year for six years in a row, and have been commended in the Guide's assessments of our teaching. In addition, with a graduate employment rate of over 98% in 2010/11 our performance placed us within the top 10 higher education institutions in the UK.

Also, the institutions tend to associate the third mission with the national and/or local economy and society. For instance:

Since its foundation in 1901, [University H] has had a long and proud tradition of working closely with the rural sector and we will continue to do so, to add relevance to our teaching and research and to act as a focal point for transferring research into practice.

Our [University J's] success will ensure that we continue to support the economic growth of the city and region.

The other value clusters (social justice, international orientation, community, academic orientation) are present as well. None of the lowly reputed HEIs associates social justice with support for outstanding students. Assertives are dominant but similar to University F, the lowly reputed HEIs tend to counterbalance the assertive style with expressives that present excellence as a subjective attribute in the eye of the beholder. For instance:

Not only are we [University H] unique in our subject base, and in the range of research and knowledge transfer work that we undertake, but we also perform extraordinarily well against many larger universities whilst retaining a collegiate approach to our activities. I firmly believe [expressive] that this is the product of our

excellent and committed academic staff, who care deeply about the learning and teaching afforded to our students, conduct innovative research with high impact upon agricultural and rural practice and provide a wide range of support to the business sectors with which we are engaged

While much has changed since those far off days, we [University I] are as convinced as ever [expressive] of the value and importance of studying Philosophy and Theology, the two academic disciplines in which we specialise.

In sum, lowly reputed HEIs tend to mimic the dominant value cluster of excellence, although they also differentiate from the highly reputed HEIs in that they develop other meanings and styles when they communicate about the dominant value cluster. The within-group variation is again rather small. Hence, the concept of strategic balance (see e.g. Mampaey, Huisman & Seeber forthcoming) is also applicable in the UK context in that (groups of) universities are different (with regards to meanings and styles) while at the same time they are similar in that they mainly stress the value cluster of excellence.

Discussion and conclusion

In European higher education, the transformation to a more market-oriented steering approach has forced HEIs to invest in brand differentiation to reduce competition and attract sustainable resources. While the higher education literature has started to explore whether or not HEIs invest in brand differentiation, we argued that the existing studies either focus on content- or

style-related processes. In this paper, we proposed a more holistic perspective that integrates both types of processes.

Our findings suggest isomorphic tendencies. In a comparative case study of ten HEIs in the UK higher education system, we found that excellence is the dominant value cluster that is mainly communicated with the assertive speech act. The lowly reputed HEIs appear to mimic highly reputed HEIs (i.e. academic drift), probably because higher education is a strongly institutionalized environment with high levels of uncertainty about the appropriate value clusters, and hence, the value clusters and styles that are present in the branding activities of highly reputed HEIs are taken for granted. To gain and maintain legitimacy and ontological security, lowly reputed HEIs feel obliged to mimic both the content and style of the branding activities of highly reputed HEIs. The within-group differentiation is even smaller in that highly reputed HEIs have very similar branding activities and this is also applicable to lowly reputed HEIs. Apparently, in the context of UK higher education, the shift to a more market-oriented steering approach has not entirely changed the strongly institutionalized nature of higher education.

That said, we also found evidence of brand differentiation between highly and lowly reputed HEIs. Whereas isomorphic tendencies could be found, lowly reputed HEIs differentiate from highly reputed HEIs by developing different meanings and styles when they communicate the dominant value cluster of excellence. One of the most conspicuous differences is the national, local and intra-institutional brand orientation of lowly reputed HEIs, whereas the highly reputed HEIs mainly develop an international brand of excellence. A plausible explanation is that highly reputed HEIs target the international market and are oriented towards a wide range of services (including research), whereas lowly

reputed HEIs are more oriented towards the national and local market and specific services (more geared towards education for the regional labour markets). Very likely, organizational reputation provides a context that enables and constrains the brand differentiation of HEIs. Indeed, both the content and the style of the branding activities of lowly reputed HEIs tends to develop a more modest stance towards excellence that corresponds with the actual reputation. Also, lowly reputed HEIs counterbalanced their assertive style with expressives that construct excellence as an organizational value in the eye of the beholder.

Our findings also resonate with recent work that stressed the role of competitive groups (Baum & Lant 2003, Lant & Baum, 1995; see also Kosmützky & Krücken forthcoming for an application in higher education), which provides an alternative but complementary interpretation of our findings. In the UK higher education system in particular, various groups of universities (e.g. the highly reputed Russell Group) have set up lobby groups to defend their particular missions and objectives (see methodology). The homogenization/differentiation patterns that we found in our study could be interpreted as a complementary strategy to defend the particular missions and objectives through branding activities. For instance, excellence is a globally institutionalized value cluster, but its actual filling materializes based on belonging to specific competitive groups (some prioritizing e.g. research excellence, others teaching excellence). Interestingly, when excellence in research is presented with an assertive style in highly reputed universities, this could be interpreted as a strategy to emphasize the centrality of research in the mission of this group of universities. Conversely, when low(er) reputed institutions present excellence in research with an expressive style, it could be seen as a subtle strategy to nuance the centrality of research and introduce alternative values such as teaching excellence. From this

perspective, branding (or image management) activities could also be conceived of as part of an ideological project to defend the group-specific missions and objectives of certain groups of universities (see also Hatch & Schultz 1997), even though the dominant value clusters may still be the same.

Our study has some limitations. We investigated the antecedents and processes underlying the development of branding activities, but we did not focus on the consequences (e.g. are the subtle differences between competitive groups perceived by the general public and what are the effects on their impressions and decisions?). Future research may further investigate the link between antecedents, processes and consequences).

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