Location, Vocation, Education: Place Marketing in the context of English 'new' universities.

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Abstract

The focus of this research was to explore interpretations of brand success in the context of a selection of comparable newer English universities. A total of twenty-four interviews were undertaken. The data analysis applied a systematic process of analysis (recursive abstraction).

Location was identified as being a fundamental antecedent of brand success. Without the heritage and history of older institutions, newer universities have needed to find a way to appeal to their audiences, who often expect them to be offering something unique. These universities have focussed on incorporating location into their branding and marketing communications to ensure their uniqueness of message.

The data also demonstrates that universities that are embedded into the fabric of their local community are seen in a more favourable light as a result. Furthermore, this research suggests how brand identity can be combined with location to create a brand personality that will be aligned to the location's operational features as well as its emotional benefits.

Finally, the data shows that students consider their university choice in the context of staying in or near their university location after graduating. Therefore, the type of employment, cultural and social opportunities a town or city offers is an important factor. The cost of living bore a close relationship to the overall image of the location, with different motivations from students influencing whether they were looking for somewhere they could keep their costs down or pay a premium for a more culturally rounded experience in a large city.

Keywords: Location, Place branding, Identity, Higher education marketing, Local culture values.

Introduction

Significant contributions to university branding scholarship have taken place, including international branding (Gray et al. 2003), brand architecture (Baker and Balmer 1997), brand equity (Pinar et al. 2014) and brand identity (Lowrie 2007), but empirical research related to assessing brand success are scarce, despite the growing importance of this subject (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007). Whilst research into successful branding has been conducted in numerous commercial settings, research into defining brand success in the Higher Education (HE) context is still needed (Melewar and Akel 2005).

de Chernatony (1999) argued that defining brand success is essential for understanding how effective a brand is and improving on it. Leadership support, a clear vision and employee buy-in as well as effective communication have all been listed in the literature as being required for a successful brand (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

The issues and challenges of 21st century Higher Education are significant. HE has its complexities, and insight into how to achieve a successful brand effectively and efficiently is important. "Universities operate in an increasingly uncertain environment, with macro forces moving with speed, complexity and risk" (Chapleo and O'Sullivan, 2017, p159). The global increase in demand for HE, an escalation in student consumerism and an increased focus on the 'end product' in a revenue-generating market has led to a shift in the HE landscape and a corresponding marketisation of the way universities operate.

While branding is arguably a relatively new development in the sector, as highlighted by (Dholakia and Acciardo 2014), it has quickly become a consideration for all non-profit organisations (NPOs), including universities. "Even the more traditional universities whose promotional activities and selection criteria which were centred on the reputation of their academic excellence and pedagogic ability have had to adopt a more managerial culture." (Boyett, 1996, p.24).

Palmer et al. (2016) state that "Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are conceptualised as brands," (p. 3033) who due to the complex and competitive nature of the HE landscape, which sees UK institutions "grapple with strategies to improves National Student Survey (NSS) scores, and address Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) requirements" (Cownie, 2017, p.290), along with other performance benchmarking criteria, universities have needed to respond by developing new marketing strategies to increase brand engagement (Farhat et al., 2020).

A good brand can help the university to establish a strong position in the marketplace, as well as protecting it from competition and improving overall performance (Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that a strong university brand may enhance student interest, and aid recruitment figures. Laidler-Kylander and Stone (2012) suggested that organisations with a strong brand attract partners and collaborators; particularly relevant to HE who rely on co-creation for knowledge transfer and funding. Chapleo (2011) and Mazzarol et al (2000) argue that branding can also help to give universities a competitive advantage by creating a consistent image and message.

The focus of this research was to explore interpretations of brand success in the context of a selection of comparable newer English universities, from a sample of key stakeholder. This work builds on existing literature in the domain of branding, specifically building on the works of Chapleo (2007, 2010, 2015), Hemsley-Brown et al (2006, 2007), and Maringe and Gibbs (2009), who identify that more understanding of brand success is needed. Investigating the benefits of branding in higher education institutions is crucial in developing a strong educational sector (de Heer and Tandoh-Offin 2015). Location was identified as being a fundamental antecedent of brand success. Without the heritage and history of older institutions, newer universities have needed to find a way to appeal to their audiences, who often expect them to be offering something unique. These universities have focussed on incorporating location into their branding and marketing communications to ensure their uniqueness of message.

HEIs are appreciating the importance of utilising their brands "to improve their performance and build deep relationships with their customers." (Hariff and Rowley, 2011, p.348). Those who advocate branding in HE draw attention to benefits such as establishing legitimacy and building prestige (Chapleo, 2011; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2008), communicating shared values as a way to secure support from stakeholders (Sargeant et al, 2008a; Sargeant et al, 2008b), and reducing the element of risk by expressing quality (Chapleo, 2011). It is therefore logical for HEIs to use their location within their marketing materials as a way to demonstrate the 'uniqueness' of the HEI brand (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017). HEIs engage in place marketing by providing location information.

The key contribution of this paper is to present why location is being considered as an antecedent of brand success in English post-1992 universities, and how this is being embedded into HEI marketing strategies. The theoretical framework underlying the exploration of the data utilises place marketing.

Theoretical Framework

Place marketing and branding

Historically, scholars have suggested the purpose of branding is to increase sales, sustain brand loyalty, and attract more customers. Furthermore, objectives of branding are to inform and educate the market, offer a differentiate from competitors, and improve promotion efficiency (Jennifer 1997). However, its form has evolved considerably (Mercer 2010). Definitions of brand that focus purely on the name, or logo, intended to identify a product or service are frequently criticised in the literature (Arnold 1992; Crainer 1995). A more contemporary approach to view branding is presented by Veloutsou and Delgado-Ballester, (2018, p. 256) who define the brand as "an evolving mental collection of actual (offer related) and emotional (human-like) characteristics and associations which convey benefits of an offer identified through a symbol, or a collection of symbols, and differentiates this offer from the rest of the marketplace."

Brands provide functional and symbolic value and help in the development of long-lasting relationships (Merz et al., 2009). Clearly, brands have evolved from being transactional tools to experience agents (Veloutsou and Ruiz-Mafé, 2020). The modern-day brand includes places, people, experiences, events, and information. Ideas are also brands and should be equally concerned with branding decisions Veloutsou and Guzmán, (2017). The relevance of the brand is highlighted by Kapferer (2012) who stated that all organisations are brands with "a name, with a personality, the power and influence, being driven by values, and a source of innovations that give birth to a community." (p.51)

The literature demonstrates how destinations can be branded (Sevin 2014) which focus on 'experiential marketing' to provide experiences whilst building emotional relationships and connections with consumers (Hudson and Ritchie 2009), as well as create a sense of attachment with potential students and their families (Colomb and Kalandides, 2010).

The field of place marketing and branding is experiencing rapid growth and continues to attract attention from both academics and practitioners. The goal, to create a positive image and reputation for a location in order to attract people and investments. Involving a range of activities such as developing a brand identity, creating a slogan or tagline, designing a suit of visual communications, and marketing campaigns, the branding focus is on highlighting the strengths and unique features of the location. Often this draws upon the natural beauty, cultural heritage, and economic opportunities.

Place marketing can offer a variety of benefits. It can help attract more tourists, boosting the economic climate by creating jobs and generating revenue for local businesses. Furthermore, it can also attract investors, as a positive image and reputation can make a location more attractive to businesses looking to grow into a new market. Additionally, and fundamentally, place marketing can help to build a sense of community, pride, and belonging.

Place marketing in Higher Education

Pringle and Fritz (2019, p. 19) argue "a strong, successful university brand will evoke emotions, positive images, and associations". Place marketing in higher education is becoming an increasingly important marketing strategy to achieve such feelings, as universities compete for students, faculty staff and research funding.

There can be little doubt, that newer universities especially, are using their location as a way to compete in a crowded marketplace and respond to the threat of substitution (Hanna and Rowley, 2013). The literature suggests that the various attributes of the city or town the HEI resides (whether based on the heritage, culture or the surrounding natural environment), is being drawn upon to create distinctive brand images which enable an opportunity for differentiation from competitors (Kemp et al 2012) similar course offerings (Rutter et al, 2017). Concepts such as place marketing, stakeholder marketing and societal marketing are now common in the HE literature (Chapleo and O'Sullivan, 2017).

HEIs are complex organisations which has adopted marketing and branding strategies to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. University marketing collateral clearly places emphasis its location. The branding and aesthetics used in marketing have a strong ability to influence consumer attitudes and perceptions towards a brand. According to Poole et al. (2018), prospective students and their parents now consider university marketing communication to be crucial in making higher education decisions. Brakus et al (2009) argue that marketing visuals have the power to shape consumers' thoughts, feelings, and senses in a particular way, which in turn can impact their behaviour.

Brands are used as a means of differentiation, or an attempt to gain a competitive position (Bélanger, Syed, and Mount 2007; Dholakia and Acciardo 2014) and this is certainly true for HE brands.
With such increased global competition, universities search for a unique definition of what they are to differentiate themselves and attract students (Chapleo 2007; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007). This research validates suggestions in the literature that the institution's location can "offer a route to building a distinct identity" (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017).

University brand differentiation can be achieved by creating a genuinely distinct higher education service (Story, 2021). De Heer and Tandoh-Offin (2015) underline that HE branding is about finding a unique position and definition to provide differentiation, and attract students, academic staff and financial support. According to Curtis et al (2009) those universities who do position their brand appropriately achieve a competitive edge in the marketplace. Kapferer defines this process as "emphasising the distinctive characteristics which make it different from its competitors, and appealing to the public" (Kapferer 2012, p.152).

Universities are looking for unique ways to define what they offer so that they stand out from their rivals when it comes to attracting students (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007). However, as this research demonstrates, HEIs struggle to pinpoint their differentiation, due to essentially all making the same promises with similar product offerings, referred to as a "sea of brand sameness" (Rutter, et al., 2017).

Brand heritage

Brand heritage is recurring terminology in the place marketing literature. Urde et al, (2007) define brand heritage as "a dimension of a brand's identity found in its track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and particularly in the organisational belief that its history is important." (p. 4).

A brand's heritage is an important aspect of its identity and can influence how it is perceived. Brand heritage has triggered much interest in the domain of place marketing with an increasing amount of exploratory research emerging (Balmer and Burghausen 2015; Hudson and John 2013). Aaker (2004) suggests that heritage is important as it adds authenticity and differentiation. Wiedmann et al. (2011) reinforce this and adds that the trustworthiness of a brand is heavily influenced by brand heritage, with consumers likely to place more trust in a heritage brand and associate less risk with it due to its track record of quality.

The literature suggests that brand heritage creates and strengthens the consumer brand bond (Wiedmann et al., 2011). It is also used to create brand communities (Kessous and Roux, 2008). Indeed, the literature complements this suggestion by noting that a good reputation signifies historical success (Yoon et al, 1993). Furthermore, studies have found that a strong brand heritage can lead to increased customer satisfaction, trustworthiness, brand attachment, and ultimately, brand loyalty (Merchant and Rose, 2013; Wiedmann et al, 2011).

Brands need to be cultivated to be consistent in delivering on their promises, driven through their core values Urde et al. (2007), which will then lead to the "accumulation of credibility and trust" (p.12). Brands are important assets that need to be maintained over the long term (Wood 2000) as a brand's history is formed by the accumulation of experiences that will ultimately shape and influence consumer perceptions of the brand. Accordingly, heritage plays a role in brand storytelling. Brands use their story and traditions to create compelling narratives that resonate with its consumers. Merchant and Ford (2008) identify this nostalgia as extremely powerful for both non-profit and profit-making brands.

However, heritage can also present challenges for university brands. As stakeholders' preferences evolve, HEI brands need to adapt to remain relevant. Balancing the preservation of heritage with the need to innovate and stay competitive can be a delicate juggling act. Scholars such as Schofield et al (2013) argue that newer universities need to attract students differently to more traditional institutions in the absence of an established heritage. The literature suggests however, that it may be more challenging for post-1992 universities to present a distinctive offering, denied as they are the history and heritage of their longer-established rivals as such, they are more likely to rely on modern campus spaces to entice students, which offer the opportunity to show distinctions to their competitors (Kemp et al, 2012).

Research Approach and Method

This paper reports on a mono-method research study considering primary data collection supported by secondary research. As an exploratory piece of work, the study is qualitative in nature. A case study method was adopted as the most appropriate mechanism to provide a solid foundation for theory construction. Specifically, a multiple case study approach of three newer (post-1992), broadly comparable English HEIs (Bournemouth university, Manchester Metropolitan University, and University of Portsmouth) was used following direction from Yin (2009), who asserts that multiple case studies are more robust than single case study design. By adopting an exploratory approach, this research has enabled rich and descriptive data (Boeije 2009) to ultimately develop strong theory-building research.

Primary data collection

This study collected data based upon the views and opinions of participants. purposeful sampling was undertaken, selecting individuals for research due to their understanding and experience of the research problem (Creswell 2009). The collection of the primary data utilised semi structured face-to-face interviews. A total of twenty-four interviews were undertaken with the research aim to understand perspectives from stakeholders who will offer perceptions of brand success from their own institution in order to demonstrate how branding efforts are received and understood" (Leijerholt et al 2019, p.152).

The research population were: final year undergraduate business, management and marketing students, academics who have been identified as embodying the HEI brand; and the HEI brand manager (or equivalent). This population were selected because it has a solid understanding of the brand through experience and interactions and are therefore aware of the values of the HEI brand under discussion.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a six-step systematic process of analysis which distils text down so that key themes can be identified (Polkinghorne 2019). This qualitative analysis method is called recursive abstraction. The ability to demonstrate that a rigorous analysis process (Gephart Jr 2004) has been undertaken in qualitative research is enforced by many in the literature. Recursive abstraction is a trusted form of analysis that has been applied in a wide variety of research areas (Rodriguez et al., 2020) and is pertinent to the fields of tourism, management, and marketing (Polkinghorne et al., 2019). Unlike other thematic analysis techniques, recursive abstraction uses a series of repeatable steps in an iterative manner (Polkinghorne 2019) A key focus is identifying high-level themes and subsequently paraphrasing and coding the data.

Coding of respondents

To protect participants' anonymity, as well as identify the 'type' of stakeholder, the following codes have been created:

Table 1: Coding of respondents

Case	Data source	Coding of Respondent
Bournemouth University (BU)	Brand-Aligned Academic x3	BUA1, BUA2, BUA3
	Head of Brand/Marketing Manager x2	BUHoB/MM1, BUHoB/MM2
	Final year undergraduate Business, Management/Marketing student x3	BUS1, BUS2, BUS3
Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)	Brand-Aligned Academic x3	MMUA1, MMUA2, MMUA3
	Head of Brand/Marketing Manager x2	MMUHoB/MM1, MMUHoB/MM2
	Final year undergraduate Business, Management/Marketing student x3	MMUS1, MMUS2, MMUS3
University of Portsmouth (UoP)	Brand-Aligned Academic x3	UoPA1, UoPA2, UoPA3
	Head of Brand/Marketing Manager x2	UoPHoB/MM1, UoPHoB/MM2
	Final year undergraduate Business, Management/Marketing student x3	UoPS1, UoPS2, UoPS3

Findings and Discussion

Location – an antecedent of HEI brand success

Clearly, all participants considered the "location and heritage to be a big part of who we are" (MMUA1) and "probably one of the main antecedents of a university's brand success for students." (UoPS2) Interviewees suggested that the location is "undoubtedly connected to the brand success of a university." (UoPA2)

These newer universities were inherently linked with their geographical location, whether that was the seaside town of Bournemouth, the port city of Portsmouth famous for its maritime heritage, or the northern powerhouse of Manchester. Location was considered especially important by respondents from MMU, who noted that the way the university had intertwined its messaging with its location; the vibrancy and buzz of Manchester as a northern powerhouse, demonstrated a distinctive and unique offering. The data highlights that drawing upon MMU's 'northern roots" is a fundamental characteristic of the institution's identity, which offers an opportunity for advantage in a complex and competitive marketplace. MMUA1 presented examples of how this narrative is presented at various touchpoints to "stand out from the crowd." "We are northern. This is really important to our identity and differentiation. Because we are such a big university, we are a northern powerhouse. If anyone is in the north, they will understand the importance of a northern powerhouse and a northern location, so we use this to our advantage." (MMUA1)

The data further suggests the location of the university is an integral consideration for not only the applicant but also their parents and other influencers. "The geographic location of the university is crucial for brand success. I always talk about our location being near the sea as well as near to London when I go to recruitment events. People care about where they live and where their kids live." (UoPA3) As well as the location of UoP helping to "make the HEI more recognisable," (UoPA1) participants noted that location "will be more connected to some people than others, and not necessarily for a host of sensible reasons." (UoPHoB/MM2)

The natural environment of the institution was considered an important consideration of the university's location: "The surrounding environment of a university is so important. I like nature, so for me, being this close to an ocean was something what drew me here." (UoPS3)

In addition to the aesthetics of the environment, considerations such as the location's cost of living was deemed a "big focus for our students" (UoPA3) perhaps more relevant for post-1992 institutions. Working with local councils to offer incentives for students was therefore considered an important activity which UoP engaged in as "offering discounts and schemes for local attractions is important as it shows how the university is associated with other local brands and attractions in the area." (UoPA1) Furthermore, interviewees considered working in partnership with the local community a key activity for universities, as the activity is mutually beneficial as "the university can help the city and the city can help the university." (UoPHoB/MM2).

The extent to which a university engages with the local community was identified as important by the data. Staff and students both considered it to be important that a university is part of a community, not a community all of its own. Universities that were embedded into the fabric of their local community were seen in a more favourable light as a result. The data provides evidence of stakeholders wanting to feel a belonging to the local community and not "existing in a university vacuum" (BUS3) suggesting that "working with local councils on location awareness is important as students look for the location first and then look to see what universities are in that city." (UoPS3)
The literature reinforces this by suggesting that HEIs who link their brand to other brands will actually shape stakeholders' perception (Hanna and Rowley, 2015) and could actually enhance brand equity (Hanna and Rowley 2013).

As well as the theme of affordability raised by students, considerations such as independence were also raised from the UoP sample in so much as being "far enough away from home that I could have my own life, away from home and have my independence. But it wasn't too far away that I couldn't jump on a train and get home in a day." (UoPS2) 203 Interviewees felt that "when cities are invested in that can be a positive thing for the university." (UoPHoB/MM2)

The data also shows that students may consider their university choice in the context of staying in or near their university town after graduating. Therefore, the type of employment and social opportunities a town or city offers will be an important factor. This also extends to part-time work while studying.

The cost of living was also identified as important, with students looking for value for money in all areas, not just accommodation or tuition fees. The cost of living in a university town bore a close relationship to the overall image of the town, with different motivations from students influencing whether they were looking for somewhere they could keep their costs down or pay a premium for a more culturally rounded experience in a large city, for example.

All these factors combine to deliver points of differentiation for the location the university is set in, many of which will be the largest points of differentiation considered by students when it comes to their choice. In this way, all three case studies suggested that location is a key element of determining whether a university brand can succeed or not. By leveraging their location as a point of differentiation, universities can attract and retain students who are interested in specific fields or experiences. This can help HEIs stand out from their competitors and builds a strong competitive brand.

Location/identity congruence

The data showed that the location runs deeper and is more influential than just being about the city or town facilities. The ethos of the locality and how it matches the ethos of the student, seems to be an important viable for choosing a university. This is consistent with the literature which suggest that developing a distinct brand identity could help target audiences perceive a self-brand fit (Kemp et al, 2012).

The university location is also "an important consideration for the lifestyle of the student." (UoPA1) Of particular interest, this research reinforces literature which asserts that consumers chose to connect with locations that best enable them to create and express their own desired identity (Kemp et al., 2012). This perception of fit with the personality of the HEI's location may therefore attract applicants and enable them to explore their desired identities (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017).

The case studies asserted that there needs to be a synergy of personalities between the location and the institution. Warnaby and Medway, (2013) refer to this as a 'place offer'. For example, Manchester's status as a northern powerhouse had an impact on how students considered the university as an extension of the city. This was also an important consideration for staff when it came to considering a university's brand – they would think of the kind of work/life balance on offer, and how they could spend their free time. A coastal university like Bournemouth, for example, would be more appealing to someone who enjoyed windsurfing than an urban university like Manchester would be. Students and staff alike constantly referred to the location of their institution as being an integral element of the overall feel and identity of the university.

The data demonstrates as well as having a marketing strategy that communicates the right message in the right channels at the right time to reach a target audience, these case studies have introduced a strong brand story focussed on their location, in order to attract attention and gain awareness.
All Marketing Services interviewees reinforced this insight by acknowledging they use a very specific

location narrative in their marketing communications. The research shows that HEI target audiences are very aware of the sophisticated marketing around institutional locations taking place in the marketing collateral to entice applications: "The university marketing team made me aware that not only was it by the sea, it is also practical and affordable." (UoPS2)

The research demonstrates how location and identity congruence are important for university students because they can enhance their sense of belonging, academic performance, social support, and diversity and inclusion. By prioritising these factors universities can create a more supporting and inclusive learning environment.

Synergising location and the place offer

All three case studies talked of their efforts to create synergies between the location they reside, and the HEI campus by assembling a place offer (Warnaby and Medway, 2013). The data demonstrates how post-1992 institutions are very aware they are unable to replicate the grandeur of universities considered as grand seats of learning, where lecture theatres and university buildings may date back centuries and have played host to truly historical moments. Instead, the towns and cities that are home to post-1992 universities have seen the concrete efficiency of the 1960s and 70s replaced at breakneck speed by sprawling glass and steel cathedrals to learning. These modern-day monuments now impose themselves not only on the horizons of their hometowns, but also on the minds of those who live there.

In an era where many provincial towns and cities have seen little capital investment in new buildings and architecture, post-19992 universities have stepped in to fill the breach in construction that was previously filled by mills, factories, office blocks and retail malls. This research shows that as newer universities are focusing on their innovative, modern approaches to education, their buildings are more than bricks and mortar – or in many cases, metal and tempered glass. Instead, they serve as visual representations of the university brand, communicating the values held by the organisations they house before a visitor has even set a foot through the door.

The data demonstrates how newer universities place offering draws upon its location and heritage and identifies synergy with their brand values and project them at various touchpoints across campus. For example, one student described Manchester as "trendy and has loads of heritage" (MMUS2) and recognised that these characteristics are echoed in the MMU servicescape as its "friendly nature resembles Manchester. It's inclusive, like Manchester is. It's a laid back and chilled environment." (MMUS2)

The research demonstrates these universities have invested into new buildings as being reflective of their brand values and demonstrating ongoing investment. By showing prospective students the new buildings and facilities that they would have access to as part of their studies, the universities are able to demonstrate something specific and unique to them through its place offering. The characteristics of the location combined with the place offering of the university itself to provide a physical manifestation of the brand, contributed significantly towards a brand identity. The data clearly highlights the importance of the "physical representation of the brand" (BUS1) in its place offering. In these newer universities, there was an expectation that the place offering should be modern and something that is continually being invested in and improved upon.

Buildings, amenities, and green space were all considered crucial factors for HEI brand success. The research demonstrates that the servicescape of the institution plays a significant role in the university brand personality, which as the literature suggest may influence decision making. (Kaplan et al. 2010).

The data also demonstrates that staff and students alike expect to see their HEI being progressive and innovative (MMUA2) in terms of facilities and buildings. Investment in the servicescape, both financially and emotionally, must be ongoing, and not seen as a one-off expense. Interestingly, there was significant focus placed on the green space of campus life. The need for open green areas was noted by all universities, despite their varied locations and settings. Spaces where tranquillity and an opportunity to engage with nature were deemed crucial. Furthermore, respondents also noted that reflecting the university's surroundings was also important, and artwork from local artists helped to grow a sense of belonging and pride of the vicinity. This was evidenced by a student who moved to Bournemouth saying: "reinforcing the location in the campus helped me to make Bournemouth my home and not feel like I was merely a visitor" (BUS1). This reinforces the literature which asserts universities use their campus attributes as a way to create a sense of attachment with potential audiences (Colomb and Kalandides, 2010).

This research demonstrates that by synergising the location and place offer, post-1992 universities can create a physical environment that aligns with the services and experiences they offer to students as well as representing local culture and traditions. This can enhance the overall experience of students and staff on campus, foster a sense of community and belonging, and contributes to the reputation and success of the institution.

Conclusion

The findings in this research contribute to the existing theory in the domains of HE branding by using a fresh approach to considering brand success. Through exploring the various interpretations and implications of brand success in the context of a selection of comparable newer English universities, this research has validated much discussion in the literature. Location was identified as a key antecedent of brand success for the post-1992 case studies. The core contribution of this paper, therefore, draws on the place marketing literature and data collected through semi-structured interviews, to understand how place marketing is being optimised in marketing strategies as a means of showcasing differentiation.

The strategic branding of HEIs has been a key focus in the university landscape for over a decade (Hashim et al, 2020; Yao et al, 2019; Rutter, et al, 2017; Poole et al, 2018). Branding has contributed a significant role in what has been called the 'market turn' in higher education (Chapleo, 2015). de Chernatony et al., (1999) stated that university branding makes a promise to consumers about the service they can expect, as well as helping institutions to build strong images and reputation to attract stakeholders. To attract students, an institution needs to stand out. This is achieved through successful branding; a process which highlights the institution's distinguishing features (AliChoudhury and Bennett 2009). Branding has become a critical ingredient for universities to increase their market share and as suggested by de Heer and Tandoh-Offin (2015), the motivation for HEIs to commit to branding may become stronger when the benefits are made clear.

Brands now have a fundamental role to play for private and public organisations alike (Dholakia and Acciardo 2014; Gromark and Melin 2013); indeed, Temporal (2002) argues that branding activity in a public sector organisation is no longer a 'nice to have' but a 'must have. This research shows that the HE brand is far from being a lifeless artefact, reinforcing the literature which refers to the brand as "a living entity, with a personality with which we can form a relationship and that can change and evolve over time." (Hanby 1999, p.8).

This research corroborates with scholars such as Naude and Ivy, (1999) who suggest that assets such as the geographical location of the post-1992 is heavily depended on for marketing purposes due to a lack of longstanding recognisable heritage. Accordingly, this research suggests that in the absence of institutional heritage, the university may instead draw upon the heritage of the location in which it resides. BU staff recognised this as a marketing tactic they employ throughout their marketing communications. This research suggests that without the heritage and history of older institutions, newer universities have needed to find a way to appeal to their audiences, who often expect them to be offering something unique. These universities have therefore focussed on incorporating location into their branding strategy to ensure their uniqueness of message is communicated effectively.

This research corroborates the literature to suggest that without the heritage and history of older institutions, newer universities have needed to find a way to appeal to their audiences, who often expect them to be offering something unique. These universities have focussed on incorporating location, their place offer, local networks and partnerships to ensure their uniqueness of message. By focussing on contemporary issues and what the university is doing today and planning for the future, post-92s remove the requirement for them to communicate their heritage (or lack thereof) as part of their brand proposition.

Furthermore, Naude and Ivy propose the marketing activities of older universities are not as aggressive as post-1992 HEIs, due to Russell Groups relying on "their traditional strengths of faculty, teaching, and research standing" (Naude & Ivy, 1999, p.132), whereas the new universities attempt to reach out to prospective students earlier in their decision-making process (Naude & Ivy, 1999) with innovative marketing strategies such as place marketing.

The research reinforces the literature that location is a fundamental element of an institution's brand (Ali-Choudhury and Bennett 2009; Chapleo, 2010) and is known to be a strong influence for student choice of study destination (Angulo et al, 2010; Veloutsou, et al 2004). This is consistent with Wala (2018) who argues that intertwining interesting stories in the brand narrative can set a brand apart from others, attract customers' attention and offer emotional added brand value. The three case studies in this research have all strengthened their brand by searching for a uniqueness of message, through showcasing their location.

The theme of place image bearing significant relevance to university choice was discussed during data collection by students in relation to study location. Staff discussed place image as an important factor for their own employability, as well being a desirable city to live in. Staff and students alike recognised that their location is a favourable location to study, and therefore "there is a big emphasis on the city, and this influences why people study here." (MMUHoB/MM1)

This research also complements the literature by demonstrating how brand identity can be combined with location to create a brand personality that will be aligned to the location's operational features as well as its emotional benefits (Morgan et al, 2003).

Interestingly, scholars suggest that marketers may even try to engage consumers on an emotional level by embellishing an existing heritage or creating a completely fictitious one (Beverland et al, 2008) This may be because longer-established brands transport consumers to their own past, making them feel part of the community that shared those brands in the past (Brown et al, 2003). This longing for experiences or products of the past invokes a feeling of sentimentality for times gone by (Hudson and

John 2013). The data validates this theory by demonstrating that where a HEI doesn't have a sustained heritage of its own, it draws upon the heritage of the destination in which it resides.

This research has important managerial implications in developing and executing branding strategies in the HE context as it suggests that the various attributes of the university location (whether based on the heritage, culture or the surrounding natural environment), can be used to create distinctive brand images which enable an opportunity for differentiation from competitors, which is fundamental in such a competitive marketplace as HE.

Limitations and future research

The research conducted in this study focused on three post-1992 universities in England and can be classified as a multiple case study. As a result, the findings provide an indication of possible trends, through the use of applying recursive abstraction. However, these patterns cannot be considered definitive, and caution must be exercised when attempting to apply them to other universities. Moreover, due to the sample size and cultural specificity, as it pertains solely to English post-1992 universities, the results are limited in scope. Therefore, the authors suggest that further exploration is necessary to determine if the conclusions reached in this study can be replicated in other countries and cultures.

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