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TRACING WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITIES IN THE GLOBAL PUBLIC(ITY) SPHERE

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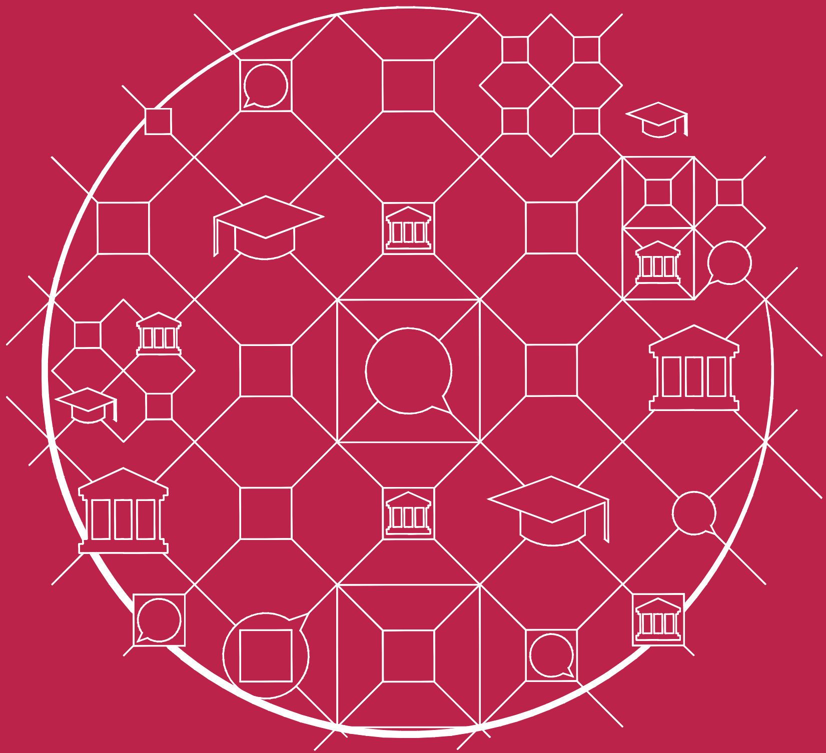

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For Karina Ka-Ying Schöch, 林嘉瑩, mein Lieblingskind auf der ganzen Welt,

who grew with this thesis and promised to read this book.

Contents

List of abbreviations

ACA	Academic Cooperation Association
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities
CBC	City Broadcasting Channel, CityU
CHEGG	Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent
CHER	Consortium of Higher Education Researchers
CityU	City University of Hong Kong
CUHK	The Chinese University of Hong Kong
EAIR	The European Higher Education Society
HEI(s)	Higher education institution(s)

HK SAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HKBU	Hong Kong Baptist University
HKU	Hong Kong University
HKUST	The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology
INCHER	International Centre for Higher Education Research
IT	Information technology
LegCo	Legislative Council
LU	Lingnan University
MAHE	Master of Higher Education Research & Development
MBA	Master of Business Administration
OCW	Open-source course ware
PDF	Portable Document Format
PolyU	The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
PRC	People's Republic of China
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds rankings
ROI	Return on investment
RRS	Really Simple Syndication
THE	Times Higher Education
UGC	University Grants Committee
ULB	University Libre Bruxelles
US	United States
UK	United Kingdom
UTD	University of Texas at Dallas

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The draft paper was presented at the EAIR 39th Annual Forum 2017, Porto, 3-6 September 2017, under the title: *A case study on the strategy to rebrand a world top 100 university*

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Preface

Entitled *Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere*, the overarching aim of this thesis is to unpack the concept of "reputation management" in the higher education context. Specifically, it intends to make sense of the representation and reputation of the globally-ranked "world-class universities", the changes observed in their external communication, and the mediatised environment that influences the external and internal communication, or even the governance, of such universities.

The term "publicity sphere" derives from the concept "public sphere" (Habermas, 1991, p. 398) with a "publicity" tweak. World-class universities use media not only for community-building, which "flagship universities" have been doing in the local higher education systems as their service to the society or nation (Altbach & Balán, 2007), but also for marketing and publicity activities aiming at reputation-building for recruitment or fundraising purposes, among others. Even though not all globally-ranked "world-class" universities are driven by global recruitment ambitions, those with income-generation purpose either via fees or taxation to the country, have both stronger motivation and financial strength to engage in global publicity activities. The resources involved are believed to be substantial although it remains difficult to quantify the investment because of inaccessible financial data in many cases and the lack of an overview of all relevant activities.

Although increasing attention has been paid to the return of investment (ROI) of university marketing and recruitment activities in recent years, cost-effectiveness assessment remains a huge challenge given the lengthy processes of "reputation-building" activities, even if narrowed down to specific (re)branding activities (e.g., changing a logo), as well as the difficulties to prove the causal relationship between the multifaceted publicity activities and the quantifiable outputs (e.g., the number of students recruited). Such challenges only increase with the digital and visual turn of organisational communication (Bell, Warren, & Schroeder, 2014, p. 2) when universities lose control of their representation in the global digital space. Damage assessment must also be taken into consideration critically. Attempts to tighten the control of university representation through regulations and legal actions may backfire with negative publicity or weaken the emotional attachment of the stakeholders to the university, which is counterproductive to the purpose of (re)branding.

In order to assess the ROI of university reputation-building activities, an all-rounded view of the processes, activities and stakeholders involved are crucial before identifying where the costs may arise and how effectiveness of such activities should be defined in the higher education context. This thesis therefore starts with a global comparative analysis of representation and ends with the suggestions for examining the processes and dynamics between stakeholders in reputation management which is essentially perception management beyond control.

University communication has evolved into a niche research area like *corporate communication* with the growing attention and volume of academic research dedicated to the topic. The author argues that context matters in university communication. By borrowing and adapting a mix of concepts including isomorphism, strategic planning, branding, rebranding, and framing from other disciplines, this thesis contributes to the contextualisation of these concepts in the higher education sector based on empirical findings. Particularly in relation to the complex organisational and governance structure of universities, the thesis argues for the need to examine *processes* with a longitudinal approach or collaborative research design pegged to different aspects of a *university communication* process. A *framing* model for higher education research has been proposed for this purpose. In addition, the thesis contributes to further articulation of the above-said concepts which may be useful for multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary conceptual development applicable not only to higher education but also other disciplines.

This thesis was prepared from mid-2014 to mid-2022 on a part-time basis. Except for the last paper on the theorisation of framing, the studies were presented in international conferences for timely dissemination and discussions in the higher education research community. Much has happened around university communication in the past eight years. I hope you enjoy both the conceptual discussions, as well as the changes I captured during this long journey of academic inquiry.

Queenie K.H. Lam

Trier, February 2022

Acknowledgement

This thesis is older than my six-year-old daughter. I am happy to see it standing on its own feet now and ready to interact with those interested in the same topic: *university communication*, in particular branding and rebranding.

As a part-time PhD researcher, a part-time practitioner, and a full-time mom, I would not have been able to juggle these three balls in the past seven years without the support and encouragement of the following:

My very patient and understanding doctoral supervisors: Jeroen Huisman and Ulrich Teichler. You did not only give me the intellectual stimuli, help me structure my ideas, critique my assumptions, but also kept me on track despite my tendency to spin off and pursue new interests. Thank you for your humane approach to doctoral supervision.

My very supportive husband and cooperative daughter: Christof & Karina Schöch. I would have given up anything for the family, but you didn't give me the excuse to do this. Thanks for accompanying me to my academic conferences during the maternity leave and for keeping me in continuous learning mode. When you grow up, Karina, you will understand why it took mommy so many years to write the three letters P-H-D!

My loving parents: Baba 老竇 and Mama 阿媽. You cannot read this thesis because it is in English. But without your life stories of the lack of chance to study during the Cultural Revolution, I would probably not have taken up all the possibilities to study in my life and developed an interest in education research. Thank you for lending me your support to pursue my academic interest thousands of miles away from home, and more than once.

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My beloved home city: Hong Kong. Thank you for giving me the best education possible as a migrant from a rural village in Mainland China and a lot of reflexive moments that shaped my research and professional activities in education, particularly physical-social mobility. I am forever grateful for the investment you have made in me, and I will not forget what I have learned and experienced in those 22 years of my youth, in schools, in social life, and at work.

My heartfelt gratitude to all the above named or implied. Behind every thesis is a community of supporters. I have not felt a moment of loneliness although I must declare that this thesis is a piece of work of my own. It has been a pleasant and exciting journey with many discoveries.

Part I. Introduction

Aim

The salience of reputation management has grown, both in terms of scale and prominence, in higher education management and governance, and, subsequently, in higher education research, in the past two decades. Reputation management is no longer just the job of university communication and public relations departments nor the unique topic of interest for a few higher education researchers. Neither practitioners nor higher education researchers would disagree that reputation plays an increasingly important role in university management and governance today, judging from the following developments: bold and unapologetic borrowing of corporate branding rhetoric in national and institutional policies; the increasing visibility of image-building, (re)branding, marketing and publicity activities of universities around the world; the presumably heavy investments into the proactive national and institutional management of reputation in the higher education sector; as well as the exponential growth in the body of literature addressing higher education branding and marketing issues in different corners of the world.

Entitled "Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere", the overarching aim of this thesis is to unpack the concept of "reputation management" in the higher education sector. Specific research focus has been placed on the cross-section of media and higher education sectors, especially the public(ity) sphere manifested in the form of media-driven world university rankings and the management of related positive or negative visibility. The role of media in the making of world university rankings and the shaping of world-class universities has been under-researched despite the obvious links between influential world university rankings (e.g., Quacquarelli Symonds [QS] and Times Higher Education [THE] rankings) and media corporations, as well as the apparent advertising and publicity activities (Wächter, Kelo, Lam, Effertz, Jost, & Kottowski, 2015) that universities paid the ranking providers to deliver in digital and physical forms (Chirikov, 2021). The increasing interdependence of media, world university rankings and universities (Stack, 2016), visible or invisible, deserves more precise and proportional attention from higher education researchers using both media and higher education lenses that transcend disciplinary boundaries. Started in 2014 as a side project of the author's professional activities in the promotion of international higher education on a supranational level, this thesis carries also an underlying, secondary aim of bridging practice, policy and academic research.

The disconnect between academic research in different disciplines, and the delayed research on reputational management policies and practices in the higher education sector may explain why marketing practitioners in the sector sometimes uncritically borrowed failed or dated practices from the corporate world (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Peterson, AlShebil, & Bishop, 2015; Grobert, Cuny, & Fornerino, 2016) that are not the most suitable for universities, especially public, non-profit universities with very different governance models and missions.

In addition, context matters in reputation management. Empirical data of institutional-level research were collected primarily from Hong Kong, a system with a very high density of both media and globally-ranked higher education institutions. While the site was chosen purposively because of the author's contextual knowledge rather than an intended aim of the research to focus on just one system, this piece of research happens to address a very important university governance issue that plagues the Hong Kong system since the 2019 social unrests; namely, the citing of "reputational risks" as a justification for stifling voices of dissent on campus and for removing legitimate, established student representation from the university governance structure. The direct impact of representation and reputation on university governance is a new phenomenon that calls for more critical research on reputation management in the higher education sector world-wide.

As a cumulative thesis, each of the papers has its specific aims that fall under the umbrella aim of unpacking the concept of reputation management in the higher education sector. Specific aims of the papers cover the representation of globally-ranked universities in general, the articulation of branding and rebranding concepts, and the proposal of a *framing* model that could be applied to higher education communication research that goes beyond (re)branding and marketing studies.

The journey

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

- *Robert Frost*

This cumulative thesis is a compilation of publications from four independent but interlinked projects organised under the title *Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere*. The thesis takes advantage of the flexibility of a cumulative thesis format to fit the purpose of tracing emerging phenomena that fall within the broad, predefined framework of the entire doctoral project, which is to investigate new developments around the representation of globally-ranked universities perceived as competing in a global public(ity) sphere constructed by rankers and media. The term global public(city) sphere is a play on Habermas' (1991) "public sphere" to emphasise the shifting focus of university communication from informing public debates to reputation management activities, which tend to boil down to branding or rebranding activities borrowed in name or in practice from the corporate world.

In light of the nature of the topic under investigation, which is largely exploratory and qualitative, it was a deliberate decision to leave room and flexibility for independent projects to emerge from the field or the preceding project without imposing a predetermined theoretical framework or fixed methodological assumptions up front. Such predetermined frameworks in qualitative research could have constrained the scope of discovery or risked reduced relevance for analysing unexpected empirical data of contemporary phenomena emerging from the ground, such as the rebranding case (*Paper 3*) that was discovered only after the start of the doctoral project. Therefore, in this thesis, concepts and methods were assembled on a contingency basis for each of the projects and presented in line with the prescribed thematic foci (two on systems – global and local, one on an institution, one on theory) and the technical requirements of the publications in terms of structure and word limits.

The structure of this thesis reflects to a large extent also the design of such a cumulative thesis, which is a portfolio of publications resulting from four stand-alone projects weaved together after the publications rather than a series of publications developed from one single, pre-planned research project using a shared theoretical framework and dataset.

This thesis consists of three parts. The first part sets the scene by describing the broader context from which universities' reputation management activities emerged and thus explains the need for the four projects, a post-publication reflection on the methodology applied in the four projects, and a preview of refined concepts and theories based on empirical findings in the four projects.

The second part consists of the four publications resulting from four independent projects developed from the observations from the preceding project. (1) The first publication is a global comparative overview of the so-called *world-class universities'* web-presentations. From this study, the author observed that different web-presentation patterns may be explained by contextual factors associated with specific world regions or countries despite a common assumption that the same group of globally-ranked universities tend to look like each other or higher-ranked universities called mimetic isomorphism. (2) This inspired the author to take a closer look into one particular system to better understand the contextual factors that may explain how universities represent themselves in similar or different ways and how that may be related to their ranking positions. The case was a purposive choice given that the Hong Kong system has a high density of globally-ranked universities of different types operating in the same systemic environment which is strongly influenced by globalisation, global rankings, and media. This study confirmed previous findings that post-1990s universities, especially former-polytechnics, tend to openly engage in aggressive branding activities when compared with both research-intensive flagship universities and lower-ranked universities in the same system. (3) That led to the rebranding case study in which the organisational context of a chosen former polytechnic going through a drastic rebranding was examined in great details and the tensions between the institution-, system-, and global-level aspirations and expectations were described and analysed from multiple perspectives.

(4) Finally, this thesis is concluded with a transdisciplinary framing model to guide future collaborative research design to investigate university communication activities from different levels or perspectives following methodologies of different disciplines or research paradigms as shown in this project. The model may also provide a framework for a systematic literature review of university communication research for organising existing research outputs and identifying research gaps or common/different terminology or methodological approaches applied for studying similar topics or parts of the entire process. This study could have been the overarching theoretical framework or have been presented as such but the need of such a transdisciplinary conceptual model was also inspired by the observations and reflections following the preceding projects that were addressing the same common theme of university communication but from different levels and perspectives using different methods and datasets.

The third and final part of the thesis discusses the implications of the work particularly in the following aspects of higher education research:

- the *relationships* between representation, reputation, and governance
- the *conceptual clarity* of world-class vs. flagship universities
- the (re) branding *processes* in the higher education context
- the *geopolitical context* and *mediatised context* of university communication in the age of globalisation and digitalisation, and
- the *transdisciplinary* nature of university communication research.

The discussion reiterates the importance of studying university communication in a more coordinated and comprehensive manner to better understand the *processes*, the roles of *different stakeholders*, the *relationships*, and the *contexts*. The thesis ends with a reflection on the limitations and potential research on *university communication* in the future.

Contextual background

This thesis is set in the context of globalisation and neoliberalism in which universities have responded to the anxiety and uncertainties of the external environment by adopting managerial approaches borrowed from the business world to increase their competitiveness on the global higher education market. Reputation and image are believed to be the assets for setting universities apart from others in the crowded market. The professionalisation of communication activities, more specifically the adoption of (re)branding logics from the business world, with or without adaptation, is therefore one of the major shifts observed in higher education management in the past one decade.

This thesis takes a critical perspective in questioning whether all these external forces and internal changes affect universities around the globe in the same way. By examining both the external representation and internal change management processes in four interconnected pieces of work, the author argues that the contextual background of university communication deserves more critical analyses in higher education research, especially from the perspective of resistance and counterproductive impacts that are still under researched.

Reputation and rankings

Universities as institutions of higher learning enjoyed varying levels of reputation in their respective societies long before they borrowed the concept of "reputation management" from the corporate world to modernise and professionalise the way they present themselves in face of global competition.

In highly selective education systems, where the annual enrolment rate has been low, the good reputation of universities, as a type of learning institution, sets them apart from other post-secondary institutions that do not attain the university status. Among the universities, the reputation of the different institutions is rather a perception of the general public, based on indicators such as the selectivity of the university entrance requirements (the scores of public examinations that new entrants have), the role of the university in the society (the social status and network of the alumni in the local community), and the size and age of the university. The oldest and the largest may have some advantage in accumulating positive public perception over the years with their activities and social networks, but limited age and size are not necessarily a disadvantage when managerial practices can be adopted to "manage" the "reputation".

As shown in the case of Hong Kong, a completely new university, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), established in the 1990s, could immediately overtake – in terms of the selectivity – the older and larger universities upgraded from polytechnics in the same era, namely The City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). Not only that, HKUST demonstrated that through the annual races in international rankings (initially business school rankings and later world university rankings), it could reinforce its position among the top 3 in the Hong Kong system via a clearly "visualised" pecking order (i.e., rankings).

The appearance of world university rankings can therefore be regarded as the watershed in university reputation management when reputation was no longer understood as an inheritance of an institution. It became a manageable "asset" that could be acquired through the participation in annual ranking races and associated events to boost visibility, strategic allocation of resources (such as the recruitment of stellar professors who bring with them visibility and research networks), the introduction of co-branded programmes (e.g., MBA programmes) endorsed by world renowned universities to attract quality students, etc.

It would be too simple to conclude that rankings drive reputation management, however, because universities appeared to be instrumentalising rankings, at least initially, as a fast track to attain a comparable level of reputation and social status that would otherwise require decades of hard work to make impressions on the mind of the local or global community. The relationship between rankings and reputation management is likely more of a cyclical relationship than a one-directional relationship. Some universities may end up turning the means into an end and get caught up in the ranking races without adding positive value to their reputation. Obsession with global rankings that departs from local realities may be counter-effective to reputation building when local stakeholders turn sceptical towards the management's narratives.

Globalisation and neoliberalism

It was no coincidence that reputation management and world university rankings both entered the higher education sector in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Globalisation and neoliberalism were the two underlying processes shaking up public institutions in internationally connected cities like Hong Kong. Being portrayed as the troika of globalisation, *Nylonkong*, a term coined by Times magazine (Elliott, 2008), Hong Kong, New York and London were the firsts to deregulate the public services in preparation for the competition in an open, barrier free, global market.

Following the examples of American and British universities, Hong Kong universities were encouraged to compete in the global student market and jointly develop the entire system into an "international education hub". All universities in the system were assigned different roles by the government (University Grants Committee [UGC], 2010) to serve both the internal needs of teaching local students and the external ambition of competing in the global science community and attracting talented mobile academics/students from abroad. This ambition was later scaled back into a "regional education hub" counting on the relative strengths of Hong Kong universities over their Asian counterparts. In practice, it has been serving primarily Mainland China, the single market that sends an overwhelming majority of international (more precisely in local terminology: non-local) students to Hong Kong.

Unlike New York or London, in the context of Hong Kong, globalisation happened next door, just across the border. The global ambition of Hong Kong universities was not fulfilled by internationalisation and attraction of students from the "Far West", but primarily by the influx of Mainland Chinese students and the "mainlandisation" of Hong Kong universities. This is a very peculiar situation not found in other education systems because the same terminology used to describe globalisation and neoliberalist developments may carry very different meanings in Hong Kong given its highly autonomous status *within* the largest market of international students itself.

To take "competition" as an example, rankings and reputation management are practically responses to the neoliberalist discourse of competition (Mok & Tan, 2004). Presumably, universities must stay competitive, as visualised through rankings and carefully managed reputation, in order to attract globally mobile, talented or rich students who would contribute human resources to their knowledge economy or monetary revenue for their higher education export. The same "competition" discourse is found in government and university policies in Hong Kong as in other ambitious systems aiming to have a share of the global student market for profits or for talents. However, in practice, the demand for study places by Mainland Chinese students constantly exceeds the supply of study places offered by Hong Kong universities (e.g., in 2006-07, there were over 30 000 applications, mostly from the Mainland, for the 1 450 first-year-first-degree places available). For undergraduate student admissions, a cap[1] has been placed to meet local demand since 2005/06. Besides, politically, China favours Hong Kong universities with national admission policies in the hope of reintegrating Hong Kong into China (Legislative Council [LegCo], 2007).

This is not to say that Hong Kong universities are not competitive or have no competitive advantage over other universities in China. It is just questionable whether rankings and reputation management are the sources of the competitiveness or competitive advantages of Hong Kong universities given the territory's special position and role in China. It is also questionable whether competition is necessary when the demand of the China market far exceeds the capacity of the Hong Kong universities. The number of Mainland Chinese students continues to rise regardless of the ranking fluctuations of the universities over the years, the supposedly reputation damaging protests in 2019 or the COVID-19 pandemic. All these lead us to rethink critically about the presumed "competition" in the global student market or the impact of rankings and reputation management on international student recruitment in the Hong Kong context.

Managerialism and corporate branding logics

Even if a government buys into the concept of globalisation and the neoliberalist approach to deregulate and marketise the higher education system, not all the universities are equally keen or capable to practice like corporate or

[1] Since the 2005/06 academic year, institutions may admit non-local students (including those from the Mainland, Macau and Taiwan) to their publicly funded sub-degree, degree and taught post-graduate programmes, subject to a quota of 10% of the approved student number targets. Since 2007, this cap has been doubled to 20% (Legislative Council, 2007).

entrepreneurial universities. Different universities may have different responses to marketisation for many reasons such as a different organisational context, identity, culture, as well as the financial resources available to effect changes (Natifu, 2016). The type of universities plays a role to some extent. For example, it was found that former polytechnics (Naude & Jonathan, 1999; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Chapleo, 2011; Lam & Tang, 2018) or new technical universities are more likely to marketise and tap into the global student market while traditional flagship universities continue to serve the local community or must at least strike a balance between serving the local needs and the global demands (Altbach & Balán, 2007).

In branding research, former polytechnics or young universities were known to be pioneers that openly embraced the corporate language of branding and image-building, while traditional, comprehensive universities were relatively restrained in adopting the "business terminology", which indicates a change towards commercialisation that undermines the legitimacy and the public good nature of universities (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). The different attitudes of different types of universities towards branding need further research to systematically map out the different reasons. These could be the management structure and culture, the perception of heritage as an asset or a liability, the drive to overtake other universities in the status hierarchy, the need to commercialise and secure private funding, etc.

Presumably, larger and older universities face more challenges in introducing sweeping changes, especially changes that are considered in conflict with their organisational identity. However, it might be wrong to assume that young, former polytechnic universities are free to discard their older identity and rebrand themselves as universities of another class, as shown in *Paper 3*. They might experience less resistance because the stakeholder groups are smaller or their emotional ties to the earlier, less reputable identity (Peterson et al., 2015) of a polytechnic may be weaker. But a university, even in its simplest and smallest form, is much more complex than a corporation because of the different structure and logics of governance, and the variety of stakeholders involved (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean, Arroyo-Gamez, Punjaisri, & Pich, 2016; Wilson & Elliot, 2016).

Supposedly, the governance model of a university should be democratic and decentralised to allow sufficient autonomy for the faculties to manage themselves collegially. That is the principle of academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Altbach, 2007, Nokkala & Bacevic, 2014). Students, who would be the customers in the commercial sense, are not sheer recipients of the products but co-creators of the products (Aspara, Aula, Tienari, & Tikkanen, 2014, p. 543; Stack, 2016, p. 22). Active students may even participate in the co-management of the production process via student unions, representation in the Senate and Council, etc. There is not a corporate branding model with employees and customers co-governing the corporation on a daily basis. Although experts of corporate branding strongly emphasise the necessity to conduct internal branding and secure the buy-in of all internal stakeholders to live the brand, the customers are always considered "external" stakeholders and the employees in general are not treated as equals to the senior management as in the higher education sector.

Universities that adopted the corporate branding model without adjusting to the higher education governance model tend to treat the students as external stakeholders and the employees as subordinates, thus distancing the management from two major internal stakeholder groups. This in fact goes against the objective of branding, which is to strengthen the sense of belonging and emotional ties or emotional ownership of all stakeholders to an organisation or its services/products (Balmer, 2009, 2010, 2013; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). Internal marketing (Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Mampaey, Schtemberg, Schijns, Huisman, & Wæraas, 2020), particularly in service branding, is considered critical for a successful exercise.

Resistance to university branding has been documented in higher education research literature (Drori, Delemstri, & Oberg, 2013; Aspara et al., 2014). However, exemplary failed cases like those in the business sector are rare. This is not because universities are better in (re)branding but failure is more tolerated (Williams & Omar, 2014) or more difficult to assess (Chapleo, 2005). With more and more universities having attempted to brand or rebrand themselves in recent years, a critical and closer look into the definitions of stakeholders in the higher education context is long overdue.

Managerialism and the professionalisation of university communication are two obvious trends around the globe. The sudden push for all to go digital because of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to even stronger competition among universities to compete for prospective students and other stakeholders near and far. Ever more resources have been allocated for "corporate communication" of universities. However, many of these campaigns are top-down, centralised, management-driven initiatives that tend to focus only on prospective students for admissions and external stakeholders (e.g., potential funders, community partners) rather than the internal stakeholders, including their current "customers" – the students.

Much valuable work on corporate communication and related concepts including reputation management, (re)branding, marketing, has been done in the business sector. There is no need to reinvent the wheels for the higher education sector specifically. Nevertheless, uncritical adoption of corporate communication strategy and model for university communication could result either in ineffective campaigns that few care about or counter-productive results, such as financial losses or even reputation damages when resistance goes public or viral on social media.

Representation and governance

The relationships between reputation and representation have undergone substantial changes in the past one decade. Representation carries a double meaning in the higher education context, one being the communicated identity of the universities, the other being the presence of democratically elected students and staff representatives in the governance structure of the universities.

Reputation was initially only related to the "representation" of the universities, in other words, the communicated identity either as a driver for proactive management of such a symbolic identity or as the symbolic capital exploited to shape a positive communicated identity of the universities. The relationships between reputation and representation were primarily found in the symbolic representation of the universities for the purpose of external communication.

In recent years, as shown in the case of Hong Kong higher education although probably not limited to it, the relationships between reputation and representation have expanded to cover a completely different domain in university governance. The avoidance of reputational risks has been used as a justification or pretext to exclude certain high-risk, vocal groups of representatives (e.g., student unions and staff unions) in the university governance structure. The management of reputational risks, i.e., potential negative symbolic representation of the universities, has been prioritised over the democratic representation of key stakeholder groups in the governance of the universities. Democratic representation, free speech, and a culture of critical debates are unique elements defining the actual identity of universities vis-à-vis business corporations or other for-profit education enterprises, like language schools or tutorial schools. To compromise the actual identity of universities to safeguard the communicated (desired) identity is a "wag the dog" phenomenon that requires a critical reflection on what the priority really is for a university.

Over the years, reputational management has moved from a topic of peripheral interest affecting only public relations and communication staff to a core issue of concern addressed openly and directly by the senior management of universities, who have learned to "live the brand" as in the corporate world. The physical co-location of the public relations and communications offices with the offices of the senior management is one clear indicator of such substantive structural changes in the governance of universities. While university governance structure and management style move closer to resemble those of business corporations, it is of utmost importance for higher education researchers to look critically at how reputation management transforms not only the symbolic representation (communicated identity) but also the substantive representation in the governance model (actual identity) in the higher education context.

This thesis draws particular attention to the new phenomenon that universities prioritised representation and reputation over the representation of internal stakeholders in the communication process or even the governance structure. An old but newly urgent question is raised to the higher education community: *What makes a university a university vis-à-vis a corporation?* The author argues that universities engaging in (re)branding projects must take this question seriously and set the changes in the higher education context in order to avoid becoming a *marketing-driven* university instead of a mission-driven university.

Methodology

Research design

This cumulative thesis is characterised by a multi-level, multi-perspective, contingent, and pragmatic approach increasingly used in qualitative action research or multi/transdisciplinary research design aiming at understanding social contexts and processes of a given topic in a globalised environment. Although not specified in the published articles, it adopts primarily a constructivist worldview (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) and acknowledges the complexities of the real world that need to be made sense of (Patton, 2002) by using multiple methods drawn from different research paradigms.

Some researchers define such a contingent approach as "pragmatism" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) or a multiparadigmatic approach (Kezar & Dee, 2011; Taylor & Medina, 2013; Bogna, Raineri, & Dell, 2020), deemed more fruitful than a mono-paradigm approach, for gaining a deeper understanding and more original knowledge of a context bound reality, which may be understood differently from different perspectives. Although the status of such non-mono-paradigm approach is not as established as the traditional positivist or constructivist paradigms, it is of great potential to enable inter/multi/trans-disciplinary research on grand challenges in the global context (Tobi & Kampen, 2018) by evading the paradigmatic dichotomy between positivism and constructivism (Tobi & Kampen, 2018; Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) so as to enable multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic collaboration.

The pragmatic approach adopted by the author was partly due to the nature of the research subject, being an interdisciplinary and a contemporary phenomenon in a global environment, and partly the format and duration of the PhD training. This thesis started with a general research design with an overarching theme and a standard methodology conceptualised for a monograph-based doctoral project to be completed in three full-time-equivalent years from 2014. The research design was later adapted for the cumulative format allowed by both host institutions, the personal circumstances of the author as a part-time student with unpredictable professional and childcare responsibilities, and the empirical discoveries on the ground during the implementation process. The author took advantage of the flexibility of the cumulative thesis and the autonomy of a self-financed student with a personalised supervision mode to follow closely the emerging phenomenon of university reputation management, more precisely, branding and rebranding in practice, over an extended period of eight years while working professionally as a policy advisor for national and institutional leaders in the area of international higher education promotion and marketing. The observations and experiences in the field played a part in shaping and refining the focus of this doctoral project while staying within the scope of the general theme.

Four independent but interlinked projects evolved out of the overarching theme, each with a different focus: first with a global comparative overview, then a system-level analysis, then a close-up investigation of one specific institution before pulling insights of the studies together to develop a transdisciplinary conceptual model designed to guide a.) collaborative multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic research, or b.) the consolidation of knowledge generated from existing research on *university communication* (e.g., a book project, a special issue of a journal, or a large-scale systematic literature review of studies conducted in different geographical or cultural contexts most relevant to global university communication studies).

Despite the changes in the overall design from a centralised to a decentralised design, the project stayed close to the original research subject: world-class universities as a specific class of universities closely linked to global university rankings and the mediatised environment. For this particular topic, communication research from interpretivist, constructivist and critical paradigms, or the pragmatic or multi-paradigmatic approaches mentioned above, can add a new dimension to the epistemological and methodological development in the field. The original design for conducting comparative and longitudinal analysis was also maintained in the distinctive methodology developed for each of the sub-projects.

Overall, the entire project is qualitative in nature using a mix of methods to match the data considered relevant to the research objective as informed both by the literature review and the nature, format and amount of the qualitative data gathered from the field. Computer software was used in each of the projects, albeit to a different extent for data collection, data storage and archiving, data structuring, and preliminary data analysis. However, the author remains closely engaged with the primary data in the entire data collection, cleaning, analysis, and interpretation process. Coding schemes were applied to facilitate the structuring and indexing of the data for analysing patterns and themes but not to the extent of limiting the scope of exploration or interpretation. Except for the large quantity of press releases in *Paper 2*, which were analysed using computer-aided quantitative methods, the author personally screened through all the collected data multiple times during the data collection, cleaning, coding, and interpretation process with the drafting of case notes and case descriptions. Basic statistics or word frequency were taken into account in the interpretation but only for indicative purposes guiding close-up qualitative analysis in a broader context where the topics or words appear.

Despite the availability of computer-assisted tools for handling large amounts of data, qualitative research remains a rather labour intensive and human-driven process to be accurate and relevant when different languages, cultures, countries, academic disciplines, research paradigms, and data formats were involved in the entire project. The handling of digital visual data was even more challenging from data collection to publication. But this is not a unique problem of this project. Challenges in visual communication research in the field may actually explain the gap between qualitative new media research and practices on the ground despite a marked shift of university marketing and branding activities from paper to the virtual space.

This thesis stopped short of venturing further into new media research on global higher education communication. The author did notice from the literature review for *Paper 3* that the quantity of university marketing and branding research publications has gone up exponentially in the past ten years. However, many of the publications either take a single source (Mampaey et al., 2020) or a single perspective (e,g., Natifu, 2016; Pringle & Fritz, 2019) in the presentation of qualitative research, or follow the traditional positivist approach of statistical analysis with very precise variables and hypotheses (e.g., Hashim, Yasin, & Ya'kob, 2020; Le, Bui, Duong, & Chang, 2021; Sharif & Lemine, 2021). There is also a positive and normative bias with the inclination to show successful cases or measure success or failure of marketing and communication practices rather than understanding constraints, resistance, and manipulation of information to good or bad effects in the higher education sector (e.g., Williams & Omar, 2014;

Mwinzi, Mberia, & Ndati, 2016). The positivist inclination and the lack of a pluralistic approach to investigate communication processes and phenomena are not unique in the field of higher education communication research. The same happened in the early years of framing research in the field of media studies which Chong and Druckman (2007a) called a "virtual cottage industry" (p. 106). It was such an observation that pushed communication researchers to come up with a broader conceptual framework of framing for studying framing-related processes and the phenomena in a holistic manner. This conceptual framework again needs another update because of the rapid innovation of virtual communication technology and the convergence, physically or virtually, of people from different backgrounds.

Besides, while longitudinal and multi-perspective/source research are considered valuable and essential for higher education branding and communication research by scholars like Clark, Chapleo and Suomi (2019) or Delmestri, Oberg and Drori (2015), such research is still relatively rare. This also deserves some reflections over how research is done and assessed in the field of higher education research.

As a higher education researcher involved in a years-long research process alongside her professional career, the author does not only gain insights into the predefined theme of the research design but also how knowledge is created, assessed, and disseminated in the higher education sector on emerging challenges related to the sector itself. For example, while journal articles supposedly have the advantage of ensuring timely dissemination of knowledge, the capacity and format of articles are not catching up with the trends of globalisation, digitalisation and visualisation in university communication, which would require a pluralistic approach or even a new format of publication. In other words, this is a double-level learning process for the author through studying the sites chosen for the research towards earning the degree and the field of higher education research in parallel.

Such an experience is unique to students writing cumulative theses who do not only have to dialogue with the supervisors, but also research publication agenda setters and gatekeepers, and finally the committee members of the examination board(s). Eventually, the final output takes into consideration the feedback of multi-stakeholders in different stages of the process. It may or may not stay close to the original research design but enjoys the benefit of engaging with multiple stakeholders, including academics, policy-makers and practitioners, through conference presentations, views and citations of the published papers, and social media sharing. Except *Paper 4*, all the papers were presented in academic colloquia and conferences before or after the publication for gathering feedback or timely dissemination of the results. This is not part of the formal requirements of a cumulative doctoral thesis, but important steps to ensure the relevance of the research.

In the following subsections, the original overarching theme of the research, as proposed in 2014, is recapped and the methodology of the four separate projects that evolved out of it are presented in a comparative overview in addition to the abridged versions of the methodology in the respective publications.

Original theme of the research

This project aims to deconstruct the popular concept of "world-class university" and reconstruct it by tracing its origin and comparing its different forms of representation in the global public(ity) sphere. The concept "world-class university" is believed to have originated from the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) launched by China's Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003, and has since been popularised by two other global university rankings (Times Higher Education World University Rankings, THE, and QS World University Rankings, QS) that joined ARWU in 2004 and 2010 and are closely linked to the media industry. In the past decade, these three global university rankings have jointly created what I understand as "a global public(ity) sphere" in which universities around the world compete openly, with the criteria laid down by the rankers, for a finite number of vertically ranked positions. In this global public(ity) sphere, the participating universities, which may or may not have joined the race voluntarily, are not rewarded with any direct material gain but with global visibility, which could be positive or negative, propagated through the rankings and their mediated presence around the world. Such a race in global university rankings and the associated global visibility is sometimes compared to the Olympics, World Cup or Formula 1. The universities racing in it are compared to athletes, football teams, or racing cars, and are generally referred to as "world-class universities".

The history of the concept of "world-class university" appears to be a short and straightforward one. A "world-class university" could simply be a university that makes its way to one of the global university rankings. The "global public(ity) sphere" shaped by the three dominant global university rankings and their mediated presence seems like an open public space in which all universities can compete for a world-class status by meeting a clear set of criteria laid down by the rankers.

These common beliefs surrounding world-class universities and the environment in which they are competing are all subject to challenges. The mere fact that two of the three dominant global university rankings today (THE and QS) are closely linked with the media and publishing industries calls for a critical review of the neutrality and openness of the global public(ity) sphere shaped by global university rankings. The concept of a "world-class university" is also much more complex than a simple equivalence to a globally-ranked university. It has been used interchangeably with terms such as "global university", "global research university", "flagship university", "top university", "elite university", "excellent university", etc., by universities, governments, media, and even higher education researchers from around the world who are trying to make sense of the world-class university phenomenon (Mok & Tan, 2004; Altbach & Balán, 2007, Altbach, 2008). Moreover, the term "world-class university" already existed before 2003 in the West, meaning that it has a pre-ARWU phase of meaning before it travelled across cultures to mask what the Shanghai ranker called 世界一流大学 in Chinese (literally translated as World's First-Rate University).

A search of the historical flow of the world-class university concept points to the appearance of the term in 2002 in an article by van Vught, van der Wende, and Westerheijden (2002). The article quoted the term from Altbach's (2001) article "Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok", indicating that the term has been in use since 2001 and likely even earlier before the presence of ARWU. It also indicates the potential migration of the term from economics into higher education and its global circulation from the United States to Europe, then Asia and the wider world, amplified by the ARWU ranking and its followers – THES and QS (Hazelkorn, 2008; Stack, 2016). This is, however, only a rough sketch that needs to be verified empirically with this project that will take into account the time and space dimensions of the development of "world-class university" as a global concept.

Project-specific methodology

This section summarises key information regarding the three case studies for a comparative overview. The methodology of the *framing* concept chapter (*Paper 4)* is not comparable with the case studies. It relies largely on literature review and synthesis of published literature from different disciplines. Therefore, it will not be repeated here (see pp. 126-148).

This thesis is doubly complex in terms of methodology because of the cumulative format and the qualitative case studies conducted with different methods based on the assumptions of different research paradigms. The methodology of qualitative research projects presented below is reconstructed as a result of the inductive or abductive processes and is not entirely the same as the original plans which entail many more detailed steps and considerations along the way. Key information, including – very importantly – the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions which influenced the methodology, including specific methods, data collection, data analysis and assessment, is presented in a tabulated, comparative manner. The steps presented are also simplified and structured to fit the comparative overview and to demonstrate the diversity of methods adopted in the different projects.

The research of universities' web-presentation or (re)branding activities subscribes to multiple paradigms, including the interpretivist, constructivist or critical paradigm, or a pragmatic approach as mentioned above. The underlying ontological assumption is that reality is socially constructed and knowledge of such phenomena should be generated from observations and experiences inductively or abductively rather than deductively as in the positivist paradigm, which is based on the assumption of objective truth. However, the author also applied sampling frames in the research design to bind the cases (Yin, 2003) so as to keep data gathering from the hyperlinked websites within the manageable limits of a single researcher. Manual and computer-aided content analysis was also applied, and coding was used to structure data collection and assist the mapping of the patterns (e.g., through colour coding of exported queries or analysis of frequencies/co-occurrences), relationships or themes of the data gathered on the ground. However, it must be noted that codes were not used as variables for verifying hypotheses or causal relationships as in positivist quantitative studies. Therefore, the entire study could be classified as qualitative.

The intention of this qualitative research has been primarily for understanding and interpreting the contemporary phenomena of reputation management and (re)branding in global higher education, but not to generalise the findings statistically to infer that the same will be found in other universities of the same characters. The findings based on rich empirical data on the ground may, however, stimulate quantitative research of specific topics of interest with more precise hypotheses using methodology in the positivist paradigm. The holistic case studies that explore and describe multiple dimensions of the phenomena, including spatial, temporal and cultural dimensions that created the bounded contexts shared by different communities, serve additionally the purpose of opening up questions for further research in the field.

The value of longitudinal and holistic qualitative research lies in generating inspirations and insights from the contexts and processes, which, in this thesis, indirectly draws attention to the need to consolidate and structure knowledge on the same topic so as to identify common terminology, concepts, overlapping research interest or existing research gaps. *Paper 4* is an attempt to create such a framework for a *transdisciplinary* university communication research as inspired by the three other case studies drawing concepts and methods from multiple disciplines and paradigms. This was, however, not pre-planned in the cumulative thesis but rather turned out to be a research gap that the author observed in the process.

There is not one single way to do qualitative research. For inter/multidisciplinary research, the methodological assumptions and choices of tools and methods are even more complex than traditional, monodisciplinary qualitative research (Tobi & Kampen, 2018). The reality is much less structured, clearcut or unidirectional than one would imagine. Previous research findings, increasing number of guides for qualitative researchers, emergence of IT tools have provided some grids to guide the research designs and actions of qualitative researchers. However, these developments have yet to catch up with the increasingly complex internet-based, inter/multi/transnational, inter/multi/transcultural (e.g., languages, polysemic texts/visuals with socio-culturally embedded meanings), inter/multi/trans-disciplinary research (e.g., different ontological and epistemological assumptions, different terminology/concepts) for tackling grand challenges in a global context. Eventually, such projects become very complex and labour-intensive processes from data collection to data analysis and interpretation. For the sake of simplicity, the table below applies the broadest categories to classify the cases undertaken in this project.

In the preparation of this thesis, such processes also did not happen step-by-step in a linear and inductive or deductive manner. In hindsight, the processes that the author went through when conducting the four projects and the entire thesis could best be described as abductive research, which Dubois and Gadde (2002) call a process of "systematic combining" where theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously. With such an approach, the author interprets the empirical materials and provides rich descriptions of the narratives from the perspectives of different actors by going back and forth between empirical materials and literature. Such a process is useful for the objective of "theory development" vis-à-vis "theory generation" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 559) and provide a platform for future research.

This leads to the issue of replicability of the processes of conducting a case study. Social phenomena cannot be replicated as the real-world changes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Even if the evidence can be reconstructed following very well documented steps and archived evidence to ensure the internal validity (i.e., congruent with reality) of the case, the interpretation of the researcher may be influenced by his/her worldview(s) and the way that the researcher frames and narrates the findings is unique or restricted by the format of the publications. There is also the difference between a static case, with actions completed in the past (*Paper 2*), and an evolving case (*Paper 3 and, to a lesser extent, Paper 1*) which may introduce uncertainties into the research process. As a result, these changes played a part in shaping the research process and making it even more difficult to track minor twists and turns on the way. For a research project studying changes and contexts with a rather loose framework at the start, such changes (e.g., the management's refusal to participate in the study or the change of the brand architecture in *Paper 3*) could have been accommodated, captured and used as part of the evidence for interpretation, however.

In the table below, I have captured the key steps and components of the research design in a post-hoc reconstruction. Each case is unique but they are also interlinked with several cross-cutting topics (rankings, world-class universities, self-representation) and an underlying structure meant for creating a multi-level and multi-perspective analysis of the emerging phenomenon of university reputation management. The comparative overview in the table also shows a spectrum of methods ranging from more traditional constructivist approach on one end to more creative multiparadigmatic approach on the other.

Table 1. Methodological overview of Papers 1-3:

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
Research focus	**To assess the presumed *homogenising effect* of global rankings on the symbolic representation of universities around the world.** To observe and analyse the *patterns* of web-presentation of "flagship universities" sampled from a global ranking in relation to their *contexts* and ranking levels. To propose a *transdisciplinary* conceptual framework for explaining the *extent* of homogenisation of university web-presentation: isomorphism (processes/resulted similarity in what way), strategic planning (rational/irrational), travel of ideas (adaptation), diffusion of innovation (web development) in the global *context*. To refine and adapt the definitions of *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Erlingsdottír & Lindberg, 2005) for more nuanced global comparative analysis of universities' symbolic representation with new empirical data.	**To examine what *branding* means on the ground in the Hong Kong higher education *context*, which was included in a global comparative framework defined in a book project.** To analyse the "world-class" discourse in the branding messages of the different universities to find out if it is a system-level rhetoric. To test a new approach of researching university branding using *different types of communication texts* indicative of different communicated identities in search of the *alignment* of identities (Balmer, 2001). To test digital methods for collecting and analysing a large quantity of press releases, the primary output of university communication activities underused in branding studies. To refine the branding concepts (Balmer, 2001; Chapleo, 2011)	**To understand an ongoing rebranding *process* and the *context* of the *change* and *resistance*, which sets rebranding apart from branding as informed by the literature review.** To refine the concept of *rebranding* (Williams & Omar, 2014) in higher education with new empirical data. To fill the research gap of lacking *longitudinal studies* in higher education branding research (Delmestri et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2019). To describe how a *stealth rebranding* (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) process looks like in the Hong Kong context.

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
		for application in the higher education sector with new empirical data.	
Ontological orientation	Constructionism: Socially constructed reality, multiple realities	Constructionism: Socially constructed reality, multiple realities	Constructionism: Socially constructed reality, multiple realities
Epistemological perspective	Interpretivist/constructivist: Knowledge is generated from observation and interpretation, a posteriori	Interpretivist/constructivist: Knowledge is generated from observation and interpretation, a posteriori	Interpretivist/constructivist: Knowledge is generated from observation and interpretation, a posteriori
Research paradigm	Primarily constructivist	Primarily constructivist	Interpretivist/constructivist/critical → Pragmatism/Multiparadigm
Methodology	Primarily qualitative, abductive	Primarily qualitative, abductive	Qualitative, abductive
Method	Case study: Yin (1994) defines case study as an empirical research activity that, by using versatile empirical material gathered in several different ways, examines a specific present-day event or action in a bounded environment. Purposeful sampling: According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of "information-rich" and illuminative cases (p. 40). They offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. Sampling is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalisation from a sample to a population.		
	A qualitative, multiple-case study (global-level) Descriptive/instrumental case (Yin, 2003) for refining the concept of *isomorphism* for application in university communication research.	A qualitative, multiple-case study (state/system-level) Descriptive/instrumental case (Yin, 2003) for refining the concept of *branding* for application in university communication research.	A qualitative, single, holistic, and longitudinal case study (institutional level) Descriptive/instrumental case (Yin, 2003) for refining the concept of *rebranding* for application in university communication research.

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
Sampling method and rationale	58 universities ranked No. 1 (including universities with tied-ranks; weighting applied in analysis) in all 39 different countries represented on the ARWU ranking (2009), which was used as a sample frame of "world-class universities" or "global higher education system". Purposeful sampling: ARWU was the only stable global university ranking at the time of data collection (April 2010 and November 2011). The other global ranking THE-QS was undergoing a separation. Quota sampling of No. 1 university(ies), "flagship universities" (Altbach & Balán, 2007) from each country represented on different levels of ARWU (presumably the most research-intensive given the ranking criteria of ARWU based on research outputs). Two rounds of data collection were conducted because significant and interesting changes were observed at the time of data interpretation.	All seven public universities (founded before 2016) with different global ranks in a single higher education system (Hong Kong) Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Criterion/intensity sampling: mediatised environment, globally-ranked universities. The system has a high density of universities with global aspiration but of different types (research-intensive, former polytechnics, liberal arts) and different ranking levels for comparative and in-depth analysis of system-level and institutional level contexts for branding communication.	One public former-polytechnic university (pre-1990s) that drastically changed the university logo (design and colour scheme) in a prolonged process of 10+ years. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Information-rich/extreme case identified from the preceding study of branding cases in the Hong Kong system. Data collection began in early February 2017 (tracing brand/logo or ranking-related online data backwards; site visit and interviews were conducted in Feb 2017) and ended in 2021.
Data source	University official websites	University official websites; a government-sponsored portal for international student recruitment	University official website (keyword search: logo, rankings), student-run social media groups on Facebook, mass media reports, social media discussion fora from internet search

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
			(keywords: CityU, logo; 城大, 校徽, branding, 排名) or hyperlinked to student-run social media discussions, interviews with internal and external stakeholders hyperlinked to student-run social media discussions, interviews with internal and external stakeholders (but not the management which declined to be interviewed), and a site visit of the campus (photos and video taken).
Type of communication material	Webpages: 58 "flagship universities" from 39 countries ranked on ARWU in 2019	Four distinctive types of communication materials: strategic plans, mission and vision statements, university self-descriptions on a government-sponsored portal targeting non-local students, and press releases. Analysis presented in the article focused only on three selected universities (HKU, CUHK, PolyU) offering press releases for the longest comparable period (2003/04 to August 2016). The numbers of press releases used are: 2 021 (CUHK), 1 918 (PolyU) and 1 296 (HKU) for the sake of comparability. The other	Alumni association meeting minutes, corporate identity guides, semi-structured interviews (internal and external stakeholders), news (official, mass media), reports (annual reports, strategic plans), photos (site visit of the campus), video (site visit), Social media (student-run social media groups).

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
		universities had much fewer articles.	
Status	Official, publicly accessible data	Official, publicly accessible data	Official and unofficial, publicly accessible online and on-site data; anonymous informants (over time, some publicly accessible data became internal data of the university intranet.)
Data format	Digital: Text, image	Digital: Text	Digital: Text, Image, Audio, Video; Non-digital: Text, Image
Language	Multilingual, only English data were used in qualitative analysis	English and Chinese, only English data were used in analysis	English and Chinese, both languages were used in analysis
Capture method and tool	Manual coding with a customised Microsoft Access form and database using a predefined coding scheme; screenshots of front pages and essential pages related to facts & figures, and rankings with Zotero.	Zotero, an open-source online research tool that automatically senses content in a web browser for adding to a web-based reference manager; or DownThemAll!, an open-source download manager that allows massive downloads of press releases.	Computer aided deductive auto-coding of documents in machine readable formats (e.g., corporate ID guides, reports) in search of branding and logo related topics, but primarily manual coding and written descriptions of other data types (e.g., photos taken during the site visit, social media screenshots, semi-structured interviews – audio, videos) for specific topics relevant to the reconstruction of process or subtopics related to the rebranding.
Tool used in addition to	Microsoft Access form and database created for data collection (coding), data storage, and initial quantitative analysis	Zotero. DownThemAll! For massive downloads of press	Zotero for data collection. ATLAS.ti for organising the data in document groups, coding (indexing) data to

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
manual notetaking	(through queries). Zotero for capturing and archiving screenshots of the visuals.	releases for computer-aided analysis. MALLET topic modelling toolkit for discovering the latent semantic structure in large collections of documents (Blei, 2012). TXM (Heiden, 2010) for close examination of the context (adjacent texts) in which these topics appeared.	facilitate qualitative analysis which was done primarily manually with recursive memoing and the mapping of the fragmented evidence to reconstruct the process and identify themes unique to rebranding, a research gap identified through the literature review.
Analysis, validation and feedback	Patton (2002): The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size.		
	Application of a customised and structured coding scheme informed by literature review and coding schemes used in similar studies (Huisman, 2007; World 100 Reputation Network, 2010) and a testing round on a few sampled websites. The front pages were coded two times by the author using the structured coding scheme and Access form to verify if the irregularities were due to miscoding or changes of the websites. Changes of websites were captured in this double-coding process. Discussions of the interpretation results with the supervisors.	Computer-assist probabilistic topic modelling for preliminary data analysis of the press releases. Discussions with a Hong Kong-based co-author familiar with higher education research and the system; pre-publication presentation in a PhD colloquium in Kassel (Nov. 2016). Triangulation of different types of communication materials: strategic plans, press releases, published student recruitment materials indicative	An ATLAS.ti project database was created to store the captured empirical data and notes. The data were organised in different document groups (e.g., Alumni, ID guides, Interviews, News, Reports, Photos, Video, Social media, Working notes, Zotero, Readings). Validation is ensured through the triangulation of official and unofficial data from different sources collected with different methods (Yin,1994) and analysed with an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The author personally collected the data

	Paper 1 – Isomorphism	Paper 2 – Branding	Paper 3 – Rebranding
		of different communicated identities (Balmer, 2001).	and screened through the data multiple times with sufficient time intervals between 2017 and 2021 for the preparation of multiple drafts (case descriptions) and presentations. Several drafts of the case were produced and discussed in PhD colloquia in Kassel (June 2017) and Ghent (April 2020), as well as in the EAIR annual forum (2017) for comments by higher education researchers in the community.

Theories and concepts

Research on university communication, specifically marketing communication, borrows heavily from concepts of corporate communication with or without adaptation of the conceptual frameworks. This thesis argues for the benefits of building on the conceptual frameworks developed in other disciplines, such as communication or business studies, but with full awareness of the different missions and organisational characteristics of a university, in particular a public university. Given the very different organisational structures, governance logics, and missions of public universities from for-profit corporations, adaptations are clearly necessary to ensure effective communication and avoid counter-productive distancing from internal stakeholders which may result in reputation damages.

In the four studies bundled in this thesis, four different but interlinked conceptual models have been applied and critically assessed for their application in university communication research. The first concept, *isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Erlingsdottír & Lindberg, 2005), was combined with the concept of *strategic planning* (Shirish, Thomson, & Annapoornima, 2009) and the *travel of ideas* (Erlingsdottír & Lindberg, 2005) and applied to analyse the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the representation of globally-ranked universities on their official websites. The second concept *branding*, borrowed from the corporate branding literature (e.g., Balmer, 2001), was assessed against its application in the higher education context (Chapleo, 2011; Lam & Tang, 2018). The third concept, *rebranding* (Williams & Omar, 2014), an extension of the branding concept was articulated with reference to the organisational characteristics and multi-stakeholder governance model of universities. Finally, the fourth concept, *framing*, rooted largely in media effect studies (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; D'Angelo, 2002, 2012), was re-modelled for guiding a transdisciplinary approach of university communication research to include communication *from* the universities and communication *about* universities, i.e., beyond representation and (re)branding issues examined in the preceding studies.

Empirical evidence and discussions of the four papers aim at adapting and further developing these concepts for university communication studies. The thesis seeks to address the general aim of unpacking the concept of "reputation management" in the higher education context, both as the result of the universities' conscious management-driven goal to participate in global competitions or the result of a defensive damage control mechanism in response to the general trend of mediatisation affecting the governance of all public sectors, including higher education (Stack, 2016, p. 394).

Reputation management

Identity, image, reputation, brand and marketing communications are closely related terms that are sometimes used interchangeably by practitioners and researchers alike. According to Balmer (2001), a corporate brand, like corporate reputation (the enduring perception) and corporate image (the immediate mental perception) (p. 257), is a concept concerning the "perception and positioning" of an organisation and how it is "seen" rather than what the organisation "has / does", as in corporate identity, or what an organisation "expresses", as in corporate marketing communications (p. 283). As for the relationships among them, corporate reputation, image, and brand are seen as an objective of effective business identity management which is realised through the channels of corporate communications. By effective identity management, Balmer refers to the alignment of various types of identities, including "desired identity", "actual identity", "communicated identity", "conceived identity" and "ideal identity" (p. 276).

This thesis focuses on the "communicated identity" of universities as to how it appeared on their official websites (*Paper 1*), how universities attempted to manage the communication of such identity with or without adopting the corporate branding logics and terminology (*Paper 2*), as well as the contestation of the "communicated (desired) identity" represented by the university management, and the "conceived (desired) identity" (*Paper 3*) that contradicts the actual/ideal identity in the perception of internal stakeholders during a rebranding process.

Identity management that intends to build up a positive image (immediate perception) or reputation (enduring perception) requires a dynamic and continuous communication process to shape the perception of internal and external stakeholders. In the higher education context, this has proven to be a particular challenge because of the organisational complexity (Huisman, 2016; Teichler, 2017) and the large number of stakeholders involved (Williams & Omar, 2014) who are not always clearly defined (Aspara et al., 2014) or delineated as internal or external stakeholders (e.g., students). University communication is either not managed or poorly managed, leading to ineffective or counter-effective reputation-building activities that result in negative publicity at home or abroad.

Branding

The term "brand" or "branding" has been cautiously taken up by universities around the world because of its association with marketisation, commercialisation, or commodification of higher education. Although some researchers argued that universities have been engaged in brand-building with their emblems and/or crests (Oberg, Drori, & Delmestri, 2017), some differentiated such traditional symbolic representation from the present-day branding activities of universities with the managerial approach to coordinate efforts to maintain a consistent communicated identity of the university or even shape the perception of different stakeholders in order to align the different identities defined by Balmer (2001) above. What is new, and sometimes controversial in the higher education sector, is the adoption of such "branding logics" (Aspara et al., 2014) from the corporate world that run against the public good character and collegial governance philosophy of universities.

Management-driven branding activities based on corporate branding models have been embraced by new universities, e.g., post-1990s former polytechnics in the UK and Hong Kong (Chapleo, 2011; Lam & Tang, 2018), as a short-cut to build up global reputation in the competition for international students and/or resources. These young(er) universities are disadvantaged because of the shorter time to accumulate reputation based on past achievements, like their older counterparts in their respective domestic systems. World university rankings provide a convenient symbolic capital for such universities to use in branding activities. The causal relationship between branding and rankings remains unclear, but it is no coincidence that the two are closely associated in the communicated identity of some universities that actively and creatively instrumentalise the positional symbols (Lam & Tang, 2018). In such cases, aspirational branding, or more precisely rebranding, based on a desired global identity may be contested by local stakeholders based on the "actual identity" they experienced or the "ideal identity" that legitimises the existence of the universities in the local communities.

In university communication research, branding has often been studied from a single aspect, e.g., the analysis of visual identities indicative of the change process: the change of the emblem into a corporate-like logo or the introduction of a brand new icon for easy recognition on social media (Drori et al., 2013, D'Andrea, Stensaker, & Allison, 2007), rather than a process which characterises the coordination aspect of introducing the "branding logics" (Aspara et al., 2014) that is new in the sector. The notion of branding in higher education, as presented in *Paper 2*, was a step forward in this direction by highlighting (a) the different extent that universities in Hong Kong adopted corporate branding terminology (a reflection of the branding logics) in their strategic plans and (b) the degree of alignment of the different communicated materials they released for their external representation. The findings echo that of previous studies, showing that former polytechnics are more open in embracing corporate branding terminology and their external communication materials (e.g., mission statements, strategic plans, press releases, recruitment materials) show a greater degree of consistency. The study took a multi-source approach to map out major types of external communication materials that contribute to the brand/reputation-building of universities, and to examine the alignment of such materials. The degree of alignment could serve as a reflection of the introduction of the branding logics in terms of the managerial coordination process or the lack thereof. However, it is not a longitudinal study of the processes, and it does not address internal communication which is proven to be critical for "rebranding" a university.

Rebranding

As shown in the case of Hong Kong, universities in the same higher education system may adopt corporate branding terminology and logics to a different degree. The adoption of branding logics does not necessitate a change of the visual identity. A change of the visual identity or brand symbols does not necessitate the adoption of corporate branding logics either. When the two come as a package, it may still not be adapted to the local higher education context, thus resulting in ineffective or counter-effective brand changes.

Radical brand changes, such as substantial changes of the brand symbols (e.g., replacing an emblem with a logo or icon) in a *rebranding* process or change of the institutional name in a *renaming* process, as typologised by William and Omar (2014), are double-edged swords that can improve or destroy an existing brand. The emotional attachment of stakeholders involved, identified or not (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018), who have associated their personal experiences with the visual brand, has too often been neglected or underestimated in the rebranding or renaming of an organisation. Failure of rebranding in the business world is not uncommon and is catching researchers' attention (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). A growing literature on failed rebranding cases points to the lack of communication to manage the emotions of involved stakeholders (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015; Grobert et al., 2016) such as loyal customers or internal stakeholders who have developed emotional attachment to the brand. As a result, rebranding becomes counter-effective when the much-desired emotional ownership, which is the "real" or "substantive" value of a successful brand (Balmer, 2009, p. 556; Balmer, 2010, p. 181; Balmer, 2013, p. 735), is lost in the process.

In higher education research, such exemplar failed cases are rare to find. University branding and rebranding remain conflated in the academic literature. Recent studies have begun to suggest the differentiation of the two by highlighting the "change management" aspect of *branding*, as in the adoption of corporate "branding logics" (Aspara et al., 2014), or *rebranding*, as in the radical revision of the visual identity (Williams & Omar, 2014). The change management process, in particular the communication strategy applied in the process, to co-create brand meaning(s) with stakeholders, especially committed stakeholders such as existing students, alumni and employees, is seen as crucial for the success or failure of a rebranding exercise (Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015). However, unlike in the corporate world, the challenges to assess the success or failure of (re)branding a university are so big that the cost-effectiveness of most rebranding cases goes unchallenged. This has been a problem in branding research (Chapleo, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2011). For rebranding, resistance, also in the form of indifference, and counter-narratives to undermine the new brand, would have to be factored in when assessing the cost-effectiveness of the brand change.

Paper 3 of this thesis presents a detailed longitudinal case study of a top-down management-driven rebranding process that stealthily and successfully implemented the radical brand change but created more resistance and indifference rather than stronger emotional bonds with the local stakeholders. While the lack of resistance strong enough to revert the brand change may be interpreted as a success in the higher education sector, a similar case in the corporate world today may be regarded as a failure for the lack of emotional ownership which speaks for the (limited) value of a brand (Balmer, 2009, 2010, 2013).

It must be noted that corporate (re)branding has been changing with time as well. Researchers in the neighbouring field have noted that increasing attention has been paid to the emotional aspect of branding (Peterson et al., 2015) in line with the visual and digital turn of corporate and product communication, which has given consumers unprecedented power to co-create brand meanings that may or may not align with the intended brand meanings. The management of negative emotional reactions in the digital space in a rebranding exercise has been gaining importance.

However, in higher education research, stakeholder resistance on social media is still under-researched. This could be the result of a tendency to analyse only official websites or social media channels for good practices. The positive bias in university communication research that favours the sharing of success cases deserves some thought about the way that the university (re)branding process is studied, including the researchers involved, the access and choices of sources, as well as research methods.

Framing

Reputation-building, image-building, (re)branding, marketing are all communication processes with positive objectives of influencing the perception, attitudes or even behaviours of the message recipients towards an organisation, a service, a product, or a person. Such processes can be coordinated or manipulated to play up favourable messages and tone down unfavourable messages to the extent that the communicated messages remain credible to the recipients. In a global market, in which such processes are mediated by mass media or social media, the concept *framing*, which has been developed as a media effect theory in communication studies (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; D'Angelo, 2002, 2012), becomes very relevant not only for the study of mass media communication as in news framing but also corporate communication and interpersonal communication in social media networks.

The concept must, however, be adapted to reflect the democratisation of media that gives more power to the message recipients, targeted or not, to create counter frames in a negotiation process, as well as the emergence of media regulators who attempt to shape or directly control frames generated by media organisations or even individuals with or without infringing the right of free speech. Based on Scheufele's (1999) framing model and D'Angelo's (2002) "multiparadigmatic" approach for researching media effects, the author developed a universal framing model in *Paper 4* that maps out major actors and processes from the construction of frames and contestation of frames to the varied reception of frames based on an active audience assumption.

Framing and the other concepts like reputation-building, image-building, (re)branding, marketing are closely associated, although framing covers a much broader scope of university communication and is not limited to the objective of projecting and highlighting the positive aspects of what is being framed. It could also be used for damage control by trivialising the damages or highlighting the salience of other, less damaging information. For universities in a mediatised context, university communication is no longer just about community engagement through press releases or reputation/image-building through (re)branding, but the interactions between universities and media, mass or social media, that directly or indirectly exert pressure on the university management's reactions to contending issues. How universities respond to their rise and fall in media-driven world university rankings is one of the most obvious examples of such multidirectional interactions when universities respond to media reports directly or to the opinions and emotions of other stakeholders via social media (Shahjahan, Grimm, & Allen, 2021).

More research on the interactions between media and higher education is necessary, especially now that many more universities have turned digital in response to the COVID pandemic. Not only marketing activities but also the core activities of universities, such as teaching, are conducted in a mediated environment that is expected to have a lasting impact post-COVID. The proposed universal framing model in this thesis aims at providing a framework to guide multidisciplinary and multi-paradigmatic research on the communication activities in higher education. It is also a contribution to the multidisciplinary efforts to develop the concept which may in turn be used for researching communication activities in other fields, not limited to higher education research.

Isomorphism

The homogenising effect of globalisation and world university rankings on universities around the world may not be as strong as feared. With a sample of flagship universities (top universities in each higher education system) chosen from a prominent world university ranking, the concept of isomorphism has been elaborated and applied to explain the patterns of similarities and differences on the official front pages of these universities in *Paper 1*. In this process, it is found that two different sets of concepts about isomorphism have been used in higher education research: one that follows the original set of concepts proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), namely "coercive", "mimetic" and "normative" isomorphism, and the other borrowed from Erlingsdottír and Lindberg (2005), namely the set of concepts consisting of isomorphism, isonymism and isopraxism.

At first glance, the two are both about isomorphism. However, with a closer look, the latter set of concepts has reduced the definition of "isomorphism" to describe only the similarity of "form" and then supplemented "isomorphism" with the other two terms "isonymism" (describing the similarity of name), and "isopraxism" (describing the similarity of practice). The former, proposing a more commonly used definition, however, implies similarities in both organisational structure and procedures and their concept is often loosely applied to explain similarities among organisations that may cover all the three aspects (isomorphism, isonymism, isopraxism) distinguished by Erlingsdottír and Lindberg.

Erlingsdottír and Lindberg (2005) believe that "idea" could be separated into "form", "practice", and "name". Moreover, an idea travels across time and space and is translated rather than simply diffused, implying adaptation to local contexts. Unlike DiMaggio and Powell, their set of concepts (isomorphism, isopraxism, and isonymism) describe the pattern of similarities among organisations instead of the path of influence causing the similarities among organisations. Both sets of concepts are applicable for explaining the similarities among organisations, but the latter focuses on describing in what ways the organisations are similar (isomorphism, isonymism, isopraxism) and the former focuses on describing for what reasons the organisations have become similar (coercive, mimetic, or normative isomorphism).

The author interpreted the two sets of concepts as complementary to each other rather than exclusive to or falsifying each other. It is important to see *isomorphism* also from the three distinctive aspects of *form*, *name,* and *practice*, although they are likely to come as a package when universities emulate others. The reason is that even when organisations undergo radical changes in order to look like another organisation, they are bound to be different in the degree of similarities either due to their inability to imitate or due to conscious adjustments necessary to fit local conditions, or simply the lack of resources in terms of symbolic capital or financial capital (Chapleo, 2005, 2007; Natifu, 2016). A more nuanced approach to analyse such a phenomenon of organisational emulation on a global scale can address the fear of homogenisation as well as stimulate the discussion about the specific contextual adaptations to effect changes.

Part II. Studies

The four studies that contribute to the understanding of "reputation management" in university communication are presented in this section. The structures of the four studies vary to some extent due to the different nature of the articles and the different requirements of the publication venues. *Paper 1*, a comparative study of web representation of globally-ranked universities using a combined conceptual framework of *isomorphism, strategic planning and travel of ideas*, and *Paper 3*, a case study of the stakeholder resistance towards the *rebranding* of a former polytechnic university, are presented as journal articles, whereas *Paper 2* and *Paper 4* are book chapters that discuss the notion of *branding* and *framing*, as well as and their potential applications in higher education research.

The sites of investigation of the four studies are: the global higher education elite community as defined by world university rankings in *Paper 1*, a chosen higher education system, the case of Hong Kong, in *Paper 2*, a chosen institution of higher education, the case of a Hong Kong university, in *Paper 3*, and a field of research, higher education research, in *Paper 4*. These are very different scopes to test the applicability and potential adaptation of the respective concepts for examining reputation management and communication issues in the higher education context.

The different sites of investigation also demonstrate the different dimensions at which university communication can be or should be studied. Reputation management is one but many slices of university communication research that has attracted both the attention of practitioners and academic researchers in recent years because of the pressure for universities to communicate externally. But even with this particular slice, there has not been systemic, thorough examinations of all these dimensions because communication has been a peripheral subject of academic research in the higher education field. Publications about university communication are scattered in different fields other than higher education, such as marketing, communication, organisational studies. There is an increasing number of case studies, but cases are highly dependent on the local context in practice despite the presumably homogenising forces of globalisation. The external validity and generalisability of case studies have always been a limitation of case studies rich in contextual values.

The mix of publications in this thesis tries to strike a balance between systemic generalisability and contextual specificities to demonstrate the importance of both in university communication research. Context matters in marketing both on global and local levels where interactions with the target groups take place. Two underlying threads: world university rankings and the case of Hong Kong, have been used to frame the thesis within a manageable scope for exploring the contextual specificities of a particular group of universities and a particular system of higher education while maintaining the global relevance of the thesis given the international nature of world university rankings and Hong Kong as a global city.

The choice of these two anchors: media-driven rankings and Hong Kong, in the boundless scope of communication and (global) higher education is arbitrary to some extent given the personal and professional interest and experiences of the author. While acknowledging that the choice of these two familiar sites may introduce an author's bias into the studies, the added value of reflexive research based on the researcher's personal and professional experiences for such a qualitative research project is believed to have outweighed the potential personal bias especially when the author consistently and consciously applied a critical, multi-perspective and multimethod approach in the analyses.

In the sub-section below, the four studies are presented in the order described above, starting from a global comparative analysis of the web representation of globally-ranked universities, to a systemic review of the notion of branding in the Hong Kong system, followed by a close-up analysis of the rebranding of a former polytechnic university, and concluded by re-opening the scope of university communication studies beyond branding through the introduction of an adapted framing model that can potentially be applied for university communication studies.

1. In search of isomorphism: An analysis of the homepages of flagship universities

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Abstract

Flagship universities are expected to assume a national mission of increasing a country's appeal in the competitive global higher education system, an imagined space often visualised through world university rankings. Based on a comparative analysis of 58 top universities from 39 different countries ranked by the Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2009, this paper contributes to, first, to the discussion of a potential global communication model adopted by universities competing internationally with empirical input, and, second, to the development a mixed conceptual framework, built around the clarified concept of isomorphism, for explaining the similarities and differences of the self-representation of such universities. The comparative analysis shows that there remained sufficient differences in the representation of flagship universities despite a common trend for them to switch from text-based to image-based websites. The much-feared homogenising impact of world university rankings were mitigated by other contextual factors and the time needed in the process of emulation. When more universities adopted new websites with dominant images, the top university on the ranking, supposedly the target of emulation, went against the trend to adopt a new form of text-based website that integrated its social media presence. The study, therefore, concludes that regardless of the existence of a global communication model or not, flagship universities are restrained by contending isomorphic forces that keep them different from their global peers, intended or not.

Keywords: isomorphism, strategic planning, travel of ideas, university websites, rankings, globalisation, resistance, context, higher education system

Introduction

Flagship universities are leading universities in different national higher education systems. With the emergence of global university rankings, they have become 'peers' in an imagined global higher education system and 'competitors' in the global knowledge economy. However, the concepts of a global higher education system and a global knowledge economy are equally vague. This suggests that such national flagship universities with a global role are facing a highly uncertain external environment in which they operate. The discourse of global competition further drives them into a state of insecurity, resulting in changes that are believed to have led to the homogenisation of university models.

Based on a content analysis of the websites of 58 flagship universities in 39 different countries listed on Shanghai Jiao Tong's Academic Ranking of World Universities in 2009, this paper seeks to investigate whether there is a global communication model found among this supposedly homogeneous group of universities. Specifically, it will first highlight major changes observed in the homepages of the sampled flagship universities captured in April 2010 and November 2011. It will then continue with a critical analysis of the homogeneity and diversity of the homepages of the flagship universities using a mix of conceptual frameworks, mainly of isomorphism, but also strategic planning, diffusion of innovation and travel of ideas. Finally, it will conclude with a reflection on the perceived role of flagship universities in global higher education and the knowledge economy in relation to their external communication strategy (or the lack of it).

Rationales and research methods

The heterogeneity of higher education systems around the world suggests that comparing universities in different systems is a 'mission impossible'. However, there are several so-called global or world university rankings which have caught considerable attention not only of students and parents, but also of policymakers and higher education practitioners in charge of internationalisation and research cooperation. Apart from misinformation, critics of these rankings warn against the phenomena of "isomorphism" and "academic drift" (Neave, 1979; Huisman, 2016) in the higher education sector resulting from the rankings' narrow emphases on indicators limited to hard sciences, past performances, or simply reputation. There is, therefore, the fear that national higher education systems and individual institutions may forgo their original mission and uniqueness in pursuit of a *world-class* status or a *global university model* propagated through such popularised global university rankings. The fear is not unfounded. Several studies, notably one by Ellen Hazelkorn (2008), have found "unintended" negative impacts of such rankings on international collaboration, research funding allocation, as well as national and institutional policies. There is, however, little research with a focus on the relationship between global university rankings and the symbolic capital of the universities. This is a gap that should be filled, especially when it becomes increasingly clear that global university rankings are more about reputation-building than about the measurement of the actual quality of higher education and research.

Rankings may not reflect the actual quality of an institution in comparison to its peers. But the ranking information itself has no doubt a symbolic indicative value, be it positive or negative, for institutional communication. In the realms of public relations and marketing, the appeals of emotion, prestige and status often override factual information. Universities that are ranked well or ranked better than their peers rarely resist the temptation to communicate their ranks for institutional branding. With the prevailing discourse of global competition, such temptation can only grow stronger.

In the global competition, universities traditionally strong in their national systems are now assigned a new mission to increase their countries' appeal to students, talented researchers and resources which are critical to the development of the knowledge economy but are prone to be globally mobile. These universities, referred to as "flagship universities" (Altbach, 2007, pp. 7-8), are not only expected to compete but also to communicate in a global environment. With their global role, they do not only have to bring their research and teaching quality to align with certain global standards, which are subject to interpretation, but also to communicate their achievements globally in order to attract mobile talents and resources.

However, how and how well do these flagship universities communicate globally? Have they capitalised on their global ranks? If so, how do they present such information on their websites? More importantly, does this particular group of universities driven into the global ranking races display a tendency to also adopt a global communication model by resembling their peers in the selected group or emulating the top-ranked universities? In other words, are there traits of isomorphism seen in the self-representation of such flagship universities? If so, what are the isomorphic features and what features remain different? Finally, do these differences or similarities fit the purpose of raising the global attractiveness of the universities in a competitive environment?

The above questions have led to the study of the homepages of 58 flagship universities ranked among the top 500 in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, also commonly known as the "Shanghai Jiaotong" ranking) in 2009. The selected universities represent 39 different countries from both developed and developing countries. They were all ranked 1st in their respective countries. Due to tied ranks in the following countries: (see number of universities shown in parenthesis) Belgium (4), Chile (2), Hungary (2), Italy (3), New Zealand (2), Poland (2), and Portugal (2), and the fact that China was represented as three separate entities – with China (6), Hong Kong (3) and Taiwan (1) –, 58 instead of 39 universities were sampled for analysis. Their homepages, as well as webpages with ranking information that are a maximum of three clicks away from the homepages, were coded in April 2010 and November 2011 using the same coding scheme covering the following aspects: language option(s), visual style of the homepage, the use of social media that are global icons today, content of featured image, and, last but not the least, the use of ranking information.

Using the coded data, quantitative content analysis of the homepages and qualitative content analysis of the ranking information used on the homepages were conducted. Where quantitative analysis was conducted for national or regional comparisons, weighting was adjusted for countries where more than one university was represented. It must also be noted that much of the analysis in this study was based on the coded data of the English version of the universities' websites, given that English is the only language that is used by all the universities sampled for the study.

Development towards a transdisciplinary conceptual framework

Although higher education research has developed into a transdisciplinary field of study, conceptual frameworks for explaining higher education developments have largely been borrowed from other disciplines such as sociology, political sciences, and economics. There is not yet any established theory for higher education *per se* and none that can be readily applied in this study of an important yet currently peripheral aspect of higher education – university marketing and communication.

The author has, therefore, called on various concepts that have been developed in sociology, economics, and communication to form a 'cocktail' conceptual framework for this study. Central to this framework is the concept of "isomorphism" which has been used frequently in studies concerning higher education institutions in a globalised environment (Stensaker & Norgård, 2001; Marvin & Marc, 2004; Gounko & Smale, 2007; Loomis & Rodriguez, 2009; Shirish et al., 2009), particularly, when assessing the impact of global university rankings.

During the literature review, it was, however, found that the concept of isomorphism is subject to clarification itself. To clarify the concept of isomorphism and its possible application in the context of higher education research, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) focusing on the concept of isomorphism and relevant concepts has been constructed for this study. Details of the framework are illustrated below.

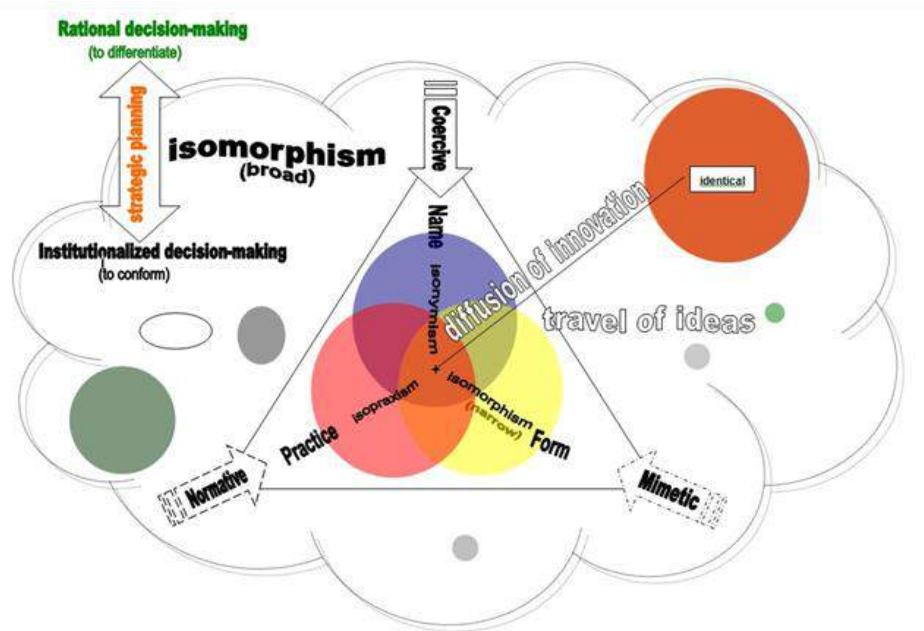

Figure 1. A cocktail conceptual framework proposed by the author for analysing higher education marketing and communication

By applying the concept of isomorphism, the phenomenon that universities (and their websites in the case of this study) around the world begin to look alike should be explained in relation to the uncertain external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Birnbaum, 2001, p. 181; Marvin & Marc, 2004, p. 85; Appold, 2005, p. 20; Jaeki & Fatemeh, 2005, pp. 1222–1223; Simon, 2005, p. 5; Gounko & Smale, 2007, p. 535; Shirish et al., 2009) that gives rise to isomorphic changes. The external environments surrounding universities are constantly changing as a result of globalisation and the ensuing neo-liberalist approach in public administration. Market forces have deregulated or liberalised the higher education sector, opening up the higher education "market" for competition from local private providers or overseas providers (Mok & Tan, 2004). Even though one may argue that market forces have not penetrated all the higher education systems around the world and public universities remain in operation in some of the most marketised countries, the discourse of global competition has created an uncertain external environment that appears volatile, if not hostile, to universities. Such an uncertain context surrounding universities, which have few established success models to hold on to, is represented by the cloud, and the different university models are represented by the circles in Figure 1.

In order to survive in a globally uncertain environment in which few references can be found from within the academic sector, universities tend to look to the business world for solutions, because it is both the pioneer and advocate of globalisation (Birnbaum, 2001; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Kantanen, 2007; D´Andrea et al, 2007). For example, the concept of strategic planning has been borrowed from the business world to help enhance the competitiveness of universities. From an economic perspective, competitive advantage could be achieved by differentiating oneself from the masses or by lowering one's production costs through economies of scale. Between the two, differentiation is regarded as a more sustainable strategy than waging a price war with competitors selling similar products. Thus, the essence of strategic planning in business is to differentiate. However, this very concept does not seem to have penetrated the higher education sector. While many universities are engaging in some kind of strategic planning today and are applying relevant concepts from the business world (e.g., marketing, branding) in their operation, the results of their planning are more in the direction towards isomorphism than differentiation.

This brings us to the distinction between rational and irrational strategic planning (Shirish et al., 2009), which should also be considered in understanding the isomorphic changes of universities. In Figure 1, such contradictory approaches are visualised with a two-end arrow which has a rational end of differentiating, pointing out of the uncertain cloudy environment, and an institutionalised end of conforming, pointing back to the cloudy environment.

Isomorphism resulting from institutionalised strategic planning, though irrational, should not be ruled out as a topic for scientific investigation. Rather, it needs to be better described and explained as it is believed to be a prevailing phenomenon in the global higher education system and is frequently associated with studies of institutional changes and innovation without much clarification of the concept itself. The term has become familiar to higher education researchers through major studies concerning the impacts of global university rankings and globalisation of higher education (Marginson, 2008, 2009; van Vught, 2008). However, if one takes a closer look at current literature, only a few systematic applications of the concept of isomorphism in higher education research are found and they are mostly used for explaining the impacts of quality assurance and regulations (Gounko & Smale, 2007; Hodson, Connolly, & Said, 2008; Stensaker, Lee, Huisman, & Langfeldt, 2009).

The study of Gounko and Smale (2007) is one of the few to have clearly demonstrated how three types of isomorphism, namely "coercive", "mimetic" and "normative" isomorphism, can be differentiated and used to explain why higher education institutions change in response to different external forces. This study clarifies and demonstrates how isomorphism can be applied in the context of higher education research without departing from the original concept of isomorphism proposed by DiMaggio & Powell. In another study by Stensaker et al. (2009), the concepts isomorphism, isonymism and isopraxism are borrowed from Erlingsdottír and Lindberg (2005) and used to analyse the impacts of European Standards and Guidelines on higher education institutions' quality assurance reviews. At first sight, one may think that the study is another example elaborating on how the concept of DiMaggio and Powell could be applied in higher education research. At closer inspection, however, it is found that although both are termed "isomorphism", the definition and scope of isomorphism proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Erlingsdottír and Lindberg (2005) are very different. The latter have reduced the definition of "isomorphism" to describe only the similarity of "form" and then supplemented "isomorphism" with the other two terms "isonymism" (describing the similarity of name), and "isopraxism" (describing the similarity of practice). The former, proposing a more commonly used definition, however, imply similarities in both organisational structure and procedures and their concept is often loosely applied to explain similarities among organisations that may cover all the three aspects (isomorphism, isonymism, isopraxism) distinguished by Erlingsdottír and Lindberg. In Figure 1, both sets of concepts concerning isomorphism in broad and narrow terms are incorporated after the following consideration.

Erlingsdottír and Lindberg (2005) believe that "idea" could be separated into "form", "practice", and "name". Moreover, an idea travels across time and space and is translated rather than diffused. Unlike DiMaggio and Powell, their set of concepts (isomorphism, isopraxism, and isonymism) seems to be describing the pattern of similarities among organisations instead of the path of influence causing the similarities among organisations. Both sets of concepts are applicable for explaining the similarities among organisations, but the latter focuses on describing in what ways the organisations are similar (isomorphism, isonymism, isopraxism) and the former focuses on describing for what reasons the organisations have become similar (coercive, mimetic, or normative isomorphism). With such an interpretation, the two sets of concepts are complementary to each other and are not exclusive to or falsifying each other.

In Figure 1, the broad definition of isomorphism and the related three forces - coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism - are presented as arrows exerting conforming forces into a triangle delineating the immediate external environment for an organisation undergoing isomorphic changes. The arrows are framed by solid and dotted lines to illustrate different levels of influence exerted by coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism (the more solid the stronger the force). The narrow definition of isomorphism (concerning only form), as well as isonymism and isopraxism, are then presented as three overlapping circles which demonstrate how organisations undergoing isomorphic changes could be similar or remain different in terms of form, name, and practice.

It is important to see isomorphism from the three aspects of *form, name* and *practice*, although, they are likely to come as a package when universities emulate others. The reason is that even when organisations undergo radical changes in order to look like another organisation, they are bound to be different in the degree of similarities either due to their inability to imitate or due to conscious adjustments necessary to fit local conditions. In other words, while the ultimate goal of organisations undergoing isomorphic changes may be to reach an identical status as the brighter, higher positioned model in terms of name, form, and practice, i.e., reach the position represented by the cross at the very centre of the three overlapping circles in Figure 1, it will never occur in reality. If and when this happens, it may better be described as cloning rather than isomorphism. Organisations reaching this point will completely lose their self-identity and become shadows of the source of influence, the big circle at the top right corner of the cloud in Figure 1. This is also where radical isomorphism most clearly contradicts the goal of differentiation, branding and strategic planning for surviving in a competitive environment.

In addition to isomorphism and strategic planning, the concepts "diffusion of innovation", first introduced by Everett Rogers (1962), and "travel of ideas", as described by Erlingsdottír and Lindberg, may be drawn to explain the similarities and differences in the universities' use of communication tools. Again, the concepts "diffusion of innovation" and "travel of ideas" are rather different from each other even though they both seem to be tracing the sources of isomorphic changes. Commonly associated with the concept of isomorphism, the concept "diffusion of innovation" implies an unequal power relation between the source of influence and the organisation undergoing isomorphic changes. Compared with the concept "travel of ideas", the term "diffusion" implies the flow of ideas from a high pressure to a low-pressure environment and "innovation" implies that the ideas flowing to the low-pressure area is newer (or perceived to be newer) than the one that will be changed or discarded. With the concept "travel of ideas," there is however no such a sense of direction or comparative newness, which often also implies a sense of superiority. Rather, it suggests the possibility of influences on equal terms without bringing in the notion of pressure or a power relation. Nevertheless, I have included both in Figure 1, because they are complementary in explaining isomorphism between organisations in different sectors (e.g., business, and higher education) or organisations in the same sector but of different ranks.

The 'cocktail' conceptual framework proposed above is a remix of concepts that have been used in sociology, business, and communication research. Given that higher education is still a green field without an established theory of its own, such a contingent remix of concepts is, perhaps, a way towards the creation of a transdisciplinary theoretical ground for further research of higher education developments, and in particular, peripheral developments in marketing and communication.

How and how well do flagship universities communicate globally?

A general switch from text-based to image-based homepages

University websites are rarely studied by communication researchers or higher education researchers. They are perceived as a standard, if not simple, information sharing platform with little creativity or substance of interest to be researched. In the field of higher education, they are also of peripheral importance in the sense that they primarily interest the practitioners who are involved in student recruitment and marketing rather than higher education researchers who have more important issues (e.g., governance, funding, knowledge transfer) to deal with.

The lack of attention given to university websites by researchers of different fields does not imply that nothing interesting is happening in this area. On the contrary, fast, and significant changes can be observed among the 58 institutions covered in this study. In the period April to August 2010, when the first round of coding and analysis took place, three universities, namely Oslo (Norway), Tehran (Iran), and Jagiellonian (Poland) launched completely new homepages, replacing their former text-based homepages with imaged-based homepages. Between August 2010 and November 2011, when the second round of coding and analysis was conducted, an additional two universities, namely Harvard (US) and Tsinghua (China), launched completely new homepages. Several Chinese and Italian universities, together with Tokyo (Japan) and Istanbul (Turkey) also made face-lifting changes to their homepages, but only in one language version. The Chinese and Japanese universities had revamped their English homepages and kept the first language homepages intact, while the Italian universities and the University of Istanbul did just the opposite.

In short, notable changes, though at a different pace, have been spotted during this study. However, it appears that not all the changes could be explained with the rationales of increasing global visibility or attracting (English-speaking) international students, as shown in the Italian and Turkish cases. This analysis does not rule out the possibility that they all intended to do so, but the changes may have misfired and missed their targets.

Without much surprise, it is also noted that when universities launch a new homepage, there is a tendency to change from a static text-based homepage to an animated image-based homepage. The only one that runs against this tendency is Harvard. It changed from an image-based homepage with very little text to a text-based homepage with text boxes linked to its various social media websites. The general switch from static text-based to animated image-based homepages may be viewed as a sign of mimetic isomorphism, if the older Harvard homepage is taken as a benchmark. This is, however, an oversimplified conclusion as the force of coercive isomorphism exerted by the adoption of new information technology (IT) in the higher education sector and the force of normative isomorphism with the growing acceptance of images in higher education marketing and communication are non-negligible. Further investigation into the institutional decision-making process is needed to verify which of the isomorphic forces play a decisive role in the changes. Besides, even if there is mimetic isomorphism, as some universities' homepages do resemble the older Harvard homepage in form, the impact of isomorphism is likely to be found among the followers themselves rather than the object of emulation. What is evident here is that Harvard remains different in a snap.

A trend in adopting social media by highly ranked flagship universities

By comparing the data collected in April 2010 and November 2011, a clear trend in the adoption of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, is observed. The numbers of flagship universities that have integrated Facebook and Twitter into their homepage have grown by 157% and 76% respectively during the study period. In absolute terms, these two social network platforms have overtaken RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which used to be the most popular means for universities to disseminate news from their homepages. Another new medium, the video-sharing platform YouTube, has also gained a noticeable increase of 60%, from 7.5 to 12 institutional users. While YouTube has not replaced RSS due to the different nature of information they deal with (i.e., video vs. text), it appears to have grown at the expense (or snubbed the growth) of two other means of communication that were found on the universities' homepages earlier, namely university promotional videos (for institutional profiling) and Open-source Course Ware (OCW) and Podcasts (for sharing recorded visual or audio format of the universities' lectures). This trend in the adoption of new communication tools has contributed to an isomorphic change of the universities' homepages and is largely driven by European universities which had been resisting the adoption of social media, in comparison with universities in Saudi Arabia or Israel, until recently.

The sudden surge in the use of social media in Europe may be interpreted as normative isomorphism instead of mimetic isomorphism since many European universities had been using social media unofficially (if not reluctantly) until they integrated the logos of such media into their homepages officially. Although we cannot rule out the possibility that some universities (such as the ones in Saudi Arabia and Israel), which are early adopters of social media, had the intention to mimic top-ranked English-speaking universities by incorporating social media icons into their homepages, the later adopters of social media are likely driven by the need to acknowledge and accept the changing communication habits of the new generation of (international) students.

Another potential form of isomorphism in force is coercive isomorphism, not in the form of regulations but standardisation of IT tools and software, as it is observed that the use of images and animation on university homepages on one hand, and the use of social media on the other, appears to grow in parallel or reinforce each other. This is true in most cases, because universities that have launched a new website clearly tend to incorporate social media links to their new homepages.

It must be noted, however, that the norm to adopt big social media brands, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, is far from global and that coercive isomorphism imposed by the IT world may be countered by state regulations. For example, it is widely known that Facebook, YouTube, Twitter are all banned in China, where the 'netizens' are active but using Chinese versions of social media. It is therefore not a surprise to see the unanimous absence of the banned social media on brand new websites of Chinese universities. This can clearly be understood as coercive isomorphism among Chinese universities because of regulatory constraints.

Another interesting observation is the comparatively slower pace (though there are also signs of increase) of Asian universities (e.g., Hong Kong, South Korea, New Zealand, and Singapore) in adopting social media as official communication channels when compared to their quick adoption of imaged-based web design. There are likely many reasons behind these universities' hesitance in embracing social media, but one of the reasons is probably their heavy reliance on Chinese students as the source of foreign students. For this reason, there is clearly little need for developing a means of attraction that cannot get the message across to the target students.

Despite a slower than expected trend in the adoption of social media among Asian universities, flagship universities, in general, appear to have become more "communicative" via their homepage by integrating different types of new media for either one-way information dissemination or interactive communication, or both, during the period of this study. The major difference observed among them is a general pattern that lowest ranked universities tend to use one-way closed communication means (e.g., virtual tours, promotion video) more than highly ranked universities, which are, by contrast, more open to the use of interactive social media. Such a difference in the openness to communicate may be a result of the differences in the culture of communication, as well as the confidence to maintain a positive image in an open and interactive environment. The lack of expertise and resources for the maintenance of social media communication is another potential explanation. Further studies are required, however, to explain the different means of communication adopted by universities as the data collected in this study focus only on their representation.

A general increase in the use of English, while multilingualism is promised

Multilingualism prevails on the homepages of flagship universities

While English is commonly regarded as the lingua franca in the global academic community, the role of English in the virtual representation of the flagship universities is not as strong as one may have assumed. After adjusting the weighting of the tie-ranked universities, only 8.3 of the flagship universities in the 39 countries use English as the first language of their websites. English is only one of the 26 languages used among this group of universities, meaning that language diversity still prevails in academia, virtually. English is, however, the most widely represented language in the 39 countries since some former British colonies have kept using English as their first academic language while providing selected webpages in their first languages. Similarly, it is noted that Spanish and Portuguese have also been adopted as the first language of the websites of South American universities, but the global impact of these two languages is much smaller compared to English.

Little change in the choice of first language has been witnessed in the period April 2010 to November 2011. But some universities have been found to have strengthened their web-presentation in their second or third languages. All the flagship universities have also been found to have had a separate English (or what they labelled as the "international") version of their websites by November 2011. A visible increase in the offer of Chinese language as a language option on Italian and some Eastern European universities' websites has been observed.

It is not uncommon to find universities offering more than one additional language to include other widely spoken languages such as Chinese, Spanish, French and German, as well as languages of the natives (e.g., Afrikaans, Xhosa, Māori) and of their close neighbours (e.g., Korean in the case of the University of Tokyo, Swedish in the case of the University of Helsinki). The prevalence of multilingualism is far from global, however, as universities in English-speaking countries (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Ireland) only offer one language option – English. Besides, a close examination of the bilingual and multilingual websites, typically found in European and South American universities, reveals that the bilingual or multilingual approach is sometimes symbolic and most of the time limited in scope. One clear example is Pierre and Marie Curie University – Paris 6 which ambitiously displays four language options, but two of them (Chinese and Spanish) had been completely non-functional during the period of this study.

English strengthens its foothold as the second language of university websites

Multilingual websites are clearly high maintenance. One may then assume that flagship universities offering only two languages, their local language and the most common second language (English) would perform better in delivering their promised options. Such an assumption may be supported by the dominant belief that English is an established lingua academia, particularly among flagship universities which have a global mission. This is however not supported by the findings in this study. The breadth, depth, and overall quality of the English websites of the flagship universities vary to a great extent. The most limited use of English was found in University Libre Bruxelles (ULB, Belgium) back in April 2010, when it provided only one single English webpage hidden under a French menu bar on its front page. Seemingly better, some universities offer identical websites with their first language and English. With this approach, they may have used the same template of the homepage, but the richness of the content is far from identical. In the worst case, from a communication perspective, the English homepages are translated from the original version, but only partially and unsystematically on the same page, thus projecting a "messy-lingual" rather than multilingual impression. One of such examples is the University of Lisbon's homepage at the time of this study.

Despite the chaos described above, the 58 universities sampled are found to have substantially increased the use of English both in breadth and depth. The most drastic changes in the English homepages are observed in Mainland China (except Hong Kong and Taiwan), Chile, Argentina, Hungary, Poland, Italy, and Japan. One common characteristic found among them is a loose link between the English websites and first-language websites. This may be explained by a clear differentiation of target users, i.e., home students vs. foreign students (for admission into English-taught programmes), as shown in the case of the University of Tokyo, and thus clearly differentiated English websites free from the constraints of the original. The loose link may also be an indicator of work in progress as illustrated in the case of the Tsinghua University (China), which had first introduced an English website, and only later, a Chinese one of the same design in 2011.

Slowly, a wider use of English is also found in Europe. The ULB had substantially enriched its English webpages and put an eye-catching "English" icon on the homepage by November 2011. Many more European universities have increased the amount of English information on their websites, while refraining from labelling English as English. They termed their English websites as "international". This seemingly politically neutral term has, however, ironically acknowledged English as the "international language", especially when the "international" label is coupled with the image of the Union Jack, as shown on the website of the University of Milan.

Using the conceptual framework of isomorphism, if the use of English on the international websites of universities today is interpreted as normative isopraxism at a global level, national regulations, and deep-rooted traditions on the use of the first language as opposed to foreign languages can be interpreted as coercive isopraxism at the national or regional level countering the influence of English. As a result of the counterforces, the normative isopraxism in the use of English has in fact resulted in, to some extent, mimetic isonymism in the promise of more English (or multiple other languages) that remains, however, iconic with less than expected substance and effect in global communication.

Considering the above analysis, the language options made available by the flagship universities on their websites should be studied alongside both their global aspirations to recruit internationally and the political influence on their choices of languages. The reason is that flagship universities are largely publicly funded. As a result of that, they are not only more likely to be regulated (linguistically) but are also more likely to be bound by traditions and localised expectations given their national standing and missions. Such socio-cultural and political contexts unique to flagship universities' existence must not be overlooked when explaining the seemingly schizophrenic approaches in which these universities present and position themselves.

Have flagship universities all capitalised on their global ranks symbolically?

An overview of the use of ranking information

All the universities sampled in this study were ranked among the world's top 500 universities and the topmost university of their respective countries by ARWU.

In theory, they are the ones who can reap the benefit of the ranking results for brand-building, at least at a national level. But, in practice, how many of them are using the ranking results on their homepage? The answer is: very few, if we only look at the homepage (i.e., the front page) of the university websites. In each of the coding exercises conducted in 2010 and 2011, only two universities were found to have made explicit reference to their ARWU position on the homepage. Slightly more universities (3-4) used the THES results, but this number is also very low. The only university that has been using ranking results extensively and consistently throughout the period of this study is King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. It was joined later by the University of Science and Technology of China which, since launching a new website, also displays an eye-catching banner on the homepage about its ranking positions.

The absence of ranking information on the homepage of other universities does not imply that there is no impact, however. The difference lies in the level of subtlety. Several universities have displayed the term "ranking" or ranking-related terms such as "leading" or "top university" on their homepages, hyperlinked to detailed descriptions of their ranking results or "achievements". This is a less eye-catching approach than displaying a banner. Yet, there is an obvious enough path directing the viewers of the homepage to the ranking results. Such an approach is commonly found among universities in New Zealand, the Nordic countries and increasingly in Eastern European countries. Moving up the level of subtlety, some universities do not display ranking information up front, but as part of the "facts and figures" or the general introduction about the university that are one to three layers below their homepages. In some cases, a ranking section or Nobel Prize winners section is displayed in parallel with the general information provided about the university without mentioning rankings on the homepage.

By taking into account more subtle expressions of the rankings such as the ones described above, over half of the universities (some 62%) in this group of 58, regardless of geographical regions and ranking positions, are using ranking information on their websites. This does not take into account sporadic ranking information given out as "news" when the annual ranking results are released, meaning that the use of ranking data by universities is bound to be more than what is presented in this study.

An analysis of the styles in which ranking information is presented

As for how and to what extent flagship universities use ranking information on their websites, an analysis of the data collected from the 36 universities that have used ranking information shows a very diverse picture as described below:

Pompous presentation style

As mentioned earlier, only two universities carried a banner on their homepage boasting their ranking positions. Such a "hard-sell" strategy is rarely found among the flagship universities analysed here. Instead, it is more common to see ranking-related messages (explicit or subtle) displayed upfront on the homepage to direct the users' attention to more detailed messages that the universities intend to convey as "facts" or "analysis". Compared to other more subtle expressions of rankings, we may call explicit presentation of rankings or links to rankings up front on a homepage "pompous presentation", which resembles an advertisement. Eight universities were found to have used this strategy, and six among them have slogans claiming themselves as the best, the leading, the top or top-ranked university in their country or region, if not globally (depending on how the ranking positions are interpreted, creatively).

Analytical presentation style

Among the universities which do not display ranking related images or messages on the front page, eight of them dedicate a separate section or webpage to rankings, indicating that they do not take rankings lightly. Apart from the University of Cambridge, which is simply listing all its top-ranking positions in the one-paragraph "League tables" section, the others with a dedicated section on rankings have gone to great lengths to describe their positions in different rankings and/or provided an "analysis" of their ranking positions, comparing their own ranking performance over the years or with other universities. It is interesting to note in this group that there is a tendency among European universities to first question the rankings before they bring in the analysis of their ranking positions. It is also noted that European universities, judging from where they locate the ranking information, tend to relate rankings to research, even though not all rankings they present in fact measure research outputs. By contrast, universities in the Asia-Pacific and Canada tend to link rankings to student recruitment or to their global positioning in general.

Factual presentation style

In stark contrast with the previous group, four universities mention rankings in passing in the introductory message about their university and seven simply incorporate rankings as statistics under "facts and figures" without discussion. These are less detailed presentations of rankings, but the brevity should not be taken as a sign of unimportance. On the contrary, the endorsement of the rankings and the unquestioned incorporation of the ranking figures as part of the institutional identity or statistics may indicate that rankings have been internalised in the university's operation. In the two specific cases – the University of Dublin and Utrecht University, ranking figures were placed in a prominent position, even before the founding year of the university itself.

Indicative presentation style

However critical a university may appear in the use of ranking information and regardless of the length of the message about rankings, universities using ranking information have inherently endorsed rankings as a means for them to shape their institutional profile. Therefore, the very act of incorporating ranking information on the university website and the critical analysis displayed are contradictory in nature. One may say that while this is not ideal, it is inevitable because "rankings are here to stay". How about Harvard, the top-most university on the ARWU ranking and many others? There is no direct reference to rankings on the website of Harvard, but the "fact" that "44 current and former faculty members" are/were Nobel Laureates is stated in the overview "Harvard at a Glance". Such an indicative presentation, avoiding the controversy of rankings while using one of the most discussed indicators that has its own established reputation, is also found in a few other old universities such as Karolinska Institute (est. 1810), Moscow State University (est. 1755) and University of Vienna (est. 1365). It is, however, not clear whether these universities intentionally avoid the use of rankings or if there is a lack of communication strategy. The doubt here is raised due to the following observations: Moscow State University, despite its high-ranking position, features one of the oldest websites among the sampled universities. The "online tour" it offers from its homepage is actually a slideshow of photos. The University of Vienna has provided a direct link to its online university shop on the English homepage, which is not found in the most commercialised higher education systems, not to mention Europe where commercialisation of higher education remains a taboo.

The analysis above suggests that the most crucial element for determining the impact of rankings is not the presentation style. Universities that display a pompous banner boasting their ranking positions are not necessarily less critical than those listing ranking information before their year of foundation as "facts and figures". Universities that have gone to great lengths to explain the flaws of rankings but continue to use (or endorse) the information to validate their own (research) achievements may have been impacted more by rankings than those which used ranking information solely for packaging themselves and student recruitment. In the worst case, when universities use ranking data to consolidate their own position at the expense of other universities in the same system, as found in some Flemish, French and New Zealand universities, the impact of rankings on the internal balance between competition and cooperation among universities in the same national system is not negligible.

An ironic observation from this study is that European universities, which have criticised rankings the most, are using ranking information on their homepages more than Asian universities, which are believed to be obsessed with rankings. Two possible reasons may explain this discrepancy between common beliefs and the practices found in this study. First, many of the Asian universities are ranked below the top 100-200. They may not have considered the ranking positions worth mentioning. Second, rankings are more likely to affect universities that aim at attracting Asian students rather than institutions located in Asia. This is shown in the differentiated approach taken by the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and the University of Milan (Italy) in adapting their Chinese and English international student recruitment brochures by including ranking information.

The above reasoning does not mean that Asian universities are not using ranking information. Rather, the decision to use ranking information or not depends also on the orientation of different Asian countries. Universities in New Zealand, as well as those in Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong are increasingly interested in tapping into the massive outflow of students from within Asia. These universities have also begun to use ranking information to position themselves in the global higher education system by proving themselves of equal standing as, at least some of, their European or American counterparts. Such an orientation on student recruitment may also explain the use of ranking information for marketing rather than indicating research performance in Asia.

Discussion

As the results from this study show, the concept of isomorphism is more complex than is commonly understood. We can search for isomorphism by looking at how things look alike (such as similarities in forms as a result of isomorphism in a narrow sense, similarities in names as a result of isonymism, or similarities in practices as a result of isopraxism) and why they look alike (such as being the result of coercive, mimetic, or normative isomorphism). The kind of mimetic isomorphism that is often associated with the unintended impacts of rankings is only one out of the many sub-types of isomorphism just mentioned.

Based on the data collected in this study, universities can be similar to or different from each other because of various forces of isomorphism that can be reinforcing each other or restraining each other. Therefore, while there is a belief that flagship universities present in global rankings may be compelled to look like their peers on the rankings or emulate the top-ranked universities, it must be noted that the mimetic isomorphism in question can be restrained by coercive and/or normative isomorphism arising from state regulations, local norms, or the nature of universities (i.e., private vs. public).

As a result of such contending forces, it is highly unlikely to find a global model of university or a global communication model at any given time, however strong the impacts of rankings may be. It is found in this study that the flagship universities, although they are sharing increasingly similar missions to lead in the imagined global higher education system and compete in the knowledge economy, are far from homogeneous in outlook, not to mention other aspects of their operation.

This is not to say that they are all uniquely different and that there is no sign of isomorphism, however. First, there are indeed signs of mimetic isomorphism between the new image-dominant homepages adopted by some lowest ranked flagships and the older homepage of the top-ranked Harvard before it switched to a new style. However, the similarities are limited to the adoption of similar homepage templates and iconic labels rather than the content of the messages being communicated. In other words, local adaptations are found even in cases of mimetic isomorphism.

Second, although mimetic isomorphism is found to be less prominent between universities in established national systems and the top-ranked universities, normative isomorphism is clearly reflected in the homogeneity among universities in the same world region. Such regional homogeneity, plus some noticeable signs of failed attempts to communicate through their homepages, implies that their differentiation from the top-ranked universities cannot be attributed to rational strategic planning. There is clearly conformity as a result of normative isomorphism, even though it is not at a global level nor driven by rankings.

In a positive sense, strong regional norms can help universities counter the fear of uncertainty in the changing global environment and maintain their regional diversity. In a negative sense, the counterforce of normative isomorphism may have only delayed a paradigm shift, as in the case of IT revolution and de-regularisation of universities, which would ultimately have its impact at a later stage. Such diversity maintained as a result of resistance, rather than conscious differentiation, is therefore only temporary. It may disappear as time goes by.

Third, compared to normative isomorphism, coercive isomorphism appears to have a smaller role to play in the homogenisation of university homepages. There are rarely hard and fast rules imposed by the states on how university websites should be designed. Though seemingly unlikely, overarching national regulations can still affect what should and should not appear on a university's homepage, even though these regulations are not applied solely to universities. At a global level, the changes in IT infrastructures and software may also result in coercive isomorphism if and when certain platforms or standards are no longer supported by existing technologies.

All in all, the findings in this study show that flagship universities in the global higher education system, if it does exist, remain virtually heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. There is a tendency to move towards homogeneity with the adoption of image-based animated homepages and the use of English and social media. But due to the different speed and ability in the adoption of innovation and the local adaptations of imported ideas, homogeneity is highly unlikely to be found at a global scale at any given time. In other words, there is no fear of global homogeneity among the homepages of flagship universities yet, and as a result, no such thing as a "global communication model" for flagship universities.

Implications

In the discourse of global competition, few seem to have doubted the existence and the boundaries of a global higher education system and a global knowledge economy. While leading universities in different national systems are assigned a new mission to compete globally, there is little questioning of their suitability and fitness for such global competition. It seems to be a natural assumption that being the top universities in their national systems, they are the best equipped to compete globally. This study challenges, to some extent, such an assumption from an institutional communication point of view. Many of these flagship universities, which are mostly publicly funded as well as heavily regulated, do not seem to be better prepared to communicate or compete globally than their private counterparts.

It is difficult to draw a line between top private universities such as Harvard and public universities by funding sources these days. But in terms of the flexibility to use the funding, the incentive to innovate, the need to take risk and to appear attractive to students, researchers, and funders – in general, the adoption of a business approach in the operation –, the public-private divide is still clearly visible in most national systems. Some flagship universities have begun to privatise part of their functions in the name of university-industry partnerships, university-community engagement activities or internationalisation of teaching, and to adopt a market-oriented approach in promotion. Nevertheless, they are far from being unchained from national regulations, localised socio-cultural norms, and public expectations to serve the local needs.

If the global higher education system in which they are competing is narrowly defined as racing up the global rankings, and if the global knowledge economy that they must lead is narrowly defined as the export of higher education services, perhaps, these publicly funded flagships are not in the best position to lead.

2. The notion of branding in the higher education sector: The case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This chapter observes that branding is a stated strategic priority of four out of seven public universities in Hong Kong. However, the branding activities they propose miss the essence – the alignment of their various identities. By adapting the concept of corporate branding to the analysis of their self-representations in four distinctive types of communication materials (strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment materials, and press releases), we introduce a new approach to university branding study by examining the content alignment in addition to the content itself. Findings show that while all Hong Kong universities have balanced their self-representations between excellence and uniqueness, new technical universities that openly state branding as a priority show more signs of alignment in the communication materials.

Keywords: Branding, strategic priority, higher education, Hong Kong, identity, brand alignment, technical university, communication materials (strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment materials, and press releases)

Introduction

This chapter seeks to clarify the notion of branding in the higher education sector by using the case of Hong Kong where neoliberalist reforms have been carried out in the past two decades. The ethos of Hong Kong universities had been elitist before the two waves of massification (Lo & Tang, 2017; Tang, 2015). The University of Hong Kong was the only university for training colonial bureaucrats and professionals from 1912 onwards, until The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was established in 1963. Only very talented students in Hong Kong were granted access to these two universities before the two waves of massification. The first wave of massification took place in the 1990s when the British colonial government encountered a legitimacy crisis in governing the city which was destined to return to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Tang, 2015). Reacting to the palpable authoritarianism and political unrest of China at the turn of 1990s, many Hong Kong people left the city. The colonial government, in response, substantially broadened the access to universities through the establishment of The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 1991 and the granting of university status to four local post-secondary colleges – Hong Kong Baptist University, City University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1994, and Lingnan University in 1999. The higher education system in Hong Kong was predominantly constituted of these public-funded universities until the second wave of massification, which was realised in the 2000s by the establishment of self-financing post-secondary community colleges and the introduction of associate degree programmes.

For nearly half a century, universities as public institutions were not seen as competitive actors in the way the corporate setting operated them (Hasse & Krücken, 2013). The competitive discourse appeared only in late 1990s when neoliberal ideology penetrated the public sector and when Hong Kong became an integral part of the PRC under the "One Country Two Systems" arrangement. The idea of "branding" Hong Kong reportedly emerged in 1997 when much attention was focused on Hong Kong's return to the PRC (Information Services Unit of Hong Kong SAR Government, n.d.). Subsequently branded as "Asia's World City" in 2001, Hong Kong ambitiously positions itself on par with London and New York as a leading player of globalisation. Heavy investments have been made to develop "world-class" hardware (infrastructures) and software (manpower) in Hong Kong so as to maintain its competitive edge in global competition. Public universities, being at the forefront of human resource development and knowledge production, have been challenged with new social expectations to provide quality education responsive to the fast-changing world and to engage in cutting-edge applied research that brings about innovations (UGC, 2010).

Specifically, strong policy drives were introduced in the first decade of the 21st Century to develop Hong Kong into a "regional education hub" (UGC, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2010) and to shape its higher education system as one of the six pillars of Hong Kong's new (knowledge) economy (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2004, 2009). Through a series of higher education reviews, system-wide (UGC, 2004a, 2004b, 2010) and institution-specific (UGC, 2016) in the past two decades, it was repeatedly "recommended" to public universities in Hong Kong to identify their strategic priorities and to develop differentiated roles based on their unique strengths with which they could aspire to "international competitiveness" (UGC, 2010, pp. 95-97). Such reviews, coupled with the introduction of competitive-based funding instruments, not only for research but also teaching and fundraising activities, have effectively brought about changes in university management culture.

Among all the changes, strategic planning and branding practices are the most noticeable due to their inherent need to communicate externally. The practice of strategic planning was first introduced by CUHK in 2004/05 and peaked in 2008/09 when most of the institutions entered into similar exercises. By 2016, all the public universities in Hong Kong have an institutional-level strategic plan. Through these planning documents, it becomes apparent that the notion of branding has gained unprecedented importance in university management. Four of the seven public universities explicitly spell out branding as a strategic priority, whereas three others indicate related activities, such as image/reputation-building and positioning.

In Hong Kong, there is no doubt that "branding" has become a popular practice in university management. Behind the popularity of university branding, there is, however, still a lack of conceptual clarity on what constitutes a university brand and what kind of activities are attributable to a university branding process.

This study adapts a corporate branding definition by Balmer (2001), as discussed below, to empirically investigate how Hong Kong public universities present themselves through different corporate communication materials (the English version of their strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment information, and press releases), and the extent to which the self-representations in the different types of communication materials indicate a coordinated approach to branding. A combination of manual and computer-aided content analysis methods, which are detailed in the methodology section, has been used.

Conceptual framework

There is a growing body of literature touching on different aspects of university branding. These include studies exploring why universities brand (Stensaker, 2007; Weerts, Freed, & Morphew, 2014; Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015), how they brand (Deephouse, 1999; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Drori et al., 2013; Mampaey et al., 2015), what kind of universities tend to brand (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Chapleo, 2011; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005), and the challenges universities face in branding (Temple, 2006; Chapleo, 2007; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). The pros and cons of university branding are often discussed in these studies as well.

There have also been several attempts to define "branding" in the higher education context. Some see branding as a project by which university administrators augment the services provided by their institution with values to facilitate and enable potential consumers to recognise these values confidently and appreciate them (Chapleo, 2007; Mampaey et al., 2015). Others see it as a process of articulating the essence as well as precise and consistent description of a university: what it "is", what it "stands for", and what it is going to be "known for" (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009), or a comprehensive part of the marketing and the strategic decisions in a university (Litten, 1980; Stensaker, 2007).

Yet, there remains a lack of consensus on the definition of a university brand or university branding as a process. Besides, the term "branding" and "brand" are often used interchangeably with similar terms, like identity, reputation, and image, by those who research on the subject and those who practise higher education marketing and branding. Arguing that "a real understanding of branding in its fullest context" (Chapleo, 2011, p. 420) is important; Chapleo (2011) attempted a "fuller definition" of university branding:

> university branding concerns defining the essential and distinct essence of the institution, encapsulating this and clearly articulate it through

> distinct, clear, and consistent messages to multiple stakeholders internally and externally. (p. 419)

However, this definition has not been applied in his study and Chapleo has conceded that applying such a definition in higher education would be challenging. So, the fundamental question of "what universities mean by branding", raised in an earlier study (Chapleo, 2004 as cited in Chapleo, 2011), was again asked without an answer in his later study (Chapleo, 2011).

We share Chapleo's view that it is important to develop a full-fledged definition of university branding due to a growing need to investigate how the effectiveness of university branding should be evaluated and measured to justify the growing importance of branding on university strategic agenda (Rolfe, 2003, as cited in Chapleo, 2011) and the increasing spending on such activities (Jevons, 2006, as cited in Chapleo, 2011). In light of this, we drew upon the marketing literature of Balmer (2001) which suggests that the confusion in defining the concept of branding and its relations with other marketing related concepts is not a problem of the higher education sector alone.

Balmer (2001), who aims to make sense of the many foggy concepts of marketing by going through the history of marketing, offers the following explanation of the defining characteristics of a "corporate brand":

> A corporate brand involves the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attributes of the organisation's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition. This proposition underpins organisational efforts to communicate, differentiate, and enhance the brand vis-à-vis key stakeholder groups and networks. A corporate brand proposition requires total corporate commitment to the corporate body from all levels of personnel. It requires senior management fealty and financial support. Ongoing management of the corporate brand resides with the chief executive officer and does not fall within the remit of the traditional directorate of marketing. (p. 281)

Balmer (2001) also differentiates a corporate brand from other closely related terms (e.g., image, reputation, identity, marketing communications) and maps the relationship among them. According to his understanding, a corporate brand, like corporate reputation (the enduring perception) and corporate image (the immediate mental perception) (p. 257), is a concept concerning the "perception and positioning" of an organisation and how it is "seen" rather than what the organisation “has / does” as in corporate identity or what an organisation “expresses” as in corporate marketing communications (p. 283). As for the relationship among them, corporate reputation, image, and brand are seen as an objective of effective business identity management which is realised through the channels of corporate communications. By effective identity management, Balmer refers to the alignment of various types of identities, including “desired identity”, “actual identity”, “communicated identity”, “conceived identity” and “ideal identity” (Balmer, 2001, p. 276).

Balmer’s definition and explanations above offer more specificities than Chapleo’s (2011) for application in research and practice, but they are not tailored for the higher education sector. Besides, he does not explicitly define what “branding”, as a process, entails. Therefore, to apply his concept of a corporate brand in a university setting, which is known for the diversity of institutional types and the complexity in internal differences (Huisman, 2016; Teichler, 2017), one would face yet another challenge of defining what kind of “identity management” and “corporate communication” activities are attributable to the process of university branding, in addition to the known challenge of defining what a university brand is.

In view of the above, we have decided to adapt Balmer’s concepts around a corporate brand for application in the higher education sector. The following working definition of university branding is thus proposed to guide our study:

> University branding is a perception management process in which a university consciously seeks to align the different types of identities (i.e., “desired identity”, “actual identity”, “communicated identity”, “conceived identity” and “ideal identity”) through centrally coordinated corporate communications to reiterate the institution’s positive unique points of difference so as to stand out in a competition.

As an exploratory study, we have taken vision and mission statements as a proxy of “communicated/desired identity” (what the university wants to be or to do), student recruitment materials as a proxy of “communicated/actual identity” (what the university is), press releases as a proxy of “communicated/actual identity” (what the university does), and university strategic plans as an indicator of a university’s conscious decision to brand or not.

The originality of this study lies in the broad, horizontal approach looking for the signs of coordination and alignment, or the absence of such, in university branding by examining the four distinctive types of corporate communications materials named above. Moreover, this is the first study which looks into the branding of individual universities in Hong Kong and includes a large quantity of university press releases in branding analysis.

Methodology

Sampling

Analyses in this study are based on a total sample of seven public universities founded before 2016 in Hong Kong. These include three "pre-1994 universities": The University of Hong Kong (HKU), The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), and four "post-1994 universities": Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), City University of Hong Kong (CityU), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), and Lingnan University (LU). Branding materials analysed, adopting Balmer's definition of total corporate communication instrumental for corporate branding (Balmer, 2001, p. 253), include four distinctive types of communication materials: strategic plans, mission and vision statements, university self-descriptions on a government-sponsored portal targeting non-local students (studyinhongkong.edu.hk), and press releases.

Data collection

The above listed communication materials were collected during the study period 2015-16 and last updated in August 2016. The documents were captured with the use of Zotero, an open-source online research tool that automatically senses content in a web browser for adding to a web-based reference manager, or DownThemAll!, an open-source download manager that allows one to download all the links or images contained in a webpage with one single click (for massive downloads of press releases). Only the English language materials were analysed in this study given that English is the common official language of the public universities in Hong Kong. Press releases in both Chinese and English languages were therefore cleaned to remove duplicates in Chinese. In the analysis of this study, we focused only on three selected universities (HKU, CUHK, PolyU) offering press releases for the longest comparable period (2003/04 to August 2016). The numbers of press releases used are: 2 021 (CUHK), 1 918 (PolyU) and 1 296 (HKU). Only online data were collected and used in this study.

Data analysis methods

A combination of manual content analysis methods and computer-aided content analysis methods was employed in this study. Texts that warrant close reading and are of manageable size were coded manually in search of common and distinctive topics. These include the strategic plans, the vision and mission statements, and the self-descriptions for student recruitment. The large quantity of press releases was first analysed automatically with the topic modelling technique, which is an unsupervised, probabilistic method of discovering the latent semantic structure in large collections of documents (Blei, 2012). To facilitate the interpretation of the topic modelling results, an open-source text analysis software, TXM (Heiden, 2010), was used to examine the context in which these topics appeared.

Findings

The presentation of the findings is organised by the types of communication materials analysed, rather than by themes, to show the differences in the self-representations in these distinctive types of materials, as well as the signs of alignment, or the lack of it, found in these materials.

Strategic plans as an indicator of a conscious decision to brand

Regardless of the actual implementation of a strategic plan, it indicates a university's conscious decision to engage in branding or not. As shown below, we found that four out of the seven universities in Hong Kong explicitly mention "brand/branding" as a strategic priority under the following sub-headings in their strategic plans:

- Our enabling platform — Communications and Branding (The University of Hong Kong [HKU], 2016),
- Six developmental areas — Community Engagement, and HKUST Brand (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology [HKUST], n.d.),
- Five strategic areas —Internationalization, Branding and Marketing (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University [PolyU], 2012),
- Five overarching strategic themes—Enhance Good Governance and the CityU Brand (City University of Hong Kong [CityU], 2015x).

CUHK, LU and HKBU did not explicitly refer to "brand/branding" in such plans, but other related terms. Under the subheading "Engagement", CUHK set establishing a distinctive identity, and enhancing reputation, visibility and positioning as one of its goals (The Chinese University of Hong Kong [CUHK], 2016). LU indicated its plan on "positioning" itself as "a unique liberal arts institution with Hong Kong characteristics" under the subheading "Positioning of Lingnan University" (Lingnan University [LU], 2009). HKBU's Vision 2020 (Hong Kong Baptist University [HKBU], 2014) lists "Improved publicity and image of HKBU for attracting quality students" as one of the intended outcomes of the strategic theme "Improvement in attractiveness and agility of HKBU programmes…"

Our analysis shows that all seven universities in Hong Kong are concerned about their positioning, reputation, image, and visibility, although not all of them explicitly state branding as a strategic priority. Those who do state branding as a priority, however, are inclined to adopt a more corporate and proactive approach to marketing and communications than those who do not. Apart from HKUST, which has dedicated a section explaining what the HKUST brand is about, CityU stated explicitly its intention to strengthen "corporate branding strategies" and PolyU announced its plan to establish a "centralised marketing function at the university level". The branding strategies of CityU have not been detailed in the strategic plan, but the university did launch a complete make-over of the university's brand, including its visual identity – the logo and colour scheme, in 2015 (CityU, 2016x). The only exception is HKU which shows awareness of its "brand", or rather "reputation" built over the years, and its intention to capitalise on it, but no clear signs of planning for a branding strategy.

Vision and mission statements as a proxy of communicated desired identity (what the university want to be/do)

Identity is a building block of a corporate brand (Balmer, 2001). University's vision and mission statements are important texts portraying the desired identity of the universities and are seen as an important organisational instrument for reinforcing the branding activities of a university (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015). By analysing the vision and mission statements of the seven universities, we seek to distil the branding messages incorporated in such identity-building statements.

The analysis of the vision statements shows that they all start with the aspiration of being recognised as or becoming a leading/first-class/world-class/premier institution excelling in one area or another, except HKU which states its position "as a leading international institution of higher learning in Asia" as a matter of fact.

The vision statements, except that of HKBU, also share a common international orientation. They either wanted to be recognised internationally or to become a global university. Given the special status of Hong Kong in Greater China, all three pre-1994 universities (HKU, CUHK, HKUST) and a post-1994 university (PolyU) further expressed a cascaded geographical orientation of "local, rest of China/national/regional, international/global/world" or in a reversed order emphasising first the global level (HKU and HKUST).

The extracts of the vision statements are shown as follows:

- HKU: The University of Hong Kong, as a leading international institution of higher learning in Asia…through a global presence, regional significance, and engagement with the rest of China.
- CUHK: To be acknowledged locally, nationally, and internationally as a first-class comprehensive research university…
- HKUST: To be a leading university with significant international impact and strong local commitment.
- PolyU: Be a leading university that excels…for the betterment of Hong Kong, the nation, and the world.
- CityU: City University of Hong Kong aspires to become a leading global university, excelling…
- HKBU: HKBU aspires to be a premier institution of…
- LU: To excel as an internationally recognised liberal arts university distinguished by outstanding…

From a branding perspective, the striking similarities in the structure of the vision statements, choice of words and geographical orientation may not effectively differentiate one university from another in Hong Kong or beyond. When it comes to differentiation, one of the three virtues of a corporate brand (Balmer, 2001, p. 281), Hong Kong universities have been found to have adopted a cautious two-tier approach, or what was called strategic balance (Deephouse, 1999; Mampaey et al., 2015), of embedding their uniqueness in the global excellence discourse. CUHK points out its "bilingual" tradition and its task in the "preservation" of (Chinese) knowledge. PolyU, formerly a polytechnic, aspires to excel in "professional education" and "applied research". CityU, another former polytechnic, also aspires to excel in "professional education" and to create "applicable knowledge". LU, a small and less known university, finds its niche as one of the "Top 10 liberal arts colleges in Asia" providing "whole-person education". HKBU highlights its "broad-based, creativity-inspiring education" and heritage of Christian higher education. What is interesting is that the uniqueness of HKU, which often comes up as a top Asian university in international rankings, and HKUST, which has been a global player, has been "neutralised" by the ubiquitous use of terms like "leading" and "global" by other universities.

Student recruitment material as a proxy of communicated actual identity (what the university is)

It is noted that all universities, except CUHK, import some phrases of their vision statements into the self-descriptions, thus showing some alignment between the vision statements and student recruitment materials. Moreover, the overarching themes of excellence and the cascaded geographical orientation found in the vision statements are also visible among almost all the self-descriptions.

Having said that, the universities found rather different foci to present themselves to the prospective students even though they all addressed common themes like excellence, their internationality and China links, age and history, employment market for the graduates, and learning experiences. Particularly with the use of ranking information and history of the institutions, interesting picks and twists can be observed.

Regarding ranking positions, a positional value often used for branding, four out of seven universities (HKU, HKUST, CityU, and PolyU) make direct references to rankings in the self-descriptions. Co-incidentally, they are also the ones that explicitly mention brand/branding as a strategic priority. The CityU example below demonstrates how a post-1994 university can generate an impression that it has been among the top 10 or so, in specific areas, and approximately top 100 in the world by using different rankings selectively and creatively:

- According to the latest Quacquarelli Symonds ranking, CityU is 11th in Asia, 108th in the world, and 5th in the world's top 50 universities under 50 years of age.
- Ranked No.3 in the greater China area in Engineering/Technology and Computer Sciences in the 2014 ARWU by Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

- Ranked 2nd in Asia Pacific region in The UTD Top 100 Business Schools Research Rankings by the University of Texas at Dallas.

The three other universities (CUHK, HKBU and LU) do not make direct reference to specific rankings. HKBU's self-description is too brief to include anything specific. LU claimed that it is "one of the Top 10 liberal arts institutions in Asia" without giving the information source. There is reason to believe that the abstinence of CUHK from using rankings, although it has reasonably good positions to show, is a conscious decision due to the clear position taken by the President of the university against rankings (CUHK, 2013; Sung, 2011, June 28). However, it may also be the result of not having a conscious decision to brand.

Regarding history and age, another set of facts and figures that is considered important for branding, we found that all the universities, except CUHK and CityU, mention their years of foundation and history. HKU is proud of being "Hong Kong's oldest tertiary institution, with a history that stretches back over a hundred years." HKUST, founded in 1991, describes itself as a young and dynamic university. PolyU, HKBU and LU, which were upgraded into universities in the 1990s, proudly trace back the birth of their institutions to their pre-university time to demonstrate their significance:

- The Hong Kong Polytechnic University has a proud history dating back to 1937. Formerly known as Hong Kong Polytechnic, the institution was granted university status in 1994.
- Hong Kong Baptist University was incepted in 1956…In 1983, the then Hong Kong Baptist College became a fully funded public tertiary institution. In 1994, the Institution achieved University status…
- Lingnan University…was incorporated on 30 July 1999 following the enactment of the Lingnan University Ordinance. Its history, however, dates back to 1888, when its forerunner, the prestigious Lingnan University in Guangzhou, China, was founded.

On the contrary, CityU, keen to replace its "polytechnic" identity with one of a "global university", is consistently silent about its history in the self-description and the strategic plan. The statement "We are neither constrained by tradition, nor rigidly defined with a fixed identity. This makes us receptive to new people and ideas and to diversity" (CityU, 2015x, p. 18) in the strategic plan may provide some explanation.

Comparatively speaking, the silence of CUHK over its founding year and history, as well as its bilingual tradition, in the self-description appears incoherent with the emphasis it placed on its bilingual tradition and its mission to preserve Chinese knowledge in the vision and mission statements.

In terms of the themes addressed by different types of universities, we found that the self-descriptions of HKUST, PolyU and CityU share more commonalities among themselves than with others. They are also more likely to emphasise the professional and innovative aspects of their teaching and learning activities. This is likely due to their common technical background. While HKU, the top university in Hong Kong, is brief about its study programmes and the learning experiences offered, these three universities go into great length to describe student related experiences. For example, PolyU puts great emphasis on its state-of-the-art facilities, particularly the "award-winning teaching and research hotel" for the tourism and hotel management programs. CityU features the creation of Discovery-Enriched Curriculum as its uniqueness.

The self-descriptions of HKBU and LU also focus on students but are relatively brief, likely because of their disadvantaged positions in the system which do not offer them a lot of options. HKBU's traditional vision of "whole-person education" has been widely adopted by other universities in Hong Kong, so it highlights its Christian education background and differentiates itself from the rest. LU, another small university, tries to turn its small size into a positive attribute by positioning itself as a "liberal arts university with Hong Kong characteristics".

Press releases as a proxy of communicated actual identity (what the universities did)

Corporate communications are the channels to achieve business identity management (Balmer, 2001, p. 283) and thus branding in a broad sense. Press releases are the major output of corporate communications. The topics addressed in university press releases are therefore an important source of information for branding analysis. Using a combination of topic modelling method and keywords analysis, the press releases of the top two universities (HKU and CUHK) and a post-1994 university (PolyU) for the period 2003-2015 were analysed to identify distinctive topics that the universities presented to the media and the general public.

The results of the topic modelling show that CUHK and HKU have more common topics between the two of them than with PolyU. The major difference between them is that CUHK has been more likely to issue press releases about scientific discoveries (e.g., medicine and climate change) than HKU. HKU has mainly used the press releases for announcing events (e.g., exhibitions) and regular surveys (e.g., forecast of Hong Kong economic outlook), which CUHK also did (e.g., CUHK's public lectures series and its survey on the HKSAR Government's popularity).

Comparing the three universities, PolyU's distinctive academic topics, such as "fashion-design-industry" and "tourism-hotel-industry", are largely consistent with those it identified as unique study offers in its student recruitment materials. The distinctive topic "event-alumnus-support" and the recurrent use of the keywords "industry" and "community" also coincide with its strategic plan of leveraging "the long-standing and strong industry partnerships", and the support of its "300 000 strong alumni community in Hong Kong, the Chinese Mainland and the wider world" to promote itself as "a unique brand locally and globally" (PolyU, 2012). Although we cannot establish any causal relationship between the press release topics and the same topics addressed in its student recruitment materials and strategic plan, we do observe a high degree of consistency in the topics addressed in its different communication materials.

Similarly, we observed that the distinctive academic topics in the press releases of CUHK on climate change and medical research also coincide with those identified in its strategic plan. However, such topics are not specifically highlighted among its comprehensive offers in the student recruitment material. The press releases, however, show the impact of the university's introduction of a public lecture series as a means for enhancing publicity and public engagement.

Discussion

As shown in the case of Hong Kong, the concepts of a university brand and university branding are far from clear in practice. Even for the four universities that explicitly state brand/branding as a strategic priority (CityU, PolyU, HKU, HKUST), only CityU specifically mentions the plan to enhance its "corporate branding strategies". Their announced priority to brand/branding in the strategic plans is not followed by specific branding strategies but a rather generic plan for improving (social) media exposures, rallying support of internal/external stakeholders (especially, alumni), and developing a communications strategy.

Besides, except HKUST, none of them have clearly articulated what their brands are.

By applying Balmer's concepts around a corporate brand (Balmer, 2001), we may argue that different activities which improve corporate communication and engage the community fall into the broad definition of corporate branding. However, noting that the essence of a successful brand lies in the alignment of the various identities of an organisation rather than the range of activities undertaken to achieve that, the listing of a wide variety of corporate communication activities itself is not precisely a branding strategy. In this sense, we argue that while many Hong Kong universities are conducting some sort of branding activities, few of them clearly articulate their brand propositions and a plan to brand instead of a plan to communicate a presumably existing brand. Strictly speaking, we may say that they are not branding.

Having said that, comparing the seven universities, universities with an announced priority to brand/branding are more likely to consider an institutional strategy to marketing and communications, though not branding exactly, than those who did not use the term specifically (CUHK, HKBU, LU). This applies particularly to new, post-1990s, public universities with a technical background (CityU, PolyU and HKUST). They are not only more ready to talk about branding in the strategic plans and adopt an institutional approach to communication, but also display more signs of alignment in their self-representations carried by different communication materials. Older, comprehensive, universities (HKU and CUHK) or new universities focusing on liberal arts education (HKBU and LU) are neither clear about their plan to brand nor showing clear signs of a coordinated approach to branding.

The above finding echoes that of previous studies which found that new, post-1992 universities in the United Kingdom (Chapleo, 2011) or position-disadvantaged universities (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009) tend to rely on branding, rather than reputation, to create a competitive edge against the more prestigious players. What we have found to be different is that not all new or position-disadvantaged universities tend to engage actively in branding, but only universities with a technical background (HKUST, CityU, PolyU). One reason could be that these universities do not have a strong reputation compared to the old comprehensive universities but are more likely to compete internationally for students and resources due to their technical background less bound by local social or cultural contexts.

Another reason could be the "sandwich" position of these universities, as demonstrated in the case of Hong Kong. The analysis of the self-representations of the universities in different types of communication materials shows that HKUST, CityU and PolyU have a lot in common both with the older, comprehensive universities (HKU and CUHK) and the smaller universities focusing on non-technical subjects (HKBU, LU). They share the grand vision of the older comprehensive universities to excel globally while the emphasis of the smaller universities is on student experience. To differentiate themselves from the other two groups, they are more likely to use rankings in their self-representations and they have to resort to a few unique, though sometimes trivial, attributes (e.g., the "award-winning teaching and research hotel" which has been "rated highly by TripAdvisor") or creativity (e.g., CityU's Discovery-Enriched Curriculum). Such inclination of technical universities to brand and brand through the use of rankings deserves further research along the types of universities.

Overall, we found that Hong Kong public universities commonly practise the act of strategic balance (Deephouse, 1999; Mampaey et al., 2015) in their self-representations. Across the board, they aspire to be globally competitive and excellent, in line with the government's policy goal of developing the city into a "regional education hub". Meanwhile, they struggle to present their uniqueness in the system based on, sometimes beautified, reality. The balanced presentation of system-wide aspirations and institution-specific realities may be interpreted as a rational decision of the universities themselves to find their niche for survival amidst strong accountability demands from the government. However, it must be noted that Hong Kong universities, though autonomous in operation, are strongly advised via top-down government policies to adopt "role differentiation" (UGC, 2010) so as to avoid competition among themselves. Their struggle to present their uniqueness may well be the result of external pressure from their major funder as well. The link between policy discourse and the branding of individual universities in Hong Kong is not the focus of this study. However, there are signs of interesting correlations that future studies may further explore.

Conclusion

In this study, we have broadened the approach for examining how universities brand themselves by adopting a corporate branding framework to examine their self-representations carried by four distinctive types of communication materials (strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment materials, and press releases) that may or may not be immediately associated with branding. With this approach, we did not only analyse the content of the self-representations but also the alignment, which is an essential feature of branding, of their communicated desired and actual identities in these different types of communication materials.

Based on our proposed working definition of university branding, there is still much work to be done for the development of a full-fledged definition of university branding as a process. University corporate communication covers a wide range of internal and external communication activities carried out at institutional and departmental levels that are not always clearly defined. Many of them may serve a branding purpose, but not all of them are relevant to branding. The communication materials selected in this exploratory study are relevant and different enough to represent the message carriers of the communicated desired and actual identities of the universities. However, there are many other corporate communication activities and products that have rarely or never been systematically analysed for their interplays and alignment. Further studies adopting such a broad definition of corporate branding to examine the alignment of branding messages may consider a comprehensive coverage of source materials, or so-called media collateral (e.g., websites, corporate design, media kit, promotional videos, social media, advertisements, etc.), for a brand audit-like analysis based on in-depth case studies.

Given the complexity of the organisation and operation of a university (Huisman, 2016), defining a single university brand has been a known challenge in practice and research. The process that universities take to communicate and enhance a brand, which is difficult to articulate in the first place, internally and externally, at institutional and departmental levels, is even more challenging to map out. Even universities that have openly announced their intention to brand may not have a full grasp of the range of activities attributable to branding, not to mention of content alignment in such activities. Not only the growing number and types of corporate communication activities, but the variety of the formats of their outputs in the form of texts, images, videos, instant messages, etcetera, pose additional challenges to researchers trying to make sense of the concept of a brand and branding. Traditional manual content analysis methods may not meet the needs of present-day realities in this particular field.

In this study, we have tested a combination of manual and computer-aided methods so as to include press releases in substantial quantities. This has enabled us to broaden the choice of source materials for analysis, but it does not come without limitations. As universities are not standardised in the way they disseminate information online, there remain difficulties in gathering comparable data and in cleaning the data to remove irregularities. This is just an example to illustrate that digital methods by no means guarantee large quantities of "useful" data although they do help immensely in broadening the search area for potential sources of information to facilitate more comprehensive analyses. Manual control remains essential in both data collection, as well as data interpretation.

Finally, we conclude that the branding or marketing activities that the seven Hong Kong universities engage in are only parts of a big elephant, as in the fable of a group of blind men trying to make sense of an elephant. Some of the universities, particularly post-1994 technical universities, seem to have grasped more parts than others or even found the links between the parts. Some of them took the parts for the whole. This sends a message to the practitioners that for branding to work, it is indeed important to first understand branding in its fullest context. Without that, their branding activities may not be much different from general, un-coordinated, marketing and communication activities and their goal to brand cannot be effectively achieved by the means they propose.

3. Conceptualising “university rebranding” as a brand change process: A longitudinal case study of a former polytechnic in Hong Kong

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Abstract

University rebranding remains conflated with branding and marketing despite Williams and Omar's (2014) efforts to typologise the different brand change processes. This paper contributes the first empirical case study to support the theorisation of "university rebranding" as a stand-alone concept. It highlights the under-researched temporal dimension of the change process, with a focus on multistakeholder brand co-creation in the digital context that transcends time and space. The qualitative analysis is based on data source and method triangulation using also unofficial sources which tend to be neglected in social media research. The stakeholders' indifference towards the official narratives, contrary to the active resistance manifested through meaning co-creation on unofficial social media, demonstrates the new challenges of managing negative emotional reactions. The paper reflects on the effectiveness of a stealth rebranding strategy that shies away from timely interactions with loyal stakeholders, particularly existing students who were not engaged sufficiently as internal stakeholders.

Keywords: rebranding, change management, process, student stakeholders, resistance, emotional reactions

Introduction

Some researchers argue that universities have always "branded" themselves with "heraldic crests, seals, and mottos" (Aspara et al., 2014, p. 523). What is new is not branding in terms of creating the symbolic representation of the universities in different types of icons, such as traditional emblems or modern text-based logos (Delmestri et al., 2015), but the "new approach toward shared brand meanings across stakeholder groups" (Wilson & Elliot, 2016, p. 3065) and the adoption of new branding logics involving struggles and dynamics of power and resistance (Aspara et al., 2014).

Universities are not only adopting the new branding logics nowadays, but also tend to engage in a brand revision. Rebranding is, therefore, a more precise term to describe such a process because it involves a change management process to move all stakeholders from one mindset/culture to another (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538).

There is, however, barely any academic literature that seeks to differentiate university branding from rebranding as a change management process. Aspara et al. (2014) studied the resistance in the change process but did not differentiate branding from rebranding conceptually because the case involved (Aalto University) could be regarded as the branding of a new entity resulting from a merger – a substantive structural change (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). Williams & Omar (2014) presented a case study of renaming (Arcadia University) to support the Brand Flux Model (Williams, 2012, as cited in Williams & Omar, 2014) that typologises different degrees of brand changes from reinforcing an existing brand to rebranding and renaming. But the rebranding concept was not backed by any empirical case. There are some other studies addressing the changes of the symbolic or discursive representations of universities that mentioned in passing renaming or rebranding. However, they stopped short of articulating rebranding as a concept of its own (e.g., Mampaey et al., 2020; Wu & Cheong, 2021) or addressing the change with a process approach (e.g., Delmestri et al., 2015; Orberg, Drori, & Delmestri, 2017) that examines the main issues of power; resistance; and control, as identified by Nadler (1981). This is, to the author's knowledge, the first study that looks at both: rebranding as a concept of its own and the temporal dimension of the brand change process, particularly with attention paid to multistakeholder co-creation of the visual representation in the digital context.

It is important to distinguish branding from rebranding since the latter is perceived as "a very high risk operation" that requires a "carefully designed strategy" (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016) to overcome negative reactions (Collange & Bonache, 2015) or the emergence of counter-symbols (March and Olsen, 1976, as cited in Christensen, Gornitzka, & Ram, 2019), especially from loyal stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2015) holding onto the old.

Even in the business sector, research on rebranding started rather late in the mid-2010s. Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach (2018) and Miller, Merrilees, & Yakimova (2014) presented comprehensive reviews of corporate rebranding literature. The former noted an increasing interest in nuanced understanding of corporate rebranding (e.g., cognitive, and emotional reactions or the acceptance or resistance towards a rebranded entity in recent years).

The new focus on audience reception research may be explained by the increasingly critical role of visual representations in the digital age. According to Bell et al., (2014), the ubiquitous presence of social media and image production technology allow organisations to engage their stakeholders visually and affectively. They observed a "visual turn" in organisational communication studies in place of the "linguistic turn", meaning visuals rather than languages shape the reality (Bell et al., 2014, p. 2). According to these authors, visuals are highly resistant to control because they are polysemic by nature, especially when they encounter active agents who may interpret the images differently. Increasing research on audience reception is therefore in sync with the digitalisation and visualisation of organisational communication.

One polysemic example in university branding is the study of Aspara et al. (2014) which shows that contrary to contemporary branding frameworks and research emphasising harmonic value co-creation, (e.g., Hashim et al., 2020; Sharif & Lemine, 2021; Le et al., 2021), new branding logics tend to trigger contradictory and adversarial interpretations among a variety of stakeholders. which remain an under-researched area in higher education marketing and branding. The democratisation of digital media poses an extra challenge for control and brand identity management because the consumers are empowered to create alternative narratives to counter the dominant narratives offered by the organisation (Aspara et al., 2014). Such resistance could be in the form of "culturally elaborate sarcasm and parody" (Aspara et al., 2014, p. 544) or alternative designs (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018) that are beyond the control of brand managers. and are systematically underrepresented in branding research due to researchers' tendency to analyse only official social media sources.

The trend to rebrand with new visual representations in the digital age and the resistance encountered by brand managers is not unique in higher education. There are exemplary cases of rebranding failure in which consumers' resistance triumphed (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). What is unique in the higher education sector is the diversity of stakeholders involved (Naude & Jonathan, 1999) and the murky boundaries between internal and external stakeholders, particularly the largest stakeholder group – the "students/consumers". This does not only mean more challenges for universities to succeed in rebranding but also more difficulties for stakeholders/consumers to organise resistance that could lead to an exemplary rebranding failure of reverting to the "old" brand, like the GAP case (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

While university employees are clearly targeted for internal marketing (Judson, Gorchels, & Aurand, 2006; Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020), students are often treated as consumers or customers, i.e., external stakeholders following commercial branding logics. focusing on prospective students. Treating students as consumers in the higher education context is debatable (Naude & Johnathan, 1999; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Aspara et al., 2014) and could become problematic when the existing students are neither addressed by internal nor external communication in a brand change process.

The lack of internal communication would not only fail to create the buy-in of intended brand meaning by internal stakeholders but may also turn them to informal, uncontrolled communications like (social) media (Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010). Past studies showed that it is not uncommon for friendly stakeholders, like employees and student unions, to resist or even turn into adversaries when internal communication failed (Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2008; Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Aspara et al., 2014; Mwinzi et al., 2016). Moreover, it is found in product-focused studies that loyal customers more committed to the brand were the ones who resisted stronger to brand changes as they might regard the change as a brand attack to undermine the brand meaning (Peterson et al., 2015).

In the higher education context, current students are highly involved in university life, the production of their own learning experiences "purchased" from the universities or even the governance of the degree-supplying institutions. It may therefore be assumed that current students could become the strongest resistance force in a rebranding process if they are not addressed internally due to their implied "consumer" status nor externally by brand messages targeting prospective students. In fact, Grobert et al. (2016) found that current students showed a higher resistance to change than entrants which points to the need to further differentiate this stakeholder group for targeted communication in rebranding practice or research.

Collange & Bonache (2015) posits that communication is key to the success or failure of rebranding. Effective communication could pre-empt and mitigate negative emotions and attitudes arising from surprises about the brand change, especially when the change is "radical" (Grobert et al., 2016). Closely related to this is the clarification of the vaguely defined stakeholders (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010). Clearly defined stakeholders are essential for enhancing the "sensitivity to potential internal resistance" (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538) and tailoring targeted messages.

For university rebranding, students in different stages of the student journey could be classified as internal or external stakeholders, and be resisting for different reasons, including the loss of internal or external legitimacy (Huisman, 2007; Christensen et al., 2019; Mampaey et al., 2020), the loss of the old identities or roles (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Aspara et al., 2014), the threat towards the original brand values and resource allocation (Stensaker & D´Andrea, 2007; Aspara et al., 2014), the loss of emotional attachment to the old symbols, or the discontent with the change process (Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010) if such a process is autocratic rather than consensual (Stuart, 2018). Therefore, it is not only important to know why students resist but what kind of students tend to resist.

In this paper, a drastic rebranding exercise of a former polytechnic university in Hong Kong was reconstructed chronologically, using informal and formal sources, to analyse the three key issues of the change management process: the power dynamics played out in the communication of the logo change, the resistance and/or indifference of the internal stakeholders, and the contest for the control of the new brand meaning.

The study aims to contribute to the articulation of university rebranding as a concept of its own and the mapping of the change management process to demonstrate key issues around university rebranding in the digital context. Moreover, it provides a more nuanced understanding of the student stakeholder group which is crucial for formulating a responsive approach to manage the resistance.

Methodology

This single longitudinal case study concerns the rebranding of a former polytechnic university (City University of Hong Kong) that entered the world top 100 league in 2015/16, according to QS World University Rankings (hereafter QS Rankings) (Table 2). Established in 1984, the polytechnic was upgraded to a university in 1995. On that occasion, it went through a renaming process by dropping the term "polytechnic" and introducing a new logo that inherited the style and colour scheme of the old.

Bearing in mind that branding is a perception management process (Balmer, 2010; Lam & Tang, 2018), the study takes a holistic approach of tracking the construction, representation, and perception in the second rebranding process (2008-2021) involving a drastic change of the colour scheme and design of the logo.

To increase "construct validity" (Yin, 1994, p. 34) of the case study, the tactics proposed by Yin (1994) were adopted. Firstly, the use of multiple sources of evidence (detailed in Table 1), including official documents, archival records of media and social media reports, nine semi-structured interviews, and direct observations/physical artifacts from a site visit in 2017. Secondly, a "chain of evidence" (Yin, 1994, pp. 98-99) was established through the creation of a case study database using ATLAS.ti, containing all the data captured online with Zotero or collected from other sources (e.g., the site visit, interviews), and the associated field notes. The diverse and fragmented data were classified into document groups. The analysis was done via a combination of automatic and manual coding, first by applying a set of deductive codes automatically to extract branding-related themes and then manually with inductive codes for more specific topics or data sources that could not be coded automatically (e.g., PDF documents, Chinese texts, audio-visual records). It must be noted that the case study is not purely based on the quantitative analysis of the codes (i.e., counts) but a qualitative interpretation of the quotes indicated by selective codes across different sources. Through data source and method triangulation (Patton, 1999), the rebranding process was reconstructed chronologically to illustrate the lengthy change process (Figure 1), and the key aspects of the rebranding were analysed thematically by focusing on the communication strategy, control, and resistance.

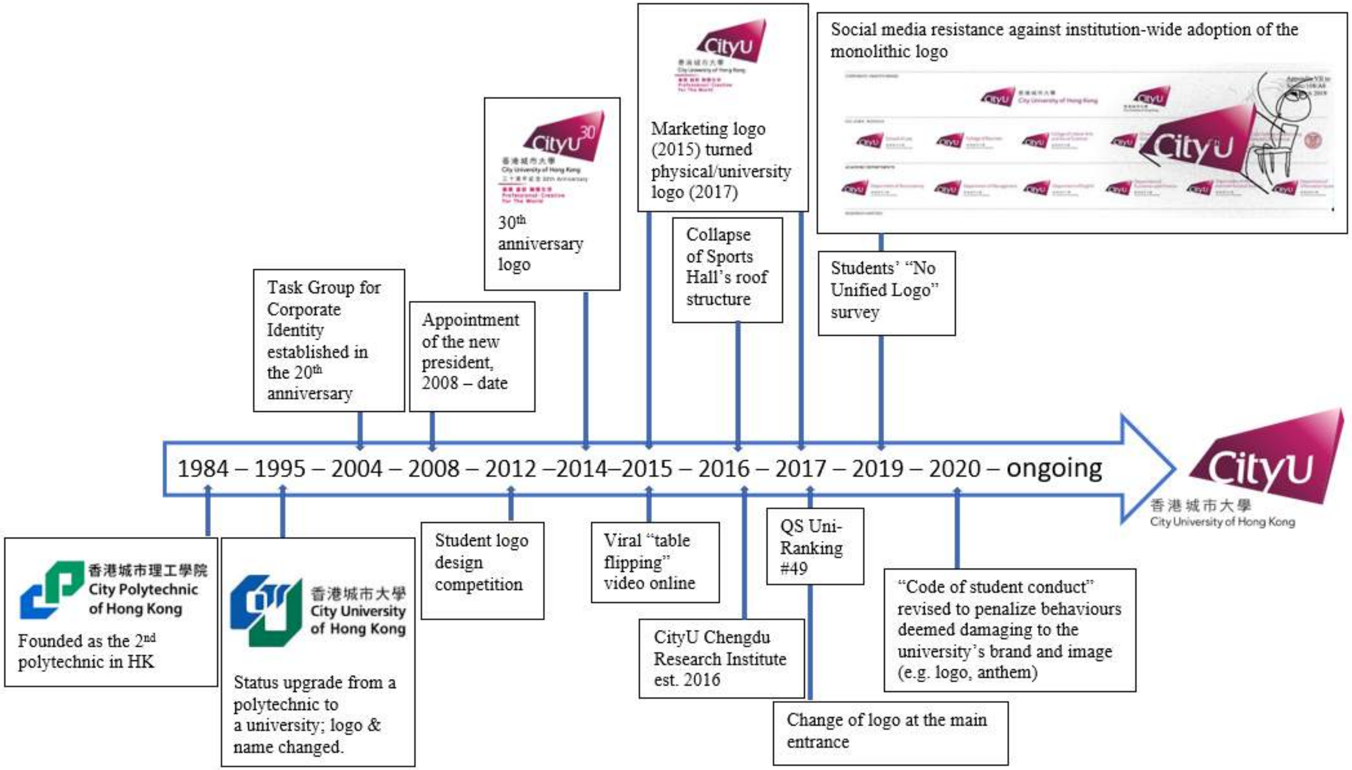

Figure 1. Reconstructed timeline of the key events from the foundation of the polytechnic in 1984 to the second rebranding process (2008-ongoing)
Created in December 2021 based on data in the public domain
(https://vpet.vtc.edu.hk/wiki/index.php?title=City_University_of_Hong_Kong;
https://www.cityu.edu.hk/cpro/cityu-brand; https://www.cityu.edu.hk/cityu30/logo.htm;
https://www.facebook.com/page/207097505984138/search/?q=logo)

Findings

The findings based on the triangulation of different data sources are presented below to demonstrate the temporal dimension of the rebranding process and the key aspects of the radical brand change, namely the communication strategy to justify the rebranding and perceived motivation, stakeholders' responses and resistance to the changes in the process, and the co-creation and contest to control the brand meaning by the management and other stakeholders, particularly the students on social media.

A chronological description of the stealth rebranding process

The rebranding process studied may be framed as from 2008 to 2021, based on evidence gathered from different sources, but the adoption of the corporate branding logics could be traced back further to 2004 (the 20th anniversary of the case university). That year, the university established a Task Group for Corporate Identity in charge of developing and maintaining a consistent brand image. Later, the university logo was regarded as the most important commercial "asset" of the university and was registered as trademarks in Hong Kong and Mainland China to gain legal protection (CityU, 2007).

The idea to rebrand the university was taken up by the then new and current President appointed in 2008/09, according to a former public relations employee interviewed. In 2012, the year the university first entered the world top 100 league of QS Rankings, a student competition was organised in search of a new university logo (CityU, 2012). A winning design was chosen but the logo was not used. In 2014, a 30th anniversary logo, designed by a famous local designer, was used for the celebration. In summer 2015, after the celebration, the university announced that the 30th on the logo would be removed to become a "marketing logo", which was to be used for "all University events and related promotional materials, as well as on stationery, name cards and other communications". Departments were allowed to "use up" all communication/promotional materials carrying the old logo (CityU, 2015c, p. 1), but there was no clear indication that the "marketing logo" would replace the old logo for other purposes, e.g., ceremonial, or legal purposes.

In summer 2017, also the year when the university first entered the world top 50 league of QS Rankings, the "marketing logo" was installed physically above the main entrance of the campus. Both the internal and external stakeholders were surprised by the "drastic change" implemented without open consultations, as shown in (social) media responses. The management argued that consultations had already been done before the introduction of the 30th anniversary logo and framed the drastic change departing from the old blue-green logos rooted in its polytechnic past (Figure 1) as a minor change of removing the 30th from the well-received anniversary logo (CityU, 2015b).

Finally, in 2019, a proposal was submitted to the Senate for the approval of the new logo as the unified logo for all departments except student bodies and two sub-units: the Hong Kong Institute for Advanced Study, a high-level strategic unit, and the Jockey Club College of Veterinary Medicine and Life Sciences, established in strategic partnership with Cornell University (CityU, 2020). Only on this "official" occasion, did the student representative of the Senate conduct a survey to voice the students' opposition against the unified logo, according to (social) media reports. But their opposition was in vain. The 200+ department logos were replaced by the marketing logo.

By 2021, the multitude of logos on departmental levels were unified on the university website as well as on social media with few exceptions, such as the old logo of the College of Business on Facebook that has over 10 000 followers.

Because of the increasing commercial value of the university brand, the university further tightened its control over the brand identity in 2021. A new policy updated in Feb 2021 stipulated the following:

> *The authority to approve the use of the University's Name, Artistic-related Intangible and Tangible Assets, Visual Identity and Trade Marks ultimately belongs to the President, who may delegate such authority to departments/persons as appropriate and in compliance with the University's Corporate Identity Manual. (CityU, 2021b)*

The use of the brand elements is limited to official university activities. Staff or students using the said brand elements without the prior written approval of the President and his delegates would be subject to disciplinary action by the University in addition to possible legal actions (CityU, 2021b).

Motivations of the rebranding

Reasons communicated by the university

The reasons given for the rebranding of the university can be summarised as follows:

- The university has been suffering from adverse publicity. It must improve its brand to reflect its excellence and appeal to the stakeholders (e.g., alumni) (CityU, 2010).
- The old logo had been used for 20 years since the university's upgrade from a polytechnic in 1995. The university has become a global leading university, but it was still misperceived as a "polytechnic" or even a "technical college" by the Hong Kong public (CityU, 2015b, p. 14).
- The dynamic "ascending status", reflected on the QS Rankings, and the forward-looking aspirations had to be matched with a new brand (CityU, 2015b, p. 14). This is symbolised in the form of an unconventional edge with a sparkling "sunlight" at the top right-hand corner of the logo (Figure 1).

In short, the rebranding was intended to close the gap between the out-dated misperception of the university as a polytechnic by local stakeholders, represented by the old, unhealthy brand, and the new global leading status of the university. It is also an aspirational brand that sets the vision for the future rather than rooted in the reputation of the past.

Reasons gathered from different sources of evidence

Response to rising global status

The university has been using QS Rankings, strategically, to define its ascending global status which was not moving up as dramatically in other rankings (Table 2). Based on the site visit observations, the rebranding campaigns used ranking information extensively and systematically in digital and print brochures, as well as on-campus promotional billboards and videos. It created an impression that the rebranding was motivated by its rise on global rankings and, therefore, the need for a new brand to match the status.

This justification was, however, challenged by a former employee of the public relations department who revealed that both rebranding and improving the university's ranking positions were already on the agenda of the President when he first took office in 2008/09. It was, therefore, a parallel development rather than a direct cause-effect relationship portrayed by the management.

Burden of polytechnic history

Unlike another former polytechnic university, which has kept "polytechnic" in its name, the case university removed "polytechnic" from its name in 1995 when it was upgraded to a university. The process discussed here is the second rebranding exercise intended to further undo the misperception of the public who still saw it as a polytechnic or a technical college (CityU, 2015b, p. 14).

Such an objective to change the public perception was seen by some alumni interviewees as "unnecessary". In their opinion, the new generation of students may not know its polytechnic history, and former polytechnic universities do not necessarily offer less good quality education than their peers in the system. The alumni interviewed were in fact very confident and satisfied with the proactive educational support offered by the university. One of the interviewees commented that it was not the polytechnic background that the university wanted to dissociate from its brand, but the "second-tier" stigma within the local system.

Global challenge to local hierarchy

The ambition of the university to be regarded as the "New Top Three", challenging the government's "role differentiation" strategy (UGC, 2010) for Hong Kong's higher education system, was reflected in its heavy investments into research areas that the management regarded as unique but were not funded by the government (e.g., the School of Veterinary Medicine). Despite the stated strategic importance of each of the government-funded universities, public research funding went primarily to the "Top Three" universities. This implies that the other universities were primarily positioned as teaching universities, which were regarded as less prestigious. The case university openly challenged the allocation of resources for research students by "quotas" and not by merit and demand (CityU, 2008b). Previously, it was accused of "mission drift" in relation to the role pronounced by the Government but it sought to justify its deviation with its quality of professional education and applied research contributions (CityU, 2003, p. 6).

To break the teaching-research divide among all the universities in Hong Kong and the dominance of the "Top Three" in the system, the university actively used global rankings to challenge the local hierarchy. It strategically targeted the QS Rankings (Downing, 2011, 2012) and "worked" its way up from around 198th in 2003/04, 147th in 2008/09 to the 49th position in 2017/18 (Table 2). By repositioning and rebranding itself as a top-tier global university following the ranking success, it aimed at changing the public perception of its status at home, according to one of the interviewees.

Ambitions of senior management

Almost all the interviewees, those holding critical or positive views alike, believed that the President was the one driving the rebranding campaign and the pursuit of global rankings. The President was known for his managerial style. He attached foremost importance to university rankings when he first took office in 2008/09 (CityU, 2008a). Judging from one of his blog posts (Kuo, 2009), he was not uncritical of the limitations of global university rankings. However, guided by his ambitious performance goals, the management team strategically identified and instrumentalised the QS Rankings to reposition itself as a global university (Downing, 2011, 2012).

To say that the university derived a strategy to boost its ranking position for rebranding purpose or the other way round is an oversimplified cause-effect relationship. More importantly was the "end" that the management team wanted to achieve by employing the two means in parallel. Some interviewees opined that it was the President's "vision" to create a better university that would be unique. Some said he wanted recognition for his personal achievement by marking his "era" of the university's development. Some believed that it was the pressure from the Council (many members have a business background) that used rankings and (research) funding to evaluate the performance of the President and his remuneration package. The official documents, however, tended to associate improved image and rise on rankings with increased funding and donation from alumni (CityU, 2010, 2015a, 2015d) without specifying the causal relationships. Back in 2003, a governance review did recommend the replacement of the Committee on Donations with an External Relations Committee (CityU, 2003, p. 24) suggesting the close links between public relations, thus rankings and rebranding, and the fundraising purpose.

Stakeholders' resistance or indifference

Lack of official occasions for bottom-up resistance

The chronological description above shows that the rebranding process lasted for more than a decade. Instead of launching the new logo boldly with a ceremony in 2015, 2017 or 2019, the official accounts of the rebranding were very limited and were characterised by unidirectional announcements rather than consultative dialogues. The university used multiple official channels to cautiously disseminate the messages about the rebranding with a video and a few photo posts in August 2015. The comment function of the YouTube video was disabled, for example. The responses to the official communication on Facebook were close to signalling indifference (Figures 2a & 2b). This is a stark contradiction to the heated discussions in non-official social media groups.

Among the informants interviewed in 2017, regardless of the position they took for or against the change, none of them was aware of the university's rebranding plan, as to how, when, and to what extent the changes would take place. It came as a surprise to all those interviewed. The same reactions were found in the student-run Facebook groups and mass media reports in which questions about the consultations and the sudden changes were raised in heated discussions.

Figure 2a. Official logo video, by CityU Facebook, 2015 (left) (https://www.facebook.com/page/182053561695/search/?q=logo). In the public domain.

Figure 2b. Official logo announcement, by CityU Facebook ,2015(right) (https://www.facebook.com/page/182053561695/search/?q=logo). In the public domain.

The discussions sparked off on (social) media by each of the surprised changes throughout the otherwise low-key rebranding process may suggest that it was a chain of incidental, opportunistic changes rather than coordinated changes following a preconceived rebranding strategy. But this could also be a stealth rebranding strategy that was known in corporate rebranding for mitigating the negative impact of radical brand changes (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006).

When the anniversary logo was suddenly turned into a marketing logo in 2015, the Vice-President explained that the idea was first suggested in 2010 and the logo was launched as "as part of the 30th anniversary celebrations". In the same official statement, he claimed to have a "branding strategy", which the university declined to share with the author, and that broad consultations with key stakeholders and "thousands and thousands of people" were organised preceding the rebranding (CityU, 2015b, p. 14). However, the said consultations were found to have been conducted for the purpose of adopting the 30th anniversary logo. By saying that "Our new logo is almost the same as the anniversary logo, but with the "30" removed!", he downplayed the change of purpose from an anniversary logo to a marketing logo and later an institutional logo as a minor issue that required no further consultations. Such a stealth approach was openly confronted by the chair of the staff association and some students in local (social) media when the marketing logo was promptly installed on the entrance of the university (Nextplus, 2017). But there remained no further open consultation.

The gradual "unofficial" changes offered no occasion for the staff and students to reflect their opinion through an official channel until a proposal to replace all the departmental logos with the new logo was finally presented to the Senate in 2019.

Belated resistance against turning a "house of brands" to "a branded house"

Universities undergoing rebranding should preferably decide on the brand architecture (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006): to have "a house of brands" (allowing the departmental logos to co-exist with the institutional logo) or "a branded house" (applying the same logo institution-wide). In this case, the institutional logo and departmental logos were allowed to co-exist between 2015 and 2019. The brand consistency was ensured by the application of the same institutional logo and a detailed style guide on the design and the relative positioning of the departmental logo (CityU, 2017). This way, the uniqueness of the different logos was preserved and the resistance of the departments towards the new logo minimised.

During the site visit in 2017, it was noticed that the marketing logo was already applied to a great extent on campus (including directories, signage, official circulars issued by the central administration, the uniform of janitor staff, university bookstore, university credit card, etc.). Some inconsistencies found were on circulars of student bodies, a few historical monuments and the logos on buildings and the concrete floor at the front entrance. In 2019, when the university suddenly announced the official plan to unify all the logos, thus a switch to a branded house, there was little left for the academics to oppose, especially when the two departments with strongest brands were exempted from the change. The strongest opposition came from the students, but the logos of student associations were also exempted from the unification.

Social media resistance through brand meaning co-creation

Due to the lack of an official occasion for internal stakeholders to oppose the change of logo throughout the process, resistance took place mainly in student-run social media groups.

Most comments about the logo change were directed against the unconventional brand colour and design of the logo. The change of the colour scheme from traditional blue green (cold colour) to unconventional burgundy (warm colour) invited a lot of critical comments. While red is associated with festivity and happiness in Chinese culture or the intended "passion and energy" (CityU, 2015b, p. 15) fit for the celebration of the 30th anniversary, comments on social media and media spoke about associations with communist China (indirectly, the admissions of fee-paying students from Mainland China and other ventures in China (CityU, 2010)), and the adjacent shopping mall Festival Walk (https://www.festivalwalk.com.hk/en/contact-us.aspx), thus an association with commercialisation and commodification of education. Therefore, the logo widely accepted for celebration and marketing purposes was perceived very differently when it became a university logo representing a solemn institution of higher learning.

One may assume that internal resistance would disappear after the cohort experiencing the change graduated (in this case, 2019). But when the management announced the introduction of the unified logo in 2019, the surprise conjured a plethora of alternative meanings and negative metaphors accumulated over the years in the digital space. Such student-run social media groups were managed by the students but open to the local community, including alumni and reporters of local media. The resistance was therefore sustained by the online community, across generations. Once again, new, and former students got to know the most widely shared derivative work of the "table-flipping logo (反枱 logo)" (Figures 3a & 3b) which associated the new logo with a YouTube video of a rude alumnus flipping the table and scolding candidates of a student-run election that went viral on social media in 2015.

Other metaphors recalled including the logo of the National Company of French Railways (https://www.sncf.com/fr), and the roof of a sports centre of the university that collapsed in 2016 (Figure 4).

Figure 3a. Table-flipping logo, by CityU Secrets Facebook, 2017 (left) ((https://www.facebook.com/page/291296904338073/search/?q=logo). In the public domain.

Figure 3b. Table-flipping logo recalled, by CBC Facebook, 2019 (right) (https://www.facebook.com/page/207097505984138/search/?q=logo). In the public domain.

Figure 4. Collapsed-roof logo, by CityU Secrets Facebook, 2019 (https://www.facebook.com/page/291296904338073/search/?q=logo). In the public domain.

A local designer also joined the discussion via the student-run broadcasting channels and his Facebook page. Below were his comments:

> *CityU is a large organisation, the brand structure and brand architecture are complex. It's not so easy to drastically unify the logo without considering of the demands of the departments… the original purpose of the design, as a celebration logo, may not fit the purpose as an institution logo. (CBC Facebook, March 14, 2019)*

These were valid comments especially in this case as shown in the loss of meaning when the marketing logo was transformed from a digital logo to a print logo and then a physical logo on buildings. The "sunlight" at the tip of the logo in the video intended to signify "energy and vibrancy" (CityU, 2015c) appeared as a "fading colour" in print and physical form. The unconventional 3-dimensional logo intended to look more dynamic on paper also created unsightly shadows when installed on the buildings.

Clampdown on behaviours deemed damaging to university reputation

In late 2020, following the city-wide political crisis in 2019, the Senate adopted a revision of the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure to stipulate disciplinary penalties of behaviours deemed "damaging the university's reputation" (CityU, 2021a). This has codified the penalties applied to students who were disciplined for creating satirical derivative work of the symbolic elements related to the university (e.g., logo and song). According to social media discussions and a local media report (Standnews, 2021), a similar disciplinary measure against staff behaviours deemed "damaging the university's reputation" was also adopted by the University Council in the same year. The first case concerned was the long-standing chairman of the staff association, an outspoken professor who was openly critical of university management issues (e.g., logo change, as reported by Nextplus, 2017). He was deprived of the discretionary benefits normally awarded to long-service retirees, implying that he was excluded from the university alumni community despite his long service as a staff representative. Such news has again stirred up a series of negative discussions on social media about the university's concern about reputation at the expense of free speech.

Discussion

The following discussion seeks to further conceptualise "university rebranding" and better understand a rebranding process, including the effectiveness of a stealth resistance-avoidance strategy, implications of stakeholders' indifference and/or resistance, challenges of online meaning co-creation, and a critical reflection on student stakeholders/consumers as internal or external stakeholders.

According to the Brand Flux Model (Williams 2012, as cited in Williams & Omar 2014) rebranding is defined more as symbolic and aesthetic changes rather than repositioning, or substantive restructuring of organisations that falls into a broader definition adopted by Muzellec & Lambkin (2006). It could be resulted from the latter two but also as a strategic choice to replace the old visual identity with a new one independent of substantive organisational changes. Using this narrow definition, this case is clearly a rebranding process, a radical brand change process.

What seems interesting is that the case university was found to have downplayed the radical changes of the visual brand (logo and colour scheme) as minor changes not worth further consultations after its adoption as a 30th anniversary logo, although the purpose of the new visual brand had been substantially changed in 2015, 2017 and 2019. Such a stealth strategy may have avoided the perceived risks of resistance typically associated with rebranding (Peterson et al., 2015; Grobert et al., 2016). However, it also attracted much criticism and (social) media attention after each surprised change of purpose that fell beyond brand managers' control.

Instead, the management played up the repositioning of the university as a global leading university to justify the need for a new brand. This justification was unconvincing based primarily on the QS rankings (Table 2) only and was unwelcomed by the internal stakeholders who were more aware of the China focus rather than global focus of the university. The new brand was instead associated with the China market and the commodification of education, which undermined its legitimacy as a solemn institution of higher learning (Huisman, 2007) based in Hong Kong.

The aggressive rebranding, commonly found among former polytechnics (Naude & Jonathan, 1999; Lam & Tang, 2018), and the risky instrumentalisation of QS rankings (Stack, 2016) to challenge the local hierarchy backfired on its reputation locally. The new logo has picked up negative associations with brand change surprises during the otherwise official low-key rebranding process. Alternative logos capitalising on highly visible scandals (e.g., the well-known table-flipping logo) were shared widely on student-run social media and sustained over time. Practically, the new visual identity has failed the primary objective of addressing the adverse publicity and deep-rooted misperception of the university in Hong Kong (CityU, 2010).

Compared to rebranding research in the business sector, where there are exemplary cases of rebranding failure that led to the reinstatement of the old brand, university rebranding rarely fails to such an extent. Reasons may include the lack of precision in the conceptualisation of university rebranding, which embraces also low risk brand revitalisation and reinforcement cases; the high tolerance of universities to ineffective rebranding because of the characteristics of universities, such as the source of income, inertia (Williams & Omar, 2014, p. 238) or the diverse stakeholders, who are vaguely defined and uncoordinated, to stage effective resistance; or the lack of a model to assess the effectiveness of (re)branding universities (Chapleo, 2005). As shown in this case, the length of the decade-long stealth process could also be a reason as organised resistance came rather late in 2019. By then it was practically impossible to reinstate the old brand because material changes were already made along the process from 2015.

Stakeholder indifference and resistance are regarded as unhealthy symptoms that could potentially lead to brand death, thus reasons driving different degrees of brand changes (Williams & Omar, 2014, p. 225). However, indifference or lack of resistance to rebranding may be mistaken as success by those applying a stealth or autocratic rebranding strategy (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Stuart, 2018). This case clearly shows that top-down enforcement and regulation of the visual consistency at the expense of interactions with the internal and external stakeholders was a missed opportunity for the much-needed meaning co-creation (Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016) both with supporters and opponents.

In the digital era, brand meanings are increasingly created by the networked consumers (Williams & Omar, 2014; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018), and the "real" / "substantive" value of brand is found in the "emotional ownership" of other stakeholders, including employees or consumers/students, rather than the "legal ownership" of the brands (Balmer, 2009, p. 556; Balmer, 2010, p. 181; Balmer, 2013, p. 735). Excessive regulatory control and protection of the legal ownership of the brand would only impede the development of such shared emotional ownership by different stakeholders. Moreover, the highhanded legal control in this case also backfired and generated negative associations making it yet another unhealthy brand that needs to be revitalised, reinforced, or rebranded.

The complexity of universities (Huisman, 2016) has a direct bearing on the brand architecture and the multistakeholder consensus-building process. Universities planning rebranding actions must critically adapt commercial rebranding approaches to their specific *context* (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Dean et al., 2016; Wilson & Elliot, 2016). A stealth rebranding strategy that worked in the corporate world to mitigate negative reactions of the consumers in the process (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) may delegitimise the rebranding process of a university where democratic governance and transparency are expected by internal stakeholders. This case demonstrates that unofficial social media groups became the ground of vibrant opposition when internal stakeholders, particularly current students, were only informed after facts as if they were external stakeholders, like prospective student consumers or potential funders.

The application of a monolithic logo in place of diverse departmental logos may present a consistent visual identity but also an autocratic image of the management for not respecting diversity and the brand value of the departments in their respective fields/disciplines. It is known in corporate rebranding cases that weak or unhealthy brands were the ones replaced by stronger brands. In the case university, some exemptions were made when the house of brands approach was switched to a branded house. This appears to be a clever resistance-avoidance strategy. However, it indirectly acknowledged that most sub-brands of the university were not worth keeping and therefore contradicted the global excellence justification.

In the digital age, meaning co-creation by active audience can no longer be prescribed and completely controlled by brand managers. The trend towards meaning co-creation with consumers or even post-modern brand creation embracing multiple co-created meanings has been observed in recent corporate branding literature (Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). However, such democratic, open approach to rebranding is yet to influence higher education marketing and branding. As demonstrated in this case, although the university is dealing with the most tech-savvy "consumers" or "pro-sumers" (producers + consumers) (Aspara et al., 2014, p. 543; Stack, 2016, p. 22), or "internal" student stakeholders as argued in this study, the rebranding approach has only become more autocratic with regulatory control of the visual and symbolic identity to protect the institutional reputation.

Conclusion

With the proliferation of university branding activities, there is no lack of research on the phenomenon but a lack of differentiation between branding and rebranding. University branding is a long and dynamic perception management process (Balmer, 2010; Lam & Tang, 2018). Rebranding adds the change management dimension to the process although the change may be purely symbolic or visual without involving substantive organisational changes. This case provides new empirical evidence to support Williams' (2012) definition of rebranding as a radical, though symbolic, brand change process second to renaming.

Rebranding is known to be a risky process. Stakeholders' resistance to detach from the old brand emotionally and accept the new brand characterises such a brand change process that requires a carefully designed rebranding and communication strategy. This case reflects on the success or failure of the stealth strategy that successfully enforced the management-driven changes but resulted in internal stakeholders' indifference to the official narratives as opposed to the active resistance on unofficial social media after each surprised change. A high-handed approach to protect the symbolic elements of the brand with disciplinary actions and legal threats against "unauthorised use" further impeded meaning co-creation by other stakeholders and therefore the development of emotional ownership (Balmer, 2009, 2010, 2013), the essence of a brand.

This paper also addresses the digital challenges of university rebranding when unofficial social media discussions of former and current internal stakeholders fall beyond the scope of management control. It shows that the co-creation of undesired meanings is unavoidable both in time and in public space. The alignment of brand consistency should therefore not be understood narrowly as visual consistency but also internal and external meaning consistency (Mampaey et al., 2020) across stakeholder groups through interactive meaning co-creation (Pringle & Fritz, 2019). However, digital media pose significant challenges to achieve such internal and external meaning consistency notably due to the multiplicity of the, often vaguely defined, stakeholders of a university. This paper highlights the need to consult and interact with tech-savvy current students and former students (alumni), who are empowered to co-create alternative designs and brand meanings on unofficial social media platforms when they are not consulted as internal stakeholders. The externalisation of loyal and committed students as “consumers” during the rebranding process deserves a critical reflection.

Due to the refusal of the management to participate in this study, this case study suffers from the lack of official responses. This is undoubtedly a limitation. However, it also provides the room for an independent and critical review of the rebranding process from different perspectives, and an additional piece of evidence of the defensive, unilateral communication approach of the university.

Appendix

Table 1. Sources of evidence cited:

Official communication
Planning documents/reports
CityU. (2003). *Report of the Review Committee on University Governance and Management.* CityU. (2008b). *Strategic plan 2003 to 2008.* CityU. (2010). *Strategic plan 2010-2015.* CityU. (2015a). *Annual report 2014-2015.* CityU. (2015d). *Strategic plan 2015-2020.* University Grants Committee (UGC). (2010). *Aspirations for the higher education system in Hong Kong.*
Guidelines/regulations
CityU. (2007). *City University of Hong Kong corporate identity graphic standards manual.* CityU. (2017). *Manual for the use of the visual identity and the design applications.* CityU. (2020). *Corporate identity manual.* CityU. (2021a). *Student Discipline Committee. Code of student conduct and disciplinary procedure.* CityU. (2021b). *University policy and guidelines for the use of the university's name, artistic-related intangible and tangible assets, visual identity and trade marks.*
Official newsletters/blog posts
CityU. (2008a). *President's speech at the installation of President cum Honorary Awards Ceremony.* Kuo, W. (2009, November 19). University world rankings and appraisals. *President's Blog - The Way*. Hong Kong: CityU. CityU. (2012, October 9). *University Logo Design Competition winners announced.* CityU. (2015b, October). *Log on to new logo.* CityU. (2015c, September). *New logo, new face.*

Website/social media
CityU Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (Keyword searched “CityU” & “logo” 2015-2021)   CityU website: Home page and department pages
Unofficial communication
Media reports/articles
Downing, K. (2011, April 3). Rankings bring Asia out of the shadows. *University World News.*   Downing, K. (2012, March 25). International rankings: A poisoned choice. *University World News.*   Nextplus. (2017, June 9). 城大校慶 logo 變校徽擋煞？   Standnews. (2021, February 20). 帶領城大工會 16 年 謝永齡被奪退休福利、罰禁足校園 勒令兩周內遷出辦公室 人事部：唔會畀理由你.
Social media
Facebook: CityU Secrets (A community page for CityU students and beyond); City Broadcasting Channel, City University of Hong Kong Students' Union (CBC) (keyword searched “logo” 2015-2021)   Facebook: 中央聖學子 (A local designer; keyword searched “CityU” 2015-2021)
Other sources
CityU campus site visit (2017): photos and a video of the university campus facilities, notice boards, on-campus advertising, monuments, staff uniform, etc.   Interviews (2017): a staff representative, an alumni association representative; an administrator (legal); a former administrator (public relations), a local alumna, an overseas alumna, a researcher/teacher/alumnus, an administrator of another university, an academic of another university   Ranking’s websites/archives: QS World University Rankings (QS); World University Rankings, Times Higher Education (THE); Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)

Table 2. Archival records of the ranking positions of the university:

	QS	THE-QS	THE	ARWU
2008/09		147		303-401
2009/10		124		303-401
2010/11	129		Not ranked#	301-400
2011/12	110		193	301-400
2012/13	95=Purdue University		182	2001-300
2013/14	104=University of Adelaide		201-225	301-400
2014/15	108		192	201-300
2015/16	57		201-250	201-300
2016/17	55		119	201-300
2017/18	49		119	201-300
2018/19	55		=110	201-300
2019/20	52		126	201-300
2020/21	48		126	201-300
Note: # No data submitted to THE because of doubts over its new methodology split with QS in 2009				

4. Framing theory for higher education research

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Abstract

The main objective of this chapter is to explore the potential and applicability of framing, a multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic "metatheory" of sensemaking through communication, or media effects specifically, in guiding higher education research. To reach this objective, the author first synthesised theoretical discussions on framing in different disciplines, collated the core concepts developed around the framing concept and developed a universal framing process model, to be applied with the introduction of a theme and the selection of research paradigms. Following that, the author provided an overview of the application of the framing concept in higher education research and explored the potential application of the model to guide and coordinate framing research in the field.

Keywords: Framing theory; metatheory; higher education; communication; sense-making; mediatisation; framing process model; multidisciplinary; multiparadigmatic

Introduction

Framing, a concept or rather a network of concepts for explaining how sense-making is done through communication in general or shaped by media effects, has been gaining increasing popularity since the early 1990s under the drive of communication researchers like Robert Entman who aspired to make communication studies – an emergent multidisciplinary field that lacks "disciplinary status" – a "master discipline that synthesises related theories and concepts" scattered in other disciplines (Entman, 1993, p. 51). The popular use of framing, merely as an eye-catching keyword or a conceptual framework, is observed also in the field of higher education research in recent years. This prompts the author to trace the ongoing efforts to theorise framing and explore its potential application in higher education research in the context of mediatisation, a process whereby higher education institutions' (HEIs) processes and decisions are increasingly framed and affected by media.

In communication studies alone, framing has taken on different meanings while being applied on different levels of analysis, from explaining how news stories are constructed by journalists to how voters' behaviours are swayed by media discourse in national elections. The call of Entman to clarify and structure framing and related concepts under "a general theory" (Entman, 1993, p. 56) has thus started a line of theoretical and methodological debates on what framing is and how framing should be defined and researched among scholars in the field of communication studies (Scheufele, 1999; Reese, Gandy, Jr., & Grant, 2001; D'Angelo, 2002; Reese, 2007; de Vreese, 2012; D'Angelo, 2012).

Having said that, theoretical discussions of framing are not confined to the communication field. In the same year when Entman tried to organise framing concepts around mass media communication, Deborah Tannen, a linguist by specialisation, presented an edited volume (1993) Framing in Discourse that contained two of her articles, first published in the psychology domain, that "lay the theoretical groundwork for the analysis of framing in discourse" (p. 5). Much later on, Chong and Druckman (2007a) also proposed a "framing theory" from the perspective of public opinion research in political science, and Dewulf, Gray, Putnam, Lewicki, Aarts, Bouwen and van Woerkum (2009) attempted to "disentangle approaches to framing" from the perspective of conflict and negotiation research in human relations studies. These parallel attempts to theorise framing indicate, on one hand, a common consensus that framing research should be coordinated for theoretical development, and on the other, a discipline-centric approach to the theorisation of framing where disciplinary interests are prioritised over the common interest on communication research.

Commonly traced back to Goffman's (1974) *Frame analysis*, or further back to Bateson's idea of metacommunicative messages (1954, as cited in Tannen, 1993, p. 3), framing has been a concept that transcends disciplinary divisions originally and continues to evolve outside the field of communication. This is partly because of the multi-disciplinary origin of communication research, especially political communication that finds its roots in different disciplines (e.g. political science, communication, psychology, sociology), and partly because framing research in different disciplines have developed their own "research paradigms" (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 874) involving "divergent ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions" (Dewulf et al., 2009, p. 161) that are difficult to reconcile. Such differentiations by discipline and research paradigm, however, are considered a valuable organic nature of framing research that should be preserved in attempts to standardise conceptual and operational definitions of framing.

Despite the lack of clarity in the theoretical status of framing, a growing body of empirical studies has evolved around it in different disciplines with or without coordination. The same has happened to framing research on higher education issues carried out in other disciplines (e.g., marketing, economics, sociology) and in the field of higher education research itself. There is therefore also a need for higher education researchers to coordinate framing-related research at some point in time. Besides, the author sees that the concept is not only becoming more popular but also more relevant to higher education research given the increasing interactions between higher education and media (both mass media and social media) in terms of communication, and the adoption of "media logic" in the operation of higher education institutions in the "mediatised" context (Stack, 2016, p. 11). Media literacy becomes essential not only in the area of communication (e.g., branding, marketing, public relations, or science communication) but also in the governance of the institutions (e.g., how do universities make decisions based on their perceived media impacts). Both higher education practitioners and researchers in the field may soon feel the need to understand media effects, as well as the potential benefits of borrowing and adapting conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches developed by framing researchers in other disciplines for understanding how framing works in strategic communication and what effects it may have on a university or an entire higher education sector.

For higher education researchers new to the concept of framing, it is important to note that the theorisation of framing remains a bottom-up and retroactive process of synthesising past studies and finding common grounds. Until now, there is not "a theory" that can be readily used, although some conceptual clarification has been done along different dimensions over the years. These have been done by modelling the news framing "process" (Scheufele, 1999; D'Angelo, 2002), by contrasting the framing concept with other theories like agenda-setting, priming or prospect theory (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; van Gorp, 2007), by differentiating frames from "topics", "themes" or "discourse" with their structuring and organising functions (Reese, 2007, p. 150; Altheide & Schneider, 2013), by defining and categorisation of different types of frames, framing devices, and framing effects through systematic analysis of empirical evidence, by synthesisation and structuration of metadata, or by developing methodological tools through critical assessments of the tools such as quantitative or qualitative framing analysis methods or refinement of framing effect experiments and evaluation. It remains quite a messy and malleable concept.

Therefore, to use the concept framing, higher education researchers will inevitably also be involved in the theorisation of framing by picking and mixing related concepts and methods and feeding back the empirical evidence to the theory. This may either be done through advanced research design linking to more systematised framing research in other fields, or retroactive synthesis of framing research conducted in higher education research that may be connected to other fields.

In this contribution, the main objective is to explore the potential and applicability of framing, a multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic "meta-theory" of sense-making through communication in general or media effects specifically, in guiding higher education research. To reach this objective, the author conducted an extensive literature review of over 150 academic publications searched through Google Scholar and Scopus, in order to:

1. synthesise the theoretical discussions on framing in other disciplines in the past three decades;
2. collate core concepts developed around the framing concept that are scattered in different fields;

3. develop a universal framing process model to guide and coordinate framing research in higher education research;
4. provide an overview of the application of framing in higher education research; and
5. explore the potential application of the model in higher education research.

Theorisation of framing in the past three decades

The popularity of framing as a conceptual framework is evident in the growing body of scientific publications in disciplines like communication, political science, psychology, sociology, linguistics, and recently also in higher education research. The first appearance of framing as a concept can be traced back to Goffman's (1974) frame analysis or Bateson's (1954) metamessages. In 1993, Robert Entman's (1993) essay *Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm* sparked off a continuous line of theoretical discussions on framing among communication researchers (Scheufele, 1999; Reese et al., 2001; D'Angelo, 2002; Reese, 2007; de Vreese, 2012; D'Angelo, 2012). As diverse as the different definitions attached to the common term framing itself, scholars in the field of communication, as well as some outside, such as Chong and Druckman (2007b) in public opinion research and Dewulf et al. (2009) in conflict and negotiation research, held very different opinions on how to theorise framing. These differences may be summarised into three dimensions: a definition of framing, a framework to organise framing research, and the status of framing as a theory.

Framing as a process traverses disciplines and paradigms

First of all, regarding the definition of framing, there has not been "one" on framing after decades of discussions. Entman's (1993) definition remains the most cited:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Entman's definition highlights the selection of facts to create the impression of salience in news framing. Manipulative omissions were implied. The process and framing techniques to create salience were only hinted at. This may be considered a narrow definition of framing. It can be operationalised to guide news frame analysis but is insufficient to reflect other aspects of framing which were brought into the picture later by other researchers favouring a broader and more critical view of framing as a sense-making process. Scheufele's (1999) process model of news framing research (p. 115), for example, has explicated the process aspect of framing. His major contribution was to have differentiated frames into "media frames" and "audience frames" (pp. 106-107) and identified four key processes (frame-building, frame-setting, individual-level processes of framing and a feedback loop from audiences to journalists) (pp. 114-118).

Comparatively speaking, Scheufele's (1999) definition of framing as a process is more inclusive than that of Entman's. Calling it a "theory of media effects", he proposed to address framing from a "metatheoretical perspective" (p. 106) to allow the application of the model for multi-level analyses or analyses of the "interplays" between levels e.g., "between individuals who operate actively in the construction of meaning and socio-cultural processes that offer meanings that are frequently contested" (Gamson, 1992, p. 67). He introduced the perspective of "media effects" on audience/individual frames and the "actors/conditions" affecting the frame-building process but did not explicitly address the paradigmatic aspect of framing research.

The strongest critique of Entman's definition came from D'Angelo (2002) who saw it as being exclusive, following a "singular paradigm" proposition (p. 873). To reopen the definition of framing, he proposed to adopt a "multiparadigmatic" approach to framing theorisation so as to embrace the diversity of framing concepts and research methods developed along different and distinctive research paradigms.

Indeed, framing studies are not only conducted in different disciplines/fields/areas but also following different paradigms (cognitive, constructive, critical) that may entail very different approaches to study framing of the same topic. Such differences could be found in methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed or multimethods; content analysis, experiments, surveys), research designs (an integrative approach that can only be delivered through a collaborative research team, a single dimensional approach that a lone researcher can deliver), levels of analysis (macro-analysis of the entire process; meso-analysis of parts of the process, e.g. frames; micro-analysis of framing attributes, e.g. framing devices), and perspectives (studying framing as dependent variables subject to external influences or independent variables influencing the recipients of framed messages). A research paradigm enables scholars to (a) share definitions of core concepts, (b) agree on the most useful theoretical statements about relationships among these concepts, (c) develop relevant hypotheses and research questions, and (d) agree on the research methods and instrumentation. (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 872). The addition of a paradigmatic perspective does not only provide one more way to conceptualise framing systematically but also gives the theory a higher potential in guiding research questions and designs following different traditions.

The later conceptual discussions of framing can be said to have developed along the lines charted by the above three scholars. Reese (2007), van Gorp (2007), and Dewulf et al. (2009) continued to explore the multiparadigmatic approach of framing research and suggested how the same research question can be tackled differently following different paradigms. Echoing the ideas of bringing together and bridging framing research in different disciplines and paradigms, de Vreese (2012) put into practice an "integrative research approach" to framing research in which political scientists and communication scientists jointly examined frame-building, frames, and framing effects using the same data set collected from a Swiss election.

D'Angelo (2012), however, critiqued the insufficiency of the integrative research approach which only focused on the operational level of design but not the level of concept explication and theory development. In his view, an additional "fitting in" process is needed on top of bringing together framing research from multiple disciplines and paradigms:

> By fitting into an integrative model, a single study or even a whole research agenda accepts certain conceptual definitions of frame and framing and relies on specified theoretical constructs and mechanisms regarding frame-building or framing effects. (p. 358)

His critique is consistent with his earlier conception of framing as a "research program" (D'Angelo, 2002) that brings together studies in different disciplines (operational research design) but continues to develop definitions and methods of different paradigms (theoretical development) without merging the paradigms.

In practice, however, the fitting-in step following a multiparadigmatic approach may be difficult to be operationalised as the tension to fit in different paradigms in one single research design could be too strong to overcome, and not many projects can afford the scale of operation to apply a multiparadigmatic approach to research the entire framing process, noting that every research question could potentially be operationalised along three distinctive paradigms.

Framing as a multiparadigmatic metatheory

Despite the lack of a common definition, scholars participated in the conceptual debates of framing seemed to have reached a consensus that framing should be positioned as a general theory (Entman, 1993, p. 56), a meta-theory (Scheufele, 1999, p. 104) or a meta-theory that traverses research paradigms (D'Angelo, 2002, p. 871; Dewulf et al., 2009). Scheufele (1999) argued that addressing framing from a metatheoretical perspective is necessary due to "terminological and conceptual inconsistencies". "[A]dditional research demonstrating framing effects for particular media or in specific content areas is of limited use to the [communication] field" …"unless framing can be used to broaden our understanding of media effects" (p. 104). Building on the framing process concept, D'Angelo (2002) argued that a multiparadigmatic framing theory encourages researchers to employ and refine different theories, which could also be contradictory, to have "a comprehensive view of the framing process" (p. 871). This approach is echoed by Dewulf et al. (2009) who believe that "a variety among approaches to framing is, in itself, an asset rather than a problem" while cautioning that the "malleability of the framing concept" which allows various communities of scholars to utilise it in different ways risks becoming meaningless (p. 157).

Given the multidisciplinary and multiparadigmatic root of framing in academic research, meta-theory appears to be the only way to accommodate the different schools of thought that have evolved around the concept in parallel or interdependently. The paradigmatic dimension introduced into the meta-theorisation of framing is said to be in line with meta-theorising in sociology, a "multiparadigm science" that "researchers ought to tackle empirical problems with elements of different paradigms" (Lauden, 1977, Ritzer, 1975, 1981, 1992, as cited in D'Angelo, 2002, p. 874). By adding this dimension to the meta-theorisation of framing, it increases the potential of the framing process model to guide the development of research questions and designs, not only horizontally along different stages of the process, but also vertically along different lines of conceptual definitions and research methods developed over time.

The multiparadigmatic metatheoretical approach to framing may therefore be interpreted as a compromise to enable framing research to accumulate in a loose framework because while many core concepts are developed and consistently attached to framing over time, few or no single study is expected to be able to explain the whole framing process (D'Angelo, 2002, pp. 874-875).

Common cores of framing

Despite the lack of a common definition, framing is more of a theory than just a concept because of the continuous elaboration of the key concepts attached to it. The following are some of core concepts considered essential by the author for constructing a universal framing process model (see Figure 1) that may accommodate the interests of researchers from different disciplines and paradigms, including our field.

Framing process

Framing is a process (e.g., journalistic process, political campaigning process) that involves the production of symbolic materials aiming to reflect selective perspectives and facts of the social world. The process does not end with the production of frames, but the framing effects on individuals and back to the framing actors in a framing cycle (Miller & Riechert, 2001). Scheufele (1999) proposed sub-processes of frame-building and framing-setting aimed at operationalising the process leading to the presumed media effects.

Frames

Many empirical studies are analyses of framing outputs – frames, using textual analysis methods because of the easy access to research materials. These studies place an emphasis on labelling and/or categorising frames, for example, by the level of analysis, as episodic/event frames, issue frames, thematic/master frames, or ideological/worldview frames (Iyengar, 1991; Gamson, 2001; Gross, 2008); by the location of the frames in the framing process, as frame in communication or frame in thought (Chong & Druckman, 2007a) which corresponds largely to Scheufele's (1999) media frames and audience/journalists' frames; by the function of frames for problem definition, causation, evaluation, solution (Entman, 1993); by the power of framing effect, as a weak or strong frame; by cognitive or emotional appeals of frames (Gross, 2008); or by symbolic association such as a horse-racing frame or a David and Goliath frame. Labelling and categorising frames represent the most popular type of framing research, which Chong and Druckman (2007a) called a "virtual cottage industry" (p. 106). They are essential but of limited value for explaining social phenomena themselves (Scheufele, 1999).

Framing devices

Framing devices are a set of micro-constructs that are used by frame creators to direct the attention of the audience to the aspect of facts deemed more salient than the omitted facts. They are essential for operationalising frame analysis, by defining the level of analysis and unit of analysis for coding. Tankard (2001) summarises three approaches to identify new framing devices: a media package – keywords and common language expected in a particular frame (e.g. nuclear progress package used for analysing news by Gamson & Modigliani (1989, as cited in Tankard, 2001), a multidimensional concept (e.g. eight dimensions of news stories used to analyse abortion coverage by Swenson [1990]), and Tankard's list of 11 news framing mechanisms: headline, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads, sources/affiliations, quotes, blown-up quotes, logos, statistics/charts/graphs, conclusion (pp. 99-101). These definitions based on news frame analysis need to be adapted for analysing other genres of communicated texts, particularly texts created or co-created by audiences (e.g., social media comments) or policy documents.

Framing effects

Framing effects on choice and decision have been extensively researched through experiments in the field of psychology since the 1980s (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1986; Levin, 1987; Kuehberger, 1998). There are also different types of framing effects, e.g., equivalency framing effects and emphasis framing effects proposed by Druckman (2001a, p. 245). Effects on different types of audience (active vs. passive, well-informed vs. under-informed) (Smith & Levin, 1996; Chong & Druckman, 2007a) suggest that framing is not a unidirectional process. Increasingly scholars are reflecting critically on the limits of framing effects dependent on the credibility of the sources or quality of frames (Druckman, 2001c; Chong & Druckman, 2007b), and the evaluation methods of framing effects (Druckman, 2001b; Kuehberger, Schulte-Mecklenbeck, & Perner, 2002; Kuehberger & Gradl, 2013).

Framing functions

Framing has the micro-scale function – routinisation of journalistic practices (Ben-Porath, 2009), and a macro-scale function to "make sense" and maintain an order of the social world, following dominant ideology or culture if perceived from a critical perspective (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004). This presupposes the intentionality of framing which is done consciously with the purpose of enforcing an interaction order for convenience, efficiency or for dominance. Censorship, for example, is a framing function found not only in the operation of media organisations but also HEIs which can be analysed on different levels.

Framing actors

In communication studies, the most obvious actors are journalists and editors who are directly involved in the production of media texts. However, newsroom practitioners, as "frame creators" do not work in a vacuum. They are in constant interactions with their management, information "sponsors" and a "web of subsidiaries" (e.g., news releases from public and private organisations) (Scheufele, 1999; Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Chong & Druckman, 2007a). They may also be regulated by "frame controllers." The roles of these actors in the construction of frames in communications are of crucial importance for understanding the mediated environment that organisations and the public are exposed to today. This is the least developed aspect of framing research (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). However, it is also the most promising aspect due to the addition of new actors (e.g., citizen journalists) following the digitalisation and democratisation of media.

Frame analysis and framing analysis

Frame analysis is both a methodology and a subject of study itself. As a methodology, frame analysis is often used to identify frames for understanding how social realities are reconstructed textually for preferred reading of certain contentious issues (such as social movements, environmental concerns, political controversies). There is a large body of literature around frame analysis and how to conduct the analysis empirically and systematically to fulfil scientific measurement standards of reliability and validity. These include, for example, the call to contrast what falls within and outside the dominant frames, the need to identify well-defined "framing devices," the choice between quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods for frame analysis, or the potential use of computer-assisted methods to process hypermedia texts (Reese, et al., 2001).

Framing power

Framing studies could follow two completely different epistemological approaches, one of a rationalist, empiricist approach, another a post-modernist, descriptive approach. Through both approaches, scholars are not only interested in knowing the frames but the framing effects on changing the social reality or the perception of it. In the digital post-truth era, the struggles among different actors to define social reality with the use of mass or social media suggest that research on the power relationships in the framing process will be of increasing relevance and importance. This would require a shift of the focus of framing research from examining the output (i.e., frames) to the study of actors, relationships and the contexts in which framing takes place (Pan & Kosicki, 2001; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Chong & Druckman, 2007b).

Summing up in a universal framing process model

The above core concepts have jointly or independently guided research on specific parts of the framing process in different disciplines or paradigms. However, as discussed above, the potential of framing for explaining social phenomena in a broader context can only be realised by joining these core concepts and exploring also the interplays among them with the adoption of a metatheoretical perspective. In light of this, the following "universal framing process model" (see Figure 1 below) based on Scheufele's (1999) news framing process model and the core concepts summarised above has been developed for applications in higher education research or other multidisciplinary fields.

This model is less context-specific compared to the "news framing" models developed by Scheufele (1999) and D'Angelo (2002) but more comprehensive than theirs to include and make explicit the conceptual constructs and mechanisms outside the news framing process, such as the major types of "framing actors", the paths down the potentially differentiated framing effects, as well as the competitive environment of framing contestation in the stage of audience reception. These new additions have expanded the framing model to enable the application of the critical paradigm for a higher level of analysis (cultural or ideological power struggles of actors) outside the immediate framing process of mediated texts.

With the digitalisation and democratisation of media, traditional framing theory and models in the communication field would need such an update to reflect the shifted balance between the media and audience as well. The visualisation of the model (Figure 1) does, however, not reflect the multiparadigmatic perspective of the theory. This is intentional because the author believes that the choice of one single paradigm or a mix of paradigms for an integrative research design exploring different stages of the framing process, should be made on a contingency basis dependent on the chosen research topic and specific research questions to be answered.

In other words, to use this model, one should first choose a theme (e.g., branding), then use it to guide the development of a research question (e.g., impact of branding on students' perception or choices of study destinations). After that one needs to decide on the research design (e.g., an integrative approach that tackles the whole process or one specific part of it) following the definitions and methods of one or more specific research paradigm(s). For example, from a critical paradigm, one could question the framing strategies of branding exercises targeting students of different racial or economic backgrounds; from a constructivist paradigm, one could observe how students and a university/higher education system interactively construct the meaning of the framing messages in a branding campaign during a crisis; from a cognitive paradigm, one could compare different framing effects of branding campaigns on the perception of students who are well-informed vs. under-informed about the university.

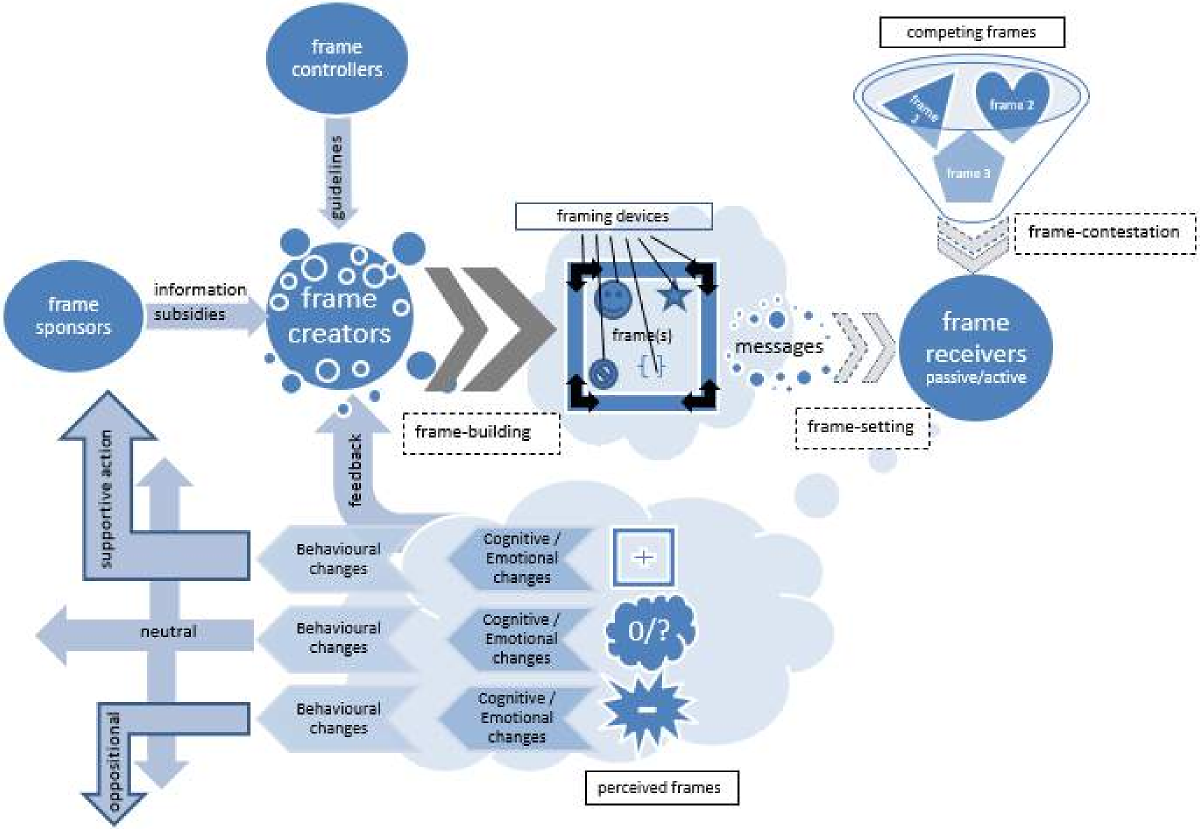

Figure 1. Universal framing process model

In the following section, the author will review how framing has been used in higher education research and explore further how this "universal framing process model" may be adapted for guiding higher education research.

Framing in higher education research

It is not new that framing is applied as a conceptual framework for research on higher education issues. Berger and Smith (1997) studied the effects of direct mail framing strategies on university fundraising. What is new is that framing research on higher education issues that used to be scattered in other disciplines begins to find their way to higher education research in recent years. In terms of quantity, a notable rise in the number of academic publications mentioning "framing" and "higher education" or "university" is observed. However, it is noted also that framing or frame has often been used casually to refer to "framework," and sometimes as an eye-catcher in the title that may not even appear a second time in the article. This observation resembles a phenomenon in the field of communication research that Reese (2007) described as the belief of many who "find in framing a more compelling hook to hang their content analyses on" (p. 151). It is not a unique problem in higher education research, but one that researchers in the field may have to face when communicating with an increasing number of "framing researchers" working on higher education issues in other neighbouring disciplines or higher education research itself, as shown below.

Topic-wise, framing has often been used in relation to admissions of college students with disadvantaged backgrounds in early years. Richardson & Lancendorf (2004) looked at media framing of affirmative action in relation to the diversity of newsroom professionals, whereas Friedrich, Lucas, and Hodell (2005) examined the framing effects on affirmative action. Recently, Martinez (2018), investigated the framing strategies of inclusion and exclusion in higher education in the frame-building stage, and Anderson (2020) conducted media frame analysis of international students and refugees in Canada. One sees in this example different studies dealing with the framing actors, frame-building process, media frames, and framing effects of a contentious topic – admissions of students with special backgrounds.

Related to disadvantaged students, framing effects on students' inclination to borrow for college education has also been investigated in recent years (Evans, Boatman, & Soliz, 2019). These can also be studied as a topic of student choices, which is another topic often seen in the application of framing in higher education research. Such research may analyse framing factors affecting choices in the admissions process, or funding options, as mentioned above, as well as students' choices of grading systems affected by framing (Smith & Smith, 2009), or their choices of satisfaction affected by framing devices used in evaluation tools (Mountford-Zimdars, Jones, Sullivan, & Heath, 2013; Ryan, 2015). Following the so-called "student journey," one can see that framing could be applied to study each and every stage of the students' university life that involves decision-making, from applications to evaluation of study experiences.

Other than student-related topics, framing has also been used to study different aspects of university governance, such as profiling. Reyes (2016) analysed frames of an entrepreneurial university in Singapore; McNaughtan, Louis, García, and McNaughtan (2019) examined university presidents' perception and the framing of university mission statements in the US, while Waymer & Street (2016) looked at media framing of black colleges in the US. On institutional policies and governance, Lee, Purcell & Chaney (2017) explored the framing effect of a tobacco-free campus policy on student perception, and Pick (2003) examined the effects of framing contestation on a university merger in Australia. Again, with this example, one sees that framing may affect university image externally through mass media, or internally by intentional or unintentional framing of the universities' management.

On a macro-level, framing has been applied to policy research for analysing how the concept of "autonomy" was shaped by a European university association (Nokkala & Bacevic, 2014) and the framing strategy in EU higher education policy (Serrano-Velarde, 2015). It has been used also on studying student movements such as the framing of anti-war social movements (Hedley & Clark, 2007); media framing of student protests in Turkey (Demirci, 2013); and the framing tactics of student movements against institutional changes in Turkish universities (Güneştepe & Tunçalp, 2016). Media framing of student movements is one of the earliest applications of framing in the study of higher education, as shown in Gitlin's (1980) research on media trivialisation of the student movement in the 1960s. With the recent outbreak of student-led political and environmental movements globally, framing is again becoming a relevant conceptual framework for researching the sociological impacts of higher education.

Finally, looking from the paradigmatic perspective, framing has been increasingly used for critical analysis of teaching materials, such as King's (2017) frame analysis of history textbooks in conflict-affected contexts in Rwanda, and

Bartosch's (2018) examination of framing in environmental and ecocritical education message.

The above literature overview shows that framing research conducted on higher education matters is not limited to the interactions between higher education and mass media but communication in general. Although research on media framing of contentious topics related to higher education sees a revival in recent years, the concept has also been applied for studying framing effects on students' decision-making process, framing actors' influence on profiling and sensitive governance policies, as well as critical ideological analysis of teaching materials, etc. This implies that the framing concepts developed in other fields would have to be broadened and adapted before application in higher education research.

Potential application of the "universal framing process model" in higher education research

The common cores listed in Section 3 above may be employed separately to guide the research of specific higher education issues such as frame analysis of communicated texts (e.g., branding materials, strategic plans) or psychological research on framing effects of, for example, promotional materials on prospective students' attitudes or choice-making decisions. However, based on previous discussions among framing researchers, a metatheoretical perspective of the framing process would be more promising for opening up potential research questions in different parts of the process or guiding an integrative research design for a more comprehensive understanding of the causal relations between communicated texts and their impacts on higher education.

The most obvious application of the framing metatheory, in the form of the universal framing process model proposed here, would be on higher education issues that are closely related to communication, particularly, external communication, when HEIs seek to shape representation of themselves for preferred readings by external stakeholders (e.g., the public, parents of prospective students, policymakers). This may involve the use of mass media, social media, or a mix of both nowadays. The universal framing process model can prompt us to think about who the frame actors were, be they in higher education institutions or outside, how did they frame the messages jointly or independently, in what texts were those messages represented, with what kind of frames and devices, at whom their messages were targeted intentionally or unintentionally, how were the frames in the messages interpreted by their target audience or unintended target groups, what kind of effects there were on the attitudes, opinion or behaviours of the target groups, did those attitudes and behaviours, in return, affect how the frame actors' attitude, opinion or behaviour.

Each of these stages in the framing process could generate a good number of research questions following previous studies of those specific parts of the process, in higher education research or other disciplines, such as frame analysis (e.g. frames and framing devices to sway public perceptions of contentious issues or a crisis), framing effects (e.g. effects on active/passive, well-informed/under-informed targets), or the influence of frame actors (e.g. activists framing social movement campaigns or counter-framing dominant media coverage). The research design could also be guided by different research paradigms following the conceptual frameworks and research methods accumulated in different schools of thought (e.g., constructivist approach to analyse representation of mediated texts, cognitive psychological experiments to examine changes of public opinion, critical analysis of dominance and power plays among frame actors).

Research designs, dependent on the resources available to the researcher(s), will most likely be limited in scope (e.g., specificity of the research topic; diversity of texts chosen for analysis; choice of research paradigm(s), number of stages in the process). However, with the framing process model, researchers will be aware of the options "framed out" in the process that may have already been addressed by previous research (in other fields or paradigms) or may still need to be addressed by future research in higher education research.

By adopting the same meta-theoretical framework, even lone higher education researchers may be able to contribute to the wider discussions on framing by supplementing empirical results and analyses of less researched parts or aspects of framing.

Alternatively, ambitious integrative research design, involving researchers from different disciplines, research paradigms or parts of the world, could be developed using the framing process model to tackle grand challenges in the higher education community. An example of such a project could be more holistic research on the impacts of media-driven global university rankings on higher education policy-making around the world or on the study choices of internationally mobile students. Higher education researchers tend to address these topics with surveys of institutions or students, or document analysis for drawing conclusions of the perceived impacts of rankings. The adoption of the framing process model, in such a case, would contribute to the sensitisation of rankings as a framing device that may or may not be as effective as perceived on institutions or individuals on one end, and, on the other hand, the sensitisation of media economics and power plays among frame actors in the creation of popular world university rankings today. In such a design, critical, constructivist, and cognitive paradigms can each have their place in the research design. Researchers may follow and develop on previous framing research that tends to focus on media frame analysis and framing effects on individuals' choices, or address, from a critical perspective, framing contestation on audience's reception of ranking information (e.g., counter framing by individuals in social media or by alternative information sources in different contexts).

It must be noted, however, that the use of the model does not imply that all research questions or designs have to address the entire framing process. The value of the meta-theoretical framing process model lies more on its structuring and organisational functions. It structures the framing process horizontally along stages of a framing process and organises framing research vertically along paradigmatic dimensions. For higher education research, which is often conceptualised as a transdisciplinary field, such a meta-theoretical framework also enables researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds to fit their work into the process for explaining a broader social phenomenon related to higher education.

Conclusion

Following the line of discussions among core contributors to the framing theory, a "universal framing process model" is proposed in this study based on the ideas of Entman to develop a "universal" theory for applications in different disciplines, the idea of Scheufele to incorporate the process perspective of framing, and new foci on framing actors, frame contestation, and multiple effect scenarios that are increasingly relevant because of the decentralisation of media power and the mediatisation of the operational context for organisations, including HEIs. The model is intentionally generic to maximise the scope of its applicability. Its ability to guide specific research comes from the "theme" attached to it to generate potential research questions following the constructs and mechanisms of the model (Figure 1), and the choices of research paradigm(s) (critical, interactionist/constructionist, cognitive) to guide the research design using the definitions, tools, and methodologies accumulated in previous framing research along the respective paradigms. This may be called a three-step-model that strikes a balance between exclusivity and inclusivity of the framing theory debated by previous scholars, as well as between horizontal coverage of all parts of a framing process and vertical continuity along research paradigms.

The author agrees on the positioning of framing as a metatheory and sees its potential in structuring integrative research designs, framing-related theories and methods and empirical findings systematically rather than convergence and standardisation towards one common definition. It is noted, nevertheless, that some common core concepts and terminology may evolve naturally over time with increasing multidisciplinary or even transdisciplinary research and increasing mobility of researchers across disciplines and paradigms.

As shown in the extensive literature review conducted in preparation of this chapter, framing has been gaining popularity in multiple disciplines sharing common interest in communication research, particularly in political communication, since the 1990s. Framing has also been applied to research on higher education issues by researchers scattered in other fields since the 1980s, although it finds its way to higher education research only in recent years and it remains a rather foreign concept to researchers in higher education research. The popularity in using framing loosely in many academic publications in higher education research indicates a communication gap between researchers in higher education research and framing researchers in neighbouring disciplines.

With the increasing interactions between higher education and media, and the mediatisation of the context in which HEIs operate, it is foreseeable that higher education research will have to deal with communication either as a dependent variable, because of increasing engagement of HEIs with the society via mass or social media, or independent variable for explaining the influence of communication on institutional processes and decisions. While similar issues may be researched from the perspectives of governance or other institutional perspectives, the proposed framing model here will, hopefully, sensitive researchers of the role of media and provide a common framework for higher education researchers touching on communication issues to structure and relate their joint efforts in the field or with other neighbouring fields.

Part III. Discussion and conclusion

Discussion

When more and more universities engage in facelifting changes of their official representation, such as the visual turn of their websites analysed in *Paper 1*, branding and rebranding in *Papers 2 and 3*, and potentially renaming in the future following the recent trend in renaming cities and countries, university communication is no longer a peripheral research area in higher education research as in ten years ago. The volume of research has gone up substantially which is a clear indication of research interest. What deserves more in-depth research on this topic is to go beyond the indicative value of the changing representation. This is because representation and reputation management of universities are found to have not only influenced the governance of universities but potentially the governance structure of the universities to exclude critical voices, such as student representation in the name of "reputation risks," as shown in *Paper 3*.

In the following section, the author shall highlight the contribution of this thesis to better understand:

- the relationship between representation, reputation, and governance,
- the conceptual clarity of world-class vs. flagship universities,
- the (re)branding processes in the higher education context,
- the implications of geopolitical context and mediatised context on university communication, and
- the transdisciplinary nature of university communication research.

The discussion reiterates the importance of studying university communication in a more coordinated and comprehensive manner to better understand the processes, the roles of different stakeholders, the relationships, and the contexts, as suggested in *Paper 4*.

The digital and visual turn of university communication implies that there is not only an exponential growth in the quantity of university communication materials, official and unofficial, but also the diversity of the formats of such materials. New tools, new methods, new research designs, and even publication venues will be needed for university communication research to catch up with the developments on the ground.

At the end of this section, the author acknowledges major limitations encountered during the studies conducted in the framework of this thesis and opens the discussion on new research directions based on the lessons learned in this thesis.

University representation, reputation, and governance

This thesis *Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Publicity Sphere* draws attention to the importance of studying the processes (Aspara et al., 2014) and the external environment (Birnbaum, 2001; Marvin & Marc, 2004; Simon, 2005; Gounko & Smale, 2007) of university communication that is comparatively less researched than the representation of universities on their websites or official social media pages. The longitudinal aspect of university communication research reflects indirectly the complexity of universities as organisations, which is a special context that universities must take into consideration (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Wilson & Elliot, 2016) when planning a change of their visual identities based on lessons borrowed from the business world.

The thesis highlights that even branding or rebranding logics (Aspara et al., 2014) in the business world change over time. Universities do not only have to adapt the business branding logics to their specific organisational contexts, which may be different in different world regions or higher education systems, as shown in *Paper 1*, but also to the changes over time. This study itself reflects the changing focus from the conformity of visual presentation and consistency of the external communication content to the co-creation process involving multiple stakeholders, especially internal stakeholders (Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020).

Given the prolonged change processes in universities (Aspara et al., 2014), aspirational branding aiming at the "future" rather than the history of the organisation, may have to catch up with changes in time to avoid becoming obsolete. Besides, a process that lasts more than ten years and is subject to changes in the external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Birnbaum, 2001; Marvin & Marc, 2004; Appold, 2005; Jaeki & Fatemeh, 2005; Simon, 2005; Gounko & Smale, 2007; Shirish et al., 2009), for example, the rises and drops on world-university rankings if the brand is associated with rankings (Stack, 2016).

As shown in *Paper 3*, a new university brand does not only associate with positive visibility but also negative visibility and meanings in the public(ity) sphere when scandals or brand change debates may arise due to poor or failed internal communication (Gotsi & Andriopoulos, 2008; Merrilees & Miller, 2008; Aspara et al., 2014; Mwinzi et al., 2016). Therefore, while it may be true that the adoption of business branding logics (Aspara et al., 2014) could serve as a shortcut to the traditional way of reputation-building through activities and achievements, universities need to attend also to the possible negative emotions (Collange & Bonache, 2015) or the emergence of counter-symbols (March & Olsen, 1976, as cited in Christensen et al., 2019), especially from loyal stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2015) holding onto an old brand. Local resistance (Aspara et al., 2014) in a (re)branding process should not be neglected or underestimated, as shown in some exemplary failed cases in the business sector (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018), although such cases remain rare in higher education research. This is particularly relevant to public universities with community-building missions (Altbach & Balán, 2007) or social missions when legitimacy is at stake during brand changes (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007, Huisman, 2007; Christensen et al., 2019; Mampaey et al., 2020).

As shown in *Paper 3*, it is a misperception that students, alumni, and staff would readily and enthusiastically embrace a global status indicated by world-university rankings, a potential added value of their own status, when such changes depart from their own experiences and expectations. Counter framing (Pick, 2003) of official narratives or counter symbols/alternative designs (March & Olsen, 1976, as cited in Christensen et al., 2019; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018) may be developed. It is true that through creative framing, universities can capitalise on the positional symbols of world-university symbols (Lam & Tang, 2018) to shape their desired communicated identity. Such a positively framed image with a weak factual basis (through association with one particular world university ranking) may not be challenged by prospective students or audiences culturally or geographically distant from the university. To the local students, alumni or the public who have personal experiences and perceptions deep-rooted in the way that university reputation is constructed locally (through admission scores and employment prospects), the meaning gap may be too large to be filled with glossy marketing materials alone.

The author concurs with the findings in the business sector which suggest that universities repositioning and rebranding, even if only symbolically, need to communicate the changes proactively through interactive discussions rather than one-way dissemination typically found among lowest ranked universities (Lam, 2014). While glossy marketing materials may attract the eyeballs of a global audience, they may attract scepticism and negative emotions of the internal or loyal stakeholders (Collange & Bonache, 2015). Such stakeholders may interpret the brand changes as a brand attack and contest the official frames through disengagement, indifference, or pressure via mass media or unofficial social media channels that could potentially damage or kill the new brand (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

For effective communication, clearly defined and identified stakeholders are essential (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010) for enhancing the "sensitivity to potential internal resistance" (Merrilees & Miller, 2008, p. 538) and tailoring targeted messages. This is not an easy task for complex organisations with multiple and diverse stakeholders like universities (Naude & Jonathan, 1999). As demonstrated in *Paper 3*, universities with global ambitions and serving largely local needs should at least clearly define the student stakeholders as *prospective, past,* or *present* students, as well as *global, regional,* or *local* in origin. Lumping all students as "external stakeholders," by following the business terminology of consumer or customers uncritically (Naude & Jonathan, 1999; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Aspara et al., 2014), risks neglecting the most important stakeholder group of university reputation management.

As shown in the Hong Kong cases featured in this thesis, marketisation, commercialisation, and commodification of higher education as a result of deregulations and defunding of public universities have put much pressure on the traditional collegial style of university governance. Competition for funding from (international) student tuition fees, donors, or public funds has driven university management to adopt business approaches in management through streamlining administration and centralising power to enable swift responses to the external environment. Collegial governance approaches through discussions, debates and consultations have been replaced by top-down management approaches or a stealth change strategy to implement changes quickly, as demonstrated in *Paper 3*. Such an undemocratic approach may indeed force through changes by avoiding the perceived risks of resistance typically associated with organisational changes, such as rebranding (Peterson et al., 2015; Grobert et al., 2016). However, changes implemented are not necessarily equivalent to rebranding success in the sense of creating a sense of emotional ownership among stakeholders. Modifying the governance approach or even governance structure to ensure managerial control over the changes could eventually undermine the external and internal legitimacy of the universities when the democratic participation of students and employees is suppressed.

The relationship between university reputation and governance has never been so close in the Hong Kong context, as shown in *Paper 3*. There may be other intervening political factors leading to the tightened control over university communication and the defensive approach to guard the reputation of universities at the expense of academic freedom and democratic governance. Geopolitics certainly plays a role for the development after 2019 that turns reputation management into a pretext and a tool for ideological control. Such a paradigm shift is, unfortunately, not unique in Hong Kong. Further studies would be required to shed light on the external environment of universities undergoing drastic political changes and how that affects the way universities control their *representation* and manage their *reputation* in a multipolar world where different sets of values are shaping universities symbolically and substantively.

The defining characters of world-class universities vs. flagship universities

The relationships between rankings and university (re)branding have been a topic of interest for both researchers and practitioners in higher education. Previous studies show that not all types of universities, but former polytechnics, are keener in pursuing rankings or business branding logics (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Chapleo, 2011; Lam & Tang, 2018) to position themselves globally as *world-class* universities. As a result, the term “world-class universities” is often reduced to competitions on world university rankings in practice.

Altbach (2007) attempted to define "world-class universities" along multiple dimensions: research excellence, top quality academics, academic freedom, institutionalised self-governance, adequate facilities, and adequate funding. This is a concept broader than the dictionary definition of "world-class" as "ranking among the foremost in the world; of an international standard of excellence" (p. 364) and from its traditional German root of being "research-oriented" in the end of the 19th century (p. 368). However, given the heavy reliance of all world university rankings on research outputs, universities without a research role in the local system would find it more difficult to enter the world-class universities race. This leads some former polytechnics or teaching-oriented universities to take up a research role in a phenomenon called "academic drift" (Neave, 1979; Huisman, 2016) on a global scale. Such *world-class* universities endorsed by world university rankings, following the *vertical excellence* (steep inter-institutional stratification) logic (Teichler, 2009, 2017), may in turn challenge other reputed universities in the global or local hierarchy based on other quality indicators organised around *horizontal excellence* (intra-institutional diversity) logic (Teichler, 2009, 2017).

This thesis contributes an example of how global rankings are instrumentalised together with aggressive corporate branding strategies to challenge the local hierarchy of universities, as shown in *Papers 2* and *3*. From a macro perspective, this has also happened between universities from developed and developing countries, such as China, where ranking endorsed *world-class* universities are overtaking reputed universities in other mature systems, such as those in Europe.

Alternatively, this thesis points out that not all flagship universities are the best equipped to communicate and compete globally (see *Papers 1* and *2*). Flagship universities, research universities, world-class universities are often used interchangeably as representatives of excellent universities, leading universities, or top universities. But they are slightly different and may in fact compete internally within their local system as described above. Flagship universities are usually traditional universities with historical heritage that are leading in the local and/or global system. They enjoy the reputation accumulated from past activities and public recognition of their achievements. They are expected to be leading the national systems in the global competition in the knowledge economy, research, and innovation (Altbach & Balán, 2007), but their legitimacy may still derive from their historical role in serving the local communities. They must therefore practise strategic balance (Deephouse, 1999) to respond to the global role and local needs. Some may not be the best prepared for global competition when the local expectation (e.g., official language requirements) holds them back from drastic changes.

Depending on the developmental level of the higher education system, not all flagship universities can enter world-university rankings. They are not necessarily research-intensive. Such universities may only take up the research role to become "comprehensive" or "research-oriented" universities much later depending on the level of development of their local higher education systems.

In the Hong Kong system, for example, flagship universities were designated an additional research role and prescribed the role and funding to compete in international research outputs that were reflected via rankings only at the turn of the 21st century. In other mature higher education systems, like the US or Germany, research universities could be research-specific institutes without teaching roles and are not flagship of the entire system but of specific disciplines. Research universities or flagship universities are not necessarily organised around world university rankings, or *vertical excellence* (steep inter-institutional stratification) as opposed to *horizontal excellence* (intra-institutional diversity), in the global or local systems (Teichler, 2009, 2017).

From a communication point of view, this thesis demonstrates that flagship universities of local systems, which tend to take up a research role and/or a service role for community-building, may not be the most prepared to communicate globally, as shown in *Paper 1*. On the other hand, second-tier universities that actively pursue ranking-driven *world-class* status and corporate branding logics to challenge the local reputation-based hierarchy may find themselves caught between the global ambition and local resistance, as shown in *Paper 3*. It is possible for a higher education system with abundant financial sources to host multiple "world-class universities," which may in turn attract more private or public funding for research or top-score students from other systems. However, when all the institutions prioritise research over teaching and international (fee-paying) student recruitment over the provision of second chance education opportunities to local students, such an academic drift could undermine the capacity of the entire system to serve the local community.

Finally, the thesis echoes earlier studies that symbolic changes of university status can also arouse unexpected local resistance (Aspara et al., 2014). The global ambitions of *world-class* universities may be more symbolic than substantive, especially in cases which practise aspirational branding or isomorphic emulation of web representation (Lam, 2014). However, such symbolic changes of the status and representation in the local system are sufficient to arouse emotional responses of the local communities that may still hold on to the old perceptions based on local history and experiences (Aspara et al., 2014). In such cases, as shown in *Paper 3*, communication with local and internal stakeholders, especially alumni and students, is of utmost importance in the rebranding or repositioning process, be it symbolic or substantive. Both the power of communication and the power over communication channels possessed by contending parties trying to shape universities or the entire higher education system according to their own basis of truth will bring representation, reputation, and governance closer than ever in higher education research.

Branding, re-branding and university rankings

The relationship between rankings and (re)branding has been an issue of inquiry in higher education (Chapleo, 2010). Noting that research output needs long-term investments, some universities or an entire system also strategically invested in commercial, media-driven rankings (Stack, 2016, Chirikov, 2021) that claim to have more weighting placed on teaching and learning activities measured by students' and employers' surveys. The surveys are perception surveys affected by the positive visibility of universities, thus justifying the benefits of visibility activities such as advertising and branding (Wächter et al., 2015). The relationship between branding and ranking has not been empirically proved, not to mention the causal relationship. But past research and this thesis found that up-and-coming universities, post-1990s universities are more eager to adapt corporate branding logics (Naude & Jonathan, 1999; Chapleo, 2011; Brown & Mazzarol, 2009; Lam & Tang, 2018) to present itself than traditional flagship universities or research universities.

One explanation is that they lack the reputation accumulated over time (Barmer, 2001) by the older universities that can be converted into symbolic capital for international recruitment of researchers and students. The other explanation, as demonstrated in *Paper 3*, is the preconceived second-tier status of such universities in their respective local systems which may be competitive globally as a system. The lower ranked universities of a system may still be among the top few percent on global rankings and develop global ambitions.

However, as shown in *Paper 3*, the conversion of the global reputation symbolised by world university rankings back to the local reputation may meet with scepticism because of internal stakeholders' deep-rooted perception of the local hierarchy and personal experiences that may contradict the global reputation claim. While external marketing may benefit from information gap filled in with paid advertising and branding activities (Stack, 2016; Chirikov, 2021), internal marketing (Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020) is proven more difficult to coordinate because of potential resistance and counter readings of brand meanings (Pick, 2003; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018; March and Olsen, 1976, as cited in Christensen et al., 2019).

Unlike the increasing attention on (re)branding failure (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018) and (negative) emotional responses of (loyal) stakeholders (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018) in business communication, there are only very few studies of failed cases of (re)branding in higher education research. This thesis raises the question of (re)branding failure in the higher education context, which poses not only challenges in achieving and measuring branding success (Chapleo, 2005), but also difficulties to detect and display failure (Williams & Omar, 2014).

Paper 3 critically reflects on the implications of brand changes *successfully* implemented with a stealth strategy that ended up in distancing stakeholders from the renewed brand after a decade long exercise. This may not (yet) be classified as a failed case because brand meaning may continue to be developed in the years to come with new cohorts of students, but it is not a successful case neither given the resistance and indifference of current internal stakeholders. From a change management perspective, a stealth strategy (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) may be more efficient in pushing through management-driven changes by avoiding risks typically associated with rebranding (Peterson et al., 2015; Grobert et al., 2016). However, it may also reduce the effectiveness of brand meaning co-creation (Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016) and brand ownership development, which takes place in the mind of the recipients (Balmer, 2009, 2010, 2013).

In other words, the absence of failed rebranding cases in higher education research literature might have given a misperception that most rebranding cases in the field have been successful. It must be noted that successfully implementing management-driven changes, sometimes through regulatory controls or legal restrictions, is not equivalent to successful rebranding, as shown in *Paper 3*. Indifference is not equivalent to the lack of resistance. On the contrary, according to Williams & Omar (2014) indifference is the most damaging reaction to (re)branding, which is supposed to aim at creating emotional ownership (Balmer, 2009, 2010, 2013) and a sense of belonging to the organisation.

The case of Hong Kong: Context matters

Context matters in marketing and (re)branding. University rebranding, in particular, must be treated as a change management process (Aspara et al., 2014; Williams & Omar, 2014) because of the risky move (Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016) to detach the emotional attachments of loyal stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2015) to the old brand. It is not uncommon that "internal" current student stakeholders tend to be left out as "external" customers in the rebranding process that typically targets prospective students. This could be the result of a risk and resistance-avoidance strategy copied from the corporate world (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) and/or the lack of clarity in the definition of stakeholders (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Finney & Scherrebeck-Hansen, 2010), a known challenge in the higher education context (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Wilson & Elliot, 2016).

This thesis contributes an illustration of the peculiar context of Hong Kong. The target market segmentation of Hong Kong higher education could be confusing given the colonial history and the present-day status of the city as a (supposedly) highly autonomous, but (clearly) not independent, *Special Administrative Region* of China. Given that China is the largest international student market and Mainland Chinese students are eager to study in Hong Kong, the competition for international students tend to end up with an influx of Mainland Chinese students who are termed "non-local students" in Hong Kong but "international students" by popular world university rankings such as THE and QS. Outside China, these students are "international" students, but within Hong Kong, they are neither local nor international. Internationalisation, intended or not, results in "mainlandisation", which gives the impression that universities are sacrificing the autonomy of Hong Kong for the China market. However, the influx of Mainland Chinese students does not only happen in Hong Kong, but also other universities subject to market forces under the influence of neoliberalism. The difference, if any, is the intensity of the pull towards the China market, coupled with suspected political infiltration over the years, especially after the 2019 political crisis.

Due to the colonial legacy, Hong Kong's education system has been heavily influenced and networked with other Anglo-phone systems. This partially explains the good performance of its universities in world university rankings, especially in the early years, as well as its conflicting situations in the course of internationalisation from a Western neoliberalist market perspective, which ultimately leads to "mainlandisation" or even nationalisation as shown in trends observed after 2019.

Such peculiar market segmentation complexity seems unique but not exclusive to China's two special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau). One can imagine similar situations in EU countries bordering Russia, where "international competition" of students may not be so "keen" or "global" in nature when the demand from a huge market next door constantly exceeds the supply in small systems. This is not only because of higher quality of education but also residence and employment prospects in the more developed economies, as illustrated in the case of Hong Kong (LegCo, 2007).

Based on the Hong Kong case, the author questions the rhetoric of "global competition" in such systems bordering big international student markets. The competition may be overstated, depending on whether the competition concerns student recruitment or research. While research competition may be global, because universities in big markets, like China or Russia, are also becoming globally competitive with national funding drives (Chirikov, 2021), the competition for students and researchers may not be so keen if the *volume* of students and *revenue* are the only concerns. Global competition for talents from these major markets may be real but in the case of Hong Kong, China has clear policy preferences over universities in Hong Kong which is considered part of the country. The linguistic proximity is another competitive advantage of Hong Kong universities especially at the undergraduate level.

This thesis suggests that the pressure of competition for students, either for revenue or talent, is unlikely the main driving force for Hong Kong universities to engage in aggressive and expensive (re)branding activities. The relationships between competition, (re)branding and ranking activities in Hong Kong appear to have been driven by inter-institutional competition in the local hierarchy (see *Paper 3*) or intra-national competition for top-scored students. Former polytechnic universities that have been providing "second chance education" for students in the home market no longer want to serve this local market segment when the university can attract better or best scored students from the China market just across the border. Such universities are eager to shed their second-tier university status locally, using global rankings and corporate branding strategies. However, such global ambition and intention to challenge the local hierarchy have been met with local scepticism and resistance, especially from alumni and existing students as discussed in the sub-section above.

Driven by global competition and the excellence discourse, perceived or real, universities aspiring to be *world-class* may have experienced similar conflicting situations when serving the global, national, and local markets. In the Hong Kong context, such conflicts have manifested on the social and political levels with outcomes contrary to the intention of internationalisation. Academic drift (Neave, 1979) and the perceived displacement of local students by the influx of Mainland Chinese students have created mistrust between local and non-local students despite great emphasis placed on internationalisation and inclusion on university campuses.

The case of Hong Kong, addressed in *Papers 2* and *3*, clearly demonstrates that context matters when we interpret similar terminology or change processes in higher education systems. The examples of Hong Kong universities in *Papers 2 and 3* have their uniqueness given the ambiguous political status of the city. However, they have been under-researched because of the "international" focus of the local academia. While the special context limits the generalisability of the examples, they are of good reference value to Western systems/institutions heavily dependent on student markets with conflicting academic and political values on the local, national, and global levels. The reconciliation of local realities and global ambitions is a common issue that *world-class* universities must tackle in the long run.

Digitalisation and mediatisation

This thesis acknowledges that the digital and visual turn of university communication heavily influences how the universities represent themselves externally. The adoption of corporate "branding logic" (Aspara et al., 2014) means much more than the alignment of external communication contents but also the alignment of representation and perception of different stakeholders, both external and internal. Perception management, particularly of visual identities that are polysemic (Bell et al., 2014), in the digital era has been proven very challenging to brand identity managers. It is not only the change from print to digital media but the shifting power between the branding organisation and the stakeholders receiving the brand identity narratives intended by the organisation.

Echoing findings in business literature, the popularisation of social media for higher education marketing targeting Generation Z or the "digital natives" implies that brand meanings are no longer the result of a unilateral dissemination of official narratives but are co-created interactively with active recipients both via official and unofficial social media channels. However, it is found that research on social media use by universities has been positively biased towards success stories and practical advices of how to manage official social media representation. Failed cases or analysis of unofficial social media resistance remain rare in the field although exemplary failed cases are becoming a new research focus in corporate communication in recent years (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018).

Rebranding, in the digital age, has caught the attention of corporate communication researchers as a risky change process. The same is found in *Paper 3* of this thesis. In business branding research, organisations undergoing rebranding have started to take notes of the implications of negative emotional reactions of loyal stakeholders (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Collange & Bonache, 2015; Grobert et al., 2016; Tarnovskaya & Biedenbach, 2018). This is a relatively new development in the field of higher education. *Paper 3* reinforces the findings of Grobert et al., (2016) that the absence of internal communication could potentially undermine external communication when internal stakeholders took to unofficial social media to air their grievances or disagreement with the official narratives.

This thesis contributes to the reflection of social media as a double-edged sword for the external communication of universities. Most of the students today possess the means and ability to share stories about their university or alma mater, thus aiding the publicity of the university through organic marketing at no cost. At the same time, they are aware of the power vested in them as consumers or stakeholders by creating external pressure and public opinion to hold the universities accountable for their behaviours, as shown in *Paper 3*. Such a public(ity) sphere is not limited to specific geographical scopes, except in places where the internet is fenced, like China. With built-in translation apps, the online linguistic barriers have also been dismantled to a large extent. The global coverage and lightning speed that information travels across geographical, cultural, linguistic borders pose significant challenges for brand managers to manage external communication or ensure that tailored messages targeting specific markets stay within the intended areas or target groups.

While it remains important to define specific market segments and target groups to generate relevant messages, universities serving markets with contradictory academic and political values may find themselves caught between two worlds and public relation catastrophes more often than before. University communication should therefore shift the focus from the generation of positive contents to damage control and crisis management. The trend towards authenticity marketing on social media also implies that brand management must walk the fine line of revealing the true identity of the university while avoiding negative interpretation of the less-than-perfect side of the university. Universities that maintain a purely positive image officially may lose out on credibility, especially among internal stakeholders, like students and employees. They may have first-hand experience that deviates or even contradicts the university's self-representation of a desired identity and speak up on the discrepancies.

The increasing risks of negative emotional reactions to a single brand also leads to the question about the "brand architecture" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006) suitable for universities in the digital era. The idea of a consolidated institutional brand to gain the collective visibility from internal stakeholders representing the universities makes sense only with the presumed visibility is positive. Otherwise, the risk of putting all the eggs in one basket is far bigger than allowing departments and faculties to have their own symbols representing themselves in their respective academic communities. Universities may be able to control the brand messages and symbols presented via official channels, but not those channels beyond their scope of influence or the content of academic activities that may bear reputational risks.

In the post-truth digital era, the power to create compelling stories about an organisation is no longer monopolised by the institutions. Individuals or unofficial communities with extensive social networks may create a stronger impact, positive or negative, emotionally than official marketing narratives which may have a credibility issue from the start for being "promotional." The study of "affect" on social media communication of universities (e.g., about rankings, see Shahjahan et al., 2012) is yet to catch up with the digital and visual turn of university communication. The public(ity) sphere in which world-class universities are operating is not only overloaded with competing information but also emotions that are hard to quantify and measure accurately. Contending truths representing different world views and values further complicate the emotional aspect of university communication research which has been under-researched until recent years.

Research on the relationship between universities and media requires a two-way road of studying both the universities' influence on media to generate publicity and public opinion to legitimise their existence or gain additional resources (e.g., public funding or donations), as well as the influence of media on the way that the universities govern themselves following the media logic or public pressure exerted via mass media or social media. This is the so-called mediatised context (Stack, 2016) in which universities today are operating.

Higher education research as a transdisciplinary field

Gibbons (1998) argues that universities of the 21st Century will be engaged in Mode 2 knowledge production characterised by "transdisciplinarity" (p. 14). In Mode 2, the determinants of a potential solution involve the integration of different skills beyond one single discipline in a framework of action. The consensus is conditioned by the context of application and evolves with it. The author argues that research on higher education institutions requires corresponding transdisciplinarity that synthesises skills and knowledge from different disciplines such as sociology and political science to understand such organisations and the environment in which they operate.

However, it is noted that higher education research remains scattered in different disciplines or multidisciplinary when scholars jointly examine a single subject but keep to their disciplinary boundaries. For example, higher education communication has been researched by scholars in different disciplines. A large share of the literature is found outside higher education research itself, particularly in communication and business management studies which may or may not be linked. Nevertheless, there is also a clear trend of increasing interest and volume of research on *higher education communication* issues, as in the case of *corporate communication*. Marketing and branding research, including digital marketing via social media, is an increasingly popular topic among higher education researchers.

Considering the above developments, this thesis does not only contribute to the research of university reputation management in general, and (re)branding, in particular, but also to the development of transdisciplinary conceptual models contextualised for higher education research (see *Paper 1* and *Paper 4*).

Through case studies of a global ranking system, the Hong Kong system, and a single university, the thesis shows the need to adapt the borrowed concepts to the organisational characteristics of universities and the context in which the universities operate (Naude & Jonathan, 1999; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Aspara et al., 2014). The latter two articles also place an emphasis on the research of processes and the need for a critical view on the interactions among multiple sources and multiple stakeholders (Chapleo, 2011; Williams & Omar, 2014; Dean et al., 2016; Mampaey et al., 2020) involved in higher education communication. Instead of a quantitative analysis of a snapshot, the thesis further shows the value of a longitudinal qualitative analysis, which is rarely done, in demonstrating the lengthy process of organisational changes, even of a symbolic nature, in a university. Finally, given the organisational complexity of universities (Huisman, 2016) and the added value of a longitudinal process analysis of university communication (Delmestri et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2019), the thesis ends with the proposal of a universal framing model for collaborative research design to cover different parts and aspects of the processes following the traditions of different disciplines and research paradigms.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The thesis features a multi-perspective examination of university communication from a global comparative analysis of universities' web-representations (*Paper 1*) to a local case study about resistance to a Hong Kong university's rebranding exercise in pursuit of a global vision (*Paper 3*). It also seeks to highlight the importance of practising and researching "university communication" as a process (*Papers 2-4*), rather than a snapshot analysis of the symbols of representation *(Paper 1*). The latter two papers suggest that university communication should not be limited to external communication, which has caught much attention of both practitioners and researchers in the field because of the heavy investments put into student recruitment promotions, but also internal communication and the interactions of both.

More emphasis in the future should be directed towards internal communication when internal stakeholders,' especially students,' word of mouth become a valuable source of information for so-called "organic marketing" in the digital communication era that values authenticity and the co-creation of meanings.

The final paper of this thesis has proposed various scenarios that university communication can be researched in a more coordinated and comprehensive manner to better understand the processes, the roles of different stakeholders, the relationships, and the contexts. *Paper 3* is an exploratory study heading towards that direction, but it has encountered several limitations other than the obvious shortage of human resources for a single researcher.

One major issue was the unmet ambition of collecting key internal documents and communication materials about the rebranding exercise because the university's management declined to support the project in the name of confidentiality and trade secrecy. It is not uncommon for research on university branding and marketing activities to live without key information such as the financial information, actual strategy, and action plans unless the researchers had the trust of the leaders managing the object of the research to disclose some insider information. This could potentially lead to positive bias of the findings although the contribution of valuable contextual insights from within a university should not be underestimated given that universities are not simple organisations.

The absence of failed (re)branding cases in the higher education sector is an interesting phenomenon that deserves a critical look into how universities (re)brand, how long it takes, and how difficult it can be assessed or reverted by the stakeholders, as we well as how university (re)branding is researched.

With the growing complexity of university communication in a mediatised environment, even if we narrow down the scope of research to marketing or specific (re)branding exercises, we are facing a surge in the volume of "relevant" communication materials and a shift of the nature of research materials from written texts to audio-video-visuals. Semi-official or unofficial interpersonal communication materials are driving social media marketing and branding, especially during the COVID pandemic which will likely have permanent impact afterwards. Such unstructured data distributed in the public and private domains would be valuable for research on meaning co-creation and perception. However, it will require a very different approach to data collection, processing, analysis, and storage.

New research methods and tools dealing with large quantities of information have been developed in the past years in other fields and adopted by higher education researchers studying social media management of universities. However, they have their own limitations, too. Unstructured unofficial texts or audio-video-visual materials are less likely to be studied because it is either impossible or very time-consuming to structure them for data analysis tools. This explains why it was only used for the analysis of press releases in *Paper 2* which constitute only one type of communication materials relevant to the whole process.

The analysis of audio-video-visual data poses yet another challenge for researchers to catch up with the "visual turn" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 2) of university marketing and (re)branding research. And this is not restricted to the research methods and tools but publication channels because of the high costs associated with printing colour photos in academic journals and unclear copyright issues, especially on logos that are registered as trademarks. The fair use principles apply for critical academic review of such visuals, but still the legal liability and lack of publication outlets that accept unconventional presentation styles may have deterred researchers from using visuals in the publications. The digitalisation of academic journals may help overcome this obstacle, but until it is mainstreamed, higher education research on visual communication of universities will remain largely text-based in presentation.

Compared to the start of this doctoral project, one can no longer say that university communication is a peripheral subject in practice or research. The growing body of literature, though not all found in journals of higher education, is a clear sign of the popularity and salience of this topic in the sector. However, the topic in general has been under-researched because of the rapid changes and developments in this aspect of university management or even governance now, as shown in *Paper 3*. *Paper 4* aims at guiding research design to tackle less researched areas in the entire communication process using the framing model, and advocates for more coordinated and collaborative approaches to tackle the big elephant together. It is hoped that university communication will not just grow in volume but also in diversity in a coordinated manner to cover more ground because every lone researcher can potentially only tackle one small part of the process with limited resources.

Besides, higher education communication, especially marketing and branding, are highly dependent on contexts, as shown in *Papers 1-3*. While some global aspects such as the likelihood of using rankings for marketing or not may be generalised, *how* such positional symbols are used can vary to a great extent in different regions, systems, or even institutions if one investigates the nuances. The fragmentation of media use speaks for even more importance of contexts in content marketing and branding. Every single case of a specific university in a different country, system, or region, can be of value for this overarching topic, especially when such single cases can be pegged to a common framework as the one proposed in *Paper 4*. Due to limited time and resources, this thesis stops short of conducting a systematic review of all studies and cases that can be pegged to the *framing* framework. The literature review is a start in that direction, which will hopefully be taken up by other researchers in our field or the author herself in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude this entire thesis in a few words, the author would like to borrow the following quote from Ulrich Teichler and adapt it for explaining the specific area of university communication research:

> *Higher education research is like a dog cake. It can be a cake made of dog meat, or a cake made for dogs, or both.*
>
> *University communication can be the communication of universities or communication about universities, or both: communication of universities about universities, and communication about universities for universities.*

The dog meat analogy might sound a little cruel, but it helps us critically reflect on the "marketing-driven" universities in some education systems that have let their symbolic representation of the university determine how the university should be governed, with or without heeding to the voices of students and employees. It is true that global rankings and corporate (re)branding logics may have provided a shortcut for young universities to gain global visibility and challenge the global or local reputation hierarchy as shown in the case presented in *Paper 3*. However, the way that universities instrumentalise such means of publicity to the extent of externalising or even expelling internal stakeholders with legal threats runs against both the collegial democratic governance philosophy of universities and the latest trend of corporate branding, especially rebranding, which values the participation of internal stakeholders and interactive communication with multiple stakeholders on social media for meaning co-creation. Ultimately, reputation, image, brand, and related symbols like an emblem, logo, icon of organisations, in different sectors aim at a common goal of creating a sense of ownership or belonging among stakeholders. Bearing this goal in mind, universities engaging in external communication, especially rebranding, must critically assess how its external communication and symbolic changes contribute towards this end rather than distancing themselves from their stakeholders or disowning them in exchange for a new desired identity chosen by the management.

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Summaries, statement, declaration & biography

Summary

Tracing World-class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere

The salience of reputation management has grown, both in terms of scale and prominence, in higher education management and governance, and, subsequently, higher education research in the past two decades. Reputation management is no longer a peripheral topic of interest for a few higher education researchers judging from the exponential growth in the volume of academic literature and the changing external environment in which universities communicate with their internal and external stakeholders. Neither practitioners nor higher education researchers would disagree that reputation plays an increasingly important role in university management and governance today, sometimes to the extent of "wagging the dog".

Entitled "Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere", the overarching aim of this thesis is to unpack the concept of "reputation management" in the higher education sector. Specific research focus has been placed on the cross-section of media and higher education sectors, the public(ity) sphere manifested in the form of media-driven world university rankings and the management of related positive or negative visibility through branding and rebranding activities. The thesis ends with a universal *framing* research framework to guide future research on university communication processes from a multidisciplinary and multi-paradigmatic approach.

Started since 2014, as a side project of the author's professional activities in the promotion of international higher education on a supranational level, this thesis carries also an underlying, secondary aim of bridging practice, policy, and academic research. The author believes that it is not only important to address research gaps in university communication, but also the disconnect between academic research in different disciplines, and the delayed research on reputational management policies and practices in the higher education sector, which may explain why marketing practitioners in the sector sometimes uncritically borrowed failed or dated practices in the corporate world that turn reputation management activities into counterproductive aspirational branding activities that alienate internal stakeholders, particularly current students and alumni.

Finally, the thesis emphasises that context matters in reputation management. Empirical data of institutional level research were collected primarily from Hong Kong, a system with a very high density of both media and "word-class universities" riding on world university rankings. While the site was chosen purposively because of the author's contextual knowledge, this piece of research happens to address a very important university governance issue that plagues the Hong Kong system since after the 2019 social unrests; namely, the citing of "reputation risks" as a justification for stifling voices of dissent on campus and for removing legitimate, established student representation from the university governance structure. The direct impact of representation and reputation on university governance is a new phenomenon that calls for more critical research on reputation management in the higher education sector world-wide.

It is believed that the same "marketing-driven universities" exist in other national systems that place the protection of institutional or national image above institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Increasing digitalisation and mediatization of higher education has exerted unprecedented level of pressure on organizations, private and public alike, to engage in constant and often also instant communication with multiple stakeholders both locally and globally via mass media and social media. The intricacy of the changing external environment implies the need to broaden and deepen university communication research to refocus on change processes beyond representation analysis indicative of the underlying change processes.

Samenvatting

De ontdekking van universiteiten van wereldklasse in de publieke/ publiciteits sfeer

Het belang van reputatiemanagement in het hoger onderwijs is de afgelopen twee decennia gegroeid, zowel in de praktijk van bestuurders als in het hogeronderwijsonderzoek. Reputatiemanagement is, afgaand op de exponentiele groei van de academische literatuur over dit onderwerp, niet langer een perifeer onderwerp. Die groei is mede het gevolg van de veranderende externe omgeving waarin universiteiten communiceren met hun interne en externe stakeholders. Noch beoefenaars, noch onderzoekers in het hoger onderwijs zullen het ermee oneens zijn dat reputatie tegenwoordig een steeds belangrijkere rol speelt in het management en bestuur van hogeronderwijsinstellingen, soms in de vorm van 'wagging the dog'.

Getiteld „De ontdekking van universiteiten van wereldklasse in de publieke/ publiciteits sfeer" (Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere), stelt dit proefschrift zich ten doel om het concept 'reputatiemanagement' in het hoger onderwijs te analyseren. De specifieke focus ligt op het snijpunt van media en hoger onderwijs, waarbij hogeronderwijsinstellingen in de publiciteit komen in het licht van internationale media-gestuurde ranglijsten en – dientengevolge – hun (negatieve of positieve) zichtbaarheid door middel van branding en rebranding proberen te managen. Het proefschrift sluit af met een algemeen onderzoekskader voor toekomstig onderzoek naar universitaire communicatieprocessen vanuit een multidisciplinair en multiparadigmatisch perspectief.

Dit project is in 2014 gestart als een nevenactiviteit van de auteur, wiens werk gericht is op de promotie van internationaal hoger onderwijs. Daarom heeft dit proefschrift ook een secondair doel: een brug slaan tussen praktijk, beleid en academisch onderzoek. De auteur is van mening dat het niet alleen belangrijk is om lacunes in het onderzoek in de universitaire communicatie aan te pakken, maar ook om te wijzen op de discrepantie tussen academisch onderzoek in verschillende disciplines en het beleid en praktijken op het gebied van reputatiemanagement in het hoger onderwijs. Die discrepantie bestaat hieruit dat marketing managers in het hoger onderwijs soms kritiekloos praktijken uit het bedrijfsleven wereld overnemen, die contraproductief zijn omdat bepaalde branding activiteiten de interne belanghebbenden vervreemden, met name studenten en alumni.

Ten slotte benadrukt het proefschrift dat de context ertoe doet. De empirische gegevens van het onderzoek werden voornamelijk verzameld in het hoger onderwijs van Hong Kong, een systeem met verschillende 'world-class' universiteiten en een zeer hoge mediadichtheid. Hoewel deze onderzoeksite doelbewust is gekozen vanwege de contextuele kennis van de auteur, behandelt dit onderzoek toevallig een zeer belangrijk probleem dat het systeem in Hong Kong plaagt sinds de sociale onrust van 20: het aanhalen van "reputatierisico's" als rechtvaardiging voor het verstikken van afwijkende meningen op de campus en voor het verwijderen van legitieme, gevestigde studentenvertegenwoordiging uit de bestuursstructuur van de universiteit. De directe impact van representatie en reputatie op het bestuur van universiteiten is een nieuw fenomeen dat vraagt om meer kritisch onderzoek naar reputatiemanagement in het hoger onderwijs wereldwijd.

Er wordt aangenomen dat ook in andere nationale hogeronderwijssystemen vergelijkbare 'marketinggedreven universiteiten' bestaan, die de bescherming van het institutionele of nationale imago boven institutionele autonomie en academische vrijheid stellen. De toenemende digitalisering en mediatisering van het hoger onderwijs heeft een ongekende druk uitgeoefend op zowel particuliere als publieke organisaties. Via massamedia en sociale media communiceren hogeronderwijsinstellingen constant en vaak ook direct met meerdere belanghebbenden, zowel lokaal als wereldwijd. De complexiteit van de veranderende omgeving impliceert de noodzaak om het universitaire communicatieonderzoek te verbreden en verdiepen om de focus te heroriënteren op veranderingsprocessen die verder gaan dan representatieanalyse.

Zusammenfassung

Auf den Spuren von Weltklasse-Universitäten in der globalen Öffentlichkeit(ssphäre)

Die Rolle des Reputationsmanagements hat in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten in der Hochschulverwaltung und -steuerung und damit auch in der Hochschulforschung sowohl an Umfang als auch an Bedeutung zugenommen. Reputationsmanagement ist kein Randthema mehr, das nur einige wenige Hochschulforschende interessiert, wenn man das exponentielle Wachstum der akademischen Literatur und das sich verändernde externe Umfeld betrachtet, in dem Hochschulen mit ihren internen und externen Interessengruppen kommunizieren. Weder Praktizierende noch Hochschulforschende würden bestreiten, dass die Reputation heute eine immer wichtigere Rolle im Hochschulmanagement und in der Hochschulleitung spielt, manchmal sogar so sehr, dass das "Pferd von hinten aufgezäumt" wird.

Unter dem Titel "Auf den Spuren von Weltklasse-Universitäten in der globalen Öffentlichkeit(ssphäre) " (Tracing World-Class Universities in the Global Public(ity) Sphere) besteht das übergeordnete Ziel dieser Arbeit darin, das Konzept des "Reputationsmanagements" im Hochschulsektor zu entschlüsseln. Ein besonderer Forschungsschwerpunkt liegt auf dem Schnittpunkt von Medien und Hochschulsektor, der Öffentlichkeit, die sich in Form von mediengesteuerten Welt-Hochschulrankings manifestiert, und dem Management der damit verbundenen, positiven oder negative Sichtbarkeit durch Branding- und Rebranding-Aktivitäten. Die Arbeit endet mit einem universellen Forschungsrahmen, der die zukünftige Forschung zu universitären Kommunikationsprozessen aus einem multidisziplinären und multiparadigmatischen Ansatz heraus leiten soll.

Diese Arbeit, die seit 2014 als Nebenprojekt der beruflichen Tätigkeit des Autors in der Förderung der internationalen Hochschulbildung auf supranationaler Ebene begonnen wurde, verfolgt auch ein grundlegendes, sekundäres Ziel, nämlich die Verbindung von Praxis, Politik und akademischer Forschung. Die Autorin ist der Ansicht, dass es nicht nur wichtig ist, Forschungslücken in der Hochschulkommunikation zu schließen, sondern auch die Diskrepanz zwischen der akademischen Forschung in verschiedenen Disziplinen und der verspäteten Forschung zu Reputationsmanagementstrategien und -praktiken im Hochschulsektor zu beheben. Dies könnte erklären, warum Marketingfachleute in diesem Sektor manchmal unkritisch gescheiterte oder veraltete Praktiken aus der Unternehmenswelt übernehmen, die Reputationsmanagementaktivitäten in kontraproduktive, aufstrebende Branding-Aktivitäten verwandeln, die interne Stakeholder, insbesondere aktuelle Studierende und Alumni, verprellen.

Schließlich unterstreicht die Arbeit, dass der Kontext beim Reputationsmanagement eine Rolle spielt. Die empirischen Daten der Forschung auf institutioneller Ebene wurden vor allem in Hong Kong gesammelt, einem System mit einer sehr hohen Dichte sowohl an Medien als auch an "Weltklasse-Universitäten", die in weltweiten Hochschulrankings geführt werden. Während der Standort aufgrund der kontextuellen Kenntnisse der Autorin gezielt ausgewählt wurde, befasst sich diese Forschungsarbeit mit einem sehr wichtigen Problem der Hochschulleitung, das das System in Hong Kong seit den sozialen Unruhen von 2019 plagt, nämlich der Berufung auf "Reputationsrisiken" als Rechtfertigung für die Unterdrückung abweichender Stimmen auf dem Campus und für die Entfernung legitimer, etablierter Studentenvertretungen aus der Hochschulleitungsstruktur. Die direkte Auswirkung von Repräsentation und Reputation auf die Hochschulleitung ist ein neues Phänomen, das eine kritischere Forschung zum Reputationsmanagement im Hochschulsektor weltweit erforderlich macht.

Es darf angenommen werden, dass es in anderen nationalen Systemen dieselben "marketinggesteuerten Universitäten" gibt, die den Schutz des institutionellen oder nationalen Images über die institutionelle Autonomie und akademische Freiheit stellen. Die zunehmende Digitalisierung und Mediatisierung des Hochschulwesens haben einen noch nie dagewesenen Druck auf private und öffentliche Organisationen ausgeübt, über Massenmedien und soziale Medien in ständiger und oft auch sofortiger Kommunikation mit zahlreichen Interessengruppen auf lokaler und globaler Ebene zu stehen. Die Komplexität des sich wandelnden externen Umfelds macht es erforderlich, die Forschung im Bereich der Hochschulkommunikation zu erweitern und zu vertiefen, um sich auf Veränderungsprozesse zu konzentrieren, die über eine Analyse der Repräsentation hinausgehen, die auf die zugrunde liegenden Veränderungsprozesse hinweist.

Statement about the co-authored book chapter

This dissertation consists of an introduction, four stand-alone studies, and a conclusion. Except *Paper 2*, all are single authored. In this section I will disclose my contribution to the co-authored publication.

Paper 2, titled "The notion of branding in the higher education sector: the case of Hong Kong" started as a joint project of myself and Hei-hang Hayes Tang (Assistant Professor, The Education University of Hong Kong) with myself in the driving seat because of my subject knowledge in university marketing and branding. Accordingly, the final publication was primarily prepared and finalised by me with minor revisions suggested by Hayes. As the second author Hayes was to provide a second opinion on the literature review, the analysis, and, particularly, the contextual information about Hong Kong's higher education system. The local, up-to-date perspective was considered essential for this systemic review because the author has been living outside Hong Kong for an extended period when the publication was prepared.

Declaration

I herewith give assurance that I completed this dissertation independently without prohibited assistance of third parties or aids other than those identified in this dissertation. All passages that are drawn from published or unpublished writings, either word-for-word or in paraphrase, have been clearly identified as such. Third parties were not involved in the drafting of the content of this dissertation; most specifically I did not employ the assistance of a dissertation advisor. No part of this thesis has been used in another doctoral or tenure process.

Kwan Heung LAM, 30 March, 2022

Author's biography

Kwan Heung Lam, also known as Queenie since high school, wears three hats in the past six years. Professionally, she was Project Manager/Senior Expert of the Brussels-based umbrella organisation and think tank *Academic Cooperation Association (ACA)*, a workplace where she stayed for almost 11 years from October 2010 to September 2021. Since 2014, she has embarked on the PhD journey as a part-time doctoral candidate at *The Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG, Ghent University, Belgium)* and *The International Centre for Higher Education Research – Kassel (INCHER-Kassel, University of Kassel, Germany)* to continue researching on her favourite topic: higher education marketing and communication. As a positive surprise, she has become the mom of a lovely girl since 2015. She enjoys all these roles and cross-referencing her challenging, sometimes contradictory but interesting professional, academic and personal experiences while wearing the three different hats at the same time.

Queenie's passion about education started in early childhood when she would rather go to the primary school to beg for a study place than going to a dragon boat festival in the next village. She enjoys since studying, and now also conducting studies about education and mobility, far exceeding her parents' original expectation of a university degree.

Queenie holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Translation (Minor: Journalism and Communication) from *The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)* (2002). Additionally, she spent an exchange year in *Georgetown University* in Washington D.C., a semester-long blended mobility programme between *New Asia College of CUHK* and *Yale University (YUNA)*, and a one-week experience as an "Interport Student" of the floating campus *Semester at Sea* during her undergraduate life. She continued as a post-graduate research student at CUHK and earned an MPhil in Communication degree (2006) while being trained as Executive Officer at the same university's *Personnel Office* and *Office of Academic Links* (2004-2008). There she began her career in the higher education sector from recruiting professors and senior administrators internationally to vetting and concluding international academic cooperation agreements.

After staying at CUHK for almost ten years, she decided to take a career break to learn more about the Bologna Process at *INCHER-Kassel* with Prof. Barbara Kehm and Prof. Ulrich Teichler in 2008. During her study at the *University of Kassel*, she was offered a position at the *International Study Centre* as Senior Advisor of the *International Summer/Winter University*. Shortly before she went back to Hong Kong, she was accidentally discovered by Bernd Wächter and Irina Ferencz in 2010 from a pile of 99 applications and gladly accepted a two-year contract as Project Officer of *ACA* in Brussels. With this distraction, she obtained her Master of Arts (M.A.) in Higher Education degree from *INCHER-Kassel* (2012) with a bit of delay.

Born in a village in southern China's Zhangzhou, raised in the cosmopolitan city Hong Kong, residing in Germany and working for Brussels, Queenie speaks three different types of Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Minnan - Fujianese/Taiwanese), English, and reasonably good German. Apart from work, she enjoys comparative analysis of Chinese, English and German news, comparative higher education research, market research (shopping) and lifelong learning (childrearing & gardening). Occasionally, she offers voluntary Cantonese and Hong Kong culture classes to German university students interested in taking up the challenge.

This thesis, accepted on 8 September 2022, is her 2nd baby and 4th university degree, prepared during her 3rd career break. Shortly before this, she joined *UniTrier*'s *Institute of Sinology* to research on the global mobility of "Chinese" scholars in the past 111 years, and experiment with her momtrepreneurial start-up *y-Europe* to develop projects and studies related to education and cultural exchanges. Following her relocation to Germany, Queenie continues working remotely for the *European Commission* as an independent expert of the EU's flagship Erasmus+ programme.

The salience of reputation management has grown, both in terms of scale and prominence, in higher education management and governance, and, subsequently, higher education research in the past two decades. Reputation management is no longer a peripheral topic of interest for a few higher education researchers judging from the exponential growth in the volume of academic literature and the changing external environment in which universities communicate with their internal and external stakeholders. Neither practitioners nor higher education researchers would disagree that reputation plays an increasingly important role in university management and governance today, sometimes to the extent of "wagging the dog".

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Illustration: Tanja Lozej