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Brand Communication of Higher Education Institutions

B. Broucker et al.

Brand Communication of Higher Education Institutions: a Call for Multichannel Communication Analysis in Higher Education Branding Research

Bruno Broucker, ¹✉

Email Bruno.Broucker@kuleuven.be

Kurt De Wit, ²

Jelle Mampaey, ³

¹ Public Governance Institute, KU Leuven, Parkstraat 45, Box 3609, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

² Education Policy Department, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

³ Faculty of Management, Open University of the Netherlands, 6421 Heerlen, The Netherlands

Research on branding is an established sub-discipline in the higher education literature. However, studies in this field have somehow produced contradictory results: some studies point at isomorphism, others find differentiation. Our study wants to offer a possible explanation for this

paradox, by proposing a more nuanced view on brand communication. Based on a multiple case study of three Flemish universities, our results mainly point at isomorphism in communication channels with a general focus that are addressed towards a broad audience. In specific communication channels, targeted towards specific stakeholders, we identify high levels of differentiation. We discuss these findings against the background of the strategic ambiguity perspective on communication in complex stakeholder environments.

Keywords

higher education branding
brand communication
strategic ambiguity
communication channels

Introduction

Branding in higher education (HE) has received increasing attention in recent years. This is the result of competition within the sector (Stensaker, 2007) and the wave of New Public Management (NPM) that has influenced many HE system reforms and has pushed towards more efficiency, effectiveness and higher performance (Broucker and De Wit, 2015). Branding is in this respect an important part of the game in neoliberal HE systems: students, public organizations and companies are seen as consumers, and higher education institutions (HEIs) operate in a (quasi-)market environment that requires strong organizational reputations (see also Christensen and Gornitzka, 2017). As Mampaey *et al.* (2015, 1178) state: “in such an environment, HEIs are pressured to ensure consumers’ loyalty through branding”. In the context of this paper, we define a brand as “a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment [...] services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognize and appreciate these values” (Chapleo, 2007, 24). Brand communication is the dissemination of the brand via various communication channels such as the university website, student brochures, social media.

Many studies have focused on HE branding and brand communication in particular (e.g. Aula *et al.*, 2015; Delmestri *et al.*, 2015; Morphew and Hartley, 2006; Mampaey *et al.*, 2015; Stensaker, 2007; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009). Interestingly, there seems to be a division between studies mainly pointing at isomorphism in the brand communication of HEIs and other studies that rather stress high levels of differentiation. More specifically, on the one hand, some

scholars have argued that HEIs mainly communicate dominant institutionalized values in their branding and that the similarities between HEIs are much more pronounced compared to the differences. For instance, many contemporary universities make claims of excellence, a dominant institutionalized value in many higher education systems (Wangenge-Ouma and Langa, 2010). Waeraas and Solbakk (2009) even state that HEIs are in this respect ‘trapped in conformity’. On the other hand, other scholars have emphasized that differentiation is possible and even necessary to reduce competition in highly competitive HE systems (e.g. Mampaey *et al.*, 2015; Seeber *et al.*, 2019). Even more, differentiation is almost unavoidable given the intra-organizational translation processes that attach very specific meanings to dominant institutionalized values (Mampaey, 2018). For instance, excellence might mean something radically different in different HEIs.

The main goal of this paper is to offer a possible explanation for this paradox in the literature. In fact, one possible explanation has already been offered. That is, research on HE branding has been conducted in multiple HE systems with diverging macro-level pressures (e.g. Mampaey *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, in HE systems with relatively high levels of marketization such as the US, competitive pressures are highly salient, which requires HEIs to differentiate from competitors. In such systems, it is not surprising that studies find differentiation in higher education branding (e.g. Gavrilă and Ramirez, 2019; Morphew and Hartley, 2006). On the contrary, in HE systems with relatively low levels of marketization and high levels of institutionalization, institutional pressures to be the same are much more salient, which requires HEIs to comply with dominant institutionalized values such as excellence (e.g. Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009).

However, even in the same HE system, contradictory results have been identified. For instance, in the UK, some studies draw attention to isomorphism (e.g. Chapleo, 2007; Sauntson and Morrish, 2010), whereas other studies find differentiation of brand communication (e.g. Huisman and Mampaey, 2018; Seeber *et al.*, 2019). What may be a possible explanation for contradictory findings in the same HE system? Our key argument is that some communication channels offer more room for differentiation, whereas others mainly communicate similarities. For instance, mission statements and other texts with a general focus might mainly communicate similarities, whereas student brochures or other specific texts might reveal different communications. This is not to say that researchers might not find differentiation of mission statements (see, e.g. Kosmützky, 2012), but relatively speaking, texts with a general focus oriented towards a broad audience might be more similar compared to specific texts

oriented towards a smaller audience. Our assumptions are based on the strategic ambiguity perspective (Eisenberg, 1984).

Based on this perspective, we assume that HEIs might mainly emphasize similarities in communication channels targeted towards a broad audience, whereas they might rather stress differences in communication channels that are targeted towards specific stakeholders. In this way, whether higher education researchers find similarities or differences depends on the communication channels they focus on; but the role of the nature of the communication channels is largely overlooked in the existing HE branding literature. Consequently, we formulate our research question as follows: to what extent do HEIs use strategic ambiguity in their brand communication and does the level of strategic ambiguity differ between communication channels?

In what follows, we present our theoretical framework to make our perspective more concrete. Then, we describe the methodology of our multiple case study and present the detailed results of this study. Finally, we discuss our findings and draw conclusions on the role of the nature of communication channels in HE branding.

Theoretical Framework

In general, around the globe, HEIs are increasingly embedded in markets where business logics prevail (Molesworth *et al.*, 2010). To a certain extent, the marketisation of HE seems to be an unstoppable train in that it is embedded in a discourse of inevitability (Mampaey *et al.*, 2019). In such an environment, communicating unique brands is increasingly necessary to gain and maintain a competitive advantage (Chapleo, 2007). From this perspective, we would expect differentiation of communicated brands between HEIs and some studies indeed find this.

However, our key argument runs as follows. Even universities with unique and strong brands will experience difficulties in communicating these brands in certain communication channels. In this respect, the concept of strategic ambiguity is key, as it helps to explain the possible divergence between different communication channels. In analogy with Wæraas (2008), we emphasize that HEIs might be different things to different people. Contemporary HEIs are typically embedded in environments with multiple, possibly conflicting stakeholder groups with conflicting expectations (Frølich *et al.*, 2013). Wæraas (2008) states that, because of this diverse audience, ambiguity in branding is key: “by presenting different identities and inconsistent self-presentation messages, an organisation is not necessarily discredited, [...]. Its ambiguity

might be precisely why it is seen as valuable: instead of building upon the enthusiasm of a few, it builds on the tolerance of many". Accordingly, ambiguous communication can be instrumental for reducing tensions and meeting contradictory expectations (see also Dickinson-Delaporte *et al.*, 2010; Leitch and Davenport, 2003). At the macro-level, the result is a HE landscape with HEIs that communicate similar, although multiple and possibly inconsistent values.

Accordingly, we assume that brand communication will be very ambiguous in general communication channels where the audience is a collection of multiple, possibly conflicting stakeholder groups. In the context of HE, the mission statement is probably the best example of such a communication channel. A mission statement is not targeted to a specific group of stakeholders, but rather responds to the expectations of multiple stakeholder groups (Seeber *et al.*, 2019). Other communication channels are less general ~~and for a broad audience~~ and are rather oriented towards one or a few specific stakeholder groups. For instance, a strategic plan is rather oriented to those stakeholder groups that are directly involved in the governance of HEIs. The key argument here is that there might be more room for differentiation in those specific communication channels targeted to specific stakeholder groups with specific, more consistent expectations. Contrariwise, the values that are communicated in the general communication channels will be much more diverse. In the next section, we discuss the values that are at the core of the debate.

Grand Discourses and values

Broadly speaking, the communicated values relate to three Grand Discourses (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) in HE:

- (1) In the Professional Bureaucracy (PB) Discourse, HEIs are described as ivory towers, with values such as internal orientation, isolated communities of practice, collegiality and academic freedom (Gumport, 2012).
- (2) In the New Public Management (NPM) Discourse, the idea is put forward that private sector practices improve the functioning of the public sector (Broucker *et al.*, 2016; Bleiklie and Michelsen, 2013; Hood, 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000). Applied to HE, this has resulted in new ways of steering the sector (de Boer and File, 2009) and related values such as efficient resource management, increased marketizsation, liberalizsation (Middlehurst and Teixeira, 2012; Broucker and ~~e~~De Wit, 2013) and the corporatisation of HEIs (de Boer *et al.*, 2008; Peters, 2013).

- (3) In the Public Value (PV) Discourse (see Moore, 1995) applied on HE, it is stated that HE should not be dominated by the efficiency debate, but that the social benefits of HE should be optimized (Cremonini *et al.*, 2014; Broucker *et al.*, 2018).

These three Grand Discourses are related to three value clusters (see also the methodology section) and are instrumental in characterizing the change in narrative that has taken place in recent decades: from the description of HE as ‘ivory towers’ in the Professional Bureaucracy Discourse, over the New Public Management Discourse since the 1980s that was drawn from the private sector and became the dominant rationale in HE reforms, to the current surge of post-NPM concepts that move beyond performance targets and seek instead to optimize the social benefits of the higher education system (Cremonini *et al.*, 2014; Broucker *et al.*, 2018). In other words, the Grand Discourses are a way to describe the rationales guiding higher education policy or higher education system reforms (Broucker and De Wit, 2015; Broucker *et al.*, 2019). The dominance of one of the three Grand Discourses in a particular epoch does not mean, however, that they completely replace each other at any one time. Rather, they coexist and can be related to and strategically deployed by different actors implied in reforms. From our perspective, ambiguous communication would imply references to values linked to multiple Grand Discourses. Unique and consistent communication would require references to values within one Grand Discourse, including specific definitions of these values (see also Mampaey *et al.*, 2015). On the one hand, our assumption is that in general communication channels with a broad audience (e.g. the mission statement), HEIs are confronted with a wider range of stakeholder expectations, requiring higher levels of strategic ambiguity. This would be translated in the adoption of a wider set of values linked to multiple Grand Discourses in brand communication, for instance a combination of PB, NPM and PV. In turn, ambiguous communication inhibits differentiation between HEIs and rather results in isomorphism. On the other hand, in communication channels that are more specific and oriented to one or few stakeholder groups, communicated values might be less ambiguous and more consistent. This would then be observable in the adoption of a narrower set of values in brand communication, primarily linked to one Grand Discourse. In turn, more consistent and precise communication enables differentiation between HEIs.

Methodology

We conducted a multiple case study consisting of several steps. First, we operationalized the different Grand Discourses, as this is the starting point to investigate the values HEIs communicate towards their stakeholders. Based on

the characteristics of the three Grand Discourses, we identified the ideal–typical characteristics of each Discourse, as a way to distinguish them from each other and used them as labels for the analysis of the texts. We identified the following labels (Table 1).

Table 1

Identified labels

PB	NPM	PV
Internal orientation	Economy/business	(Value for) society
Truth	Performance/excellence	Stakeholders
Collegiality	Market (competition) and commercialization	Dialogue/collaboration
Academic freedom	Innovation	Broad international orientation
Conservatism	Efficiency/effectiveness	Sustainability
National orientation	Corporation and entrepreneurship	Human rights and citizenship
Academic community	Growth	Well-being
Trust	Privatization	Networks
	Accountability	Ethics
	Autonomy	
	International competitiveness	

AQ1

This table allowed us, in a second stage, to attach the values to the excerpts in the texts (see below) and to label them as PB, NPM or PV. To ensure reliability, the texts went back and forth between the authors and were only labelled when consensus was reached.

Third, we identified two main groups of texts. On the one hand, general texts **that** are targeted to a broad audience, i.e. mission statements on the websites of each HEI (cf. Celly and Knepper, 2009). On the other hand, we retrieved more specific strategy texts and policy plans from each case, because these texts have primarily a fundamental role in organizational governance and can be assumed to be primarily oriented towards a more selective range of actors that are directly involved in governance. Hence, relatively speaking, these strategy texts and policy plans have by definition a much smaller audience with less conflicting

expectations. While policy plans and strategy texts are mostly used by specific groups of stakeholders to organize a “dialogue with the different constituencies” involved in governance (Jongbloed *et al.*, 2008), mission statements have a broader audience. The combination of those two categories of texts allows a better insight into the (mis)alignment of the brand communication between different (types of) communication channels with different levels of specificity.

Finally, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Krippendorff, 1980) to derive the meanings within the texts attached to the values operationalized from the Grand Discourses. We started with within-case analyses of each HEI, followed by a between-case analysis wherein we compared the values and meanings across HEIs. We discussed the coding until we reached consensus, again for reliability. As cases, we selected three HEIs within the Flemish HE system. The Flemish system consists of 6 universities and 13 universities of applied sciences, and a number of postgraduate institutions. The universities are all, for the most part, self-governing institutions. This means they can decide themselves on the composition of their decision-making bodies, within the general framework defined by law. As a common feature, policy-making within universities is democratic, involving the participation of both internal and external stakeholders in the decision-making processes. Notwithstanding their autonomous status, universities do, however, receive the largest part of their funding from the government, partly through grants and partly on a competitive basis. As the basic funding is provided by the government, the universities as a counterpart are obliged to account to the government for the public funding they receive. They must draft annual reports and accounts and must take part in the quality assurance and accreditation system. They are not, however, obliged to draft long-term strategic or development plans. Yet, as will become clear in the case studies, all institutions nowadays produce a number of strategic texts and policy plans, thus allowing an analysis as proposed in this article.

In our analysis, we included HEIs with a different age, size and status. The reason to select Flanders is that we got access to the more specific documents in the selected cases via our local network. The table below provides the overview of the cases (Table 2).

Table 2
Overview Of Cases And Documents

	University of Hasselt (UHasselt)	KU Leuven	University of Brussels (VUB)
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	University of Hasselt (UHasselt)	KU Leuven	University of Brussels (VUB)
Age, status, size	Young, small, regional reputation	Old, big, international top reputation	Average age and size, international orientation, but intermediate international reputation
Highly visible texts	Mission statement	Mission statement	Mission statement
Less visible texts	Policy documents research, education, innovation	Policy plan students and education + Research policy plan	Research policy plan + Education policy plan
	Strategic plan Internationalization	Strategic plan internationalization	Strategic plan internationalization
	Strategic plan gender	Gender and diversity policy plan	Gender equality plan
	Rector's policy plan		Rector's policy plan
			General strategic plan
			Plan for sustainability

Case Study Results

Based on the analysis of the texts and the labelling of the excerpts, we counted the number of identified excerpts per Discourse. This allows to understand the importance of each Discourse, per category of text and facilitates comparison between cases. As stated above, we only labelled excerpts when the three authors identified them as a clear indicator of a certain category. In case a paragraph contained excerpts from different categories, then those excerpts were labelled independently and seen as a mixture of Discourses within the same paragraph. Contrariwise, if a whole coherent paragraph was considered to be part of the same Discourse, it only was counted as one excerpt. Consciously, we did not count frequencies based on the number of words per text, as the texts had different lengths and were not seen as an indicator for its importance. Likewise, we did not take into account the length of an excerpt, as long as it was conceived as a clear indicator for a Discourse. This implies that certain excerpts could contain a whole subparagraph of a text or a short sentence in a paragraph. This methodology also allowed a qualitative interpretation of the Discourses within the larger meaning of the text (see below). The table below demonstrates the quantitative results: they are the sum of the excerpts that were labelled per

category and validated between the authors. The table already demonstrates two elements: first, in the general texts, we see numbers that are quite close to each other. In all three cases, PV gets the highest absolute number, but it is for the KU Leuven at the same level as NPM and PB, and nearly at the same level for the VUB. Moreover, we cannot state that there is one dominant Discourse in this category of text, as the sum of the numbers of the other two Discourses is at least at the same level as the highest number; e.g. at the UHasselt, PB and NPM together count 7 excerpts against 8 for PV. The same goes for the other universities. This leads us to a first conclusion, that in the general mission statements a mixture of Discourses can be identified.

Second, in the more specific texts of UHasselt and KU Leuven, we observe one dominant Discourse (respectively, PV and NPM), but with a non-neglectable second category (respectively, 20% NPM for UHasselt and 19% PV for KU Leuven). At the VUB, we see a different picture as there seem to be two dominant Discourses with a non-neglectable third category. As a result, we can already state that the more specific texts demonstrate not the same mixture of Discourses compared to the general texts (Table 3).

Table 3

Quantitative results of labelled excerpts

	UHasselt — texts		KU Leuven — texts		VUB — texts	
	General	Specific	General	Specific	General	Specific
PB	4	0	4	1	4	11
NPM	3	16	5	53	9	51
PV	8	64	5	13	10	58

We will describe the results for each university in detail in the subsequent sections and use excerpts (translated from Dutch) to highlight our conclusions.

University of Hasselt (UHasselt)

The UHasselt is a Flemish university whose roots go back to 1973 but only in 2005 got its current name, after a merger period. It has 17 bachelor and 25 master programmes, six faculties, approximately 6400 students, two campuses and 1300 staff. From the documents, the analysis of excerpts and the table above, we derive three important conclusions. First, in its mission statement, UHasselt mixes three Discourses: PB, NPM and PV. As highlighted in the section above, we cannot state that there is one dominant Discourse. We will

here demonstrate with a number of excerpts how Discourses are mixed in the mission statement. Excerpts that are typically interpreted as PV Discourse are for instance those that emphasize to a large extent the university's social responsibility:

UHasselt "regards it as its social responsibility to contribute actively to a sustainable and innovative region, [...] to contribute to the socio-economic development of society". It wants to provide "expertise that meets the need of society". [PV codes: sustainability, value for society]

The research activities are "clearly defined domains with a high degree of social and/or technological relevance". [PV code: value for society]

Another indicator for PV is the emphasis on the collaborative nature of the university. From a PV perspective, this collaborative action is quite important, as it stresses the importance an institution attaches to reaching outwards, but also shows that it does not put its individual position first:

UHasselt wants to be a 'hub' for international students and stresses the importance of international collaboration. [PV code: collaboration]

Among the core competences deemed important are "teamwork", "stakeholder awareness", "ethical thinking". [PV codes: stakeholders, collaboration, ethics]

But as said, the university mixes this Discourse with other Discourses. On the one hand, PV is mixed with PB where it is highlighted that independent critical thinking is quintessential. This is typical PB language, as the element of independent thought stresses the academic freedom that is key to universities from a traditional perspective:

"The UHasselt believes that an open and critical mind, and openness are essential for a well-functioning academic community. We put upfront the truth, embrace new ideas and welcome new insights". [PB codes: academic community, truth]

And on the other hand, NPM values are acknowledged such as innovation, performance and excellence:

"Our success is measured on the continuous growth of the impact and reputation of our university and our region". [NPM codes: performance, excellence, competition]

A second result from our analysis is that the quantitative results clearly demonstrate that the UHasselt centres consistently more specific texts around the Discourse of Public Value (80% of the labelled excerpts were indeed labelled as PV).

For instance, the research policy mission emphasizes that

"to respond to social and economic challenges, the university chooses to focus on a number of priority areas. [...]. Through this [...] the university can achieve the scale required to participate successfully in inter-university and international networks". [PV codes: value for society; network]

The similarity with the PV codes stressed in the mission statement above is remarkable: the university indeed puts emphasis on its added value to society and collaboration to create that value, especially in more specific texts. The same holds for the educational vision, where UHasselt strives

"for academic excellence, combined with economic and social relevance. UHasselt also pays attention to gender equality, stipulating to make efforts to create an optimal life-work balance" [PV code: value for society; well-being]

In the policy plans, the element of collaboration is also stressed: it is stated that UHasselt wants to grow towards the ideal of a "connected organization". The aim is to build a culture of 'connectedness' and to become a 'civic university'. Those excerpts are clearly PV-related Discourses.

A third, and important conclusion from our analysis, is the not to be underestimated presence and the role of the NPM Discourse. As stated above, approx. 20% of the labelled excerpts were labelled as NPM. From the analysis, we identify that this NPM role in the Discourse is twofold: to some extent the university explicitly argues against NPM, but also uses NPM to support the Discourse of PV. Not as an alternative, but as a necessity to achieve PV-related values. We provide examples of both. A first example is where the UHasselt emphasizes that it wants to reduce the inter-institutional competition within Flanders. This element is a clearly NPM-related Discourse, but used as a way to make much more explicit the desire to strive for PV. Apart from that NPM is also used, not as a goal, but as a mean to achieve PV, and from that perspective it seems as if NPM Discourse is instrumental in realizing PV-related objectives. Indeed, the UHasselt does not claim to seek excellence and performance as ultimate goals, but only as a way to achieve its objectives, which are basically aimed at contributing to societal needs (PV):

"The research at the UHasselt is international, competitive and generates new knowledge that contributes to an innovative society [NPM codes: competitiveness, innovation] [...]. The university stimulates research that is based on intensive interaction, cross-pollination and collaboration with other universities, companies and organisations [PV codes: collaboration, dialogue]. To play our role in society and contribute to societal challenges [PV code: stakeholders, citizenship, society], the UHasselt needs a strong research base. Excellent research provides the necessary fundamentals for this research base". [NPM code: excellence]

The quantitative table and the qualitative interpretation of the excerpts together confirm the analysis made for the UHasselt: while the mission statement uses a mixture of three Discourses, the more specific texts are oriented towards PV — under which NPM is sometimes used as an instrument to reach the PV-related objectives. We can thus conclude that the UHasselt uses primarily a PV Discourse towards more specific constituencies.

KU Leuven

KU Leuven is the oldest Flemish university (1425) with campuses in ten towns, and it has about 55,600 students, of which 10,000 are international students. It is a comprehensive university with 16 faculties and approximately 11,500 staff. From the documents and the analysis of excerpts, we derive three conclusions that are very much comparable with the UHasselt. First, in its mission statement, KU Leuven also mixes three Discourses: PB, NPM and PV. From this mixture, we cannot state that there is one dominant Discourse (4 excerpts are labelled PB, 5 are labelled NPM, and 5 are labelled PV). Indeed, PV is also observable for KU Leuven, as it puts emphasis on the social responsibility of the university and the role the university sees for itself within society:

"KU Leuven offers its students an academic education based on high-level research, with the aim of preparing them to assume their social responsibilities". [PV code: value for society]

"KU Leuven aims to actively participate in public and cultural debate [...] It puts its expertise to the service of society, with particular consideration for its most vulnerable members". [PV codes: dialogue, value for society, human rights, ethics]

Similar to UHasselt, in the mission statement PV is mixed with PB and NPM. Regarding PB, we identified that the PB-related values of conservatism and internal orientation are constructed as the building blocks necessary for the fulfilment of PV-related values. This means that KU Leuven confirms the value of ‘academic freedom’ as a way to emphasize and realise collaboration and open discussion. We interpret this as an example of re-contextualization, in which PV is re-contextualized in the context of PB:

(KU Leuven) "was born of and has grown within the Catholic tradition. From its Christian view of the world and the human **being**, KU Leuven endeavours to be a place for open discussion of social, philosophical and ethical issues and a critical centre of reflection in and for the Catholic community".
[PB codes: conservatism, academic freedom]

Interestingly, KU Leuven does not neglect the NPM-related values in its mission statement either, where it emphasizes its focus on research, international excellence and performance:

"KU Leuven is a research intensive, international oriented university [...] It strives towards international excellence" [NPM-codes: performance, excellence, international competition]

"the University Hospitals offer highly qualitative basic and top referential care in all domains of health" [NPM-codes: performance, excellence]

As a result, we observe that the mission statement is oriented towards a mix of the three Grand Discourses, as is the case for UHasselt.

Second, we found that the more specific documents are mainly built on NPM-related values. Indeed, on the totality of excerpts labelled in the more specific texts NPM takes 79% of its share. This is a similar number as the PV orientation of the UHasselt. Typical examples could be found in the strategic and other plans, where in general the focus is put on efficiency, performance and excellence. Similar to UHasselt, it seems that KU Leuven, while it mixes the three Grand Discourses in its mission statement, uses a more consistent language in its specific documents:

"Less is more", "A radical reduction of the number of councils is necessary" [NPM codes: efficiency]

"the emphasis will be put on concrete outputs" [NPM codes: performance, effectiveness]

"The KU Leuven is aimed towards excellence and is ambitious. This policy of excellence of the KU Leuven has a double aim: to stimulate all research towards excellence, and to create the optimal conditions to make within this excellent research a number of 'highlights' where KU Leuven can be internationally recognized" [NPM codes: excellence, performance, international competitive]

"our aim is to recruit the best international students" [NPM code: international competitiveness]

"KU Leuven will develop a framework for the selection and development of partnerships that are a priority. For this selection of primary partners, the KU Leuven puts the bar high". [NPM codes: excellence, international competitiveness]

As a third conclusion, and again comparable with the UHasselt, is the not to be underestimated presence and the role — in this case — of the PV Discourse for the support of the NPM Discourse (we counted 19% of PV-related excerpts). Based on the analysis, we can conclude that those excerpts were used as a mean to achieve NPM-related goals:

"KU Leuven wants to pay attention to the individual student. A large pool of actions for a good orientation and support for new students, in all their diversity, [PV codes: wellbeing, stakeholders] must lead to a positive success story for every student". [NPM codes: performance, effectiveness]

"KU Leuven puts interdisciplinarity high on the agenda. For that purpose, it establishes an active policy with ample possibilities for inter- and transdisciplinary research [...]. [PV codes: collaboration, dialogue, network] Interdisciplinary Institutes will bring research together around 'poles of excellence'". [NPM codes: excellence, performance]

The quantitative table and the qualitative interpretation of the excerpts together confirm the analysis made for the KU Leuven: while the mission statement uses a mixture of three Discourses, the more specific texts are oriented towards NPM

— under which PV is sometimes used as an instrument to reach the NPM-related objectives. We can thus conclude that the KU Leuven uses primarily a NPM Discourse towards more specific constituencies.

University of Brussels (VUB)

The University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, VUB) was established in 1970, has four campuses in the Brussels Capital Region, about 16,300 students (one-fifth are international), and some 3300 staff. The first conclusion based on the data analysis is that the VUB also mixes the three Discourses in its more general mission statement (respectively, 4, 9 and 10 excerpts for PB, NPM and PV). That means that the VUB is similar to the other two universities. Indeed, it can be read that the VUB puts emphasis on social values such as democratisation, and that, like the other two universities, it emphasizes the role of the university towards society:

"A score of challenges lies ahead: the further democratisation of HE, the loud call for socially responsible and relevant research and education". [PV codes: value for society, ethics]

"VUB wants to provide an active and engaged contribution to a better society". [PV code: value for society]

Apart from that, the VUB stresses in its mission statement the necessity for partnerships and collaboration, and values as engagement towards society and tolerance towards others. The key values stated as underpinning this mission are "openness, tolerance, and respect for person and society", "social engagement and sustainability", "the construction of a lifelong, high-quality, and professional relationship with students, industry, and society", "a tailor-made approach in education and a strong involvement of the student" [PV codes: ethics, sustainability, value for society, dialogue, stakeholders]. It is clear that those excerpts indeed indicate the importance the VUB attaches to PV-related values in its mission statement.

Yet, similar to the other universities, examples of PB and NPM are also found in the mission statement. Regarding PB, the VUB also — and similar to KU Leuven — refers to its tradition, its free spirit and academic freedom:

"Already for 180 years, the VUB as a university with a free and critical spirit builds towards a better society". [PB codes: conservatism, academic freedom]

In this excerpt, re-contextualization is also obvious, where PB-related values are reconstructed as the building blocks of the PV-related value for society. With respect to NPM, the VUB — similar to the other universities — stresses the quality it aims at, the drive for innovation and performance and its will to excel in its core activities:

"We want to achieve the highest possible quality in everything we do". [NPM codes: performance, excellence]

Second, regarding the analysis of the more specific documents, we identify a more mixed pattern and a more balanced language combining primarily NPM and PV. This is very different from the other two universities. The NPM Discourse counts for 43% of the labelled excerpts, while the PV Discourse takes 48% of the labelled excerpts. This clearly demonstrates a dominant mixture of PV with NPM for the VUB, while PB takes 9% of the excerpts. The following excerpts are used to demonstrate this mixed message.

In the strategic plan 2013–2016, the environment of the university is defined as ‘turbulent’, and this is done mainly in NPM language:

"Not only is there competition for students and money, the government wants to rationalize through an institutional review and wants to decide on what HE may offer, internationally there is a war on talent, scientist feel strong pressure to perform..." [NPM codes: competition, accountability, performance]

This analysis of the environment may be used by the VUB to stress the importance NPM values have for the university as it wants to ascertain its place in this environment. To be able to do so, it is stressed that the university needs to be competitive, driven by the will to excel, to grow and to be performant:

"In that complex and exciting world the VUB wants to stand its ground and to continue to grow". [NPM codes: competition, performance, growth]

"to further the awareness among the VUB community of the importance of performance parameters" [NPM code: performance]

"Other goals are to retain a high research output, to bring in funding of the EU and the national research council". [NPM codes: performance, growth]

"Every year it is measured whether what was planned has been realized". [NPM codes: growth, performance, effectiveness]

Yet, as already indicated, the stance taken by the VUB seems to follow two paths: emphasizing the importance of performance for securing the market position is clearly NPM, but in its more specific texts, the university also stresses its uniqueness by referring to social values (collaboration, sustainability, well-being,...) related to PV. The NPM rhetoric can be found primarily in the research policy documents that focus on performance, excellence, ~~incentivation~~ **incentivisation**, and valorisation, while the PV keywords are clearly present in the education and other policy texts:

"Students engage themselves for a sustainable, humanist society",
"Students are educated as world citizens." [PV codes: sustainability, society, citizenship]

"The VUB was to be a catalyzer for solutions that are democratic, ecological, socially and economically responsible". [PV codes: values to society, sustainability, well-being]

"The VUB implements an active policy for the prevention of environmental pollution". [PV codes: values to society, well-being]

"The VUB seeks connectedness in all its activities and between all members of its community" [PV codes: collaboration, network].

As a third conclusion, it is interesting to see that PB is used to support this mixture of NPM/PV-related Discourses, as the KU Leuven and UHasselt, respectively, used PV and NPM to support NPM and PV. It is also interesting that PB supports not only NPM and PV, but also the mixture of NPM/PV — as demonstrated in the last excerpt:

"Research at the VUB is free, because our researchers are free. Free in their right to take initiative, free to choose their own independent path. [PB code: academic freedom, trust] [...] The VUB is not the biggest university, but its research groups are great, with efficient research groups that receive time and space". [NPM code: efficiency]

"The VUB has a humanistic world view [PB codes: conservatism, academic freedom] and wants with this view provide an answer to current and future societal challenges". [PV codes: society, citizenship]

"‘Unity in diversity’ is for the VUB more than the integration of foreign students, professors and researchers in our local ecosystem. This diversity is the implementation of the *universitas* ideal, essential to educate independent world citizens [...]. [PB codes: truth, academic freedom, conservatism] As open university platform [PV codes: stakeholders, dialogue, well-being], we cherish early adopters of new technology, scientific theories and societal models. [NPM code: innovation] As such we want to be the source of new creative talent with a clear intercultural focus [PV code: well-being] that goes beyond the evident and that is open to new ideas". [NPM code: innovation]

In sum, similar to KU Leuven and UHasselt, we observe a mix of Grand Discourses in the mission statement (PB, NPM and PV). In contrast to the more specific texts, which have a narrower focus, but unlike the other cases, UHasselt is focused on two Grand Discourses, namely NPM and PV.

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Discussion and Conclusions

We started the article with the following research question: to what extent do HEIs use strategic ambiguity in their brand communication and does the level of strategic ambiguity differ between communication channels? From the cases above, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Regarding the brand communication in general communication channels

In the mission statements, a mixture of Grand Discourses can be found. This confirms that HEIs use ambiguous communication in their general texts oriented towards a broad audience with multiple, possibly conflicting stakeholder groups, and this can most probably be interpreted as a way to satisfy the variety of stakeholder expectations. Accordingly, isomorphism was quite dominant in mission statements. The message the HEIs convey is remarkably similar, as they all ambiguously mix the different Grand Discourses.

As the three HEIs are part of the same HE system, we can argue that the higher education system and its environment seem to steer to a certain extent the brand communication in general documents, as HEIs are expected to reply to multiple, conflicting expectations. With the mission statements, HEIs create legitimacy in the context of their multiple, possibly conflicting roles expected from the multitude of stakeholders, which is why we observe ambiguity in the communication (because of the mixture of Grand Discourses) and isomorphism because of the same ambiguity found in each HEI. The table below provides the general overview (Table 4).

Table 4
Dominant brand communications

	UHasselt	KU Leuven	VUB
General mission statements	PB/NPM/PV	PB/NPM/PV	PB/NPM/PV
More specific documents	PV	NPM	NPM/PV

Regarding the more specific communication channels

When turning then to the more specific documents, we can derive that the brand communication is much more differentiated in these communication channels. This leads us to the next conclusion that brand communications might serve different purposes in different communication channels. The differentiation in more specific documents is related to the status and position of the HEIs within its system. As is seen in Table 3 and 4, UHasselt mostly uses PV language. A possible explanation is that UHasselt needs to distinguish its brand communication from the communications of the other (bigger) universities. Moreover, as UHasselt is heavily integrated into its own region, its unique selling proposition is to provide a singular contribution to that region through collaboration with partners. However, it is somehow surprising to see that the unique selling position is mainly adopted in the context of more specific texts. This is probably due to the fact that the complex and possibly conflicting stakeholder environment inhibits the communication of this unique selling position in the general texts.

KU Leuven’s specific documents are centred around NPM. The university is known for its reputation, has a high position on international rankings and is the biggest in its country, which is why NPM is used to maintain and proclaim that position. VUB shows a combination of NPM and PV. This is in line with its status, size and reputation, which can be considered as ‘intermediate’. The VUB, in its more specific documents, stresses the need to be efficient and compete

with others (NPM), while at the same time accentuating its intermediate position. The position of the VUB in Brussels urges it to communicate its unique geographical position, with which it can strive to be an attractive HEI for international students, a partner for regional collaboration with a view on creating regional impact, and a hub of diversity in the diverse Brussels society (PV). The VUB wants to increase its position in the market and hence the dominance of NPM in more specific documents, but it balances this by emphasizing elements from PV. In sum, in the specific documents of HEIs we observe more differentiation, less ambiguity and less isomorphism compared to the mission statements.

Our contributions

Our conclusions contribute to the branding in the HE literature in several ways. First, the fact that there is an identifiable difference between communication channels is crucial, especially linked to the fact that different communication channels seem to address different types of stakeholders — even though they might overlap. Our perspective can help to offer an explanation for the paradox in the literature on HE branding showing isomorphism and differentiation in the same HE system. From our analysis, the situation seems to be complex, with communication in specific documents not only diverging from the general mission statements, but also diverging more between HEIs. This highlights that more research needs to be conducted on the role of communication channels for the branding of HEIs, hence our call for multichannel communication analysis in HE branding research.

Second, our study suggests that we should stop looking at isomorphism/differentiation as two opposite sides of a continuum. Isomorphism and differentiation can co-occur in one and the same HE system, but researchers should look for it in different places. From this perspective, this is an extra argument for future research to take more into account different communication channels.

Third, we argue that the conceptualization of branding can somehow be reviewed. When reviewing the literature, the research somehow seems to predetermine that a certain communication in itself is meant for traditional branding purposes, while it might serve other purposes and might be much more differentiated than is visible at the surface. Researchers need to be aware of this. Therefore, we plea to further enlarge our perspective on branding by including purposes of branding communications beyond strategic positioning, and to analyse documents in the light of the purposes they serve in a particular communication context. This broader conceptualization of contextualised

branding could further our understanding of (differentiation in) the branding communications of HEIs. A possible way forward is to compare our results with other HE systems (with different levels of marketization), or with a larger sample of HEIs within the same system. This would increase our understanding of the role of multichannel communication in ~~He-HE~~ branding.

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