

Staged Institutions, Lived Experiences: A Netnographic and Phenomenological Inquiry into Digital Branding and Student Engagement in UK Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Digital branding is a strategic priority for UK higher education institutions (HEIs) facing intense competition. However, the link between university digital branding and actual student engagement remains theoretically underdeveloped. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study using an innovative multi-layered approach to netnography, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and visual elicitation to examine the influence of digital branding that shapes, mediates, and sometimes disrupts student engagement in a UK university. The dramaturgical theory of Goffman (1959) is the main theoretical prism, and the communities of practice by Wenger (1998) and the liquid modernity by Bauman (2000) are used as the supporting frameworks. Based on these, we construct and empirically test the construct of digital brand congruence the extent of conformity between the digital image of an institution and student perceived sense of belonging and engagement. Analysis reveals four core themes: idealized institutional staging, the authenticity paradox in digital content, platform specific engagement dynamics, and the marginalization of non-traditional voices. The paper offers a conceptual model and practical insights for HE marketing practitioners to better align their digital identity with student belonging.

Keywords: digital branding; student engagement; higher education; netnography; IPA; digital brand congruence

Introduction

The landscape of UK higher education has undergone great transformation over the past two decades. The introduction of full tuition fees, diversification of the student body, the heightening competition in the global market, and the upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have all re-oriented universities as much more market driven entities that must operate in complex and digitally saturated contexts (Watermeyer et al., 2021; Bamber, 2026). In this regard, digital branding or strategic management and communication of an institution identity, values and proposition in digital space has emerged as a key tool in which universities are using to appeal to potential students, retain existing ones and create institutional loyalty (Comai, 2025).

However, even with a massive institutional investment in digital marketing and social media management, the association between institutional digital branding and the actual experiences of engagement of students is poorly theorised and empirically sparse. The existing literature pays much attention to pre-enrolment brand perception and choice behaviour (Maringe, 2006; Klassen, 2002) or considers student engagement as an outcome variable in quantitative research that simplifies the complexity of student experience (Tight, 2020; Kuh et al., 2008). The most obvious gap is the lack of a rich, interpretive narrative of how enrolled students perceive, negotiate and respond to the digital brand communications of their institution in-house.

This paper addresses that gap through a qualitative study situated within a single UK university, referred to as 'University Alpha' which is selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) on the basis of its demonstrably active digital communications strategy. This research utilizes a multi-layered qualitative research design using netnographic methodology by Kozinets (2020) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and visual elicitation. The main theoretical contribution of the paper is the construct of digital brand congruence, the perceived fit between the image projected by an institution and the lived sense of belonging, recognition and engagement of students, which was developed using the primary prism of Goffmanian dramaturgical theory and well supported by Wenger (1998) and Bauman (2000).

The paper continues in the following way. Section 2 offers a literature review of digital branding and student engagement within UK HE that presents the major theoretical void. Section 3 outlines the conceptual framework, which is the Digital Brand Congruence Model (Figure 1). Section 4 elaborates on the methodology, which contains a clear defence of the single case study design and the rationale behind the generalisation of its analysis. The findings are introduced and discussed in sections 5 and 6 in four themes. Section 7 provides with theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Literature Review

Digital Branding in Higher Education

The use of branding theory in higher education has increased significantly since the early 2000s as a result of the increasingly marketised nature of the UK universities and the increase in the intensity of competition over students, research funding and global prestige (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2009; Chapleo, 2010). University branding scholarship has adapted constructs of corporate brand management including brand identity, brand image, brand equity, brand loyalty, to the unique complexities of the HE environment in which the product is multidimensional, the consumer is a producer of the experience and the institution is a bearer of historically embedded values that are not easily open to commercial reasoning (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Mourad et al., 2020).

More recently, the use of digital communication mediums has fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of HE branding. Universities now operate across various digital platforms such as institutional websites, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, virtual open days, and Discord communities (Peruta and Shields, 2018; Rutter et al., 2016). In this respect, digital branding is not merely the digitisation of the marketing communication already in place; it is a qualitatively new form of institutional self-presentation with its immediate, interactive, visual richness, and co-creation potential (Swaminathan et al., 2020; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).

Empirical studies of digital branding in UK HE have focused on the social media strategy of universities (Rutter et al., 2016; Peruta and Shields, 2018), the impact of student ambassador programmes and visual

storytelling to the recruitment campaign (Voorveld, 2019), but have not considered mainly the question of how enrolled students experience and make meaning from institutional digital brand communications. The post-enrolment digital brand relationship in which students can compare projected digital identity with lived reality has received minimal scholarly attention and this constitutes the primary empirical gap this study addresses.

Student Engagement in UK Higher Education

Student engagement has become one of the most extensively researched and contested concepts in higher education studies (Hassan, 2026; Tight, 2020). Generally referred to as investment of time, energy, and cognitive, emotional and behavioural resources of students in the learning process, engagement is always associated with a set of positive results such as academic success, retention, and wellbeing (Trowler, 2010; Coates, 2007; Fredricks et al., 2004). The tripartite framework created by Trowler (2010) differentiates between behavioural engagement (participation in academic and extracurricular activities), emotional engagement (sense of belonging and institutional identification), and cognitive engagement (investment in deep learning). This multidimensional conception has contributed much to the field, but critics have claimed that it has not done enough to consider structural and identity-related aspects of non-traditional student groups (Thomas, 2012; Zepke, 2014).

More recent research has drawn attention to the digitalisation of student engagement, the extent to which digital platforms mediate or constrain students' engagement with their institution (Bond et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2017). This digitalisation was accelerated tremendously by the COVID-19 pandemic (Watermeyer et al., 2021), and the digital aspect of student engagement is no longer a side effect, but a primary one. However, the particular effect of institutional digital branding in creating student engagement, the process where a strategic, planned institutional communication policy is converted into (or does not result in) student belonging and engagement, is theorized poorly and hence forms the theoretical gap that this study attempts to fill.

Identifying the Critical Gap

The intersection of these two literatures presents a gap in question: how does the alignment or misalignment between an institution's projected digital brand identity and students' lived experiences shape student engagement? question lies between HE marketing and student engagement theory, the two traditions which have evolved largely parallel to each other and it is this point at which the current study finds itself. The concept of person-environment fit (Kristof-Brown and Billsberry, 2013) provides a relevant reference point where individuals experience greater motivation and performance when their expectations and identities align with those of the organisation they inhabit. Applied to the HE digital branding scenario, the misalignment, as we call the strategic experience gap, can lead to a state of disillusionment, disengagement and critical distance towards the institutional identity. The next section builds the theoretical framework on which these dynamics are analysed.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is structured in such a way that it has a single dominant theoretical lens and two complementary frameworks that are combined to produce the construct of digital brand congruence. This disciplined theoretical architecture is explicitly labelled as such it responds to the analytical demand for depth over breadth: rather than invoking multiple theories at equal weight, the framework positions Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory as the analytical lens through which Wenger (1998) and Bauman (2000) are funnelled as targeted supporting resources.

Primary Lens: Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework conceptualises social life as theatrical performance, in which actors manage the impressions they create through deliberate construction of front stage presentations and the concealment of back stage realities. Applied to the university's digital communications, this framework lights the performative dimension of institutional branding: the curated Instagram feeds, aspirational website copy and professionally produced student ambassador content constitute the university's digital front stage.

Goffman differentiates between sincere performance, where the actor sincerely believes in the role he is performing, and cynical performance, where the actor is aware of the impressions he is manipulating and does so knowingly and strategically. This difference finds a direct reflection in modern discussions of authenticity in digital brand communication: are students being exposed to the digital content of their university as something heartfelt and genuine, or as a cynical act of impression management aimed at recruiting and retaining consumers? The dramaturgical model also serves as a warning to the audience that they are listening with critical interest: Goffman acknowledges that audiences are interested in invading the front stage, interpreting it as back stage reality and that the plausibility of a performance is determined by its internal coherence and suppression of cues of discrepancy. It is these sophisticated audiences that digitally literate students are, as will be shown.

The dramaturgical framework offers the major analytical tool to comprehend the way the University Alpha digital brand communication is built and the way the students interpret and react to it. It supports the construct of digital brand congruence, the perceived fit between institutional digital front stage (performance being managed) and the experience of back stage reality by the student and directs the interpretation in all four empirical themes. All the rest of the theoretical resources are brought into a dialogue and subdued to this first lens.

Supporting Lens 1: Wenger's Communities of Practice

The communities of practice (CoP) framework by Etienne Wenger (1998) is used selectively as a prism to shed light on the social and participatory aspects of student use of institutional digital spaces. The CoP theory conceptualises belonging and identity as constituted by being involved in communities that are typified by mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. We carry this process of selectivity forward to suggest that the digital platforms of universities are digital communities of practice whereby membership and recognition is mediated by digital interaction. The concept of legitimate peripheral participation developed by Wenger adds to the Goffmanian explanation of exclusion: students whose identities are not central to the mainstream narrative of the digital brand, i.e., the ones whose stories are not included in the institutional digital front stage, are in the peripheral

position in the digital community of practice and are not integrated into it but feel disengaged. Wenger offers a vocabulary on a community level to know why some students find the institutional digital performance to be compelling whereas others feel it to be excluding. This aiding lens is called upon in connection with Themes 1 and 4 of this study.

Supporting Lens 2: Bauman's Liquid Modernity

The selective application of the concept of liquid modernity described by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) as the dissolution of fixed structures and the development of fluid and contingent social forms is used in the analysis of platform-differentiated engagement dynamics (Theme 3). The digital presence of the contemporary university is necessarily liquid: it cannot be solid or definite on a fragmented platform ecology typified by the changing algorithmic logics and the speedy changing expectations of the audience. The framework by Bauman offers important macro theoretical terminology with which the lack of coherent cross platform brand identity as it is seen in a netnographically constructed context can be viewed and elaborates the Goffmanian explanation of fragmented construction of the front stage in the digital realm without adding an analytical curve of its own.

The Digital Brand Congruence Model

With a combination of these frameworks, the concept of digital brand congruence is explained as the degree of perceived alignment between an institution's projected digital front stage identity (Goffman, 1959) and a student's lived experience of belonging, recognition, and participation in the institution's digital and physical communities (Wenger, 1998), through the mediating influence of the fluid, platform fragmented brand ecology of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). The construct works on three dimensions that correspond to the tripartite model of engagement introduced by Trowler (2010): cognitive congruence (alignment between the intellectual identity projected digitally and students' academic experience); emotional congruence (alignment between belonging narratives and students' felt sense of community); and behavioural congruence (alignment between the active student identity projected digitally and students' actual engagement opportunities). The theorisation of high congruence between these dimensions is that they will produce authentic and sustained engagement; the theorisation

of low congruence is the strategic experience gap which is theorised to produce detachment and disillusionment. The entire model is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Digital Brand Congruence Model

	INSTITUTIONAL INPUT		MEDIATING CONSTRUCT		STUDENT OUTCOMES	
	Institutional Digital Brand <i>Primary Lens:</i> <i>Goffman (1959)</i> Front Stage Curated aspiration Ambassador performance Platform brand staging Visibility hierarchy	▶	DIGITAL BRAND CONGRUENCE <i>Cognitive</i> <i>Emotional</i> <i>Behavioural</i> HIGH <---> LOW	▶	Student Engagement <i>Trowler (2010)</i> HIGH CONGRUENCE: Belonging Co-creation LOW CONGRUENCE: Disillusionment Detachment	
	Strategic-Experiential Gap (when congruence is low)					
	Supporting Lenses: Wenger (1998) Communities of Practice Bauman (2000) Liquid Modernity					

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Methodology

Research Design: Instrumental Single Case Study

The present research design is instrumental single case study (Stake, 1995), which places the investigation in the University ‘Alpha’, located in the UK, having a diverse student population and proven active digital communications strategy across various platforms. University Alpha was not chosen simply because it was convenient; it is more of a theoretically motivated selection of a critical case, as understood by Flyvbjerg (2006). University Alpha serves as a least likely scenario in this

research a place where strategic experiential gap and digital brand incongruity would be least anticipated to occur due to the highly established and professionally developed digital brand strategy. The reasoning behind this is that determining strategic experience gaps and engagement dissonance in such a high performing environment would be much more compelling to their possible prevalence in the UK higher education sector as a whole. Conversely, weaker grounds of general inference would be provided by similar findings in institutions where digital branding is not as developed. This selection logic of case thus enhances the premise of analytical generalisation and the posture is clearly recognised at the beginning of the study.

According to Yin (2018), analytical generalisation involves extending theoretical propositions from a case study to broader theory rather than making statistical generalisations from a sample to a population. In this context, the findings of this study do not claim to be statistically representative of UK HEIs, rather they claim to generate theoretically transferable insights, based on empirical richness, that sheds light on the processes of digital brand congruence and their implications on student engagement in similar institutional settings. The concept of transferability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) further supports this position. In this study, the use of netnography, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and visual elicitation generates detailed and context sensitive insights. These insights enable readers in comparable institutional settings to make informed judgements about the extent to which the findings may be applicable to their own contexts. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University where the lead researchers are based.

Netnographic Data Collection

Netnography was carried out in five main institutional digital spaces of University Alpha including Instagram, Tik Tok, LinkedIn, the institutional web (student life, news, and about sections) and the official YouTube channel. Data was collected through enduring immersive observation in a six-month study period consisting of two academic semesters of unique brand moments such as Welcome Week, examination times, graduation, and open day events. In accordance with the revised guidelines of Kozinets (2020), the field notes were done in detail capturing the patterns of institutional posting,

content themes, visual aesthetics, visible measures of engagement, reactions by followers, and discursive framing of student life. In line with ethical netnography, platforms of University Alpha are considered as places of institutional communication and not individual expression, and the content is paraphrased and analytically outlined instead of being reproduced verbatim.

IPA Interviews and Visual Elicitation

Fourteen students at University Alpha participated in IPA-guided semi-structured group interviews. IPA was chosen due to its ability to elicit idiographic, phenomena saturated descriptions of lived experience and its prior implementation in scenarios where the texture of subjective meaning making is the topic of interest (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Fieldsend, 2021). The fourteen participants are sufficient to the IPA standards of multi-participant research and are also sufficiently deep as to not undermine ideographic richness. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants based on diversity in terms of year of study, discipline, home/international status, gender and age. Table 1 offers characteristics of the participants.

Table: Participant Characteristics

Code	Year	Discipline	Status	Gender	Age	Primary Platforms
P1	Final Year UG	Business	Home	Female	18-21	Instagram, TikTok
P2	First Year UG	Engineering	International	Male	18-21	Instagram, LinkedIn
P3	Second Year UG	Health Sciences	Home	Female	22-25	Instagram, Website
P4	Postgraduate	Law	Home	Male	26-30	LinkedIn, Website
P5	First Year UG	Creative Arts	Home	Non-binary	18-21	TikTok, YouTube
P6	Second Year UG	Social Sciences	International	Female	22-25	TikTok, Instagram

Code	Year	Discipline	Status	Gender	Age	Primary Platforms
P7	Final Year UG	Computing	Home	Male	18-21	TikTok, YouTube
P8	Postgraduate	Education	Home	Female	31-40	LinkedIn, Website
P9	First Year UG	Humanities	Home	Female	18-21	Instagram, TikTok
P10	Second Year UG	Business	International	Male	22-25	Instagram, LinkedIn
P11	Final Year UG	Business	Home	Female	26-30	Website, Instagram
P12	Postgraduate	Architecture	International	Male	22-25	LinkedIn, Website
P13	First Year UG	Psychology	Home	Female	18-21	Instagram, TikTok
P14	Second Year UG	Media	Home	Non-binary	22-25	TikTok, YouTube

Each group IPA interview had visual elicitation. Before the interview, the participants were asked to choose between three and five screenshots on the digital platforms at the University Alpha that they considered meaningful, surprising, representative, or problematic. These images were used as elicitation prompts (Clark and Morriss, 2017; Harper, 2002) that were not the objects of content analysis but prompted participants to engage in phenomenological narration where they projected and expressed their experiential knowledge about the digital brand of the institution.

Analytical Strategy

Netnographic data were inductively analysed, based on the logic of iterative memo writing of grounded netnography (Kozinets, 2020). The data obtained in interviews were analysed in accordance with the procedure of close reading, initial noting and the formation of experiential themes based on the study

of cross-case patterns offered by IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Cross-data layer integration was done in the crystallisation strategy of Richardson (2000), which recognizes that netnographic observations, phenomenological descriptions and narratives elicited by a visual representation shed light on various aspects of a complex social reality. Four participants were invited to read analytical summaries to member check and ensured that they resonated with emerging themes.

The research was ethically approved by the University 'Alpha's' Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was given in writing to all participants, and included recording, anonymisation, use of visual material, and the right to withdraw without penalty. The participants are coded P 1-P14. The recording of interviews was kept in encrypted institutional servers and was meant to be destroyed after publication.

Findings

Analysis across the three data layers generated four superordinate themes, each comprising two to three subordinate themes. Supporting evidence is drawn from netnographic field notes (NF), interview excerpts (P1-P14), and visual elicitation descriptions (VE). Quotation has been made light edited to make it readable without losing voice and meaning. Netnography, IPA interviews and visual elicitation were not used as three parallel ways to get confirmation, but rather as three analytically different perspectives on the same social phenomenon that each gave a different dimension of brand congruence not available in any single method.

Theme 1: The Staging of Idealised Institutional Identity

1a. The glossy digital front stage

The netnographic observations of the Instagram and Tik Tok stream of University Alpha regularly provided the image of a well-regulated aesthetics of the aspirational student life: sunlit campus photos, heterogeneous groups of smiling students, stories of success (graduates working in prestigious companies, placement students in energetic professional environments), professionally made video content. In field notes, there was a significant preponderance of idealised imagery, renovated buildings

in atmospheric light, students involved in visually interesting things, an eventuality filled with life and good humour and little of mundane, everyday student life. This is a digital front stage of Goffmanian meaning: an impression that is under firm strategic control, and back stage realities that are discrepant are suppressed systematically.

The Instagram felt like a brochure that never ended. Everything was golden hour, everyone looked happy. I remember scrolling it when I was applying and thinking.... this is what university looks like. But when I actually got here, I was like... where is this place? (P1, VE: prospectus-style Instagram post)

P9 described a closely similar experience:

The Tik Toks were so active, as though university was a social event in itself. However, it was really very lonely to settle down, at least during the first month. The online version of this place did not equip me to that.

P3 offered a related observation, noting the temporal dimension of the gap between digital promise and physical reality:

I used to save the university's Instagram posts before I arrived. There was one of a student sitting on the grass with a coffee, looking really relaxed, surrounded by friends. I genuinely thought that would be my life. The campus is nice, but it does not look like that most of the time. Most of the time it is grey and everyone is rushing. (P3, VE: lifestyle Instagram post saved prior to enrolment)

These 3 accounts (P1, P9, P3) show a similar pattern across year groups and disciplines, indicating a general representation of the idealised staging which is structurally reproduced rather than idiosyncratically perceived. It is noticed that, the gap between the front stage / back stage presentation of projected and experienced reality is not just a causal marketing slip, but it is a structural generator of low digital brand congruence and has direct consequences of early emotional engagement and sense of belonging in students.

An international student P10 made this observation in the visibility hierarchy of discipline and nationality, adding to the above:

"On LinkedIn they talk about partnerships with big companies in the UK and those look really nice, but they're always the same type of student, young, British, business or computing. But I'm an international, my experience is never the one that they post. It is like there is an ideal student. This is for a placement announcement on LinkedIn that will be posted on the website (VE: LinkedIn placement announcement post)".

The account of P10 exemplifies a multiple axes of visibility hierarchy: discipline, nationality and programme type, all contribute to the invisibility of students who do not match the dominant brand archetype. It is a multi-dimensional exclusion that is in line with Wenger's (1998) account of legitimate peripheral participation, where being a part of a digital community of practice is not a simple matter of showing up but of being recognised and who is recognised is decided by which profiles fit the dominant brand narrative of the institution.

1b. Selective representation and the visibility hierarchy

The netnographic field notes revealed a methodical process in what content was being amplified digitally: some of the stories of students, disciplines, and social settings were clearly overrepresented and some became virtually invisible. Success stories in employability in the business, law and computing sectors were front and center; creative arts, humanities were uncommon. The student social life was always symbolized by a limited number of archetypes: the active sportsman, the student ambassador, the professionally oriented networker. These selective selection are a hierarchy of visibility, a gradient of institutional digital recognition that privileges this or that identity of student and student progression. Within the context of Wenger (1998), students whose disciplines or paths fall out of the dominant brand narrative are on the periphery of the digital community of practice in the institution, creating a sense of disengagement and not belonging.

I study economics. I have never once seen a economics student on the university's Instagram or TikTok. It is always business students, or someone doing a placement at a tech company. It is like we do not exist in the digital version of the university. (P11)

P13, who identified herself as a first-year psychology student and is “very active” on TikTok, explained the decoding thing in more detail:

It's easy to tell when someone is posting for the university and when they're posting for themselves: lighting is different, the captions are longer and more formal, and they never complain".(P13, VE: side-by-side comparison of official and peer-created TikTok content)

What Goffman (1959) describes as audience sophistication is this decoding ability, the ability to recognize the cues that are not in accord with the statement and reveal a cynical performance, even if the actor has a high level of technical expertise. The better the institutional production, the more obvious the artificiality of the institution is to the audience that is absorbing up its years of genuine peer content.

Theme 2: The Authenticity Paradox in Student Facing Digital Content

2a. Student ambassadors as branded performers

University Alpha utilized student ambassadors to a significant extent, who are chosen student content creators who make vlogs, Instagram stories, and Tik Tok videos on behalf of the university. Netnographic observation of this material indicated a type of informed informality: intentional and apparent informality, use of first-person address, seeming spontaneity and personal disclosure aimed at indicating authenticity. Nevertheless, the content was still visually organised in an institutional context, uniform brand colours, approved messages and the obvious lack of critical or negative content. This controlled inauthenticity was easily unraveled by students.

The student blogs were well-written but they all said the same things. Like there is a template somewhere. 'I was nervous at first but then I found my people.' 'The lecturers are really supportive.' I could predict what they were going to say. (P7)

This, according to Goffman (1959), constitutes a cynical performance: it is ostensibly being delivered as a sincere communication with peers but is actually being used as an institutional impression management. Students who are digitally literate, trained to decode the conventions of social media genres are able to easily detect the mismatched cues, the lack of negativity, the corporate uniformity of the brand, the predictable storyline, which reveal the artificial quality of the performance. The paradox of authenticity is that the more the institutional effort to enact authenticity the more obvious the performing is to its audience and the less authentic it feels.

2b. Moments of genuine digital community

Compared to controlled brand content, respondents indicated particular online spaces perceived as being truly authentic: YouTube channel, course related group chat, unofficial Facebook groups, and even some reactive institutional content created in response to real life happenings.

There is a student-run Instagram page that just posts memes about our university, relatable stuff about the canteen queues, the broken lifts, the library at exam time. That actually makes me feel like I belong here more than the official stuff. (P5, VE: screenshot of unofficial student meme page)

Similar to this context, another student narrated:

There's a WhatsApp group some of us started in first year, nothing official, just people from my course. When someone's stuck on an assignment or having a tough week, that's where it actually gets sorted and not from anything the university sends out. It's messy and unpolished but it's real, you know. That's where I actually feel like I have people here. (P11)

These spaces, in the terms of Goffman (1959), give us a glimpse of the back stage the uncontrolled, unidealized realities of university life that the front stage masks with a systematicity but which students perceive as part of the authentic community. It is shared, recognisable experience, the broken lift, the library stress, assignment deadlines, which forms the true social fabric of community and not the

aspirational front stage, that formulated the authentic social fabric of community as Wenger (1998) characterises it. These data imply that high digital brand congruence, not better performance might be needed.

Theme 3: Platform Differentiated Engagement Dynamics

3a. Platform-specific logics and student navigation

The participants exhibited advanced platform-sophisticated knowledge of the communicative logics that were linked to different platforms. Instagram was always positioned as aspirational and focused to outer audiences, a front stage of dressing. Tik Tok was perceived as more possibly authentic and yet identifiably controlled at University Alpha. LinkedIn was in a much different place: being linked to identity and future orientation, its content elicited more engagement among various participants specifically because the professional narrative resonated more closely with their instrumental motivations to attend university.

Their TikToks are getting better, a bit more funny now. But they are still clearly made by the marketing department. You can tell because there is no mess, no awkwardness. Real student TikToks are chaotic. (P14, VE: comparison of official versus student produced TikTok content)

Similarly, another student mentioned:

I follow LinkedIn more than the Instagram these days. It's not a joke, it's just reporting what positions are being filled by graduates and which companies are attending careers fairs. That's the stuff I really want, it feels like proof this degree has some use beyond living, that's the stuff I really care about. (P4)

This platform differentiation can be contrasted with the liquid modernity of Bauman (2000): the digital brand of the institution is necessarily fluid and changes its register and aesthetic to the communicative culture of each platform. Yet, this flexible fluidity is generating a broken brand ecology as opposed to creating a unified brand experience. The cross-platform students experience presents fragmented

institutional identities that fail to become recognisable, reliable institutional character producing episodic, not cumulative engagement.

3b. The institutional website as credibility anchor, not community

The use of netnographic observation and accounts of participants always placed the institutional site as a point of credibility, and not as an engagement platform. The members mentioned it in practical, information searching terms, checking deadlines, finding support services, checking credentials instead of as a place of belonging or community. A few of them mentioned that there was a considerable aesthetic and tonal mismatch between the informality of the content on the social media and the formal and statural register of the site, which supports the disjointedness of the cross platform brand experience.

The website is where you go when you need to know something official. It is not where you feel part of the university. It is more like a government website. Very formal, a bit cold. (P7)

This is an extension of the same kind of use P4 describes (below) as checking results, finding forms with a more explicit statement of the difference in tone between platforms, making the website seem formal, impersonal even, adding further emphasis to the disjointedness that has been expressed in this sub-theme.

I only really go on the website for stuff like checking my module results or finding the right form to submit. It doesn't feel like it's talking to me as a person, more like a filing cabinet. The Instagram feels like it's made by students, the website feels like it's made by a legal team. (P4)

Theme 4: Marginalised Voices and the Digital Inclusion Gap

4a. International students and cultural coding

The students of international origin narrated the digital exclusion that is not based on the lack of various visualization, but on the cultural coding of the content aimed at an implicitly domestic and UK cultural audience. The presence of cultural allusions, societal expectations and perceived knowledge of the

norms of the UK HE established some elements of digital exclusion to students whose background did not align with the dominant representation.

When I was researching UK universities from back home, the Instagram looked very international.. lots of different faces. But the actual content, the language, the references it was very British. I did not always understand what they were celebrating or why it mattered. (P2)

P6 shared an experience related to this:

The student ambassador who happened to be of my country assisted. But there was but one. And she had to act on behalf of us all, which is unrealistic. (P6)

According to Goffman (1959), international students regard the institutional digital front stage textualized to address a specific cultural audience as such and understand that the plurality of the stage is a visual and not an experiential, plurality. Brand image visual diversity does not necessarily create cultural inclusivity in brand experience; token representation recreates, but does not solve, the exclusion it claims to.

4b. Mature students and the youth normative digital brand

Mature students were always subjected to the digital brand of University Alpha as being implicitly youth normative, in the sense that it is oriented towards an imagined 18-21 year old student who is primarily concerned with university as a social and residential experience. This youth normativity was not felt as direct marginalization but as a kind of non-recognition in a more systemic sense: the systematic lack of material that would celebrate the unique motivations, issues and identities of adult learners.

All the content assumes you are eighteen, you have just left home for the first time, you want to go clubbing and join every society. I am thirty-five, I have children, I am here to change my career. I feel invisible in the university's digital world. (P8)

By dramaturgical definitions, mature students are not even cast at all in the institutional digital performance in the dramaturgical terms of Goffman (1959) because they see no familiar part in the front

stage and thus perceive the performance as part of another person. This observation brings the belonging framework by Thomas (2012) to the digital brand space: youth normative digital front stage serves as a structural impediment to emotional interaction among students of greater age, a kind of symbolic exclusion that is practiced by the representational decisions of the institutional brand management.

Discussion

The analysis took place through three methods in a manner of iteration. First, netnographic observation of the digital platforms generated patterns such as aspirational staging, the invisibility of student identities, and shifts in content register between platforms, which were observed after field notes. These were not findings, rather, these informed questions of interviews.

The patterns were accorded significance in the interviews conducted with the participants by the IPA. For example, P1 talked about her initial arrival on campus and not recognising the campus from the Instagram photos she had saved. P9's story of loneliness went against the 'Student Social Life' that TikTok had offered. P8 didn't even get a mention in the institutional story. All of this wasn't there in the content itself, it only came to light when people discussed them living in the content.

A third layer was the visual elicitation. The respondents were asked to select images and describe them themselves, thus allowing their thinking processes to emerge on their own. Official and student-generated TikTok content were compared to P14; an unofficial meme page was pulled up by P5 and posting aesthetics were compared directly in P13. This is evidence which direct questioning could not have given.

Empirical Validation of the Digital Brand Congruence Model

Results provide a significant empirical evidence to the model of digital brand congruence (Figure 1), as well as its three dimensional framework. In each of the four themes, a similar trend of perceived incongruity between the digital front stage of University Alpha and the lived back stage realities of students, the strategic experiential gap theorised in the conceptual framework can be observed. This disjuncture occurs in all three aspects of congruence: cognitively (mismatch between the intellectual

identity projected digitally and the academic experience of students), emotionally (mismatch between the narrative of community and the narrative of belonging and the experience of not being noticed or not belonging felt by students), and behaviourally (mismatch between the participatory student identity projected online and the actual opportunities to engage offered to students). More importantly, the data also show the circumstances in which digital brand congruence is reached: in the unofficial, horizontally generated digital messages of student communities themselves, as opposed to professionally controlled institutional brand messages. This conclusion has important theoretical implications. Congruence is not an outcome of institutional investment of brand management but an emergent characteristic of participatory digital culture. Prediction of the model that high congruence yields belonging and co-creation and low congruence yields disillusionment and detachment is confirmed with all four themes.

Theoretical Contribution: Extending Goffman into Digital HE Branding

The main theoretical contribution is the introduction and adaptation of the dramaturgical framework introduced by Goffman (1959) to the area of digital branding in higher education. The front stage/back stage interactions determined in all four themes i.e. the idealised Instagram front stage, the cynical ambassador performance, the platform specific stage management, and the acting exclusions of the visibility hierarchy are a logical dramaturgical explanation of how UK universities make and maintain digital brand identities and how digitally savvy students interpret and react to them. Although Goffman has been used in numerous face-to-face organisational applications, the use of Goffman in institutional digital brand communication is a theoretically fruitful extrapolation of the application that provides analytical gain unattainable through traditional brand management systems. Of special importance is the authenticity paradox (Theme 2). It brings the work of Beverland (2005) and Gilmore and Pine (2007) on performative authenticity to the HE context and shows that the audience decoding effects of the strategy of seeking authentic sounding digital content via student ambassador programmes make the strategy progressively selfdefeating. To institutions, this implies a qualitatively different strategic rationale: not the simulation of authenticity by means of exquisite performance but the establishment of structural conditions open digital spaces, authentic student co-production, a willingness to take critical voice that allow authentic expression to take place naturally.

Analytical Generalisation: Defending the Critical Case

The single case study design would necessitate the long-term interaction with the query about what sorts of assertions can be rightfully drawn on the basis of a solitary institutional location. Since the critical case logic (Flyverbjerg, 2006) has been identified in the methodology, the generalisation warrant is the strongest one, i.e., findings on a least-likely case, i.e. an institution where digital brand engagement is expected to achieve the best results, have stronger theoretical weight than would findings on an average or typical case. The theoretical propositions developed here of front stage/back stage dynamics in institutional digital branding, authenticity paradox and structural processes of digital inclusion gaps are put forward as analytical generalisations (Yin, 2018) of mechanisms that work on the UK HE, but which may be stronger in institutions with less developed digital brand capabilities. This argumentative reasoning produces certain, falsifiable forecasts of forthcoming comparative research. Strategic experiential disjunctions ought to be wider and digital brand congruence lesser, at organizations with less developed digital branding plans and resources at their disposal to handle the gap difference between the projected and the experienced institutional identity. The current research provides the theoretical background and construct vocabulary on which such predictions are going to be evaluated. It is also worth mentioning that the fact that evidence was plentiful in three independent data streams i.e. netnographic observation, IPA accounts and visual elicitation gives it some internal corroboration that is not possible in the context of single-method studies, which further contributes to the reliability of the analytical generalisations that are being promoted.

Implications of the Digital Inclusion Gap

The results presented in Theme 4 apply the belonging framework proposed by Thomas (2012) and the critical engagement scholarship proposed by Zepke (2014) to the digital brand realm and prove that structural inequalities of UK HE, such as dissimilar belonging experience of international and mature students, are replicated and even enhanced within the digital brand ecosystem of the institution. The youth normative digital brand and culturally coded international facing content are two types of symbolic exclusion that is performed by means of representational decisions of institutional brand

management. This result has practical urgency within the requirements of the access and participation agenda for students. It is appropriate to interpret digital brand inclusion as a structural factor that dictates engagement and retention of non-traditional student groups rather than as a diversity objective.

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

This paper contributes to the theoretical work in three main ways. First, it presents and empirically confirms the construct of digital brand congruence, the perceived identity between institutional projected digital identity and the sense of belonging, recognition and engagement among students as a new theoretical approach at the cross of HE marketing and student engagement research. Second, it enhances the use of the dramaturgical theory, as developed by Goffman (1959), as one of the key analytical tools to understand the institutional digital brand communication, illustrating its ability to shed light on the process of performance, authenticity paradox and audience decoding practices in UK HE, with the specific analytical insights of Wenger (1998) and Bauman (2000) being added to. Third, it adds the Digital Brand Congruence Model (Figure 1) as a conceptual resource that not only systematises the empirical results but also offers a clear theoretical framework on how this disciplinary intersection, which has been understudied should be approached in the future.

Practical Implications

The findings give some practical directions to be taken by the HE marketing and communications professionals. To start with, the institutions ought to stop being aspiration performance oriented and switch to what we call an authentic dissonance strategy: the intentional incorporation of imperfect, mundane, and self-critical digital material that reduces the strategic experiential divide and earns credibility with digitally savvy student audiences. It is not an argument with professional quality in digital communications but is the actual structural space of unmanaged student voice and managed brand content. Further, the institutions are to create systematic audits of digital brand inclusion, periodic, systematic evaluations of digital content representation, in collaboration with students of non-representative groups, which are meant to identify and rectify the visibility hierarchies, cultural codings

and youth normative assumptions that derive non-traditional students of meaningful digital brand presence. Moreover, organizations must invest in coherent cross-platform design of the brand journey: the planned, gradual orchestration of digital touchpoints across platforms into progressive, engagement generative brand experiences, instead of the fragmented ecosystem of platform specific identities that the current study records.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations are to be taken into consideration. The single case study design as a theoretically purposeful design, which is defended using critical case logic, constitutes a single institutional context. This methodology should be further applied to other types of institutions in future research in order to test whether the dynamics of digital brand congruence are found in other contexts and whether the strategic-experiential gap is more explicit at those institutions in which the digital capabilities of the brand are underdeveloped as the critical case logic suggests. In addition to that, further studies could expand the number of respondents to a significantly larger sample size. The framework would be augmented by cross-national comparative studies. Longitudinal designs would be more effective in capturing the process of digital brand-engagement relationship change through the course of the academic career of a student, and the staff view of institutional digital brand management the creative negotiations, resource constrained, and strategic pressured processes of forming the content students experience would be a fruitful line of future inquiry that would supplement the student experience focus of the current study.

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