ABSTRACT

The thesis considers the multiple perspectives of the brand and evaluates their relevance for the development of university brand promises. It finds that contrary to existing published presumptions, there is considerable potential for the application of branding within the university context.

Qualitative data collected from four English universities, two pre-1992 universities: Durham University and The University of Manchester, and two post-1992 universities: the University of Bedfordshire and Oxford Brookes University provide empirical support for the institutional and product related categories around which university brand promises can be defined, categories brought together in the development of an Institutional and Product Dimensions Model. The thesis presents universities' own perspectives on university branding to assess the level of buy-in, resonance, and understanding of sector fit. Primary evidence is considered against a series of perspectives and models including Product Dimensions and a Differentiation Perspectives Model to identify the breadth and depth to which differentiation is actually achievable in a university environment.

Supported by an analysis of 85 English university websites, the research also identifies the 33 characteristic categories around which university brand promises are defined, characteristics brought together through the development of The Brand Promise Characteristic Model. Coupled with that finding is the risk to differentiation that high characteristic convergence around a relatively small set of characteristics presents. The development of The Characteristic Convergence Model captures the areas around which high characteristic convergence is most prevalent. While the research identifies that there is considerable potential for the development of university brand promises, it is in relation to the delivery that the challenges are most acute. The conceptualisation of the factors influencing the delivery of the brand promise identifies the unique sectoral challenges to the application and delivery of university brand promises, concepts such as delivery demarcation, visual identity flouting, jurisdictional impotency, functional irreverence, academic disparateness, subject fixation, and parochialism.

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