

Thematic analysis of marketing messages in UK universities' prospectuses

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Abstract

Purpose – Prospective students are exposed to abundant choices, and they are eagerly searching for information to select the best universities for themselves. Likewise, prospectuses are regularly produced by universities to meet this information needs; the purpose of this paper is to examine the key marketing messages used in their prospectuses.

Design/methodology/approach – The 2017 undergraduate prospectuses of 121 universities in the UK (out of the 134 members of University UK) were thematically analysed using NVivo10.

Findings – Messages were predominantly about the location, the course, student experience, credibility and career progression. They are framed in an appealing way, filled with facts and figures, images of beautiful buildings and smiling students, testimonials of facilities and experiences that form a sense of compatibility and belonging.

Research limitations/implications – This study provides insights for the higher educational institutions to enhance their future marketing communications strategies in terms of effectively differentiating one university from another by highlighting the predominantly used appeals among 121 prospectuses and the need for adopting a more consistent approach between the clearing period and non-clearing period in terms of designing the prospectuses. This study has considered only the print platform, and therefore future studies should also look at social media and university websites in the context of the integrated marketing communications.

Practical implications – Accurate and coherent narratives should be provided, taking into consideration the diverse nature of target audience. Universities need to realise that they can be held responsible for the promises presented in their prospectuses. Using the city appeal by many universities may be challenging, as there is need to attract students not just to the city itself, but to the university's campus.

Originality/value – Having a significantly larger sample than any other previous studies in this field, the empirical evidence provided in this paper is rich and in-depth, thanks to the size and age of the sample as well as the integrated and combined methodological approach. Five key themes with sub-themes, descriptions and examples were provided, suitable for future research in higher education marketing.

Keywords University, Marketing communications, Higher education, UK, Thematic analysis, Prospectus

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The corporatization and marketization of the universities has its origins in neoliberalism (Lynch, 2006, p. 3), the notion that there is no alternative to the market as a basis for organising society. Education, in this context, is treated as another service to be delivered on the market to those who can afford it. In other words, education provides people with choices. This study explores the way in which the UK higher education institutions brand themselves to reach out. The competition in this sector is fierce and is not just within the country but also across the borders to connect with prospective students.

The trend in global student mobility has contributed to a rapidly evolving market in international education, which, in turn, has created new opportunities, challenges and an increasingly competitive higher education environment (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). This competition, coupled with increasing budget pressures, is forcing the higher education institutions to strengthen their advertising and marketing efforts in order to hold on to their corner of the global market (Maslowsky, 2013). It is vital for educational institutions to market themselves in such climate of competition in the global world for universities,



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and extensive literature on the transfer of the concepts and practices of marketing from other industrial sectors to higher education have been formed (Gibbs, 2002).

Recently, Anglia Ruskin University has been sued by the graduate who moved from Hong Kong to study at the university's Lord Ashcroft International Business School in Cambridge after being won over by the claims in the prospectus (Polianskaya, 2018). It was alleged that the university failed to deliver and that it was accused of a breach of contract and fraudulent misrepresentation. In 2017, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) upheld complaints about assertions from six universities (Bothwell, 2017), making them remove claims in their prospectuses and their marketing materials. These claims were "misleading" in terms of their accomplishments in rankings or other performance tables such as the National Students Survey and the Research Excellence Framework. According to the ASA rulings, if the universities are making claims about their national or global ranking, student satisfaction or graduate success, they need to support their claims with good evidence (Bothwell, 2017).

As any other consumer exposed to abundant choices, prospective students – primarily millennials (Generation Y) and post-millennials (Generation Z) – are eagerly searching for the information in order to select the best universities for themselves. The choice of university is a highly involved decision, reflecting one's needs, values and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1994). It is, at the same time, a difficult decision as the students have to search through a barrage of information, such as websites, prospectuses and open-day visits before making a decision. With the advancement of information technology, websites have become a vital marketing communication tool for recruiting students, as they are often the first point of search for prospective students in terms of general information as well as insight into university life. However, the universities' websites are not solely designed to provide information for prospective students because they are obliged to present a lot of information on their website to various stakeholders such as the media, prospective students and staff (Mogaji, 2016a). Unlike the websites, prospectuses are specifically designed to provide information for prospective students and therefore provide more coherent narratives associated with student recruitment.

Another marketing activity for the universities, in relation to recruitment, is to host open days that provide prospective students an opportunity to find out more about the wide range of courses available to them. This, however, mostly targets students within the local area or, at best, within the country (Mogaji, 2016a, b) rather than international students. It is also considered to be particularly useful for students who have been accepted by more than one institution, who has to decide which offer to accept (Moogan *et al.*, 1999).

Thus, these points highlight the unique feature and importance of prospectuses as a marketing communications tool for universities. Hartley and Morphey (2008) noted that the prospectus is a very important medium by which universities communicate their features and they are designed to entice prospective students to enrol in the university. This indicates that the contents therein are purposefully selected by the marketing team to appeal to the students, their parents and those helping in making choices.

The research question in this empirical study is to investigate the key marketing messages used across UK universities prospectuses. It aims to contribute to the discussion of the UK universities' marketing communication activities via prospectuses. For the literature review, the authors used such keywords as "the higher education marketing", "UK University prospectus", "UK University student recruitment" in Google Scholar, EBSCO, Science Direct, Research Gate and ASA websites. In terms of the research methodology, by using a thematic analysis via NVivo10, a qualitative content analysis tool for the thematic analysis, the authors analysed the recurring themes in the marketing communications messages in universities prospectuses. The research design and process are explained in greater details in methodology and data sample section. Although there are not abundant

evidences of research on the universities prospectuses to this date, methodological approaches used in the existing literature are diverse, ranging from critical discourse analysis (Askehave, 2007) to genre analysis (Kim and Uhm, 2017). However, no research so far adopted a qualitative content analysis tool for the thematic analysis, NVivo10, nor has any study covered this large a sample, over 100 prospectuses.

Literature review

Information search by students

The decision to attend a university is an important one (Menon *et al.*, 2007) due to the cost implication and sacrifices that are expected. Making the choice about university is driven by both rational and emotional factors (Angulo *et al.*, 2010). An emotional attachment because of friends or family might play a role and at the same time, the rational factors highlight the investment of resources in attending higher education and where the benefits they expect to derive exceed the costs to be incurred in its acquisition (Menon *et al.*, 2007).

Various studies have explored the information search pattern of prospective students. In most cases, they are under-informed on important matters regarding their choice and some of the students did not consider it necessary to become personally involved in an information search (Mogaji, 2016a; James *et al.*, 1999; Menon *et al.*, 2007, 2010). Furthermore, many students only search for information about local universities and may not search further if they feel their needs have been met.

Interestingly, Ball *et al.* (1999) found that students from higher socio-economic status families had clearer strategies for choosing their universities. Menon *et al.* (2007) also noted that students who considered the choice of higher education important were found to be more likely to engage in an information search, while students who felt that the choice of higher education was not important did not seem to bother with collecting significant information. Building on Menon *et al.* (2007), Mogaji (2016a) argued that universities should stimulate information searches by prospective students by providing relevant information through promotional campaigns, invitations to prospective students for visits to the university premises, and well-designed websites. In a similar vein, Menon (2004) suggested that higher education institutions can focus on their comparative strengths, making their university appealing through advertisement and by maintaining informative websites. It is therefore important to consider the way in which universities are reaching out to prospective students via prospectuses.

Universities marketing channels

Universities engage in many marketing activities to enrol students on their courses. These days, the role of social media as a marketing channel cannot be ignored especially because the majority of today's university students are millennials, often considered as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). The penetration of social media in their daily activities is high and they often seek social interaction and information using social media (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). Universities have developed strategies to market themselves through this channel (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011; Siamagka and Christodoulides, 2016) and there are increasing efforts to target both millennials and more mature students using social media (Melchiorre and Johnson, 2017).

University websites are also an important marketing tool. While examining the marketing strategies of UK universities during clearing, Mogaji (2016a) found that the majority of websites were redesigned to provide information about clearing with slides highlighting student satisfaction, guaranteed accommodation and graduate employability. Clearing matches applicants to university places that are yet to be filled (www.ucas.com). This is available to anyone who has made a UCAS Undergraduate application and does not

hold any offers. Universities also provide information for specific audience on their websites, for example, targeting international students.

In addition to social media and websites, traditional strategies to reach out to prospective students are still available, such as open days. However, these are mostly targeted at students within the area or, at the most, within the country. Campus visits give the potential students an opportunity to explore the university environment, ask questions and have a feel for what they are about to experience if they join the university. While open days appear to be particularly useful for students who have been accepted by more than one institution and have to decide whose offer to accept (Moogan *et al.*, 1999), they might not be a good way to enrol international students, as these students may not be able to visit the campuses.

Importantly, the universities also publish prospectuses for prospective students on a yearly basis, often made available for the start of the higher education fairs in March. The document offers detailed information about what the courses, student life and in general, what the university has to offer. While the universities make efforts to ensure that their prospectuses are accurate and up-to-date, they also adopt more creative means of reaching out to their prospective students. For example, electronic copies of the prospectuses are being made available online or PDF copies are being made available for download to computers, phones and tablets, and interactive copies with enhanced content are being provided, instead of physical copies.

University prospectus is, thus, still considered an important communication and marketing tool in helping prospective students and their families decide on which University to attend (Rutter *et al.*, 2016; Shaw, 2013). It has been found to be a crucial factor in shaping initial impressions of a University, especially the visual and textual presentation of information (Winter and Chapleo, 2017).

Few studies have explored UK university prospectus. Rutter *et al.* (2016) examined the brand personality of top 10 universities in UK and identified a clear differentiation and demonstration of an exciting and competent brand. The findings were, however, limited to ten universities. In a similar vein, Winter and Thompson-Whiteside (2017) content-analysed 105 undergraduate prospectuses but their focus was only on location, which is just one of many ways of differentiation. There is, thus, a significant gap in knowledge with regards to the key messages being communicated by UK universities, and this study aims to fill this lacuna.

Framing the marketing messages

Universities present their marketing communication messages in the prospectus, making their appeals distinctive and persuasive. These appeals are embedded in visual and textual content to attract the viewer's attention to the message and arouse interest and reactions – for example, award-winning facilities, perfect suburb locations, perfect for student life, a place to inspire and alumni support after graduation.

Chandy *et al.* (2001) argued that the intrinsic differences in consumers' motivation and ability to process information also determined the type of advertising appeal to use. They concluded, therefore, that knowledge of these differences can help marketers develop advertising strategies to meet their customers' needs. This confirms Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka's (2006) view that a successful marketing campaign for higher education institutions must examine how potential students search for information. As Naude and Ivy (1999) observed, aggressive marketing by academic institutions to increase the market share is measured by the quality and quantity of student enrolments. However, little research has explored the advertising strategies of UK higher education institutions. This research aims to help fill that gap.

Framing is a key analytical construct which has been used in this study. Goffman (1974) considered framing as a prominent theory in analysing how the media packages content for

public consumption. According to Boykoff and Laschever (2011, p. 346), the media “organise issues, pointing both backward at what happened and forward, offering interpretive cues for what it all means”. It has been described as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation” (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6), “principles of organization” (Goffman, 1974, p. 10) and “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, p. 143).

According to Entman (1993, pp. 51–52), the concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text; he argued: “Analysis of frames illustrates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or a communication) of information from one location – such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel – to that consciousness”. Although there is no single definition of framing, it is generally agreed that frames are “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information” (Neuman and Koskinen, 1992, p. 60).

Frames in the media text can be examined and identified by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts and judgements. Furthermore, the consequences of framing can be conceived on individual and societal levels (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52). An individual-level consequence may be altered attitudes about an issue based on exposure to certain frames. A societal-level consequence, on the other hand, may contribute to shaping social-level processes such as political socialisation, decision making and collective actions.

Frame issues have been known to shape how the public perceives reality (Gitlin, 1980; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Framing identifies and explains the situations and issues inside the media discourse rather than simply identifying coverage as positive or negative (Tankard, 2001). According to Iyengar (1991), frames can be presented as keywords, expressions, sources, sentences or visuals.

Weight and Cooper (2015) noted that framing theory has been applied to discourse media effects in various ways. Cacciatore *et al.* (2016) acknowledged that it is one of the most often used theories in communication, but they suggested the need for a paradigm shift in better understanding and contextualising it. This does not make the theory irrelevant, but they suggest the best approach may include the need to discard the general “framing” label altogether. In an attempt to use more specific terminology when discussing this idea, we considered two specific options provided by Druckman (2001) and Scheufele and Iyengar (2014), which are equivalence and emphasis framing. Equivalence framing involves controlling the presentation of the information while emphasis framing involves controlling the content of a communication.

Even though this theory has often been used to describe how news stories are presented, it is also considered appropriate for understanding how universities are using their prospectus to develop their marketing communication messages and branding. An emphasis on framing is considered suitable in this context because universities can control and manipulate the content of their prospectus, which includes texts and images, in a way that will appeal to prospective students.

Carter *et al.* (2015) noted that media professionals determine how to “frame” their coverage, choosing the facts to include, the context, and the language to describe the subject. Thus, universities’ marketing communication teams are more likely to frame their stories around the students’ interests and what is most appealing to them and those involved in the decision-making process. A framing effect is one in which salient attributes of a message – its organisation, selection of content, or thematic structure – render particular thoughts applicable, resulting in their activation and use in evaluations (Price *et al.*, 1997, p. 486). The selection of suitable content in the prospectuses is the main focus of this study in order to explore the type of content universities consider attractive to prospective students and how this content is framed in their prospectuses.

Methodology

The research methodology used for this study is thematic analysis using NVivo10, a qualitative content analysis tool for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the search for emerging themes that best describe the phenomenon (Daly *et al.*, 1997). It is considered as an inductive generic qualitative approach that “seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Caelli *et al.*, 2008, p. 3). Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) further considered it as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data”. To this extent, patterns within the prospectuses that indicate how UK universities are communicating with prospective students were derived from subsequent analyses of the prospectuses.

Data sample

The 2017 undergraduate prospectuses of 121 universities in the UK (out of the 134 members of Universities UK) were collected for analysis. At the time of the research, some universities did not have their prospectus ready, while other universities allowed prospective students to personalise their prospectus. Additionally, there are five private higher education institutions that award their own degrees in the UK. The University of Buckingham is a member of Universities UK, so was included in the sample. BPP University College of Professional Studies, the College of Law, Ashridge Business School and the IFS School of Finance are not members of Universities UK and were, therefore, excluded.

Digital copies of the prospectus in PDF formats were downloaded from the universities' websites. For those with no digital copy online, we requested a hardcopy to be sent by post. On arrival, these hardcopy prospectuses were digitally converted, using an optical character recognition (OCR) scanner, into editable and searchable data in a PDF format. These PDF files were then exported to NVivo10, a qualitative content analysis tool for thematic analysis.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that thematic analysis involves a number of choices that should be made explicit to guarantee the validity and reliability of the study. Among these is the identification of themes within the data and the “level” at which these themes are to be identified. The themes within the data are identified in a theoretical/deductive/top-down way. Hartley and Morphew (2008), in their analysis of prospectuses in America, identified six thematic areas as forming the basis of their analysis, which led into a more theoretical approach. The data could be identified at a semantic level because the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the content of the prospectuses. The analysis does not look for anything beyond what the universities have included in their prospectuses. These themes capture what is important about the data in relation to the research questions.

The six phases of analysis established by Braun and Clarke (2006) were adopted for the data analysis. First, there was familiarisation and immersion with the data, by reading the prospectuses over and over again to gain a better understanding of how UK universities are communicating with prospective students. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) noted that “immersion usually involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data, and reading the data in an active way – searching for meanings, patterns and so on”. Second, the initial codes were generated. Since the themes are more “theory-driven”, the coding was approached with Hartley and Morphew's (2008) six thematic areas in mind, which were considered as parent nodes in NVivo during the analysis.

Third, there was a search for themes (child nodes) that related to the main theme (parent nodes) – for example, identifying references to the campus and city as location. Fourth, the themes (child nodes) were reviewed and refined as it became more evident that some of these themes were closely related and some were dormant (dormant themes were

subsequently removed). Co-curricular opportunities were not considered as a suitable parent code, taking into consideration other child nodes during the analysis; it was therefore renamed student experiences. Admissions and financial aid were removed as these were considered irrelevant in a UK university prospectus but replaced with bursaries and financial assistance.

Fifth, the refined child nodes were considered satisfactory and renamed. After detailed analysis, five parent nodes emerged (from 35 child nodes). Even though the analysis started with the Hartley and Morphew's (2008) themes as a theoretical background, a different set of thematic areas emerged from the analysis of UK universities' prospectus. They are the location, the course, student experience, credibility and career progression. A detailed description and examples is provided in Table I.

Results

The creative design of the prospectuses varied considerably in size and shape. The prospectuses were, overall, colourfully designed with various images of staff and students in different locations. There were no two similar designs. Hardcopies sent through the post were packaged in customised envelopes and printed on quality paper, suggesting that the universities were seeking to convey from the outset an impression of uniqueness and prestige. Printing on premium-quality paper and strategic positioning of the marketing communication materials have been known to boost consumer attitudes towards an advertisement and the brand, and to increase the intention to patronise (Hampel *et al.*, 2012).

In some cases, the key messages were shown right from the front cover as tag lines, which were also used as hashtags in the university's social media campaigns. For example, looking at the four universities in Birmingham City, they all had different tag lines: Aston University – Yours for taking; Birmingham City University – Ambitions at heart; Newman University – Expect to achieve; and University of Birmingham – Shape your future here; while in Southampton, it is about the world: Southampton Solent University – We change worlds and University of Southampton – Discover a new world.

The key marketing messages in UK universities' prospectuses are the location of the University, range of course on offer, facilities in place to enhance student experiences, Universities highlight of their credibility and reputation and effort towards students' career progression. Figure 1 showed the 5 main themes and 35 sub-themes. Descriptions and examples are presented in Table I.

The city

The location of a university is an important factor for all stakeholders, and, therefore, universities often present their institutional context in two ways: the city and the campus. For example, Birmingham – which has three universities – has to use the identity of the city to market its universities, yet each campus offers a unique opportunity for reaching out to prospective students. With different universities in many parts of the country, universities often frame their location to appeal to prospective students, especially those who wish to leave home and explore life in other parts of the country. Awesome night life, stunning coastal scenery, tranquil parks, great shopping and the best of modern city living are all marketing messages designed to appeal to prospective students. Vibrant and multi-diversified cities with interesting activities are often presented, while some universities also associate themselves with the football and rugby teams in their city. In addition, the culture and population of the city is presented in a way that indicates a close-knit community where everyone is supported. They claim the city provides a relaxed and student-friendly environment to study and live, and that it has been consistently rated as one of the best places to live in the UK. Students are promised safety and are invited to an attractive and historic city, an ideal place to build their future.

Table I.
Key themes, description and examples

Main theme	Sub-theme	Description and examples
The city	1. The location	<p>A description of the city where the university is located. This marketing strategy can often be shared by more than one university</p> <p>"With the vibrant city of Brighton only minutes away from the magnificent South Downs National Park on your doorstep, our beautiful campus location offers you the perfect recipe for a fantastic student lifestyle"</p> <p>"And from the moment you arrive at UCLan you'll be impressed, not just with our campus facilities, but with our great location in the heart of Lancashire, close to the major cities of Manchester and Liverpool" (University of Central Lancashire)</p> <p>"In the World Heritage City of Bath you can discover its beautiful stone buildings and the natural hot springs which gave the city its name" (University of Bath)</p>
	2. The campus	<p>Unlike the location, the campus appeal is different for each university. There are efforts to make the university stand out among other universities sharing the same location. This includes the aesthetics and the natural settings of the campus</p> <p>"We're lucky to have such a beautiful place to call home – our stunning single-site campus is the University's most glorious asset, measuring 440 acres in total (equivalent to 7,040 tennis courts or 250 football pitches)" (Loughborough University)</p> <p>Unique, best-of-both-worlds location, and a safe, leafy campus less than 40 minutes by train from central London and just seven miles from Heathrow airport" (Royal Holloway, University of London)</p>
	3. Social activities	<p>These are social activities taking place in the city that can interest students. Like the location, universities within the same city can use things to appeal to prospective students</p> <p>"As for the nightlife, you're spoilt for choice. There are restaurants and bars to suit every taste and pocket. Theatre and music venue featuring latest acts; colourful festivals, and plenty of late-night clubs to choose from" (University of Central Lancashire)</p> <p>"There's plenty of places to let your hair down in Bournemouth, day or night. There's loads of choices when it comes to pubs, bars, clubs, music venues and theatres. Whatever cuisine you're into, you'll find somewhere serving it" (Bournemouth University)</p>
	4. Sport activities	<p>This refers to the sporting heritage within the city that universities align their marketing campaign with. If a city is known for sports, the university may want to use that association to attract prospective students</p> <p>"Liverpool is sport mad. Home to two of the Premiership's biggest football teams, both Liverpool and Everton Football Clubs are a mile or so from the city centre" (University of Liverpool)</p>
	5. Culture and population	<p>"Home to two of the world's most famous football clubs – Manchester United and Manchester City" (University of Manchester)</p> <p>This highlights the vibrant and multi-diversified nature of the city that can attract prospective students. The universities present themselves to be in a city that has interesting culture, historical sights, and people who are happy to welcome students</p> <p>"With a wealth of cultural attractions, impressive architecture, fantastic shopping and a year-round programme of world-class events, it is easy to understand why Glasgow is firmly established as one of Europe's most exciting destinations" (University of Glasgow)</p> <p>"Bursting with culture, cuisine, architecture, entertainment and history – from winding arcades to huge retail centres – Cardiff was ranked the third best capital city in Europe, for quality of life" (Cardiff University)</p>
	6. Amenities and facilities	<p>These are the amenities available to enhance the experiences of the students. This includes banks, retail stores and hospitals. Universities also inform students about discounts and offers available for them in the city</p> <p>"Cardiff is one of the UK's best shopping destinations with the St. David's retail centre standing alongside pedestrianised shopping streets, indoor and outdoor markets and a quirky network of Victorian and Edwardian shopping arcades" (Cardiff University)</p>

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Main theme	Sub-theme	Description and examples
The course		<p>"You can enjoy great student discounts with an NUS card! Grab uni essentials and more on a city shopping spree at the Waitfrun and Mander Shopping Centres" (University of Wolverhampton)</p> <p>Universities provide the students with many options to convince them that they have something for them. It is anticipated that prospective students will find something they like from the huge list of courses on offer. This also includes various joint honours</p> <p>"Over 100 courses at degree preparation and undergraduate level in art, design, fashion, communication and performing arts" (The University of Arts London)</p> <p>"Tailor your study to your own interests and career aspirations by choosing optional modules" (Birmingham City University)</p> <p>"Teaching Gaelic course since the 18th Century" (University of Aberdeen)</p> <p>These are the effort being put into creating the courses, working with industry partners to develop courses that students will find relevant for their career</p> <p>"Partnered with leading national and international employers to develop our courses" (De Montfort University)</p> <p>"We make constant changes to our courses to meet the demands of employers in a dynamic and fast-paced world" (Edinburgh Napier University)</p> <p>The qualifications and expertise of teaching staff at the university. They are inspirational, and responsible for teaching the range of courses on offer</p> <p>"We prioritise investment in academic staff post so that the staff:student ratio is consistently high" (Coventry University)</p> <p>"Our lecturers are rated among the most enthusiastic and interesting in the country" (Anglia Ruskin University)</p> <p>"UK's only University where 100% of teaching staff are fellows of the Higher Education Academy" (University of Huddersfield)</p> <p>To highlight how current the courses are. The research input into the development of the course is acknowledged, often by recognising the research activities at the university</p> <p>"A leading teaching and research institution offering courses informed by current faculty research" (University of Sussex)</p> <p>"Department reflect the world of work and its research is at the cutting edge of practice" (Birkbeck, University of London)</p> <p>These are the efforts made to present a credible course that has been accredited. Student can feel that their course is relevant and will be recognised when they graduate</p> <p>"We have over 70 professional accreditations of our courses" (University of Huddersfield)</p> <p>"Many of our courses come with relevant industry accreditation and we have partnerships with world-leading Companies" (University of Bedfordshire)</p>
	7. Range of courses on offer	<p>Universities cite their ranking and results from the survey as evidence of how satisfied students are</p> <p>"Top in the North West for Student Satisfaction" (Edge Hill University)</p> <p>"University of the year for student experience" (Coventry University)</p> <p>Students are used as content creators. Quotes from student vlogs and blogposts are shared as a form of word of mouth. Students are used to convey their messages to prospective students about their experiences at university</p> <p>"Everyone is so friendly, and college puts on loads of activities to get you meeting new people" (University of Oxford)</p> <p>"Jack the dog is the star of the ALS team. He is super cute and loves a cuddle, which really helps when you need additional support or just want to unwind during stressful periods" (Bournemouth University)</p>
	8. Partners on courses	
	9. Teaching staff	
	10. Research input into course development	
	11. Accreditation by professional bodies	
	12. National Student Survey	
	13. Students' shared experiences	

Table I.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Description and examples
	14. Accommodation	As some students will be leaving home for the first time, universities flaunt their investment in students' accommodation. Prospective students are assured of guaranteed accommodation "Investment of £500 m in new student accommodation and state-of-the-art facilities on our beautiful campus" (University of York) "There are over 1,000 rooms on campus and lots of them are en-suite" (University of Worcester) These are investments in sporting facilities for the students, to enhance their experience at the university. This can sometimes be included as part of the societies under the Student's Union "Major recent investment of over £30 million means we have quality indoor and outdoor sports facilities" (Edge Hill University) "The University has invested over £14 million in the redevelopment of our sports facilities" (University of St Andrews) These are investments in libraries, lectures, and information technology. Universities provide information about these resources, which will help the students in their learning "We've opened a seven-storey library in Luton featuring state-of-the-art IT equipment and group and quiet study areas" (University of Bedfordshire) "We've invested hundreds of millions of pounds in high-tech learning environments, giving our students unique learning experiences in world-class facilities" (Bradford University)
	15. Sporting facilities	Financial support made available for students from different backgrounds and with different financial needs "We offer generous financial support to students on low income" (Birkbeck, University of London) "We also offer financial support, bursaries and scholarships to students, so that anyone with the talent and ambition can benefit from a Leeds education, regardless of background" (University of Leeds)
	16. Learning resources	For those who may need to take care of the children while attending university, the availability of nurseries on campus is also made known to prospective students "Queen's offers a range of childcare support, including full-time daycare, out-of-school care and a summer activity scheme" (Queen's University)
	17. Bursaries and financial assistance	The Oaks Nursery is run by Kent Union offering a limited number of student discounted places each year" (University of Kent) These are for those with religious beliefs who require a place of worship. Universities highlight that they are open to everyone, and worship centres are available to meet those needs "We offer an interdenominational University Chapel, an Islamic Centre with facilities for Muslim worship, and Jewish kosher rooms" (Keele University)
	18. Nursery for mothers	"Our chaplains and other religious representatives serve students and staff across 12 faiths and denominations" (Queen's University)
	19. Religious worship centre	Universities take pride in the union of their students, an avenue to provide support for prospective students "180 student societies – University of Sussex Right at the very heart of our award-winning student experience sits Loughborough Students' Union (LSU). Owned and run entirely by our students" (Loughborough University)
	20. Student Union and Societies	Universities also provide transportation for their students "Free Bus travel across campus. £2 for a bus from Campus to Town/ the station or a 15 min walk – free and good exercise" (Loughborough University)
	21. Transportation	"A free University bus service operates Mondays to Fridays during term time, linking all four campuses" (Kingston University)

(continued)

Main theme	Sub-theme	Description and examples
Credibility	22. Student support	These are the services available to support the students while at university. This includes support for international students, students with health needs and for LGBT. This is a form of assurance that the university is interested in the wellbeing of their students "We have support programmes in place for care leavers, estranged students, mature students, students with caring responsibilities, forces veterans, asylum seekers and students with a disability or additional learning needs" (Cardiff University) "Staff at the Disability Service welcome the opportunity to discuss with disabled applicants how to get the most out of their experience at Strathclyde" (University of Strathclyde)
	23. Local ranking	These are rankings that compare the university with others in the UK "Top 5 UK university for research quality," (Cardiff University)
	24. Global ranking	"Lincoln rates in the top 10 nationally for both teaching quality and student experience" (University of Lincoln) These are rankings that compare the university with others around the world "Ranked in World's Top 1%" (University of Aberdeen)
	25. Other rankings	"We're consistently ranked one of the top 50 universities in the world" (University of Edinburgh) As universities use different types of rankings to appeals to prospective students, these are rankings outside the local and global ranking of universities. They are different from the research or student experience ranking "8th most sustainable campus in the World" (Bradford University)
	26. Alumni	"Safest university in England and Wales" (Royal Agricultural University) Universities take pride in their alumni as a sign of credibility and reputation. They highlight how successful their alumni are, an indication that prospective students will be in such company "When you complete a degree at Oxford, you will join a global community of more than 250,000 graduates" (University of Oxford)
27. The global reach		"More than 10 of our alumni and staff have been recognised with Nobel Prizes" (University of Birmingham) Universities highlight the number of international students they have, number of languages spoken, and number of staff and students from overseas countries. This is an indication of how global they have become "We will introduce students to people from every corner of the planet" (University of Essex) "35,000 individuals, 177 countries and 4 continents" (Anglia Ruskin University)
	28. History and tradition	"40% of our academic staff are from overseas and we have students representing 157 nationalities" (University of Kent) Universities take pride in their long history and heritage, indicating years they were founded, which feeds their reputation as a well-established institution "4th oldest English-speaking university in the world" (University of Glasgow)
29. University groups		"Queen's is the ninth oldest university in the UK" (Queen's University) Universities disclose their membership of a university group, which is often an indication of being in a special group with the intention of appealing to prospective students "Member of the prestigious Russell Group of research-intensive universities" (University of Exeter)
		"Founding member of the Russell Group" (University of Southampton)

(continued)

Table I.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Description and examples
Career progression	30. Prize and award	<p>"We are a Russell Group university and one of the world's premier institutions for inspirational and life-changing research" (University of York)</p> <p>Universities also showcase the awards and prize they have received, flaunting their accolades and achievements as evidence of their credibility</p>
	31. Graduate employment record	<p>"The University has received two prestigious Queen's awards" (University of Huddersfield)</p> <p>"The university has won Queen's Anniversary prizes for further and higher education on six occasions" (Queen's University)</p> <p>Universities use their results from the Destinations of Leavers from HE (DLHE) survey as an indication of career profession for their graduates</p> <p>"96% of graduates enter directly into work, further study or training within 6 months" (University of Aberdeen)</p> <p>"2nd in the UK for graduate employability. 96% of our class of 2015 were in work or further study after six months after graduating" (University of Wolverhampton)</p>
	32. Industry connections	<p>Universities also highlight their industry connection for a long-term partnership and not just for an internship. It is a partnership that can feed into their course design, provide jobs for their graduates and ensure students are in the midst of a thriving community</p> <p>"Edinburgh is a hub for lots of employers, and with links to industry, studying here means you can put yourself in prime position for getting a job both while you study and once you graduate" (Edinburg Napier University)</p> <p>"Our Manchester Institute of Biotechnology is one of Europe's leading industry interfaced institutes, with world-leading capabilities in chemicals synthesis and manufacture" (University of Manchester)</p>
	33. Opportunity for placement	<p>To improve their students' career progression, prospective students are informed of opportunities for industry placement – at least as a form of experience for their CV</p> <p>"Previous successful placements have been with globally recognised brands, giving real-world, relevant experience in your chosen sector" (University of Bath)</p> <p>"All our programmes offer placements – from summer internships to full years in industry. You'll gain invaluable skills and insight from these real-world experiences, enhancing your employability and confidence" (Bradford University)</p> <p>Universities are also highlighting their employability and career service to improve their students' career progression. This is an indication that there are efforts put in place to support them. This can also include trainings and workshop</p> <p>"Our Career and Employability Services can help you develop your employability skills and help you find local part-time work during your studies" (Bradford University)</p> <p>"The Careers and Employability Team at the University attach the utmost importance to securing excellent employment prospects for our graduates" (University of Chester)</p> <p>Universities show off their successful alumni to appeal to prospective students that they are on the path to success. If these alumni can pass through this university and succeed, then they can too. Alumni comments and quotes are also presented to emphasise the point</p> <p>"The School maintains a Kent Arts Network to allow students to network with alumni" (University of Kent)</p> <p>"From politicians and journalists to scientists and innovators – many well-known faces have been through Cardiff's corridors" (Cardiff University)</p>
	34. Employability and career services	
	35. Successful alumni	

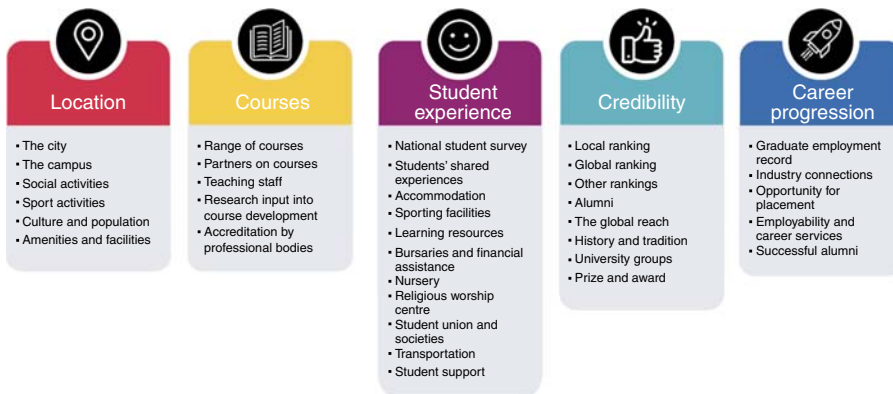


Figure 1.
Key themes and examples

The courses

More than half of a typical UK university prospectus contains the entire range of courses on offer. The contents in this section are often framed and presented in a way that makes the courses appealing. The unique features of the courses offered by the university are usually presented, highlighting the effort they have made to make their courses different from other university courses. This is designed to appeal to those students who are looking for something unique and different. In addition, the teaching and research staff responsible for these courses are showcased in the prospectus. Universities take great pleasure in presenting their research activities to prospective students; they profess that their teaching staff are often active researchers, developing new ideas and publishing new research findings, and that they offer research-led teaching. Clearly, the idea here is to get the students thinking about the fact that researchers involved in ground-breaking work will be teaching them.

Student experience

The huge investment in facilities to enhance the students' experiences are also flaunted in the prospectus, often showing students enjoying the sporting facilities or relaxing in the halls of residence. Universities are spending a lot of money on their facilities to help set themselves apart from their competitors, and to attract prospective students to come and explore the facilities that the university provides. Due to the fact that every student will have different needs and be looking for universities that meet those needs, extra support is provided for students with a disability, a medical condition or other specific needs. This is also conveyed through the prospectuses in anticipation of attracting prospective students with special needs. Furthermore, as most universities charge similar tuition fees, this is not considered an appealing marketing message; however, the availability of bursaries is often presented. These are strategies that some students may find appealing, especially students who might consider a particular university due to the extra financial support they will receive. Universities are also making offers to meet the diverse demands of their students, providing a nursery for parents who are studying, worship centres for religious students, and extra support such as discounted public transport within the city and free shuttle buses between campuses. Even though these offers might not be taken up by all students, there will always be individuals who will be interested.

Credibility

The University of Edinburgh welcomes prospective students to a university that has been influencing the world since 1583. Other universities, especially post-1992 universities, adopt

a different approach to building their reputation by highlighting their brand evolution. Birmingham City University claims to have been educating professionals for over 170 years as they were established in 1843; Manchester Metropolitan University describes themselves as a leading modern university with a history of higher education since 1824, which was when Manchester Mechanics Institution was founded. This may make them appear older than the University of Liverpool, which simply writes: Est. 1881. In addition to showcasing their reputation, universities flaunt their rankings, often considered as evidence of external validation. The global reach of these universities is also presented as a selling point to prospective students, and universities take pride in the diversity of their student body, especially regarding the number of international students. Highlighting the fact that thousands of students from more than 100 countries have chosen to study at their university conveys the idea that all these international students cannot be wrong, and that there is something special on offer, and perhaps also a sense of community.

Career progression

It must be acknowledged that for various reasons, securing a job after graduation is a key reason for attending university. Students do not want to pay a large amount of school fees and not secure their future. Post-1992 universities such as Cardiff Metropolitan and Manchester Metropolitan University often present the idea that students will be prepared with the necessary practical skills to enter the work place, while other universities convey the idea of learning – for example, Liverpool University frames its mission as being “for advancement of learning and ennoblement of life, inspiring people to learn and achieve”. Universities present their commitment to the prospects of their students. The idea that their students are better placed to gain a job after graduation is often presented in marketing communication, backed up by facts and figures. Universities claim that a percentage of their recent graduates have found full-time employment or continued to further study within six months, comparing this to other top reputable universities.

Discussion

The competition within the higher education sector is fierce and the universities need to reach out to prospective students and their parents through convincing and appealing marketing communications. The results indicate that the messages in the prospectuses are framed in an appealing way, filled with facts and figures, images of beautiful buildings and smiling students, and testimonials about facilities and experiences.

Universities are making conscious creative efforts to reach out to their prospective students. The framing theory was considered relevant as they are able to control and manipulate the content of their prospectus. The result of the analysis presented evidence of the two options of framing – provided by Druckman (2001) and Scheufele and Iyengar (2014) – emphasis and equivalence.

While describing emphasis framing effect, Druckman (2001) highlighted the possibilities of “emphasising a subset of potentially relevant considerations, a speaker can lead individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (p. 230). This is evident by universities presenting information about their nursery facilities for those who may think having children can prevent them from attending university, and free shuttle transportation for those who might see transportation as an additional cost, or the availability of religious worship centres for those who may require a place for their religious duties. Though this may not be relevant for all the students, some prospective students will find this relevant when constructing their opinion about the university to attend.

The other type of framing is the equivalency framing effect (Druckman, 2001), which examines how “the use of different, but logically equivalent, words or phrases causes individuals to alter their preferences” (p. 228). Post-1992 universities want to frame their marketing message

to illustrate their long history and tradition, yet instead of presenting the fact that they became a university in 1992, they refer to their brand evolution. The University of St Andrews can simply state that they were founded in 1413; however, Birmingham City University had to claim they were established in 1843 because they have been educating professionals since then, and Manchester Metropolitan University claimed 1824, which was when Manchester Mechanics Institution was founded. Likewise, some other universities will want to frame their credibility by using rankings, for example, “TOP new university (post-1992) in the North West for educating health professionals”. This is an effort to find a niche for themselves by excluding many universities founded before 1992 and universities outside of the north west. The university may not be lying or misleading, it could be a fact and it may not be surprising if they are the only university on that list. This is a creative use of the equivalency framing effect where factual and stylistic elements are presented to influence prospective students looking for a university with a long history and heritage, and one that has a good ranking.

Although six thematic areas found by Hartley and Morphey’s (2008) analysis of prospectuses in America formed the basis of our analysis, we found a close relationship between what was presented by US and UK universities in terms of Institutional Context/Campus Features and Academics/Faculty. There were, however, differences, in particular with regards to admissions and financial aid. Tuition fees are no longer considered a competitive advantage for UK universities as they are now charging GBP9000 and consequently not advertising offers of cheaper tuition fees, as Levy (2013) reported. Instead, bursaries, which reduce the institutions’ fees, are offered. In addition, co-curricular opportunities, as presented in US universities, were defined as student experiences by UK universities, which includes student activities and residence life. In addition, the idea of a global university with international students from different parts of the world studying in the UK was highlighted, as universities in the UK take great pride in the number of countries represented on their campuses. This study moved beyond the list of Hartley and Morphey’s (2008) to identify unique themes that are relevant to UK universities and their marketing strategies.

The vast range of degree courses and institutions available to students in the UK now makes the decision-making process rather complex (Price *et al.*, 2003), which suggests that universities have to make relevant information readily available for prospective students as they make their choice. This relates closely to the student who sued her university after she claimed it left her with nothing more than a “Mickey Mouse” degree (Polianskaya, 2018).

A university’s website, unlike its prospectus, is not specifically made for providing information to prospective students, and some students may not be able to attend an open-day. This highlights the importance of the prospectus in providing information about the university, including the social experiences and facilities available to the students. Winter and Chapleo (2017) noted that students are more likely to read the prospectus in preparation for an open-day visit and they come with a set of expectations for how a university should look, which includes beautiful buildings and environment. This justifies the institutional and campus features presented by the universities.

Investment in facilities and campus development is also considered an advertising appeal presented to prospective students. Potential students are encouraged to come and explore the beautiful campuses, impressive range of teaching and learning resources, specialist equipment and facilities that enable students to learn, as well as other state-of-the-art facilities. However, taking pride in the location of the university might have to be shared with others. Location has been found to have an impact on the brand personality of a university (Dholakia and Acciaro, 2014; Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017). It is therefore left for universities in same cities to see how best they use the city to enhance their brand and appeal for prospective students, perhaps in an international market. Promoting the city and their association with the city could appeal to international students who have never been to the UK before and would like to find a city where they can fit in.

Images are predominantly used throughout the prospectus, and the implications of the creative decision about which image to use are considered important here. Students want to see themselves in the university, as reflected from the images in the prospectus, which is a form of “compatibility” – the ability of a university to provide a “sense of belonging” (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012, p. 480). Kittle and Ciba (2001) identified that the appropriate use of images can make a student consider the university a place where they feel welcome. Seeing a vibrant and diversified community may make them want to join university life.

Conveying this inclusivity can be challenging, especially for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT), black and minority ethnic and less-abled students. Mogaji and Farinloye (2015) explored LGBT-identified students in universities’ marketing communications, suggesting the need for gay iconography such as the rainbow, freedom rings and the pink triangle. Read *et al.* (2003) also examined imagery and textual information provided by universities and concluded that young middle-class white males are the most represented within an institutional prospectus.

A way of indicating this inclusivity is to allow students to share their experience at the university. Often the university prospectus publishes an image of a student, with the student’s name and degree and quotes about their experience. The selection of these students should be thoughtfully considered so as not to convey a different meaning, as Mogaji (2014) found that UK universities still convey a subtle message about the state of racial and gender equality in academia. This is summed up by findings of Winter and Chapleo (2017) that a key reason for choosing one university above another is the feeling of belonging it engenders, suggesting that for university managers graphically presenting these images without depicting individuals in a stereotypical manner is important.

Winter and Chapleo (2017) found that students were not interested in the research abilities of the staff but in how well they could engage. Their teaching reputation was considered more important for students than their research profiles, suggesting that not all these themes may be relevant. The need to tone down the emphasis on research abilities and output, which might be more applicable for a postgraduate prospectus, is presented. Perhaps, universities’ achievements on the Teaching Excellence Framework may be more suitable for undergraduate studies and the Research Excellence Framework for postgraduate studies.

Even though the Russell Group takes pride in their external validations and local and international rankings, new universities are also able to find a niche for themselves where they can flaunt their own unique records, such as student experiences ranking at a regional level even though they might not be doing great on a national level. This appears to have been fuelled by the global context of higher education, which is considered to be a “fast-moving, fast-changing and uneven environment, criss-crossed by shifting relations of collaboration, competition and hierarchy” (Marginson, 2006, p. 131).

Acknowledging that the main audience for the prospectus is 18–24 year olds (Winter and Thompson-Whiteside, 2017), there is nonetheless a growing number of mature students (Melchiorre and Johnson, 2017). Accordingly, there is a need for universities to mind the textual presentation of their prospectuses and provide information that caters for this wider audience.

Advertising appeals are considered as unique selling points for UK universities; however, it should be noted that prospectuses are a form of advertisement and sometimes advertisements can be misleading, even though prospective students might not want to believe their prospectus is misleading them. This suggests the need for universities to realise that they can be held responsible for the promises presented in their marketing material. Bradley (2013) observed some misleading data-based marketing claims in prospectuses. It is important to make sure the perception the students have from the prospectus concurs with what they experience on campus. This includes effort towards a reflection of diversity, as they want to feel a part of the university.

The ASA has upheld complaints about assertions made by six universities (Bothwell, 2017), which has managerial implications. University managers need to ensure that claims made in the prospectus are truthful and not misleading and, when appropriate, are backed by evidence, because students are likely to take these claims seriously as they decide which university to attend. If found misleading, these assertions can have a negative impact on the university's brand.

Conclusion

The marketisation of higher education, lifting the cap on university tuition fees and numbers of students, has actually led to increasing emphasis on universities to market themselves to prospective students (Bradley, 2013; Hemsley-Brown, 2011; Molesworth *et al.*, 2009). There is competition among all institutions – not just the very best (Levy, 2013) – and they are adopting different ways to reach out to the prospective students. One way is through the prospectus.

This study provides substantial contribution to the marketing of higher education in the UK. First, the study examines current marketing communication practices by UK higher education institutions via university prospectuses, by investigating a significantly larger sample than any other previous research in this field. The empirical evidence provided in this paper is rich and in-depth due to the size and age of the sample. When compared to social media and websites, university prospectuses have been overlooked by many researchers (Rutter *et al.*, 2017). This study sheds light on future marketing communication strategies in terms of how best to differentiate one university from another by demonstrating the types of appeals that are being predominantly used.

Second, the study offers a detailed category of key marketing messages with sub-themes, descriptions, and examples, which can be used for further studies in marketing higher education in the UK and beyond. These themes illustrate the advertising messages that universities are sending out to prospective students and their parents. Their rankings and reputation are often flaunted, along with their safe, student-friendly cities with a vibrant and fun culture, or the beautiful countryside campuses, just minutes from a world-class city. The investment in world-class facilities is showcased through colourful, glossy prospectuses, and this indicates a conscious effort by universities to set themselves apart from the competition and put themselves at the forefront of student recruitment.

Third, this study provides insights for the higher educational institutions to enhance their future marketing communications strategies in terms of effectively differentiating one university to another by highlighting the predominantly used appeals among 121 prospectuses and the need for adopting more consistent approach between the clearing period and the non-clearing period in terms of designing the prospectuses.

Fourth, the study offers theoretical contribution by extending the use of framing effect in advertising and marketing communications. This theory was developed for political communication; however, this study has presented evidence of how universities can creatively frame their message to appeal to prospective students. This includes the way the universities have described their history and heritage, used rankings to highlight credibility, and present facilities to enhance student experiences.

In addition, as Mogaji (2016b) suggested, universities need to adopt more consistent and broader view on advertising strategies throughout the year. As shown above, our findings showed that there are differences between advertising strategies adopted during clearing and during the usual recruitment period. This is due to the fact that, during the usual recruitment period, there seems no urgency to fill clearing and adjustment slots. Therefore, we recommend that the universities need to take into account consistency and redesign the prospectuses to reflect clearing period in August.

Selecting a university is considered a highly involved decision and students are expected to make every possible effort to get the right information before making any commitment.

Investments of this magnitude require sourcing impartial information from other locations, such as websites, word of mouth, university statistics (to compare official course data from universities and colleges), campus visits and university comparison websites.

Reaching out to prospective students using city appeal can be more challenging for universities in the same city trying to compete with a more established and high-ranking university, such as Manchester (University of Manchester vs Manchester Metropolitan) and Oxford (University of Oxford vs Oxford Brookes University), as well as Southampton (University of Southampton vs Southampton Solent University); this is further reflected in Leeds Beckett University changing their name, removing “Metropolitan” and replacing it with “Beckett” and changing their logo (Mogaji, 2018). There is need to understand other ways to attract students not just to the city itself, but to the university’s campus. They may need to identify a unique selling point to attract students.

As the UK is considered a diversified country, universities can also tap into this idea in order to reach out to prospective students. Some universities provide a place of worship to meet the religious needs of students, provide a nursery for childcare, and cater for the sexual orientation of students, as observed by Mogaji and Farinloye (2015). Gays and lesbians are often ignored, despite the fact that six universities score full marks in a guide to gay-friendly universities by Stonewall, a charity that lobbies for the lesbian, gay and bisexual community (Gil, 2014). This offers an opportunity to fill a niche.

The limitations of this study lie in the fact that the analysis was conducted with print format marketing communications only. Therefore, websites and social media platforms could be considered in further research. Future research can also be expanded to include wider international and cross-cultural studies and importantly explore the students’ perception of these marketing messages, to understand if students are taking note of these messages and how important they consider them.

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