27th EISIC - 2024

Influence of Corporate Communication on Corporate Reputation of UK Cobranded HEIs through Student-HEI Identification

Dr Khadija Rauf
University of Bedfordshire, UK
Khadija.Rauf@beds.ac.uk

Mohammad Waqar Abbasi
University of West London, UK
Waqar.Abbasi@uwl.ac.uk

Abstract

Purpose: Cobranding has gained momentum in the education sector, creating new challenges and opportunities for HEIs. This study explores the intricate relationship between corporate communication, student-HEI identification, and corporate reputation in the context of UK cobranded higher education institutions (HEIs) where private HEI is a service provider and public HEI is a course developer and an awarding body.

Methodology: The research setting for this study is the UK with focus on the UK private HEIs. Mixed methods have been employed with a post-positivist philosophy. Data has been collected from three private HEIs with campuses in London, Luton and Birmingham. Participants are students studying cobranded educational programme in the private HEIs. The qualitative and quantitative data have been gathered through two phases named Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Findings: The findings reveal that effective corporate communication plays a pivotal role in fostering student-HEI identification. Specifically, positive communication from lecturers and staff significantly contributes to students' identification with both institutions. Students form strong affiliations not only with the institution they physically attend but also with the partner university responsible for course design. Student-HEI identification directly correlates with corporate reputation. HEIs can enhance their reputational standing, fostering identification among students, by tailored communication and alignment with students' self-definitional needs.

Research Implications: Theoretical contributions include empirical evidence supporting the direct impact of corporate communication on student HEI identification and its subsequent influence on corporate reputation. This research bridges a critical gap by extending prior theories into the realm of local academic partnerships, shedding light on the dynamics of student identification in cobranded HEIs. Practically, the study provides valuable insights for academic partnership managers, emphasising the significance of communication and lecturer-student relationships.

Originality and Value: This study is novel in terms of examining the impact of corporate communication on student identification with cobranded HEIs in the UK and in assessing the influence of student-HEI identification on corporate reputation of both HEIs involved in the partnership. The study adds a novel perspective to the literature, offering practical guidelines for HEIs navigating the complexities of cobranding in higher education.

Keywords: Corporate Reputation, Corporate Communication, Cobranded HEIs, Academic Partnerships, Student-HEI Identification

1. Introduction

Marketers use cobranding to transfer positive associations of the partner brand to the newly formed co-brand. It is considered a popular technique to introduce new consumer products (Washburn et al., 2000a), to increase brand awareness, to gain competitive advantage for both partners. For over 20 years, universities across UK, US and Europe have been increasingly forming alliances or partnerships with foreign institutions. Success in transnational academic partnerships paved the way for UK universities to start considering local academic partnerships. Since 2010, policies of UK higher education have changed, focusing on promoting competition, widening access to higher education and student choice. This change allowed private providers (alternative HEIs) to enter the market. Since 2011, there has been a remarkable growth in the number of private HEIs (Mariampillai, 2019) evident from the total number of private HEIs in 2019 being 813 (Hunt and Boliver, 2019) compared to 674 recorded in 2011/12 (Hughes et al., 2013) and 732 in 2014 (Shury et al., 2016). These private HEI offers degree courses in partnership with private HEIs in the UK.

Consumer attitude towards newly formed and existing partner brands is examined in literature (Ueltschy and Laroche, 2004). Xiao and Lee (2014) found that consumer perception of cobranded product could be enhanced by building consumer-brand identification. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed a theory related to consumer-company identification (CCI) stating that consumers identify with brands to satisfy their self-definitional needs. In addition, they argued that people perceive themselves as members of the organisation even when they have no direct interaction or interpersonal ties with the organisation.

Many researchers have empirically tested this model in the different contexts. For instance, in international partnerships context that country of origin of the institution developing the program content and the degree accreditor strongly influence the consumer's perception of the cobranded programme (Chee et al., 2016). It means that reputation and country of origin are used as proxy to determine student evaluation and identification towards a cobranded programme (Wilkins et al., 2018b). However, there is no evidence of empirical research based on theory (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) in the context of cobranded HEIs at local level such as in the UK. Underpinned by consumer-company identification theory, this study has two main objectives:

1. Examine the impact of corporate communication on student identification with cobranded HEIs.
2. Assess the impact of student-HEI identification on corporate reputation of cobranded HEIs.

To achieve above objectives and due to limited knowledge on subject under investigation, it is important to explore and understand student identification, including its antecedents and consequences in cobranding HE context, through a systematic literature review. Steps of systematic literature review are as follows.

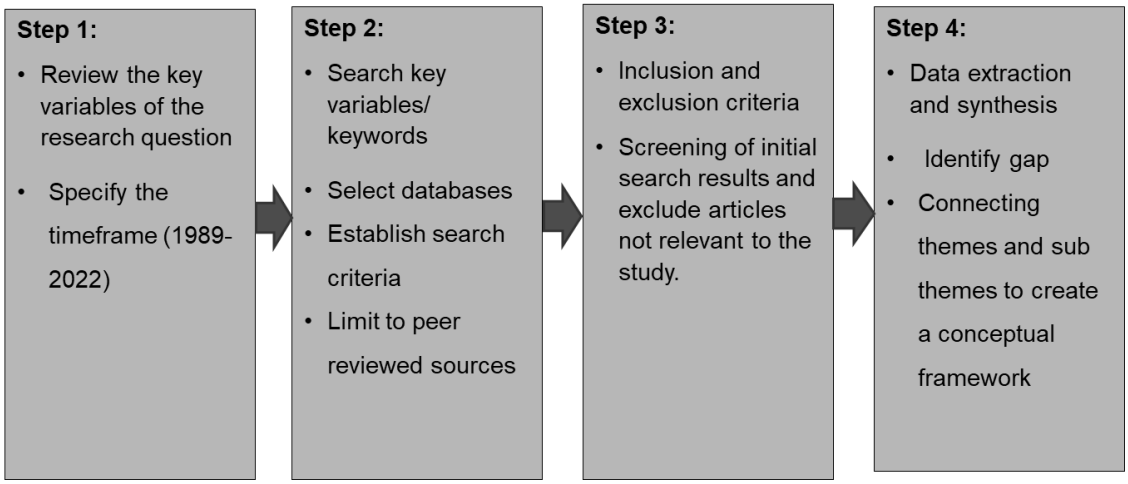

Figure 1: Steps involved in systematic literature review

Due to cobranding nature of study, the study examines student identification with the college and with the partner university simultaneously and individually. In literature, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) CCI framework facilitated to understand how organisations or institutions develop a relationship with consumers or students and convert them into brand ambassadors and advocates.

Based on CCI framework, the study follows the constructs of corporate reputation, corporate communication and student trust and adopted the definition from prior studies to validate in cobranded HE context.

Construct	Definition with Source
Corporate Communication (CCOMMS)	Corporate communication consists of internal and external communication with an ultimate aim of building a positive relationship with stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2008).
Corporate Reputation (CR)	In academic context, corporate reputation is "a subjective and collective recognition, perception, attitude and evaluation of higher education institutions among all key stakeholder groups (internal and external) during a certain period of time based on their past experiences, communication, and potential to satisfy expectations in comparison with the competition" (Šontaitė and Bakanauskas, 2011).

Student Trust (ST)	Trust is defined as a consumer's belief that the organisation delivers quality products, so perceived quality is one determinant of trust (Dzimińska et al., 2018).

Table 1: Constructs and their definitions

Based on the systematic literature review, the following initial conceptual framework was constructed for this study.

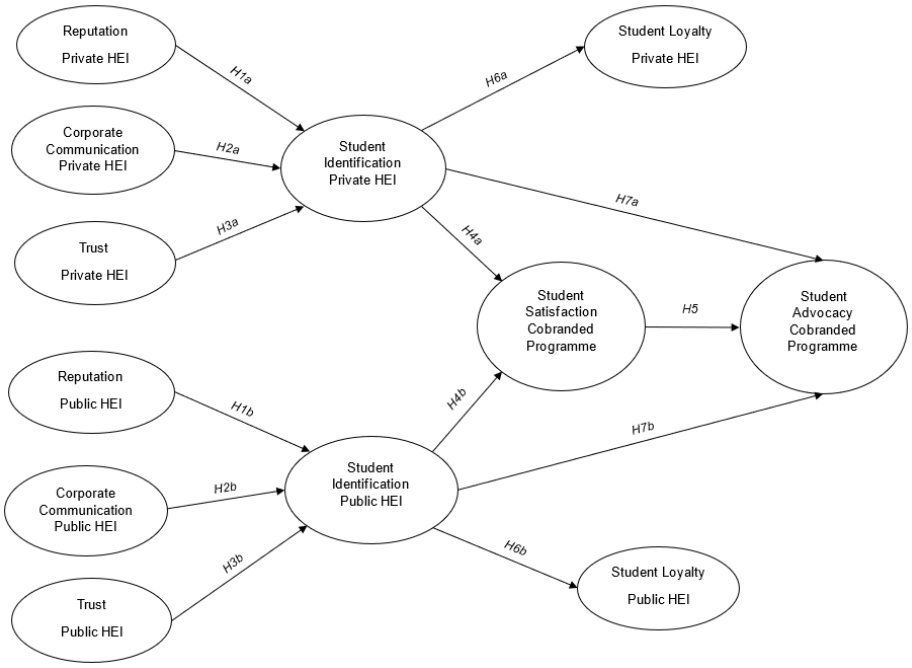

Figure 2: Initial Conceptual Framework

2. Methodology

The study employs post positivism philosophy with a mixed method approach (qualitative and quantitative). According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003), post positivism emphasises the understanding of the perspectives on the research from multiple dimensions rather than simply focusing on single elements in case of positivism. Similarly, triangulation helps to strengthen the construct validity of a study by providing multiple measures to the same phenomena (Yin, 2017). In this study triangulation has been achieved by collecting data in two phases.

Phase 1 is qualitative research consists of two studies. Study 1 involves individual interviews with private HEI students. Study 2 is about confirming the findings of interviews with academic experts.

Phase 2 is based on the quantitative research where a pilot study confirmed the reliability of the questionnaire for the main study to assess the relationship between variables and to meet the study objectives.

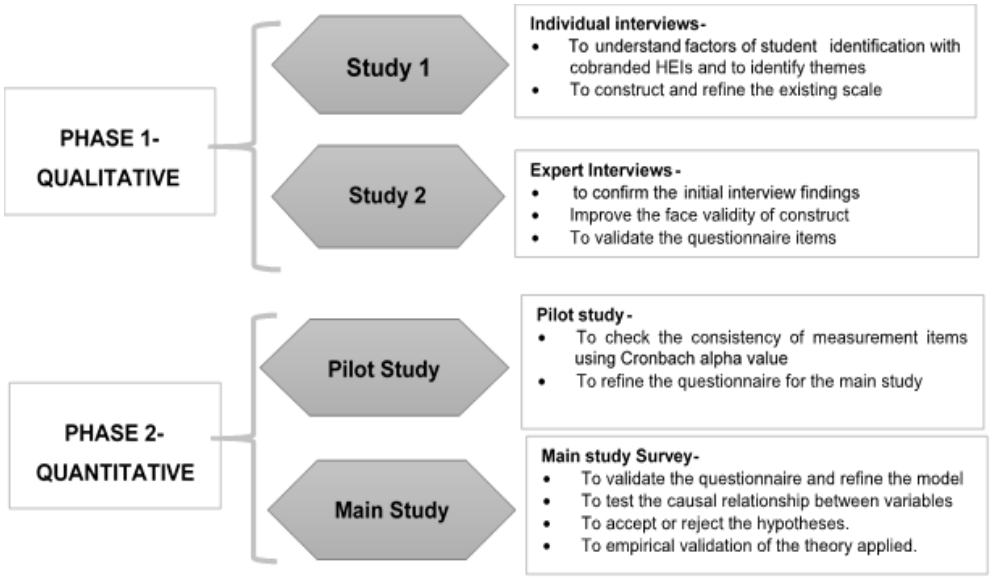

Figure 3: Mixed methods research design

The context of the study is cobranded private HEIs in the UK. Therefore, data for this study has been collected from three different private HEIs that are offering a cobranded degree course in partnership with the UK public universities. The participating private HEIs have campuses in different locations in the UK and therefore, the questionnaire was distributed in Luton, Birmingham and two different locations in London. The unit of analysis is the individual student studying a degree programme e.g. business, health and computer sciences in private HEIs.

2.1. Phase 1 Qualitative Research - Study 1

Individual interviews were conducted based on purposive sampling to inform the researcher about factors that influence student identification, perception, and behaviour in academic partnerships at local level. Saturation was achieved by the tenth interview. This allowed the researchers to better understand the phenomena and generate items to measure student identification for cobranded HEIs. QSR NVivo 12 was employed to analyse the semi-structured interviews and to generate themes and sub-themes.

2.2. Phase 1 Qualitative Research - Study 2

Interview findings were then subjectively validated with five academia experts using scoring criteria (Thornhill et al., 2009, Morgado et al., 2017). Expert interviews helped determine whether items should be retained or discarded using the scoring criteria given below (Hardesty and Bearden, 2004) and to assess whether the measurement items adequately represent the construct domain (Rossiter, 2002).

The final draft questionnaire was designed based on the findings of phase 1 containing new items of the study and from the literature.

2.3. Phase 2 Quantitative Research - Pilot and Main Study

Due to the dual conceptual framework, this phase is a dominant phase of the study. Pilot study supported to refine the questionnaire for the main study. Quantitative data analysis consists of five stages as shown in the image below.

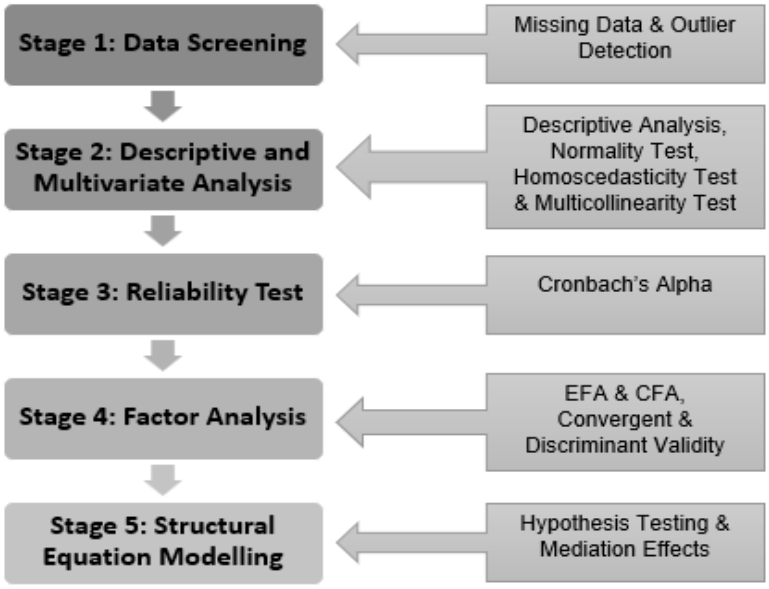

Figure 4: Stages of Phase 2 Main Study with Statistical Techniques

IBM SPSS 26 was employed to delete the outliers, perform the reliability test, descriptive analysis, and exploratory factor analysis to validate the newly developed domain of the latent constructs. Item redundancy was also considered in this analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis was performed in AMOS to validate the measurement items. Last step involved testing the hypothesis using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS 26.

3. Analysis

3.1. Pilot Study Results

The questionnaire was designed in Qualtrics. Based on convenience sample, 100 participants were selected and sent the questionnaire through Qualtrics link. A total of 66 useable responses were collected to analyse the internal consistency. Results are as follows showing the Cronbach alpha value of all the constructs is above 0.8, which is good and well above the threshold value. The number of items were also reduced from 183 to 123 based on participants feedback and to avoid the repetition and fatigue.

3.2. Main Study Results

Total number of questionnaires attempted was 644. 56 students opted out at the beginning leaving the 588 number of questionnaires returned and analysed. The following table provides a summary of the respondent's profile.

Demographic Factor	Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	219	39.67
	Female	333	60.33
	Total	**552**	**100**
Age	20-30	161	28.55
	30-40	216	38.30
	40-50	123	21.80
	Above 50	64	11.35
	Total	**564**	**100**
Ethnic Background	British	58	10.28
	European	334	59.22
	African	46	8.16
	Asian	69	12.23
	Other	57	10.11
	Total	**564**	**100**
Course	Business	424	75.31
	Health Sciences	112	19.89
	Computer Sciences	9	1.6
	Other	18	3.2
	Total	**563**	**100**
Status	Existing	515	92.79
	Former	40	7.21
	Total	**555**	**100**

Table 2: Main Study Survey Respondent Demographics

3.2.1. Stage 1: Data Screening Results

This study followed the deletion method to handle missing data and excluded 92 responses because their completion rate was 50% or less. 644 questionnaires were distributed, 588 were returned, of which 496 were usable. The usable response rate was therefore 77%.

Following the data screening stage, outliers were deleted using univariate and multivariate detection methods. Univariate outliers can be detected by analysing frequency distribution of z scores, z>3.00. This study inspected univariate outliers by assessing the z-score. Tabachnick et al. (2007) suggested that a case is considered an outlier when z-score is greater than ± 3.29. Box plots are simpler to interpret in terms of values that are far away from the box, which are considered extreme values or outliers. For results of univariate outliers, please refer to the following diagram.

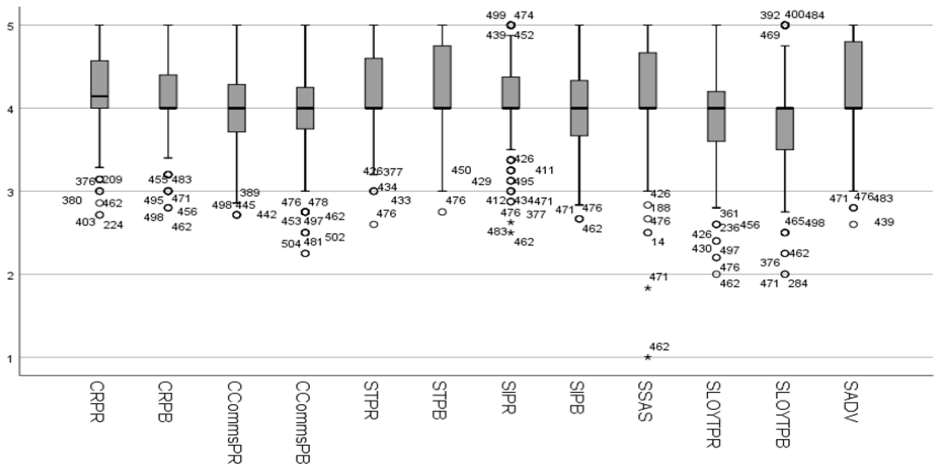

Figure 5: Univariate outliers

According to Hair et al. (2010), the multivariate method to detect outliers is by assessing the Mahalanobis D^2 measure. Mahalanobis D^2 measures the distance of each case from the centre for all variables (Hair et al., 2010). If chi-square value is less than 0.001 ($p<0.001$), then the case is considered an outlier. Therefore, this study deleted 74 cases as outlier and achieved a useable sample of 422.

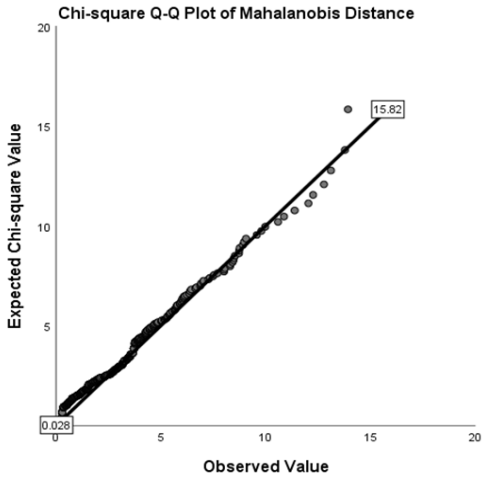

Figure 6: Chi-square Q-Q Plot of Mahalanobis Distance

3.2.2. Stage 2: Descriptive & Multivariate Analysis

To check the univariate normality the study applied skewness and kurtosis (Tabachnick et al., 2007, Kline, 2015). Hair et al. (2010) stated the range of skewness and kurtosis for the normal distribution is ±2.58. Normality test has no concerns in this study.

Multicollinearity refers to the relationship between two or more independent variables which demonstrate little correlation with other exogenous variables. To handle the problem of multicollinearity an examination of tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) with threshold

values of 0.1 and VIF of 10 is recommended (Hair et al., 2010). There was no multicollinearity among the variables.

3.2.3. Stage 3 & 4: Reliability Test & Factor Analysis

The Cronbach's alpha values of all the constructs are above the cut-off point of 0.6 satisfying the reliability test of the main study.

Next stage is the factor analysis. Factor analysis is a statistical technique used to refine the underlying patterns or relationships in the large number of variables into smaller set of factors (Hair et al., 2010).

Exploratory factor analysis is one of several multivariate statistical methods, refers to a reduction process of multi-measurement measures into fewer factors (Tabachnick et al., 2007, Hair et al., 2010). It is known that EFA explores the data and provides information regarding the number of variables that adequately represents the data. It also assesses empirically the relevancy of new measures to the pre-determined constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Due to new items developed in the study, EFA is a prerequisite before testing the hypotheses. EFA has been satisfied by achieving the threshold value of 0.5.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) refers "a way of testing how well measured variables (indicators) specify the constructs" (Hair et al., 2010). The study developed a measurement model in AMOS 26 to perform CFA. Maximum Likelihood Estimation option was checked in AMOS to assess the model fit. Further, the modification indices and standardised residuals are used. The sample size of the study is greater than 250 (n=422) and the study follows the three-indicator rule. All the measurement items extracted from EFA initially loaded well above the threshold value of 0.5. However, a few items were deleted to achieve the expected standard fit indices discussed earlier. The study has achieved a good model fit. IFI, TFI, and CFI are above 0.94, well above the recommended value of 0.9. RMSEA value is 0.05 which meets the acceptable level.

After developing and confirming the measurement model fit, the next step is to assess the validity of measured variables. To assess the convergent validity, three measures should be considered that include factor loadings, average variance extracted and construct reliability (CR). The results of CR depict that the measured variables define to their constructs adequately with most of constructs loaded above 0.8. The measurement model has achieved adequate discriminant validity.

After testing the adequacy of structural model, the proposed hypotheses were examined. All hypotheses were accepted, and results are provided in below table.

Hypotheses	Standardised Estimates	SE	Critical Ratio (CR)	P-value	Results
H1a CCommsPR → SIdentificationPR	0.234	0.022	7.521	***	Supported
H1b CCommsPB → SIdentificationPB	0.365	0.029	10.155	***	Supported
H2a STrustPR → SIdentificationPR	0.909	0.052	16.010	***	Supported
H2b STrustPB → SIdentificationPB	0.866	0.042	17.632	***	Supported
H3a SIdentificationPR → CReputationPR	0.782	0.064	13.194	***	Supported
H3b SIdentificationPB → CReputationPB	0.851	0.067	14.293	***	Supported
H4a SIdentificationPR → SloyaltyPR	0.946	0.070	15.396	***	Supported
H4b SIdentificationPB → SloyaltyPB	0.886	0.064	15.485	***	Supported
H5a SIdentificationPR → Satisfaction	0.630	0.078	8.681	***	Supported
H5b SIdentificationPB → Satisfaction	0.269	0.074	4.029	***	Supported
H6a SIdentificationPR → Advocacy	0.238	0.082	3.064	*	Supported
H6b SIdentificationPB → Advocacy	0.336	0.071	5.123	***	Supported
H7 Satisfaction → Advocacy	0.368	0.067	5.412	***	Supported

Table 3: Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Structural equation modelling (SEM) is a multivariate technique that combines aspects of factor analysis and multiple regression to examine the relationships among multiple variables (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, stage 5 is about the development of structural model to verify the causal relationships between the dependent and independent variables and to test the proposed hypotheses. The criteria applied to assess the structural model fit are same as they were for the measurement model fit. Therefore, the study follows the same cut-off indices to report the structural model fit.

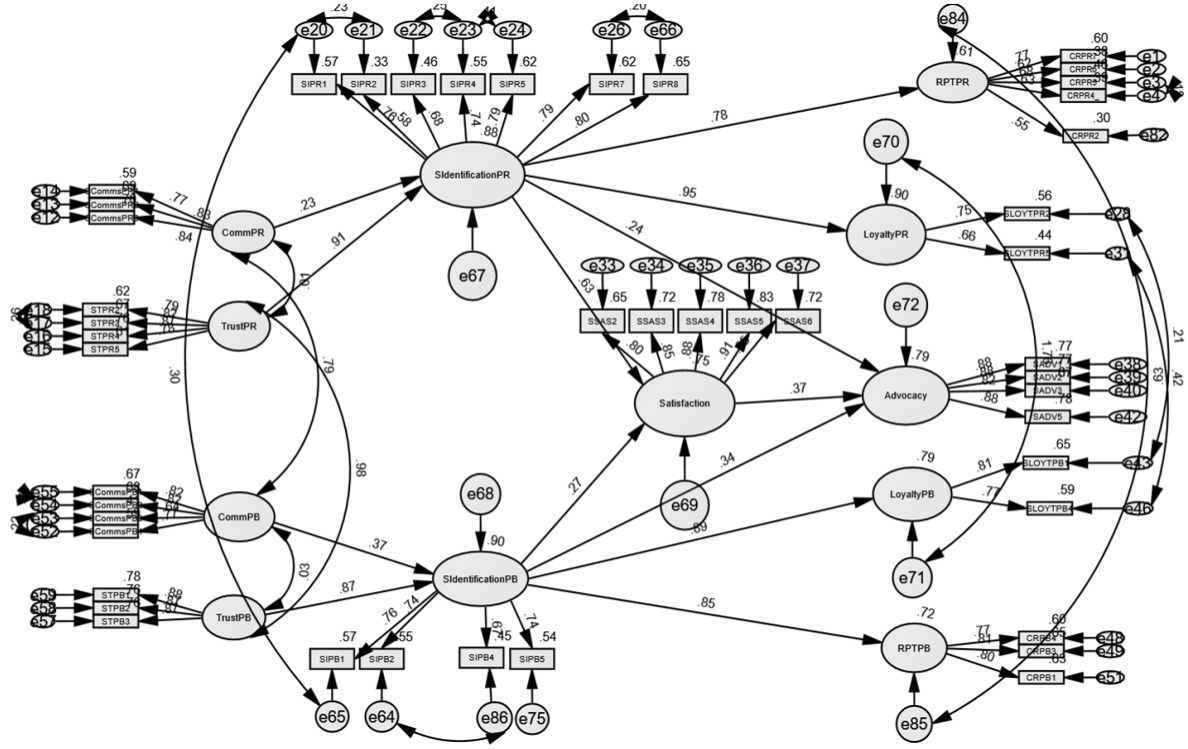

Figure 7: Structural Model

4. Findings

The quantitative findings show that there is a significant direct relationship of corporate communication with student HEI identification for both institutions. It means that students identify themselves with both institutions (private and public) based on the communication approach adopted by both. This finding is consistent with the theory proposed by Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), which states that students feel more identified with their institutions when they are in contact with the institutions.

The findings reveal that lecturers are a main source of building student identification with cobranded HEIs. This study has supported the findings of Smidts et al. (2001), Oltarzhevskyi (2019), Verčič et al. (2016), and Tourky et al. (2020) that positive staff communication is vital in building student identification in cobranded HEI context. In case of partnerships, private HEIs are the service providers and are responsible for sharing all the information with students on the behalf of the public HEI. Therefore, in this scenario, sharing information with academic staff or lecturers would support students in identifying with the institutions (Smidts et al., 2001).

As revealed by the qualitative findings and tested empirically, factors that influence student perception and reinforce their level of connectedness with the private HEI are a campus environment that allows students to “feel like home”, and friendly and supportive staff who

treat students as “part of the family”. Also, mature students stated that smaller size of the campus makes an institution a comfortable place for them to study. The findings reveal that communication is an influential factor in student identification with cobranded HEI, as mentioned earlier. The findings also reveal that private HEIs are successful in meeting their self-definitional needs such as providing an opportunity to study after long study gap, offering them a chance to get a recognised education which is valuable to employers, catering to the needs of all ages, enhancing their job prospects, and boosting their level of confidence, knowledge, and skills.

Driven by self-definitional needs, students identify strongly with the private HEI because they perceive that the institution shares similar attributes that support their needs. The findings are consistent with consumer-company identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Although there is no physical interaction of students with the public HEI, students are still found to be identified with the public HEI. The reason that students identify with the public HEI is the course itself which is designed by the university.

The findings show that corporate reputation depends on student identification with HEIs contrary to what prior studies argued. This study has provided empirical evidence that student identification has a significant, direct, and positive relationship with corporate reputation. Therefore, the study shows that favourable, positive identification facilitated by the HEI’s communication supports to build a good relationship with students.

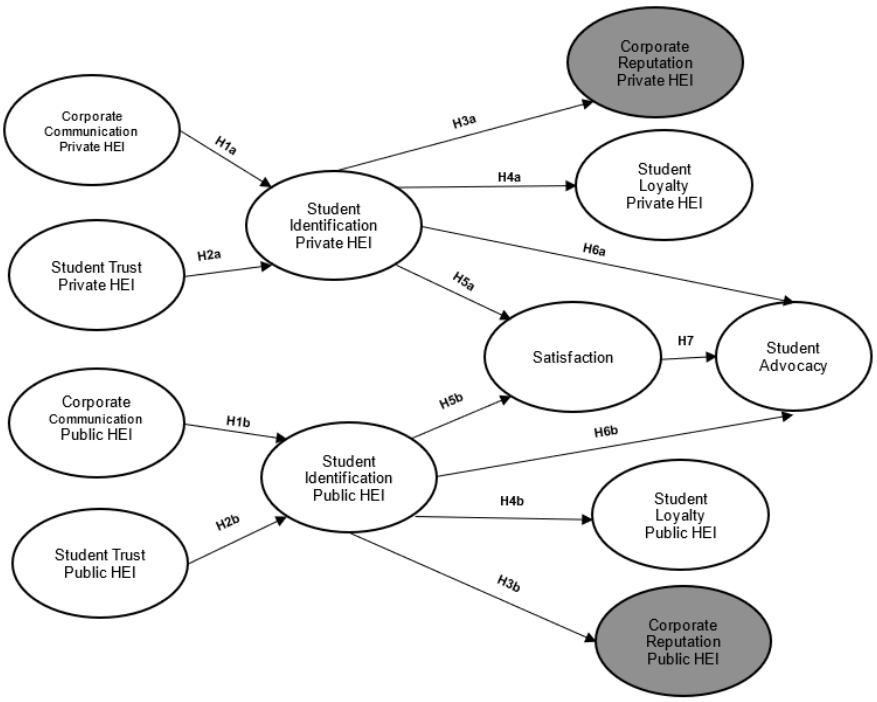

Figure 8: Revised Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Implications

This study makes important theoretical contributions to cobranding in higher education, corporate communication, corporate reputation, local academic partnerships in the UK, and student identification literature. For instance, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing knowledge of corporate communication by providing empirical evidence that corporate communication directly influences student HEI identification and indirectly influences corporate reputation (Goodman, 2006) for cobranded HEIs.

The extant literature has promoted the merits of student identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003, Balaji et al., 2016) and the impact of country of origin (Chee et al., 2016, Heffernan et al., 2018) on identification in case of transnational higher education. No research was conducted to analyse student identification in local partnerships. By adopting a rigorous methodological approach, this study has addressed the identified gap and derived insights into the antecedent and consequence of student identification for cobranded HEIs in the UK.

Practical Implications

This study has also generated valuable practical insights for academic partnership managers and marketing managers within cobranded HEIs. These insights can assist in decision-making in forming new HEI partnerships as well as managing existing partnerships. It is recommended to the academic partnership managers who are struggling to build the reputation of their institution, to focus on corporate communication with students and build good relationships with them. This study indicates that success of local academic partnerships is dependent on student perception that HEIs offer distinct attributes that are similar to their needs.

This study has also highlighted the importance of the relationship between lecturers and students as a driver of student identification. Therefore, private HEI managers must provide lecturers frequent training and development opportunities that make them more effective communicators.

References

Balaji, M., Roy, S. K. & Sadeque, S. (2016). Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification. Journal of Business Research, 69, 3023-3032.

Balmer, J. M. (2017). The corporate identity, total corporate communications, stakeholders' attributed identities, identifications and behaviours continuum. European Journal of marketing.

Bhattacharya, C. B. & Sen, S. (2003). Consumer–company identification: A framework for understanding consumers' relationships with companies. Journal of marketing, 67, 76-88.

Chee, C. M., Butt, M. M., Wilkins, S. & Ong, F. S. (2016). Country of origin and country of service delivery effects in transnational higher education: a comparison of international branch campuses from developed and developing nations. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 26, 86-102.

Goodman, M. B. (2006). Corporate communication practice and pedagogy at the dawn of the new millennium. Corporate Communications: An International Journal.

Fombrun, C. J. (1996). Reputation: Realizing value from the corporate image. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Hair, J. F., Anderson, R. E., Babin, B. J. & Black, W. C. (2010). Multivariate data analysis: A global perspective (Vol. 7). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Hardesty, D. M. & Bearden, W. O. (2004). The use of expert judges in scale development: Implications for improving face validity of measures of unobservable constructs. Journal of Business Research, 57, 98-107.

Heffernan, T., Wilkins, S. & Butt, M. M. (2018). Transnational higher education: The importance of institutional reputation, trust and student-university identification in international partnerships. International Journal of Educational Management, 32, 227-240.

Hesa (2019). Higher Education Student Statistics: Alternative Providers, 2017/18 - Student numbers and characteristics.

Hughes, T., Porter, A., Jones, S. & Sheen, J. (2013). Privately funded providers of higher education in the UK.

Kline, R. B. (2015). Principles and practice of structural equation modeling. Guilford publications.

Mariampillai, J. (2019). Private Providers and the Expansion of Collaborative Higher Education in the UK: Unintended Effects of Deregulation? Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 6, 97-104.

Morgado, F. F., Meireles, J. F., Neves, C. M., Amaral, A. & Ferreira, M. E. (2017). Scale development: ten main limitations and recommendations to improve future research practices. Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica, 30.

Oltarzhevskyi, D. O. (2019). Typology of contemporary corporate communication channels. Corporate Communications: An International Journal.

Rossiter, J. R. (2002). The C-OAR-SE procedure for scale development in marketing. International journal of research in marketing, 19, 305-335.

Shury, J., Adams, L., Barnes, M., Huntley Hewitt, J. & Oozeerally, T. (2016). Understanding the market of alternative higher education providers and their students in 2014. Retried from: https://assets. publishing. service. gov. uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524453/he-alternative-providers-. pdf.

Smidts, A., Pruyn, A. T. H. & Van Riel, C. B. (2001). The impact of employee communication and perceived external prestige on organizational identification. Academy of Management journal, 44, 1051-1062.

Sung, M. & Yang, S.-U. (2009). Student–university relationships and reputation: a study of the links between key factors fostering students' supportive behavioral intentions towards their university. Higher education, 57, 787-811.

Tabachnick, B. G., Fidell, L. S. & Ullman, J. B. (2007). Using multivariate statistics. pearson Boston, MA.

Teddlie, C. & Tashakkori, A. (2003). Major issues and controversies in the use of mixed methods in the social and behavioral sciences. Handbook of mixed methods in social behavioral research, 1, 13-50.

Thornhill, A., Saunders, M. & Lewis, P. (2009). Research methods for business students. Prentice Hall: London.

Tourky, M., Alwi, S. F. S., Kitchen, P., Melewar, T. & Shaalan, A. (2020). New conceptualization and measurement of corporate identity: Evidence from UK food and beverage industry. Journal of Business Research, 109, 595-606.

Tourky, M. E., Kitchen, P. J., Dean, D. & Shaalan, A. S. (2013). Corporate identity antecedents and components: Toward a theoretical framework. Corporate Reputation Review, 16, 263-284.

Ueltschy, L. C. & Laroche, M. (2004). Co-branding internationally: everyone wins? Journal of Applied Business Research, 20.

Verčič, A. T., Verčič, D. & Žnidar, K. (2016). Exploring academic reputation–is it a multidimensional construct? Corporate Communications: An International Journal.

Washburn, J. H., Till, B. D. & Priluck, R. (2000a). Co-branding: brand equity and trial effects.
Journal of consumer marketing, 17, 591-604.

Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M. & Heffernan, T. (2018b). International brand alliances and co-branding: antecedents of cognitive dissonance and student satisfaction with co-branded higher education programs. Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 28, 32-50.

Xiao, N. & Hwan Lee, S. (2014). Brand identity fit in co-branding: the moderating role of CB identification and consumer coping. European Journal of Marketing, 48, 1239-1254.

Xiao, N. & Lee, S. H. M. (2014). Brand identity fit in co-branding. European Journal of Marketing.

Yang, S.-U. (2007). An integrated model for organization—public relational outcomes, organizational reputation, and their antecedents. Journal of Public Relations Research, 19, 91-121.

Yin, R. K. (2017). Case study research and applications: Design and methods. Sage publications.