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# IMC antecedents and the consequences of planned brand identity in higher education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to identify integrated marketing communication (IMC) antecedents and the consequences of planned brand identity in the context of higher education, and empirically test a number of hypotheses related to the constructs of these antecedents and consequences.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A model of the IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity was tested in a survey conducted among stakeholders in two London-based universities. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied to gain insight into the various influences and relationships.

**Findings** – The study identifies and confirms key constructs in planned brand identity. IMC antecedents of planned brand identity, such as brand elements, service attributes, public relations and place/country of origin, were found to positively influence the planned brand identity consequences of awareness, image and reputation. However, websites, social media, advertising and direct marketing were not found to have significant influence.

**Research limitations/implications** – The focus on two UK universities limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research should be conducted in other country settings to test the relationships identified in the present study. Also, future research may build on the study's findings by investigating the attitudinal and behavioural consequences of brand identification in the higher education context.

**Practical implications** – Professionals responsible for universities' promotional and branding activities need to evaluate the relative contributions of the IMC antecedents of planned brand identity. Brand elements such as design, colour and name, for example, should be reviewed to determine whether modifications are required in different international markets. The increasing prevalence of social media, one of the key antecedents of brand awareness, offers opportunities for universities to engage in brand co-creation by



interacting with past, present and future students on relevant digital platforms. Finally, the place/country-of-origin cue is of particular relevance to institutions of higher education given the increasing numbers of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels who are choosing to study abroad (Melewar and Akel, 2005). The attraction of the UK as a country to study in, or the appeal of individual cities such as London, should be fully integrated into universities' IMC strategies.

**Originality/value** – The study makes two main contributions. First is the theoretical contribution by identifying the core IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity for universities and from this extrapolate key directions for future research. Second it is indicated that a number of managerial implications are designed to assist in the formulation of improved professional practice.

**Keywords** Reputation, Image, Brand identity, Integrated marketing communications, Identification, Brand elements

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Companies commit significant resources for formulating and improving the factors underpinning brand awareness and brand identity, whether at the corporate level or individual brand level. Many marketers have adopted integrated marketing communication (IMC) so as to increase the effectiveness of brand awareness and to produce maximum impact amongst relevant target audiences (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). Despite the growing recognition of IMC by academics and practitioners alike, it is evident that empirical research continues to be underdeveloped in relation to the interrelationship between IMC and brand identity, awareness, image, positioning, reputation and identification. The rationale for the research in this study is to increase our understanding of the component elements of IMC and their consequences for planned brand identity, thereby contributing to the existing theoretical foundations established in previous research such as Caemmerer (2009), Eagle and Kitchen (2000), Gould (2004), Kerr and Patti (2013) and Laurie and Mortimer (2011).

The concepts of planned brand identity, awareness, image, reputation and identification are well established in the IMC literature. However, such conceptualisations are typically applied to businesses rather than to the relatively under-researched domain of higher education. The present study seeks to deepen our understanding of IMC by examining its antecedents and consequences in the higher education context. To do this, we develop a model that encompasses the IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity, awareness, image, reputation and identification in the context of higher education. We test the model by deriving a number of hypotheses that we subject to empirical testing in the context of two UK universities. It is important to integrate the IMC concept and practice into the context of higher education, as there is increasing competition between universities to attract students in the global education marketplace. The contribution of IMC towards building a strong university brand thus represents an area of significant interest both from managerial theoretical perspectives.

The study makes two main contributions. First, we make a theoretical contribution by identifying the core IMC antecedents and consequences of planned (desired) brand identity for universities and from this extrapolating key directions for future research. Second, we indicate a number of managerial implications designed to assist in the formulation of improved professional practice.

## The evolution of IMC

The term "IMC" gained currency in the 1990s (Schultz *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b) and was driven by dramatic changes in the marketing and mass communication environments, although scholars (Hutton, 1996; Spotts *et al.*, 1998) argue that the IMC concept emerged much earlier within the context of the marketing discipline. The integrated approach to marketing communications emerged from a recognition that firms must use an array of

communications messages and channels to manage stakeholder relations effectively. Thus, IMC can be seen as a natural evolution in marketing communications rather than a transformation in marketing thought (Kliatchko, 2005). Regardless of its historical origins, by 2000, IMC was seen by many as a way of better managing the growing range of marketing communications choices which were becoming available to marketers, including the internet and sophisticated consumer databases (Duncan, 2002).

IMC has been described as “one of the most influential marketing management frameworks of our time” (Schultz and Patti, 2009, p. 75). It has evolved from its early incarnation as a tactical tool for harmonising the various elements of the marketing communications mix such as advertising, sales promotions and public relations to its current status as a strategic approach to building customer relationships and brand equity. No longer merely an “inside – out” device for ensuring the consistency of marketing communications, IMC now plays a long-term strategic brand management role (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004; Porcu *et al.*, 2012) which contributes to the enhancement of brand equity (Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005) and can deliver both memory and attitudinal benefits (Garretson and Burton, 2005). This evolution in IMC has been driven by major changes in the marketplace, media and communications and consumers (Gould, 2004). IMC’s development reflects the shift of marketing from a mass-oriented one-way process to the more complex and interactive phenomenon that marketing has become in our digital, co-creation age.

Although different authors use the same term (IMC), they may refer to semantically different aspects of the integration of communications (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006). Among these are:

- Integration as “content”, which refers to the links and consistency between media and marketing messages. The consistency of the marketing communication mix (Schultz *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b) is highlighted as a way of improving the efficiency of communications, which can increase brand equity (Keller, 1996; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005).
- Integration as a “process”, which refers to organisational and inter-functional mechanisms that aim to align the activities of communications specialists. It involves management between the communication processes and activities developed by the various marketing communications experts inside and outside the organisation (Gronstedt and Thorson, 1996; Eagle and Kitchen, 2000).
- Integration as the “creation and development of long-term market relationships”. The integration of communications coincided to a large extent with the need to develop a system of managing relationships with consumers and other stakeholders through direct and interactive contact (Duncan, 2002).

In a study contrasting the perceptions of UK and New Zealand practitioners with regard to what IMC is, Eagle *et al.* (2007, p. 961) propose six summations of IMC as follows: coordination of communications disciplines; a way to organise the business or firm; a way to develop and direct brand strategy; a way to deliver unified messages; coordination of advertising and PR programmes; and a strategic brand business process. Underlying such summations is the concept of strategic integration, elaborated by Fuchs *et al.* (2000, p. 124) as comprising an organisation’s direction, product/market focus, resources, operational capabilities and organisational culture. Kerr and Patti (2013, p. 2) argue that strategic integration “is the defining construct of IMC”. The strategic integration view posits that IMC is more than simply the coordination of different marketing messages and channels, and that IMC needs to be embedded throughout the business or organisation as a strategic driver of elements such as product and service attributes.

Recent literature has called for more efforts to measure IMC and robust empirical research to assess the outcomes deriving from IMC (Schultz *et al.*, 2013; Kitchen and Schultz, 2009; Kilatchko, 2008, 2009). Our study responds to such calls by measuring the relationships between the key constructs underpinning the IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity, specifically in the higher education sector, a hitherto under-researched field in the extant IMC literature.

### Model of IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity

Based on an extensive analysis of the literature, we propose that the IMC antecedents of university planned brand identity comprise the following: brand elements (logo, name and colour) (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014; Pieters and Wedel, 2004), service attributes (Aaker, 1991), websites (Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006), social media (Nekmat and Gower, 2012), advertising (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014), public relations (Kitchen, 2008), direct marketing (Schultz *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b; Duncan, 2002) and place/country of origin (Caemmerer, 2009). The IMC consequences of planned brand identity, namely, brand awareness, image, positioning, and reputation, are shown in the model in Figure 1. It is important to note that our conceptualisation of IMC antecedents encompasses not only media communication activities but also the elements that are being communicated, such as service attributes and place/country of origin. This approach acknowledges the multidimensional nature of IMC antecedents and reflects the elements that constitute those antecedents in the specific context of higher education.

#### Brand elements and planned brand identity

Brand elements have a central role in the communication process (Pieters and Wedel, 2004, p. 36). They help to attain a high level of brand identity and awareness or attention to the brand, in turn enable the recognition and recall of a brand during consumption or purchase (Vranesevic and Stancec, 2003). Identity can be defined as what the organisation is in terms of an entity’s distinctive and defining traits (Balmer, 2011; Balmer *et al.*, 2007). In our study, “planned brand identity” refers to the brand identity that the organisation seeks to achieve through the design and implementation of a coherent and comprehensive IMC strategy. Planned brand identity thus differs from previously established conceptualisations of “desired identity” (Balmer and Soenen, 1999), in that the focus is on a specific brand identity outcome directly associated with an IMC strategy.

Foroudi *et al.* (2014) have identified the main brand elements as:

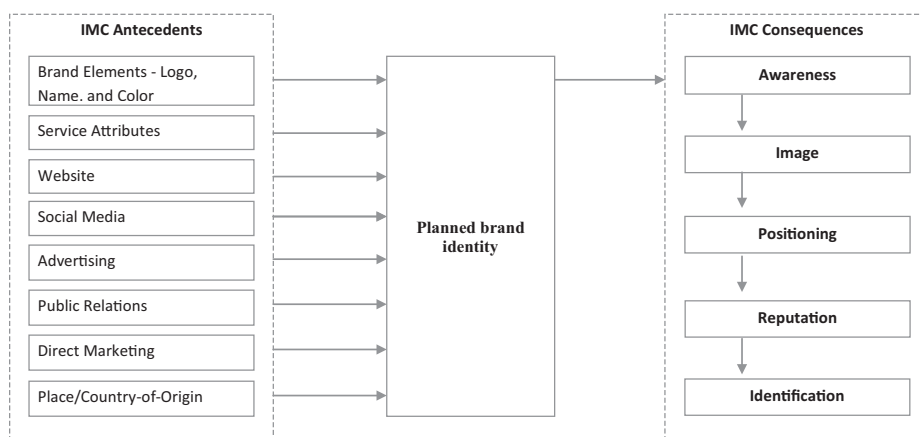


Figure 1. Research model

- Logo, which can be defined ‘as signature of a company with an essential communication, distinctiveness, which can reflect a company’s image.
- Corporate name as the most pervasive element in brand communications that identifies a brand and increases recognition speed.
- Colour as a medium of communication and an integral element of brand and marketing communications, which induces emotions and moods, affects consumers’ perceptions and behaviour, and helps brands position or differentiate themselves from competitors.

Brand elements play a crucial role in the communication of the desired positioning strategy (Alessandri, 2001; Chun and Davies, 2001) and can transmit the strategic, visual dimensions of a brand/corporate identity to various audiences (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Van Riel *et al.*, 2001). Empirical findings by Chun and Davies (2006) have shown that at an organisational level, the relationship of brand identity to positioning may vary according to the audience targeted, e.g. certain elements of corporate brand imagery can be promoted to both internal and external stakeholders, whilst other elements of brand imagery should be applied on a stakeholder-specific basis.

Brand elements are the central aspect of corporate visual identity (Balmer, 2001; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006) which are used to condense the personality of a firm and its values for it to be effectively presented to stakeholders (Kay, 2006; Van Riel *et al.*, 2001). Organisations devote extensive time, research and financial resources to developing favourable brand elements which reflect the brand’s identity and help mould its image in a positive way (Napoles, 1988). Based on this, the following hypothesis is derived:

- H1.* Brand elements (logo, name and colours) positively influence planned brand identity.

#### *Service attributes and planned brand identity*

Service attributes play an important role in influencing how a service will be evaluated (Mason and Baquette, 1998). Such attributes are one of the characteristics that define a particular service, and which affect consumer’s purchase decisions. Service attributes also tend to feature prominently in a brand’s positioning strategy (Aaker, 1991; Chun and Davies, 2001). Strong brand identity can inspire confidence among the company’s external target groups, acknowledge the vital role of customers (Van Riel, 1995) and aid customer’s learning about the brand (Alessandri, 2001). The effect is particularly strong when consumers cannot adequately gauge service attributes before the purchase decision, and they therefore draw inferences from the company that stands behind the service (Brown, 1998). According to Kitchen and Burgmann (2010), organising and manipulating the numerous components of the promotional mix help to generate a unified consumer-focused message, thereby contributing towards achieving various organisational objectives. IMC scholars suggest that the concept can be implemented effectively only if all elements of the marketing mix are coordinated, to produce a consistent and integrated brand message (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006). Therefore, we hypothesise:

- H2.* Service attributes positively influence planned brand identity.

#### *Website and planned brand identity*

Websites are designed to represent the ambitions and values of a brand and its business, and these play an essential part in a brand’s presentation of itself to internal and external stakeholders (Van den Bosch *et al.*, 2006). The creation and maintenance of a well-designed website is an essential strategy for company success in the marketplace (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008). Websites contribute to brand awareness by facilitating the provision of relevant information to current and



prospective consumers (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008). Liu and Arnett (2000) found that a well-designed website would lead to a favourable attitude towards the site and its services/products. A website that is logical and convenient to use can minimise the likelihood that customers will make mistakes and make their experience more satisfying. Tarafdar and Zhang (2008) identified seven elements of website as navigation design, visual identity/design, information design, usability, customisation, security and availability. A corporate website is a communication channel that companies use to reveal their identity to manage external impressions of the firm (Abdullah *et al.*, 2013; Bravo *et al.*, 2012), a tool to reflect a corporate image to signal its uniqueness (AbuGhazaleh *et al.*, 2012), an indication of a brand's identity and reputation (Argyriou *et al.*, 2006) and a major determinant for constructing online loyalty (Kabadayi and Gupta, 2011). Alhudaithy and Kitchen (2009, p. 58) noted that "websites offer the opportunity for marketers to utilise a wide assortment of cues such as colors, images and sounds to attract consumers' attention and generate favourable attitudes". A corporate website enables strengthening brands and builds an image of itself in the consumer's mind (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008) and plays an important role in an organisation's IMC strategy (Mulhern, 2009). Based on these findings from the literature, our hypothesis is as follows:

H3. Websites positively influence planned brand identity,

#### *Social media and planned brand identity*

Social media can be defined as:

- Online tools, applications, platforms and media that depend on information technology.
- Peer-to-peer communication channels that enable the interactive Web's content creation, collaboration and exchange by participants and the public, facets which introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organisations, communities and individuals
- Social media links used to form a virtual community via cross-platforms, and therefore affecting people's real-life behaviours (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014, p. 28).

Mangold and Faulds (2009) present social media as the "new hybrid element of promotion mix". According to Nekmat and Gower (2012), social media has provided IMC scholars with a new outlet for research on the communications between consumers and brands. Social media platforms are one of the most dominant outlets for social interaction and information sharing (Hughes *et al.*, 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012), allowing brands to distribute direct, unfiltered messages to both mass audiences and specific, targeted audiences (Wallace *et al.*, 2011; Pegoraro and Clavio, 2010). Mangold and Faulds (2009) state that social media as open communication among brands and customers creates a sense of community that enhances customer engagement with the brand.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) identify two interrelated roles of social media in the IMC:

- (1) it enables organisations to interact with customers; and
- (2) it increases customer-to-customer interactions.

While the former is consistent with the traditional role of IMC, the latter is a more recent development. The potential power and scope of opportunity offered by social media platforms in a wider IMC programme not only make them an integral component of IMC strategy but also provide both marketing practitioners and scholars with a completely new set of purposes for marketing. Social media has shifted marketing strategies from emphasis on the mass market to highly individualised, segmented markets (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Social media has

evolved into one of the most dominant outlets for social interaction and information sharing (Hughes *et al.*, 2012), and is therefore, considered a critical means of brand communications for higher education institutions in their brand profile-raising strategies (Melewar and Akel, 2005). Kwon and Sung (2011) suggest that brands with a strong social media presence are better equipped to increase brand identity and awareness, and to maintain communication with consumers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H4. Social media positively influence planned brand identity.*

#### *Advertising and planned brand identity*

Advertising can play an important role in increasing brand awareness as one of the components of brand knowledge (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2014). Advertising is considered as one of the principal components of image creation (Meenaghan, 1995). According to Belch and Belch (2011), advertising in business organisations focuses on informing consumers about their products or services, their characteristics, availability and position, whereas IMC emphasises sustaining a consistent image and representing products or services through different ways that are presented to both internal and external consumer populations (Kliatchko, 2008). This is particularly important in the IMC context, as it itself contributes towards brand image created by the organisation (Luck and Moffatt, 2009). Belch and Belch (2011) suggest that the most important value that advertising adds to IMC is integrity of the brand portrayal to consumers regardless of the types of communication tools chosen to deliver the message.

As consumer – brand interactions are on the rise because of advances in technology, it may be argued that the flexibility presented by IMC facilitates consistency, improvement in brand knowledge and the creation of long-term consumer – brand relationships. Hence, it is important to determine the most appropriate types of advertising within the IMC strategy, given their importance in the cultivation of brand identity, perception and image of products and services (Keller, 2003; Laurie and Mortimer, 2011; Radder and Huang, 2008). Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H5. Advertising positively influences planned brand identity.*

#### *Public relations and planned brand identity*

Public relations can be defined as the professional maintenance of a favourable public image by a brand/company or other organisation. The goal of the public relations function is the cultivation and maintenance of relationships with the public upon whom organisational legitimacy, success and growth depend. Even though public relations and media relation activities are increasingly recognised as critical components of the IMC arsenal, there exists a significant gap in the literature on public relations and marketing communication, with the role of public relations underdeveloped (Kitchen, 2008). Public relations as a key element of corporate/brand communication is used to evaluate social trends and formulate corporate policies that can help the company/brand innovate and proactively adapt to changes in society (Illia and Balmer, 2012; Kitchen and Panopoulos, 2010).

In his review of the public relations literature, Hallahan (2007, p. 308) found it to be “fragmentary and hardly conclusive”. In addition, there is ongoing debate about the relationship between public relations and IMC, with many scholars and academics viewing the former as an independent strategic function within an organisational context (Grunig, 2006). IMC as a messaging and channel blitzkrieg, introduced and conducted as a process of marketing planning (Kerr *et al.*, 2008), triggers public relations scholars’ fears of marketing as the dominant communication function (Grunig *et al.*, 2002) and public relations as a marketing support function (Keh *et al.*, 2007; Hendrix, 2004; Debreceeny and Cochrane, 2004). Hallahan (2007) further argues that the common concern about IMC is marketing’s

impending intrusion on the management function of public relations within an organisation. Although, literature has failed to confirm these apprehensions (Hallahan, 2007), IMC scholarship has done little to address them. In fact, numerous researchers in the field of IMC (Hendrix, 2004; Kerr *et al.*, 2008) position public relations under the context of marketing.

Despite these concerns, Gurau (2008) and Hallahan (2007) claim that the relationship between public relations and IMC fulfils the latter's purpose of developing long-term customer relationships with a customer-centric mind-set. Kotler *et al.* (2005) add that public relations strive to create information to attract attention to the product and create awareness through the adoption of several tools such as mass media and events that have the ability to attract positive attention to the company. Consequently, public relations function is increasingly taking some of the most important roles within the IMC process and influence on brand identity into consideration. Thus, we hypothesise:

*H6. Public relations positively influence planned brand identity.*

#### *Direct marketing and planned brand identity*

Direct marketing is a channel-agnostic form of advertising which allows businesses to communicate about their brand straight to the customer, with advertising techniques that can include cell phone text messaging, email, interactive consumer websites, online display advertisements and database marketing. Direct marketing as a key element of IMC (Schultz *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b; Duncan, 2002) is highly developed in US and UK advertising agencies (Kitchen *et al.*, 2008). It has been stated that when an organisation achieves a high level of IMC, a strong relation between IMC and marketing communication performances can be observed (McGrath, 2005; Porcu *et al.*, 2012; Vantamay, 2011). Direct marketing can create and increase familiarity and brand awareness by visual and verbal exposure of a brand to the consumer, as well as creating strong brand associations in the consumer's memory (Rossiter and Percy, 1987; Yoo *et al.*, 2000). Also, it increases the brand's likelihood of being included in the consumer's consideration set, thereby enhancing market performance of the brand (Krishnan and Chakravarti, 1993). Direct marketing helps firms develop strategic positions to differentiate their brand from their competitors and creates goodwill amongst consumers and stakeholders. Likable advertising through direct marketing has an impact on persuasion because a likable commercial affects the emotional component of our attitudes towards the brand. This perspective can be stated more formally for empirical testing as follows:

*H7. Direct marketing positively influences planned brand identity.*

#### *Place/country of origin and planned brand identity*

Country of origin has been defined as the country/place of manufacture, production or growth where a product comes from and which is conveyed through marketing communications messages (Caemmerer, 2009). Place/country of origin as a pervasive element in corporate and brand identity (Melewar, 2003) influences product quality perceptions, performance, reliability differences (Veloutsou and Taylor, 2012) and consumer perceptions. Previous studies have found that different types of country of origin exist, such as "country of brand" where the brand is located (Liefeld, 2004), "country of manufacture" where the product is made or "country of design" where the product is designed (Aiello *et al.*, 2008). A place/country can be a strong symbol and can contribute significantly to the brand identity and image of the product (Aiello *et al.*, 2008). In a market where consumers do not have strong product familiarity (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1989; Parrot *et al.*, 2002), the place/country of origin becomes potentially valuable as consumers may have confidence in, and positive feelings towards, the place/country (Johansson, 1989). It creates an important aspect in the customer's evaluation of the product, which can have a great impact on

consumer decision-making (Johansson, 1989). Country of origin has been shown to exert considerable influence on consumer perceptions, attitudes and behaviour across a range of product and service categories (Pappu *et al.*, 2006; Yasin *et al.*, 2007). Institutions of higher education commonly highlight their country (and city) of origin to increase brand awareness and to positively influence perceptions. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H8. Place/country of origin positively influences planned brand identity

#### *Planned brand identity and awareness*

Brand awareness refers to how well known the brand is to the target group, namely, the ability that customers have to recognise and be able to place the brand in a certain product category. Brand awareness refers to whether consumers can recall or recognise a brand, or simply whether consumers know about a brand (Huang and Sarigollu, 2012; Keller, 2008; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Brand awareness reflects the salience of the brand in the customer's mind. According to Sayers (2006), awareness is a somewhat far-reaching and ambiguous term that is instinctively understood by individuals in most organisations and societies. Aaker (1991) further points out the benefits of brand awareness as being a signal of substance and commitment and that the brand is a brand to be considered. He further argues that the awareness in itself leads to the customer's liking of the brand, as people tend to like what they are familiar with. Another benefit is that the brand is "an anchor to which other associations can be attached" (Aaker, 1991, p. 63). Brand awareness should be a key objective of all managers' marketing programmes (Kelly, 1991) and is necessary for the communications development to take place as it precedes all other steps in the development of consumer perceptions (Rossiter and Percy, 1987). Brand identity is acknowledged to have a positive influence on consumers' awareness of the brand/company and their familiarity with the brand/company. The brand identity in turn serves as a bridge between the elements that influence brand identity and the identity that the customers perceive (Urde, 2009). This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H9. Planned brand identity positively influences brand awareness.

#### *Awareness and image*

Awareness and image are recognised as key goals of IMC implementation (Duncan and Caywood, 1996). Image is the immediate mental picture an individual holds of the brand/organisation. It can materially affect individuals' sense of association with an organisation and is likely to have an impact on behaviour (Balmer *et al.*, 2011; Foroudi *et al.*, 2014; Karaosmanoglu *et al.*, 2011). Brand image is largely "product category-specific" (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). Martinez and de-Chernatony (2004, p. 39) define brand image as the "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory". For the development of brand image, brand awareness is gestated as a brand node or trace in ability to hold in mind, which allows customers to recognise and keep in mind the brand in various settings (Rossiter and Percy, 1987). A positive image may develop increased consumer search and an eagerness to look for distribution channels for a brand (Simonson *et al.*, 1988). The long-term success of a brand depends on the brand owner's ability to select a brand meaning before entering a market, to functionalise the meaning in the form of an image and to maintain the image over time (Gardner and Levy, 1955). Organisations use IMC as a message development method which can integrate different message strategies or communication techniques or different communication channels for the purpose of making marketing communication messages more effective, influencing and stimulating positive decisions and attitudes and facilitating the development of brand awareness and brand image (Kitchen *et al.*, 2008). Brand awareness positively relates to IMC invested in the brand, which then leads to greater brand image. Therefore, we hypothesise:

H10. Brand awareness positively influences brand image.

#### *Image, positioning, reputation and identification*

In a dynamic marketplace, the marketing department creates an image for the product based on its intended audience and proactively manages brand position to retain its advantage (Jewell and Saenger, 2014). A clear delivery of coherent messages through online and offline marketing communication tools helps the company achieve and maintain a favourable image in the mind of consumers. Intangible image associations may provide valuable sources of brand equity and lead to clearer strategic brand positioning with respect to competitive offers (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Alwi and Kitchen, 2014). Positioning can be regarded as creating a position in the “prospects mind” (Trout and Ries, 1972, p. 181).

Reputation is the overall evaluation of a company/brand over time (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014). Brand identity and elements represent potentially potent communication tools and can affect inferences made about brand attributes or benefits (Aaker, 1991) and can work synergistically with other elements of a marketing mix to anchor clusters of associations about the brand (Carpenter and Nakamoto, 1989), establish a brand’s positioning and maintain reputation (Park *et al.*, 1986). Furthermore, when brands are undifferentiated, the brand elements may represent the sole basis for any differential advantage perceived by consumers (Aaker, 1991).

According to Dutton *et al.* (1994), customers identify with an organisation based on their perceptions of its defining characteristics or perceived identity. The reputation of a company is an indicator of company success, as a well-regarded company is assumed to be efficacious (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995). If a company reputation is perceived as successful and well known by consumers, this reputation may enhance the development of customer identification. Attractiveness of the corporate identity can be a critical element of customer identification (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). The external image of a company, which is similar and closely related to reputation, plays an important role in leading to customer – company identification (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005). Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) state that when a person associates himself with a well-regarded brand, then positive identification is generated. To support the development of brand image, positioning, reputation and identification, marketing managers need to ensure consistency within the company’s IMC strategy to ensure congruence with the desired brand identity (De Chernatony and Cottam, 2006). Accordingly, the following research hypotheses are incorporated into our model:

H11. Brand image positively influences brand positioning.

H12. Brand positioning positively influences brand reputation.

H13. Brand reputation positively influences identification.

## **Method**

### *Data collection and sample*

Survey data were collected to empirically test the research hypotheses. The study was conducted within two London-based universities. These data were collected from internal stakeholders (existing students and employees) between November 2015 and July 2016. Further, 600 printed questionnaires were sent to stakeholders of UniversityI, from which 329 usable questionnaires were returned and analysed. From 600 questionnaires distributed to students and employees of UniversityII, and after making every possible effort to increase the response rate, a total of 337 usable completed questionnaires was processed and analysed. A majority of respondents from both universities were female (UniversityI 57.4 per cent and UniversityII 45.7 per cent). Most of the UniversityI and UniversityII respondents were between the ages of 24 to 30 years (50.8 and

61.5 per cent, respectively). Respondents comprised existing undergraduate students (74 and 81 per cent), existing postgraduate students (17.5 and 12.8 per cent), current PhD students (4 and 5.6 per cent) and employees (3 and 9.8 per cent).

#### *Measure development and assessment*

The questionnaire contained measures based on scales from previous studies which have been established to be psychometrically sound (Churchill, 1979; Hair *et al.*, 2006). Planned brand identity scales (Cole *et al.*, 2006; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; He *et al.*, 2012) were adapted to the higher education context. Based on previous studies, eight IMC factors were identified as follows:

- (1) brand elements which influence brand elements' favourability: logo, name and colour (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014);
- (2) service attributes (Yoo *et al.*, 2000; Dodds *et al.*, 1991);
- (3) website, which has seven factors (information, navigability, usability, customisation, download speed, security and availability) to measure the website (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008) were also obtained from existing scales;
- (4) social media (Hughes *et al.*, 2012);
- (5) advertising (Radder and Huang, 2008);
- (6) public relations;
- (7) direct marketing; and
- (8) place/country of origin (Pappu *et al.*, 2006).

Additionally, awareness scales (Yoo and Donthu, 2001), image (Martinez and de-Chernatony, 2004), positioning and reputation (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014) were adapted to the university context from existing scales (the items used to conduct the investigation in this study can be obtained from the first author). Based on the recommendations of Singh *et al.* (1990), all items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Both UniversityI and UniversityII surveys included the same items for all the study constructs to ensure comparability.

The measures were subjected to a series of factor and reliability analyses as preliminary examinations of their performance within the entire sample. All *a priori* scales showed satisfactory reliability (UniversityI 0.876 through 0.986 > 0.70; UniversityII 0.875 through 0.996 > 0.70) for both samples (Hair *et al.*, 2006; Nunnally, 1978). At this stage, three items from logo design, one item from colour and two items from name were excluded because their loading and contributions to reliability were somewhat lower than those of their peers. Also, five items of information and two items of social media were deleted. One item from advertising, one item from brand personality, seven items from country of origin, three items of brand awareness, eight items from brand image, two items of brand reputation were dropped at this stage because of cross-loading and reliability. The reliabilities of all scales in the current research are consistent across the two samples. Consequently, any dissimilarity in the relations between the constructs of interest cannot be attributed to differential reliabilities. The remaining items loaded significantly in both samples, with composite reliabilities ranging from 0.73 to 0.93.

#### **Results and analysis**

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to examine the large numbers of variables and to describe such variables in terms of their common underlying factors (Hair *et al.*, 2006).

EFA determines the factor structure of measures that examines internal reliability and discovers underlying structures in relatively large sets of variables (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). EFA was run through SPSS 21 separately for the two sets of questionnaires. Appendix II shows the descriptive statistics, factor loadings, reliabilities, construct reliability and average extracted variance. The results show that the items loaded ranging from 0.744 to 0.947 (UniversityI) 0.709 to 0.935 (UniversityII) satisfied the minimum criteria for factor loadings (Churchill, 1979; Hair *et al.*, 2006). The Cronbach's alpha value for each factor confirmed that the items in each factor were internally consistent (Nunnally, 1978). In addition, the appropriateness and accuracy of data collected were tested by assessing the value of the Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, which was found to be 0.876 (UniversityI) and 0.886 (UniversityII) (sampling adequacy 0.6 and above is acceptable) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity (BTS) was significant (BTS = 0.000 < 0.001) and satisfied the required criteria (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007).

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the relationships between the set of measurement items and their respective factors and to assess discriminant validity (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). In a series of analyses, the correlation between each pair of latent variables was constrained to 1 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In addition, the variance extracted for each construct was compared to the square of each off-diagonal value within the Phi-matrix for that construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In all cases, the variance extracted exceeded the Phi estimates, suggesting that each set of items represents a distinct underlying concept.

AMOS 21 software was used to run the model to test the hypotheses by using all available observations in a two-group analysis. The model fit was evaluated for overall fitness by referring to the fit indices as suggested by authors (Hair *et al.*, 2006; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). The CFI and RMSEA provide sufficient unique information to evaluate a model (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Based on this criterion, Garver and Mentzer (1999) recommend the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean squared approximation of error (RMSEA) (UniversityI 0.054; UniversityII 0.058 < 0.08) indicates acceptable fit). CFI UniversityI 0.921; UniversityII 0.909 (> 0.90 indicates good fit) is an incremental index that evaluates the fit of a model with the null baseline model (Hair *et al.*, 2006).

According to Hair *et al.* (2006), the Tucker – Lewis index (TLI), also known as the non-normed fit index (NNFI), compares the  $\chi^2$  value of the model to that of the independence model and takes degrees of freedom for the model into consideration (Hair *et al.*, 2006; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Therefore, the measurement model of these three factors was nomologically valid (Steenkamp and Trijp, 1991). Additionally, the incremental fit index (IFI) was: UniversityI = 0.921 and UniversityII = 0.910 and TLI was: UniversityI = 0.918 and UniversityII = 0.906, respectively. All were greater than the suggested threshold of 0.90 (Hair *et al.*, 2006), and each criterion of fit thus indicated that the proposed measurement model's fit was acceptable.

We used hierarchical linear regression analysis to examine the research hypotheses. Based on the standardised parameter estimates for the hypothesised relationships between the constructs, which are shown in Table I, the result provides support for *H1* (brand elements > planned brand identity) (UniversityI  $\beta = 0.497$ ,  $t = 2.923$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.425$ ,  $t = 2.418$ ). Regarding *H2* (product attributes > planned brand identity) there was association between these relationships from both universities' respondents (UniversityI  $\beta = 0.106$ ,  $t = 1.625$  UniversityII  $\beta = 0.169$ ,  $t = 2.837$ ). The hypothesised model from both analyses shows that the effect of website on (*H3* UniversityI ( $\beta = 0.062$ ,  $t = 0.600$ ,  $p = 0.548 > 0.05$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.003$ ,  $t = 0.023$ ,  $p = 0.981 > 0.05$ ) and social media (*H4* UniversityI  $\beta = 0.034$ ,  $t = 0.704$ ,  $p = 0.481 > 0.05$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.023$ ,  $t = 0.457$ ,  $p = 0.647 > 0.05$ ) on planned brand identity was not statistically significant. Regarding *H5*

**Table I.**  
Results of hypothesis  
testing (UniversityI  
and UniversityII)

Hypotheses relationships			UniversityI				UniversityII			
			Estimate	SE	C.R	<i>p</i>	Estimate	SE	C.R	<i>p</i>
<i>H1</i>	Brand Elements	→ Planned brand identity	0.497	0.170	2.923	0.003	0.425	0.176	2.418	0.016
<i>H2</i>	Service Attributes	→ Planned brand identity	0.116	0.053	2.187	0.029	0.169	0.060	2.837	0.005
<i>H3</i>	Website	→ Planned brand identity	0.062	0.103	0.600	0.548	0.003	0.113	0.023	0.981
<i>H4</i>	Social Media	→ Planned brand identity	0.034	0.048	0.704	0.481	0.023	0.050	0.457	0.647
<i>H5</i>	Advertising	→ Planned brand identity	0.198	0.106	1.874	0.061	0.250	0.106	2.351	0.019
<i>H6</i>	Public relations	→ Planned brand identity	0.162	0.052	3.083	0.002	0.252	0.057	4.401	***
<i>H7</i>	Direct marketing	→ Planned brand identity	0.214	0.052	4.124	***	0.087	0.062	1.405	0.160
<i>H8</i>	Place/Country-of-Origin	→ Planned brand identity	0.335	0.078	4.303	***	0.170	0.046	3.661	***
<i>H9</i>	Planned brand identity	→ Awareness	0.291	0.053	5.482	***	0.307	0.056	5.505	***
<i>H10</i>	Awareness	→ Image	0.356	0.053	6.659	***	0.364	0.053	6.853	***
<i>H11</i>	Image	→ Positioning	0.227	0.057	3.979	***	0.377	0.072	5.245	***
<i>H12</i>	Positioning	→ Reputation	0.242	0.077	3.145	0.002	0.285	0.042	6.806	***
<i>H13</i>	Reputation	→ Identification	0.223	0.080	2.776	0.006	0.514	0.076	6.781	***

**Notes:** \*\*\* $p < 0.05$ ; Path = relationship between independent variable on dependent variable;  $b$  = standardised regression coefficient; SE = standard error;  $p$  = level of significance

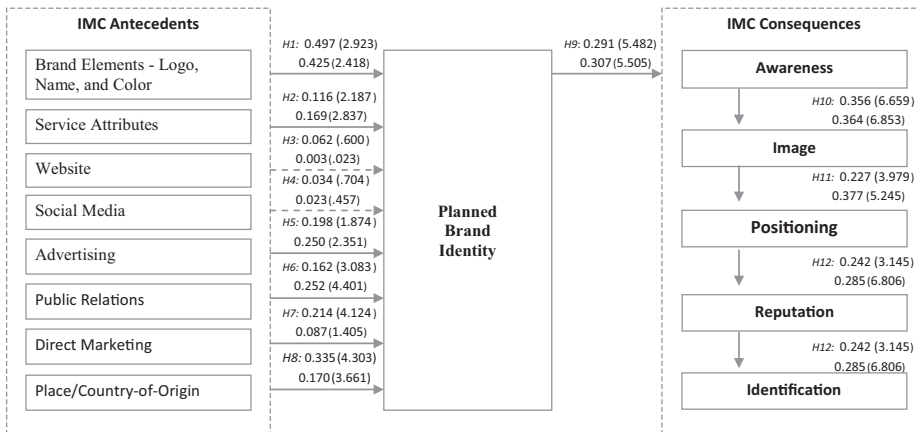
(advertising > planned brand identity), there was no association between these relationships from UniversityI participants ( $\beta = 0.198$ ,  $t = 1.874$ ,  $p = 0.061 > 0.05$ ) and is significantly different from 0 at the 0.05 significance level and that it may not be particularly effective regarding participants' perception. Nevertheless, the relationship between the constructs was confirmed by UniversityII students and employees ( $\beta = 0.250$ ,  $t = 2.351$ ).

In the hypothesised model, the effect of public relations on planned brand identity (*H6*; UniversityI  $\beta = 0.162$ ,  $t = 3.083$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.252$ ,  $t = 4.401$ , respectively) did reach significance. In addition to the hypothesised effects, guided by the employees and students' perception of UniversityI, the relationships between direct marketing and planned brand identity (*H7*  $\beta = 0.214$ ,  $t = 4.124$ ) were statistically accepted; however, the relationship was not significant from UniversityII respondents' perception ( $\beta = 0.087$ ,  $t = 1.405$ ;  $p = 0.160 > 0.05$ ). With regard to research hypothesis *H8*, our findings indicated that there is relationship between the university's place/country of origin and planned brand identity (UniversityI  $\beta = 0.335$ ,  $t = 4.303$  and UniversityII  $\beta = 0.170$ ,  $t = 3.661$  respectively). The hypothesised model from both analyses shows that the effect of planned brand identity on awareness (*H9* UniversityI  $\beta = 0.291$ ,  $t = 5.482$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.307$ ,  $t = 5.505$ ) was statistically significant. In addition, the findings indicated that there are relationships between awareness and image (*H10* UniversityI  $\beta = 0.356$ ,  $t = 6.659$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.364$ ,  $t = 6.853$ ). *H11*, which explain the relationship between image and positioning, was found to be significant in the hypothesised direction (UniversityI  $\beta = 0.227$ ,  $t = 3.979$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.377$ ,  $t = 5.245$ ). The hypothesised relationship between positioning and reputation and reputation and identification was found to be significant (UniversityI  $\beta = 0.242$ ,  $t = 3.145$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.285$ ,  $t = 6.806$ ; UniversityI  $\beta = 0.223$ ,  $t = 2.776$ ; UniversityII  $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $t = 6.781$ ), and *H12* and *H13* were fully accepted. The structural equation model results are shown in Table I. The operational model is shown in Figure 2. The results of SEM show that the model provides a strong test of the hypothesised associations between the constructs of interest.

## Discussion

The results indicate that the IMC antecedent brand elements (logo, name, colour) positively influence planned brand identity for both universities in the study. This finding confirms that of previous work in branding literature emphasising the brand-building capacity of





**Figure 2.**  
SEM model outcomes

visual elements (Aaker, 1991; Foroudi *et al.*, 2014). Our study confirms that brand elements function in the higher education sector similar to their function in commercial settings. It should be noted, however, that universities may be constrained in their freedom to adapt the use of visual elements such as colour by their distinct heritages which may imply the use of a traditionally established palette. The naming of higher education institutions also represents a potential challenge, in that internal stakeholders such as academic staff may be resistant to innovations in institutional naming.

Service attributes as an IMC antecedent are also confirmed to positively influence planned brand identity. In a higher education context, service attributes include the portfolio of degree programmes offered, the quality of teaching staff, the quality of campus facilities, etc. Our findings lend support to previous studies examining the influence of service attributes on brand equity (Krishnan and Hartline, 2001). The influence of public relations as an IMC antecedent of planned brand identity was also supported. This illustrates the need for strategic integration, a fundamental principle of IMC, between the public relations function and the full range of other IMC antecedents of planned brand identity to ensure communication of a consistent and coherent brand message to diverse audiences.

The influence of place/country of origin for products and services is extensively established in the literature (Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998; Usunier, 2006; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). Place of origin can influence consumer perceptions of quality and intention to buy. Origin strategies for universities thus represent a potentially powerful means of differentiation in attempts to attract students and staff. The two universities in our study were both located in London, a city with unusually high levels of brand awareness, which may have contributed to the positive influence of the place of origin that IMC antecedent recorded in our findings. Higher education institutions located in other, perhaps less well known, cities should carefully consider the extent to which they incorporate their place of origin in their university branding. Place of origin can also be operationalised at regional and national levels rather than solely at the city level, and it is conceivable that some universities would benefit from establishing associations with their regional or national brand rather than with their city brand if their city brand is relatively weak.

The above hypotheses were all supported. However, other hypotheses were not supported. Websites as an IMC antecedent, for example, were not found to positively influence planned brand identity. This may be regarded as a surprising finding, as it contradicts previous research examining the brand-building role of websites (Tarafdar and Zhang, 2008). Further research is

thus warranted into the hypothesised influence of websites on planned brand identity. The influence of social media was also found not to be significant. This too is a surprising finding, given the increasingly pervasive nature of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. A possible explanation for our finding of non-significance is that this does not reflect the weakness of social media *per se*, but rather the two universities in our study may have failed to adequately exploit the branding power of available social media platforms. Similarly, the hypothesis that advertising as an IMC antecedent positively influences planned brand identity was also not supported. As the power of advertising has been widely established in the literature (Garretson and Burton, 2005; Zarantonello *et al.*, 2014), we surmise that our finding of non-significance may be explained by ineffective design and implementation of advertising strategy by the two universities in our study rather than by any inherent limitation in advertising as a means of marketing communication.

Companies use direct marketing as an essential element to communicate on behalf of the company and influence liking or persuade audiences. According to Levy (1966), if you do not communicate in an appropriate language, you are speaking in terms no one can understand. In this respect, the results of our study from University I respondents support the hypothesis that the IMC antecedent direct marketing positively influences planned brand identity, which is consistent with findings from previous studies (Rossiter and Percy, 1987; Yoo *et al.*, 2000; Keller, 2003), showing that by creating familiarity and awareness, direct marketing has an influence on the brand identity of an organisation. Interestingly however, the findings from University II indicated that there is an insignificant relationship between direct marketing and planned brand identity.

Moving from our analysis of IMC antecedents to IMC consequences, our findings support the hypothesis that planned brand identity positively influences awareness and that awareness in turn positively influences image. These findings confirm previous studies that have examined the constructs of brand awareness (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2012; Homburg *et al.*, 2010; Radder and Huang, 2008) and brand image (Knox and Freeman, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2011). However, more understanding is needed of the potential range of different images that may be held of universities by each of their distinct stakeholder groups. The image of an institution held by its academic staff, for example, may differ from the image of the same university held by its future, present and past students. Although our results support the hypothesis that brand awareness positively influences image, a more nuanced view may be derived from future studies that decompose the images that are held by the different target audiences.

Individuals' attitudes towards the university's brand image have a strong and positive influence on the university's positioning (Alwi and Kitchen, 2014). According to Keller (2000, p. 124), "the intangible corporate image associations may provide valuable sources of brand equity and could serve as critical points-of-difference in terms of positioning with respect to competitive offers". Furthermore, the results indicate that within both universities, individuals' attitudes towards the university's positioning are positive and respondents also expressed a positive overall evaluation of the university's brand (Foroudi *et al.*, 2014). To remain competitive, universities should differentiate themselves from the other universities in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world. According to Balmer (2008), the ideal identity is the optimum positioning of the organisation in its market (or markets) in a given time frame. This is normally based on current knowledge from the strategic planners and others about the organisation's capabilities and prospects in the context of the general business and competitive environment. The results of this study are similar to those of previous studies (which assert that positioning is a key element of the company, which is wedded to customer perception) (Aaker, 1991; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Abratt and Kleyn, 2012; Alwi and Kitchen, 2014).

The identification of customers with organisations and brands has been the subject of many previous studies (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Reed *et al.*, 2007). The results of our study build on such earlier work by indicating that individuals' attitudes towards the university's reputation have a positive influence on identification, which is consistent with previous studies (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995). An organisation's reputation often serves as an indicator of organisational success. If the reputation is perceived positively and is well known by consumers, this may also enhance consumers' pride in identifying with a brand that has a good reputation (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Smidts *et al.*, 2001). Our findings indicate that employees and students associated themselves with their university brand and that positive identification was generated.

## Conclusions

The results of our study empirically show the IMC antecedents and consequences of planned brand identity in a higher education setting. The antecedents of planned brand identity (brand elements, website, product attributes, social media, advertising, brand personality, place/country of origin) vary with respect to influence. The hypothesised relationships between brand awareness and brand image, between brand image and brand reputation and between brand reputation and brand identification were all supported.

### *Managerial implications*

From the study results, we derive several managerial implications as follows. Professionals responsible for universities' promotional and branding activities need to evaluate the relative contributions of the IMC antecedents of brand awareness. Brand elements such as design, colour and name should be reviewed to determine whether modifications are required in different international markets.

The extensive literature on international marketing standardisation and adaptation (Schmid and Kotulla, 2011) provides a range of strategy options in this regard. Universities may also take into consideration the need to localise their websites for international audiences, either simply by translating existing content into the language of the target market or by creating customised content for each market. In terms of product attributes, the portfolio of degree programmes offered should be constantly reviewed to ensure that changing consumer demands are being met. The increasing prevalence of social media, one of the key antecedents of brand awareness, offers opportunities for universities to engage in brand co-creation by interacting with past, present and future students on relevant platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. The impact of advertising by universities needs to be closely monitored for reach and effectiveness. Universities should also devote more attention to their brand personality, as this can influence perceptions held by different stakeholder groups. Finally, the country-of-origin effect is a potentially powerful antecedent of brand awareness for universities. Country of origin has been extensively studied in the marketing literature (for comprehensive overviews, see Al-Sulaiti and Baker, 1998; Dinnie, 2004; Usunier, 2006; Verlegh and Steenkamp, 1999). The country-of-origin cue is of particular relevance to institutions of higher education given the increasing numbers of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels who are choosing to study abroad. The attraction of the UK as a country to study in, or the appeal of individual cities such as London, should be fully integrated into universities' IMC strategies.

### *Limitations and future research*

Future research should be conducted in other country settings to test the relationships identified in the present study. Also, future research may build on the study's findings by investigating the attitudinal and behavioural consequences of brand identification in the

higher education context. To what extent, for example, does brand identification determine behavioural consequences such as brand loyalty and willingness to engage in positive word of mouth? An additional stream of future research could seek to investigate whether brand awareness operates differentially across schools within a university, or whether brand awareness is a homogeneous construct across institutions. Future research is also warranted into the potential decomposing of the country-of-origin cue to reflect the perceptual power of subnational geographic entities such as cities and regions.

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