

# Uncovering Emerging Research Themes in Higher Education Branding: A Bibliometric Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

In today's competitive and globalized environment, higher education institutions must establish a solid and enduring reputation to influence prospective students' rational and emotional decision-making processes. This study maps the research landscape on brand equity in higher education through a bibliometric analysis of 628 publications from the Web of Science database. We identified leading authors, influential journals, and emerging trends using advanced tools such as VOSviewer and Biblioshiny. Our methodology incorporates bibliographic coupling, citation analysis, cluster analysis, keyword examination, and a four-field diagram to uncover new insights into brand awareness, brand equity, brand image, and loyalty. The study underscores the crucial role of a robust reputation as a critical factor in attracting students. Our findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of higher education branding, ensuring robustness and generalizability across bibliometric datasets, and contribute significantly to advancing research in this field.

**Keywords:** Branding, Higher education, Biblioshiny, Bibliometric analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been growing interest in fundamental marketing principles, with a particular focus on "branding," which has captured the attention of researchers and practitioners in various fields. This interest has been fueled by recognition of its critical impact on the commercial performance of organizations.<sup>[1-3]</sup> Globally, the success of branding in the business realm has been closely associated with attracting and retaining consumers.<sup>[4]</sup> However, a gap in understanding branding within higher education contexts suggests a need for more profound research. A literature review reveals a need for more research addressing branding efforts,<sup>[5-7]</sup> brand image, and brand association in the higher education sector.<sup>[5,8]</sup> Furthermore, studies have yet to comprehensively explore various aspects of the higher education sector.<sup>[6,9]</sup>

Branding in higher education has emerged as a crucial strategy for gaining a competitive advantage and achieving a larger market share.<sup>[10]</sup> Nonetheless, more research remains on how brand awareness influences students' choices of higher education institutions, making it essential to investigate the role of brand awareness in their enrollment decisions.<sup>[11]</sup> Branding has become

a topic of great relevance, especially for educational institutions, as it enables them to establish a solid public reputation, differentiating them from their competitors.<sup>[12]</sup> In this context, reputation is crucial in distinguishing educational institutions,<sup>[13]</sup> further strengthening their connection with their students and alumni.

Therefore, this research conducts a bibliometric investigation of 628 research articles addressing the theme of branding in higher education. Unlike standard literature reviews, the bibliometric technique focuses on analyzing vast amounts of scientific data, like citation counts and keyword occurrences, making it a more objective analytical approach and less prone to bias.<sup>[14]</sup> This way, the bibliometric approach complements and enriches literature reviews by allowing for more precise highlighting of a specific discipline's current and evolving nuances.

Specifically, the bibliometric method is crucial for enhancing our understanding of branding in higher education: i) it facilitates the identification of the intellectual framework, including influential authors, potential collaborations, prominent institutions, relevant countries, and academic network patterns; ii) it detects dominant research themes by identifying thematic groups, offering an overview of significant areas of interest, and iii) a bibliometric analysis of a decade's worth of research on brand value and higher education delivers critical insights into the literature's progression, identifying well-established and emerging areas for future research.



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In addition to revealing the current state, themes, and developments in the field, this study seeks to address the following research questions to deepen the understanding of branding in higher education:

RQ1. Who are the authors, journals, articles, countries and organizations most dominant in branding research in higher education?

RQ2. What are the current research themes of brand value in higher education? How can these themes be further developed? What are the main keywords? How has their prevalence evolved over time?

RQ3. What are the prospective research directions in higher education branding?

Thus, this study aims to advance knowledge in this area and provide relevant insights for marketing professionals and managers of educational institutions.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adhered to the bibliometric analysis framework outlined by Donthu *et al.*,<sup>[15]</sup> progressing through the following five stages:

### Database Selection

The decision to use Clarivate's Web of Science was made after a thorough evaluation of its status as one of the world's premier scientific citation and analytical databases, offering access to a vast array of academic publications.<sup>[16,17]</sup> With coverage spanning 256 disciplines, the database enables comprehensive searches and analyses, providing more precise and reliable information on publications compared to other available databases.

### Search Formula Creation

The search process used the "title, abstracts, and keywords" fields, incorporating boolean operators "AND/OR" with the chosen keywords. This produced a highly precise search formula: TITLE-ABS-KEY (Branding) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("higher education").

### Data Compilation and Retrieval

The search above formula initially yielded 681 documents. After defining the time frame from 2003 to 2023, 636 documents were identified. Following recommendations by Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruiz-Navarro,<sup>[18]</sup> only articles and reviews were selected and considered "certified knowledge." Consequently, other document types were excluded, such as conference papers, books, and book chapters. This resulted in a final set of 628 articles and reviews selected for this study, as shown in Figure 1.

## Conducting Analysis

Donthu *et al.*,<sup>[15]</sup> pointed out that the study employed both primary and enrichment analyses with the help of Biblioshiny and VOSviewer. Biblioshiny offers a comprehensive array of bibliometric techniques, while VOSviewer excels in network visualization, allowing researchers to utilize the best features of both tools. This combination has been widely adopted in recent bibliometric studies.

VOSviewer was utilized in the study to conduct a comprehensive analysis, identifying the most cited documents, authors, organizations, and sources and executing bibliographic coupling. Biblioshiny, on the other hand, produced a wide range of charts, covering annual scientific production, geographic distribution of the top five countries, source impact, author impact, and the most cited local sources within the domain. Furthermore, keyword analyses were conducted to identify the top 30 keywords, create tree diagrams, trend topic analysis, perform keyword growth analysis, and thematic map analysis. Lastly, a three-field plot was created to visualize the interplay among countries, keywords, and journals in the domain, providing a complete picture of the research landscape.

## Identifying Current Themes and Future Research Directions

Bibliographic coupling using VOSviewer was conducted to pinpoint emerging themes and groups in the domain. Donthu *et al.*,<sup>[15]</sup> advise scholars to utilize this analysis to identify evolving themes and trends. Following their recommendations, the outcomes of keyword analyses, cluster analyses, and content analyses were then used to propose future research directions for each identified theme.

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This section presents the findings of our bibliometric analysis based on 628 documents. This quantitative analysis reveals trends in scientific production, addressing the temporal evolution of publication volume, distribution of document types, most prolific authors, notable institutions, and geographic analysis of contributions by country and continent. Moreover, it includes a keyword study to identify central themes and an author collaboration map to visualize collaborative networks.

### Performance and Citation Analysis Results

Since 2013, the volume of publications has grown by 30.99% annually. Six hundred twenty-eight documents have been disseminated, comprising 600 articles and 28 reviews. These documents have been authored by 1,630 authors, including 92 unique authors. There is an average of 2.93 co-authors per document distributed across 343 journals, with an average of 10.28 citations per document.

The distribution of publications between 2003 and 2023 is displayed, with a significant increase in publications on the topic beginning in 2019. This surge is attributed to heightened competition among higher education institutions, which has intensified the strategic use of branding. This development has created more significant pressure on institutions to differentiate and stand out, leading to more extensive documentation of these cases. In this context, branding has been recognized as a crucial strategic tool for market positioning, attracting student talent, and ensuring long-term financial viability. The growing body of literature on higher education branding reflects this shift in competitive dynamics and the perceived need for institutions to manage their brand effectively to maintain relevance and competitiveness.

The analysis of the articles from the 628 publications reveals that 277 are linked and possess at least five citations each. The ten documents with the most citations are displayed in Table 1. The article by Islam, Rahman, and Hollebeek<sup>[19]</sup> titled "Consumer Engagement in Online Brand Communities: A Solicitation of Congruity Theory" received the highest number of citations (194). This article concludes that the congruence between brand image and values influences consumer engagement, positively affecting brand loyalty. The second most-cited article, by Hew *et al.*,<sup>[18]</sup> with 144 citations, explores how the success of MOOCs is related to student satisfaction, which can extend institutional reach, strengthen the brand, and generate additional revenue. Research by Rutter, Roper, and Lettice,<sup>[21]</sup> which received 115 citations, shows that social media activity, especially interaction and validation, positively influences student recruitment, mainly when universities actively engage. Findings reveal a robust connection between the scale and brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and students' intentions to back their university as alumni. The ten most cited articles primarily cover four central themes: "brand identity" (Waeraas and Solbakk),<sup>[22]</sup> "brand knowledge" (Martin and Cervino),<sup>[23]</sup> "brand value" (Tanrikulu and Gelibolu)<sup>[24]</sup> and "brand management" (Rutter, Lettice and Nadeau).<sup>[25]</sup>

An assessment revealed 30 authors who have authored at least three papers, each with three or more citations. Table 2 enumerates the ten most cited authors. Linda Hollebeek is the most influential author, with three papers garnering 362 citations. She is followed by T. C. Melewar, with four documents and 189 citations; Pantea Foroudi, with three documents and 185 citations; and Philip Kitchen, with three papers totaling 170 citations.

According to the "author impact analysis" carried out with Biblioshiny, Nguyen is ranked ninth with an h-index of 5. Another author appearing in the top 10 is Melewar, who has the most citations and an h-index of 4, placing them in the fourth position in terms of impact, as illustrated in Table 3.

Subsequently, an analysis of sources revealed 35 journals with a minimum of three papers and three citations each. Table 4 lists the ten most cited sources in the domain, and Table 5 outlines the source impact analysis results. Leading the discipline, the Journal of Business Research had 21 papers and 1085 citations (Table 4), followed by the Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, with 80 papers and 844 citations. In addition to being the most cited sources, these journals have the most impact concerning branding in higher education.

Following an organizational analysis, 30 institutions were identified, each having a minimum of four papers and four citations. Table 6 lists the ten most influential organizations in the domain. The University of Middlesex, the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom, Deakin University, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia emerged as leading institutions. Finally, a country analysis revealed that 54 countries have at least three papers and citations. Leading in influence, the United Kingdom has 69 papers and 1536 citations. The United States follows with 87 documents and 1147 citations, while Australia and China have 54 papers (868 citations) and 38 documents (812 citations), respectively.

## Results of Science Mapping and Visualization

The tree diagram presented in Figure 3 reveals the 20 most prominent keywords. As depicted in the Figure, "higher education" is the most frequently used, indicating that social networks are widely used for brand positioning. The concept of brand follows with keywords such as "Branding", "Brand identity", "Brand equity" and "Brand image" which are among the most popular within the domain.

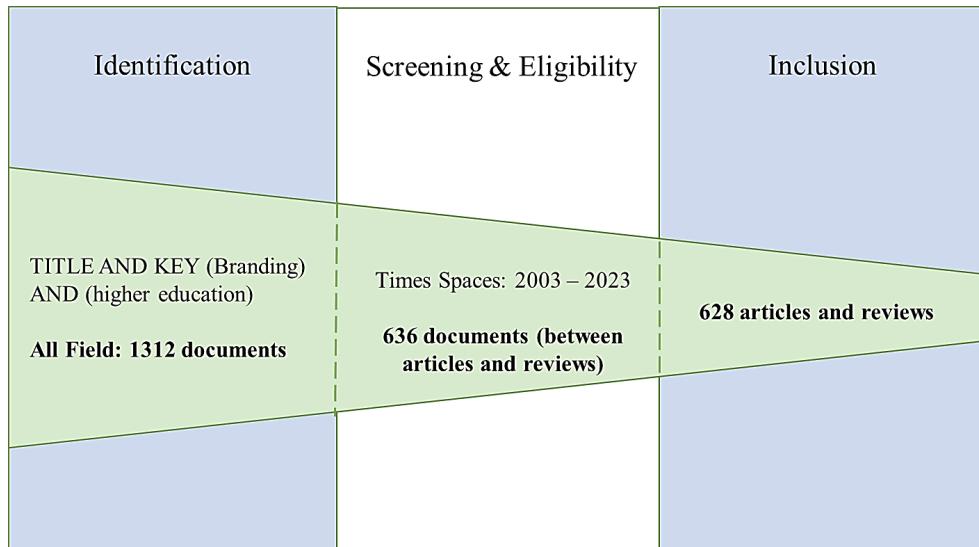
In Figure 4, a keyword trend analysis is shown. Recent research (2015-2022) has highlighted an emerging focus on branding in higher education institutions, driving the usage of keywords like "Brand identity", "Brand equity", "Brand loyalty", "Brand image", and "Brand awareness". The increased presence of students on social networks and the growing role of social media in higher education branding have also brought "social media marketing" to prominence.

The study employed Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to analyze the authors' keywords' interrelationships in the literature. As depicted in Figure 5, the conceptual structure map reveals two distinct conceptual domains. The red domain highlights terms such as 'brand experience,' 'brand reputation,' and 'brand identity,' closely linked with keywords associated with trust, engagement, and student satisfaction. This cluster suggests a focus on relational marketing to foster student loyalty in higher education.

On the other hand, the blue domain, which includes terms like 'social media,' 'Facebook,' and 'social networks,' signifies a strong emphasis on leveraging digital media, particularly social

networks, to connect with students. Both clusters intersect with terms that encompass university image, loyalty, and co-creation among educational institutions with their student body. The Thematic Mapping allows for outlining the conceptual structure surrounding brand value in higher education. It involves a network analysis of word co-occurrences to determine the themes of a field of study and trends from the scientific literature (Della Corte).<sup>[33]</sup> The mapping visualizes four typologies of themes across four quadrants: a) Engine Themes, b) Emerging

or Declining Themes, c) Niche Themes, and d) Basic Themes. The quadrants are defined according to levels of development or density and degrees of relevance or centrality. The distinctive features of engine themes include their high density and centrality, while niche themes are marked by high density but low centrality. Basic themes, meanwhile, possess low density yet maintain high relevance, whereas emerging or declining themes display both low density and centrality.



**Figure 1:** Data Retrieval Criterion.

**Table 1: Most cited articles.**

Sl. No.	Authors	Article Title	Citations	Total link strength
1	Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek <sup>[17]</sup>	Consumer engagement in online brand communities: a solicitation of congruity theory.	194	341
2	Hew et al., <sup>[20]</sup>	What predicts student satisfaction with MOOCs: A gradient boosting trees supervised machine learning and sentiment analysis approach.	144	18
3	Rutter, Roper, and Lettice <sup>[21]</sup>	Social media interaction, the university brand and recruitment performance.	115	270
4	Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek <sup>[26]</sup>	Personality factors as predictors of online consumer engagement: an empirical investigation.	114	268
5	Rauschnabel et al., <sup>[27]</sup>	Brand management in higher education: The University Brand Personality Scale.	111	575
6	Dennis et al., <sup>[28]</sup>	The role of brand attachment strength in higher education.	105	406
7	Alwi and Kitchen <sup>[29]</sup>	Projecting corporate brand image and behavioral response in business schools: Cognitive or affective brand attributes?	97	578
8	Tejedor, Segalàs and Rosas-Casals <sup>[30]</sup>	Transdisciplinarity in higher education for sustainability: How discourses are approached in engineering education.	97	1
9	Peruta and Shields <sup>[31]</sup>	Social media in higher education: understanding how colleges and universities use Facebook	94	29
10	Foroudi et al., <sup>[32]</sup>	Enhancing university brand image and reputation through customer value co-creation behaviour.	92	213

Source: Vosviewer.

**Table 2: Most cited authors.**

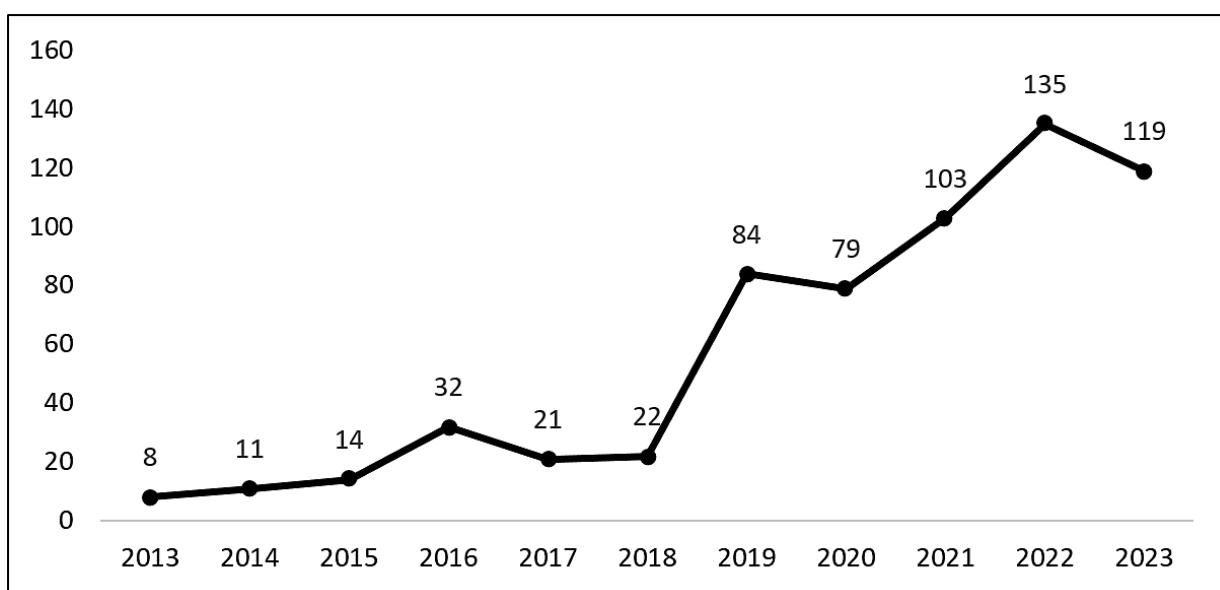
Sl. No.	Authors	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
1	Hollebeek, Linda	3	362	344
2	Melewar, T. C	4	189	971
3	Foroudi, Pantea	3	185	733
4	Kitchen, Philip	3	170	954
5	Plewa, Carolin	3	112	534
6	Conduit, Jodie	3	100	446
7	Blanco-Gonzalez Alicia	3	92	599
8	Le Tri D.	3	70	280
9	Nguyen Bang	3	62	721
10	Mampaey, Jelle	5	60	440

Source: Vosviewer.

**Table 3: Author impact analysis.**

Author	H-Index	G-Index	M-Index	TC	NP	YSP
Nguyen, Bang	5	5	0.556	149	5	2016
Chapleo, Chris	4	4	0.444	37	4	2016
Mampaey, Jelle	4	5	0.400	60	5	2015
Melewar, Tunku Chik	4	4	0.444	189	4	2016
Suomi, Kati	4	4	0.444	56	4	2016
Alves, Helena	3	3	1.000	10	4	2022
Amani, David	3	4	1.000	18	5	2022
Clark, Peter	3	3	0.333	33	3	2016
Conduit, Jodie	3	4	0.333	100	3	2016
Foroudi, Pantea	3	3	0.375	185	3	2017

Note: TC: Total Citations, NP: Number of Publications, and YSP: Year of Start of Publishing.

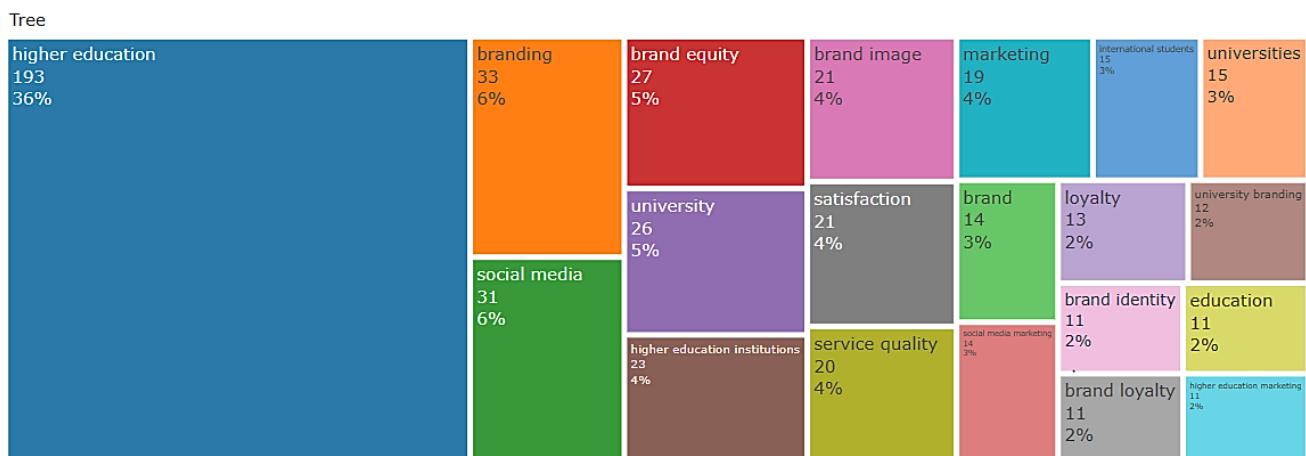
**Figure 2:** Evolution of Published Documents from 2003 to 2023.

Source: Own elaboration based on information from Clarivate's study.

**Table 4: Most cited sources.**

Sl. No.	Source	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
1	Journal of Business Research	21	1085	5529
2	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	80	844	12530
3	Studies in Higher Education	10	311	1615
4	Journal of Brand Management	8	186	1904
5	Journal of Cleaner Production	4	183	105
6	Higher Education	10	129	744
7	Discourse-Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education	4	125	253
8	Marketing Intelligence and Planning	3	125	698
9	International Journal of Educational Management	12	102	3497
10	European Journal of marketing	3	69	1025

Source: Vosviewer.



**Figure 3:** Tree diagram of author keywords. Source: Vosviewer.

Figure 6 presents a thematic map derived from bibliometric analysis, identifying four quadrants representing the different states of development and centrality of research themes. In the "Niche Themes" quadrant, there is a significant intersection between brand performance and marketing in higher education, specifically about choosing a university or tertiary education institution, indicating a specialized study area with the potential for developing strategies to attract prospective students, such as gamification. "Engine Themes," located in the upper quadrant, emphasize digital marketing strategies on social networks to enhance student satisfaction and loyalty. This is especially pertinent in a context where prospective students have access to educational options worldwide, driving the need to internationalize the reputation of higher education institutions. These findings reflect the urgent need to implement innovative programs. The research underscores the importance of developing effective strategies that adapt to an increasingly globalized and competitive environment.

In the "Basic Themes" quadrant, research examines various aspects linked to the support universities provide to their digital

marketing strategies on social networks. These studies seek to understand how institutions can effectively position their brands in the competitive higher education landscape, leveraging available digital tools and platforms. Furthermore, topics such as internationalization and the impact of neoliberalism on higher education are explored, recognizing the growing importance of globalization and economic imperatives in shaping university branding strategies.

Within the "Declining Themes" quadrant, a shift in research focus on brand loyalty in the context of higher education is observed. It has been determined that brand loyalty is not significantly linked or influenced by gender, representing a notable finding that challenges certain previous assumptions in the branding field. Additionally, there has been a transition in academic attention away from traditional consumer satisfaction research, commonly seen in the business realm, towards a more specialized focus within higher education. This shift reflects a better understanding of the dynamics influencing brand loyalty in the university

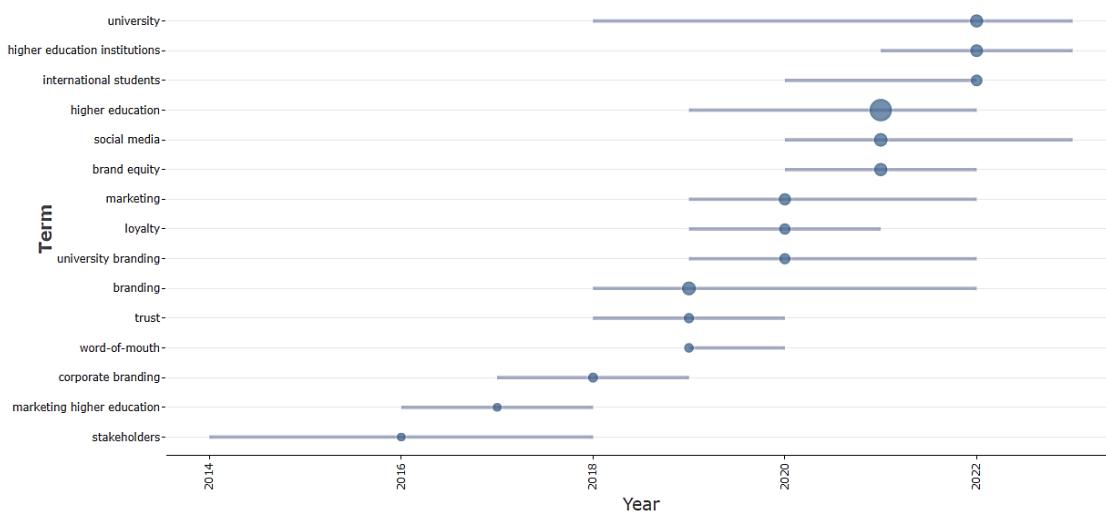
environment. It suggests the need for research approaches that are more tailored to the particularities of this sector.

The presentation in Figure 7 showcases a three-field chart incorporating country, keywords, and journal. The chart depicts occurrences using Sankey diagrams, with square sizes indicating frequency. Notably, UK scholars<sup>[34]</sup> exhibit a higher frequency of utilizing keywords such as "branding" and "brand image." In contrast, keywords like "Brand image" and "social media" are more prevalent among US academics. Spanish scholars primarily use "loyalty" in their studies, in addition to "quality service." When examining the journal keywords, besides "brand," the keyword "brand image" is favored in the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* and the *Journal of Business Research*. Table 7 and Figure 8 show the countries with the highest productive leadership based on the corresponding authorship, divided into international and national collaboration. The United States has the highest number of affiliated documents ( $n=69$ ) with an MCP\_Ratio of 0.159, whereas the United Kingdom, having a smaller number of affiliated documents ( $n=53$ ), has an MCP\_Ratio of

0.415. This indicates a higher level of international collaboration due to obtaining a higher MCP ratio.

Scientific leadership is intertwined with the type of collaboration, as detailing which country holds the principal authorship through respective correspondence underlies the collaboration type. Mentioning MCP signifies that at least two countries have produced the document, hence evaluating international collaboration. At the same time, SCP indicates collaboration within the same country, potentially among different institutions or at least two authors from the same institution.

By examining co-authorship patterns, bibliometric studies can identify collaboration relationships between institutions and/or countries. This analysis can reveal the extent of national and international collaborations and provide an image of knowledge exchange networks. This interpretation emphasizes the significance of international collaborations in enhancing the research output's global impact and the utility of bibliometric analysis in understanding the dynamics of research collaborations.



**Figure 4:** Keyword Trend Analysis. Source: Biblioshiny.

**Table 5: Sources with the most impact.**

Source	H-Index	G- Index	M-Index	TC	NP	YSP
Journal of Business Research	16	21	1.455	1085	21	2014
Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	16	26	2.000	844	80	2017
Studies in Higher Education	9	10	1.125	311	10	2017
Journal of Brand Management	8	8	0.800	186	8	2015
Higher Education	6	10	0.667	129	10	2016
International Journal of Educational Management	5	10	0.833	102	12	2019
Corporate Reputation review	4	5	0.800	66	5	2020
Discourse-Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education	4	4	0.500	125	4	2017
Higher Education Research and Development	4	6	0.364	62	6	2014
Journal of Cleaner Production	4	4	0.364	183	4	2014

Note: TC: Total Citations, NP: Number of Publications, and YSP: Year of Start of Publishing.

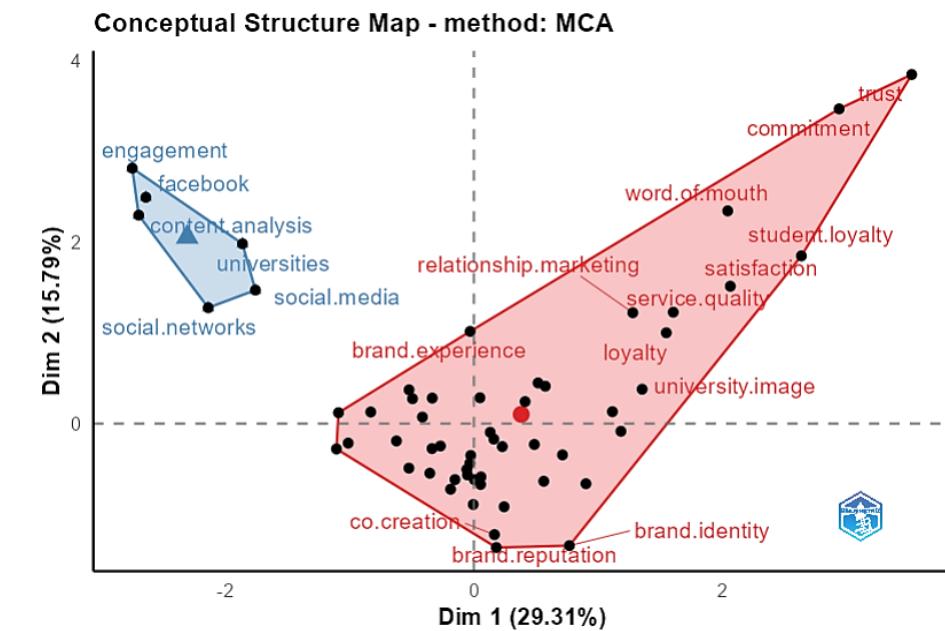


Figure 5: Conceptual Structure Map. Source: Biblioshiny.

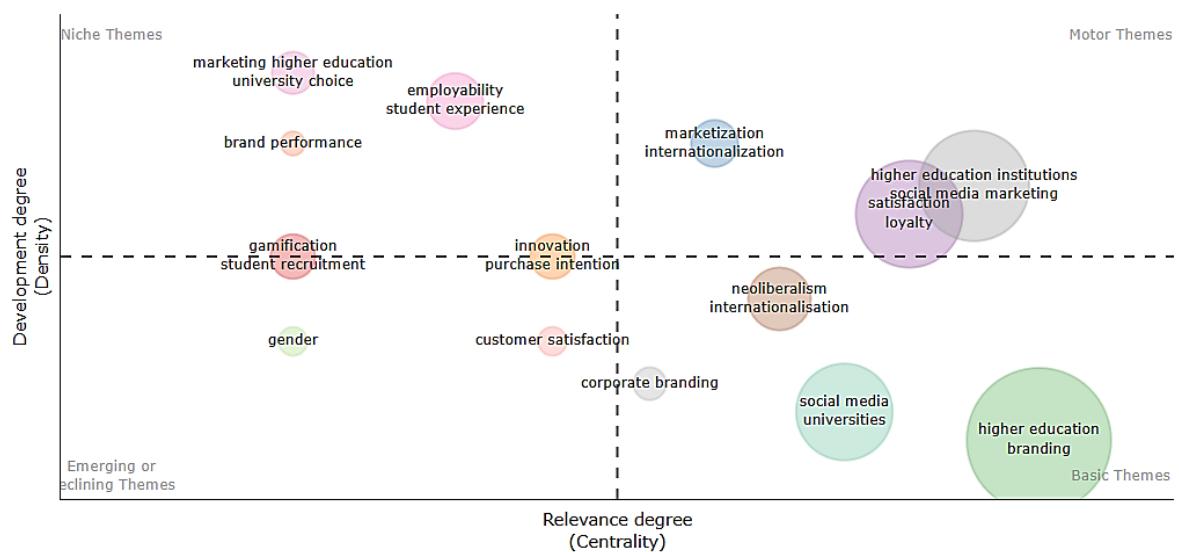


Figure 6: Thematic Map. Source: Biblioshiny.

Table 6: Most influential organizations.

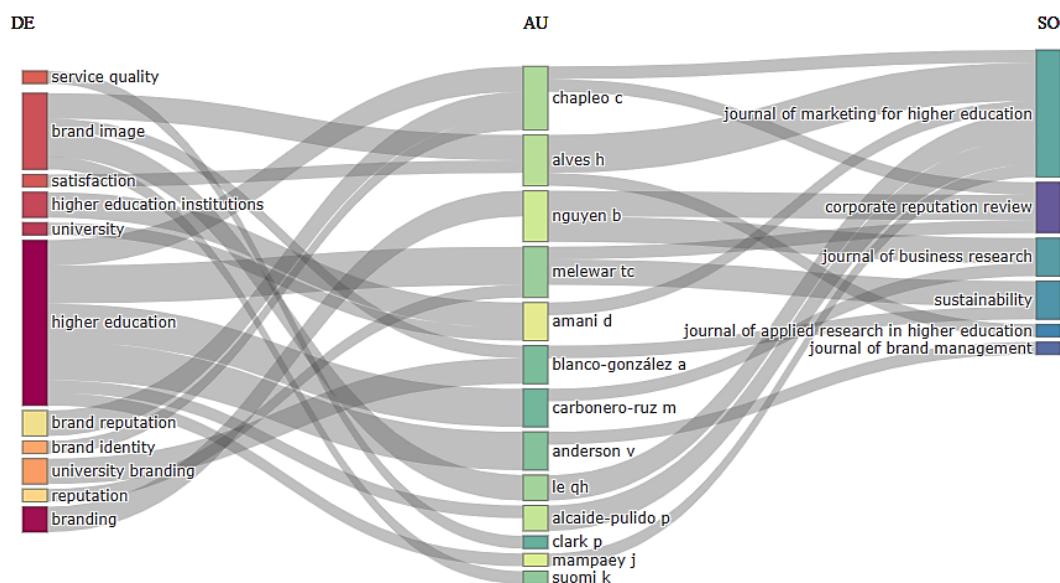
Sl. No.	Organization	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
1	Middlesex University	6	295	962
2	Deakin University	5	227	637
3	Newcastle University	4	213	658
4	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology	10	200	1312
5	Surrey University	4	137	361
6	University of Adelaide	5	126	713
7	Xiamen University Malaysai	5	121	1202
8	Griffith university	4	91	64
9	University Sydney	5	82	576
10	Bournemouth University	7	58	1266

Source: Vosviewer.

**Table 7:** Analysis according to scientific leadership and type of collaboration.

Rank	Country	Documents	SCP	MCP	Freq.	MCP_Ratio
1	USA	69	58	11	0.11	0.159
2	United Kingdom	53	31	22	0.084	0.415
3	China	46	30	16	0.073	0.348
4	Spain	43	37	6	0.068	0.14
5	Australia	37	22	15	0.059	0.405
6	India	31	24	7	0.049	0.226
7	Malaysia	28	20	8	0.045	0.286
8	Canada	15	11	4	0.024	0.267
9	Indonesia	14	12	2	0.022	0.143
10	Russia	14	13	1	0.022	0.071

Freq.=Frequency of the total documents; SCP=Single Country Production; MCP=Multiple Country Production.

**Figure 7:** Three-field diagram Authors, Keywords, and Journals. Source: Biblioshiny.

## Future Research Questions

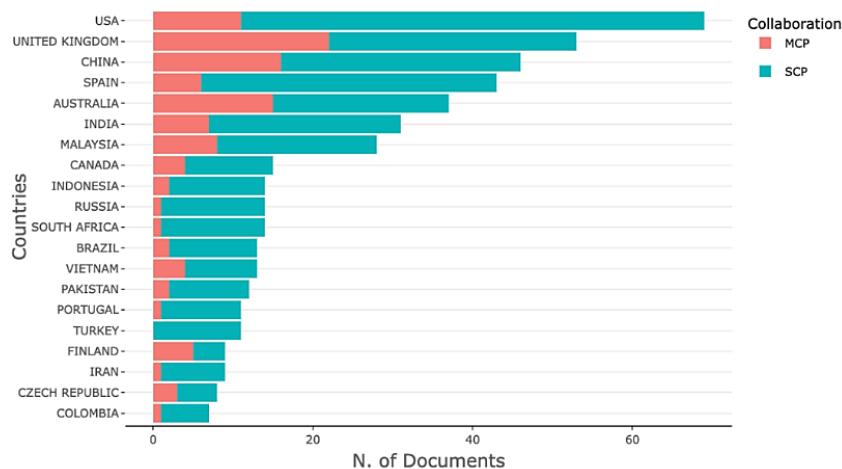
Firstly, focusing more on the emerging idea that brand value is a collaborative process is recommended, underscoring the importance of analyzing social media and online communities. This perspective also carries methodological implications. Future researchers are urged to move beyond conventional survey and self-report methodologies. Using machine learning and artificial intelligence, researchers can automatically gather data from web pages of higher education institutions and social media platforms. Meanwhile, higher education institutions can employ machine learning to monitor stakeholder perceptions of their institutional brand regularly. Textual parameters mentioned in the previous study<sup>[34]</sup> can be further used to analyze published articles.

Secondly, upcoming researchers must investigate how higher education institutions can effectively manage student-faculty relationships and internal brand consistency disruptions. Lastly,

the authors underscore the necessity of promoting greater collaboration between research on brand value and the domain of higher education. A sub-theme offers pertinent examples of such interdisciplinary research. For example, what influence do student perceptions exert on external perceptions of university brands and their participation in branding endeavors? Moreover, there is a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the connections and indirect impacts among different perspectives on brand value (student-centric, faculty-centric) and their enduring consequences for universities.

## LIMITATIONS

This study provided bibliometric insights into branding in higher education using data from the Web of Science Core Collection. While this analysis is comprehensive and objective, it has several limitations. First, specific influential articles not indexed in this database were excluded, which may limit the completeness of our



**Figure 8:** Collaborative production leadership distribution. Source: Biblioshiny.

analysis. Second, our search was restricted to articles and reviews published in English, potentially omitting high-impact research available in other languages. Third, data retrieval and extraction were conducted on March 1, 2023. While some data might reflect dynamic changes, the trends identified will likely remain broadly consistent. These limitations suggest that while our findings offer valuable insights into emerging research themes in higher education branding, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to broader contexts or languages. Further research incorporating additional databases and linguistic diversity may provide a more comprehensive view of the field.

## CONCLUSION

This research represents the inaugural bibliometric scrutiny of a decade's worth of research on brand value within higher education. The quantitative assessment serves as an initial exploration or inquiry into the domain of higher education branding. The study, conducted with comprehensive thoroughness, provides a quantitative depiction of the historical, contemporary, and prospective trajectory of brand research, covering dimensions such as brand value, brand image, brand knowledge, and brand management. The overarching observation indicates a sustained exponential growth in higher education branding, transitioning from an embryonic phase to a phase of expansion. Initially grounded in general brand research, the earlier endeavors progressively shifted towards an intensified focus on brand image, brand value, and brand management in recent studies.

Researchers at all stages of their careers, from newcomers to seasoned professionals, will find this study informative for their work in brand development within higher education. It reveals the key journals, seminal articles, and thematic content within these domains, shedding light on emerging trends and those in decline. Moreover, the identified clusters offer a holistic perspective of these areas, suggesting promising directions for future

research. Therefore, it lays a strong foundation for the continued advancement of brand research within higher education.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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