



Strategic Trajectories of University Brand Management in Digital Area: A Comparative Synthesis of International and Ukrainian Evidence

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15421/15253>**Cherniavska Oleksandra**Ph.D. Student, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9769-4867>, chernyavska.oleksandra@gmail.com*Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design (Kyiv, Ukraine)***Abstract.**

Relevance. The study addresses the growing role of digital environments in shaping university identity, where branding is increasingly connected to governance, stakeholder participation and communication through online platforms. The topic is important because higher education institutions are required to align their strategic communication with rapidly changing digital tools and practices.

The purpose. The research aims to systematise existing knowledge, trace the chronological development of digital university branding from 2008 to 2025 and compare how global models are adapted in different regional contexts, including Ukraine.

Results. The structured review of peer-reviewed studies allowed identification of four stages in the evolution of digital university branding. The field has moved from initial studies of brand personality and basic online presence to structured governance models, multi-actor participation and the use of social media as branding ecosystems. Ukrainian universities show accelerated adoption of such practices, adapting global approaches to local conditions. Underexplored areas include the influence of platform logics on brand perception, governance of decentralised and multi-author environments and the contribution of students, alumni, faculty and staff to institutional identity.

Conclusions. The study advances theoretical understanding of digital brand governance in higher education and provides practical guidance for aligning communication strategies with institutional missions. Further research should integrate theory and practice, apply cross-platform analysis and expand comparative evidence across regions to design governance models that reflect current realities of digital communication.

Keywords: brand management, digitalization, higher education, social media, platform-based communication, stakeholder engagement, comparative analysis

Стратегічні траєкторії управління брендом університету в цифровій сфері: порівняльний синтез міжнародного та українського досвіду

Чернявська Олександра*Київський національний університет технологій та дизайну (Київ, Україна)***Анотація.**

Актуальність. Дослідження розглядає зростаючу роль цифрового середовища у формуванні ідентичності університету, де брендинг все більше пов'язаний з управлінням, участю зацікавлених сторін та комунікацією через онлайн-платформи. Ця тема є важливою, оскільки вищі навчальні заклади повинні узгоджувати свою стратегічну комунікацію зі швидкозмінними цифровими інструментами та практиками.

Мета. Дослідження спрямоване на систематизацію існуючих знань, простеження хронологічного розвитку брендингу цифрового університету з 2008 по 2025 рік та порівняння того, як глобальні моделі адаптуються в різних регіональних контекстах, включаючи Україну.

Результати. Структурований огляд рецензованих досліджень дозволив визначити чотири етапи еволюції цифрового брендингу університетів. Галузь пройшла шлях від початкових досліджень особистості бренду та базової онлайн-присутності до структурованих моделей управління, участі багатьох учасників та використання соціальних мереж як екосистем брендингу. Українські університети демонструють прискорене впровадження таких практик, адаптуючи глобальні підходи до місцевих умов. Недосліджені сфери включають вплив логіки платформи на сприйняття бренду, управління децентралізованим та багатоавторським середовищем, а також внесок студентів, випускників, викладачів та співробітників в інституційну ідентичність.

Висновки. Дослідження розвиває теоретичне розуміння управління цифровим брендом у вищій освіті та надає практичні рекомендації щодо узгодження комунікаційних стратегій з місіями установи. Подальші дослідження повинні інтегрувати теорію та практику, застосовувати кросплатформний аналіз та розширювати порівняльні дані в різних регіонах для розробки моделей управління, що відображають сучасні реалії цифрової комунікації.

Ключові слова: бренд-менеджмент, діджиталізація, вища освіта, соціальні мережі, комунікація на основі платформ, взаємодія зі зацікавленими сторонами, порівняльний аналіз



1. Introduction

Relevance. Over the past two decades digital technologies have significantly changed how universities build and present their image. The main information space has shifted online. Websites social media and other platforms have become the primary channels of communication. Information there is updated constantly, and brand perception is shaped both by official messages and by the activity of students alumni and staff. Brand management has gradually become a managed process that includes content planning coordination of resources and work with audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic increased universities' reliance on digital channels. Political and economic crises have reduced the effectiveness of traditional reputation-building methods. International competition has placed additional pressure on universities especially in Ukraine and in Central and Eastern Europe. They need to take into account differences in languages cultures and legal systems. At the same time the growth of user-generated content and the influence of platform algorithms have changed the mechanisms of brand visibility. Studying strategic brand management in the digital environment is important for understanding how universities adapt to these conditions. Analysing the stages of its development from 2008 to 2025 and their characteristics in both international and Ukrainian contexts makes it possible to assess how existing practices meet the challenges of modern education and to identify directions for improvement.

The aim of the study is to identify the specific features of strategic university brand management in the digital environment as a phenomenon that evolves alongside the development of digital technologies, to determine the stages of its evolution from 2008 to 2025, and to analyse the characteristics of each stage in both international and Ukrainian contexts, taking into account the theoretical models and practices that emerged during this period.

The methodology of the study is based on a comparative-analytical approach. It draws upon a curated corpus of peer-reviewed studies published between 2017 and 2025, with a focus on the Ukrainian, European, and international contexts. The research involves qualitative synthesis of conceptual models (e.g., Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework, marketing mix extensions), empirical case analyses (e.g., content strategies across Twitter and institutional platforms), and applied recommendations for brand positioning, stakeholder interaction, and digital performance monitoring.

The subject of the research is the strategic configuration of university brand management in the digital environment. This includes formal practices

such as coordinated communication and performance analytics, as well as informal processes that emerge in user communities. The study assumes that a university brand is not a fixed image but a dynamic system of meanings that changes with context and interaction.

By situating the discussion at the intersection of brand management theory and higher education transformation in the digital area, this study contributes to the ongoing academic and institutional debate about how universities articulate, adapt, and amplify their identities in the digital age. The Ukrainian case, in particular, provides fertile ground for examining these dynamics, given the country's active integration into European knowledge frameworks and its unique digitalisation trajectories shaped by crisis, innovation, and reform.

2. Analysis of Previous Research and Publications.

The literature on university brand management in digital settings includes both conceptual models and practical cases. International studies have adapted existing marketing theories to the higher education context, while Ukrainian research has focused on applied strategies and context-specific challenges. Several works revise established frameworks. Pinar (2020) modifies the CBBE model for university brands and tests it in Turkey and the US. Stukalina and Pavlyuk (2021) apply CBBE to segment students in Latvia. Lim et al. (2018) extend the marketing mix to seven elements for HEIs in the Asia-Pacific. Demydiuk et al. (2025) localise this model for a Ukrainian university, adding a social element and digital tools such as SEO and SMM.

Practice-oriented studies complement these frameworks. Borovyk et al. (2023) describe a branding strategy for a Ukrainian language centre, including content design, ambassador roles, and governance structure. Demydiuk et al. (2025) provide digital marketing guidelines for regional institutions. Zhadko et al. (2019) examine student perceptions of digital brand identity through surveys.

Digital governance is a recurring topic. Faubet and Thomas (2017) present university-level communication models. Jones (2025) explores coordination across accounts and use of performance dashboards. Karadağ et al. (2022), Lisun (2023), and Sarder and Mustaqeem (2024) link platform-specific features with brand strategy. Their findings show how digital presence affects brand meaning, especially when content is co-produced.



Comparative work offers additional insight. Lisun (2023) compares Ukrainian and European universities. Borodiyenko et al. (2024) analyse ten EU cases. Karadağ et al. (2022) study Turkish and UK universities, and Lim et al. (2018) cover the Asia-Pacific region. Most Ukrainian studies build or adapt their own models instead of applying existing

ones directly. This reflects both institutional constraints and the need for local solutions.

Recent literature shows a shift from generic messaging to structured, digitally coordinated brand systems. Ukrainian contributions are becoming part of the international discussion but retain distinct features shaped by local conditions.

Table 1.

Comparative Overview of University Brand-Management Research in Digital Environments

Aspect	Summary / Notable Content
Branding frameworks / models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBBE model adapted to a university “brand ecosystem” (Pinar, 2020). • CBBE applied and validated in a Latvian case (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). • Higher-education marketing mix “7 Ps” empirically tested (Lim et al., 2018). • Conceptual (non-canonical) scheme integrating digital branding for Ukraine/EU (Lisun, 2023). • “7 P + S” mix localized for a regional Ukrainian HEI (Demydiuk et al., 2025)
Strategic-structure coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-step sequence—diagnostics, positioning, value proposition, communications, relationship management—illustrated in a Ukrainian single-case study (Borovyk et al., 2023). • Lisun (2023), Lim et al. (2018) and Demydiuk et al. (2025) discuss full cycles from analysis → implementation → monitoring, with differing depth.
Digital-relationship integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive social-media audit of Ukrainian and European HEIs (Lisun, 2023). • SMM, SEO and digital-platform tactics in a Ukrainian single case (Borovyk et al., 2023). • UGC vs. BGC analysis on Twitter across Turkey/UK universities (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Additional studies offer varying levels of social-media, CRM and platform analytics (Zhadko et al., 2019; Faubet & Thomas, 2017; Jones, 2025; Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Demydiuk et al., 2025).
Empirical case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainian single-case branding via an innovative language centre (Borovyk et al., 2023). • Ten leading EU universities compared qualitatively (Borodiyenko et al., 2024). • Social-media cases in Turkey and the UK (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Student-survey evidence during digitalisation in Ukraine (Zhadko et al., 2019). • UK institutional rebrand narratives (Pennack, 2017; Holloway & Williams, 2019). • Multi-case social-media branding in Bangladesh (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024).
Ukraine-specific focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparative Ukraine/EU digital branding (Lisun, 2023). • Single-case Ukrainian language-centre strategy (Borovyk et al., 2023). • EU best-practice lessons for Ukraine (Borodiyenko et al., 2024). • Branding elements amid education digitalisation (Zhadko et al., 2019). • Regional HEI marketing-mix adaptation with digital tools (Demydiuk et al., 2025).
International scope / comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine vs. EU comparison (Lisun, 2023). • Ten-country EU sample (Borodiyenko et al., 2024). • Turkey/UK (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Turkey/US (Pinar, 2020). • Latvia (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). • Sweden (Opoku et al., 2008). • Asia-Pacific (Lim et al., 2018). • Bangladesh (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024).
Stakeholder engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder mapping and feedback loops in a Ukrainian case (Borovyk et al., 2023). • UGC vs. BGC as stakeholder proxies (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Student perceptions as central stakeholders (Zhadko et al., 2019; Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). • Broader “7 Ps” touchpoints (Lim et al., 2018; Demydiuk et al., 2025).
Canonical-framework application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic use of Keller’s CBBE in a brand-ecosystem approach (Pinar, 2020). • CBBE mapped to local vs. foreign student perceptions (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021).
Depth of digital metrics / analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social-network audit of Ukraine/EU HEIs (Lisun, 2023). • R-based UGC–BGC correspondence analysis (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Engagement-rate, impression and follower analytics by platform (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). • Additional metrics for brand trust and touchpoints (Zhadko et al., 2019; Faubet & Thomas, 2017; Jones, 2025; Demydiuk et al., 2025).



Aspect	Summary / Notable Content
Practical recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital-brand integration and channel optimisation (Lisun, 2023). • Tactical guidance for Ukrainian / CEE contexts (Borovyk et al., 2023; Borodiyenko et al., 2024). • Aligning brand personality with competitive strategy (Karadağ et al., 2022). • Social-media structure and governance (Jones, 2025; Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Demydiuk et al., 2025).

Source: Compiled by the author based on Pinar (2020), Stukalina & Pavlyuk (2021), Lim et al. (2018), Lisun (2023), Karadağ et al. (2022), Borodiyenko et al. (2024), and others

The table helps compare how studies vary in the level of analysis, quality of evidence and clarity of concepts in different countries and research designs. It shows that Ukrainian studies in this field are becoming more detailed and strategic in their use of data. At the same time, they are still only partly connected to the broader international work on university branding. This suggests the need for approaches that combine local digital practices with recognised international models.

3. Results.

This section presents the findings of the literature-based analytical reconstruction conducted by the author, with particular emphasis on the temporal, regional, and conceptual evolution of university brand-management strategies in digital environments. The analysis is structured into four subsections: conceptual milestones and periodization (3.1), key

strategic trajectories (3.2), contextualization within the Ukrainian academic ecosystem (3.3), and a synthesis of trends and research gaps (3.4).

3.1 Conceptual Milestones and Chronological Periodization.

To examine how approaches to university brand management in digital environments have evolved, the literature was grouped into distinct periods. The periodisation was based on three criteria: the dominant conceptual frameworks used by researchers, the nature of branding infrastructures adopted by universities, and the prevailing governance arrangements for brand-related activities. Each period contains works that set turning points in the field, either by introducing new theoretical models, refining existing concepts, or documenting shifts in practical application.

Table 2.

Chronological Periodisation of Digital University Brand-Management Strategies (2008–2025)

Period (Years)	Period Title	Analytical Summary with References
2008–2015	Early Exploration	Initial studies assessed university brand personalities in Sweden (Opoku et al., 2008) and mapped social media use in Canadian HEIs (Bélanger et al., 2014). UK-based interviews revealed reliance on corporate branding logic and minimal strategic use of digital tools (Chapleo, 2015).
2016–2020	Institutionalisation and Model Building	Structural models emerged, including digital branding governance archetypes (Faubet & Thomas, 2017) and refinements of the HEI marketing mix (Lim et al., 2018). Keller’s CBBE model was adapted into a university brand-ecosystem format and validated in cross-national contexts (Pinar, 2020).
2019–2023	Empirical Digital Integration and Stakeholder Branding	Ukrainian and European case studies deepened understanding of digital strategy (Zhadko et al., 2019; Lisun, 2023; Borovyk et al., 2023). A decade-long analysis of EU branding emphasised autonomy, innovation, and ethics (Borodiyenko et al., 2024). In Latvia, student-origin segmentation refined the CBBE application (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021).
2021–2025	Platform-Based Branding and Network Effects	Strategic use of social media platforms expanded: Twitter was analysed by content origin and brand personality (Karadağ et al., 2022); platform-specific branding functions were mapped in South Asia (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). Governance shifted towards cross-campus collaboration and account integration (Jones, 2025).

Source: compiled and systematised by the author based on key academic contributions from 2008 to 2025.



The analysis of these periods shows a gradual movement from adopting corporate communication patterns to creating branding systems tailored to the academic context. Over time, the emphasis shifted from isolated digital initiatives to integrated platform strategies, with growing attention to multi-actor participation and network effects. These changes provide the foundation for identifying the main strategic trajectories discussed in the next subsection.

3.2 Strategic Trajectories in Digital University Brand Management.

Studies show that universities develop their

digital brand strategies along different but overlapping paths. Authors use varied methods and focus on different regions, yet certain patterns appear repeatedly. Table 3 summarises the main works, showing the conceptual frameworks applied, attention to digital channels, case scope, and distinctive features. This comparison helps to identify which approaches draw on established theory and which are developed for specific contexts. It also indicates where the evidence base is strong, where it is partial, and where research is absent.

Table 3.

Comparative Profile of Key Studies on Digital University Brand-Management

Reference	Framework used	Digital relationship focus	Case study / scope	Ukraine-specific detail	International / aggregate scope	Strategic depth	Unique points
Lisun (2023)	Yes – custom (no canonical model)	High – social-media audit and touch-point taxonomy	Multiple universities (Ukraine + EU)	Yes	Yes	High	Rare integration of digital transformation with full strategic diagnostics in a Ukrainian context
Borovyk, Ustychenko, Zalozna, and Voloshchenko (2023)	No – multi-step practical scheme	High – SMM, SEO, digital platforms	Single case (Cherkasy State Business College)	Yes	No	Moderate	Feedback loops and local digital tactics not tied to canonical frameworks
Borodiyenko, Drok, and Kolodii (2024)	Partial – values-focused framework	Moderate – “progressive” brand communications	Multiple cases (10 leading EU HEIs)	Yes (extrapolated lessons)	Yes	High	Differentiated EU value communication translated for Ukrainian policy learning
Karadağ, Demir, and Ayan (2022)	Strategic – alignment of strategy and personality	High – UGC/BGC Twitter analysis	Four universities (Turkey / UK)	No	Yes (Turkey + UK)	High	Maps UGC vs. BGC dispersions to competitive archetypes
Zhadko, Gagarina, and Mykhailova (2019)	No	Moderate – digitalisation emphasis	Student survey (Ukraine)	Yes	No	Low–moderate	Element-wise approach; limited strategic integration
Faubet and Thomas (2017)	No – governance focus	Moderate–high – digital-comms governance	Conceptual discussion	No	Implicit	Moderate	Three governance models for HEI digital branding
Jones (2025)	No – governance / strategy	High – cross-campus social-media collaboration	Insight / best-practice guide	No	Implicit	Moderate	Structural reform for digital comms across decentralised HEIs



Reference	Framework used	Digital relationship focus	Case study / scope	Ukraine-specific detail	International / aggregate scope	Strategic depth	Unique points
Sarder and Mustaqeem (2024)	None – practical empirical	High – platform-specific SMM impact	Multiple institutions (Bangladesh)	No	No	Moderate	Platform-differentiated SMM metrics for branding and engagement
Pinar (2020)	Yes – Keller CBBE “brand ecosystem”	Low–moderate (mentions digital)	Empirical, Turkey / US	No	Yes	High	Canonical-framework rigour; service “sub-brands”; limited digital depth
Stukalina and Pavlyuk (2021)	Yes – Keller CBBE	Minimal	Single case (Latvia)	No	No	High (for CBBE)	Market-orientation; CBBE split by local vs. foreign students
Opoku, Abratt, and Saheli-Sangari (2008)	Yes – online brand-personality typology	Moderate–high	Multiple universities (Sweden)	No	Yes	Moderate–high	Early, detailed positioning of online personalities
Lim, Stanton, and Roper (2018)	Yes – “7 Ps” marketing mix	Low–moderate	Asia-Pacific survey	No	Yes	High	Marketing mix for B2C/B2B HE offerings
Demydiuk, Pidlisnyuk, and Strilchuk (2025)	Yes – “7 P + S” marketing mix	Moderate–high – digital-tool focus	Single regional university (Ukraine)	Yes	No	Moderate	Adds “social” P; integrates SEO, SMM, contextual advertising

Source: compiled by the author based on reviewed literature.

The analysis of studies in Table 3 allows three main strategic directions in digital university brand management to be identified. The first is the formalisation of internal governance. In the early years, digital tools were used without a clear plan. University leaders in the United Kingdom did not view them as strategic and often followed corporate models with limited relevance to higher education (Chapleo, 2015). Later, more structured governance schemes for digital communication emerged (Faubet & Thomas, 2017). The higher education marketing mix was refined to incorporate digital channels more systematically (Lim, Stanton & Roper, 2018).

The second direction is the adaptation of existing models to local conditions. One example is the Keller CBBE model, originally designed for corporate brands. It was tested in universities in Turkey and the United States (Pinar, 2020). In Latvia, the same

model was expanded to include student background as a key factor in brand evaluation (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). Such adaptation involves not only applying a model to a new market but also changing indicators, emphasis, and segmentation logic to reflect local audiences and priorities.

The third direction is the use of digital platforms as coordination tools. Branding is no longer only about sending messages; it also involves ongoing interaction with users across multiple platforms. Research shows that different platforms serve different functions in brand building. One study compared content produced by universities and by users on Twitter (Karadağ, Demir & Ayan, 2022). Another analysed how Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok contribute in distinct ways to branding efforts (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024). Jones (2025) reported cases where universities manage departmental social media accounts as part of a unified system.



Taken together, these three directions indicate a shift towards more structured governance, greater adaptation to local contexts, and stronger integration of platform-specific coordination in the development of a university's digital brand.

3.3 Ukrainian Context: Accelerated Integration and Strategic Reflexivity.

Ukraine offers an example of rapid progress in digital brand management under external pressure. Although Ukrainian universities joined this academic field later than others, several studies from 2019 to 2025 show fast development in research and practice.

The first large-scale study appeared in 2019. Zhadko, Gagarina and Mykhailova (2019) used a student survey to examine how digital tools affected the internal brand image of universities. Their work showed that digitalisation had already started to change how students perceive institutional identity. Later, Lisun (2023) compared Ukrainian and European universities. She proposed a branding model that responds to crisis situations. In her view, digital marketing tools can help institutions stay visible and maintain trust during instability. This model combined external communication with ideas of resilience and adaptability.

Borovyk, Ustychenko, Zalozna and Voloshchenko (2023) analysed one Ukrainian university in depth. Their strategy included clear content blocks, defined roles for student ambassadors, and better coordination across university departments. This was one of the first studies to connect branding with internal management structures in a Ukrainian case. These studies reflect broader regional patterns. For example, in Latvia, Stukalina and Pavlyuk (2021) introduced audience segmentation based on student origin. Ukrainian institutions also began using this logic to shape their messages on different platforms. This suggests growing attention to who receives the brand message, not only how it is delivered.

The Ukrainian literature shows two tendencies. On one hand, researchers rely on international branding theories. On the other, they start to build their own models based on local challenges, such as war, migration, and limited resources. This combination of external influence and internal development is shaping a distinct Ukrainian approach to digital university branding.

4. Conclusions.

The conducted review and analytical synthesis indicate that digital university branding is evolving into a distinct area of research with its own methodological approaches and conceptual frameworks. The historical reconstruction presented in this study confirms a gradual shift from corporate borrowing to the formation of strategies specifically adapted to

the institutional logic of higher education. The proposed chronological periodisation, combined with the identification of three strategic directions, provides a structured lens for understanding this evolution. This framework reflects not only the adaptation of external models but also the emergence of branding practices that are integrated with governance processes and cross-platform communication strategies.

The Ukrainian case offers a particular contribution to the field by illustrating a model of accelerated integration under conditions of instability. Here, institutions have been compelled to combine resilience-oriented communication with structured internal coordination, demonstrating that context-specific constraints can stimulate innovation in digital brand governance. Such findings enrich the broader comparative landscape, showing how regional challenges influence the selection and adaptation of branding tools.

The originality of this research lies in its integration of temporal analysis, regional differentiation, and governance-oriented interpretation of branding strategies. While previous studies often examined these dimensions separately, the present work brings them together into a coherent analytical structure. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how digital branding evolves when influenced by technological change, organisational transformation, and socio-political context.

At the same time, the synthesis highlights several gaps that should guide future inquiry. These include the ethical implications of algorithmic and platform logics for brand perception, the mechanisms of managing decentralised and multi-author branding environments, and the underexplored role of academic staff as active brand co-creators. Addressing these issues will require methodological approaches that connect strategic frameworks with empirical evidence drawn from diverse institutional settings.

Future research can extend the proposed framework by applying it to longitudinal and cross-regional studies, exploring the interaction between digital branding and other institutional functions such as quality assurance, student recruitment, and alumni relations. Expanding the evidence base through comparative studies would help to develop governance models that are both context-sensitive and scalable across different higher education systems. Such models could serve as practical tools for decision-makers and communication teams, ensuring that digital branding strategies reflect the realities of institutional life while supporting long-term organisational identity.



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