

Meta-Analysis of the Concept of Brand Humanisation in Higher Education

Research Paper

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Abstract: Research purpose. The purpose of this study is to identify and quantitatively evaluate the volume of scientific publications, the latest research trends, and the main topics related to brand humanisation in higher education (HE). This aim is motivated by the growing importance of empathetic and human-centred communication in a competitive and digitalised educational environment. Although widely applied in practice, the concept remains fragmented in academic research, creating the need for a systematic bibliometric analysis to clarify its development and future directions.

Design / Methodology / Approach. A bibliometric analysis was applied to systematise knowledge on brand humanisation in HE during 2005-2024. The analysis was conducted in several stages, including literature review, database selection, keyword specification, article screening, data extraction, and analysis. Data were retrieved from Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection, ensuring access to peer-reviewed publications and reliable citation indicators. After applying selection criteria, 84 articles were retained. Descriptive bibliometrics (publication dynamics, citation statistics, collaboration patterns) were combined with science mapping techniques (keyword co-occurrence networks, overlay visualisation, and thematic mapping) using VOSviewer, R Bibliometrix, and Microsoft Excel. This framework enabled the identification of research clusters, dominant themes, and emerging areas.

Findings. The analysis reveals that research on brand humanisation in HE remains underdeveloped but shows growing interest. The most influential works focus on constructs such as brand personality, image, and identity, while direct studies on anthropomorphism and storytelling are rare. Results highlight the USA, Malaysia, and Canada as leading contributors, though international collaboration is still limited. Science mapping uncovers six thematic clusters: brand image and reputation; brand identity and loyalty; personality and perception; social media engagement; consumer behaviour; and anthropomorphism. Findings confirm a shift from traditional branding approaches towards digital communication, personalisation, and emotional engagement, reflecting universities' adaptation to students' evolving expectations in digital environments.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. This study provides the first systematic bibliometric overview of brand humanisation in HE, consolidating fragmented knowledge and identifying emerging themes. While primarily academic in focus, its practical relevance lies in offering insights into the most studied and underexplored aspects of the field. These insights can guide universities and HE marketers in recognising trends, addressing conceptual gaps, and aligning their communication strategies with approaches emphasised in the literature. In this way, the study serves as a roadmap for institutions seeking to enhance positioning and responsiveness in a digitally mediated education environment.

Keywords: brand anthropomorphism • brand humanisation • engagement • higher education • higher education marketing

JEL codes: M31, I23

Introduction

The ongoing digital transformation of society have played a pivotal role in shaping brand humanisation strategies in higher education (HE). Universities were compelled to radically change the ways they engage with students, as physical distancing and increased feelings of isolation made empathetic communication more crucial than ever.

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At the same time, the rapid digitalisation of marketing, together with the growing influence of Machine Learning (from social media platforms to AI chatbots) has introduced new opportunities to humanise university brands, while also presenting certain challenges. Industry 5.0 principles emphasised human-centred innovation, advocating for technology to enhance human experiences rather than replace them (Reavey et al., 2018). In the context of HE marketing, this has meant deploying digital tools to amplify personalisation and empathy. For example, virtual assistants and chatbots have become commonplace on university websites, with institutions increasingly experimenting to make these interactions culturally sensitive, emotionally expressive, and approachable. Emerging technologies, such as digital twins or virtual student “influencers,” provide simulated human interactions that offer more immersive engagement and foster a sense of connection.

The digital transformation of communication also involves reaching students in new spaces (from Instagram and YouTube to virtual reality environments). Social media has proven to be particularly impactful for brand humanisation, enabling both real-time storytelling and interactive engagement. Forward-looking trends, such as metaverse campuses and AI-driven student communities, further expand the possibilities for meaningful interaction. Yet, across these innovations, the fundamental principle remains that effective brand humanisation relies on understanding relationships, maintaining authentic presence, and leveraging perceived anthropomorphism to strengthen students’ emotional connection and loyalty (Vernuccio et al., 2025). It should be noted that HE branding does not concern students alone. HEIs rely on humanised communication to engage diverse stakeholder groups, including academic staff, administrative personnel, alumni, strategic partners, and prospective collaborators. Institutional strategy, governance culture, and staff identity contribute significantly to how human traits are expressed in branding.

Moreover, the diversity of marketing technologies requires coordinated strategies to ensure consistency and coherence across various touchpoints. Research highlights that cross-cultural differences influence how students perceive and relate to brand messaging, suggesting the need for tailored approaches that resonate effectively with different audiences (Perera et al., 2023a; Perera et al., 2023b; Roy & Misra, 2024). While younger students often connect more easily with softer constructs such as brand identity, more mature graduates may be more responsive to constructs like commitment and engagement (Al-Abdallah & Ababakr, 2025; Dennis et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing strategic use of humanised communication in HE, the concept remains theoretically fragmented. Existing studies focus predominantly on broader branding constructs, such as image, identity, reputation, and authenticity, while offering limited conceptual clarification of humanisation itself and its underlying mechanisms (De Miranda, 2020). At the same time, the rapid shift toward digital, personalised, and relational communication in HE highlights the need to understand how humanised branding functions as a differentiating strategy in an increasingly competitive global environment. Understanding why brand humanisation matters is essential for HE professionals who increasingly operate in a competitive, international, and digitally mediated environment. Humanised branding can help universities differentiate themselves, build trust, and strengthen relationships with prospective and current students. For practitioners, clearer knowledge about brand humanisation can support more effective recruitment and retention strategies, improve the clarity and emotional resonance of institutional communication, and enhance student engagement through personalised and meaningful interactions. In a period marked by demographic shifts, intensified competition, and rapid technological change, these insights help HEIs create more authentic and relatable identities. Therefore, researching this gap is not only academically relevant but also practically significant for strengthening the effectiveness of HE marketing. As this gap becomes clearer, it is essential to consider why a deeper understanding of brand humanisation matters for higher education professionals. Why do HEI practitioners need more knowledge about how humanised branding works? How can findings from this research be applied to recruitment and retention strategies to strengthen relationships with prospective and current students? And how might improved understanding of human-centred communication enhance the overall effectiveness of higher education marketing during turbulent and highly competitive times in the sector? These questions highlight the practical importance of addressing the conceptual gap identified in the literature. These gaps demonstrate the necessity of a systematic bibliometric assessment capable of mapping how the field has developed, where research concentrations lie, and which areas require further conceptual refinement.

In response, the aim of this study is to identify and quantitatively evaluate the volume of scientific publications, the latest research trends, and the main thematic directions related to brand humanisation in HE. To achieve this aim, a bibliometric analysis was conducted, enabling the systematic examination of publication structures, dominant research topics, author contributions, and citation patterns (Donthu et al., 2021; Odoi-Yorke et al., 2024).

Literature review

In order to understand the humanisation of brands, we should start from the perspective of the production of goods and services that satisfy human wants. This broad topic comprises three streams: a human-focused perspective, examining consumers' perceptions of brands as having human-like qualities; a relationship-focused perspective, examining how consumers' relationships with brands can resemble their relationships with people; and more self-focused perspective, examining not how the brand is like people in general, but rather how it is specifically like oneself - they might humanise brands in other ways (e.g., seeing brands as like or connected to the self; regarding brands as relationship partners) (Folkes & MacInnis, 2016).

Humanising a brand involves cultivating a distinct authentic brand personality – using specific slogans, tone, and imagery with assertive or relaxing messaging that consistently support and underline some human traits (humor, sincerity, adventurousness, nostalgia, hope, sense of belonging etc.), and thus satisfying these intrinsic or extrinsic needs – using insights from psychology (e.g., social proof, reward mechanisms) to design messaging that resonates deeply with students. Brand may benefit from employing hybrid message strategies that combine assertiveness with other persuasive cues, to enhance message impact based on different psychological and behavioural responses (Gong et al., 2025; Kronrod et al., 2022).

Personalisation through data profiling allows for efficient handling of consumer inquiries, customising interactions based on individual preferences, and quickly adjusting to dynamic situations (Vinoi et al., 2025). This essentially involves applying digital CRM with a human touch: using data to remember students' personal details and preferences, similarly to how individuals recall characteristics of акшутві. The goal is to demonstrate that tailored content leads to stronger student engagement and satisfaction, as it signals effort and respect for the individual as a form of rational evaluation, subsequently fostering emotional loyalty. Importantly, personalisation requires the support of robust AI CRM systems (Jin et al., 2023; Mathwick et al., 2010).

Frequently, brand humanisation uses altruistic positioning presenting the university as more transcendent and a caring, socially responsible actor. For universities, this might mean highlighting how the university contributes to society (e.g. scientific research, volunteering, supporting local communities). Empathy could be directed to ethical outcomes (Schoofs et al., 2022). It could represent a more altruistic approach, aligning with the 'ethics of care' (EoC) in public relations, which positions organisations as moral caregivers in their communications with stakeholders (Hou & Johnston, 2024). Care ethics literature enumerates important values like "cooperation, respect, caring, nurturance, interconnection, justice, equity, honesty, sensitivity, perceptiveness, intuition, altruism, fairness, morality, and commitment" (Grunig et al., 2000). EoC could be a dynamic, socially constructed process as a level-transcending ethical framework for public relations of university Public Relations, that is open to contextual interpretations, by recognising the interchangeable role of care-receivers (e.g., public, community members) as caregivers to co-deliver care ethics (Hou & Johnston, 2024; Madden & Alt, 2021).

Empathy and personal care in communications are essential in HE marketing, particularly during crisis situations. Such approaches help to understand stakeholders' needs, concerns, experiences, and emotions, thereby adequately addressing their expected mental state. Schoofs et al. (2022) emphasise that an empathetic response should demonstrate understanding of stakeholders' experiences, sensitivity to their emotions, and a commitment to addressing their needs and concerns.

Effective international recruitment often uses digitally personalised communication and strong Customer Relationship Management (CRM). Support becomes very customised with immediate follow-ups, provides and guides timely information, and virtual AI tools and assistants to address individual questions, signalling a human touch behind the brand (Sharma & Rahman, 2022). Institutions use a deferral approach, virtual fairs, mobile applications, and one-on-one (peer-to-peer) advisor communications (Dalisaymo, 2025). Parasocial relationships can humanise brands and strengthen consumers' digital brand relationships (Weiger et al., 2025).

A strong, interactive online presence is another vital factor for high-involvement services. Social media and virtual platforms allow universities to showcase human aspects of campus life and engage students. In the context of high-involvement services, the moderating effect of brand reputation on affective content works better for providers with a quality (vs. social responsibility) reputation. Thus, universities could humanise their digital content (through stories, short videos, student takeovers, interactive Q&As, etc.) and create a sense of connection with different international cultures (Chapleo, 2011; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2016; Hung & Yen, 2022; Zhu, 2022)

Using anthropomorphic cues (e.g., personable mascots, virtual avatars, or humanised language) makes the institution appear more like a person than an abstract entity. A digital extension of this strategy involves deploying anthropomorphised agents, such as AI chatbots and virtual assistants, to interact with prospective students (Dabiran et al., 2024; Pisica et al., 2023). When chatbots are assigned human-like names, avatars, or the ability to express emotion, students perceive the institution as more approachable and empathetic (Zogaj et al., 2023). On a broader scale, HE institutions are advised to incorporate anthropomorphic elements into their branding strategies. Anthropomorphised appeals are particularly effective in high-uncertainty decision contexts, where they exert significantly greater influence than impersonal approaches. The underlying mechanism involves uncertainty reduction, which explains cross-cultural differences in the effectiveness of anthropomorphism for complex and risky choices, such as the decision to study abroad. This mechanism mitigates perceived risks by making the institution appear more familiar and trustworthy. This effect is especially relevant in societies or cultures with high uncertainty avoidance. Conversely, AI products lacking human-like features may be less effective in cultural contexts (Velasco et al., 2021).

Students could seek out institutions that embrace human values like diversity, environmental friendliness and inclusion in their brand identity (Grosz, 2008; Schwartz, 1992). In practice, this might mean that human value-expressive brand anthropomorphism messaging could help them in their efforts to create long-term competitive advantages (Conger et al., 2018; Ketron & Naletelich, 2019). Showcasing human value inclusiveness in marketing materials, highlighting initiatives for equity, or publicising prosocial and parasocial (e.g. through influencers) values-driven projects (sustainability, community outreach) ties into brand altruism (Pinar et al., 2014). Overall, findings reveal a clear pattern by which brand competitiveness increases through greater engagement, sparked by tweets with high levels of human values (Chinchilla et al., 2020; Fantauzzi et al., 2019; Mirzaei et al., 2024).

Emotional storytelling is highlighted in numerous studies as a powerful tool for brand humanisation, providing both identity and authenticity. Rather than merely presenting rational facts, such as programs, rankings, or facilities, universities communicate authentic narratives about people (students, alumni, and faculty) to convey brand values and personality (Gómez-Bayona et al., 2024). These narratives trigger empathy and emotional transport, enabling prospective students to envision themselves within the stories and to relate personally. Storytelling effectively humanises abstract concepts and serves as a natural vehicle for expressing a brand's ideas, values, vision, actions, and journey (Srivastava et al., 2023). Cultural exposure also influences storytelling style (Lounsbury et al., 2019). A university's narrative can be tailored to the specific needs of students, often emphasising student experiences, personal growth, and community engagement rather than self-promotion; for example, using character-driven stories as protagonists enhances the perception of the brand as authentic and human (Anaza et al., 2020).

Research methodology

To explore how brand humanisation has been addressed in HE researches, this study conducted a bibliometric analysis of relevant scholarly publications. This approach allowed for a systematic examination of publication trends, identification of prominent research themes, mapping of authors' contributions, and evaluation of citation impact (Donthu et al., 2021; Odoi-Yorke et al., 2024). The study was carried out in several consecutive phases, as shown in Figure 1. In the first phase, the existing literature was analysed to identify the main research concept, determine the research gap in this field, and formulate the research objective and questions. In the second phase, two internationally recognised academic databases (Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection) were chosen for data collection. They provide access to a wide range of qualitative, peer-reviewed publications and the opportunity to analyse citation and research trends (Chadegani et al., 2013; Elsevier, 2024).

A search strategy was developed in the third stage by defining keywords and setting inclusion and exclusion criteria. Figure 2 illustrates the article selection process and its stages in the PRISMA flowchart. The literature selection was conducted using the following keywords: ("brand humani*ation" OR "humani*ing brand*" OR "humani*ed brand*" OR "human traits in branding" OR "brand personality" OR "Brand* Anthropomorphi*" OR "anthropomorphi* brand*" OR "Image humani*ation" OR "Emotional branding" OR "Emotional storytelling" OR "brand* personification*" OR "Personified brand*") AND ("higher education" OR "universit*" OR "academic institution*" OR HEI*). Data selection was carried out in the fields: article title, abstract, and keywords.

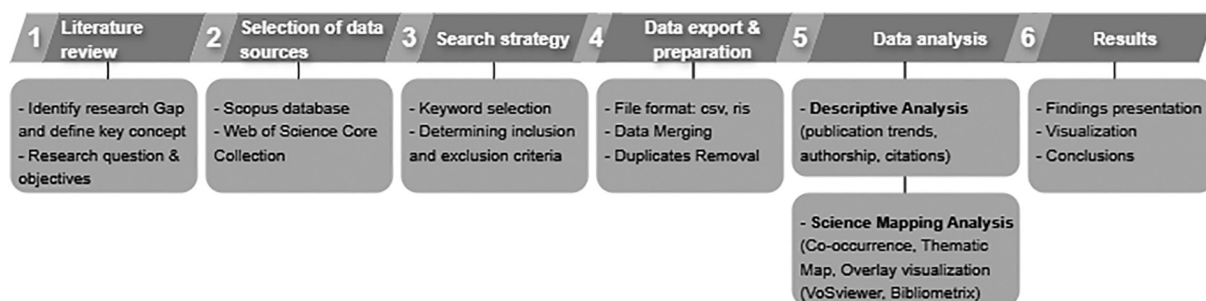


Figure 1. Methodological framework for bibliometric analysis (Source: developed by the authors).

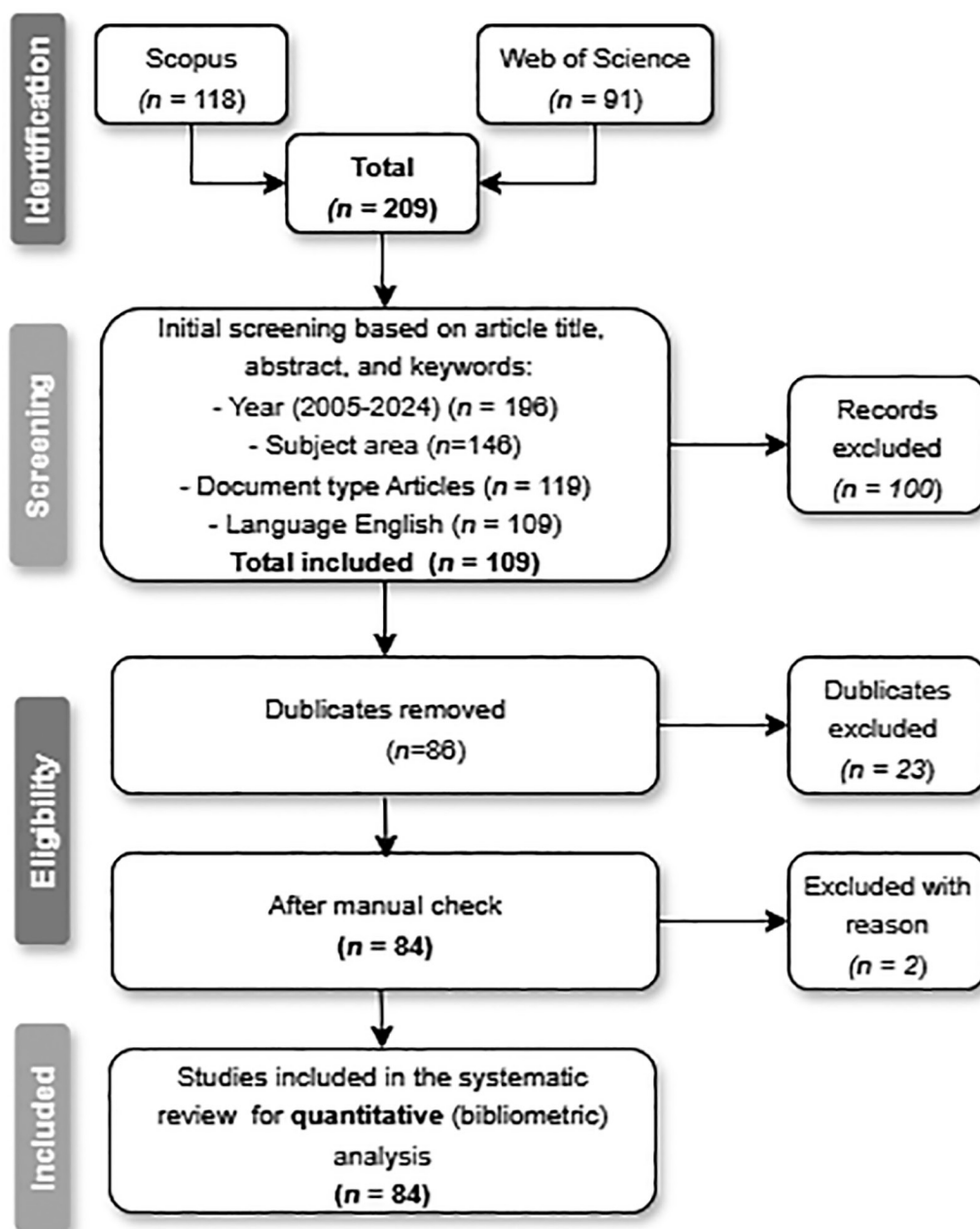


Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 flowchart illustrating the search strategy for the bibliometric analysis (Page et al., 2021) (Source: developed by the authors).

In addition, the following restrictions were applied:

- publication type: only peer-reviewed scientific articles were included, excluding conference papers, abstracts, books, and other types of publications;
- language: only publications in English;
- subject area: Social Sciences, Business, Management and Accounting, Economics, Econometrics and Finance, Decision Sciences, Education;
- publication period: from 2005 to 2024 (covering a twenty-year period).

After the initial selection ($n=209$), irrelevant articles and duplicates were excluded, resulting in 84 articles being retained for further quantitative bibliometric analysis. In the fourth stage, the selected data were exported in appropriate formats (.csv, .ris) and subsequently merged into a unified dataset. Following data merging, data structuring and preparation for further analysis were carried out, ensuring a consistent bibliographic record format.

In the fifth phase, a comprehensive data analysis was conducted, integrating both descriptive and science mapping methods. The descriptive analysis examined publication trends over the study period, identified the geographical distribution of publications by highlighting the leading countries in the field, assessed the extent of international collaboration, and determined citation indicators, including the most cited articles. Science mapping analysis, in turn, focused on uncovering the structure of research topics and their interrelationships using methods such as keyword co-occurrence, word clouds, co-occurrence overlay, and thematic mapping. The software VOSviewer (version 1.6.19), Microsoft Excel, and the R package Bibliometrix were employed for result mapping and visualisation.

In the sixth phase, the analysis results were summarised and interpreted, emphasising the most significant findings. Visualisations, including charts, thematic maps, and network maps, were used to support the presentation of results. Based on the analysed data, conclusions were subsequently formulated.

Overall, this methodological framework ensured a systematic and replicable approach to identifying, selecting, and analysing relevant publications. The combination of descriptive and science-mapping techniques provided a comprehensive basis for evaluating both the structural characteristics and the thematic evolution of research on brand humanisation in higher education.

Research results

This section presents the main bibliometric results, including publication trends, geographical distribution, citation patterns, and the thematic structure of research on brand humanisation in higher education. Figure 3 shows the main bibliometric statistics of this study, obtained using the Bibliometrix R package tool. In total, the study included and analysed 84 scientific publications, published from 2005 to 2024, with an average annual growth rate of 14.8%. The analysed articles were represented in fifty-one scientific journals, and they were contributed by 231 authors, of whom only five authors published their research results individually. The average number of co-authors per publication is 2.95, while international co-authored publications account for 22.62%. This indicates a moderate level of international collaboration in this research area. The analysed dataset has identified 300 unique author keywords. The average age of publications is seven years, indicating a relatively early stage of development in this research field. The average number of citations per publication is 23.37.

Publication Trends (2005-2024). Figure 4 reflects the dynamics of scientific publications development on the topic of brand humanisation in the context of HE over the last twenty years. The total number of publications during this period (84 articles over twenty years) indicates a relatively low academic interest. The average annual publication growth rate was 14.8%. Between 2006 and 2014, the number of publications remained very low, rarely exceeding two to three articles per year. From 2015 onwards, a gradual increase is observed. In 2024, the highest number of publications was recorded, with a total of 12 articles, representing the peak across the entire period. This trend reflects the growing academic interest in brand humanisation strategies in HE, driven by intensified competition, the expansion of digital and social media channels, and the increasing importance of university reputation and international rankings (.

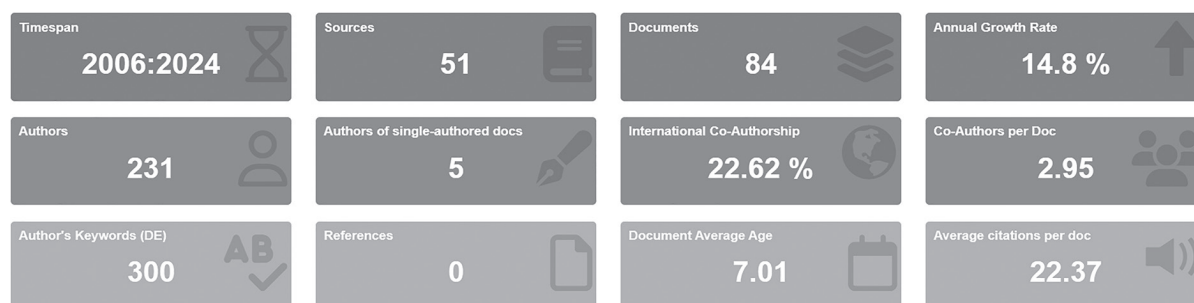


Figure 3. Main descriptive statistics of the bibliometric dataset (Source: Bibliometrix R package output, based on the dataset prepared by the authors)

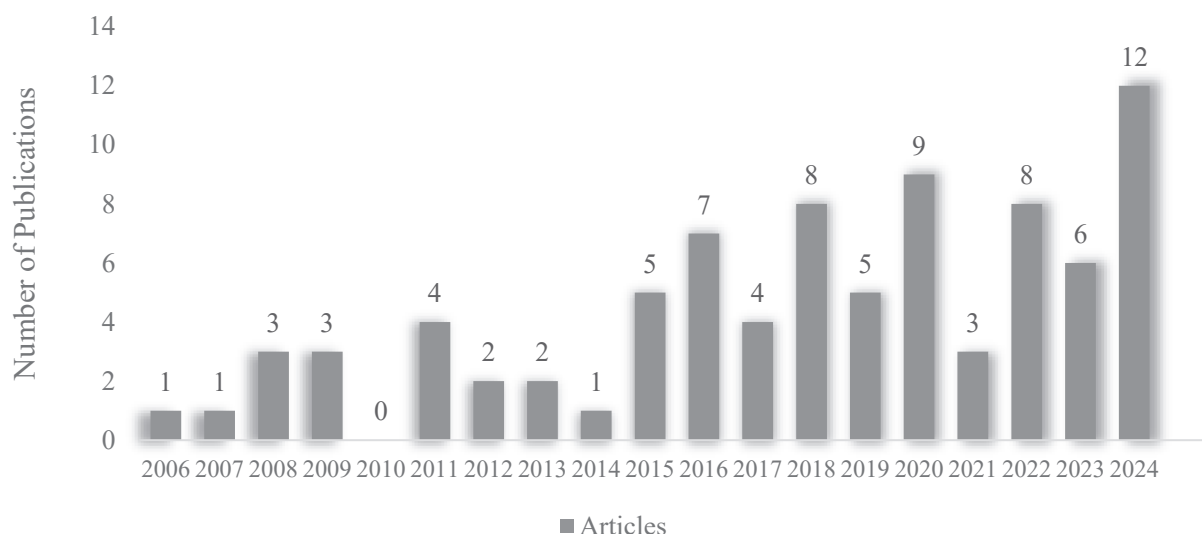


Figure 4. Trends in scientific publications (Source: developed by the authors)

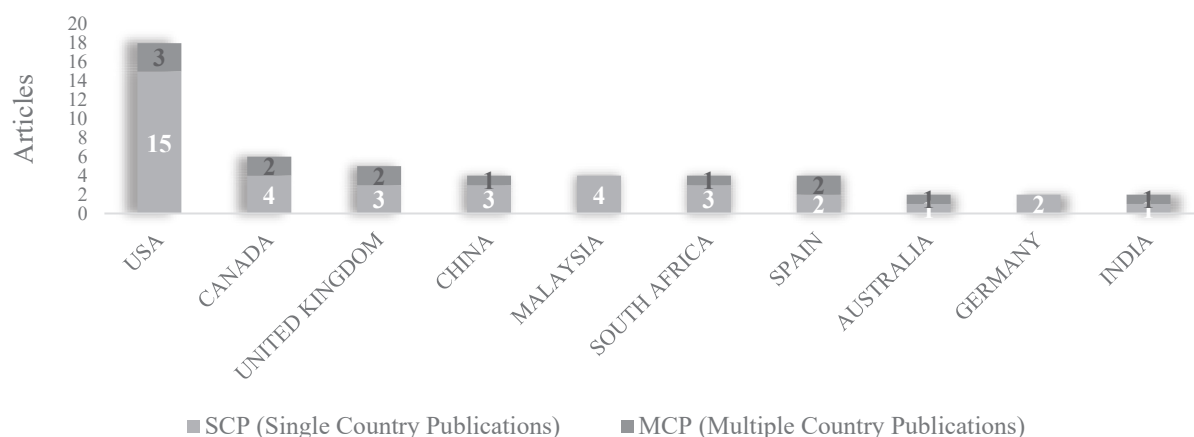


Figure 5. Distribution of scientific publications by the TOP 10 countries (Source: developed by the authors)

Country Distribution and International Collaboration. Figure 5 shows the distribution of publications included in the study by country affiliation and type of author collaboration. The analysis reflects the TOP 10 countries with the highest number of publications on brand humanisation in HE. The diagram highlights two types of publications: single country publications (SCP), where the authors are from one country, and multiple country publications (MCP), which have been created through international collaboration among authors. The results indicate that the USA is the most active country in researching the investigated topic, with a total of 18 articles. Among these, 83% were

produced by authors from a single country, while 17% involved international collaboration. Canada ranks second with six articles, of which 67% were conducted nationally and 33% through international cooperation. The United Kingdom is third with five articles, 60% of which were national and 40% collaborative at the international level. Other countries, including China, Malaysia, South Africa, Spain, Australia, Germany, and India, show relatively similar levels of activity, ranging from three to four articles. However, differences in collaboration patterns are observed: for instance, in Spain, 50% of publications resulted from international cooperation, whereas India and Germany are dominated entirely by nationally authored articles.

Top 5 Most Cited publications. Table 1 summarises the five most cited publications on brand humanisation in HE from 2005 to 2024. These publications are notable for their high citation rates and contributions to developing branding theory and practice in HE. The most cited publication is the article by Sung & Yang (2008) titled “Toward the model of university image: The influence of brand personality, external prestige, and reputation” with 233 citations, which developed a model of university image and analysed the impact of brand personality, external prestige, and reputation on student engagement and attitudes. In second place is the article by Rauschnabel et al. (2016) “Brand management in higher education: The University Brand Personality Scale” with 158 citations, where the authors developed a six-dimensional university brand personality measurement scale (UBPS). The third most cited publication, “The new WTP: Willingness to participate” (Parent et al., 2011), with 150 citations, examines students’ willingness to engage and participate in building the university brand. The article “A marketing communications approach for the digital era:anagerial guidelines for social media integration” by Killian and McManus (2015) with 122 citations provides guidelines for integrating social media into HE branding. Meanwhile, the study “Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification” by Balaji et al. (2016), with 115 citations, developed and tested a student and university identification model. The results reveal that knowledge of and prestige associated with the university brand significantly enhance students’ identification with the university.

In examining the most significant journals that publish research on brand humanisation in the context of HE, it can be concluded that the majority of publications focus on a small number of academic journals. Most articles have been published in the “Journal of Marketing for Higher Education” with a total of 13 articles, followed by “Business Horizons” and “Journal of Product and Brand Management” with six articles each.

Word Cloud Analysis. The word cloud (Figure 6) provides a visual insight into the most commonly used keywords in publications about brand humanisation in the context of HE. The size of the keywords indicates their frequency of use. The larger the word, the more often it appears in the analysed articles.

Dominant concepts such as ‘brand personality’, ‘higher education’, ‘impact’, ‘image’, ‘identity’, and ‘consumers’ reflect the main research directions related to the formation, identity, and impact of university image. Meanwhile, keywords like ‘social media’, ‘service quality’, and ‘loyalty’ indicate the importance of social media and service quality in building student loyalty (Chapleo, 2015; Dholakia et al., 2014; Farid et al., 2025; Girardin et al., 2023).

Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis. In the next phase of the study, a keyword co-occurrence network map (Figure 7) was created using the VOSviewer program (v.1.6.19), based on publications selected from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. From the initially obtained 488 keywords, applying a minimum recurrence threshold (at least 3 times), 52 frequently used keywords were identified. After data cleaning and merging similar meaning keywords, 45 keywords were retained, collectively forming six thematic clusters, with names derived from the dominant terms within them and their significance in the research context.

Table 1. Top 5 Most Cited Publications (Source: developed by the authors)

Authors	Title	Journal	Year	No of citations
Sung, M., & Yang	Toward the model of university image: The influence of brand personality, external prestige, and reputation.	Journal of Public Relations Research	2008	233
Rauschnabel, P.A., Krey, N., Babin, B.J., Ivens, B.S.	Brand management in higher education: The University Brand Personality Scale	Journal of Business Research	2016	158
Parent, M., Plangger, K., Bal, A.	The new WTP: Willingness to participate	Business Horizons	2011	150
Killian, G., & McManus, K.	A marketing communications approach for the digital era: Managerial guidelines for social media integration	Business horizons	2015	122
Balaji, M. S., Roy, S. K., & Sadeque, S	Antecedents and consequences of university brand identification	Journal of Business Research	2016	115



Figure 6. Word cloud of the most frequent keywords in publications (Source: the Bibliometrix R package output, based on the dataset prepared by the authors)

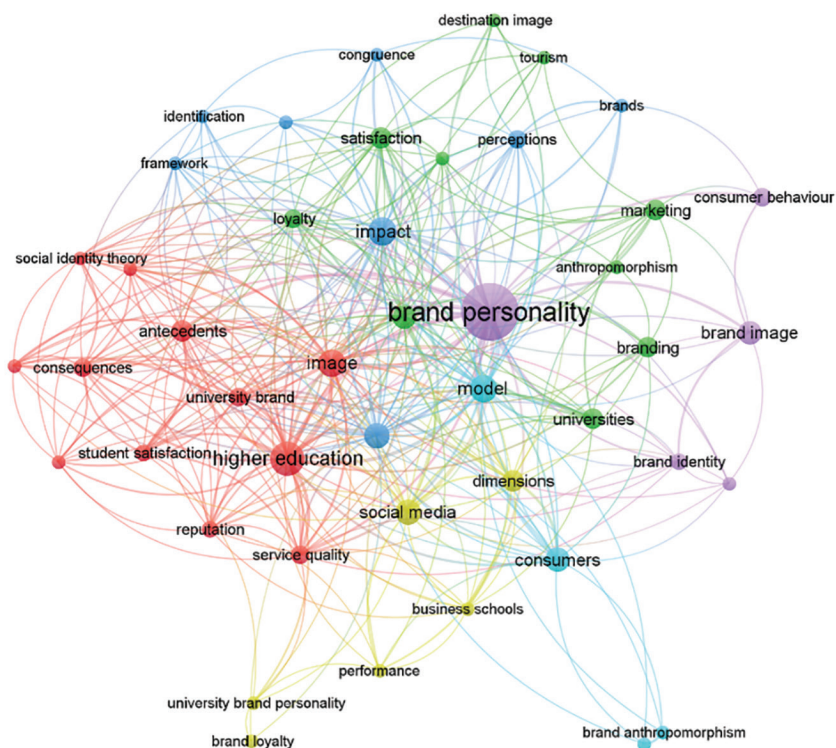


Figure 7. Keyword co-occurrence network (Source: developed by the authors based on the Scopus and WOS databases using VOSviewer)

The analysis indicates that the most frequently used keyword is “brand personality,” appearing 50 times, followed by “higher education” (18 occurrences) and “impact” (12 occurrences). For instance, the red cluster, titled “Brand Image and Humanisation in Higher Education,” encompasses topics related to the brand image, identity, and reputation building of HE institutions, as well as perception, linking these aspects to service quality and student satisfaction, and includes a total of 12 keywords. The green cluster “Brand Identity and Behavior” focuses on aspects of loyalty and satisfaction in HE, particularly related to anthropomorphism and marketing, with 10 keywords. The blue cluster “Brand Personality and Perception” includes eight keywords and focuses on the impact of brand personality and perception, especially in the context of HE. The yellow cluster “Social Media and Brand Loyalty” with six keywords covers studies on the importance of social media in university branding. The purple cluster “Brand Personality and Consumer” includes 5 keywords and focuses on research about the concept of brand personality and its impact on consumer behaviour. Meanwhile, the light blue cluster “Brand Anthropomorphism and Competence” includes only four keywords and concentrates on conceptual models of brand anthropomorphism and their relation to consumer perception and competence. Overall, this analysis shows that brand humanisation studies in HE cover a diverse range of topics, from brand image and identity to social media and consumer behaviour. Meanwhile, concepts of anthropomorphism currently occupy a relatively narrow niche.

The evolution of research trends in the field was examined through a keyword co-occurrence overlay analysis covering the period from 2005 to 2024. This approach makes it possible to trace changes in scholarly focus over time by identifying keywords associated with earlier and more recent studies. Rather than presenting these findings visually, the temporal development of themes is summarised in Table 2 and described narratively.

The results indicate that between 2016 and approximately 2018, research was largely concentrated on traditional branding constructs such as brand image, identity, reputation, and core brand management principles. These themes reflect a period of conceptual consolidation, particularly within higher education branding research.

In subsequent years, scholarly attention shifted towards more dynamic and interaction-based topics, including the role of social media, brand loyalty, service quality, and student engagement. More recent studies increasingly address anthropomorphism and digital communication strategies, underscoring the growing importance of emotional connection, online presence, and interactive brand experiences.

Overall, this temporal shift highlights the influence of digital transformation and evolving communication channels on branding research. It also reflects the necessity for higher education institutions to continuously adapt their branding strategies in response to changing student behaviours, expectations, and values.

Thematic Map Analysis. On the other hand, in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the structure of research trends in the field of brand humanisation within the context of HE, a thematic table was created (Table 3) based on the results of the Bibliometrix R tool. Here, keywords are classified into four different quadrants based on their significance (centrality) and level of development (density).

The **motor themes** quadrant includes themes with high centrality and density, which are both theoretically significant and well-developed. It is dominated by keywords such as ‘higher education’, ‘image’, ‘personality’, ‘competence’, ‘communication’, and ‘corporate image’, collectively marking the research focus on the brand image and personality aspects of HE institutions, their perception, reputation building, as well as factors related to competence and communication that strengthen brand identity (Roy & Misra, 2024; Entradas et al., 2024; Budnikovich et al., Dwyer, 2022; 2023; Foroudi et al., 2020; Ivy, 2001; Luckyardi et al., 2023; Cartwright & Angulo-Ruiz, 2024). The **basic themes** quadrant is characterised by high centrality but a lower level of development. This quadrant includes keywords such as ‘brand personality’, ‘satisfaction’, ‘social media’, and ‘universities’, indicating that these topics have a significant theoretical basis (Sarder & Mustaqeem, 2024; Mohseni & Titkanloo, 2022; Marjanović et al., 2023; Lowrie, 2007; Le et al., 2023; Chen, 2016; Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Chen, 2022). However, there is a need to continue developing them further.

The **niche themes** quadrant includes well-developed, yet less central themes that have not yet stabilised. For example, the themes “planned behaviour”, “product”, “self-efficacy”, “student satisfaction”, “design”, and “logo” (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Weiss & Johar, 2013; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Roskosa & Stukalina, 2020; Magasi & Bwemelo, 2024). These themes are characterised by specific research directions that focus more on design elements, student experience, and psychological factors, but these themes are not widely integrated into the existing research discourse and could serve as a basis for further study. The **emerging or declining themes** quadrant displays topics with less centrality and development level, such as “consumer research”, “moderating role”, “motivation”, and “interest” (Sweeneya & Soutar, 2001; Vo et al., 2024; Sarangal et al., 2024). Although these themes are currently underdeveloped, they have the potential to become significant directions for future research.

Table 2. Temporal evolution of dominant research themes (2005-2024) (Source: developed by the authors based on the Scopus and WOS databases using VOSviewer)

Period	Dominant Research Themes	Main research focus
2005-2015	Brand image; brand identity; brand reputation; core brand values	Foundational conceptualisation of brand management and identity formation
2016-2018	Brand image; identity; reputation; brand management	Consolidation of branding frameworks, particularly in higher education contexts
2019-2021	Social media; brand loyalty; service quality; student satisfaction	Impact of digital platforms on brand relationships and stakeholder perceptions
2022-2024	Student engagement; anthropomorphism; digital communication; social media branding	Advanced branding strategies reflecting digital transformation and behavioural change

Table 3. Thematic map of keywords (Source: developed by the authors based on Scopus and WOS data using the Bibliometrix R-package)

Theme Type	Key Themes
Niche Themes quadrant	Planned behavior; product; self-efficacy; PLS-SEM; student satisfaction; behavior; design; logo
Motor Themes quadrant	Higher education; image; personality; impact; perceptions; attachment; competence; intentional agents; stereotype; identification, content, communication, corporate image
Basic Themes quadrant	Brand personality; model; satisfaction; social media; universities; institutions; consumers; identity; dimensions
Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant	Consumer research; trust; moderating role; power; motivation
Transversal / Conceptual Themes quadrant	Stereotype content; communication; corporate image

Overall, this thematic map analysis reveals that research on brand humanisation in the context of HE is currently primarily based on areas related to the study of brand image, personality, their perception and reputation building. At the same time, developmental processes also include topics such as digital communication, social media use, and student behaviour study. Meanwhile, less researched areas, such as competency development, consumer behaviour, self-efficacy, and student satisfaction, play a niche role, providing potential for future research.

Conclusion

Brand humanisation in HE has emerged as a contemporary and relevant topic in international student marketing, as universities that humanised their brand (through anthropomorphic cues, empathetic storytelling, personalised engagement, and altruistic values), were able to differentiate themselves in the global education market (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Despite its practical relevance, the academic exploration of this concept has remained limited, with most studies focusing on related constructs such as 'brand personality,' 'brand image,' 'brand identity,' and 'brand reputation,' while direct research on 'brand humanisation' and 'brand anthropomorphism' was scarce (Papadopoulou et al., 2023; Pinar et al., 2014; Snadrou & Haoucha, 2024; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013; Xia, 2024).

To address this gap, we systematically and quantitatively analysed the academic literature on brand humanisation in HE using a bibliometric approach. Particular attention was given to developmental trends, significant themes, and the research structure. Datasets from Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection were merged, resulting in a final sample of 84 peer-reviewed articles.

The analysis revealed that, although publications in this area have increased in recent years, the field is still at an early stage of development. Thematic and keyword co-occurrence analyses indicated researchers shifting from traditional branding concepts towards digital communication, social media, and student engagement strategies, reflecting HE institutions' adaptation to digital transformation and evolving student behaviour patterns. Emerging topics such as 'planned behaviour,' 'self-efficacy,' and 'student satisfaction' were identified as underexplored areas.

These findings underscore the necessity of a focused bibliometric investigation to systematically map the development of brand humanisation in HE, identify emerging themes, and provide a structured understanding of the current state of research, which formed the basis for the aim of the present study.

On the other hand, the analysis of country distribution and international collaboration highlights the USA's dominant position in terms of publication output. The data also indicate that international collaboration among authors remains relatively underdeveloped in this field, with only 22.62% of all publications resulting from international cooperation and an average of 2.95 co-authors per publication.

These results provide a comprehensive insight into the development of Brand Humanisation research in the context of HE and reveal significant conceptual and regional gaps, the prevention of which could serve as a basis for further exploration in this field. These findings reinforce theoretical claims that humanisation functions as a relational branding mechanism, supporting models of brand personality, social identity, and perceived anthropomorphism. The shift toward digitally mediated communication aligns with theories of relational marketing, where emotional cues, personalised interaction, and human-like brand traits strengthen attachment and loyalty. Moreover, the emergence of anthropomorphic and value-driven themes suggests that HEIs increasingly rely on symbolic and emotional differentiation rather than functional attributes alone. This confirms that humanisation is not merely a communication tactic but a strategic branding approach grounded in contemporary branding and consumer psychology frameworks.

The findings of this study help clarify why research on brand humanisation is important for higher education professionals. By identifying the dominant themes, emerging trends, and conceptual gaps, the analysis shows how humanised communication can support key institutional goals such as recruitment, retention, stakeholder engagement, and differentiation in competitive markets. The results indicate that while areas such as brand personality, identity, and digital communication are well established, other aspects, such as anthropomorphism, personalised interaction, and emotional storytelling, remain underexplored. These gaps point to future research opportunities that could directly assist HE practitioners in applying humanisation more effectively in their marketing and communication strategies. Advancing research in these areas would provide clearer guidance on how HEIs can use humanised branding to build stronger relationships and create more meaningful and authentic institutional identities.

The obtained results clarify why brand humanisation matters for HE by showing that human-centred communication can strengthen institutional authenticity, support recruitment and retention, and enhance stakeholder engagement in a competitive environment. However, some aspects remain underexplored, particularly the practical effects of anthropomorphism, personalised digital communication, and emotional messaging. Future research should therefore examine how these specific strategies shape applicant decisions, student engagement, and institutional reputation, thereby providing higher education professionals with clearer guidance for applying humanised branding in practice.

This study has several limitations. First, the bibliometric analysis was conducted solely using the Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection databases. This may have led to excluding relevant studies published in sources or languages other than English. Second, only articles focusing specifically on Brand Humanisation in the context of HE were included, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other fields. Third, the selection of publications was based on a defined search strategy combining the concepts of "brand humanisation," "emotional branding," and "brand anthropomorphism" with broader branding categories, which may have influenced the precision of the topic focus. Finally, the relatively small number of publications included may also constrain the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this work the author(s) have not used any type of generative AI or AI-assisted technologies.

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