

Using a Mixed Methods Approach to Examine the (Re)Imaging of Higher Education Institutions in the Western Balkans

Antigoni Papadimitriou

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for the current study derives from my involvement as a senior researcher in the project “European integration in higher education and research in the Western Balkans” (NORGLOBAL) and it had the aim of strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions in the Western Balkans (WB) in the area of educational research in general, and higher education and research policy analysis in particular. In order to collect data and communicate with higher education administrators in the region, first I chose to visit all the higher education institutions (HEIs) websites, some of which worked well while others were broken or did not work in the English version in particular. After I had completed the website investigation for the purpose of the NORGLOBAL

A. Papadimitriou (✉)
Public Safety Leadership, The Johns Hopkins University,
School of Education, Baltimore, MD, USA

© The Author(s) 2018
A. Papadimitriou (ed.), *Competition in Higher Education Branding
and Marketing*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58527-7_5

and had published several articles and book chapters, I decided to explore further marketing and branding in the WB region and beyond. Our publisher Palgrave Macmillan offered another motivation for the current version. During the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) with Gerardo Blanco Ramirez, we organized a symposium about Marketing and Branding in higher education, and I presented the paper “WB websites and branding” (Papadimitriou 2014).

The overall objective of this chapter is to present how HEIs were positioning themselves on their websites’ homepages during summer 2014 and for that purpose I adopted a sequential mixed methods design. The empirical laboratory for this mixed methods research became the higher education institutions from the Western Balkans.

BRANDING AND WESTERN BALKANS

National and international competition has been a catalyst for branding in higher education (Stensaker 2007). Therefore, managerial strategies such as marketing and branding become a priority to HEIs in order to create an identity advantage at the national, regional, and international levels. Furthermore, branding has become an additional marketing concept adopted by HEIs which is now usually associated with the creation of images for the purpose of increasing “sales.” In higher education, the purpose of developing a brand is not only to sell “products and services,” but also to communicate “corporate identity” in order to promote attraction and loyalty (Bulotaite 2003). Marketing is the communication component of the strategic branding process for an organization (Eshuis et al. 2014; Kavaratzis 2004). Currently, HEIs websites are one of the most important parameters for communication (Celly and Knepper 2010), and are becoming a key data source in the study of branding (Chapleo et al. 2011).

Western Balkans is a fairly new European region, now defined by the formula “ex-YU[goslavian] countries—Slovenia+Albania” (Zgaga 2015, 71). Most of the countries in the region have a shared history as part of the former Yugoslavia and they are now free to go their separate ways. Consequently, each of these countries has experienced the deconstruction and the reconstruction of their national systems of higher education (Papadimitriou and Stensaker 2014, Papadimitriou et al. 2015). The WB in this study refers, as many regional treatments

do, to Albania (AL), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), Croatia (CR), Kosovo¹ (KO), Montenegro (MO), Serbia (SE), and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

METHODOLOGY

In order to provide an understanding of how Western Balkans HEIs were positioning themselves on their websites' homepages, this study adopts a sequential mixed methods design (Creswell 2013). The first order of research was to identify all public and private universities from the region. The study took place between June and August 2014. At that time, 119 universities in actual operation were listed by the Ministry of Education and Quality Assurance Agencies. In the first stage the methodology for analyzing the data involved several phases:

1. I collected data about university characteristics such as age (year of establishment), location (country and city), and ownership (public and private). In this analysis, the ages of the universities were collapsed into three categories: universities established before 1989 were characterized as "old"; universities established during the period 1990–2003 as "in transition"; and those established after 2004 as "new." An additional characteristic included a distance parameter or field-position "central" and "periphery," which identified a university's location from each country's capital (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Leblebici et al. 1991). Information from the data derived either from HEIs websites and/or other university documents. These variables may also be termed as control variables, used in the later part of the analysis to understand self-presentation within the sample universities.
2. I created a list with all HEIs and I checked online for all HEIs' websites. My initial research found a few institutions' sites had broken pages; those institutions were excluded from the study. Most HEIs websites are multilayered; thus, the data for this study were drawn from two resources: first from outside layers of the institutions' websites—i.e., the front pages of the institution at the central level and then from English websites. I used content analysis first to collect data about:

¹UNESCO omits Kosovo.

- a. the languages on the websites: the national one (i.e., Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian, etc.) and English. Then I coded each language in order to be able to analyze quantitatively the quality information.
 - b. I collected data regarding the logo. Here I used two dimensions: “available/not.” I did not analyze the type of the logo.
 - c. I also collected data regarding pictures, images, video, etc. Here I used two dimensions: “available/not.” I did not analyze the type of images.
 - d. I analyzed the websites in order to define whether each institution had followed major, current trends, specifically the inclusion of social media. By mentioning social media links, I mean social networking sites (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.) (Bozyigit and Akkan 2014; Greenwood 2012). I also developed codes for each type of social media in order to analyze quantitatively.
 - e. Finally, I collected data regarding quality and accreditation. Front HEIs homepages (national languages) expected to host quality assurance agencies, accreditation using English names. Here I used two dimensions: “available/not.”
3. The second type of data was derived only from the English websites. The normal procedure was to allow one click at the heading, namely English. In English websites, I looked for another heading, namely mission/vision statements as well as president’s/rector’s welcome messages, where I used two dimensions: “available/not.”
 4. After this phase, I re-analyzed the data through a further review of the mission/vision/welcome statements collected. This phase can be considered as a more inductive approach which “seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Caelli et al. 2008, p. 3). Thematic analysis is a search for issues that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly et al. 1997). Boyatzis (1998, p. 161) defined a theme as, “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon.” The process involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice and Ezzy 1999, p. 258), while Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, p. 82) considered it “a form of pattern recognition within the data, where

emerging themes become the categories for analysis.” In this final analysis, I was looking for themes about *quality* (accreditation, quality assurance, university achievement, excellence, European Standards, Bologna Process, ISO standards etc.) and HEIs *exotericism* (internationalization/regionalization/Europeanization etc.). Finally, this analysis helped in order to build our understanding of how HEIs in the WB position themselves by utilizing messages about quality and *exotericism or exocentric*.

LIMITATIONS

As mentioned by other similar studies, limitations of this study clearly exist. Highlighting these limitations, (Bozyigit and Akkan 2014) referred to the phenomenon that websites of institutions are continuously being updated and changed; thus, the results of the study represent a fleeting, almost fluid, one-time sample valid only at the time of collection. In order to overcome these limitations, researchers will likely have to retain dated, time-stamped images of the websites for future studies and comparisons. In order to validate and track changes, I keep images from only ten universities homepages’ websites for future studies. However, this is not the case regarding the English documents (mission/vision and welcome messages) as I used thematic analysis and the documents are available for future comparisons.

MAIN FINDINGS

The main results of this study are presented in the following two sections: the first one reflects data from HEIs homepages, while the second section reflects data from HEIs English homepages.

HEIs HOMEPAGE FIRST VIEW

Online data revealed a majority 70.5% of the HEIs (84 out of 119 that were sampled during the Summer of 2014) used the online environment to publicly present themselves. Regarding public versus. private ownership, data indicate that 40 out of 45 public universities (88.8%) appeared with websites while in the private sector only 44 out of 74 institutions (59.45%). During that sampling, the most broken or non-responsive websites mostly pertained to the private HEIs in Albania; however, five

of the Albanian public universities also contained broken or non-responsive webpages. Table 5.1 provides information about the sample as well as information about the establishment of the higher education law and the establishment of the HEIs in the region. Table 5.1 also provides information about HEIs websites translated into English.

Under data for branding, each university's homepage contained the university logo. Within this data set, mostly the older, public universities made the year of establishment very visible in each of their logos. Similarly, most of these older universities included symbols such as flags, buildings, and Latin letters. In contrast, the newer, private HEIs chose logos with more modern schemes and several times with just letters; however, this current study did not include further analysis of each logo. Data from these homepages also contained the use of visual/audio-visual images (photographs, interactive pictures, and videos). Most of the institutions used an enormous number of visual/audio-visual images in an effort to create a favorable impression to viewers (stakeholders). This current study used only two dimensions as to whether websites did or did not include visual/audio-visual images. However, I remember that I discovered pictures mostly in private HEIs from the USA (Statute of Liberty, US passports Symbols of dollars) and the UK (red busses, Buckingham Palace).

The current study also collected data about the translation of the websites into different languages beyond the national. HEIs used either verbal (the name of the language) or little flags. HEIs, especially for English translation, used either the UK or the USA flag symbol. In Albania, 12 out of 25 (six public and six private) HEIs appeared without a second language. One public university appeared having Italian and French, while two private universities appeared to have only English homepages. In BH only one out of 17 HEIs appeared without an English website; however, two of the English websites were broken. One private HEI also included English and Turkish, another private HEI appeared having Croatian, and another HEI only an English homepage. Another private HEI appeared with Italian and German flags; however, those pages appeared in local language. I did not systematically visit the translated websites. Four HEIs appeared to use Serbian as a local language, and one private school noted Turkish, Bosnian, and Croatian. In Croatia all public universities appeared having both Croatian and English websites; one of them appeared with Italian as well, while the one private HEI in the sample appeared without English. In Montenegro,

Table 5.1 Mapping HEIs in the Western Balkans and their homepages

<i>WB</i>	<i>HE Law</i>	<i>Establishment of public HEIs</i>	<i>Number of public HEIs</i>	<i>Active homepages</i>	<i>Homepages in English</i>	<i>Establishment of private HEIs</i>	<i>Number of private HEIs</i>	<i>Active homepages</i>	<i>Homepages in English</i>
AL	1999	1957	15	10	3	2002	34	15	5
BH	2007	1949	8	8	3	2004	16	9	6
CR	2003	1669	7	7	4	1997	2	1	-
KO	2003	1970	2	2	-	2000	3	2	1
MO	2003	1975	1	1	-	2006	2	2	2
SE	2005	1904	6	6	4	1989	7	6	1
FYROM	2000	1949	6	6	5	2001	10	9	6
Total			45	40	19	Total	74	44	21

all three universities appeared having Montenegrin and English websites. In Kosovo all HEIs appeared with English websites, one private HEI appeared having only English website; another with Albanian, English, and Turkish; another with Albanian and English; and another one with Albanian, Bosnian, English, and Turkish. In Serbia 11 out of 12 appeared with Serbian and English and only one private HEI had only a Serbian website. In one private HEI data revealed that France appeared as a different language. All HEI websites in FYROM appeared in national language and English. One private HEI had English website only, two HEIs appeared with additional language such as Albanian, another two HEIs included Turkish and Albanian, and another one included Serbian and Spanish. Here I need to highlight that I only checked visually if the language appeared on their homepage and not about the actual translation of the websites.

The homepages also analyzed information about quality and accreditation signs. In this domain, data indicate that in the national homepages only three public HEIs (Croatia, Serbia, and FYROM) included words such as EUA-IEP (European University Association—Institutional Evaluation Programme); additionally, three private HEIs (BH, Kosovo, and Serbia) appeared to have messages (in a small picture) about being accredited by agencies outside of the country (also provided the names of the accreditation agency). In another private HEI from Albania there appeared, in a small rectangular image, “our programs follow the Bologna standards.”

The final topic area investigated by using first order homepages websites was the use or availability of social media appearing on these homepages. A visual search of each page sought out the current social media internationally recognized symbol. Under that visual analysis, each symbol of social media was checked (see Fig. 5.1). This figure represents an overall visual of the type of social media present at each institution. For the period under study (Summer 2014), the most popular social media were:

- Facebook: 77% of private HEIs were using that platform and 74% of the public sector.
- YouTube was the second most used platform at 61% in private sector and 52% in the public sector.
- Twitter was in the third place; however here the public sector seems to use more—42%—and the private 34%.

- LinkedIn appeared in the final place where it was used 37% in the public HEIs and 15% in private HEIs.

Figure 5.2 provides another picture by social media within HEIs in each country. Data show that Facebook and YouTube appeared in all countries. Albania’s HEIs appeared with less use of social media. LinkedIn is attractive to public HEIs in Kosovo (100%), Serbia (83%), FYROM (43%). While this study was being performed and a time-capsule of

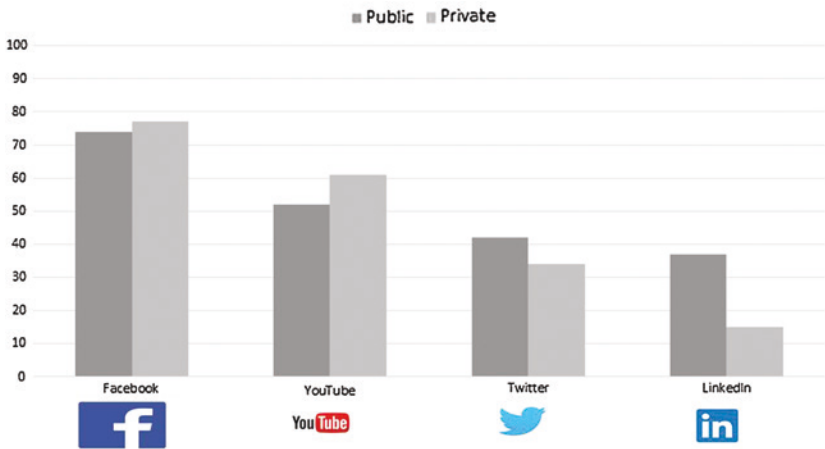


Fig. 5.1 Overall picture of social media in WB public and private HEIs

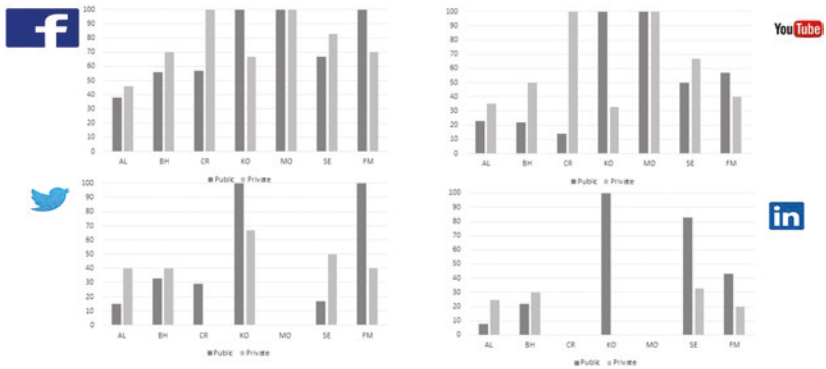


Fig. 5.2 Distribution of social media within public and private HEIs in the WB

one period's (Summer 2014) data were recorded, HEIs in Croatia and Montenegro did not indicate the use of LinkedIn. Twitter also seemed unpopular in Montenegrin HEIs, yet Facebook was most popular in the public HEIs in Kosovo, Montenegro, and FYROM.

NEXT CLICK: ENGLISH HOMEPAGE ANALYSIS

In this second phase, I first identified how many HEIs translated their homepages into the English language. For this analysis, I only checked it by clicking the English sign (flag or verbal) to see if the site provided me with the English version. In several cases even after having clicked the English button, the websites appeared unresponsive because the homepage did not change; consequently, I did not include those HEIs as having English websites. Although findings from this analysis showed that 41 out of 84 HEIs translated and communicated their "brand," the overall breakdown between public and private institutions revealed 19 out of 40 were public universities, and 21 out of 44 were private institutions. Table 5.1 includes the sample that I called English web respectively for both public and private HEIs. During my search, one of the goals I had was to find communicative messages or documents that specifically contained vision/mission and president's/rector's welcome. Therefore, I performed "several clicks" in order to find those documents for further analysis. In this final analysis, I was looking for themes about *quality* (accreditation, quality assurance, university achievement, excellence, Bologna Process, European standards, ISO standards etc.) as well as for themes focusing on HEIs' *exotericism* such as international, European and/or regional. Table 5.2 presents the main findings (themes) of the content analysis that I retrieved from the 41 English websites in the region. While Table 5.3 presents the quantitative data of the sample.

Data reveal that from 40 English websites I found themes about *quality* in five public universities' welcome messages (three from Albania, and one each from Croatia and Serbia); however, all of them were universities located in the periphery and mostly old universities. I also found messages about *quality* in six mission/vision statements (one in BH and Croatia and two in Serbia and FYROM). Among these, half of them were located in periphery and half in urban cities and almost all of them were old universities. I also found messages about *exotericism* in five

Table 5.2 Analyzing English homepages in the WB focusing on *quality* and *exotericism*

		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>			
	<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	
	<i>HEIs Quality</i>				
Albania	1	Highly professionally qualified national and international staff	The university is also known internationally because of much inter-university collaboration with many associates and collaborators around the word	No document	No document
	2	Commitment to students' needs: quality education	Our university is a partner university in different projects of the European union network	No document	No document
	3	Future plans Improving the quality of curricula and teaching and research facilities	N/A	No document	No document
	4	Opportunity to study following American standards of HE at a reasonable cost, at home. We continue our long path to excellence	Member of US universities group. Partners with European universities	N/A	Provide knowledge to succeed in international work environment
	5	Graduating with the possible highest quality- links with the labour market Our objective excellence 2020: excellence labour market function and contribution to development	N/A	No document	No document

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

		<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	
6	Dealing with university standards or broader European sister	Our students continue their studies in European universities	No document	No document	No document
7	No document	No document	N/A	N/A	Successful laboratory within and outside of the country
8	One of the few private with public reputation of a quality educational institution	Is a member of European network.... Has made partnerships and agreement with international institutions		Promote scientific excellence and innovation	Regional institution in the WB and the Eastern Mediterranean
Bosnia Herzegovina	1 Serve as a center of high quality education Accredited by the council for HE Values quality	Outstanding students from 30 countries as well as the Balkans and Turkey English language school Cares for the common values of Turkey and BH		To become and a center of excellence and quality	Vision to become an internationally approved HEI Become a major hub in Balkans bridging the East to the West Mission's dimension: Internationalized HE Become a recognized regional university
	2 N/A	Available to students from home and abroad Cooperation with all relevant institutions in the region and in the world		Recognized internationally for the quality of teaching	

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>
3	N/A	No document	No document
4	Be student here does not imply acquiring qualitative education is much more than that Our dream to become a brand Excellence staff and faculty from top universities around the world	No document	No document
5		No document	No document
			Our students have secured places at the best post-graduates programs in the world and are consistently employed by leading companies in the region and beyond Offers programs with global perspectives Unique partnership is able to offer a degree accepted not only in BH but also in the UK Our university is standing at the turning point facing the European integrative process Become a leading HEI not only in BH but in the region as well
6	N/A	No document	No document

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>
		<i>Exotericism</i>	
7	Aim to improve the conditions of quality in education process	N/A	Provide education and training of highly qualified personnel Application of European standards Achieve excellence in the performance of the teaching process
8	N/A	Programs based on the American system of education Student become catalysts in the economic development of the region Curricula based on best practices and traditions of American universities and applying all the principles of the Bologna process initiatives by the European reform of HE Using Harvard "case study" method	Solving local and global challenges Become a respectable HEI in the region and internationally Prepare graduates for HH, the WB and abroad Engage in technological and business development of the local community and region
9	No document	No document	No document

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

		<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
		<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>
		<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>
Croatia	1	No document	No document	Provide high quality programs University shall ensure high level of student standard ... increase the quality of communication	- Research teaching artistic activities in cooperation with a local national and international economic entities - Students careers closely linked with the local community No document
	2	Desirable place to study through high quality programs High quality employce The external evaluation indicates that we are in a nice track	N/A	No document	N/A Vision targets the inclusion to be within top 500 European Universities
	3	No document	No document	N/A	
	4	No document	No document		

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

		<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	
Kosovo	1 Degree accredited in the US and is recognized all over the word	N/A	Deliver high quality American education to local students	Will be one of leading HEIs in Southern Europe	
Montenegro	1 No document	No document	Create conditions for studying upon principles of high quality European education	N/A	
	2 University is based on Bologna Declaration principles accordance with the latest European standards	N/A	No document	No document	No document

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

		<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	
Serbia	1	N/A	No document	No document	No document
	2	N/A	Be the participants to create new Europe the new word N/A	Study programs completely adapted to world standards Effort to make quality HE available to all N/A	We like to be a regional university center which concerns itself with the development of the region Gathers students and educators from the country, region and Southwestern Europe The university is decisive to integrate itself into European academic environment... as an important international institution of HE on the Balkans. N/A
	3	No document	No document		
	4	No document	No document	Provide superior education and exceptional knowledge Set the stronger standards in HE	

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

		<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
		<i>HEIs Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>
	5	Provide optimal conditions to students by to-quality standards	Building new bridges of cooperation with European and world renowned universities research centers	No document	No document
The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	1	N/A	N/A	No document	No document
	2	No document	No document	No document Provide quality in all segments of its functioning	No document University wish is completely integrated in national and international environment Continuous process of Europeanization and internationalization with international relations to international universities Is committed to offer nationally and internationally recognized opportunities for education
	3	No document	No document	Provide the highest level of educational, scientific and research excellence	Is committed to offer nationally and internationally recognized opportunities for education
	4	No document	No document	No document	No document
	5	No document	No document	N/A	Promoting scientific disciplines in accordance with the requirements of the region and the country
	6	N/A	N/A	No document	No document

(continued)

Table 5.2 (continued)

<i>Rector's/President's Message</i>		<i>Mission/Vision Statement</i>	
<i>HEIs</i>	<i>Quality</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Quality</i>
		<i>Exotericism</i>	<i>Exotericism</i>
7	No document	No document	No document
8	Accredited programs for graduate and undergraduate studies	Located in the heart of the Balkans, is the gathering point for students from all over the region including Turkey N/A	No document No document
9	We emphasise quality and individual attention, students receive quality customer service	N/A	Provide excellence in HE by combining the best European and American educational standards
10	N/A	Modern European university for the country and the region N/A	Highly qualified university To create, implement and maintain higher quality education
11	We apply most modern methods of HE, with a precise and complete application of the Bologna process Commitment to excellence	N/A	Is committed to global progress N/A

(continued)

Table 5.3 Mapping the *quality* and *exotericism* messages in English homepages in the WB HEIs

WB	<i>Public</i>						<i>Private</i>									
	<i>Active home-pages</i>		<i>Home-pages in English</i>		<i>Welcome messages</i>		<i>Mission/Vision</i>		<i>Active home-pages</i>		<i>Home-pages in English</i>		<i>Welcome messages</i>		<i>Mission/Vision</i>	
	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	<i>Qual</i>	<i>Ex</i>	
AL	10	3	3	2	2	-	-	15	5	4	3	1	3			
BH	8	3	-	2	1	1	1	9	6	4	3	3	3			
CR	7	4	1	-	1	2	1	1	-	-	-	-	-			
KO	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	-	1	1			
MO	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	1	-	-	-			
SE	6	4	1	1	2	2	6	6	1	-	1	-	-			
FYROM	6	5	-	-	2	3	9	9	6	3	2	3	2			
Total	40	19	5	5	6	8	44	21	13	9	8	8	9			

Quality: Qual, Exotericism: Ex

welcome messages and in eight mission/vision statements. The majority of those universities were old and located in periphery except in Serbia where two universities were urban. I did not find *exotericism* themes in public universities from Kosovo and Montenegro. Data from the private sector indicated more institutions hosted themes about *quality* in welcome messages (13) and mission/vision statements (8). Similarly, more themes about *exotericism* appeared in nine welcome messages and in nine mission/vision statements. The majority of those HEIs mentioned *quality* and *exotericism* in their English documents were mostly new and located in urban cities, except in the FYROM where those institutions were mostly in *transition age* (1990–2003) and located in the periphery.

Messages about *quality* related to teaching, research, and services were found in several documents which highlighted that the institutions adopted European standards and the Bologna principles. Furthermore, among mostly private institutions their websites highlighted that they had adopted US standards to educate students in their home country. Those HEIs that included *quality* themes also mentioned the quality of the faculty and the staff in an effort to promote excellence and innovation. Messages about HEIs *exotericism* mostly related to regionalization effort such as “to become a hub in the Balkans” or “become a regional institution in the WB”. Most of the public universities highlighted that they participated in several European networks, collaborated with many associates abroad, and that they would like to become recognized among European universities; while on the other hand, some HEIs wanted to be recognized as Southeastern European universities. Some institutions from Albania, BH, and the FYROM expressed their interest to include Turkish students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory study identified tangible, website data indicating how higher education in the Western Balkans (re)images itself by language choices in their websites. Also from this data, I could argue that institutions take advantage of the online environment and demonstrate their existence in a competitive marketplace.

Almost all of the websites included in this study appeared with logo and pictures, and almost all of them seemed to promote their identities through the innovative marketing avenues found in the social media. This study examined whether those universities included social media

platforms without examining how they were presented in those platforms. However, other studies have found that European universities have promoted their offerings (courses, research services) via their social networks platforms (Asderaki and Maragos 2012) including Canadian universities (Belanger et al. 2014), as well as universities from Australia and New Zealand (Raciti 2010). The current study suggests that future studies especially performed by local researchers (or/and familiar with WB languages and alphabet) could possibly investigate more closely how Western Balkans universities engage primary stakeholders on popular media platforms and what type of conversations and discussion WB universities initiate.

The current study analyzes English websites in relation to *quality* and *exotericism*. Data for the period under study (Summer 2014) revealed that mostly private HEIs took the advantage to communicate to viewers by hosting documents in English. Legitimacy issues concerning private higher education institutions in the region remain a concern (Brankovic 2014, Papadimitriou et al. 2016). The mushrooming of private higher education in the region has been discussed in several studies as well the notion of quality in those institutions (Brankovic 2014). For legitimacy among private HEIs, some of those institutions used the Bologna Process; however, Bologna is mostly silent on private higher education. Although an analysis of the documents revealed both public and private sectors mentioned the Bologna Process, which may indicate the WB's ambition of returning to Europe (Papadimitriou et al. 2015; Rupnik 1992). Similar explanations could also be the demonstration of several signs about quality and European standards hosted in the local HEIs websites. It seems that both sectors, especially in English, use words such as quality, excellence, innovation, European standards, or Bologna Process to reposition themselves—or in other word, they used those terms for deBalkanization.

One of the interesting findings, although not surprising, was the fact that mostly public universities in the periphery included in their mission/vision statement the *exotericism* dimension as well as themes of *quality*. Perhaps universities on the periphery in the region wanted to use the translated English websites as a tool to gain prestige or legitimacy. On the other hand, urban old universities may have been perceived as “elite” within the region. Students might prefer the urban old universities and for that reason, those universities may not have discovered the *exotericism* purpose and the *quality* as important parameters to

be communicated through university websites. Papadimitriou (2011) noted “that quality practices such EUA-IEP adopted mostly in Greek peripheral universities to gain prestige and to show that *the sleepy peripheral university was becoming more Europe-minded* (paraphrasing DiMaggio and Powell 1991, p. 70),” and she interpreted that phenomenon as a “sign of trying to establish legitimacy through mimetic isomorphism” (p. 193).

As noted, this study took place during the Summer of 2014; however, recently (September 2016) I took a quick trip revisiting several websites in the region. This quick web-surf revealed that several HEIs in the region have updated and changed their websites; most of them were using high-quality presentations, and might have hired professionals to redesign their websites. However, in 2014, most of the websites hosted myriad of colorful pictures. Some of these observed changes might reflect how a metamorphosis among universities has emerged as they have awakened and taken seriously the benefits of a competitive, modern (perhaps more efficiency) website where they include English translated homepages, where they host their rankings (if any), locate their facilities and their services, and moreover, include areas for future students and alumni, all of which are now in English. The current trip demonstrates that future research on marketing and branding is needed in the region mostly by researchers understanding Western Balkan languages.

REFERENCES

- Asderaki, F., & Maragos, D. (2012). The internationalization of higher education: The added value of the European portals and social media pages for the national and the institutional internationalization strategies. In *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Communication Technologies in Education* (pp. 498–510). Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/18f8/71fd1029d5cf9eacc24f1cee1dce80adb2e8.pdf>.
- Bélanger, C. H., Bali, S., & Longden, B. (2014). How Canadian universities use social media to brand themselves. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 20(1), 14–29.
- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bozyigit, S., & Akkan, E. (2014). Linking universities to the target market via web sites: A content analysis of Turkish private universities’ web sites. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 148, 486–493.

- Branković, J. (2014). Positioning of private higher education institutions in the Western Balkans: Emulation, differentiation and legitimacy building. In J. Branković, M. Kovacevic, P. Maassen, B. Stensaker, & M. Vucasovic (Eds.), *The re-institutionalization of higher education in the Western Balkans: The interplay between European ideas, domestic policies and institutional practices* (pp. 121–144). Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Bulotaite, N. (2003). University heritage: An institutional tool for branding and marketing. *Higher Education in Europe*, XXVIII(4), 449–454.
- Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2008). Clear as mud: Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(2), 1–13.
- Celly, K. S., & Knepper, B. (2010). The California state university: A case on branding the largest public university system in the US. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 15(2), 137–156.
- Chapleo, C., Durán, M. V. C., & Díaz, A. C. (2011). Do UK universities communicate their brands effectively through their websites? *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 21(1), 25–46.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Incorporated: Sage Publications.
- Daly, J., Kellehear, A., & Gliksman, M. (1997). *The public health researcher: A methodological approach*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1991). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. In W. W. Powell & P. J. DiMaggio (Eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 63–83). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eshuis, J., Klijn, E.-H., Braun, E. (2014). Place marketing and citizen participation: Branding as strategy to address emotional dimension of policy making? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 80(1), 151–171.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92.
- Greenwood, G. (2012). Examining the presence of social media of university Web sites. *Journal of College Admission*, (Summer), 24–28.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2004). From city marketing to city branding: Towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands. *Place Branding*, 1(1), 58–73.
- Leblebici, H., Salancik, G. R., Copay, A., & King, T. (1991). Institutional change and the transformation of interorganizational fields: An organizational history of the U.S. radio broadcasting industry. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36(3), 333–363.

- Papadimitriou, A. (2011). *The enigma of quality in Greek higher education: A mixed methods study of introducing quality management into Greek higher education*. Enshcede, The Netherlands: University of Twente, CHEPS.
- Papadimitriou, A. (2014, November). *Branding in the Western Balkan Higher Education on the incorporation of internationalization, quality, and social media*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Association of the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Washington D.C., USA.
- Papadimitriou, A., & Stensaker, B. (2014). Governance capacity of Western Balkans universities: Perceptions of institutional leadership. In J. Branković, M. Kovacevic, P. Maassen, B. Stensaker, & M. Vucasic (Eds.), *The re-institutionalization of higher education in the Western Balkans: The interplay between European ideas, domestic policies and institutional practices* (pp. 91–120). Berlin: Peter Lang.
- Papadimitriou, A., Gornitzka, Å., & Stensaker, B. (2015). Designed diffusion? The impact of an EU capacity building instrument in the Western Balkans. *Journal of European Integration*. doi:10.1080/07036337.2015.1046857.
- Papadimitriou, A., Stensaker, B., & Kanazir, S. (2016, September). *An analysis of public regulatory arrangements for private higher education in the Western Balkans*. Paper presented at the 29th Annual Conference on Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), Cambridge, UK.
- Raciti, M. (2010). Marketing Australian higher education at the turn of the 21st century: A précis of reforms, commercialization and the new university hierarchy. *E-Journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching*, 4, 32–41. Retrieved from <http://www.ejbest.org>.
- Rice, P. L., & Ezzy, D. (1999). *Qualitative research methods: A health focus*, Vol. 720, Melbourne.
- Rupnik, J. (1992). *Higher education and the reform process in Central and Eastern Europe*. Paris: Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques.
- Stensaker, B. (2007). The relationship between branding and organisational change. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(1), 1–18.
- Zgaga, P. (2015). How to gain global connectivity while retaining respect for local variations? A reflection on higher education reforms in South-east Europe. In P. Zgaga, U. Teichler, H. G. Schuetze, & A. Wolter (Eds.), *Higher education reform: Looking back—Looking forward* (pp. 65–84). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.