Cosmopolitan Brands

Myers, Martin; Bhopal, Kalwant

DOI:
10.1080/01425692.2021.1941763

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Myers, M & Bhopal, K 2021, 'Cosmopolitan Brands: graduate students navigating the social space of elite global universities', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 42, no. 5-6, pp. 701-716. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2021.1941763

Cosmopolitan Brands: graduate students navigating the social space of elite global universities

Abstract

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the competition for economic, social and cultural capitals within educational fields, this article reports empirical research from 49 in-depth interviews with graduate students at four elite universities in the USA and the UK. It argues the brands of elite global universities work to reproduce social and cultural capital for a small cohort of elite students, and by doing so perpetuate and reinforce systems that privilege a select few. By drawing upon student narratives, our findings demonstrate the cosmopolitan nature of elite university brands. These 'Cosmopolitan Brands' are immersed in local and highly exclusive practices which reinforce wider inequalities of social class. We explore how individual students navigate their immersion and positioning within the brands of global elite universities; competing first as students at university before progressing to compete for power and status within global economies.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan; elite university; Brand; Bourdieu

Martin Myers, University of Nottingham
Martin.Myers@Nottingham.ac.uk

Kalwant Bhopal, University of Birmingham
K.Bhopal@Bham.ac.uk

Introduction

This article explores the experiences of graduate students at elite universities in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK). Graduate students occupy specific and different spaces to undergraduates and academics within university fields that can be both dependant on, and in conflict with, their individual and institutional circumstances. So for example, whilst access to graduate programmes at different types of university is often determined by social class (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018) this can be mitigated by institutional factors such as elite universities competing to attract 'talent' (Marginson 2008: 310). Often positioned on the cusp of entering academia itself or more lucrative sectors of the employment market, graduate students are potentially well-situated to generate insightful accounts of their situated awareness and engagement within the field of elite universities including their brands. In this article we focus on their perception of elite university brands, including how the brand works as a form of capital that perpetuates privilege whilst simultaneously shaping graduate student identities. Using Bourdieu we argue that the local brands of elite universities operate within national and global Higher Education (HE) economies to reproduce patterns of privilege. We define brands based in such local:global relationships as Cosmopolitan Brands.

Brands and the Field of Elite Universities

Although readily identifiable, brands are difficult to define or quantify. Originally serving largely functional roles, brands conveyed factual details such as a product's quality or place of origin (Murphy 1990; Hart 1998; Moore and Reid 2008). However, the late twentieth century has seen a shift towards less tangible but perhaps more potent delivery of images of power, value and brand personality (Murphy 1990; Aaker, 1991; Moor 2007) often positioning brands as an expressive form of individual or shared collective experience (Hart

1998). The investment of consumers with (and within) brand identity signalled growing commercial interest in identifying and measuring the financial value of the brand (Murphy 1998). Although both factual and intangible attributes of brands function as assets or liabilities, increasing or depleting a product's or an institution's value; the brand itself often features as an 'intangible' form of capital on corporate or institutional balance sheets. Its measurement by accountants is, 'a conceptual practice – it is a form of attribution, recognition and figuring out' that 'resists accounting legibility' (van Eekelen 2015, 456). Bourdieu (2005) also identifies the recognisability of nebulous concepts such as 'goodwill' or 'brand loyalty' as key to determining the commercial value of brands as symbolic capital; the brand, 'functions as a form of credit, it presupposes the trust or belief of those upon whom it bears because they are disposed to grant it credence' (Bourdieu 2005, 195). There is therefore some congruence between sociological and accountancy understandings; the value of the brand is determined by the widespread belief in its legitimacy and its legitimate value despite often nebulous approaches to its measurement.

Lury (2004) suggests brands operate in a similar fashion to the role of 'money' in Simmel's (1978) account of social life, by calibrating the relational value of objects; she distinguishes Simmel's money working as the 'means' whilst brands are 'a medium' (Lury 2004, 4). Moor and Lury (2011) note a proliferation of measurements of brand values is reciprocal to the production of value; the process of measurement reflects, 'an implicit understanding of value itself as omnipresent and indeterminate, formed necessarily in relations of measurement and valuation that are constantly shifting' (Moor and Lury 2011, 451). Some parallels are noticeable in changes to British university branding since the 1960s, where representations of universities as idealised seats of learning have been displaced by promotional discourses reflecting policy designed to commercialise and commodify higher education (Ali-

Choudhury et al, 2009; Sauntson and Morrish 2011; Morrish and Sauntson 2019; Sanigar, 2013). Sauntson and Morrish suggest competition to attract students 'has made universities re-order their priorities from promoting knowledge to the promotion of self and 'brand'' (2019, 93). In this context, Kornberger takes the 'medium' analogy further, suggesting university brands have become 'one long shopping window' and a 'semantic space constituted by the relentless labor of evaluation devices that makes values visible; the brand resembles a platform upon which claims, calculations, and categorizations compete, collide, and sometimes coalesce' (2015:108).

Noting the direct relationship between policy promoting marketisation within HE and the promotional language used by universities, Sanigar (2013) also notes the homogeneity of language used by mission groups such as the Russell Group[1]. One common distinction of Russell Group universities is that they are 'selecting' rather than 'recruiting' institutions. In the context of capped tuition fees they sit outside of the free market mechanisms envisaged by competition policy because current fee levels mean they are always over-subscribed. This suggests the value of an elite brand element such as 'Russell Group' runs deeper than simple statements about the brand.

Being understood as a 'selective' institution emerges out of discourse that identifies characteristics about university brands and accords them distinct values based on a mixture of tangible and intangible measurements. In this respect HE economies mirror other corporate activities to provide new and greater calibration of brand value. HE economies have witnessed a proliferation of national and global measurements of comparative university performance. In the UK the Research Excellence Framework has been bolstered by the

[1] The Russell Group consists of 24 (self-selected) research intensive UK universities created to lobby on behalf of its members' interests.

Teaching Excellence Framework and Knowledge Exchange Framework[2]; an increasing range of national university rankings; and also, by indicators related to remedying specific institutional shortcomings (e.g. the Athena Swan Charter[3]). It is significant that all these UK measures are in some way informed and calibrated by universities themselves. Global rankings also tend to assess universities performance against a range of metrics including citation scores, research income and other prestige factors calibrated by academics and universities themselves (Marginson 2014).

Elite Universities

Elite university brands are often characterised by a mixture of universities' local attributes (including institutional histories and ethos), national and global identities. This reflects their increasing competition in economies in which the 'global and the local do not exist as cultural polarities but as combined and mutually implicating principles' (Beck 2002, 17). The entanglement of the local and global in brands, finds a corollary in Bourdieu's concept of 'field'; the relational structures that bind institutions and their agents in continuous competition for resources and power or 'capitals' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). A university being one example of a local 'field' in which academics, students, departments and faculties, compete for position and resources. The broader national 'field' of HE being the space in which universities compete with each other (Bourdieu 1988). For elite universities, the global economies in which they compete can also be conceived as a specific 'field'; one in which institutionally and individually its agents, including graduate students, perform and deploy its brand as a form of capital. For graduate students, the experience of the brand will

[2] The Research Excellence Framework is a periodic assessment of research quality undertaken on behalf of UK research funding bodies. The Teaching Excellence Framework introduced in 2017 is the UK government's assessment of undergraduate teaching quality. A proposed Knowledge Exchange Framework will assess institutions ability to share research knowledge.

[3] A voluntary self-assessment framework promoted by Advance HE to improve gender equality.

be both framed by their institutional field but also differentiated by their individual attributes and status within the field. The university brand encompasses economic, cultural and social capitals in a collision of relational and transactional processes that resonates with Lury's account of brands as 'a kind of privately owned currency' (2004, 138). The brand functioning as the medium in which the circulation of dominant ideas organises the economy; consequently institutional brands identified as having greater value are able to both compete more effectively within the HE economy and shape the rules governing its field.

Marginson (2008) notes how Bourdieu (1993a) identifies a polarity between an "elite subfield of restricted production, and the subfield of large-scale mass production tending towards commercial production" (2008, 305) which he argues translates into a global bloc of elite universities dubbed the 'Global Super-League' by *The Economist* (2005). What is striking is how readily identifiable members of the Super-League are; their limited numbers; their American-Anglo locations; and the consistency of their ascendancy, (ten years on, or fifty years previously we would still identify the same cohort). The Super-League consists entirely of Ivy League, Oxbridge[4] and a small number of immediately recognisable, prestigious universities including a handful of Russell Group institutions.

Not only are their collective nomenclatures recognisable brands; individual institutions all have globally recognisable brand names: Oxford or Harvard, the L.S.E. or M.I.T. The universities selected for this study consistently rank in the top 10, across the range of teaching, research and financial measures, of published annual world rankings of universities including the *QS World Rankings*; *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*; and, the *Academic Ranking of World Universities*. These are universities defined by the

[4] The Ivy League are eight prestigious private US universities. All but one predate the American Revolution and they are characterised by exceptionally large endowment funds. Oxbridge is the colloquial term for the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, the two oldest, most prestigious and wealthiest UK universities.

exclusivity of their selection processes; the disproportionate representation and influence of their alumni across economic, social and political spheres; and their recognisability within public discourse, (even their architecture and buildings are familiar film locations and tourist destinations). Their shared brand characteristics materialise in terms of the tangible success of *Global Super-League* universities; the recognition of that success; and in the potential for the same institutions to set the criteria for measuring their own brand value. Kornberger describes the Harvard University brand functioning 'as a resource for individual identity and as medium for collective identification' (2015, 109); it works as a 'currency' (Lury 2004) to shape the social world including the production and consumption of knowledge or cultural capital. The brand is characterised by its recognisable authority freighting its own knowledge with the brand's value and legitimising political and social orthodoxies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Within global higher educational economies the legitimisation afforded to local brands, to a Cambridge or a Yale for example, inevitably extends their global power not least because the forms of knowledge they produce include the forms of knowledge that legitimise their own institution's standing within the global field.

Cosmopolitanism and Brands

The roots and routes of cosmopolitanism are historically long established and broadly distributed within different intellectual traditions. Sometimes they are simplified within a 'ground-setting fable' (Inglis 2012, 12) that links ancient Greek stoics, possibly by way of St Paul and early Christianity (Derrida 2001); Kant's *ius cosmopoliticum* as the Enlightenment staging post for rethinking social and political responses to the holocaust; and more recent accounts of globalisation (Inglis 2012). This article considers cosmopolitanism as a feature of globalisation in late modernity to locate the local characteristics of university brands within

their participation in global HE economies. It explores how brands work within the architecture of Beck's cosmopolitanism underpinning a 'Second Age of Modernity' characterised by the decreasing significance of national borders, and increasingly non-territorial economies in which capital and labour become more mobile (Beck 2005). Situating these trends within their potential to address social injustice within nation states, Beck's work sits amongst the varied disciplinary discourse that emerges around the cosmopolitan that, "foreground the ethical settlement of *the good society* in contexts of global flows of people, capital and values" (Keith 2015, 3). He anticipates individualised reflexive identities emerging to challenge the *status quo* for example, or reimagines mobilities as a means of migration engendering 'world (societal) upward mobility' (Beck 2005, 149).

Elite university brands resonate and operate within the spaces and economies that define Beck's cosmopolitanism including their local spatial roots, national reputations at the heart of political, economic and social power, and their extended global reach within HE economies. The currency of these brands intertwines with the expansion of universities influence into global markets that maintain, reproduce and restrict access to privileged forms of capital (Bourdieu 2005). Globalisation and neo-liberal economies have been associated with greater private investment within traditionally state run education practices, simultaneously matched by increasingly market-driven practice in the state sector's delivery of education (Verger, Lubienski and Steiner-Khamsi 2015). This becomes significant for nations extending their power and domination of economic fields beyond national economies, if as Bourdieu suggests, "the 'global market' is a political creation (as the national market had been)" (2005, 225). The model for the global market therefore is neither a free market economy driven by laws of supply and demand, nor is it a fluid or liquid global economy in which individuals reflexively manage newly found cosmopolitan identities (Beck 1992; Beck et al 2003;

Bauman 2000a). Instead a process of domination of subordinate national economies by wealthier, more powerful states occurs. This mirrors the momentum of powerful institutions and ideology within already powerful nation states and the struggle for position individually within those institutions. These processes become apparent as universities market educational packages tethered to pre-existing national understandings of institutional value (Friedman 2017) in which local geographies represent added value in the competition to cater for global student markets (McCarthy and Kenway 2014). The globally recognised brands of elite universities have the potential to authorise the legitimacy of knowledge production rooted in the local context of their universities and, at the same time, provides a means for national economies to exert influence abroad.

Methodology

Whilst previous research has investigated students' access to elite universities, there is little research which examines how graduate student's experiences in elite US and UK universities contribute to the reinforcement and cultivation of elite university brands. Graduate students were identified as potentially well-situated and informed participants with specific awareness of university fields and brands both in terms of their past experiences and their future ambitions. We focussed on the following research questions:

- What effect did students' prior educational experiences and family background have on their trajectories to elite universities?
- How did students experience and navigate the space of elite universities?
- How did students understand their university brand?

This article focuses on the last of these questions exploring the work of university brands in shaping student identities and students' understandings of the role and impact the brand would exert on their career trajectories and ambitions.

We selected four universities. Two in the United States: US1 is an Ivy League institution and US2 a private research university. Both universities main income derives from large endowment reserves. Two in the UK: UK1 and UK2 both receive considerable state funding and are also independently wealthy. All were chosen due to their consistent ranking in the top 10 of all international league tables of universities for teaching, research excellence and reputation. We were interested in exploring a cross-national sample to examine whether students' experiences of attending elite universities crossed cultural and national boundaries, and whether students were influenced by the global and international brand of the university.

A snowball sample was used to recruit respondents. At three universities we were invited to deliver guest lectures and during this time asked students if they wished to participate. This led to students recommending others who would be interested in the study, once respondents had known someone who had already participated they more were willing to participate themselves. At the fourth university, we used personal contacts to recruit students which included our contacts describing the research to students. If they agreed contact was made. We are aware of the limitations of this sampling method; for example we had to rely on respondents recommending participants and potentially individuals were more likely to recommend those who shared similar traits and characteristics, and those likely to be interested in the topic. Consequently, our snowball sample may not be entirely representative of the population but represent a sub-group who are interested in the topic (Van Meter 1990).

Respondents were studying on a range of courses including Humanities, Social and Physical Sciences. All were enrolled on graduate degree courses, 45 were studying for a graduate degree by research (PhD) and 4 for a graduate taught degree (MA). Twenty-two students were studying in the United States (15 at US1; 7 at US2); and 27 students were studying in the United Kingdom (14 at UK1; 13 at UK2). A total of 28 respondents were female and 21 were male.

For the majority of students (40) both their parents previously attended university and of these, all had one parent employed in a professional occupation (e.g. doctor, lawyer, university professor). A further four students had one parent who had attended university; and five students stated that neither parent had previously been to university. The majority of students (44) previously completed undergraduate degrees at elite universities. Of the five students who had not previously attended an elite university four attended public universities in the US and one a non-elite UK university. Twenty students were international students; 11 were British students studying in the US; two Americans in the UK; and seven students were from other countries in the UK.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 40 respondents and 9 via Skype. Thirty interviews were digitally recorded and hand written notes were taken during and after other interviews at the request of respondents who chose not to be recorded. All interviews were transcribed and data analysed using thematic analysis and cross-checked to ensure accuracy and consistency. We used thematic analysis as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 76), to identify patterns across the data set and derive meaning from these patterns. Our analysis consisted of coding and

developing themes, defining and naming and reviewing the themes. This process was one which went back and forth until we were able to derive meaning from the data (Boyatzis 1998). By focussing across the dataset we were able to make sense of shared meanings and experiences as communicated by respondents. Examples of our emergent codes included; family background; prior educational experiences; 'fitting in' and belonging, identity, exclusion and privilege. These codes were developed to form conceptual analyses based on specific concepts such as *habitus*, fields and brands.

Student identities and elite university brands

Many respondents shared characteristics widely identified with progression to elite universities. These include being from wealthier families; parents working in high-status, professional occupations who themselves often attended elite universities; greater access to cultural capital; and, prior attendance at exclusive, fee-paying schools often with longstanding connections to elite universities (Bhopal 2018; Bhopal, Myers and Pitkin 2020; Bourdieu 1996; Jack 2014; Karabel, 2005; Reay 2018; Zimdars 2010; Zimdars, Sullivan and Heath 2009). Graduate students at elite universities also often completed undergraduate studies at the same or similar elite universities reflecting broader patterns of classed progression through higher education (Pásztor and Wakeling 2018). Regardless of their personal background, respondents consistently identified patterns of privilege associated with these characteristics that mirrored a Bourdieusian narrative of the reproduction of privilege. Prior access to economic, social and economic capitals benefitted students in their competition for places at elite universities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu 1996). The same characteristics tended to signal students whose *habitus* aligned most closely with

the elite university field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and consequently thrived in its environment.

Students often identified university brands in relation to the value and significance of the university 'name'. Whilst a range of considerations would possibly inform graduate students' choice of institution, (e.g. subject or departmental reputation), the 'name' or 'brand' of elite universities often took precedence. David (British, UK2) said,

> It is more than just a name. It's not Sussex University or Nottingham. It has a cachet that means I didn't just go to university I went to UK2. Just the name says it all.

Tony (British, US2) said he was 'always aware' of the 'names' of elite universities. He related this directly attending a British fee-paying school where all his teachers held degrees from either UK1 or UK2; and, to his father having attended both the same school and UK2. Students like Tony also suggested these universities were relatively accessible to them. Bartholomew (British, UK2) suggested his attendance at UK2 was 'the norm and not the exception' and Betty (American, US1) commented 'it's just natural'. Tony, Bartholomew and Betty related their expectations to a specific set of shared experiences related to their parent's professional backgrounds and attendance at exclusive fee-paying schools. They described the brand as exclusive and valuable, but simultaneously a commonplace feature of their lives. It was a *medium* in which they could easily deploy capitals accrued throughout their lifetimes. Despite acknowledging easy access to the brand, students tended to legitimise their access in terms of personal endeavour. Tony described *all* the privileges associated with his family background as his 'one big opportunity', before stating, 'after that it's all down to me'. The currency of the brand was both legitimised as a feature of hard work and intellectual achievement, and simultaneously, legitimising those attributes.

Students from less privileged backgrounds often appeared less at ease with the brand and less able to benefit from it. Lorna (American, US1), a working class student described her discomfort in terms of social interactions with other students and academics and stated she was 'not worthy' of US1. Pressed on what constituted being 'worthy', Lorna felt it would probably entail 'becoming' like other students but identified that without their background and experience this was impossible. Reay notes how all students face pressure and challenges when embarking on their studies, but only those from working class backgrounds face their account within a 'language of fear and anxiety'; those from more privileged backgrounds provide coherent accounts of their 'entitlement and self-realization' (Reay 2005, 922). Lorna identified the same value of the US1 brand name as more privileged students, and explained, 'having the name on my *résumé* would make a big difference to my future'. However, unlike more privileged peers she did not comfortably align her *habitus* with the university field. The brand was an integral feature of her discomfort, it structured and reconstituted *habitus* within student's current social world (Bourdieu 1977) by shaping strategies to success (Bourdieu 2008). Whilst the brand legitimised more privileged students' belief in their personal hard work and intellect; for students like Lorna it appeared to undermine such self-belief. Anna (British, UK2) argued that 'ingrained institutionalised privilege' was perpetuated because students from privileged backgrounds were best able to 'articulate their entitlement' to being at UK2. Their occupation of elite spaces was a normal, everyday expectation. This partly reflects the 'channelling' of middle-class students through '*institutional habitus'* towards specific universities (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Their *habitus* reinforced their sense of belonging; they were already imbued with the attributes of their university and its brand. These students used the brand as a currency in which its legitimacy reinforced their belief in their own legitimacy to occupy the spaces of the brand. The ease with which they used brand

indicating how they moved beyond being just brand consumers and becoming active producers of its capital; they were legitimising their own identities within the brand itself.

Another working-class student, Keira (British, UK1), also questioned her legitimacy to attend UK1, stating

> I have feelings of imposter syndrome all the time. So, this results in a sense of having to prove myself all the time, feelings of inferiority.

Keira's discomfort participating in the wider university social life overlapped with doubts about her academic and intellectual credibility. The legitimisation of an individual's right to greater status is one of the key dynamics through which some cultural capital is privileged over others and reproduced intergenerationally (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Keira stated her intention to distance herself from the UK1 brand,

> I don't want to shout about it and tell everyone I went to UK1, unlike my fellow students who will use it as an advantage and take it all over the world to enable them to get a great job.

Keira recognised she would reap lesser material rewards than students who positioned their ambitions more comfortably within the brand. Another student, Femi (British, UK2), unusually challenged the legitimising work of the UK2 brand; she questioned the university's meritocratic claims, the functional markers of quality indicated by its brand, and the underpinning lifestyle and ethos elements of the brand,

> I don't think these universities are full of smart people. That's bullshit! Most of the students have had an advantageous starting point. They've had more support to get them here, they've been to private schools, they've had tutoring, coaching to prepare them for the interviews and tests to get here. They have been told by everyone it's their right to be here.

Despite challenging the moral standing of the university and the legitimacy of its brand, Femi also identified the value of the brand to her personally as a means of transferrable capital.

The relational nature of social space in elite universities, ensured students' positions within institutions were never fixed but always in flux based on their possession of types and amounts of capital, tempered by their dispositions and changing in relation to other students (whose own capitals and dispositions changed and adapted to the social space) (Bourdieu 1984; 1985; 1986). In this sense, Kornberger's description of brands as an 'organizing device' that 'reframes the relationship between the individual and society' (2015:110) rings only partly true. Whilst the brand was evidently shaping the competitive social organisation of elite universities, in practice it was doing so largely by reinforcing pre-existing advantages. By confirming or denying students' legitimacy within elite universities the brand rendered some students as primarily consumers rather than producers of the brand's cultural capital. To compete effectively within the elite university field required the legitimacy bestowed by the brand to occupy its social space and by using the brand as a productive form of currency.

The Cosmopolitan Brand: local and global elite capital

A recurrent theme to emerge from students' accounts was their perception of their institution's global reach related to personal ambitions for careers played out on a global stage. This mirrored the privileged dispositions of ascendant elites or 'haves' identified by Bauman (2000a; 2000b) who are free to move across borders in pursuit of work, pleasure or economic gain as compared to 'have nots', who move because they are forced to. The global reach of the brand was considered important, but also often described in relation to the local geography of institutions.

The value of being engaged and legitimised within elite university brands was exemplified by international students who often identified the global transferability of its cultural capital as a key indicator of value. Gargi (Indian, UK2), an international student, previously studied as an undergraduate at an elite university in America. She described similar characteristics to

privileged home students and suggested her affluent family background meant attending an Ivy League university and UK2 was 'natural to me'. Gargi identified the transferrable value of her degree,

> Ivy League and Oxbridge are recognised everywhere, so if I go back home and say I have a degree from these universities it is something that will help me in the future. Everyone back home [in India] knows what these universities are and what they stand for. I can go anywhere in the world and everyone knows what getting a degree from these universities means and what it says about you.

Gargi identified value in her degree credentials as transferrable across borders in part because of the recognisability of the brand. She also identified how this value gave her access to global opportunities because the brand imbued her with its capital values,

> The name will get me far. It has already established me to have access to great opportunities in Europe and internationally around the world. I can take that with me everywhere I go. Having that marks you out from everyone, it gives you so much standing and credentials that are worth a lot in many different ways. It says certain things about you as a person – and not just about your education, your class and your access to people.

Home students also identified the value of globally recognised institutional brands, Ralf noting the potential impact US1 might have for him,

> I know that I can use the name and take it anywhere in the world and use it to my advantage, it will be recognised and there will be others who are in similar positions. I was able to do an internship at a major company in my first year and all the other interns had been to an elite university – as had most of the people working there – the idea that the name is global makes an impact.

Students identified the exclusivity of institutional brands and their global currency, but also highlighted traits emblematic of institutions' recognisability that were rooted in their local physical spaces. Students at all four institutions described their university being a physical attraction. Edward (American, US2) described, 'coach loads of tourists from China and elsewhere going to the university shop to buy branded hoodies and other paraphernalia', and

Georgina (British, UK2) described tourists photographing a dining hall that was 'Harry Potterworld in the flesh'. Tony commented on the physical resemblances of Ivy League universities, 'All the green spaces and the red buildings. They look similar and they feel the same'. A picture emerged of global brands defined by their name, reputation, imagery and the weight of influence afforded their exclusive membership that existed beyond the university actors themselves. The branded hoodies, caps, pens, keychains and bottle openers on sale in university stores were marketed to and consumed by visiting day-trippers more readily than the graduate students in our research.

Tony identified how he would 'capitalise on the brand name' by comparing it to another brand instantly recognisable anywhere in the world,

> You don't have to explain it, you don't have to explain what it means. It's just known, it's a brand. I guess it's like saying Chanel or something. Everyone knows what Chanel is, who doesn't know?

Almost all students suggested their confidence in the global recognition of the brand would have a beneficial impact on their careers. However, Zena (American, US1) who had not previously attended an elite university described feeling 'ill at ease' studying at US2; suggesting this was partly a consequence of expectations of how students position themselves and exhibit the dispositions of the university's global brand identity,

> How [US1] is understood is universal, how elite is understood is also universal. The brand is seen as the most valuable. It's transferable and known all over the world. It's based on having a certain style, a certain way of doing things; speaking, thinking and even writing and if you don't conform to that you will find it hard to fit in. It's about learning the culture here and how it works. The language is all part of that, how you speak with the professors and how you interact with the other students.

Zena highlighted how the transferrable mobile capital of the US1 brand was a form of cultural capital shaping the US1 brand in the image of the local institutional social space of

her university. The brand was less an exemplar of 'national' reach in a global world but rather the 'local' reach of the university. A local reach which found its similarity with the brands of other, similar elite institutions. Femi described a similar account of the UK2 brand and noted how students were required to conform to behaviours shaped at the local institutional level

> It is the reputation that exists that is over and above the actual quality of the education. The advantage of being here has to do with the name. As a [UK2] student, it opens up doors and gives you access to networks, but it's the name that opens up the doors. But by the same token the name and brand can also be a problem, because you have to conform to the brand and know what is expected of you. You have to be good in a certain kind of way, you have to have a certain kind of brilliance.

Femi's account of conforming to the brand suggests elite university brands operate to reinforce the *status quo* by producing patterns of social behaviours, individual characteristics and competition for resources that mirror Bourdieu's account of fields in which students are complicit (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1993b). The brand's potency (and its value to the students in our research) defined by its local characteristics *and* its ready global transferability marked it out as a Cosmopolitan Brand. Being a student of an elite university was often compared to membership of an exclusive club that provided access to, and compatibility with, the exclusivity of its brand. Simon (British, US2) described the relation between his current experience of studying at US2 and future ambitions for an international career that emphasised the effectiveness of the brand's cosmopolitanism,

> The brand gives you and provides you with entrance into exclusive spaces, which leads to other exclusive spaces. This space has a hierarchy based on how intelligent and interesting you are. The name also gives you super confidence that you can't get from anywhere else. It's like saying, well if [US2] thinks I'm good enough then I must be really good and I can use that and exploit it to get what I want.

Simon linked the US2 brand directly to exclusive forms of cultural capital fostered and competed for locally within the university. This exclusivity, fine-tuned by competition into

'hierarchies of intelligence' that were simultaneously legitimised by the 'super confidence' of the brand. At ease with the US2 brand, Simon seemed effortlessly comfortable articulating his legitimacy to becoming an elite global citizen. Throughout our discussions with students at elite universities there was a noticeable self-reflexivity on the part of students. All students identified the advantages elite universities bestowed upon them and most recognised the brand as a valuable globally understood asset. According to Juan (American, US2),

> US2 is marketed as an elite brand and that's what it is. Once you say the name, there are certain things attached to it. It gives you a magical bubble of opportunities that you would not otherwise have access to.

Juan's 'magical bubble of opportunities' in many respects summed up the ambiguities of the clearly nebulous qualities of brands and graduate student's awareness of their tangible value.

Conclusions

Whilst graduate students in our study readily identified and *named* the brands of elite universities, the tangible evidence of what constituted the brand often appeared unclear. The consistent and related features to emerge in student's account of brands included: the role brands played in shaping the social organisation of their universities; the value of the brand; students differing positioning in relation to the brand as consumers and/or producers of the brand's value; and, that the local:global relationship of elite university brands functioned as Cosmopolitan Brands.

Students described how elite universities largely reinforced patterns of disadvantage. These accounts mirrored Bourdieu's analysis of institutional reproduction (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and of research that has explored the persistence of privilege within elite universities (Bourdieu 1996; Jack 2014; Reay 2018). Students from more privileged backgrounds found it both easier to gain entry and to thrive in elite universities. This is readily understood in terms

of students possessing more or better forms of capitals, and having habitus that closely aligned with the field of the university (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Elite university brands tended to deliver some of the value anticipated from commercial or marketing perspectives including providing recognition and legitimisation of institutional quality, but not to deliver other outcomes such as extending their market (Murphy 1998). The brand did not extend the elite university market to a broader cohort of students but instead, actively maintained greater value for more privileged students. Unlike the exclusivity associated with Chanel or Rolex and acquired by individuals investing economic capital to own the brand; elite university brands functioned to retain exclusivity. The brand restricted access according to students' dispositions to 'fit' with the brand itself. Elite university brands functioned not just as a form of cultural capital to be acquired, but more significantly as a medium (Lury 2004) an 'organizing device' (Kornberger 2015) within which the exclusive cohort of elite university actors can compete for capitals. This 'fit' emerged in ways that paralleled individual *habitus* and possession of capitals but also framed how graduate students engaged with the brand. A spectrum emerged in which some students were solely consumers of the brand capital, whilst others became both consumers and active producers of its capital. The producers of brand capital were more privileged students. In effect the brand allowed more privileged students to legitimise their own value as part of the brand. Less privileged students tended to derive some, but less valuable benefits from the brand. Whilst the exclusivity of elite university brands restricted any broadening of the university market to a more diverse body of students; the brand was significant, in opening up new value beyond the traditional domains of the university. This was identifiable firstly in the transferrable capital value of the brand acquired by students to deploy in diverse global settings; and secondly, by legitimising the global reach of universities. Students best positioned to deploy brand capital globally were those who demonstrated the closest 'fit' to the brand; their status and position easily

reproduced by the brand. They were also positioning themselves in this role to perform the significant role of being producers of the brand and its value. The extension of the brand globally adding new value and new weight to its pre-existing architecture; an organising institutional field reproducing its own patterns of privilege and generating value to its actors. In this way, the Cosmopolitan Brand of elite universities was both protecting its brand interests and those who belonged within its most exclusive inner circles. The Cosmopolitan Brand worked to ensure those most aligned with its interests were the new producers of its brand capital; by doing so, it ensured the new producers of its brand capital shared its pre-existing interests. For brands to retain or increase value requires them to be measurable. In this sense, elite universities are supremely poised to reinforce their status, their own brands legitimising the value of cultural capital they produce. The proliferation of global rankings seemed largely irrelevant to the universities in our research. Unlike other universities promoting themselves in global educational economies, they have never struggled to maintain consistent top ten spots in all the major world rankings. This is unsurprising given elite universities produce knowledge about what constitutes the status of that knowledge. Elite universities generate a legitimacy around the types of cultural capital they produce that is 'taken for granted' (Bourdieu 1977, 166). For elite universities this legitimacy, so apparent in their Cosmopolitan Brands, is also imbued in the experiences of its graduate students who are complicit in local, institutional competitions for position and status; processes in which they are continually demonstrating their congruity with established orders. The global brand's legitimacy, its currency, is embedded in the local institutional competition for its capitals.

This is a mutually benefitting process. Elite universities deploy their 'brands' and their 'people'; by doing so, asserting the ascendancy of their cultural capital to position their institutions at the forefront of strategies to maintain and extend economic power globally. For

graduate students the brand's legitimacy bestows personal legitimacy and a 'taken for granted' status within competition for the acquisition of capitals. As elite universities extend their pre-existing ascendancy within their national social, political and economic hierarchies on a global stage; their graduate students are also increasingly global actors. Students invariably described both an awareness of their institutions' global brands; and also, the pressurised, competitive local processes shaping their time at university. Their general complicity in these processes in no small part reflected their awareness of the personal rewards that accrued from the brand. The ease with which some students navigated elite universities whilst those from less privileged backgrounds often struggled, highlights the enduring importance of local, domestic competition to retain and acquire capitals. Perhaps most significantly, students appeared positioned in terms of their competition for legitimacy; the competition for cultural capital that confirmed their right to the brand and the status it conferred. That branded legitimacy would have the biggest impact on their future acquisition of cultural, social and economic capitals through their progression into high status employment. This local competition highlights the cosmopolitan nature of elite university brands to privilege specific students. Whilst elite university brands are often understood in terms of globally recognised logos, rankings and influence; they are more significantly shaped by a local university ethos encompassing how its members behave and think, teach and learn. A picture developed from the accounts students in our research provided of their pathways to elite universities, experiences whilst there and hopes for the future. They were engaged in an ongoing local struggle for a bigger slice of the university brand. This competition, largely determined by pre-existing habitus and access to capitals, imbued a cohort of already privileged students with globally legitimate and legitimising cultural capital. This *elite corps* acquires access to a global brand, enabling them to secure positions of privilege and advantage in the future.

References

Aaker, D.A. (1991) *Managing Brand Equity*. New York: The Free Press.

Ali-Choudhury, R., Bennett, R., & Savani, S. (2009). University marketing directors' views on the components of a university brand. *International review on public and nonprofit marketing*, *6*(1), 11.

Bauman, Z. 2000a. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bauman, Z. 2000b. Tourists and vagabonds: Or, living in postmodern times. In *Identity and social change*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society*. London:Sage.

Beck, U. (2002). The cosmopolitan society and its enemies. *Theory, culture & society*, *19*(1-2), 17-44.

Beck, U. (2005). The cosmopolitan state: redefining power in the global age. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, *18*(3-4), 143-159.

Beck, U., Bonss, W., & Lau, C. (2003). The theory of reflexive modernization: Problematic, hypotheses and research programme. *Theory, culture & society*, *20*(2), 1-33.

Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Policy Press.

Bhopal, K., Myers, M., & Pitkin, C. (2020). Routes through higher education: BME students and the development of a 'specialisation of consciousness'. *British Educational Research Journal*.

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Vol. 16). Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1985. The social space and the genesis of groups. *Information (International Social Science Council)*, *24*(2), 195-220.

Bourdieu, P. 1986. The forms of capital. In Richardson J. (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. 1988. *Homo academicus*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 1993a. *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. Colombia: Columbia University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1993b. *Sociology in question* (Vol. 18). London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. 1996. *The State Nobility*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 2005. *The social structures of the economy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. 2008. Sketches for a self-analysis. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. and J.C. Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Vol. 4). London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. and L.J. Wacquant. 1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago press.

Boyatzis, R. 1988. *Transforming Qualitative Information*. London: Sage.

Braun, V. and V. Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, *3*(2), 77-101.

Derrida, J. (2001). *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*. Psychology Press.

The Economist. 2005. The brains business, September 8.

Friedman, J. Z. 2017. Everyday nationalism and elite research universities in the USA and England. *Higher Education*, 1-15.

Hart, S. (1998) 'The Future for Brands' in in Hart, S. and Murphy, J. *Brands*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Inglis, D. (2012). Alternative histories of cosmopolitanism. *Routledge handbook of cosmopolitanism studies*, 11.

Jack, A. 2014. Culture Shock Revisited: The Social and Cultural Contingencies to Class Marginality. *Sociological Forum* 29 (2): 453-475.

Karabel, J. 2005. *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Keith, M. (2006). *After the cosmopolitan?* London:Routledge.

Kenway, J., J. Fahey and A. Koh. 2013. The libidinal economy of the globalising elite school market. In: Maxwell, C, Aggleton, P (eds) *Privilege, Agency and affect*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 15–31.

Kenway, J., D. Langmeadand D. Epstein. 2015. Globalizing femininity in elite schools for girls: Some paradoxical failures of success. In: van Zanten, A, Ball, S, Darchy-Koechlin, B (eds) *Elites, Privilege and Excellence: The National and Global Redefinition of Educational Advantage*. London: Routledge.

Koh, A. and J. Kenway. 2012. Cultivating national leaders in an elite school: Deploying the transnational in the national interest. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *22*(4), 333-351.

Kornberger, M. (2015). Think Different: On Studying the Brand as Organizing Device. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, *45*(2), 105-113.

Lury, C. 2004. *Brands: The logos of the global economy*. Routledge.

McCarthy, C., and J. Kenway. 2014. Introduction: Understanding the re-articulations of privilege over time and space, in special issue Elite schools in Globalising Circumstances, *Globalisation, Societies and Education 12*(2), 165-176.

Marginson, S. 2008. Global field and global imagining: Bourdieu and worldwide higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *29*(3), 303-315.

Marginson, S. (2014). University rankings and social science. *European Journal of Education*, *49*(1), 45-59.

Maxwell, C., and P. Aggleton. 2013. Becoming accomplished: Concerted cultivation among privately educated young women. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 21(1), 75-93.

Moor, L. (2007). *The Rise of Brands*. Oxford: Berg.

Moor, L., & Lury, C. (2011). Making and measuring value: comparison, singularity and agency in brand valuation practice. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *4*(4), 439-454.

Moore, K., & Reid, S. (2008). The birth of brand: 4000 years of branding. *Business History*, *50*(4), 419-432.

Morrish, L., & Sauntson, H. (2019). *Academic irregularities: language and neoliberalism in higher education*. Routledge.

Murphy, J.M. (1990). *Brand Strategy*. Cambridge: Institute of Directors.

Murphy, J.M. (1998) 'What is Branding?' in Hart, S.and Murphy, J. *Brands*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Pásztor, A., & Wakeling, P. (2018). All PhDs are equal but… Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate. *British journal of sociology of education*, *39*(7), 982-997.

Reay, D. 2005. Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class. *Sociology*, *39*(5), 911-928.

Reay, D. 2018. *Miseducation*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Reay, D., David, M. E., & Ball, S. J. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Class, race, gender and higher education*. Trentham Books.

Sanigar, M. A. (2013). Selling an Education. Universities as commercial entities: a corpus-based study of university websites as self-promotion. *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics*, *18*, 85-114.

Sauntson, H., & Morrish, L. (2011). Vision, values and international excellence: The 'products' that university mission statements sell to students. *The marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer*, 73-85.

Simmel, G. 1978. The Philosophy of Money. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1900)

van Eekelen, B. F. 2015. Accounting for ideas: Bringing a knowledge economy into the picture. *Economy and Society*, *44*(3), 445-479.

Van Meter, K. 1990. Methodological and Design Issues: Techniques for Assessing the Representatives of Snowball Samples, *NIDA Research Monograph*, 31-43.

Verger, A., C. Lubienski and G. Steiner-Khamsi. 2016. The emergence and structuring of the global education industry: Towards an analytical framework. *World yearbook of education*, 3-24. New York: Routledge.

Zimdars, A. 2010. Fairness and undergraduate admission: a qualitative exploration of admissions choices at the University of Oxford. *Oxford Review of Education* 38(3).

Zimdars, A., Sullivan, A., & Heath, A. (2009). Elite higher education admissions in the arts and sciences: Is cultural capital the key? *Sociology*, *43*(4), 648-666.