

EXPRESSIONS OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE BRANDING OF POST-SOVIET UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Despite the fact that there is a lot of discussion around the concept of digital transformation, a review of the literature shows that there are many different, often conflicting interpretations and definitions of this term. Some authors argue that digital transformation refers to the introduction of IT into the activities of the company, others consider it a natural, evolutionary process. Among the latter, one of the most complete and comprehensive concepts of digital transformation describes it as a natural process of development, in which digital technologies and opportunities are used to create business models that create value, as well as deliver more efficient services. It is also possible to consider digital transformation in terms of the interaction between organizational, structural, strategic and technological changes necessary to meet the requirements of the modern digital age.

The number of conceptual and empirical studies and publications about digital transformation has grown dramatically in recent years. A significant number are also publications related to digital transformation in the university system. However, at the time of writing this article, there were few works related to digital transformation in higher education in post-Soviet countries.

This article discusses the existing theories, approaches and models of digital transformation in order to derive a common terminology around which it will be possible to build a discourse. A literature study is also being carried out in order to build a model that will be used to study the branding of universities in the post-Soviet countries and its constituent elements. Finally, the results of the study show how digital transformation affects the brands of post-Soviet universities.

Keywords and phrases: digital transformation, brand, post-Soviet universities, higher education.

ԹՎԱՅԻՆ ՓՈԽԱԿԵՐՊՄԱՆ ԱՐՏԱՀԱՅՏՈՒՄԸ ՀԵՏԽՈՐՀՐԴԱՅԻՆ ԲՈՒՀԵՐԻ ԱՊՐԱՆՔԱՆԻՇԵՐՈՒՄ (BRAND)

ԶԱՐՈՒՀԻ ՍՈՂՈՄՈՆՅԱՆ

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Համառոտագիր

Չնայած այն հանգամանքին, որ կան բազմաթիվ քննարկումներ թվային փոխակերպման (Digital transformation) հայեցակարգի շուրջ՝ գրականության ամբողջական ուսումնասիրությունը գալիս է փաստելու, որ կան նշյալ եզրույթի բազմաթիվ, երբեմն նաև իրար հակասող մեկնաբանություններ և սահմանումներ: Որոշ հեղինակներ պնդում են, որ թվային փոխակերպումը վերաբերում է ընկերության գործունեության մեջ SS լուծումների ինտեգրմանը, ոմանք այն համարում են բնական, էվոլյուցիոն գործընթաց: Վերջիններիս թվում թվային փոխակերպումների առավել համապարփակ և ամբողջական հայեցակարգերից մեկն այն նկարագրում է՝ որպես զարգացման բնականոն մի գործընթաց, որը թվային տեխնոլոգիաներն ու դրանց ընձեռած հնարավորություններն օգտագործում է արժեք ստեղծող բիզնես մոդելների գեներացման, ծառայությունների ավելի արդյունավետ մատուցման և այլնի համար: Հնարավոր է նաև թվային փոխակերպումը դիտարկել կազմակերպչական, կառուցվածքային, ռազմավարական և տեխնոլոգիական փոփոխությունների փոխազդեցության տեսանկյունից, որոնք անհրաժեշտ են ներկայիս թվային դարաշրջանի պահանջները բավարարելու համար:

«Թվային փոխակերպում» իրողությանը վերաբերող հայեցակարգային և էմպիրիկ հետազոտությունների և հրապարակումների քանակը կտրուկ աճ է գրանցել վերջին տարիներին: Զգալի թիվ են կազմում նաև այն հրապարակումները, որոնք վերաբերում են թվային փոխակերպմանը բուհական համակարգում: Այդուհանդերձ, սույն հոդվածը գրելու ժամանակ բավական սակավաթիվ էին այն աշխատանքները, որոնք թիրախում էին թվային փոխակերպումը հենց հետխորհրդային երկրների բարձրագույն կրթության ոլորտներում:

Սույն հոդվածում քննարկվում են թվային փոխակերպման առկա տեսությունները, մոտեցումները և մոդելները՝ նպատակ ունենալով դուրս բերել ընդհանրական եզրութաբանություն, որի շուրջ հնարավոր կլինի խոսույթ կառուցել: Իրականացվում է նաև գրականության ուսումնասիրություն՝ նպատակ

ունենալով դուրս բերել մի մոդել, որի կիրառմամբ հնարավոր կլինի ուսումնասիրել հետխորհրդային երկրների բուհերի բրենդը և վերջինիս բաղկացուցիչ տարրերը: Վերջապես, հետազոտության արդյունքները գալիս են լուսաբանելու, թե ինչպես է թվային փոխակերպումն արտացոլվում հետխորհրդային բուհերի բրենդերում:

Բանալի բառեր և բառակապակցություններ. թվային փոխակերպում, ապրանքանիշ, հետխորհրդային բուհեր, բարձրագույն կրթություն:

ПРОЯВЛЕНИЯ ЦИФРОВОЙ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИИ В БРЕНДАХ ПОСТСОВЕТСКИХ УНИВЕРСИТЕТОВ

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Аннотация

Несмотря на то, что вокруг концепции цифровой трансформации (Digital transformation) ведется множество дискуссий, обзор литературы показывает, что существует множество различных, зачастую противоречащих друг другу интерпретаций и определений этого термина. Некоторые авторы утверждают, что цифровая трансформация относится к внедрению ИТ в деятельность компании, некоторые рассматривают ее как естественный, эволюционный процесс. Среди последних одна из наиболее полных и всесторонних концепций цифровых преобразований описывает ее как естественный процесс развития, в котором цифровые технологии и возможности используются для создания бизнес-моделей, создающих ценность, а также предоставления более эффективных услуг. Также можно рассматривать цифровую трансформацию с точки зрения взаимодействия между организационными, структурными, стратегическими и технологическими изменениями, необходимыми для удовлетворения требований современной цифровой эпохи.

Количество концептуальных и эмпирических исследований и публикаций о «Цифровой трансформации» резко выросло за последние годы. Значительное количество составляют также публикации, связанные с цифровой трансформацией в университетской системе. Тем не менее, на момент написания данной статьи было немного работ, относящихся к цифровой трансформации в сфере высшего образования в постсоветских странах.

В данной статье обсуждаются существующие теории, подходы и модели цифровой трансформации с целью вывода общей терминологии, вокруг которой можно будет строить дискурс. Также проводится исследование литературы с целью

построения модели, которая будет использована для изучения бренда университетов постсоветских стран и его составляющих элементов. Наконец, результаты исследования показывают как цифровая трансформация отражается на брендах постсоветских университетов.

Ключевые слова и словосочетания: цифровая трансформация, бренд, постсоветские университеты, высшее образование.

Introduction

Digital transformation (hereinafter referred to as DT) has gained momentum in recent decades and it is viewed and perceived as a must in all walks of life: medicine, education, public domain, education, etc. At times, the said expression is so omnipresent that it is extremely difficult to understand what transformations are meant and what has urged those.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are a lot of discussions around the concept of DT, the review of the body of literature reveals that there are many different interpretations and conceptualizations of the term [1]. Some authors claim that digital transformation simply refers to the adoption of IT in company operations and activities [27], some see it as an evolutionary process [49]. Among the latter, one of the most comprehensive and well-rounded conceptualizations of digital transformations describes it as an evolutionary process that makes use of digital technologies and capabilities to produce value-generating business models, more sophisticated and effective business practices and operations, and better service delivery [37]. It is also possible to view digital transformation from the perspective of the interplay between the organizational structural, strategic, and technological changes that are necessary in order to satisfy the demands of the current digital era [18].

Despite the existing differences around the concept of digital transformation and the impact it has on different systems, undeniable is the fact that DT has become a necessity for many businesses, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards.

Theoretical and methodological bases

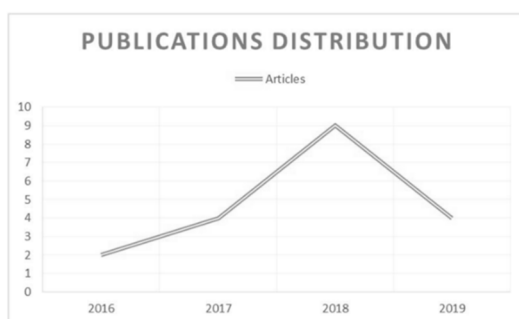
This paper will discuss existing theories, approaches, and models of digital transformation with the aim of arriving at a common metalanguage to be used. The literature review will then be examined in order to find a model that will be used when scrutinizing what the university brand is and what elements it is comprised of. The discussion on the higher education system back in the Soviet Union will follow where the principles and the values that all HEIs adhered to will be presented. Finally, the study aims at revealing how DT is reflected in the post-Soviet HEI branding, because despite the fact that the search of the literature on the transformation of higher education institutional landscape in post-Soviet countries has yielded a number of valuable articles, it seems that no research has been conducted on how HE systems of post-Soviet countries have adapted to digital transformation and whether they have done so overall.

Digital Transformation: much ado about nothing?

The concept of DT has been actively discussed for a while now, yet, as is truly highlighted by Gong, the term has been so broadly used (and misused) that it becomes very confusing. As a result, it is vitally necessary to give DT some conceptual rigor [24].

Research on digital transformation has undoubtedly been given a conceptual and empirical boost with the sharp rise in publications pertaining to it, but at the same time, there are still some questions about how it should be conceptualized and theorized because it is being socially constructed from different fields of knowledge. The underlying structural barriers may obstruct communication between the domains and wreak havoc on the coherence of research streams without a firm grasp of the fundamental components of digital transformation and the logic of how these components link [24]. Over time, there have been a substantial number of papers on how HEIs have embraced digital transformation. Figure 1 shows that since 2016 the number of publications has grown by 200 percent yearly; by March 2019, the increase had already reached 133 percent [6].

Figure 1. Publications distribution [6]



Irrespective of the rise in the number of publications and alongside the fact that there is no unanimous definition of DT, there is no explicit and unified definition that could be used to address similar terms, namely “digital transformation,” “digitalization” or “digitization,” which are often used interchangeably. As is accurately mentioned by Borcan [11], “[w]hile academics and professionals seem to agree on the transformative impact of digital technologies, the understanding of digitization, digitalization and digital transformation as tools, concepts, visions or simply general terms naming their consequences is still imperfect” [12].

As far as DT is concerned it is obvious that it is a more complex process than mere digitalization or technological shift because DT goes beyond the digitizing of resources and ultimately results in the creation and extraction of value from digital assets [34], [41]. Though there was a considerable emphasis on the employment of digital technologies at the beginning, organizations and researchers began to see DT as more than just a shift in technology. They understood that it necessitates not only the use of cutting-edge technology

but also a coordinated approach to people, culture, mindset, talent development, and leadership in order to be successful. Hence, it is obvious that DT affects different dimensions of HEIs.

After having searched through the electronic databases Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, Benavides et al. [6] have singled out the dimensions which have reflected the DT or have been forced “to intervene in DT processes” within HEIs.

Figure 2. The radar of the dimensions of the DT in HEIs



[6]

While teaching has been most affected by DT, marketing seems to be the least affected dimension.

While there is no unified definition of DT [43], a recent review of 124 articles has defined the concept as “a fundamental change process enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies, accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities aimed at radically improving an entity (an organization, a business network, an industry, or society) and redefining its value proposition for its stakeholders” [24].

Branding: literature review

When new providers enter the market, they can put tremendous pressure on established universities. This is especially important in dynamic environments, when private institutions are soaking up the majority of the HE growth.

In order to see the evolution of the “brand” over the years, it is enough to refer back to the article written by de Chernatony et al. [16] where the authors state that one hundred publications from commercial and academic journals were examined for content analysis to provide a comprehensive view of the definitions of “brand” utilized. Over 80% of the papers analyzed were published during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which reflects both the rising interest in brands as valuable assets in the late 1980s-early 1990s, and the debate about the “death of the brand” in the mid-1990s [16].

After doing a content analysis of the literature, the authors identified twelve main themes that according to them were accurate categorizations of the broad range of definitions of the brand in the literature: i. brand as a legal instrument, ii. brand as a logo, iii. brand as a company, iv. brand as a shorthand, v. brand as a risk reducer, vi. brand as an identity system, vii. brand as an image in consumers' minds, viii. brand as a value system, ix. brand as a personality, x. brand as a relationship, xi. brand as adding value, xii. brand as an evolving entity [16]. The authors viewed the above-given definitions as a framework that can be useful for analyzing different brand definitions reviewed.

When discussing the components of university branding, Bernnett et al. suggest emphasizing three basic ingredients that are present within a brand: (a) a collection of promises presented to the outside world concerning the brand's benefits (brand as “covenant”), (b) a set of distinctive features that define the brand's inherent nature and reality (the brand's quiddity), and (c) an assortment of aesthetic designations and external communications that describe the brand (the brand's symbolic and external representation) [8].

Covenant

According to the definition provided by Ambler and Styles, a brand is “the promise of the bundle of attributes that someone buys ... these attributes may be real or illusory, rational or emotional, tangible or invisible” [3]. The concept “brand covenant” was used by Balmer and Gray to denote a set of promises on the brand's physical and emotional advantages to purchasers [5]. This particular attribute has been chosen to be used when referring to higher education institutions because “brand covenant” is said to be most applicable to service industries given the intangibility and heterogeneity of the latter.

Quiddity

The quiddity of a university brand refers to the reality of a brand rather than the promise it makes [7]. Some authors refer to university quiddity as an “organizational identity” that includes both values and behavioral characteristics [29], [4]. In this sense, the quiddity is similar to what de Chernatony et al. have identified as “brand as an identity system” and a “brand as a value system.” Creating an identity not only shields a business

from competition, but also enables it to realize economic benefits. A professionally administered identity system enables managers to enhance a brand's significance for consumers [20]. It also conveys the brand's essence to other stakeholders and promotes a more strategic approach [17]. When referring to the context of higher education institutions, a university's organizational identity encompasses the following: (a) the demographics of its student body (e.g. the percentages of ethnic minorities and nontraditional students it accepts); (b) internal values [13] relating to whether the university is elite and exclusive rather than inclusive and comprehensive; and (c) whether it has "traditional" as opposed to contemporary educational values [2], and (d) whether the university values research above teaching [22]. Bennett suggests that there are other dimensions of university brand's quiddity like physical actuality and the practicability [7].

Symbolic and external representation

Brand names (in terms of distinctiveness, relevance, etc.; see [9]), logos, typefaces, color schemes, stationery, forms, receptionist uniforms, vehicles, and premises are all key symbols of a brand [30]. People observe the aforesaid stylistic descriptors and form judgments about the company based on what they see [42]. Those visuals can be used in order to "create and sustain organizational meaning" [48], symbolize many aspects of an organization's goals and ideals [35]. Given the fact that service industries offer things that are intangible [51], and cannot literally be bought and used, symbolism becomes especially important for them [7]. As has been termed by Shanks et al. "Educational services are intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable from the person delivering it, variable, perishable and the customer (student) participates in the process". [46].

Alongside branding, a university can also be represented by its formal marketing campaign and its broader corporate communication with various external stakeholders, companies, agencies, etc. The said communication can be controlled and uncontrolled [35]. By controlled communication, university's elaborate marketing campaign with corresponding advertising, public relations, prospectuses, event calendars and many more is implied. As far as uncontrolled communication is concerned, an example of the latter can be a scandal within the organization (related to its staff members, students, bribes, favoritism), a financial crisis, strike of students and/or employees [8]. Different authors determine different criteria that can have a say on an organization's public image, such as behaviour, history, strategies, or involvement in different processes happening in the country.

The university brand: a model to be used

Notwithstanding the fact that the literature review has yielded different frameworks and models of university brand, the one suggested by Bennett et al. [8] will be used in this paper, yet not all variables offered by them will be covered given the constraints dictated by the topic itself.

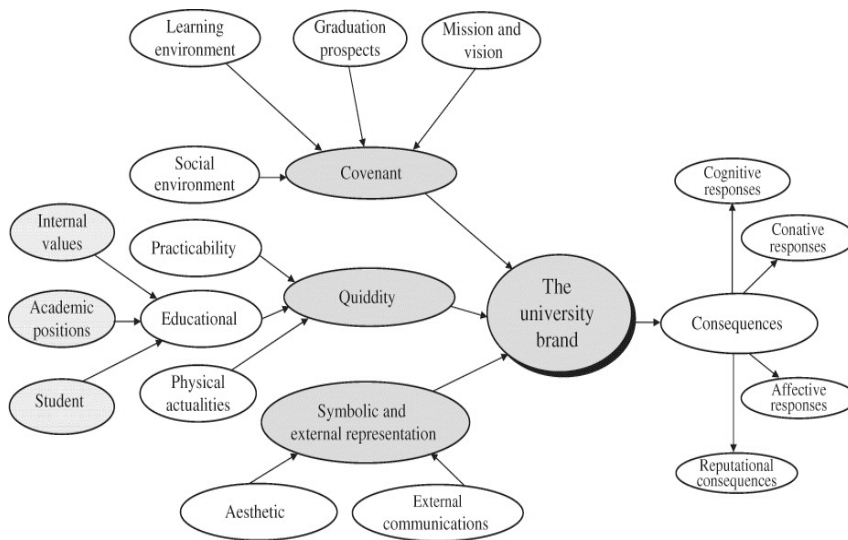
As it has been highlighted above, the university brand is composed of three components: covenant, quiddity, symbolic and external representation. The authors have constructed the three components as second-order latent variables with third-order formative indicators.

In order to understand whether post-Soviet universities have reflected the idea of digital transformation in their university brands, I will be referring to Figure 3 in order to find any reflection of DT first in university covenants. I will be examining the mission statements and the visions of the HEIs, graduation prospects, and promises in general. Though specific aspects of the learning environment that allegedly attract students are the quality and extent of student support services, well-known and successful teaching staff, and a student-centered administration [22], [25], this aspect of covenant will not be covered in this paper, given the fact that “learning environment” components can be revealed primarily by means of surveys and focus group discussions which proved impossible to be carried out within the scope of this paper given the number of universities involved, their geographic locations, and tight deadlines.

When examining the quiddity, I will be targeting the internal values of HEIs which might be reflected in universities’ founding documents (charters, founding principles, strategic plans, etc.) trying to reveal whether HEIs have “traditional” as opposed to contemporary (mass-market) educational values [2]. Practicability and physical actualities will not be covered as the latter implies architecture and campus layout, safety and security, the facilities of the city in which the university is located [36], and other features which, per se can be indicative of University’s plans to incorporate digital transformation into its operations, but the said link might be difficult to prove given the loose connection between the two. Practicability, which from the students’ viewpoint entails entry requirements allowing candidates to matriculate, desired degree programmes [10], suitable physical location [2], affordable fees, and decent accommodation [10] will not be covered, as the necessary information can be accumulated primarily by means of surveys and questionnaires.

As far as the symbolic and external representation of a university brand is concerned, university logos, typefaces, color schemes, stationery forms, vehicles, receptionists’ uniforms, and premises [9] will not be analyzed DT-wise, because these aesthetic designations are perceived by a wider public who form opinions and judgments about the organization [42]. Alongside marketing communication (controlled and uncontrolled), an organization’s public image can also include its history, organizational structure, and strategies, which will also be examined in order to see whether they contain any indication about and/or reflection of DT.

Figure 3. Suggested model of university branding [8]



Organizations that want to improve their brand's reputation and image should prioritize building a substantial and prominent online presence [33]. Shehzadi et al. examined the effect of ICT, E-service quality, and E-information quality on the reputation of educational institutions via the lenses of students' e-learning, e-word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and satisfaction [47]. Publicly conveying a good message has an immediate and profound effect on brand image, and the results reveal that e-WOM and student satisfaction both contributed to the growth of university branding. There is considerable evidence to prove e-WOM significantly impacted the public's perception of academic institutions. These findings further validate the significance of students' use of E-learning systems, ICT, E-service quality, and E-information quality in bolstering the reputation of the business [19].

Hence, given the importance of online presence, university websites will be scrutinized with the aim of revealing how digital transformation is reflected in the elements of university branding mentioned earlier.

Why post-Soviet countries? What's the added value?

The Soviet system of higher education was distinguished by a number of characteristics. First, it was primarily state-centered, with central planning and a top-down command mode of administration [21], [26]. The higher education system was integrated into a wider system of economic planning and was required to comply with directives from higher authorities. Higher education institutions were mandated to teach a particular number of individuals in specific specialties, although the greater economic planning system was responsible for assigning graduates to jobs. Control and oversight of higher education institutions were delegated to a vast number of sectoral ministries tasked with overseeing certain sectors [28].

Second, higher education was heavily focused on vocational training since it served as a system for producing "highly trained" cadre for the national economy [26], [50]. There was a lot of talk during the Soviet era about how universities and research institutions needed to be more "life-oriented" and responsive to the needs of the national economy. In higher education, this caused some disruptions in structure and content. Beginning in the early Soviet era [15], [45], emphasis on technical and vocational education has persisted.

Third, the Soviet system was characterized by its emphasis on uniformity, or the policy of applying the same standards to all organizations and citizens [39], [26]. This strategy helped to unite the culturally and linguistically diverse nations by making Russian the official language and instituting standardized curricula and textbooks. The Soviet Union's plan to steadily increase educational opportunities in all of its republics bore fruit. When it came to higher learning, each Soviet country had its own share of both general and specialized universities. The student population grew from 811 thousand in 1940 to 5.2 million in 1991 [28].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, higher education in almost all "new nations" undertook a similar path of reforms, which, in the majority of cases, was neo-liberal per se. In an endeavor to "normalize" their higher education systems tuition fees were introduced, national standardized exams were incorporated, and performance-based funding (not in all countries) was established. Neoliberal politics, which holds that the market can serve as a substitute for the democratic state in producing cultural logic and value, is the root driver of the corporatization and marketization of universities [32]. When it comes to state-guaranteed rights in areas like healthcare, education, and social security, neoliberalism takes a very dim view [14], [52], [53]. People who are willing to and able to make market-driven decisions (the "consumer citizen") are held up as the ideal. The new market state places the responsibility of care for one's own well-being on the person (rather than the state). The government should serve as a conduit for public demand and market forces [44]. This neoliberal stance is deeply Hobbesian in nature, with an emphasis on fostering privatized citizens who prioritize themselves above everyone else. Citizens raised in the neoliberal model's privatized, consumer-led society are taught to fear for their own safety while simultaneously being indifferent to the plight of others less fortunate than themselves [32]. The neo-liberal notion of citizenship has extremely negative repercussions when applied to HE [23]. It views education as a commodity to be sold to those with the means to buy it. The justification given is that it gives individuals more options. People are led to believe they would be able to buy any type of higher education they want in this brave new market by the promise of choice [32].

Despite the fact that the search for literature on the transformation of higher education institutional landscape in post-Soviet countries has yielded a number of valuable articles, it seems that no research has been conducted on how HE systems of post-Soviet countries have adapted to digital transformation and whether they have done so overall. The mere premise that all post-Soviet countries have a shared past and must consequently have a common legacy is what makes the study of these countries extremely useful in terms of revealing any commonalities and recurring patterns that can be the outcome of their

common historical past, or, to the contrary, discovering acute differences which might stem from different strategies and approaches they have adopted after their Soviet past. Trapped between Soviet legacy and global challenges, it would be of interest to discover how the mentioned countries have managed to reflect their DT approaches in university branding.

The choice of HE institutions

The USSR was comprised of 15 countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan (presented in alphabetical order). Analyzing the branding of every single HEI DT-wise would be impossible given the deadlines and the likelihood of having to deal with a huge amount of data. Hence, given the fact that all countries proudly advertise their universities in case those appear in international rankings, a decision has been made to analyze only those HEIs which have an overall score in Quacquarelli Symonds' (QS) World University Rankings and/or UK's Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings. The higher the university's rankings in one of these allegedly “prestigious” ranking systems, the more likely HEIs are to publicize that fact in marketing materials like brochures, catalogs, and annual reports in an effort to draw in more high-quality students and faculty and secure more government and private funding.

Overall, 90 HEIs were analyzed, with the below-given distribution per country:

Table 1: post-Soviet HEIs in QS, THE rankings

N	Country	N of HEIs
1	Azerbaijan	1
2	Belarus	1
3	Estonia	4
4	Georgia	2
5	Kazakhstan	3
6	Latvia	4
7	Lithuania	5
8	Russian Federation	60
9	Ukraine	10
OVERALL		90

The HEIs of certain countries (Armenia, Turkmenistan), despite being included in one and/or both rankings, were not given an overall score, and hence they have not been subject to analysis. Certain countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) were not included in the roster of QS and/or THE countries. A lot of other countries, despite having scored HEIs, also had a number of other institutions, which have not received any overall

scores (Russia-40, Lithuania-2, Latvia-3, etc.). Obviously, the said HEIs were not analyzed as well.

The outcomes

In the introduction of *Competition in Higher Education Branding and Marketing*, Gerardo Blanco Ramirez [40] starts off with two sentences in order to demonstrate that the ideas and activities linked to marketing and branding have fully penetrated into the life of colleges and universities. He states that sentences like “I’m sorry for being late to the meeting; I was dealing with a social media crisis,” and “I think these are good ideas, but we need to consider how these initiatives will affect our university’s brand” might have sounded quite weird some decades ago, yet at present university administrators need to be experienced enough in order to respond to posts, publications and content that portray their institutions in a negative light and to be able to think ahead and determine whether or not this or that particular activity will fit into the overall branding of their universities.

One of the findings to be highlighted from the very start is the fact that the English versions of the websites of the vast majority of HEIs were not updated, which meant that the necessary information could not be found. Not being able to locate things like HEI’s mission and vision, the Russian versions of the websites were consulted. In the majority of cases, documents like the charter, the strategy, and the developmental plans were available in Russian. Interestingly enough, even the institutions which claimed internationalization to be their priority have failed to translate the materials which can have an influence on the choice of candidates (both local and foreign), their parents, and potential cooperation partners. One such example is Baku State University. At the time of writing this paper, the English version of Baku State University website did not have the translated version of such documents as the “Mission and Development Strategy” and “the Development Programme”. Taking into consideration the significance of having an online presence, it was beyond the purview of this paper to translate the essential papers in order to move on to the examination of those documents later, however, it should equally be noted that in the scenario if the Russian versions had been considered, the overall picture could have been completely different.

When analyzing how DT is reflected in the HEI brand covenant mission in particular, the following picture can be observed: in some cases, HEI missions mention innovation and technologies, which does not encompass the whole depth of digital transformation, that has been defined as “a fundamental change process enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies, accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities aimed at radically improving an entity (an organization, a business network, an industry, or society) and redefining its value proposition for its stakeholders” [24]. In certain cases, the missions highlight “... the development of education, research, technology and other creative activities” (University of Tartu), in other cases the university is said to “... contribute to the global science, higher education, knowledge, technology transfer and innovation...” (University of Latvia), etc. Overall, in the vast majority of cases HEI missions do not contain any mentions of DT, except for the mission of HSE University (the Russian Federation),

which is formulated as follows, “HSE University’s mission is based upon the national goals and strategic development objectives of the Russian Federation, which include preservation of the population, health and well-being of the people, ensuring opportunities for self-realization and cultivation of talent in children and youth, thereby creating a comfortable and safe environment for life, providing esteemed jobs and effective work, successful enterprise and successful digital transformation, as laid out in Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation ...”. In this particular case, the HEI has elaborated steps that will lead to the global competitiveness of the Russian educational system, e.g., through the digital transformation of contents, formats and organization of educational activities, will contribute to ensuring forward-looking development and effective use of Russia’s S&T potential amidst radical technological transformation, and digital transformation of Russia’s economy, state, and professional education.

The initial hypothesis here was that the missions of HEIs might be dating back to the early 2000s, the epoch when DT was not widely discussed and written about: as it is shown in Figure 1, research publications have examined the digital transformation in HEIs from technological, organizational, and social aspects since 2016. The said hypothesis might have the right to exist especially in case of those institutions that have a long history. Undeniable is the fact that every significant strategic endeavor should begin with a clear and compelling mission statement as it outlines the most fundamental aspects of each company (the same for HEIs): what it does, who it serves, what it sells, who buys it, and how it differs from the competition. Mission statements are typically cited as an integral part of this process [31]. Moreover, changing the mission of the HEI is often regarded as risky and costly, given the fact that this change would mean subsequent changes cascading down to different aspects of HEI operations. Yet, the hypothesis proved to be false, given that a number of HEIs have quite recently validated their new strategic directions with university missions included, and yet, only one of those (HSE) reflects the concept of DT.

When analyzing the visions of HEIs, it can be ascertained that none of them had any indication or mention of DT. Graduation prospects were mostly presented in numbers and figures and included names and pictures of outstanding alumni who had reached heights in their careers. It needs to be acknowledged that restricting the study only to university websites has limited the possibility of studying “university promises” which often take the form of short posts and/or short videos/animations. Given the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, it was impossible to scrutinize the Facebook pages and other social media platforms of specific HEIs during this study.

As far as the quiddity is concerned, founding documents like charters, principles, strategic plans, etc. have been studied with the aim of revealing whether HEIs have “traditional” as opposed to contemporary (mass-market) educational values and how those incorporate the ideas and/or underlying concepts of DT. Just like brand covenant (mission and vision), the first perception was that University charters were elaborated and implemented a long time ago, and that was the reason why they had no mention of DT. For instance, the charter of Belarusian State University was signed back in 1999, after which it was amended a couple of times, the last update taking place in 2011. However, this was not

always the case. The Statute of Tartu University was adopted in 2020, and yet it contains only one line stating that "... it advances knowledge and technology transfer and innovation and popularizes research...". The same holds true for Riga Stradiņš University, the development strategy of which was implemented in 2019 with no indication about DT. Some HEIs mention technologies and innovation in their strategic and development plans, which can be perceived as referring to "digital transformation." For instance, in case of Lithuanian University of Health Sciences when referring to infrastructures, they mention that suchlike infrastructures are necessary to ensure modern environmental conditions for employees and students by applying advanced information technology solutions. This can entail some elements of digital transformation; however, information technologies alone cannot lead to digital transformation in case they do not result in a fundamental change, accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities aimed at radically improving an entity and redefining its value proposition for its stakeholders. Another example is Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (Vilnius Tech), which states, "We are constantly looking for more advanced technological solutions that will contribute to the world by creating added value in new or rapidly changing environment".

Moreover, the Rector's address states that the abbreviation for Vilnius Gediminas Technical University is VILNIUS TECH, which expresses the experience in engineering and technologies, outlines the intensive application of technologies in university life, the ever-growing need for technology, and its transforming and empowering importance in science, business, everyday life of man and society.

The seemingly plausible hypothesis that the year of signing and/or implementing guiding documents can be a factor as to why the HEIs under study have not incorporated DT in their founding or guiding documents, can also be rejected by stating some of the essential documents that go far beyond the short-term planning. Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, for instance, when referring to the new strategic academic leadership programme set for the decade 2021-2030 states that the programme aims to include over a hundred universities in territorial and nationwide development projects.

A similar picture can be traced when examining the history, organizational structure, and strategies of HEIs. The elements that come across when studying the history of HEIs are chronological data, names of previous rectors, important events in the history of the HEI, etc. Organizational structure mostly presented the organigram with the names and positions of department heads. As far as the strategies are concerned, they have already been covered when discussing brand quiddity in the previous paragraph.

This paper can serve as a good starting point for all future studies which will target DT and its reflection in university brands in Europe and beyond. Having data coming from different countries and being able to trace similar patterns will provide more fruitful grounds

to accept or reject the hypothesis that the said similarities are the result of a common political past.

Alongside with the findings presented above, there are also some limitations of the study that need to be taken into account:

- When analyzing the brand covenant (mission statements and the visions of the HEIs, graduation prospects, and promises in general) restricting the study only to university websites limits the possibility of studying “university promises” which often take the form of short posts and/or short videos/animations. During this study, it was impossible to analyze the information that Russian universities could have otherwise posted on social media websites (Facebook, else), given the sanctions exercised against the Russian Federation.
- Analyzing the English versions of the websites revealed some limitations that can considerably diminish the added value of the paper. Quite a significant number of HEIs under study did not have necessary documents translated into English, hence, further studies need to consider both English and Russian (or the official language of the country) versions to ensure that holistic information has been collected.

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