THE BRAND OF HUMANITIES UNIVERSITIES IN THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

MARCA DE LAS UNIVERSIDADES DE HUMANIDADES EN LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DIGITAL DE LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR

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ABSTRACT

Modern globalization and digital transformation significantly alter the approaches to building the brand of higher education institutions, particularly those specializing in the humanities. The purpose of this study is to reconsider the concept of a university brand in the digital era and to develop new tools for its formation, taking into account the needs of target audiences. The research is based on an empirical study of applicants' preferences, the development of customer journey maps (CJMs), and the identification of value expectations among different groups. The authors present a branding methodology that includes the creation of a separate digital space for prospective students, which made it possible to significantly increase enrollment without the use of advertising budgets. The article emphasizes the importance of integrating digital technologies and artificial intelligence into educational processes while maintaining the humanitarian identity of universities. The presented results have practical significance for building educational brands in the context of digital transformation and serve as a foundation for further research in educational marketing and university reputation management.

Keywords:

University Branding, Digital Transformation Of Education, Educational Marketing, Humanitarian Universities.

RESUMEN

La globalización moderna y la transformación digital transforman significativamente los enfoques para construir la marca de las instituciones de educación superior, en particular las especializadas en humanidades. El propósito de este estudio es reconsiderar el concepto de marca universitaria en la era digital y desarrollar nuevas herramientas para su formación, considerando las necesidades de los públicos objetivo. La investigación se basa en un estudio empírico de las preferencias de los solicitantes, el desarrollo de mapas de recorrido del cliente (CJM) y la identificación de las expectativas de valor entre diferentes grupos. Los autores presentan una metodología de desarrollo de marca que incluye la creación de un espacio digital independiente para los futuros estudiantes, lo que permitió aumentar significativamente la matrícula sin necesidad de invertir en publicidad. El artículo enfatiza la importancia de integrar las tecnologías digitales y la inteligencia artificial en los procesos educativos, manteniendo al mismo tiempo la identidad

humanitaria de las universidades. Los resultados presentados tienen relevancia práctica para construir marcas educativas en el contexto de la transformación digital y sirven de base para futuras investigaciones en marketing educativo y gestión de la reputación universitaria.

Palabras clave:

Marca universitaria, transformación digital de la educación, marketing educativo, universidades humanitarias.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is characterized by a radical transformation in the principles of interaction between individuals, companies, and entire sectors of the economy, including education. Under the conditions of globalization, digital transformation, and the widespread use of artificial intelligence, traditional approaches to understanding branding are losing their effectiveness. Today, a brand is no longer merely a tool of marketing communications but has become a complex concept encompassing the entire spectrum of how an organization is perceived: from the quality of its services and products to emotional engagement, from value orientations to stakeholder involvement in the co-development of the organization.

The relevance of rethinking the concept of branding is determined by increasing competition, the transparency of the information environment, and the need to build long-term relationships with diverse audiences. This is particularly important for organizations whose activities are based on intellectual capital and communication with society, such as universities. In this context, a brand becomes not just a marker of distinction but an expression of organizational identity, integrating internal values, social role, and the real experiences of all stakeholders.

The purpose of this study is to formulate and theoretically substantiate a new understanding of the brand as a complex, multidimensional system of perception and relationships between an organization and its key audiences. To illustrate this approach, the article presents a practical example of the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH), demonstrating how the new approach to branding is implemented in practice under conditions of digitalization and the widespread use of artificial intelligence technologies.

To achieve this aim, the following research tasks were set:

• to analyze the evolution of the concept of branding and identify its contemporary characteristics;

• to formulate a theoretical model of an integrated understanding of branding, including emotional, functional, social, and value components;

• to demonstrate the practical application of the new approach to branding using a case study of a specific educational organization (RSUH);

• to provide recommendations for the further development of the new approach to branding in the context of current socio-technological trends.

Thus, the proposed study is intended not only to reconceptualize the notion of branding but also to create a foundation for its practical application, ensuring the sustainable development of organizations in the digital era.

Traditionally, a brand was perceived as a marketing instrument whose primary tasks were company recognition, differentiation from competitors, and enhancement of commercial efficiency. However, under the conditions of digital transformation and globalization, such an understanding proves to be limited. As Aleshina (2021), emphasizes, "digital globalization is regarded as a new operating environment in which a university must adapt its brand to digital conditions and new models of interaction with consumers and stakeholders".

Today, the brand is transforming into a comprehensive concept that incorporates not only visual and communicative components but also deeper aspects of organizational perception by different audiences, their real-life experiences, and emotional engagement. The importance of emotional aspects of brand perception is growing, since, according to Vanyushkina (2019), "university branding and marketing communications are increasingly penetrating the digital educational environment, creating conditions for intellectual and emotional interaction between teachers and students".

Approaches to brand formation in the digital era are actively discussed in international scholarship. Researchers stress the necessity of a comprehensive revision of positioning strategies for universities under digital transformation (Laudien et al., 2022), as well as the development of digital branding in higher education with an emphasis on emotional and behavioral aspects of engagement with target audiences (Mishra & Warr, 2021).

Modern understanding of branding is based on an integrative approach that reflects the essence of an organization, its social role, culture, and internal values. Thus, a brand is no longer merely an external attribute but becomes a living mechanism supported by all participants in interaction: employees, consumers, partners, and society at large. This creates a multi-layered system of perception, where not only rational characteristics of products and services matter, but also the value-based, emotional, and social dimensions of organizational activity.

It is important to note, however, that in the era of digital transformation, a university's brand is shaped not only

through its official website but also across the entire spectrum of digital channels and points of contact with prospective students. According to a 2023 survey conducted at RSUH with 1,562 respondents, the university's official website served as the primary source of information for 59.3% of applicants. At the same time, student reviews (12.1%), university pages on catalog sites (8.7%), and activity on social networks (7%) also played a significant role (Abaev et al., 2025). These findings confirm the necessity of cultivating a positive digital footprint throughout all stages of applicant engagement from preliminary information searches on external resources to direct interaction via the university's digital platforms.

A crucial element of the new approach to branding is the concept of "Reasons to Believe", which serves as the foundation of sustainable, long-term relationships with audiences. This principle assumes that a successful brand must substantiate its advantages with factual evidence and authentic user experience. Such transparency and authenticity are critically important in the digital age, as the authors of Communications in the Context of Digital Change emphasize: "digital transformation significantly increases the transparency of information and accelerates communication between the brand and its audience" (Krivonosova, 2023).

Thus, under contemporary conditions, a brand ceases to be solely a promotional phenomenon, evolving into a deep, multifaceted system encompassing all dimensions of an organization's relationships with its key audiences. This approach is particularly vital for organizations operating in the intellectual and social domains, such as universities, where the brand becomes not only a marketing instrument but also a reflection of social responsibility and institutional identity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative analysis and practical case study implementation. The study was conducted at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) between 2022 and 2024, with the primary aim of examining applicant preferences, mapping customer journeys, and evaluating the effectiveness of digital branding strategies.

First, a large-scale survey was administered to prospective students applying to RSUH. A total of 1,562 respondents participated in the 2023 survey, representing diverse educational backgrounds, geographical regions, and program interests. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended items designed to capture the sources of information applicants relied upon, the significance of academic programs, the role of digital platforms,

and value-based expectations in choosing a university. Responses were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify dominant patterns and preferences.

Second, the results of the survey were applied to construct Customer Journey Maps (CJMs) for key target groups, including applicants, parents, students, faculty, alumni, and employers. For each audience, the CJM method identified typical stages of interaction with the university (initial search, information acquisition, engagement, enrollment, and long-term relationship). At each stage, values, expectations, and critical touchpoints were mapped. This method enabled the researchers to integrate both functional and emotional components into the university's branding model.

Third, the study adopted a case study approach, focusing on the development and launch of a dedicated applicant portal (gorggu.ru). Web analytics tools were used to monitor traffic, engagement levels, and conversion rates, while enrollment statistics from 2022–2025 were analyzed to assess the platform's effectiveness.

Finally, triangulation of survey data, CJM mapping, and case study outcomes ensured the reliability of findings. This integrated methodological framework provided both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for constructing a sustainable university brand under conditions of digital transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

- Branding in Higher Education: The Specificity of Humanities Universities – The Case of RSUH

Branding in higher education is characterized by particular complexity, shaped by the diversity of audiences and the social significance of educational institutions. Unlike commercial organizations, universities interact simultaneously with several fundamentally different groups: applicants and their parents, students, faculty, alumni, employers, government representatives, and society at large. Each of these audiences has its own expectations, and therefore a university brand must form a holistic image that accounts for the interests of all stakeholders. According to Aleshina (2021), university marketing in the era of digital globalization requires "individualization and democratization of solutions, and the co-creation of value with consumers and stakeholders".

Branding acquires special significance in humanities universities, as their mission extends beyond the transmission of professional knowledge and skills, focusing instead on the personal development of students. The key objectives of humanities education include fostering critical and creative thinking, shaping value orientations, and developing social competences.

At the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH), the problem of maintaining a humanities identity while actively integrating digital technologies and artificial intelligence becomes particularly evident. As Valeeva (2023) observes, digital transformation in higher education should not be reduced merely to the transmission of information, but must aim "at the development of human thinking in accordance with the technological paradigm of modern society and the expansion of educational opportunities". Humanities universities must therefore integrate digital solutions in a way that preserves their unique values without diminishing the importance of humanistic knowledge or reducing education to mere formality.

A 2023 study revealed that for 34.5% of RSUH applicants, the decisive factor in choosing the university was the availability of their desired program, underscoring the importance of a personalized approach to branding in humanities institutions (Abaev et al., 2025). Thus, the specificity of branding in humanities universities, as illustrated by the RSUH case, lies in the ability to combine advanced digital technologies with humanistic values, thereby creating a sustainable brand that reflects both tradition and innovation in modern humanities education.

In the context of developing branding strategies for humanities universities, special attention is paid to cultivating so-called "skills of the future." Contemporary research stresses that successful universities in the digital era must combine the development of soft skills with training in digital literacy and critical thinking (Mejía-Manzano et al., 2022).

- Practical Implementation of a New Branding Approach at RSUH

The Russian State University for the Humanities demonstrates in practice the potential of a comprehensive approach to branding in higher education. At the core of the university brand lies its academic reputation, shaped not only by the quality of teaching and institutional recognition, but also by the strength of its research schools, the authority of academic teams, and carefully designed teaching methodologies. According to Vanyushkina (2019), the reputation of the teaching staff and the quality of methodological approaches are decisive factors in the perception of a modern university brand. An equally important element of the RSUH brand is its transparent and rigorous system for selecting both applicants and faculty, ensuring that educational activities align with the mission of the institution.

A key stage in RSUH's branding process was the approval of a positioning concept grounded in the idea of social responsibility and the sustainable development of human civilization. This approach emphasizes the integration of interdisciplinary research aimed at solving both global and local societal challenges. Within this framework, the university brand transcends educational goals, becoming a symbol of its broader social mission and its commitment to sustainable development.

Functional and emotional advantages play a particularly significant role in the new RSUH branding. Functional advantages include the cultivation of in-demand soft skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, creativity, and emotional intelligence. As Valeeva (2023) stresses, under conditions of digital transformation, the foremost task of educational institutions is "the development of human thinking and the expansion of educational opportunities". Emotional advantages are manifested in students' perception of the importance of their involvement in social and research projects, and in their confidence that the acquired competences will remain relevant throughout their professional lives.

Based on the results of an empirical study of applicants' preferences in choosing a university (Abaev et al., 2025), this article proposes a methodology for designing customer journey maps (CJMs) for the university's key audiences. The methodology includes:

1. Identification of key target audiences (applicants, parents, students, faculty, alumni, employers, and society at large);

2. Development of a journey map for each audience, outlining the main stages of interaction with the university;

3. Mapping the system of values and expectations for each audience;

4. Identification of optimal communication channels and content at each stage;

5. Formation of an integrated marketing, advertising, and branding strategy based on this framework.

For example, the applicant's journey map typically includes the following stages: initial information search through catalog websites (43.8%), further study of the university's official website, attendance at open days, and review analysis. Effective branding must therefore address each stage of the journey and ensure a positive experience throughout.

RSUH has successfully implemented this comprehensive branding model, combining academic reputation, social responsibility, as well as functional and emotional advantages, thereby securing a sustainable and attractive position in the modern educational environment.

- Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence in University Branding: The RSUH Case

Digital transformation exerts a profound influence on the perception of university brands, fundamentally reshaping

the interaction between institutions and their audiences. This is primarily due to increased transparency regarding institutional activities and the rapid dissemination of information related to educational quality, research achievements, internal culture, and governance. According to a study by the Russian International Affairs Council, the digitalization of the educational environment has introduced new formats, enabling universities to utilize digital tools for more open and immediate engagement with applicants and students (Russian International Affairs Council, 2024). As a result, universities, including RSUH, are actively adopting interactive and personalized forms of communication such as online educational platforms, virtual tours, social networks, and interactive projects—fostering an image of an open and modern educational environment.

One of the most successful examples of digital transformation at RSUH was the creation of the specialized website gorggu.ru. An analysis of applicant preferences and CJM mapping revealed the need for a separate digital platform, since the presence of information for multiple audiences (students, faculty, alumni) on the main university website complicated access to critical information for prospective students. In response, RSUH developed a dedicated platform tailored exclusively to applicant needs. The gorggu.ru project attracted over 100,000 unique visitors annually, becoming the largest external traffic source for the university.

The results exceeded expectations: student enrollment at RSUH increased from 13,500 in 2022 to more than 18,000 by 2025. Beginning in 2024, the university was compelled to raise entry requirements and tuition fees due to the full use of classroom capacity. Notably, these outcomes were achieved without the use of an advertising budget, which is particularly significant for a state institution. Success was secured solely through classical marketing research and the practical implementation of its results across websites, social media, admission services, and other university divisions.

A distinctive aspect of digital transformation in branding humanities universities is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies into the educational process. An illustrative example is the use of ChatGPT technology by an RSUH student in preparing a thesis, which sparked extensive discussion in both academic and public circles. This practice mirrors global experience: while generative AI facilitates access to information, it also raises concerns about diminishing depth and originality in research, necessitating the development of critical attitudes toward AI tools. This case confirmed that AI implementation requires a responsible approach grounded in ethics and critical thinking, aimed at preserving authorial identity and academic integrity.

The integration of AI in higher education is widely discussed in international scholarship. Research indicates that AI adoption alters the role of educators and demands a rethinking of pedagogical strategies (Selwyn, 2019). International organizations emphasize the importance of developing digital ethics and ensuring inclusivity in education (Pedro et al., 2021). Key trends in the development of AI and digital technologies in higher education, including generative neural networks and adaptive educational platforms, are identified in recent analytical reports (Baldassarri, 2022). However, successful integration of such technologies is only possible if students develop critical thinking skills and the capacity for mindful use of AI (McArdle, 2022).

Accordingly, RSUH and similar institutions face the vital task of designing strategies that integrate digital technologies and artificial intelligence while emphasizing and preserving their humanitarian identity. Such strategies should include the introduction of specialized courses in digital ethics and critical engagement with AI, as well as the development of teaching methods that foster creative and meaningful applications of new technologies. As Krasnova & Mozhaeva (2019) argue, the success of electronic and digital education depends precisely on deliberate approaches and methodological literacy in applying new technologies, which is especially important for humanities disciplines (Mishra & Warr, 2021). By implementing such strategies, universities can leverage digital transformation to enhance their uniqueness and competitiveness, building the brand of next-generation innovative humanities education.

CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary conditions of globalization and digital transformation demand a profound reconsideration of traditional notions of branding, particularly in socially significant domains such as higher education. Based on the conducted analysis and empirical research, a new understanding of the university brand has been developed as a comprehensive, integrated system that unites traditional elements, academic reputation and the quality of educational methodologies, with modern components such as the emotional experience of interaction, the value orientations of target audiences, and the active application of digital technologies.

Today, a university brand is no longer simply a marketing tool, but a full-fledged organizational identity that reflects its uniqueness, social mission, and significance in a changing society. Effective brand development requires not only image management, but also a deep understanding of the needs of diverse target audiences through the construction of customer journey maps (CJMs) and the identification of their value orientations, which makes it

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possible to design targeted communication and marketing strategies.

The practical implementation of this new approach at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) demonstrates the high effectiveness of a comprehensive strategy based on research and carried out without the use of advertising budgets. The development of CJMs for applicants and the identification of their needs led to the creation of a separate project, gorggu.ru, focused exclusively on their interests. This website became the largest external channel for attracting prospective students, contributing to a significant increase in enrollment from 13,500 in 2022 to more than 18,000 in 2025, and making it possible to raise both entry requirements and tuition fees.

The integration of digital technologies, together with the development of digital ethics and critical attitudes toward artificial intelligence, has enabled RSUH not only to preserve but also to strengthen its humanitarian identity under new conditions.

Looking ahead, further development of RSUH and similar humanities universities should place particular emphasis on the continuous improvement of digital strategies, the creation of educational programs fostering critical thinking and the responsible use of technology, and the strengthening of the university's social role as a center for sustainable development in the digital era. Such a comprehensive approach ensures institutional resilience, competitiveness, and significance within the global educational space.

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