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Published online: 20 Sep 2023.

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Creating the "University experience": promotional and multimodal video productions in Scandinavian higher education

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ABSTRACT

Promotional videos produced by higher education institutions (HEIs) are an important medium for introducing new generations of students to HEIs and communicating their roles and purposes to the outside world. Despite the widespread use of such videos, research on their contents and implications is relatively sparse. This study addresses this gap by analysing videos from 12 Scandinavian HEIs. The study found that the videos aligned with the concept of the 'Promotional University 2.0', emphasizing an intention to 'aspire to more' and 'add to the real world', and portraying the university as an arena for play and joy. Three main categories of videos emerged: student-centred, market-centred, and organization-centred. The study also highlights the ideological implications of the representations, as they reflect the tension between traditional and commercialized views of the university. The results contribute to an understanding of how promotional videos shape the expectations of students and other stakeholders. This research is important as it helps us understand how HEIs communicate and represent themselves in the highly competitive marketplace of higher education. It also illustrates the incommensurability between higher education policies aiming to promote democratization and serve the public interest on the one hand, and the images of HEIs created by promotional multimodal content on the other.

Introduction

Fall in love with the smallest detail and the biggest phenomenon. Immerse yourself in what makes your heart race. Look forward to getting lost and finding new paths. (voiceover, video from Aarhus University, 2021)

What characterizes those who influence the future? What makes them start their own companies and revolutionize industries? It's because some people don't just want something; they want something more. (voiceover, video from NHH, 2020)

Promotional videos produced by higher education institutions (HEIs) enjoy wide circulation, and significant amounts of time, money and organizational resources are devoted to producing them. New generations of students are introduced to HEIs through promotional videos, and these productions have become important media and instruments by which HEIs attract prospective students and communicate their roles and purposes to the outside world. It is worth noting that the relationship between HEIs' communicative efforts and their effects is complex and challenging to estimate (Eriksson & Och Ivarsson Westerberg, 2021). Nevertheless,

promotional videos are multimodal compositions, as they use a range of modes and technologies, such as written/spoken language, visuality, aurality and spatiality, in order to create and communicate meaning. But what meaning are these videos conveying, and what images of the HEIs are they generating?

From a historical perspective, HEIs are highly resilient organizational forms, as they have shown themselves able to adapt to new structures, values, and functions (Young & Pinheiro, 2022). This is also reflected in the scholarly debate, where the modern university has been characterized by a variety of typologies, e.g. 'the service university' (Cummings, 1997), 'the entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 1998), 'the enterprise university' (Marginson & Considine, 2000), and 'the promotional university' (Hearn, 2010). HEIs are also understood as increasingly 'commercialized' (Bok, 2003), 'marketized' (Ek et al., 2013), and even 'McDonaldized' (Ritzer, 2002). These typologies and the values embedded in them contrast (and partly contradict) some of the previous visions of the modern European university, which combine views of the university as a meritocratic community of scholars, a representative democracy,

an instrument serving the public interest and a service enterprise embedded in competitive markets (Olsen, 2007). Hence, the field of higher education can be characterized in terms of institutional pluralism, diverging policy aims, and a layered reality, and thus as comprising different *institutional logics* (Henningsson & Geschwind, 2021).

With all these often competing functions, aims, logics and 'layered realities' of the modern university in mind, one can wonder what promotional videos actually communicate. The ways in which promotional videos handle the complexity of HEIs lie at the core of this paper, in which we systematically scrutinize promotional videos for prospective students at 12 Scandinavian HEIs. Our point of departure is that HEIs' promotional activities negotiate and form views of the university through a number of activities, among which multimodality has become particularly important. Multimodal contents provide a novel lens through which interpretations and understandings of the institutional logics that shape HEIs can be explored. The concept of institutional logics has become a widely recognized component of modern institutional theories and plays a crucial role in institutional and organizational studies. However, the use of institutional logics in higher education studies is a relatively new phenomenon (Cai & Mountford, 2022), and it has received limited recognition in mainstream higher education studies (Lepori, 2016, p. 255). Therefore, in this paper promotional videos are used as an *analytical prism* for exploring ideas about Scandinavian HEIs and how they are coping with different types of images, policy aims and logics. We ask the following research questions: (RQ1) What conceptualizations of the modern university do promotional videos convey in different types of Scandinavian HEIs? (RQ2) How do institutional logics operate on the level of multimodality in Scandinavian HEIs?

Theoretical observations

Promotional communication in higher education institutions

There is an emerging literature on strategic communication, branding and reputation management in higher education (e.g. Chaplo & Hemsley-Brown, 2010; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017; Drori, 2013; Drori et al., 2016; Elken et al., 2018; Engwall, 2008; Kosmützky, 2012; Lueg et al., 2022; Sataøen & Wæraas, 2016). This research deals with strategic and promotional communication as organizational processes in universities (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009), implications for students (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016), implications for university governance and policy (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017), and the role

of marketing practices within HEIs (Sands & Smith, 2000). In addition, several studies have analysed promotional content in the higher education sector as specific communicative processes, among which the discourses of branding and reputation are noticeably impacting the university organization (Ng, 2014; Vásquez et al., 2013; Xiong, 2012).

Many of the studies are based on broad and overarching ideas about the changing role of communication in today's society. These ideas underscore that we are living in a 'brand society' (Kornberger, 2010) and 'promotional culture' (Davis, 2013), where 'attention' (Webester, 2014) has become a key form of capital for all kinds of organizations. Consequently, branding, promotion and reputation have become important concepts even within the higher education sector (Stensaker, 2007). Internationally, an emerging body of research is critically analysing strategic and promotional communication's role as a game-changer in higher education. These studies originate from Andrew Wernick's groundbreaking chapter 'The Promotional University', in which he claimed that North American universities had become 'entrepreneurial, public relations oriented, and engrossed in the search for funds' (Wernick, 1991, p. 156). Alison Hearn (2010) later argued for the emergence of the Promotional University 2.0, where all faculty, staff and students are socialized into the promotional logics of communication and branding. In Hearn's view, the so-called 'university experience' is increasingly configured as a collection of lifestyle choices accompanied by marketing campaigns about food courts, great social life, student services, and so on (Hearn, 2010). Interestingly, strategic and promotional communication has in HEIs historically been something that could be spoken about 'only in the most hushed tones' (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009, p. 146), and it has enjoyed only limited (internal) support. Today, however, increased competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), new communication practices (Mattson & Barnes, 2009) and rankings (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017) have spurred HEIs to communicate strategically in new ways.

Several studies show that universities make use of various strategies to show who they are and what they do (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018), and various researchers have investigated different types of promotional contents, such as campus viewbooks (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Nygaard & Sataøen, 2018), university brochures (Andersson & Machin, 2014), rectors' welcome addresses (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018), vice-Chancellor blogging (Lövgren, 2017), core values (Wæraas & H, 2018), symbols and logos (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009) and iconography (Drori et al., 2016). Surprisingly, despite the widespread use of multimodal promotional videos by HEIs, critical research on their contents

and implications is relatively sparse, and most studies are published in marketing journals (see, e.g. Peruta & Shields, 2017), or consist of single-case studies. The present study addresses this gap by critically analysing promotional videos from 12 Scandinavian HEIs. In doing so we employ a theoretical framework derived from institutional theories of organizations, and especially the concept of institutional logics.

Institutional theories of organizations: institutional logics and higher education

Research informed by institutional theories shares an interest in social norms and shared expectations as key sources of organizations' structures, actions and outcomes (David, Tolberg &Boghossian, 2019), and institutions are often described as characterized by different logics (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). In their most basic sense, institutional logics have to do with the content and meaning of institutions and consist of 'the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). Institutional logics are 'cultural rules' that arise within sectors because knowledge is distributed in modern and differentiated societies, and social reality is therefore segmented into different value spheres or provinces of meaning (Jones et al., 2017; Pallas et al., 2016).

Initially, an institutional-logics approach was used to describe the contradictory practices and beliefs inherent in modern western institutions. Institutional logics are typically understood as the organizing principles of an organizational field, which makes them important for both the stability and change of organizations within the field (Scott et al., 2000). The logics do not exist in isolation but may interact; hence, contradictions can arise between different institutional logics (Jones et al., 2017). Specifically, institutional logics can explain and provide an understanding of contradictions in universities (Henningsson & Geschwind, 2021). Moreover, higher education has been considered a prototypical case of an organizational field characterized by institutional pluralism, and universities are prime examples of hybrid organizations with different and diverging institutional principles (Lepori, 2016). Institutional logics therefore provide a nuanced framework 'where actors in the higher education field can be strategic and creative in responding to the conflicting pressure of managerial and academic logics, beyond the simple choice between adoption and resistance' (ibid.: 253). Moreover, the concept of institutional logics in higher education studies has grown in popularity, especially in the past five years, 'due to its usefulness in helping researchers navigate complexity in studies of stable, dynamic, or emerging fields' (Cai & Mountford, 2022, 1628).

Building on Friedland and Alford (1991), who proposed that capitalism, state bureaucracy and political democracy are three contending institutional orders with differing practices, Thornton et al. (2012) have described *seven* logics: corporations, professions, markets, states, religions, communities and families (see Table 1). Institutional logics incorporate material, normative, symbolic and cultural aspects that both shape, and are manifested in and between, organizational fields and single organizations.

How these logics play out in promotional videos is an open empirical question, however. Nevertheless, Fünfschilling and Truffer (2014) argue that since the 1980s the rise of market and corporate logics, with their focus on management models and economic efficiency, has transformed the field of higher education. Henningsson and Geschwind (2021) argue

Table 1. Institutional logics (adapted from Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012).

	Market	Corporation	Profession	State	Family	Community	Religion
Characteristics	Transactions	Hierarchy	Networks	Redistribution	Firm	Care and solidarity	Temple
Source of legitimacy	Share price	Market position and power	Expertise	Democratic participation	Loyalty	Reciprocity	Faith and magic
Source of authority	Shareholders	Management	Professional associations	Bureaucracy	Parent/ patriarchal	Ideology	Charisma
Strategies	Efficiency and Profit	Size and diversification	Reputation	Increase common good	Increase honor	Increase status	Increase symbolism

Table 2. Selection of HEIs.

Country	Old and general Universities	Specialized Institutions	Post-war/'68 generation universities	Young Universities
Denmark	Aarhus University (AU)	Technical University of Denmark (DTU)	Roskilde University (RUC)	Aalborg University (AAU)
Norway	Bergen University (UoB)	Norwegian School of Economics (NHH)	Tromsø University (OuT)	Oslo Metropolitan University (Oslo MET)
Sweden	Uppsala University (UU)	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)	Umeå University (UMU)	Örebro University (ÖRU)

instead that the higher education field is characterized by institutional pluralism as well as by different and competing logics.

Thus far, institutional theories have failed to respond to the 'visual turn' (Boxenbaum et al., 2018), and scholars emphasize empirical analysis of institutional logics mainly through written language (Jones et al., 2017). The role of materiality, visuality and multimodality has 'received only scarce attention' in the analysis of institutional logics (ibid.: 18), and few scholars exploit the possibilities of visual and multimodal representations in terms of being able to create, stabilize and reproduce understandings and meanings that influence institutional processes and logics. In line with Jones et al. (2017, p. 34), we argue that institutions are multimodal achievements: 'The meanings we encounter in our daily organizational lives are created, manifested, shared, stored and transmitted in a variety of forms that clearly transcend the spoken or written word. [...] Visual images are almost "omnipresent" in our daily (private as well as professional) lives. It is therefore negligent to assume that institutional theory can or should be a theory of spoken and written language only'. Consequently, there is an opportunity to integrate multimodal aspects – both as phenomena and as data – in order to refine institutional analyses of organizations and organizing. Our starting point is that today's institutions are multimodal compositions. Organizations produce and are (re)produced by meaning(s) through the creation, manifestation, sharing and transmitting of forms that transcend written or spoken texts. Therefore, we continue by discussing the methodological approach of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA).

Multimodality in organization studies: methods, sample, and analytical strategies

Visual and multimodal signs resemble written language in their ability to materialize the 'unobservable, unknowable substances of institutional logics' (Jones et al., 2017, p. 21). Our analysis is based on all the different elements constituting communication, e.g. texts, visuals, music, symbols, moving images – all of which can be considered *semiotic resources*. The idea is that the different elements create meaning together. The analysis is inspired by MCDA, which provides a toolset for describing and analysing underlying ideas, values and identities that characterize communication. More specifically, MCDA focuses on how different semiotic resources work together in creating meaning and maintaining discourses. It concerns identifying discourses and making visible implicit and tacit meanings, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions.

Another core assumption in MCDA is that communication and language are increasingly standardized, which is conducive to their being used more frequently for economic and political purposes. Such use of standardized and codified language and a so-called technologization of communication can also be observed within visual communication (Ledin & Machin, 2020) and multimodal communication (Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2021). This is visible, for instance, in increasingly standardized and codified ways of visualizing information using semiotic resources such as images, infographics and layouts. Here, contradictions, paradoxes and inconsistencies are substituted or even concealed. The technologization of communication can also gloss over and neutralize opposing positions and narratives (Chen & Eriksson, 2022).

MCDA is a critical methodology since the aim is to describe and analyse underlying ideas, values and identities that characterizes communication, which it ultimately conduces to maintain. In MCDA, language is seen as infused with ideology in the sense that communication can contribute to maintaining established power relations in society. Therefore, the critical aspect of our analysis centres on unpacking the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and societal implications embedded within the promotional content. We aim to uncover the ways in which these videos reflect and reinforce institutional logics. This involves scrutinizing how the videos construct and perpetuate certain images of university life. Our choice of MCDA further allows us to examine different modes of communication, their interplay, and how they contribute to the construction of these images. However, our analysis may not encompass all facets of these videos and their societal impact due to the limitations inherent in our research design, which includes focusing on a specific set of videos and exclusively analysing multimodal content, without accounting for the reception and utilization of the material.

Sample and research context

Scandinavian HEIs share many basic characteristics, and the region has well-developed HEIs, with approximately 40 universities, and over 80 other specialized or regional HEIs. Still there are significant differences (see, e.g. Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2019). For instance, in both Norway and Sweden, higher education is the responsibility of a single government ministry devoted to education (except for the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation), whereas in Denmark the responsibility is spread across several ministries; Norway has one monolithic research funding organization, while

Denmark and Sweden have several each; and the economic importance of producing graduates is higher in Denmark (through implementation of 'taximeter funding') than in Norway and Sweden (ibid).

We strived for variation in the sample, by including videos from different types of HEIs in Scandinavia (see Table 2). Inspired by Christensen and Gornitzka (2017) and Paradeise and Thoenig (2013), our sample included four institutional types: (1) old and general universities, (2) specialized HEIs, (3) post-war/'68 generation HEIs, and (4) young HEIs. These types differ regarding resources, history, identities and organization. *Old and general universities* have histories and identities related to the period before the massification of higher education. They belong to an institutional elite and serve as academic models for newer universities. Furthermore, the old and general universities are comprehensive, with all-encompassing teaching and research profiles. These universities have similarities with what have been called 'top of the pile' universities, which are universities that 'set the baseline for all universities' (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). *Specialized HEIs* have a clear niche in the higher education system, as they are explicitly specialized and focused. In Christensen and Gornitzka's (2017) view, specialized universities score high on performance because of the advantages of having a more narrow and focused profile. The *'68 generation HEIs* were initially set up in various European countries with the intention of providing alternatives to established conventional HEIs (e.g. experimenting with new management systems, giving greater priority to learning, and being more deeply anchored in regional contexts) (Huiseman et al., 2002). This type has affinities with Paradeise and Thoenig's (2013, p. 201) category of 'missionaries', which are universities that 'stand against the very notion of reputation and denounce the principle of excellence as a danger'. *Young HEIs* are new or newly merged universities. These institutions differ from the '68 generation universities by not necessarily adhering to a radical or socially conscious profile. The category also comprises newly merged institutions, and such merging of HEIs has been a trend in Scandinavia in recent decades. In Paradeise and Thoenig's (2013) categorization, young universities often have affinities with the so-called 'wannabe-universities', focusing on excellence, recognition, and rankings.

Analysis

In the first step of our analysis, we searched the HEIs' websites, social media accounts, and YouTube channels for relevant videos. Five videos from each HEI ($N = 60$) were subjected to screening and initial descriptive analysis. In the second step, 12 videos – one from each HEI in the sample – were purposively chosen for in-depth analysis. The following selection criteria were used. Videos were selected that were deemed important for the universities in terms of numbers of views, significance on social media, or prominence on the main website, and that are official productions. We furthermore decided only to include videos with a maximum length of three minutes (excluding, for instance, episodic and narrative video productions). For this in-depth analysis, the authors created 'inventories' (Ledin & Machin, 2020). Talk, dialogue and voiceovers were transcribed (and translated into English by the authors), and we searched for patterns and significant common features and differences. The analysis is exploratory, and we worked abductively, alternating between theoretical considerations and the empirical material.

The following dimensions, which have been developed within a MCDA framework, were central for building the 'inventories' (Ledin & Machin, 2020): *Social actors, social actions, attributes, environment, visuality and colour,* and *infographics.* Creating inventories based on these dimensions is a useful first step, as they highlight the individual choices that are made to construct the videos. Still, a multimodal analysis needs to consider how different elements and semiotic resources are integrated. Together, and in combination, these resources communicate – and create – meaning. For instance, claims about the role and status of the university, science and education are made by combining music, voiceovers, texts, symbols, moving images and infographics.

Results

All of the HEIs in our sample have an established capacity for communicational and promotional activities in well-equipped communication departments, and they all are actively promoting themselves on various (social) media platforms and communication channels, such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. They also have substantial numbers of 'followers' and 'subscribers' on their social media accounts and digital platforms. All the videos combine different modes of communication: visuals, texts, infographics, music and moving images. The promotional videos are most often published on YouTube and/or on the HEIs' web-portals, and they enjoy wide circulation. The amount of content produced by the HEIs, as well as its circulation – as indicated by 'followers', 'subscribers' and 'likes' – reflects Machin's (2016) observation that contemporary society is permeated by multimodal forms of meaning enactment.

Main characteristics of the promotional videos

The analysed videos vary between 30 seconds (DTU) and two minutes and 51 seconds (RUC) in length. The production quality and style also vary, ranging from narrative videos (e.g. AU), and documentary-like production (e.g. SLU), to more low-tech production (e.g. ÖRU). Most videos have a catchy title including a slogan or an explicitly formulated topic, for example, *Experience Umeå* (UMU), *Make it real with Aalborg* (AAU), and *In the right place with the right people* (UoB). In general, the commonalities of the videos are more prevalent than the differences, indicating the presence of a field-level logic. The commonalities include energetic young actors; environments characterized by combinations of outdoor activities and modern, high-tech campuses; and collaborative, playful activities. The attributes are also surprisingly consistent across the videos: high-tech devices and installations, such as power plants, robots, and computers, are present in almost every video. In Table 3 we present core findings from the analysis and the inventories. In the following sections we will elaborate on these findings using typical examples from the videos.

All the videos include young people performing different activities. Moreover, the casting of actors is consistent across the videos, and includes actors with diverse skin colours and genders. Less than half of the videos include middle-aged or older actors, and then only in marginal sequences. These older actors are always functionalized as teachers or researchers. Although most of the younger actors are impersonalized, attributes such as books, rucksacks, computers, whiteboards, and pens often indicate a student role. In a minority of the videos (ÖRU and Oslo MET), the actors are functionalized with professional clothing and/or uniforms (health care) or in professional roles (kindergarten teaching).

The activities in the videos include sports and social engagements, and are characterized by playfulness and collaboration. Several films contain a birds-eye view of students engaged in such campus activities. Most of them involve material processes, including physical action in one way or another. Interestingly, most of the material processes involve a 'doer' (often a student) who engages with technological objects. Moreover, outdoor activities in natural settings are emphasized in the videos. Often these outdoor activities involve sports, sometimes combined with scientific investigations. In those cases, they deal with activities of a technical nature, such as using technical instruments or conducting nature-based investigations. These observations tie in well with the attributes in the videos. The most frequently shown attributes are lab coats, technological devices (such as robots, computers and research equipment from the natural sciences) and libraries. The attributes are characterized by symbolism and are linked to the 'hard' sciences.

The selection of images and visual depictions of higher education are therefore indicative of standardization and codification. Nevertheless, the dimensions of colour, text, voiceover and music display greater variety. Although most of the videos are dark (muted, diluted and low saturation), and, hence, indicative of a technological orientation, there are also examples of brighter colours (e.g. UMU, Oslo MET). The music ranges from light, instrumental background music to hard, up-front, digital and futuristic music. The voiceovers range from narrative stories (AU) to poem-like accounts (UoT).

Three types of videos

Although commonalities and similarities are prevalent in the material, three main varieties of promotional videos can be identified (Figure 1). First, some videos are oriented towards student life and what the university can give to the students (*student-centred videos*). The second type of video is vision-driven and focuses on what the university – and the students through their education – can provide to society qua market (*market centred*). The third type focuses on presenting the university as an organization, its history, values, and identities (*organization centred*). Although all of the studied videos mainly fall within one of these three categories, the varieties can coexist and overlap. Most of the promotional videos are student centred, although some of these (Oslo MET, UU, and AU) also share characteristics with the more market-centred and organization-centred types. Not surprisingly, among the specialized universities we observe that two (out of three) videos fall within the market-centred category.

Student-centred videos

As discussed by Christensen and Gornitzka (2017), there is a general tendency of increasingly catering to students' needs. This is clearly evident in the student-centred videos. These videos adopt the students' perspective, and several even have a student voiceover, reassuring fellow students that studying at such-and-such a university will be great (e.g. UoT, UU, UMU). These videos primarily focus on offering a good, safe and meaningful student life, which is often visually illustrated by urban areas, (active) student-life, and sports and play. Typically, these videos portray young people in playful surroundings, such as sports and parties. The playfulness is also integrated into

Table 3. Promotional videos and core dimensions.

	Video title	Actors	Actions	Attributes	Environments	Voices	Symbols/graphics	Music	Effects	Color
UU	Welcome to Uppsala University	Young people	Study, party, socialize (mental)	Informal and formal clothes. Student dorms and student kitchens	Library, lecture rooms, student dorms, campus facilities, city views	Yes (former student)	The University logo at the end	Semi-rapid, instrumental music.	Low-tech. Slow-motion. Effect: mysterious	Low level of saturation
SLU	This is SLU. A presentation of our organization	Young people, researchers	Collaborate, study, research (material)	Lab-coats, research equipment, machines	Labs, dramatic landscapes and environments from around the world, animals, work and study environment both on/off campus, global environment	Yes	Infographics throughout the video	soft background music	Nature documentary-like. Global casting	Green/blue used as important colors. Low brightness at the end
UMU	Experience Umeå	Young people	Play, create, do sports, socialize (behavioral)	Leisure, campus facilities	Outdoor activities (sports, skiing, skating), outdoor winter settings, campus activities	No	No	soft background music	Soft, moving pictures. Shifting scenes, both slow and normal motion.	Bright pictures with high saturation
ÖRU	Six reasons for choosing Örebro	Students, professionals	Study, work, play (material)	Uniforms, leisure, campus facilities, robots, books	Campus and the city	No	Logo, coat-of-arms, city castle	Soft techno-music	Slideshow of pictures	Mostly bright pictures with high saturation
RUC	The real university	Students and teachers	Collaborate, work, study (behavioral)	Lab-coats, classrooms, campus	Campus-oriented: Classrooms, student rooms, labs, tech equipment, library	Yes, in-film dialogue	University logotype	Soft techno-music	Birds-eye view of campus, slow motion	Most pictures are low in brightness and saturation. Monochromatic
AAU	Make it real with Aalborg	Young people	Work, create, engage in tech-devices (material)	Technological objects. Machines, electricity, cars	Urban environment (machines, power plants) in combination with campus-based rooms (including tech and science)	Yes	University logo	Semi-rapid techno-music	Slow motion	Dark, low saturation
AU	That's why we're here	Young people	Sleeping, studying, eating, laughing, crying (mental)	Modern clothes, a variety of attributes, commercial brands, flags, party	Both on and off-campus scenes. Student life. Party. Library. Lecture rooms	Yes, in-film dialogue	University logo	Dreamy, mysterious music	Symbolism is important (e.g. under water). Hand-held camera, rapid sequences	Mostly dark, low saturation almost monochromatic
DTU	Do something with your world	Young people	Studying, doing sports, hard, intense (material)	Modern clothes	Waterfalls, controlled explosions, sports, tech, group work	Yes, student voices	Infographics, stylized cells	Rapid, hard and dark tech-music	Slow motion	Low brightness and saturation

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

|	Video title	Actors	Actions	Attributes	Environments	Voices	Symbols/graphics	Music	Effects	Color
Oslo Met	Introduction to Oslo Met	Young people and children	Smiling, laughing, playing, working, (mental)	Different professions (teacher, preschool teacher, nurse, engineer) + tech-objects, robot.	Urban (metro, backyards), plus natural settings for play and recreation (beach and forests). Campus environment (library) but most often in a professional context (uniforms)	No	A brain symbol, rainbow	soft, rapid and happy music	Rapid, colorful, NY-aesthetics, split screens illustrating duality (preschool–construction site; urban – nature) etc.	High brightness and saturation
UoB	In the right place with the right people	Young people	Studying, research, creating (material)	Leisure, lab coats, tech	City view, combined with visual illustrations of the text (e.g. ROVs, Rockets, poverty, the parliament).	No	University logo/ coat-of-arms, stylized microbes, infographics	Repeated rock riff	Panoramic. Rapid shifts. Action-based clips. The scenes are illustrations of the text. Rock music.	Numerous scenes/ pictures with various saturation and brightness
NHH	NHH aspires to more	Young, diverse people and teachers	Studying, teaching (material)	Modern but proper clothing, books, computer	Library, campus, nature, leader on a stage, lecture and workshop	Yes	University logo/ coat-of-arms	Rapid piano music	Serious, slow	Pictures are with less brightness and saturation. Almost monochromatic
UoT	Study at the World's Northernmost University	Young people	Read, play, do sports, be outdoors (mental)	Scenery, lab, outdoors	Outdoors, snow, frost, reindeer, lab, skiing, ocean, urbanity	Yes, former student	University logo at the end	Mystical solemn music	Dark, slow, mysterious, scenery	High brightness and saturation
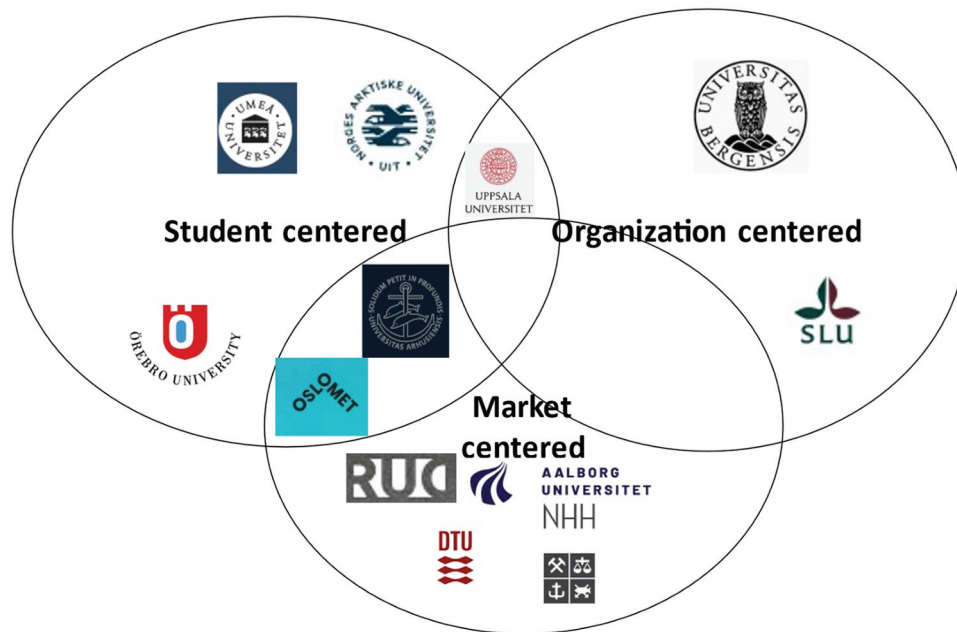
Figure 1. Three types of videos.

Figure 2. Uppsala University: Welcome to Uppsala University (2018).

classroom environments, where students are laughing and enjoying comfortable facilities. For instance, on-campus scenes tend to focus on collaborative work in larger groups. A video that falls within this category is *Welcome to Uppsala University*, from UU, 2018 (Figure 2).

The main social actors in UU's video are young people, functionalized as students (illustration in Figure 2). Researchers and teachers are almost entirely absent from the video, although a voiceover tells us that as a student you will 'go up and down the same stairs as researchers and Nobel Prize winners', together with moving images

from a traditional university setting, such as classical buildings and libraries. The music is soft, and the pictures are muted and diluted. The attributes all highlight Uppsala's student life, where friendships are made, parties are held, and perhaps the world can be changed. These features exemplify a peculiar combination of family and corporation logics (Thornton et al., 2012), as the caring for (and loyalty to) peers and colleagues is combined with hints of competition. Paradoxically, the vision of UU presented in the video is not related to the effort of learning, intellectual struggle, or research, which could have been expected given UU's history

and identity (consider Uppsala's famous motto, 'To think freely is great, but to think rightly is greater'.).

UMU's promotional video also falls within the student-centred category, and it has a written punchline at the end: 'everything will turn out well'. The purpose is to reassure students coming to Umeå that being a student there will be pleasurable, socially fulfiling and stimulating. This is underlined by the composition of pictures and moving images throughout the video, which depict outdoor activities, sports, and creative endeavours. The colours are bright and saturated, which is characteristic of most student-centred videos. The student-centred videos are clearly highlighting a special experience of student life, beyond the actual education that is supposed to take place. Often this is related to the city or region in which the university is situated. The video from UoT is an example of this. Here the student voiceover poetically claims:

> Tromsø. 350 kilometers above the Polar Circle. Two months with no sunrise. Magical. To study and live here is a life full of snow, darkness and light. [...] I feel like I am living in the outskirts of the world. I look around and see the mountains. The mystical giants and the fjords. But I live in a city.

These are lines that also could have been found in tourist magazines, where travel experiences are promoted and marketed. Moreover, it has a clear touch of borealism as it uses exotic and stereotypical descriptions related to norther regions and cultures.

Market-centred videos

The second category of videos highlights the transformative effect of the student experience, either by focusing on how students become something else than they were before, or by stressing the university's capacity to be a change agent and knowledge provider for the so-called 'real world'. A common topic is how HEIs are trying to influence the future, though the films offer no clear vision of this future. This can be illustrated by DTU's 2020 promotional video titled *Do something with your world*. The title underscores the main idea, namely that students are not supposed to only sit back and read books (as the voiceover in the video says); they are supposed to *do* things and become *doers*. The music and actions in the video are hard, rapid and intense, and the images are rendered with dark filters. The objects and attributes belong to the realm of nature, science, and technology, for instance, with illustrations and moving pictures of cells, microscopes, lab safety goggles, controlled explosions, lasers and ocean waves. The voiceover conveys a consistent and coherent verbal message: Studying at DTU is about more than just books and theories; it is about innovation, applying knowledge, and changing the world through technology. DTU's promotional video ties in with market logics where innovation and employability are implicit themes.

AAU's video also falls within this category (Figure 3), as it highlights the entrepreneurial role of the university. The video is titled 'make it real', and the voiceover starts by stating that at 'at Aalborg we don't just study theory for the sake of theory'. Moreover, collaboration between the university and external organizations and companies is important 'for solving real problems', and in many respects the video aligns with an individualistic view of education. Simultaneously, however, the focus on tackling real problems brings to mind AAU's historical legacy of being at the forefront of problem-based learning. Nevertheless, this renowned problem-centred pedagogy (the so-called Aalborg Model) is not explicitly mentioned in the video. The voiceover concludes by asking 'What do *you* dream of doing (for the real world)?' and the video is characterized by dark and muted colours, while the images emphasize technological devices and attributes from the natural sciences; see Figure 3 below.

NHH's promotional video is another example of this category. In it, a voiceover states:

> ... we want something more on behalf of our students, candidates, and lecturers. NHH is more than its curriculum, more than a network, and more than a career path. It is the place for those who want to create, those who want to lead, and those who want to leave a lasting legacy. NHH is for all those who aspire to more.

The adverb 'more' is used frequently in the video, e.g. 'some people want something *more*,' 'we want *more* on behalf of our students, candidates and teachers', 'NHH is *more* than its curriculum... a networks... a career path', 'NHH is for those aspire to *more*.' Hence, ambition and excellence implicitly come across as important for understanding the organizational core values. This is accompanied by moving images of ambitious young people (reading in dark and closed libraries late at night, giving speeches on large stages). The video recontextualizes NHH as a place for committed, motivated and determined people, and it underscores that NHH has a history and reputation of precisely that. In this context, the slogan of the video, 'a place for those who want more' points to the elitist aspects of the education. Still, the meaning of 'more' is not defined and it becomes an 'empty signifier' that can mean whatever a viewer wants it to mean. For instance, wanting something more could be about changing the world to make it more sustainable, or creating a more just global future. Alternatively, it could also be about earning more money. Even so, images are used in the video to communicate that this is an educational institution (library, workshops, lectures) with modern facilities, and is meant for ambitious students aiming at securing a top-notch education. The
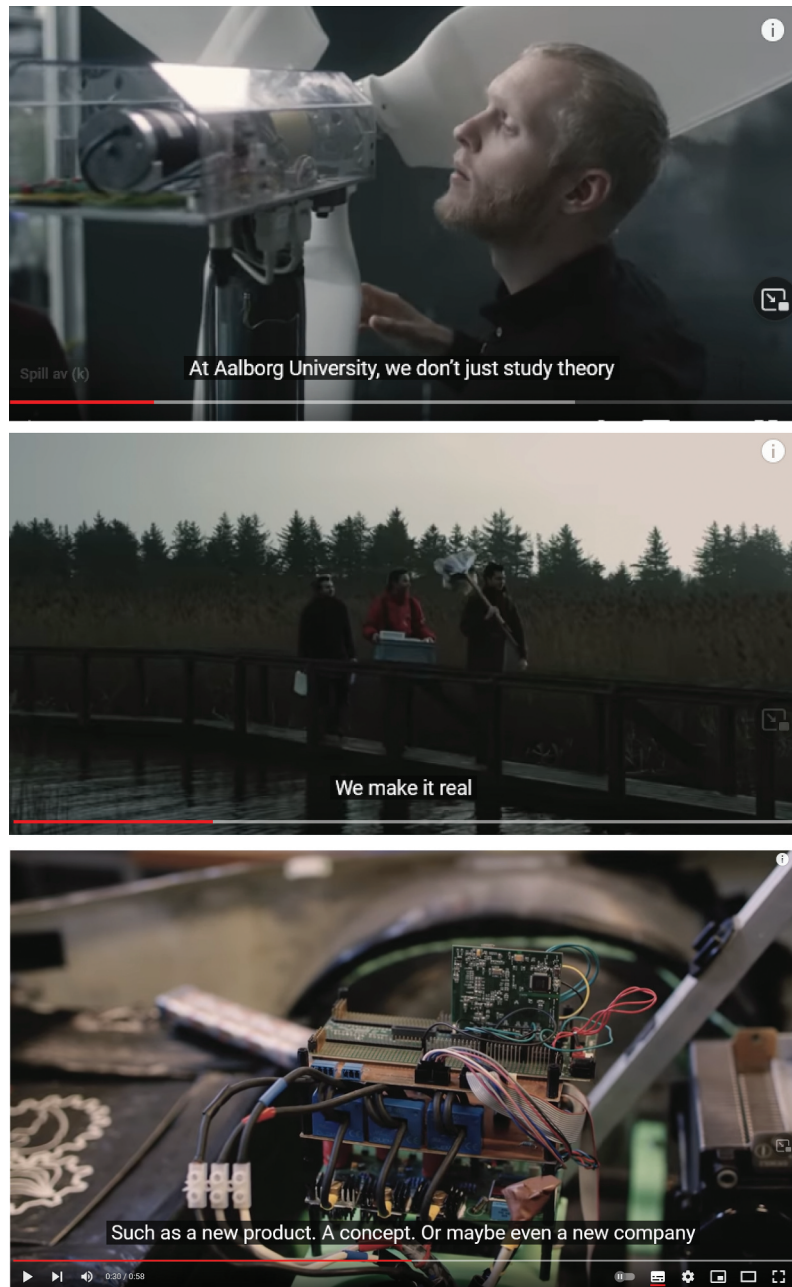
Figure 3. "Make it real": dark, technologically oriented images.

market-oriented videos tie in with a corporate logic (Thornton et al., 2012), where market position, hierarchy, ambition and competition are paramount.

Organization-centred videos

In the last category of videos we find an orientation towards the organization itself. These videos are implicit answers to the question 'who are we?' SLU and UoB can serve as examples. In SLU's video, the university's organization, aims, and ambitions are presented. SLU is portrayed as an institution that is working for 'real change', and is positioned as a global, green, nature-oriented university through core concepts such as 'global', 'the planet', 'change' and 'sustainability'. The main colours used in the video are green and blue, which resonate with being a 'green' university and caring for the (global) ocean and water systems. The video combines moving pictures of students and research environments with iconic scenery and natural landscapes from around the world. Furthermore, infographics have an important place in this video. Similar infographics are used in other organization-centred videos as well. They occur frequently, and emphasize facts and objectivity, which are important for SLU, as it is specialized in natural sciences, forestry, and agriculture. For two examples, see Figure 4.

Although these infographics connote facts, objectivity and causal relations, they fail to communicate valid information. They simply make no sense.
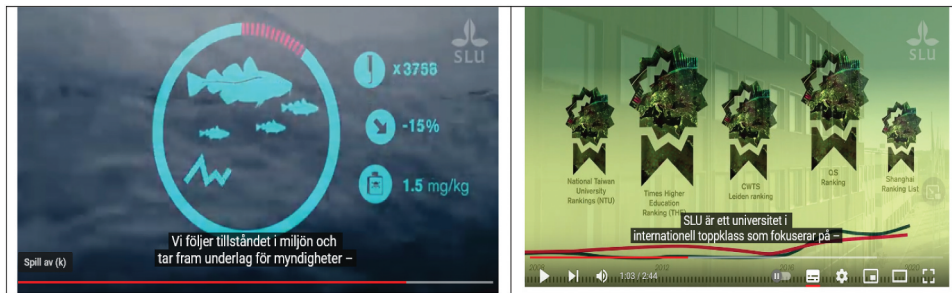
Figure 4. The use of infographics in SLU's video.

Hence, they resemble what Morphew and Hartley (2006, p. 457) call 'rhetorical pyrotechnics'. The infographics are pretty to look at, but deliver little in the way of valid information about the organization. What they do communicate, however, is a university experience where causality, objectivity and quantifiable facts are pivotal. They also communicate that the organization is well organized, structured, and prosperous.

UoB offers another example of an organization-centred promotional video which aims at defining the identity of the organization. The 2019 video is titled 'The University of Bergen – In the right place with the right people' and can be found across several of UoB's communication channels. Textual captions accompanying the imagery state that:

> Between 7 mountains. But also under the sea and outer space. We reveal the past and shape the future. From the smallest building blocks; to the structures of society. Because we believe that to solve the greatest problems we need to be in the right place with the right people. Climate change, pollution, social inequality, health challenges cannot be solved by one person. Our 4,000 knowledge seeking employees. 18,500 future society builders. 4 centers of excellence. Knowledge clusters, work together to find the answers that will create a better future. We provide knowledge that shapes society

The imagery in the video shifts rapidly between the tree-lined, green, inner-city campus of UoB to blue, grey technical imagery of hard science, with underground robots, labs and so on – but soon also shows smiling students in diverse scholarly settings and researchers doing what presumably are important things. The message is that the university itself, knowledge as such, and certainly the future, are social endeavours in which both faculty and students ('future builders of society') play equally important roles. By hinting at the importance of Bergen as a specific location, the particular roles of the organization's members, and the university's orientation towards the future, the video arguably seeks to establish a sense of rightness – that being in Bergen, right now, with the people who are there, is important for the future. UoB's video can also be characterized as organization centred because it focuses on educational areas and research domains that have been strategically prioritized. In line with Thornton et al. (2012), videos falling into this category share a community logic where trust, reciprocity, pride and looking out for one's peers are important dimensions.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysed videos resonate well with Alison Hearn's (2010) notion of the Promotional University 2.0, where faculty, staff, and students are socialized into a promotional rationality of communication. The so-called 'university experience' is increasingly configured as a set of lifestyle choices (ibid.), accompanied by images of students' enjoyment and cooperation, sports, and playfulness. This study has contributed to an understanding of how promotional videos 'act back' on the universities and educational policies by constructing expectations – and thus materializations – of fun and friendship, rather than of joining the university with a focus on studies. The deliberate attempts at constructing a university's image, often characterized by a blend of community, family, and corporate logics, can shape prospective students' perceptions and aspirations. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these promotional portrayals, while fostering an atmosphere of enjoyment, innovation, and individual empowerment, may inadvertently overshadow broader societal functions that universities have historically played. The absence of references to democratic values, public interest, and higher education's role in critical self-reflection raises questions about the alignment between policy goals and the images projected through multimodal communication. In this context, the reflective consideration of how universities present themselves and the resulting expectations they generate opens for discussions on the evolution of higher education institutions, their purposes, and their interactions with society. Future research should explore how generated expectations impact the evolution of higher education institutions, their core purposes, and their interactions with society.

Nevertheless, the 'university experience' is combined with a promise of being an agent of change, and of being special and at the forefront of technological development. Several of the videos underscore an intention to 'aspire to more' (e.g. NHH), 'add to the real world' (e.g. AAU), and 'make a difference' (e.g. DTU). Consequently, Scandinavian HEIs are depicted as both *something else* and *something more* than the classical modern university as described by Olsen (2007) among others. The videos certainly also contradict the view of promotion and communication as something that can only be spoken about in hushed tones (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). The videos are boldly promoting and communicating the unique qualities and benefits of Scandinavian HEIs to a wider audience, breaking away from traditional norms and policy expectations.

The videos conform to commonly used signs and symbols, confirming the development towards technologization of communication. For instance, there are contextual depictions of 'science', for example images of students interacting with futuristic and flashy technological gadgets, laboratory environments, material actions, advanced 'science-laden' infographics, and white lab coats, which are used as a generalized symbol of science. In that respect, the videos demonstrate common, universal and standardized ways of visualizing HEIs, which is indicative of field-level logic. Moreover, navigating and taking informed choices among universities based on these videos are almost impossible for prospective students. Given the different institutional types in the sample, greater variation would have been expected. Still, the meaning of the videos is to some degree conditioned by institutional trajectories. In particular, the specialized institutions stand out as being market centred and oriented towards a corporate logic. This is no surprise, as these HEIs are closer to industry and often nurture more intimate relationships with organizations outside the university. Moreover, the Danish promotional videos stand out in the Scandinavian context, with being highly market-centred. The Danish material also visually and textually connects the students' life to the future job-market. This is evident in the videos' overall concepts, such as e.g. 'make it real', 'the real university', 'do something with the world'. This, of course, resonates well with Danish policies in the domain of higher education, which for the last decade has gravitated very much around the concept of 'employability'.

The institutional logics related to community, family and corporations are the most prevalent logics in the material. At this stage of our research we can only speculate about the reasons behind the lesser presence of ideals connected to professions, markets, and the state, as opposed to the greater focus on depicting the 'cozy', warm and welcoming atmosphere of the university through community and family logics. The prevalence of community and family logics is illustrated by the emphasis on students (as the main social actors), welcoming and playful environments, joyful music, soft colours, and attributes related to student life (parties, dancing, sports). The context significantly shapes the portrayal of specific aspects of university life, primarily as a form of marketing directed at prospective students. Thus, it's unsurprising that the videos emphasize logics of community and family in reflecting the university experience. However, these videos might also serve as strategic communication directed towards national authorities, thereby encompassing elements of policy-driven logics. For instance, when a university highlights its pivotal role or contributions to societal transformation, it aligns with the discourse on employability and innovation. Moreover, while several videos seem to reflect family and community logics, their very creation and rationale might be rooted in market logics, with efficiency, profit, and competition as core drivers.

Multimodal analyses further underscore the dynamic character of these logics, where modalities occasionally exhibit contradictions. This phenomenon was particularly noticeable in the utilization of infographics. While textual elements convey factuality and causality, aligning with professional logic, the visuals and moving images within the infographic align more with market logics, spotlighting rising statistics, positive trend and ticking numbers. Thus, multimodal communication often enables multiple voices to be expressed, drawing on different and sometimes even competing logics simultaneously (Henningsson & Geschwind, 2021). One reason for this might be that visual signs are less socially controlled and more immediately perceived than written language, and, hence, they can represent complexity through minimal signs (Jones et al., 2017). Moreover, multimodality can have the character of connecting different realms of meaning, and, hence it is useful for depicting pluralistic and complex settings such as HEIs where different external pressures operate simultaneously.

Although hardly controversial, these results suggest that external demands manifest themselves in the promotional material, as a mix of logics is involved. In a sense, the promotional material in itself might be a way of managing these conflicting institutional pressures. This type of multimodal communication within HEIs, with its inherent polysemy (Höllerer et al., 2013), may have the potential to conceal inconsistencies between institutional logics. Still, it is almost impossible to identify references to, or instances of, the democratic functions of HEIs as societal institutions. The higher education systems

in post-war Scandinavia are characterized by growth and democratization, with new social groups and larger cohorts of young people having been included. However, ideas about democracy, the public interest, and HEIs' responsibility to raise national levels of human capital and GDP are not reflected in the videos, nor are Humboldtian ideas about how HEIs can contribute to critical self-reflection by individuals and society at large. The implications of these results for policy are hard to ignore. Promotional videos are creating an almost youth-centric image of HEIs as an arena for enjoyment, often gravitating around the individual student and his or her needs and comfort. Paradoxically this image is paired with a limitless technological orientation and optimism. As such, policy aims of democratization and serving the public interest become incommensurable with the images of HEIs produced by promotional and multimodal content. As there is a political interest in controlling HEIs in areas such as employability, efficiency and quality assurance, these videos might serve as a space where HEIs themselves can handle and negotiate the many ideas, policy aims and demands imposed upon and ascribed to HEIs.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

Funding

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