

## Branding the “wow-academy”: The risks of promotional culture and quasi-corporate communication in higher education

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### Abstract

This article examines the branding of the new Tampere University in Finland and the reactions it evoked in Finnish social media and news media between 2018–2020. The merger of the University of Tampere and Tampere University of Technology into a new foundation-based university provoked considerable public debate and sparked uproar over the communication style and practices of the university’s new management. The main reason for the outcry was that the new governance model of the university ignored the traditional democratic way of running a university. Our article contributes to the growing literature on public relations communication in higher education by focusing on promotional culture and the role of the changing media landscape in university branding. We analyze how and why the brand messages were contested and transformed into memes and satirical commentaries on social media. When the university’s management tried to restrain this subversive play with legal sanctions, the issue escalated into the news media. Our qualitative analysis demonstrates the possible repercussions of a quasi-corporate style of communication on the credibility of the university as a higher education institution in a hybrid media environment.

### Keywords

branding, public relations, promotional culture, quasi-corporate communication, university communication, social media, hybrid media system, higher education reforms

## 1 Introduction: The marketization of higher education

In the past 10 to 15 years, public relations (PR) and image management have become increasingly important parts of the promotional culture of higher education institutions. This development has been documented and analyzed in organization and management studies focusing on university branding (e. g., Aula & Tienari, 2011; Chapleo, 2011, 2015; Davies, 2020; Hearn, 2015; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011). Furthermore, science communication studies have analyzed the increasing role of PR and strategic communication in promoting research and education (e. g., Bauer, 2008; Entradas, 2022; Fürst, Vogler, Schäfer, & Sörensen, 2021; Hearn, 2010, 2015; Marcinkowski & Kohring, 2014; Nelkin, 1995; Väliverronen, 2004, 2021;

Vogler & Schäfer, 2020; Williams & Gajevic, 2013). Many of those studies in organization and management have used interview data to describe branding efforts, and those in science communication often employ quantitative media analysis. In addition, some researchers have focused on university websites and student recruitment (Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018) and social media in branding (e. g., Fähnrich, Vogelgesang, & Scharrow, 2020; Pringle & Fritz, 2019).

In this article, we focus on the role of the changing media landscape, that is, the hybrid media system, in the PR communication and branding of a Finnish university after a university merger. The hybrid media system can be understood as an intertwining of older and newer media forms from journalistic to social media and is regarded as facilitating “networking, flexibil-



ity, spontaneity and ad hoc organization” (Chadwick, 2013, p. 210). Essentially, the hybrid media system allows for a redistribution of voice as the communication by the organization is challenged by internal and external stakeholders, including opponents and critics who typically use the newer forms of media to disseminate their views (e.g., Ojala, Pantti, & Laaksonen, 2019; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). From this perspective, the question of branding becomes a question of polyvocality and resistance (e.g., Gabriel, 2008). University branding is not a one-directional, linear process of communication; instead, it is a discursive struggle over the voice of the organization.

We take a closer look at the conflicts resulting from the staff and students of the so-called new Tampere University as they contested and resisted the new practices of university branding that emerged after the Tampere University merger was made public in 2019. Our data consist of social media and news media content related to the branding campaign, including memes and parodies aimed at satirizing the university’s promotional discourse. We focus on the most intense promotion- and branding-related debates from 2018–2020, which were also picked up by the news media. For this purpose, we identified key events in the branding of Tampere University to provide a timeline and thematic structure for our analysis. These events followed the efforts of the university management to cultivate “excellence” among the staff by creating “wow experiences” with the help of a new “marketing and branding playbook.”

Our article contributes to the growing literature on PR communication in higher education by analyzing the circulation and transformation of promotional discourses between university brand communication, various social media platforms, and news media. We analyze how and why the brand messages were contested and transformed into resistance expressed through discourses and memes on social media platforms. We combine the analysis of Tampere University advertisements and advertorials with related social media

and news media data while drawing from understandings of the dynamics of the hybrid media system. Our findings highlight the role of the promotional quasi-corporate communication style as a key trigger for critical conversations about Tampere University and demonstrate the power of the hybrid media system as a platform for voicing polyphonic concerns and criticism, particularly by the internal stakeholders of the university.

The article proceeds in six stages. First, we provide a theoretical discussion of the rise of promotional discourses in academia and the importance of hybrid media in voicing discontent with this development. Then, we highlight the changes in the Finnish higher education system from the 2000s onwards as a context for our analysis, followed by a presentation of our data and methodological approach. In our analysis, we explore how and why the brand messages published through advertising, traditional media outlets, and internal communication were contested and satirized on social media platforms and how this contestation sparked criticism against university management in the news media. In the final sections, we discuss the repercussions of quasi-corporate communication in the hybrid media space, make comparisons to previous studies, and highlight the risks of promotional discourses in universities more generally.

## 2 The rise of the promotional university

The increasing market orientation of universities and research organizations has been widely discussed and analyzed in various contexts (e.g., Cronin, 2016; Hearn, 2010; Marcinkowski & Kohring, 2014; Nelkin, 1995; Véliveronen, 2004, 2021; Williams & Gajevic, 2013). In this new commercially competitive environment for science communication, success in international rankings, prestigious grants, patents and agreements with distinguished institutions “serve as shorthands of excellence and relevance, and are used as such in corporate communica-

tion to establish a strong brand” (Davies & Horst, 2016, p. 115).

Marketization, commercialization, and university branding have guided the development of the higher education sector, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia since the 1990s (Molesworth et al., 2011). This development is often conceptualized in terms of academic capitalism and the commodification of research (e.g., Hackett, 1990, 2014; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In many European countries, the introduction of new public management (NPM) in higher education (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007) has intensified strategic communication and professional PR in university communication, reflecting increasing competition between these institutions (e.g., Fähnrich et al., 2020; Marcinkowski & Kohring, 2014). In the Nordic countries, marketization and university branding have traditionally been less visible (Elken, Stensaker, & Dedze, 2018), although some examples of these have been reported in research literature (e.g., Aspara, Aula, Tienari, & Tikkanen, 2014; Aula & Tienari, 2011; Davies, 2020).

The concept of *promotional culture* provides a perspective on higher education and science–media relations. The term was first introduced by Andrew Wernick (1991) to describe ‘the semiotic colonization’ of culture by commercial advertising. Wernick (1991) also described the rise of ‘the promotional university’ and the rise of promotional discourse in student and staff recruitment, as well as in academic publishing (see also Fairclough, 1993). *Promotional discourse* in general refers to language use in competitive environments where goods and services are sold to customers, and they need to sound and look the best possible (Fairclough, 1993). Promotional discourse is characterized by an appropriation of the linguistic and rhetorical resources of corporate advertising (Bhatia, 2004), in which public and traditional expressions and clichés are used in creative ways to compete for the attention of the public. This is also becoming more common at research universities, which are becoming marketplaces for large num-

bers of students and external financing of research and are therefore unable to maintain their special status and dignity (Bhatia, 2004).

Later, Aeron Davis (2013, p. 9) made a distinction between promotional industries, promotional intermediaries, and promotional practices; he argued that living in promotional times is part of a larger cultural shift in society: “increasing promotional orientation of society and that promotion has had a significant ‘social-shaping’ influence on those who either adopt it or engage with it.” Bauman (2007) argued that in order to operate in today’s consumer society, people are invited to turn themselves into promotional commodities – and this applies to academics as well (e.g., Cottom, 2015). “Organizations, and those who work for them, have internalized, often unconsciously, various promotional responses and routines” (Väliveronnen, 2021, p. 138). Analyzing promotional practices in UK universities, Cronin (2016) argues that branding and managing media visibility have become an important part of the new ‘reputational capital’ of universities, drawing from Bourdieu’s (2011 [1986]) symbolic capital. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital usually refers to historically embedded privilege and prestige, but Cronin (2006) argued that the new reputational capital “is based on a more fluid, fragile enactment of value that is tied to the shifting cultural economy of the media” (p. 399). The emergence of the new ‘PR University’ described by Cronin (2006) “intensifies investments in PR and marketing departments, which are related to the increasing use of metrics and the penetration of ‘audit culture’ in university practices” (Väliveronnen, 2021, p. 138).

This development is also increasingly visible in Finnish universities, although competition for students and staff is not as hard as in many other countries. Finnish universities do not charge tuition fees from domestic or European Union (EU) or European Economic Area (EEA) students, and the impact of research evaluations on the allocation of resources in higher education is not as significant as in the United Kingdom (see also Kuusela et al., 2019).

### 3 One or many voices? University communication in the hybrid media system

Following these changes in higher education, universities and the ways in which they are managed have increasingly begun to incorporate the operating logics of the business world (Furedi, 2011; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Raipola, 2019). New practices of branding and reputation management have introduced more streamlined corporate communication practices (Cronin, 2016; Davies & Horst, 2016; Hearn, 2015; Välliveronen, 2021). Universities have recruited new staff for their PR and marketing units, and the style of communication has adopted many practices from corporate communication. Fährnich et al. (2020) argue that the increase in strategic and corporate-style communication in universities is intensified by three factors. First, the increasing professionalization of strategic communication is a response to the public quest for universities' greater role in society and the public sphere. This is often referred to as the 'third mission' of universities (besides teaching and research), promoting new forms of outreach and public engagement. Second, strategic communication reflects the increasing competition in higher education, manifested by rankings, branding, and image management. This competition also takes place in public arenas. Third, these efforts are facilitated by changes in the media landscape, such as digitalization.

Driven by these changes, it seems that universities and research institutes are increasingly adopting quasi-entrepreneurial practices in their communication, including science communication, to manage their reputations and to please their stakeholders and potential customers in situations where they have become increasingly dependent on external funding. Following the classic tenets of strategic communication, these practices include promoting the idea of one institution—one voice (Davies & Horst, 2016).

The idealistic univocality of promotional communication, however, is an oxymoron, as organizations are shown

to be fundamentally heterogeneous and polyvocal sites where the diversity of their members' voices inexorably comes in one way or another (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981 [1975]; Hazen, 1993; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). As Benoit-Barné and Martine (2021) point out, an organization speaking with one voice is a very rare accomplishment. Further, it could be argued that an organization cannot have its own voice; rather, it always speaks through something, for example, a spokesperson or a document (Cooren, 2020). An important set of voices that represent an organization are the voices of its internal stakeholders, such as employees, or, in the case of a university, its researchers, teachers, and students. Research suggests that the voices of ordinary members are considered more authentic than the official voice of the organization or its management, which stimulates organizations to encourage active employee communication to build organizational reputation (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020; Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2014). Therefore, employees who communicate in their professional roles are considered an asset for the organization – but only if their messages are in line with the organizational voice. This is why management might seek to control the voices in organizations: they can be disciplined, silenced, colonized, manipulated, distorted, dismissed, or devalued (Christensen & Christensen, 2022; Dempsey, 2017).

The promotional, controlled voice, however, is easily met with counter-voices in the hybrid media system, which gives space for resistance and polyvocality (e.g., Sihvonen, Koskela, & Laaksonen, 2020; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). As pointed out by Gabriel (2008), modern forms of employee resistance typically adopt the forms of counteraction used by consumers to question, oppose, or cynically reject the managerial practices of their organization. The spaces offered by social media platforms for such resistance invite the dissemination of compelling narratives, personal viewpoints, emotional expressions, and community formation (e.g., Chadwick, 2013). At the same time, they are spaces for discursive struggles over

the voice of the organization: Who can speak and whose matters are salient? Such questions and tensions are highlighted in the precarious employment situation in Finnish academia, where the majority of researchers work on short-term contracts or personal grants that entail uncertainty about their future.

#### 4 Changing university politics in Finland

The Finnish government introduced several higher education reforms after the mid-2000s, the aim of which was to diversify the funding base, increase competition and effectiveness in research and teaching, and facilitate cooperation with leading foreign universities (Nokkala & Välimaa, 2017). The Universities Act from 2009 dissociated “universities from the state budget and made them public corporations under private law capable of making contracts and functioning as independent economic entities” (Välimaa, Aittola, & Ursin, 2014, p. 46). In 2009, there were 20 universities in Finland, while the total number decreased to 14 in 2022. The Universities Act also introduced a minimum of 40% representation of external members in their most important decision-making body, the university board (Välimaa, 2011). The implementation of this new management structure has caused continuous struggles at Tampere University from 2017 onwards.

As part of this new “restructuring” policy, two new foundation-based universities were established: Aalto University was formed in a merger of the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the University of Arts and Design Helsinki; and the new Tampere University was formed in a merger of the University of Tampere (UTA) and the Tampere University of Technology (TUT). The rationale behind the launching of these new foundation-based universities echoed the NPM discourse of effectiveness, marketization, and competition (Drowley, Lewis, & Brooks, 2013; Välimaa et al., 2014). Aalto University started in 2010 and the new Tampere University was

initiated in 2019. The creation of the first merger, Aalto University, was a major part of the legislative reform manifested in the Universities Act from 2009. Already in the initialization phase, it was referred to as an “innovation university” and even a “world-class business university” (Aula & Tienari, 2011; Poutanen, Tomperi, Kuusela, Kaleva, & Tervasmäki, 2022; Välimaa et al., 2014), bringing in a new promotional level in the higher education discourse in Finland.

Although Finnish higher education institutions are largely publicly funded and do not charge tuition fees to Finnish or EU / EEA students, they are also competing for external funding, visibility, applicants, and (top) researchers internationally. Quite simply, their stakeholders are different than before, and this has an impact on the strategic level of communication: Universities aim to communicate to corporate donors, external members of management teams, and other partners that are likely to come from the private sector. The external communication of universities is increasingly directed toward PR and marketing, especially when it comes to the recruitment of applicants and future employees. However, internal communication between administration, staff, and students has remained more traditional. The different interests, needs, and expectations of these various stakeholders guide the development of all communication activities and practices, and thus also the form and content of communication (Sihvonen et al., 2020). These promotional activities go hand in hand with the extremely competitive frame for research funding that the Finnish government sustains.

From the NPM perspective, the activities in public sector organizations are (too) strictly governed by legislation, and democratic decision-making can be rigid and slow (Kaljunen, 2011), while private organizations are regarded as more flexible and agile as well as innovative and responsive to change. Adopting the NPM principle in universities has meant that the role of administration has increased throughout and the possibilities of researchers and teachers to influence their working con-

ditions have diminished. At Tampere University, in particular, staff involvement in general has declined and the increasing calls for equality and equity have been dismissed by the management (Poutanen et al., 2022). As a result, the researchers, teachers, and students of the organization have channeled their concerns through multivocal criticism and resistance on social media.

## 5 Materials and method

The data of our study comprises two datasets – social media data and journalistic data – that both cover the period from January 2018 to May 2020. For both, we used the Finnish Mohawk database, which comprehensively records Finnish public social media discussions (Pöyry, Laaksonen, Kekkonen, & Pääkkönen, 2018) and content from major news media.

The full news media dataset consisted of 1063 media texts downloaded from the Mohawk database. These texts included the search words “tampere” and “university” either in the body text or in the title and were published between January 1, 2019, and May 8, 2020. The search targeted the two biggest national journalistic outlets, the daily *Helsingin Sanomat* and the public service media outlet *Yle Online News*, as well as the local daily newspaper in Tampere, *Aamulehti*. In addition, a national weekly periodical, *Suomen Kuvalehti*, was accessed manually because the publication took a special interest in the case. The search in this periodical resulted in 10 articles and columns from summer 2018 to spring 2020. Overall, the study included four news media outlets.

The social media queries were guided by the search and visualization tools offered by the Mohawk platform. In total, the query with terms “tampereen yliopisto,” “tampereuni,” “tuninaama,” and “tunipalo” resulted in 65477 messages. From these, “tampereuni” is the official identifier and hashtag of Tampere University. The unofficial acronym for the university is TUNI, which is reflected in the two other keywords, both of which emerged

as central hashtags around Twitter debates connected to Tampere University. A clear majority of messages, almost 55000, were from Twitter, and the most active period, as measured by message volume, was spring 2020. Based on the metadata regarding the platforms, most frequent words and hashtags, and message volume over time, we decided to limit our analysis to spring 2020, when the discussion was the most heated. We extracted message data for the period from January 1 to March 24, 2020. This dataset consisted of 9303 social media messages featuring the search terms “tampereuni,” “tuninaama,” or “tunipalo.” Most of the messages were tweets (n=9215), accompanied by public Facebook page posts (n=70), Instagram posts (n=12), five forum messages, and one blog post. Including “tampereen yliopisto” in our search terms would have increased the share of messages from other platforms beyond Twitter, but considering our initial exploration with the larger dataset, we deemed the focus on Twitter to be appropriate.

We first constructed a tabular timeline of the Tampere University branding process using the media data as our starting point to identify the key events of the branding activity, as well as the most heated promotion-related debates regarding the new Tampere University (Figure 1). First, the entire dataset was accessed in spreadsheet format and one of the authors used the news headlines to identify the stories related to the university reform, thus excluding, for example, news coverage on research based at Tampere University. This filtering resulted in 63 news items. Next, we browsed through the news to identify coverage that discussed events and debates related to branding and communication at the new university. Based on this analysis, we focused our qualitative investigation on the following four key events:

1. The launch of the new brand and visual identity, spring–summer 2018,
2. an outburst of promotional rhetoric concerning university marketing and recruitment, summer–autumn 2018 (con-

- tinued with new debates until spring 2020),
3. memes and parodies of the university logo and brand, spring 2020,
  4. the resignation of the communications and brand director, spring 2020.

In our analysis, we combined content analysis with the principles of critical discourse analysis, as presented by Fairclough (2013). Through qualitative content analysis of the media material, we reconstructed the flow of events during the branding process and described how the discussion of the new university evolved. In particular, we recognized central events and peaks in the discussion as signs of the most heated promotion-related debates. Focusing on these peaks, we paid close attention to the discourses concerning the branding of the new university, as well as the counter-discourses commenting on them. Based on the peaks recognized, we studied how promotional and managerial voices were present in discussions and how visual and verbal means were engaged and combined by social media users to voice their opinions and criticism. When analyzing the social media data, we also followed links shared with other materials that seemed relevant to the debate, including blog posts and news media content.

Because of the hybrid media character of our data, our analysis of the discourses proceeded from a form-and-meaning analysis to a subsequent analysis of dis-

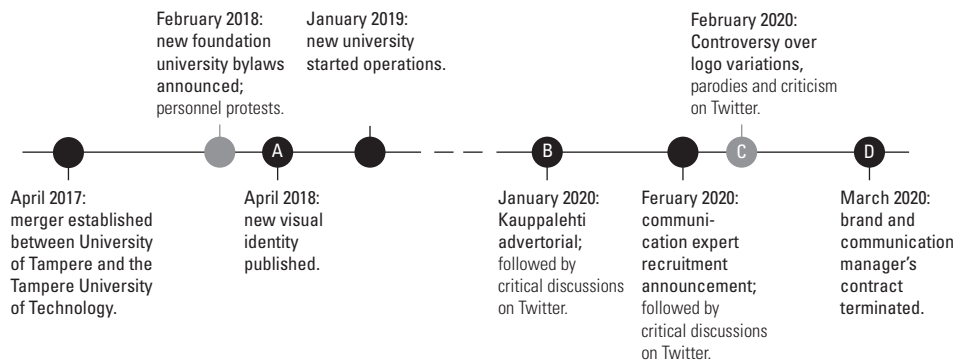
course practices (Fairclough, 2013, pp. 94–95). In this way, we were able to highlight the discursive practices and their combinations, which were drawn on by the participants. Similar approaches, based on Fairclough’s (2013) framework, have been applied earlier to studies of university websites and student recruitment to uncover ideology and power relations (e.g., Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018), particularly when it comes to addressing prospective students.

In the empirical analysis, we use the names of the journalist(s) when referring to news media texts, while the social media data is partly anonymized: Only the names of the Twitter users who have given consent to publish their tweets are mentioned. All other mentions of individual persons have been omitted from the examples.

## 6 Findings

The four key events in the media publicity of the Tampere University case highlight how the quasi-corporate strategic communication of university branding triggered stakeholder reactions in both social and traditional media and how social media was used creatively by students, staff, and the public alike to produce new forms of democratic resistance, which again led to coverage in traditional media. Figure 1 illustrates how the events proceeded and which reactions followed.

Figure 1: Timeline of the branding of the new Tampere University and related controversies



Note: The letters A, B, C, and D indicate the four key events selected for analysis.

As shown in Figure 1, the new Tampere University foundation was officially established in April 2017 in a merger between the UTA and TUT, and the new university started its operations in January 2019. Before the merger, TUT was already operating as a ‘strategically managed foundation’ with a top-down style of leadership model, while the UTA board followed its own traditional, collegial decision-making model. In the battle for administration, UTA “was fighting a losing battle against TUT and the Ministry, with neither its board nor collegial decision-making bodies being able to effectively influence the direction of the merger process” (Poutanen et al., 2022, p. 430). These struggles on the administration of the university have continued until recently.

### 6.1 The new Tampere University: Visual image and branding

In connection with the merger, a comprehensive brand strategy and visual identity were designed for the new university. The university hired an advertising agency and a brand agency for the design. The new logo and visual look of the university were announced in spring 2018 in a prominent marketing campaign consisting of newspaper, online, and outdoor advertising. The university also hired a communications and brand director. For the unified use of the brand and visual identity, a detailed PR material bank was introduced internally, including instructions for using graphics and communicating the brand in social media. The material bank also provided ‘tone of voice’ guidelines, the aim of which was to ensure that the core values

and promises of the brand were conveyed in all organizational communications (Rai-pola, 2019).

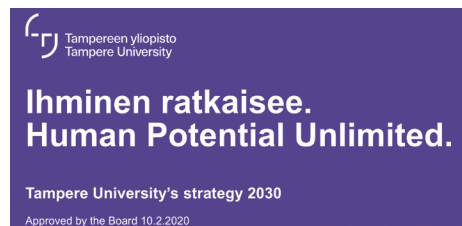
In 2018, Tampere University launched the slogan “human potential unlimited,” symbolizing its new strategy for 2030 (Figure 2). For international branding and marketing purposes, it published a video with a rather pompous introduction:

Who can solve all the problems of the world, who can find the cure, heal the sick or help the poor? Who can bring peace to the world? Who can bring light to the dark? [...] We all can. Together. (Tampere Universities, 2018)

However, branding was not limited to external communication. The new leadership of the university had also borrowed business-like methods and rhetoric for internal communication in order to cultivate “excellence” and a new spirit among staff. *Suomen Kuvalehti* published a sarcastic story with the headline “WOW. Universities in Tampere merged. A university was born where logos and slogans are pivotal and curricula are missing” (Onninen, 2019). The story referred to the rector’s message, which sought participants to a workshop related to “creating a wow experience.” According to the message, the recipients were “reported” by their colleagues as “enthusiastic, imaginative, reform-minded” individuals. They were invited to two workshops of about five hours to “create the wow experience.” In the workshops, researchers were divided into “spark groups” of leopards, bears, and eagles. The “Game Book v.1.0 for Developing an Operating Culture” (Onninen, 2019) was designed.

New types of stakeholders and the different emphases associated with them had also led to a change in the style and tone of external communication at Tampere University. Where, for example, university student recruitment was previously based on rather neutral and detailed information packaged in the most informative way possible, there now seemed to be an increasing desire to transform educational presentations and search tools into marketing tools (see also Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018).

Figure 2: The new visual identity (aka tuniface) and slogan of Tampere University in Finnish and English





This promotional spirit of student recruitment was highlighted, for example, in a newspaper advertisement published in March 2020 by Tampere University, emphasizing that the university is “the most multidisciplinary in Finland.” However, according to national statistics, Tampere University was only in fourth place in multidisciplinary, which provided journalists with a basis for looking critically at its targeted marketing (Paananen, 2020).

## 6.2 “Buzz rhetoric” and the “wow academy”

It is evident that the university community tolerates a certain degree of promotional language in external communication (e.g., Davis, 2013; Oplatka, 2009; Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018), for example, in student recruitment, but when such language use is extended to university administration and the visibility of the university in general, there seems to be a tolerance threshold: when it is exceeded, vivid reactions and even protests may be expected. In the case of Tampere University, the use of promotional language in university communication indicated a change in the earlier discursive practice and was noted by news media, as shown in the previous section, but also gave rise to critical social media commentary. An explicit indication of the fact that a threshold had been exceeded was that the promotional language in this context got an established label: Online commentators started calling it “buzz rhetoric,” a recognizable hype-building communication style considered to be out of place in the university.

On January 22, 2020, *Kauppalehti*, a leading national business newspaper, published an advertorial by the Tampere University Association. The advertorial had a provoking title: “New era of innovations has begun, we light small fires (of excitement) at the boundaries of science”:

“However, we need people like Future Finders who put themselves on the line at the boundary and, as if, light small fires of enthusiasm,” says Taru Pilvi. [...] According to Taru Pilvi, the change in culture is successful if, in the future, the graduates from the Tampere University,

when they hear the word innovation, think first of energetic activities and surprising, even absurd ensembles, and only afterwards of social, medical, and technological inventions. (Tampere University Association, 2020)

On the day of publication, the advertorial was followed by only a few tweets but resurfaced five days later, when *Yle*’s editor marveled at the language used on Twitter.

It is somehow great that the Tampere Wow Academy sounds more like a parody of itself day by day. Here, for example, is an innovative text in which no sentence means anything. (tweet, Jan. 27, 2020)

In total, this tweet collected 59 replies, 109 retweets, and 670 likes. In the thread, the rector’s message, with its promotional jargon, was perceived as blunt and untrue, and it was considered inappropriate for a university to pay for content collaboration.

Critical Twitter commenters involved many employees of Tampere University who experienced a conflict between the university’s reputation and its communication style. The personal status and reputation of employees is considered to be a potentially valuable expansion to the organizational voice (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020), but in this case, the employees became opponents to the communication efforts of the university. For many, the novel business-like branding communication appeared contradictory to the university values and was juxtaposed with recent changes in support services and employee practices that were considered deteriorating to the core activity of doing science.

Hi @TampereUni, I have a wild suggestion. What if, instead of multi-channel storytelling, we invested in the core activities of the university, namely research and teaching? #HumanPotentialUnlimited #WOW. (tweet, Feb. 3, 2020)

@user@user@user@TampereUni My thoughts exactly. Personally, I have experienced the buzz rhetoric and (in my opinion) the rhetoric foreign to a university as disrespectful to us researchers and scientists. The external commu-

nication of the new university seems to want to make us what many of us are not. It alienates. (tweet, Feb. 5, 2020)

Criticism subsided for a moment but resurfaced on February 4, when Tampere University published a recruitment announcement for a communication expert. The text featured the familiar fires on interfaces, superhero forces, and storytelling. Among others, a professor of journalism commented on the text and started the following discussion:

I am a professor of communication. Yet, I do not understand half of this @TampereUni announcement recruiting a communication expert. Either it is me or the marketing communication of my new university which is totally out of touch with the realities of the university and the society. Not like this! (tweet, Feb. 4, 2020)

According to information just arrived @TampereUni REALLY needs the communication expert to put out the fires of excitement with which the university management is actively trying to destroy the whole reputation of the university. Not like this. #tampere. (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

Indeed, it was language use, experienced as problematic, which the critical discussion focused on in early 2020. From the point of view of the community, the language used in the announcement was incongruent with the university organization and represented false branding and corporate style. The issue was also addressed in journalistic media, including statements by an esteemed sociology professor and Ilkka Herlin, chairman of the Tampere University board and a well-known businessman and environmentalist (Keski-Heikkilä, 2020). This peak in the discussion shows how reactions to promotional language functioned as outlets for broader dissatisfaction.

@user @user Because @TampereUni makes every effort to forget that it is a university and larp a start-up company filled with buzz and fuzz whose entire existence revolves around

the flattery of outside financiers. (tweet, Feb. 12, 2020)

The publications produced by the management and the communication department did not correspond to what was considered desirable at the university. The clash between the values represented by the university community and the new management was evident. The discussants felt that the new organization refused to understand the quality and significance of the work done at the university, and the university communication and PR staff were considered hired to sugar-coat and embellish the problematic nature of organizational change. Along these lines, the discussion progressed rapidly into the problematic nature of the new university processes: staff representation on the university board, secrecy in the recruitment of the rector, and organizational decision-making. These themes go much deeper than the criticism of buzz rhetoric and promotional discourse.

### 6.3 Visual image out of control: Memes and parodies on social media

On social media, stakeholders responded to the new buzz rhetoric in ways that are emblematic of social media, including humor, memes, and visual communication. Recent studies have recognized humor as one potentially effective way to participate in societal and political discussions online (e.g., Laaksonen, Koivukoski, & Porttikivi, 2022; Ross & Rivers, 2017), ranging from sheer entertainment to strategic counter-hegemonic practices (Davis, Love, & Killen, 2018). Likewise, memes act as visual arguments that can be used to support and protest against hegemonic ideas (Denisova, 2019).

In the online discussions concerning the Tampere University case, the commenters adopted the identified buzz as a tool for critical commentary toward Tampere University's new branding communication and organization through ridicule, for example, the metaphor of "lighting small fires (of excitement) on the interfaces" used in the *Kauppaliehti* piece (Tampere University Association, 2020), in

particular, and the metaphor of a “tunifire” created as a wordplay from it both thrived in online discussions (see also Piata, 2016). On Twitter, the metaphors of lighting fires or “tunifires” on interfaces started to embody the communication failures of Tampere University instead of the original innovation activities.

The tuniface logo (*tuninaama*), launched in spring 2018, and the dark purple chosen as the university’s brand color were prominently displayed at the opening ceremony of the 2019 academic year. The minimalistic and expressionless human face form of the logo (Figure 2) was received as an indirect invitation for modification by many. An article in *Suomen Kuvalehti* reported that a researcher received a reprimand from the communication department after showing a version of the logo with a beanie on their lecture slides (Onninen, 2019).

In early 2020, controversy over the tuniface logo took on new dimensions. On February 18, 2020, the students’ Green Left association of Tampere University (Viva, 2020) published an open letter on its website in response to a message sent by Tampere University’s management concerning an earlier blog post from 2018. The 2018 text made ironic remarks about the bubbling megatrend of ignoring the constitution and called for the great ancient Cthulhu to take the lead at Tampere University. The original text was illustrated with a variation of the Tampere University logo, with tentacles (a Cthulhu trademark feature) added to the tuniface. The first publicly distributed ironic tuniface variation was thus born in June 2018, but the debate on its symbolic value did not reach national-level publicity until early 2020. Tampere University’s response to the student organization was made public and met with criticism online:

@TampereUni administration threatens a student organization with legal action over publishing this logo version. Apparently, the knowledge of the traditions of student humor has burned to dust in some small fire, as the issue is approached from this angle. (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

@TampereUni Are we lighting up some small fires at the boundaries of freedom of speech and immaterial rights? (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

In response to Tampere University’s threatening message, numerous students and other Twitter users began making their own versions of the tuniface – as a response to a challenge announced on Twitter by a student politician:

So we thought we would spread the glory of satire and parody with a small competition! So do your own parody of the university logo and post it with the hashtag #tuninaama, winner will be awarded with reputation and honor! (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

The suggested form of parody and carnivalesque was prominent for a few days in February 2020 but continued occasionally thereafter as well. National news media reported on the social media buzz accompanied by galleries of logo variations (e. g., Körkkö, 2020). The modifications included popular vernacular online expressions and classic global memes, such as the Phantom comic, “this is fine” dog and the disaster girl meme (Figure 3). Various fire-related visual cues have been used in many versions (firefighters, Sauron’s tower, different burning house memes, and

Figure 3: Version of the disaster girl with tuninaama



Note: The text reads: “I lit up wee fires on interfaces.”

fire comics). In line with Denisova’s (2019) notion, memes combine global discourses with a local agenda. Several modifications, however, relied on local image macros that often reappropriated content from old Finnish movies and TV series as well as political figures.

While image macros and other memetic content were often used to produce humorous framing, some visual material was also used to build connotations referring to suppressing freedom of speech and totalitarian regimes. These versions used imagery from popular culture (Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and Hitler movies) and historical visuals from old Soviet Union propaganda posters. Some versions contained further direct references to Tampere University-branded material beyond the tuniface logo, for example, by suggesting tweaked versions of the university slogan (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Tuninaama variation where the “Human potential unlimited” slogan is modified



According to Wiggins (2019), memes are used for constructing identities and raising self-esteem, but they also help bring marginal issues to broader attention, which also happened in the Tampere University case. Overall, while the main point of the visual variations was satire and parody, many of the tweets shared a more serious and critical undertone: Twitter users resisted the style and tone of Tampere University communications, which was seen

as opposite to the existing values and spirit of the university community. Some tweets made this tension explicit and suggested alternative actions:

I gladly greet the fact that when the university threatens those having fun with its brand, #tuninaama and #tunipalo end up trending on social media. Could it be thought that openness and humor work better as a unifying force than an intranet announcement saying that we need to speak in a “we-form.” (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

Tampere University responded to the ongoing stir by tweeting its apology in the afternoon of February 18, 2018. The tweet, sent from rector Mari Walls’s personal account, included a discreetly modified version of the tuniface with a small emoji on top of it:

Based on the feedback we received, we asked the student organization Viva to remove the university logo modification from their posters and website. Our reaction was too sharp and we regret it. It is not intended to prohibit satire or the use of memes. #tuninaama (tweet, Feb. 18, 2020)

Overall, the use of the tuniface logo and hashtag in social media posts positioned them as signs of critical speech imbued with irony, which seeks to dispel the uncertainty and tensions surrounding the beginning of a new university in creative and community-strengthening ways. Thus, paradoxically, these messages challenged the management and new branding strategy of the university but simultaneously seemed to strengthen the university community. As the final tweet in a long analytic thread puts it:

You should be pleased that we still care so much about this university that we can criticize it. Indifference [toward] the university is the worst thing that could happen. (tweet, Feb. 19, 2020)

#### 6.4 Resolution to the “communication problem”

By spring 2020, Tampere University was increasingly embroiled in a reputation crisis, and university management had to respond to remedy the situation. The university’s promotional discourse and buzz rhetoric were ridiculed in public. At the same time, university staff and students increasingly criticized university management. The reason for this was not only the failed branding of the university but, above all, the fact that the activities of the university management were questioned. Since the establishment of the Foundation University, the administration of Tampere University has been criticized for dismantling democratic practices and for a culture of secrecy (Kuusela et al., 2019; Poutanen et al., 2022). However, in the public debates we examined, promotional communication emerged as the central focus of criticism, and the Tampere University responses framed the controversy as an issue of communication.

The ongoing debate was finally addressed in an intervention by top management. On February 26, 2020, *Suomen Kuvalehti* published an interview with the chairman of the Tampere University board, Ilkka Herlin, who said that Tampere University communication “policy must be changed.” He argued: “That culture of communication has come from another world to the Tampere University, where different academic cultures are being reconciled at the same time. It hasn’t worked. This is quite obvious” (Keski-Heikkilä, 2020). Changes followed soon. On March 4, *Aamulehti* newspaper reported that the employment contract of the communications and brand director of Tampere University had been terminated, and her resignation took effect immediately. Two days later, on March 6, the rector of Tampere University sent an email to the staff with apologies:

Our brand and brand communications have sparked a lot of discussion in our community and also in the public. I am very sorry that we have not succeeded in creating the conditions for everyone to feel that they truly belong to

the new university community. (Paananen, 2020)

Thus, despite the ongoing, almost three-year discussion about university democracy and organizational change, the reputation crisis of the university was defined narrowly as a communication problem, and the solution was to dismiss the communications and brand director. The apologies also framed the issues clearly as a communication issue, not as a management issue; no apology for the style of management was offered. This could be regarded as a way to silence the more profound structural debates related to university administration and personnel policies by indicating that some action had been taken.

### 7 Discussion: Quasi-corporate communication and its repercussions in the hybrid media space

Our analysis demonstrates that promotional discourses and branding in higher education may lead to ‘dysfunctional’ effects and reputation crises in the hybrid media system. The promotional discourse by Tampere University was directly disseminated in some news media, most notably the advertorial published in *Kaupparehti* in February 2020 (Tampere University Association, 2020). However, various critical voices gained visibility on social media platforms, from Twitter to blogs and Facebook. In the hybrid media system, different media formats, platforms, and genres are reflexively connected, and their operational logics support each other, paving way to new discursive practices. This intertwined logic is clearly visible in our data. First, news media coverage of Tampere University’s politics and branding acted as discussion openers on social media, for example, in critical discussions about business-style internal communication or the advertorial in *Kaupparehti*. Second, social media debates tended to result in news media coverage, particularly in the visual narratives constructed by

news media from logo variations circulating on Twitter. This is a typical example of the cyclical media logic of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013; Ojala et al., 2019).

For a traditional organization such as a university, as well as for strategic communication in particular, the hybrid media space is an uncontrollable arena where reputation management can be very difficult, if not impossible. The new university gained a lot of visibility in terms of metrics and buzz but not in ways that would have built the kind of reputational capital, as suggested by Cronin (2016). Instead, the social media conversations mostly represented the voices of dissatisfied employees, students, and other stakeholders, which brought the polyvocality of the university institution to the fore (Benoit-Barné & Martine, 2021; Hazen, 1993). Promotional practices adopted by the university were confronted with active stakeholders, who started to modify the promotional material for their own purposes to express critical views.

Previous studies based on interviews have shown that university branding efforts often meet criticism from university staff (e.g., Aspara et al., 2014; Chapleo, 2015; Davies, 2020; Frandsen et al., 2018). Universities are “plurivocal organizations” (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017, p. 153) and perhaps “too complex to express in a succinct brand proposition” (Chapleo, 2015, p. 160). In the case of Tampere University, this criticism was rooted in the ongoing struggles of university management. In the merger of the university, previous collegial and representative bodies were replaced by more streamlined top-down management structures, which “left little room for democratic resistance” (Poutanen et al., 2022, p. 432) for teachers, researchers, and students. Therefore, in line with the thinking of Gabriel (2008), the members of the university community had to find other channels for their ‘spectacles of resistance,’ and the brand campaign escalated into a reputation crisis in a hybrid media environment. In the end, the university leadership faced a reputational problem that had to be solved in one way or another. It was solved as a ‘communication

problem’: the communications and brand director had to go.

During the branding campaign, the resistance found new energy on social media platforms, particularly blogs and memes, which ridiculed the campaign slogans. Partly similar criticism was sparked by the previous merger of Aalto University in 2009 (Aspara et al., 2014; Aula & Tienari, 2011; Tienari, Aula, & Aarrevaara, 2016). This merger took place 10 years earlier, when social media platforms were just emerging, and it did not cause similar public debates as the case analyzed here. Our case also bears many similarities to the branding campaign of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, analyzed by Davies (2020); she argues that the “openness of the campaign meant that it was readily picked up on and personalized (and occasionally subverted)” (p. 239) by the university staff.

In our case, this play with words and images was further intensified by the circulation of memes between social media platforms and news media. The hybrid media environment facilitates the participation and mobilization of protests, which is important for social activism (Caren, Andrews, & Lu, 2020). However, university management tried to restrain this open circulation of meanings by threatening a student organization with legal action over publishing a meme of the university logo. This act of intimidation actually encouraged new actors to publish memes, which further ridiculed the campaign slogans. Frustrated by diminishing democratic possibilities to take part in the new university’s administration, some students and teachers at Tampere University found a new way to resist and subvert the top-down management and corporate style of communication (Gabriel, 2008). In the news media, this playful contestation led to increasing public criticism against university management and the communications and brand departments.

In autumn 2021, it became increasingly clear that the difficulties with the Tampere University brand went beyond the obvious “communication problem.” When university management announced plans

to close down the university library and significantly reduce administrative and support staff, this sparked demonstrations among the staff and students. The management of the university was accused of “managerialist top-down leadership” and diminishing democracy, which aimed to transform the university into a “product development laboratory” (Teittinen, 2021). This public criticism continued in December 2021, when Tampere University announced its decision to terminate 107 positions in administration and support staff.

## 8 Conclusion: The risks of promotional discourses and practices

In this article, we studied the process of building a new university merger from the perspective of branding and promotional communication and the related tensions. By adopting a critical stance toward promotional culture (Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991) and the rise of a promotional university (Cronin, 2016; Davies & Horst, 2016; Hearn, 2010; Välliveronnen, 2021; Wernick, 2006), we focused our empirical analysis on four distinctive and heated debates that emerged during the branding process in 2018–2020. Using social media and news media data, we analyzed how and why brand messages were contested and transformed into resistance expressed through discourses and memes on social media platforms.

Overall, our findings highlight the role of promotional discourse and quasi-corporate communication style as key triggers for critical conversations about Tampere University. The novel organizational culture of Tampere University and in particular its new communication style sharply contradicted the perceptions and expectations of the university community, which eroded the university’s reputation and legitimacy (Sihvonen et al., 2020). The practices of external advertising agencies, consultants, and the communications and brand director who came from the corporate world differed so radically from traditional university communication practic-

es that this caused ongoing controversies within the university and media outcry. The discrepancy between community values based on university democracy and the managerialist management practices of the university was simply too great.

However, the results of our case study cannot be generalized. More research is needed, particularly focusing on university branding in the hybrid media environment, which fosters the distribution and amplification of different voices. In our case, voices were raised to defend the university as a “public good” (Calhoun, 2006) upholding values of transparency, openness, and democracy. Moreover, the internal and external discussions also had some influence on the actions of the management, if not on the values and external forces driving the decision-making, at least to language use. The irony of our case was that the excessive promotional discourse and buzz rhetoric provoked memes and parodies that turned public attention toward problematic developments at the university. In the short term, quasi-corporate-style branding efforts, combined with top-down corporatist management, may lead to a crisis of credibility, as our analysis demonstrates.

Promotional practices may also reduce academic freedom and researchers’ freedom of expression in public arenas. Recently, Finnish state research institutes<sup>1</sup> in particular have adopted more top-down communication practices that limit the freedom of expression of their researchers and promote a one-voice policy (Saikkonen & Välliveronnen, 2022; Välliveronnen & Saikkonen, 2021). Streamlined quasi-corporate communication practices have also been introduced to universities (e.g., Cronin, 2016; Davies & Horst, 2016; Hearn, 2015). When the plurivocality of universities is played down and dissident voices are suppressed, this poses a threat to academic freedom. This means that promotional practices are not only instrumental but also “introduce ideological and

1 For information regarding higher education and research in Finland, see <https://okm.fi/en/heis-and-science-agencies>.

cultural shifts to science communication practices and to the public role of science” (Väliveronen, 2021, p. 141).

Our analysis contributes to the discussion of the possibilities of “democratic resistance” against the managerialization of universities by highlighting how the changing power relations in communication afforded by the hybrid media system support the visibility and communality of organizational resistance (also Gabriel, 2008). Unlike during the Aalto merger in 2009 (e.g., Aspara et al., 2014; Aula & Tienari, 2011), the situation of the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Davies, 2020) and Tampere University demonstrates that academics and other stakeholders are versed to take advantage of the communication opportunities available for them in the current media system. As many online commenters pointed out, they would be happy to join the “choir” of Tampere University if the management would first acknowledge the existing community, their values and autonomy – both in decision-making and in communication.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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