

UDC 378.147

**Oleksandra CHERNIAVSKA**

*PhD candidate,*

*Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design,*

*Kyiv, Ukraine*

**VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AS A STRATEGIC ASSET FOR UNIVERSITY BRAND  
MANAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A CASE STUDY OF THE ERASMUS+  
VEHUB4YOU PROJECT**

In the context of global digitalization, universities must reconsider their branding strategies, shifting from traditional reputation-building models toward dynamic, networked brand identities. This article explores how participation in virtual exchange projects, particularly the ERASMUS+ VEHUB4YOU initiative, functions as a strategic tool for strengthening university brands in the digital space. By examining the theoretical foundations of brand management in higher education and the operational framework of VEHUB4YOU, the article demonstrates the pivotal role of digital educational initiatives in enhancing universities' global visibility, reputation, and value-driven identities. The digital transformation of higher education has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which universities manage and project their brand identities. In an era where physical campus features are increasingly secondary to digital presence, reputation, and international engagement, universities must strategically embed themselves within global digital ecosystems (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Marginson, 2006). Virtual exchange (VE) platforms, such as those enabled by the ERASMUS+ VEHUB4YOU project, provide a unique opportunity for universities not only to expand educational access but also to strengthen their brands by associating with innovation, inclusiveness, and international collaboration.

Recent studies in higher education branding emphasize the necessity for value-based differentiation and co-created brand identities, particularly within the digital environment (Ind & Schmidt, 2019; Chapleo, 2011). Universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only academic excellence but also social relevance, innovation capabilities, and global interconnectedness (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). To further clarify the strategic repositioning of university branding in the digital era, Table 1 presents a comparative overview of traditional branding models and those enabled by virtual exchange initiatives such as VEHUB4YOU. The table illustrates key shifts in reputational anchors, engagement mechanisms, and innovation signaling, emphasizing how digital ecosystems facilitate broader audience reach, more dynamic stakeholder involvement, and accelerated brand co-creation.

Table 1.

**Strategic Differences Between Traditional and Virtual Exchange–Enabled University  
Branding**

| <b>Branding<br/>Dimension</b> | <b>Traditional University Branding</b>      | <b>Virtual Exchange–Enabled Branding<br/>(e.g. VEHUB4YOU)</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Reputation<br/>Anchor</b>  | Campus infrastructure and academic rankings | Digital identity and project-based collaboration              |
| <b>Audience<br/>Reach</b>     | Local or national student base              | Global student-partner networks                               |

|                              |                                           |                                                        |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Engagement Model</b>      | Top-down communication (brochures, fairs) | Interactive, co-created experience                     |
| <b>Content Medium</b>        | Print, physical events                    | Virtual hubs, digital storytelling                     |
| <b>Strategic Focus</b>       | Accreditation, faculty expertise          | Sustainability, inclusiveness, innovation              |
| <b>Reputational Signals</b>  | Alumni success, league tables             | Participation in EU/global programs, online visibility |
| <b>Innovation Perception</b> | Slow to moderate                          | Accelerated and dynamic                                |

In the digital era, a university's reputation increasingly depends on its active participation in global knowledge networks (Marginson, 2006). Through VEHUB4YOU, universities gain visibility in transnational educational dialogues, broadening their stakeholder engagement and demonstrating digital maturity. Student participation in virtual projects, cross-border collaborations, and the production of internationally visible outcomes all contribute to strengthening universities' global digital reputations.

As the comparison shows, while traditional branding relies heavily on physical infrastructure and hierarchical communication, VEHUB4YOU-style branding leverages global digital networks, interactive formats, and transnational visibility to embed universities within international innovation discourse. Within this framework, digital engagement and experiential learning initiatives, such as VEHUB4YOU, act as critical touchpoints where institutional values are enacted, and brand perceptions are formed. The ERASMUS+ VEHUB4YOU project establishes a network of 60 virtual business hubs across Ukraine and Azerbaijan, offering students access to European business education through digital exchange formats. For participating universities, engagement in VEHUB4YOU serves as a reputation-building strategy, demonstrating their capacity for digital innovation, commitment to internationalization, and responsiveness to sustainable development goals (Guth, 2016). According to Cherniavska (2023), the visual and symbolic elements of the VEHUB4YOU digital style — such as its logo and branding language — encode values of openness, collaboration, and entrepreneurial spirit. Universities aligning themselves with these elements effectively integrate these attributes into their own brand narratives, enhancing digital brand consistency and emotional resonance with students and partners. Moreover, virtual exchange initiatives align university branding with the values of inclusion, sustainability, and global citizenship, resonating with emerging expectations among prospective students and international partners (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009).

Virtual exchange projects such as VEHUB4YOU exemplify how educational digitalization can be leveraged for strategic brand management. By fostering international engagement, promoting digital competencies, and aligning with global educational values, universities not only enhance their educational offerings but also consolidate their positions within the competitive global education marketplace. In this context, virtual exchange serves not merely as an educational innovation but as a vital component of brand governance and reputation management in the digital age.

## References

1. Chapleo, C. (2011). Exploring rationales for branding a university: Should we be seeking to measure branding in UK universities? *Journal of Brand Management*, 18(6), 411–422. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2010.53>
2. Cherniavska, O. D. (2023). *Value-Driven Digital Brand Management: The Values Engraved in VEHUB4YOU's Logo and Digital Style*. In Materials of the V International Scientific-Practical Conference "Problemy integratsii osvity, nauky ta biznesu v umovakh hlobalizatsii": Theses of Presentations, October 6, 2023 (p. 226). Kyiv: Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design. <https://menagement.knutd.edu.ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2024/01/mng-1-37-2023-10.pdf>
3. Guth, S. (2016). Virtual Exchange as a Tool for Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *EVOLVE Project White Paper*. <https://evolve-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EVOLVE-White-Paper-SDGs.pdf>
4. Ind, N., & Schmidt, H. J. (2019). Co-creating brands: Brand management from a co-creative perspective. *Journal of Brand Management*, 26(5), 518–526. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-019-00160-1>
5. Jongbloed, B., Enders, J., & Salerno, C. (2008). Higher education and its communities: Interconnections, interdependencies and a research agenda. *Higher Education*, 56(3), 303–324. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9128-2>
6. Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of national and global competition in higher education. *Higher Education*, 52(1), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-7649-x>
7. Sujchaphong, N., Nguyen, B., & Melewar, T. C. (2015). Internal branding in universities and the lessons learnt from the past: The significance of employee brand support and transformational leadership. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 25(2), 204–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2015.1083515>
8. Wæraas, A., & Solbakk, M. N. (2009). Defining the essence of a university: Lessons from higher education branding. *Higher Education*, 57(4), 449–462. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9155-z>