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Creating Value in the Entrepreneurial University: Marketization and Merchandising Strategies

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Abstract: Higher education institutions are called to expand their role and responsibilities, by enhancing their entrepreneurial mindset and redefining relationships with stakeholders. In order to cope with these new challenges, they have started to operate in a strategic manner, by performing marketing and merchandising activities. Indeed, in a sector characterized by the presence of competitive funding models, several forms of accountability, and performance indicators, universities have become open systems and have started to operate like enterprises, considering students as customers. Given this premise, the aim of the paper is to individuate marketing and merchandising strategies in higher education and to evaluate their effectiveness in order to foster stakeholders engagement. This is in line with the entrepreneurial university model that represents the starting point of the theoretical study, then a literature review of “marketization” in higher education institutions is presented, showing how this field is not yet completely investigated. Data refer to the Italian context and are analyzed through a qualitative method. Findings suggest that most Italian universities perform merchandising strategies, but currently there is not sufficient information to evaluate their effectiveness in higher education, it was only possible to make hypotheses.

Keywords: university; stakeholders engagement; public marketing; merchandising

1. Introduction

In a context where governments are reducing public spending, higher education institutions have been forced to reconsider their relationships with stakeholders, by adopting new practices in order to foster their competitiveness (Plewa and Quester 2008).

The idea that universities, previously perceived as organizations completely detached from the rest of society, could operate in an entrepreneurial way was introduced in the early 1980s, but this led to several debates on how higher education institutions could provide a significant contribution to social and economic growth. It is in line with the entrepreneurial paradigm (Etzkowitz et al. 2000), a new way through which higher education institutions are called to operate, characterized by the capitalization of scientific research in order to diversify their financial resources sources. It suggests a continuous interchange between universities and the rest of society, with universities that appear more practical and engaged in societal issues, far from the previous idea that described them as “ivory towers” (Etzkowitz 1998). In this sense, they have re-conceptualized their role, and are now able to generate value in a regional or national context (Mowery and Sampat 2005). This can be identified with the concept of social engagement, that is one of the three dimensions of universities’ third mission (E3M 2012), seen as the set of the activities through which higher education institutions build linkages with external stakeholders and share the results of their work, by ensuring mutual benefits (NCCPA 2011). The aim is to stimulate social and economic development by changing funding channels (shifted from the public sector to students) and providing more and different learning

opportunities. In this sense, a dialogue between academia and the other actors in society becomes central in universities' activities.

A university's social engagement can be seen as a sort of practical learning; sometimes it is described as a "service learning", through which engaged students, during their learning opportunities, provide society with several services (Annette 2002), or as a "community-based learning", where community-based projects are implemented (Millican 2008). It can represent a new kind of research, that is carried out with society (Strand 2000), or, according to other authors, a "learning by doing" opportunity for students, who will become lifelong learners (Langworthy and Turner 2003). Finally, social engagement could also represent a new form of education, aimed to ensure sustainable development in society (Corcoran and Wals 2004; Cough and Scott 2007).

More recent studies have overcome these debates, and implications linked to this new mission, by focusing on the strategic approach adopted by universities in order to improve their international visibility and to expand their interactions with stakeholders. Strategic planning has become a widespread practice for higher education institutions, even if its application in European universities is still in a preliminary phase, associated with less systematic results, if compared with the American context. So, universities have started to define their mission statements and guidelines (Gibbs and Murphy 2009), but also to perform several marketing activities. Some authors talk about a "marketization" of higher education to indicate universities' increasing interest in promoting themselves to potential students, seen as their primary consumers, in order to achieve their satisfaction.

In this sense, universities have a range of marketing activities to choose from and these can be more or less traditional. First of all, according to Sung and Sung-Uh (2008), universities, as an enterprise, need to build and share their brand image and reputation to improve their prestige among both internal and external targets.

Of course, in the age of social media, a social media strategy can represent the starting place to engage and connect students, even if it is an ambiguous tool requiring specific competences to be implemented. Then, merchandising of university-branded products is a useful strategy to engage especially internal stakeholders, such as students, professors, and administrative staff.

Other marketing activities regard the exploitation of a "human brand", by underling academics' competences and knowledge; traditional advertising; relational marketing activities; and extracurricular activities, such as sports or social networking events.

Based on these considerations, after a literature review of marketing strategies in higher education, we decided to focus our attention on only one of their possible manifestations, that is merchandising, and we tested its application in the Italian higher education system.

In this sense, our aim will be to provide an answer to the following research questions: Are higher education institutions carrying out marketing and merchandising strategies? Could creativity and entrepreneurship that characterize marketing and merchandising in higher education represent a step towards a more entrepreneurial university? In order to do this, we decided to proceed with an analysis of the current situation in the Italian context.

The work is organized as follows: Section 2 is dedicated to the theoretical framework, by including considerations on the entrepreneurial university model and a literature review of different marketing applications in higher education institutions, now perceived as entrepreneurial entities. Then, in Section 3 we will explain the methodology adopted to collect and analyze data, while preliminary findings will be presented in Section 4. Finally, Section 5 will be dedicated to discussions and Section 6 to conclusions, by showing possible directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section is dedicated to the theoretical framework of the paper and it is organized in two main pillars. First of all, we introduce the model of the entrepreneurial university by considering different approaches and points of view, with the aim to individuate a set of conditions and elements that universities have to manage in order to operate in an entrepreneurial way. Then we review the

available literature on the concept of marketization in higher education institutions, with a specific focus on marketing and merchandising tools, seen as possible manifestations of the new “academic entrepreneurship”.

2.1. The Entrepreneurial University

According to [Ranga and Etzkowitz \(2013\)](#), a university becomes entrepreneurial when it is able to “provide students with new ideas, skills, and entrepreneurial talent” and “to generate technology that has changed its position, from a traditional source of human resources and knowledge to a new source of technology generation and transfer”. The entrepreneurial university model ([Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000](#); [Clark 2001](#); [Siegel et al. 2007](#)) takes into account various conditions that summarize the university’s new and wider role in social and economic growth, consisting in: a) the approach to operational and strategic choices; b) connections with external environment (society, institutions, the economy), generated and managed with an entrepreneurial approach; c) professors, researchers, and students who act in an entrepreneurial way ([Gunasekara 2006](#)). It describes a new university, seen as the response to the increasing relevance of knowledge in fostering innovation in national and regional contexts. [Crow et al. \(2019\)](#) introduce the term “academic entrepreneurship”, to summarize the new universities’ involvement in commercialization and technology transfer, by including formal intellectual property transactions, such as patenting and licensing, but also informal ones, such as different types of entrepreneurial ventures, aimed to make students and universities closer ([Siegel and Wright 2015](#)), to generate different forms of social engagement ([Vorley and Nelles 2008](#)).

Of course, several environmental factors can effect this transition from a “traditional” university to the entrepreneurial one: Academic staff could lack managerial and leadership features, and a diversification of financial resources sources is needed ([Clark 1998](#)). In this sense, [Clark \(2015\)](#) focused on financial aspects of this revolution, by considering a diversified funding base as the main characteristic of the entrepreneurial university. So, university becomes a place that diversifies its incomes in order to not depend upon the State, nor upon corporations and their commercial influence, nor upon student tuitions. This is in line with the “market logic” ([Clark 1986](#); [Leslie and Johnson 1974](#)) developed in contrast with the “academy” one and the “bureaucratic” one. The “academy” logic underlines the autonomy and self-governance of universities, with the State only taking a “funder” role; the “bureaucratic” logic, instead, encourages the State to play a larger role, by specifying higher education institutions’ goals and objectives ([Martinez 1999](#)).

On the other hand, according to the market approach, universities are more autonomous from the State and look at market logics to compete successfully in the marketplace. In order to affect and improve their performance, they start to focus on customers’ needs (students in this case) and to look for collaborative partnerships.

In the US this new idea of universities emerged in a bottom-up way, while in Europe it is following a top-down path, introduced with the aim to solve the innovation gap that characterizes these two geographical contexts. Of course, the entrepreneurial university phenomenon is linked to the wider university’s third mission concept, even if it appears more focused on the short term economic aspects deriving from it. According to [Krimly \(1991\)](#), indeed, entrepreneurship should be resisted by higher education institutions: An intensive pecuniary interest could distract universities from their specific role.

As previously mentioned, an entrepreneurial university, and the researchers inside it, has to learn to communicate, but not only how it operates and the reason why, it has also to communicate effectively to the society where it lives. Dialogue, discussion, and debate become key factors in order to promote interactions with all categories of stakeholders ([Miller 2001](#)). Indeed, universities have to communicate with students, in order to understand and satisfy their needs, with the world of work, to fit their requests by training students with specific skills and competences and with the public sector, to obtain funds.

According to the model, versatility has to characterize the way people operate within universities and the knowledge that becomes, at the same time, theoretical, practical, and interdisciplinary.

In this sense, [Etzkowitz and Viale \(2010\)](#) identified a set of principles that universities have to take into account in order to foster innovation; they are:

- Capitalization: Knowledge capitalization becomes crucial for economic and social development, by summarizing the relevant role played by universities within society;
- Interdependence: Universities are no longer ivory towers, but they start to operate and collaborate with industries and the public sector;
- Independence: Universities are not other organizations' emanations;
- Hybridization: Given the presence of the interdependence and independence principles, universities are hybrid entities;
- Reflexivity: Universities have to continuously reorganize themselves by redefining their relationships with the rest of society.

More in detail, [Nelles and Vorley \(2009\)](#) built the framework of the "entrepreneurial architecture" in order to study contemporary universities. The model is based on the presence of five different elements (i.e., structures, strategies, systems, leadership, and culture) that together contribute to the success of the third mission within universities.

Entrepreneurial structures represent the physical place dedicated to knowledge transfer, such as technology parks, incubators, technology transfer offices, and departments of continuing education and professional development, while systems regard the norms that foster communication between researchers and entrepreneurial structures, as well as linkages between teaching, research, and entrepreneurial activities. The role of leadership is to establish structures and systems and to ensure the achievement of strategic goals identified and described through strategies; in this sense, leadership and strategy will evolve together. Lastly, organizational culture summarizes the attitudes of individuals within the organization, their values, and propensity for entrepreneurial engagement.

In the struggle for competitiveness and international visibility, aimed to attract more and more students, these conditions and elements will help universities to distinguish themselves from competitors.

In this sense, [Cantaragau \(2012\)](#) considers academic entrepreneurship as a practice performed with the intention to transfer knowledge between the university and the external environment to produce economic and social values both for external actors and for members of the academia; higher education institutions start to think and operate in a strategic manner, by summarizing their identities and priorities in their mission statements, just like enterprises do. Teaching, research, and the third mission continue to exist, but now universities have to take into account the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality linked to their activity. To sum up, according to the model, on the one hand, there is an extension of university research into social and economic development, on the other hand, an insertion of industrial goals and market practices into universities ([Etzkowitz 1998](#)); according to [Chell \(2007\)](#), this can be described as a combination between the "pro-social community-spirited motives" of a nonprofit organization and the "entrepreneurial process of pursuit of opportunity" of a market-based organization. So, academic entrepreneurship can be seen as a further evolution of higher education institutions (after the two academic revolutions), summarized in a new strategy for social and economic growth.

The development of the entrepreneurial university (in compliance with the characteristics described) is structured in three different steps. In the first one, universities define their strategic guidelines and their objectives, then they start to play an active role for the commercialization of their intellectual property, and, at the end, they become effectively able to improve the innovation process.

Given this premise, the “marketization” of the higher education system could be placed in the first phase of the process, by representing the specific strategy (deriving from the entrepreneurial world) that universities adopt with the aim to improve their stakeholders engagement, by generating in them a sense of belonging.

2.2. Marketing and Merchandising in Higher Education Institutions

According to several authors (Marginson and Wende 2007; Natale and Doran 2012), “marketization” is the name of a new phenomenon that invaded the higher education system in the era of the entrepreneurial economy. Indeed, in this context, traditional factors such as land, capital, and labor lost their centrality in the process of growth and development, while the value of knowledge increased (Dan 2012), becoming the source of competitive advantage. The term marketization shows this increasing competition in the educational field, leading universities to be more business-like by adopting a strategic approach (as theorized by the entrepreneurial university model). With the introduction and escalation of tuition fees, universities’ funding shifted from the public sector to students. In this sense, according to Mourad et al. (2011), higher education institutions have become market-oriented and students have become their customers, so, in order to satisfy and retain them, universities have to build and maintain a good reputation overtime. Universities started to appear and operate as entrepreneurial entities with the aim to increase the number of students and to engage them by stimulating their sense of belonging. A sense of belonging refers to feeling at home at university, to feel as members of one specific community (Hausmann et al. 2007; Hurtado and Carter 1997); and when students feel that they belong to a specific university, they tend to be more motivated to persist in it and to engage with others students. What is more, by pursuing this objective, higher education institutions started to implement marketing and merchandising activities (Angulo-Ruiz et al. 2010; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006) by looking for an edge over competitors. If, according to the academic entrepreneurship view, universities tend to apply many aspects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Crow et al. 2019), the development of marketing and merchandising in higher education could be seen as a manifestation of its specific market logic. These activities would be performed by universities with the aim to generate revenue streams, that will be used to improve education and research methods and to better cope with social and economic issues. So, on the basis of these considerations, linkages between the entrepreneurial university paradigm and the development of marketing and merchandising in higher education could be identified in two specific ways.

First of all, marketing and merchandising can be seen as specific entrepreneurial ventures carried out by universities to reposition their reputation around the world, a way to expand connections with external stakeholders, to approach new market demands and, in terms of future perspectives, to become students’ first choice; in other words, to distinguish themselves from competitors, just like enterprises do (Crow et al. 2019).

On the other hand, merchandising turns out to be a useful tool in a time when higher education institutions have to look for new instruments in order to diversify their incomes (Clark 2015): revenues generated through the commercialization of branded products can be exploited in order to support research activity or deserving students, pursuing excellence in universities’ activities.

So, in line with the market approach (Clark 1986; Leslie and Johnson 1974), marketing and merchandising can be seen as those market logics that universities adopt in order to compete in the market of education, witnessing the recent introduction of industrial goals in higher education.

Of course, these tools involve significant costs and studies in order to investigate their effectiveness, but, at the same time, they can provide valuable insights for university administrators (Angulo-Ruiz et al. 2016), especially in terms of international visibility and stakeholders’ engagement.

Currently marketing and merchandising in higher education appear as topics not completely investigated; several researchers examined different aspects of these activities, but most of the current literature results mainly focused on Canadian, French, and Swedish contexts.

In this sense, according to [Naidoo and Wu \(2011\)](#), universities have to perform these activities exclusively in order to attract international students, while [Bolan and Robinson \(2013\)](#) tried to study the application of marketing in Ontario universities. [Chen \(2008\)](#), instead, investigated the potential of international marketing activities in order to increase the awareness of students, now perceived as customers. Other authors preferred to focus on the role of communication in higher education institutions: [Bélanger et al. \(2014\)](#) studied social media marketing as a useful tool for students recruitment, while [Lavigne \(2005\)](#) identified the favorite communication tools for higher education institutions. Additionally, [Shields and Peruta \(2018\)](#) studied the effectiveness of social media in the recruitment process: In their opinion, in the age of social media, universities have to elaborate a complex marketing plan, by exploiting new technologies and communication tools, in order to influence and attract more students. According to [Clark et al. \(2017\)](#), students who are connected with their university through social media seem to have a higher quality relationship with their schools than those who do not; a robust presence on social media could help in order to reinforce and share the institution's brand image ([Pringle and Fritz 2018](#)).

Building a university's brand image is important in order to affect not only external stakeholders, but also internal ones, such as students, who want to know how their university is perceived by others ([Sung and Sung-Uh 2008](#)). In addition, according to [Smidth et al. \(2001\)](#), universities can improve their external prestige by communicating their brand image.

In this sense, social media are now inserted in the range of marketing activities that universities can choose in order to achieve their objectives and, compared with them, they ensure several advantages, such as lower costs and the possibility of instantaneously measuring the effectiveness of posts and campaigns. At the same time, social media strategies risk alienation of their specific target audience with excessive and uninteresting posts and, in order to avoid this, they should be supported by experience and specific competences within the organization ([Peruta and Shields 2017](#)). [Opoku et al. \(2006\)](#) state that universities have to allocate more efforts and resources to communication on the Internet.

Paid social media, instead, represent all forms of marketing use of social media where an organization pays for content placement in users' timelines: Students do not need to follow universities' pages to see their posts and campaigns and universities are able to achieve their target more easily.

The university's brand image can also be shared through merchandising activities, that consist in the commercialization of branded products and play a relevant role in terms of stakeholder engagement. Indeed, such activities stimulate a sense of belonging and connection from students to institutions.

On the other hand, [Thomson \(2006\)](#) studied another marketing tool: According to him, an organization could exploit its "human brand" in order to attract and retain customers. A human brand is identified with that well-known persona who becomes the "subject of marketing, interpersonal, or inter-organizational communication" (p. 104); in this sense, academics, with their competences and knowledge, could represent a valuable human brand for higher education institutions ([Shafaei et al. 2019](#)) and, consequently, drive trust among students.

For what concerns other more traditional marketing activities, higher education institutions can generate brand awareness and a positive image through traditional advertising ([Chapleo 2011](#); [Keller 1993](#)), (e.g., radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, public transport, career expo, and exhibitions). By exploiting these means, universities try to influence students' choices and to build long-term relationships with them.

Relational marketing activities, for instance, allow universities to build linkages with potential students and an emotional attachment overtime ([Arnett et al. 2003](#); [Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006](#); [Moogan 2011](#)). The aim is to address students' needs and expectations, in order to create a relationship based on loyalty. According to [Arnett et al. \(2003\)](#); [Klassen \(2002\)](#); and [Moogan \(2011\)](#), this process starts with recruitment, continues with retention of students ([Angulo-Ruiz and Pergelova 2013](#)), and ends with alumni relations in order to attract other future potential students.

But, beyond the effect generated by marketing activities, that could be more or less traditional, other factors appear able to influence students choice.

First of all, reputation is important in order to make the institution more reliable: It consists in the external stakeholders' perception (Deephouse 2000; Fischer and Reuber 2007), in comparison to other and similar institutions (Deutsch and Ross 2003; Fombrun and Shanley 1990). In a context where students, who are no longer passive subjects, start to calculate the return on their investment, reputation becomes central in university choice (Petruzzelli and Romanazzi 2010). So, in this system (the educational one), now based on competition, satisfaction indicators can be used to build a good reputation and quality in education can aid the satisfaction of stakeholders' desires.

Furthermore, universities, when they carry out their marketing campaigns, have to take into account what students expect of higher education. In this sense, several authors talk about career prospects (Gray et al. 2003; Mai 2005; Wiese et al. 2010), others about vision of a high-status occupation (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides 2010), and others about quality in teaching activities (Chapman and Pyvis 2006; Wiese et al. 2010). So, students see the higher education system as an opportunity to build and improve their future work opportunities (Brinkworth et al. 2009; Jimenez and Salas-Velasco 2000; Rochat and Demeulemeester 2001; Montmarquette et al. 2002) and universities have to satisfy their ambitions.

Finally, extracurricular activities, such as sport activities or the organization of social networking events, can be useful for students engagement and connection. Additionally, students who are more connected with their institutions tend to remain engaged with them and to complete their studies there, representing a valuable resource for universities.

Possible risks connected to these new activities for universities are analyzed by Gibbs (2018); according to him, marketing and merchandising strategies could become dangerous for higher education institutions, creating the risk of applying a consumeristic model to the education system (William 2013). In this sense, higher education cannot be perceived as a business practice that has to be consumed, but it will remain always a path to knowledge, and marketing can only help in pursuing and sharing this relevant and noble commitment.

3. Methodology

As previously mentioned, the aim of this work is, first of all, to analyze the extent to which higher education institutions perform their marketing and merchandising strategies in order to achieve wider engagement; then, to understand whether the creativity and entrepreneurship that characterize marketing and merchandising in higher education could represent a step towards a more entrepreneurial university. In this sense, we investigate the effective capacity of these strategies to generate a sense of belonging or connection among stakeholders, identified, in this case, with students, professors, and administrative staff.

To do so, the research was focused on the Italian university system, which comprises 97 higher education institutions. Among these, 67 are state universities and 30 are non-state universities. The term "non-state" does not mean "private": Indeed, among the 30 non-state universities, 8 do not belong to the State but to other public entities, while the other 22 are effectively "private". Among non-state institutions, 3 are characterized by a religious orientation, while 11 are online universities.

Data collection on universities' merchandising was carried out by exploiting what they declare in their websites or the information coming from different sources, such as official accounts on social networks (especially Facebook).

Data were systemized in an excel file, where we highlighted basic information on the universities, such as their foundation date and their nature (state or non-state). Then, an in-depth study on marketing and merchandising activities of each institution was conducted, firstly by looking at their official websites, secondly analyzing other sources. In this sense, the first information collected was whether the institution carries out these activities or not; then, whether such activities concerned ad hoc communication campaigns or the commercialization of branded products. Given our focus on merchandising, we then clustered universities considering the kind of products they provide: Branded gadgets (characterized by low prices), clothing, sport equipment and, just in one case, precious and

handmade objects (associated with higher prices). The last steps were aimed to individuate the channel through which students, professors, administrative staff, and others can buy these products and then the motivations behind such activities.

So, starting with an analysis of the current situation in a national context (the Italian one), the scope was to draw general conclusions on merchandising strategies in higher education, with the awareness that many differences will be inevitably identified between Italy and other countries, by influencing strategy effectiveness.

The theoretical framework starts by providing considerations on the entrepreneurial university model that led universities to operate as enterprises, by adopting a new strategic approach to achieve their objectives. Then, a literature review of marketing and merchandising practices in higher education institutions was carried out, by showing how the topic is not yet completely investigated. Then, by following the same approach as several authors (Foucault 1982; Yin 2003; Lillis and Lynch 2014), collected data were analyzed qualitatively.

More precisely, it was decided to adopt the same approach used by Arias-Coello et al. (2018), who performed a documentary analysis on universities' official declarations, by following two main steps. Firstly, the research aims to understand whether and how Italian higher education institutions implement marketing and merchandising activities in their strategies, by considering them as an opportunity to engage more stakeholders. Then the purpose is to understand whether the Italian universities' efforts could represent a step towards the entrepreneurial university model.

4. Findings

In the sample, composed of 97 institutions, according to that they declare through their websites or the information we can read on the Internet, 60 seem to implement merchandising strategies, that can take several forms. Most are state universities, while only eight non-state universities and three higher education schools perform such activities. As previously mentioned, merchandising strategies could be too expensive for education institutions, especially for those universities that mainly base their activity on the availability of public resources, but, against general expectations, non-state universities do not result as very interested in merchandising: For 22 of them there is no reference to it. We can assume that state universities need, more than non-state ones, to improve their image and reputation and, given reductions in public funds, to diversify their financial resources sources.

For what concerns the 60 higher education institutions that perform merchandising, three of them do not implement it anymore and two experienced it only on two occasional events: The Normal School Of Pisa distributed gadgets during the institution bicentenary celebration, and the University of Trento did it exclusively during the placement day. Regarding these two universities, there are no information about the current merchandising, so we can suppose that they have not started to commercialize their products. The University of Torino, instead, carried out merchandising, but now it does not anymore. Then, by considering all institutions engaged in merchandising, one of them, The University of Calabria, realizes this practice exclusively through the activity performed by its campus, the University of Genoa through the activity of the engineering faculty, and the University of Messina thanks to the efforts of its CUS (the university's sport center). One university inserts the section "merchandising" in its official website, without providing further information about it. Finally, three of them are still working towards providing their customers (students, professors, administrative staff, and all people who could be interested) with this service and, among these, The University of Macerata is working towards the launch of their own university radio, considered as another expression of marketing strategies, deriving from the entrepreneurial world.

As previously mentioned, marketing activities consist in several ways, through which organizations can try to attract customers and give them a specific feeling of belonging; in this sense, for what concerns our sample, we can note that most Italian universities (state and non-state) do marketing through the commercialization of different branded products, such as clothing or gadgets, and only two of them by implementing an ad hoc communication campaign. In this sense, Italian

higher education institutions show a deep delay; if compared with other countries where universities have started to go beyond the mere commercialization of branded products, by effectively reflecting the entrepreneurial principles (sometimes creating an own enterprise).

So, according to our analysis, 49 state universities carry out merchandising activities, which include only eight non-state universities and three higher education schools: It is a shocking finding.

More in detail, for what concerns the eight non-state institutions that carry out merchandising, our attention is mainly focused on three of them. Indeed, there is one institution, the Bocconi University, that operates like American colleges, by dedicating resources and attention to merchandising and providing its students with branded sports clothing and equipment; then, the Cattolica University implements merchandising with the aim to offer several benefits to students, who can buy products or practice sport with discounted prices. Then, Niccolò Cusano University, instead, is the only higher education institution that combines the provision of branded gadgets with that of precious and handmade objects, characterized by higher prices. We can suppose that this institution has defined different priorities, probably on the basis of a wider resources availability. The other non-state universities that perform merchandising activities are the IULM, the University LUISS—Guido Carlo, the University of Bolzano, and the Humanitas University. Finally, there is the Guglielmo Marconi University that currently does not implement merchandising, but declares the intention to start.

Usually, branded products commercialized by universities are not very expensive (students represent the main portion of customers), or, at least, institutions apply facilitations for their internal stakeholders; in this sense, Niccolò Cusano University is not in line with the others.

Then, three higher education schools implement merchandising strategies, even if in different ways: One of them has experimented merchandising only during its bicentenary and now does not implement it anymore (the Normal School of Pisa); the Sant'Anna School offers a huge range of products through its store; the SISSA University of Trieste is more focused on marketing strategies and carries out a specific communication plan with media through the engagement of an external society.

Generally, for state and non-state higher education institutions this merchandising strategy is associated with the presence of a store, a dedicated shop that could be placed inside of faculties, in the university campus, or in the center of the city, even if the distribution of products could also be realized online.

For what concerns the channel exploited by universities in order to realize their merchandising strategies, 27 Italian institutions have a store where people can buy branded products, two of them declare to operate online, with the intention to open a shop in future. In this sense, both the University of Bolzano (a non-state university) and the University of Padova (a state university) represent two exceptions, since they have three physical stores. Seven universities, instead, combine physical and virtual activity by adding an online shop to the material one, and only one, that has a physical store, is still working in order to extend its service online. Eleven institutions prefer to exploit the online channel exclusively, without employing resources, in terms of staff and structures, in managing the store. Among these 11 universities, two sell their products without getting profits: the University of Sassari exchanges its gadgets and clothing with donations that will be exploited to sustain deserving students and the research activity, while the Polytechnic University of Bari collects funds in order to provide new students with branded t-shirts.

Finally, there are eight other universities that perform merchandising activities without providing information about the channel they exploit.

Only two universities, the Insubria University and the Polytechnic University of Milan, which are both state universities, clearly declare to consider merchandising as a central part of their engagement strategy. In order to stimulate a greater sense of connection in their stakeholders, they provide branded products through their store and distribution centers.

The University for Foreigners of Perugia, instead, declares to carry out merchandising with the only aim to improve its communication activity. Communication is considered as a relevant aspect by the Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria and the SISSA University of Trieste too. While

Mediterranea is characterized by the presence of a specific marketing office exclusively focused on communication strategy, SISSA University, as previously shown, delegates this activity to a dedicated external society.

Given the state of the art of marketing and merchandising practices performed by Italian higher education institutions, with a specific focus on merchandising, for what concerns the second step of the research, the aim was to understand their effectiveness and whether the creativity and the entrepreneurship that characterize them could be seen as a step towards a more entrepreneurial university.

Currently, there are no sufficient data in order to define their effectiveness in terms of stakeholders' engagement (there are no declarations from institutions). On the basis of fragmented available information, deriving from a qualitative analysis of higher education institutions' behaviors overtime, it is possible to make assumptions. In this sense, the effectiveness of marketing and merchandising strategies in Italian higher education institutions depends on the effect of several factors, such as the specificity of commercialized products, the channel exploited to distribute them, the price policy adopted, the resources that institutions invest on them, and the availability of a target audience (do stakeholders actually want to be connected with their university?).

We can conclude that merchandising strategies were not effective for the three institutions that do not implement them anymore and for the two institutions that experimented with this kind of activity on occasional events, without institutionalizing them for the future. On the other hand, merchandising should be more effective for those seven universities that have decided to invest more in it, by distributing their branded products through two different channels— online and physical channels.

For what concerns the relevance of such activities in Italy, we can state that marketing and merchandising in higher education are still in a preliminary phase, and they could represent the first step towards the entrepreneurial university model, even if they need to be further developed in order to compete in an international context. Indeed, if marketing and merchandising appear as “innovations” in the Italian educational field, they are a habit for foreign universities, especially for American ones.

5. Discussion

In a higher education system where competition has progressively become the norm, the education provided is subjected to the pressures of a consumerism model and students are perceived as customers, universities are facing a phase of “marketization”. In this sense, several market ideologies and market-oriented reforms are introduced in education, by calling higher education institutions to operate in an entrepreneurial way, to respect several conditions and appear more business-like. These institutions reflect the entrepreneurial university model introduced by Etzkowitz, by adopting a strategic orientation, by defining and communicating their values and their mission statements.

University entrepreneurship could be seen as a further evolution of higher education institutions: Overtime they have added academic research and a third mission to their first and primary task of teaching, now they are called to operate by considering the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality associated to their activity, just like enterprises do. According to the market approach (Clark 1986; Leslie and Johnson 1974), they have become places that diversify their funding bases, by reducing their dependence upon the State or upon other actors in society. So, the aim is to attract, engage, and retain more students and, in this sense, marketing and merchandising strategies could represent useful tools in order to spread and strengthen the university's image and reputation among current and potential students, ensuring, at the same time, new revenue streams. In this sense, universities can choose from different activities and practices, that can be more or less traditional. They include social media strategies, the possibility of commercializing branded gadgets, or exploiting the institution's human brand, but also traditional advertising, relational marketing activities, and extracurricular activities, such as sport or social networking events.

We focused on merchandising, a new strategy, coming from the entrepreneurial world, through which universities commercialize branded clothing or gadgets, in order to expand their international visibility and to stimulate a sense of belonging in their principal stakeholders.

In this sense, the aim was to understand the extent to which higher education institutions perform this strategy and then to evaluate its effectiveness in an entrepreneurial university perspective.

To do so, the Italian university system was investigated through a documentary analysis, by considering what universities disclose in their official websites. The data collection process was not easy, given the fragmentation through which universities share information about their activity, so in several cases we had to exploit other sources, such as their social network accounts (especially Facebook) or other related pages. Indeed, only for some of them was a section for “merchandising” included in the official website, providing information about the products that are commercialized and the channel exploited. Other institutions include the “merchandising” section in their websites, without saying anything about these activities, while for others it was possible to retrace information about merchandising exclusively through their social network pages or through special websites dedicated to the physical store. For some institutions it was not possible to obtain data about their marketing or merchandising strategies, so we concluded that they do not perform this kind of strategy. On the other hand, most of them carry out their merchandising through the commercialization of branded products, by applying facilitations for students, professors, and internal staff. This confirms that, while abroad marketing and merchandising have become a common practice for universities, a significant part of their strategic plan, in the Italian higher education system they are still in a preliminary phase.

However, we can state that, if these strategies turn out to be in line with the set of conditions and elements required by the entrepreneurial paradigm, ensuring more connections with external stakeholders and a greater visibility for universities, they can be seen as the first effort towards a more entrepreneurial approach for Italian higher education institutions. Of course, they need to be improved and further developed to compete in an international dimension. Indeed, foreign universities have completely assimilated entrepreneurial principles, providing wider ranges of products, sometimes creating their own enterprises, and overcoming the marketing and merchandising phase in their “entrepreneurial path”. In this sense, Niccolò Cusano University is the only one that shows a deeper engagement in marketing and merchandising, commercializing gadgets and clothing, but also precious and more expensive products.

6. Conclusions

By exploiting available information, research findings suggest that most Italian universities, 60 out of 97, perform merchandising strategies, even if three of them do not implement these activities anymore.

Universities aim to listen and satisfy their customers’ needs, so they have started to carry out such activities to bring institutions and students closer. According to the “market” logic, marketing and merchandising can be seen as entrepreneurial activities, performed by higher education institutions to diversify their financial resources sources and obtain further revenue streams. These will be used to improve the universities’ effectiveness in all their activities (teaching, research, and the third mission).

The context analyzed results were deeply fragmented: Certain universities invest relevant resources in merchandising, while others, on the other hand, prefer to engage only some specific schools or bodies within the university (such as the university campus or the university sport center) in merchandising, showing a deep delay when compared to the international context, where merchandising is a common practice for universities. Given the Italian education system, characterized by the presence of state and non-state universities, through this study it is possible to conclude that, against general opinions and expectations, the public nature of institutions is linked to a deeper interest in marketing and merchandising activities, while very few non-state universities are interested in them. It does not mean that non-state universities are completely detached from merchandising strategies, but only eight out of 30 disclose to be engaged in them and, among these, only three invest relevant resources in order to provide a personalized service to their students. So, the Bocconi University

can be compared to American colleges, offering branded sport clothing and equipment, the Cattolica University offers several benefits in terms of discounted prices, and the last one, Niccolò Cusano University, is the only that combines the provision of branded gadgets with that of precious and handmade objects at higher prices. We can conclude that, even if non-state universities may have more resources to designate to merchandising, they are less interested in diversifying their financing sources than the state ones.

The practical implication of this work tries, first of all, to individuate the correlation between the entrepreneurial university model and the development of marketing and merchandising strategies in higher education institutions, then to prove the relevance that marketing and merchandising strategies could aid in attracting and connecting more students. In this sense, if the concept of “academic entrepreneurship”, introduced by [Crow et al. \(2019\)](#), indicates formal and informal transactions carried out by universities to improve their visibility and to approach and engage more students, merchandising can be seen in line with the entrepreneurial university paradigm. Then, if, according to [Clark \(2015\)](#), a university becomes entrepreneurial by operating in a new strategic manner and diversifying their financial resources sources, marketing and merchandising can help in it, at least for what concerns the Italian context. At the same time, this work shows how the effectiveness of strategies could depend on the specificity of national contexts: Italy is characterized by a deep delay when compared with the US.

Then, this work aimed to investigate the effectiveness of these activities and to understand whether they can be seen as a step towards the university entrepreneurial model. For what concerns the first aspect, the research results were limited. Indeed, there is not sufficient information to evaluate the outcome linked to marketing and merchandising in Italian universities. Indeed, higher education institutions do not disclose these effects. Of course, we can state that marketing effectiveness in the Italian education system is influenced by several factors, such as the specificity of commercialized products, the channel exploited to distribute them, the price policy adopted, the resources that institutions invest on them, and the availability of a target audience. In this sense, despite universities’ efforts, stakeholders could be uninterested in buying branded clothing, gadgets, and objects of their institution if they do not “feel at home at university”.

We were only able to make hypotheses by analyzing the evolution of universities’ behavior overtime, so we concluded that merchandising was not effective for the three institutions that do not implement it anymore and for the two institutions that occasionally performed it without continuing in the future. Maybe, at the same time, merchandising should be more effective for those institutions that put it at the center of their engagement strategy, by providing products through several channels.

For what concerns the last step of our study, the motivation hidden behind merchandising in higher education is first of all to attract more potential students and later to engage them, by generating a sense of connection with the institution, in a long-term perspective. Indeed, connected students usually do not change institutions to conclude their studies, so they represent a valuable resource for universities. In this sense, Italian higher education institutions tend not to share their motivation in performing merchandising: Only two universities (the Insubria University and the Polytechnic University of Milan) declare to put merchandising at the center of their engagement strategy, while the University for Foreigners of Perugia, the Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria, and the SISSA University of Trieste perform it in order to improve their communication activity.

Given the efforts of Italian higher education institutions in marketing and merchandising, we can state that such strategies can be seen as the first step towards the entrepreneurial university model, but they need to be further developed and improved. Indeed, even if they drive an extension of university engagement in social and economic issues and, at the same time, the insertion of market practices and goals in them, they are in a preliminary phase, if compared in an international context. In this sense, American colleges and universities started to perform merchandising several years ago, going beyond the commercialization of branded products for internal stakeholders and now they effectively operate like enterprises.

In this sense, future researches are needed, with the aim to individuate more specific indicators able to provide information about the effectiveness, and the usefulness, of marketing and merchandising in higher education institutions (the sense of belonging generated in students through these activities could be considered as a proxy of their effectiveness). Indeed, even if marketing and merchandising strategies could ensure several advantages in terms of stakeholder engagement, at the same time they could distract universities from their specific and relevant role: Higher education institutions have to provide society with education, a good that must be shared and learnt.

Lastly, further researches could be aimed to identify specific foreign best practices that can help Italian universities in order to develop their entrepreneurial mindset and to better achieve all their scopes.

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