





MAKING ABSTRACT VALUES TANGIBLE: HOW EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES CONSTRUCT THEIR VISUAL IDENTITY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CREATIVITY

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Abstract. The European University Initiative established 64 transnational alliances of higher education institutions. Each of these European Universities Alliances seeks to align universities to enhance academic excellence and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area. While branding of higher education institutions has become a professionalized practice, creating a transnational alliance poses challenges beyond traditional academic visual identity. The aim is to map out visual and discursive self-representation patterns of European University Alliances on their websites, involving European values such as for example, international cooperation, student mobility, and inclusivity. Using multimodal discourse analysis, this study examines online construction of academic identities of selected European University Alliances. It analyses (1) composition, colour, and typography used in European University Alliances' logotypes; (2) the features of photographs and graphics; and (3) the typology of names and keywords in mission statements. The findings highlight the importance of generic imagery and compositional devices evoking positive emotional responses as well as recognizable cultural symbols and colours that align with the values of academia and "Europeanness".

Keywords: academic visual identity, European universities, European University Alliance, visual identification, web pages.

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1. Introduction

The European University Initiative (EUI) is a flagship program of the European Commission (EC) aimed at establishing a more integrated European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This goal is to be achieved through the foundation and development of European universities, which are described as

"transnational alliances that will lead the way towards the universities of the future, promoting European values and identity, and revolutionizing the quality and competitiveness of European higher education" (European Commission: European Education Area, 2023).

According to the EUI, the first 17 European University Alliances (EUAs) were selected in a competitive call in 2019 and *Erasmus+* funding was assigned to consortia of 4–8 universities representing various member states of the European Union (EU) for the piloting period of 3 years. The second call increased the number of EUAs to 44. The consortia were to test the possibility of offering joint courses and programs of studies as double/joint degrees,

significantly increase the mobility of students and staff, devise joint virtual campuses for academic and civic engagements, research-based entrepreneurial mindset and challenge-driven interdisciplinary education. Academics were to engage in innovative pedagogy and explore joint research possibilities on such challenges facing Europe as demographic change and migration, climate change adaptation and food safety, democracy, multilingualism, or cultural heritage, to name just a few.

The EC's EUI calls, and the subsequently developed alliance-level strategies of deeper integration and institutional transformation, required an implementation of a variety of European values, including transnational challenge-oriented and interdisciplinary collaboration, academic unity, sustainability and responsible citizenship, inclusivity and diversity, human rights, excellence, and innovation in higher education. Yet, the first 44 EUAs were left to choose their priorities and modes of integration and decide how forge a joint trans-institutional identity that fosters engagement and internationalization, often according to a model of common structures developed to meet their needs. They were also to creatively promote this new identity among academics, students and stakeholders, despite the varied histories, capacities, cultures and national or regional specificities of partners to be allied. Needless to say, these identities were to be compatible with (and evaluated on) the EUI's requirements as well as successful management of visibility.

The EUAs are novel entities and the way they fit in within the landscape of established higher education institutions with recognizable academic identity needs to be investigated. In addition, it is important to study how the European values and initiatives within the common EHEA are then embedded and appropriated by individual organizations and institutions. While predominantly descriptive and comparative, the study's novelty lies in previewing how the abstract values of higher education are grasped through visual and linguistic affordances.

This study explores the following broad research question: What means to construct their academic visual identity are used by the EUAs (as shown in their logos, imagery and lexical patterns on their websites)? This research question needs to be addressed through a mixed-method (*i.e.*, quantitative and qualitative) approach characteristic of multimodal discourse analysis (Machin, 2013). The creativity and variability of practices and products of forging academic identity is captured as a departure point for discussing larger issues of professional academic branding and marketing, also in a critical vein.

This article starts with a presentation of "academic visual identity" according to current literature (Breeze, 2013; Wu & Yin Mei Cheong, 2022). Then, the sampling and coding procedure is explained before the analysis of a dataset of visuals and lexical items is presented. The results are quantified and screened for salient patterns, which are described in reference to categories of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Ledin & Machin, 2018; Machin, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2011), particularly colour, typography, imagery, and modality. The naming patterns and keywords are identified through semantic and etymological typological analysis. Regarding the analysis of patterns of images, attention is paid to representations of social actors, image-text relations, and semiotic resources used for either conceptual or narrative designs (Ravelli & van Leeuwen, 2018). Then, we focus on the specifics of lexical framing of these novel collective identities in the EUAs "mission statements" to map how they endorse the EU-dominant academic ideologies (Dan & Arendt, 2021; Fairclough,

2003). The conclusion touches on the recommendations for visual marketing of academic identity (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2005), and the consequences of professional branding of higher education institutions (Messaris, 2012).

2. Theoretical framework and method for studying academic visual identity

Academic visual identity is an extension of corporate identity to the higher education sector through a range of symbolic and visual representations of its products, offers and values. While based on corporate branding, academic visual identity may be more challenging as most of products and practices of academia are less tangible and more complex than commodities and services, and include educational opportunities, research outputs and infrastructures, or expert human resources in a range of disciplines. For recognizable institutional identity, branding is realized mostly via symbolic representations, naming patterns and corresponding artefacts, such as logotypes, mottos/slogans, shields, signage, stationery, photographic material, video material and websites (Wu & Yin Mei Cheong, 2022).

van Riel and Balmer (1997, p. 335) point out, that institutional identities can be powerful instruments of integration stakeholders' interests and values "when well-managed". This means that organizations can creatively construct, shape, maintain, and project self-identities to maximize success and viability. While most literature relates to managing corporate identity (e.g., Breeze, 2013) to create a common ethos and clearly represent objectives and values both to internal stakeholders and external publics, many insights, such as the rules for visual and discursive means of projecting identities, can be applied to academic organizations. While corporations strive to maximize profits through product/service innovation and quality at reasonable prices, academic visual identity in the case of EUAs studied here will be mostly devoted to matching the funder's (EC's) policy and values, the EUI call requirements, and the academic traditions of excellence in research and education (cf. Fürst et al., 2022). Increasingly, however, universities also succumb to self-representation in terms of "marketized" goals, ranking-related performance indicators, and efficiency in managerial administration (Ledin & Machin, 2016; Tatyeva & Zagidullina, 2023).

For Breeze (2013, pp. 148–150), institutional websites seem to be the main venues for controlled identity formation and management. Most websites of academic institutions are professionally designed to be informative and well-organized, user-friendly and navigable, as well as credible and frequently updated. They also include attractive visuals, and a consistent compositional and layout style pertaining to a certain aesthetic convention. Complex websites tend to be self-contained, with hyperlinks directing the users to other self-managed subpages within the site (or to social media platforms) that expand on and nuance information and generate engagement. Special care is given to the content and design of homepages, which explain the mission and purposes of the organization ("who we are", "about us"). In the case of EUAs studied here, apart from logos and descriptions of partnering institutions, such pages are likely to explain the European policy initiative and spotlight the specificity of a given alliance with its priorities. It will also project a positive, if not celebratory, outlook on the prospects and accomplishments of the alliance.

There are a few strands of inquiry related to how complex multimodal ensembles of images and texts, such as websites, could be subjected to research. Apart from the well-established traditions of visual semiotics (Danesi, 2006), visual communication (Messaris, 2012) and visual rhetoric (Molek-Kozakowska & Kampka, 2021), the studies of academic visual identity can also profit from a specific strand of multimodal discourse analysis, namely multimodal critical discourse analysis, which offers a comprehensive toolkit for systematic empirical studies. With the rooting in social semiotics and the imports from pragma-linguistics, cognitive and social sciences, and art and design, multimodal critical discourse analysis, as conceptualized first by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) and then operationalized by Machin (2007, 2013) and others, is able to account for a variety of visual aspects of identity representation. Multimodal critical discourse analysis includes scrutinizing how specific content, including values and sentiments (ideational metafunction), is represented by an organization to a targeted recipient (interpersonal metafunction), via an assortment of modes, compositions and designs that draw on specific technological affordances and cultural meanings (textual metafunction) (Djonov, 2007; Molek-Kozakowska & Kampka, 2023).

This study will take advantage of the work done via the methodological nuancing of multimodal critical discourse analysis. It will be based on the verified applications of colour (van Leeuwen, 2011), including the cultural meanings and aesthetic implications of certain palettes and gradients, especially in the European institutional context. It will look at typography and its affordances for making designs associated with certain values, such as tradition or modernity, lightness or heaviness, decoration or simplicity, technology or humanity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Ledin & Machin, 2018). It will explore conventions of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism, especially when related to logotypes and infographics, as well as the uses of shapes and maps for the sake of representation of “Europeanness” (Machin, 2007). All these have not only a semiotic, but also a rhetorical potential in foregrounding certain values at the expense of others and providing cues to ideological meanings and values to be naturalized (Dan & Arendt, 2021; Messaris, 2012). Whenever values, ideologies and stereotypes are identified in this study as reproduced visually by EUAs, the multimodal discourse analysis moves into its critical terrain.

In academic visual identity, the choice of perspective and mode of representation of objects, actors and settings is an important tool for impression management through positive connotations, especially for photographic images, and particularly as regards professional high-quality stock photography (Frosh, 2002; Ledin & Machin, 2018). For Machin (2007, pp. 110–122), the recipient is positioned to align with the ideas, values and sentiments presented in photos through gaze, angle of interaction, or distance (close-up, long-shot). There are also visual means of representing social actors as “professionals”, and capturing their poses in order to endow them with agency, emotionality or moral stance. Meanwhile, the perceived realism and attributed evidentiality of images can be managed by means of manipulating modality with photographic filters or cropping or redesigning of available images (Ravelli & van Leeuwen, 2018). Even representations of campus settings, research infrastructures and academic interiors or events can be used for highly captivating visual narratives and for enhancing the anchoring of text-image relations to boost credibility (Molek-Kozakowska & Kampka, 2021).

3. Results of analysis of European University Alliances' visual identities

3.1. Sampling and coding

For this study, all the visual and textual material was retrieved in the first quarter of 2023 from the respective official websites of 44 alliances, specifically their self-descriptions in *who we are/about us* sections. The dataset was aggregated manually and calibrated to compare 44 logos, 120 visual (graphic or photographic) elements, and 17 keywords representing discursive strategies used by EUAs for their institutional identity. The corpus of images was coded by the two authors according to a coding scheme that included categories and strategies operationalized above. These were: (1) in case of logotypes – iconicity, colour, typography; (2) in case of images – representation of human and institutional actors, settings, graphics, maps. In the case of naming and lexical patterns, semantic type, etymology, frequency and collocation patterns were identified automatically and analysed manually.

The analysis has been conducted in several iterations as outlined below. First, the 44 logotypes of the EUAs are divided into categories according to their type, with the symbolic elements analyzed in terms of their connoted meaning and correlation to particular European values (Machin, 2007). In subsection 3.2, the iconicity, colour and typography of logos, treated as semiotic resources, are scrutinized as for their characteristic features and meaning potentials to represent “Europeanness”, “academia”, and “being allied”. In subsection 3.3, the photographs and graphics are categorized in terms of their representational meaning (narrative and conceptual) and analyzed in relation to their possible interpretations regarding the EUA's communicated values and aims. Subsection 3.4 provides an overview of naming patterns and lexical prominence in the context of framing of EUAs' missions and their reproduction of the ideology of European academic excellence.

3.2. Analysis of logos

A logo serves as a visual representation of a company or an organization; it condenses its central values and mission in a pictorial form that is distinctive, recognizable and memorable (Heilbrunn, 1998). Logos, despite their minimalistic form, are potent carriers of complex meanings and differentiate the organization from others through the combination of name, shape, color, and typography (Wheeler, 2009). At the core of the logo design lies the recognition that the interplay of such semiotic resources can evoke various connotations and cultural references, reflect the dominant ethos of a particular time, or the geographical context in which the organization operates. Some authors (Heilbrunn, 1998, p. 373) distinguish three subtypes of logos: the logotype, the icotype, and the mixed logo. The first one consists exclusively of alphabetical and numeric signs, which can be “iconized” into a symbol, due to a creative use of typography and color (24% in EUA sample). The icotype uses a graphic sign or image as an index of organization, which, with time, symbolizes its profile or product (e.g., *Apple Inc.*). EUAs icotypes with inscribed logotypes account for 20% of cases. The mixed logo is the most common for EUAs (56%) because it allows to exploit both graphic and alphanumeric significations.

The icotypes applied in such mixed logos share certain patterns of representation. Geometrical figures, including circles, semicircles, ovals and squares, constitute the largest category of iconographic elements deployed, making up 29.5% of all EUAs logos (Figure 1). Following multimodal critical discourse analysis research literature, these shapes, universally recognized across cultures, have an added significance and aesthetic value based on symmetry (Machin, 2013).



Figure 1. Selected European University Alliances' logos with geometrical iconographic elements (sources: Unite! University Network for Innovation, Technology and Engineering, 2023; Transform4Europe, 2023)

One of the most frequently used shapes is the circle, which tends to be applied to connote equality and collaboration. Every point on its circumference is equally distanced from the center, which emphasizes the non-hierarchical structuring of the alliance, as well as the unity of its members. Similarly, the square, delimited by its equal sides and angles, represents stability, order, and reliability. However, the arrangement of the elements in logos can be very diverse and thus open the logo to additional interpretations. For instance, in the logo of *Una Europa* (2023), the name is enclosed within the singular line circle, highlighting not only the union of the members of the alliance but also the wider notion of one, united Europe. As far as the logo of *Unite!* (Figure 1) is concerned, the icotype is a combination of seven circles of different sizes, where such a cluster of overlapping figures emphasizes "crossing of boundaries", and the integration of different units into one structure (resonating with the word "unite"). While the individuality of every element is underlined by a separate colour, they all share the low saturation of muted blue, green, and purple, indicating truth and sophistication, according to multimodal critical discourse analysis (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 82). Additionally, the circles are semitransparent, permeating each other; they constitute unity through a mosaic. These traits can be linked symbolically with European identity being a collection of distinct nations and cultures, and unity in diversity.

On the other hand, the icotype of *Transform4Europe* (Figure 1) combines four equal squares with rounded corners. Three of them are green and arranged in a neat pattern; however, the fourth figure is blue and distorts the order by stepping outside the system. Such a measure may evoke a sense of uncertainty or lack of balance. Yet, a different set of connotations may be intended here, namely with innovativeness, which is often perceived as "thinking outside the box", as well as being original in pursuing new solutions and challenges. In this way, the name (with the verb transform) and the relatively dynamic visual choices of geometrical figuration mutually reinforce one another. This, according to multimodal critical discourse analysis may be a case of visual rhyming (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

A similar range of positive connotations with unity and innovation is expressed through other means of geometric iconography or compositions forming a centre with mostly symmetrical, emanating rays. This comprises 11% of the EUAs icotypes (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Selected European University Alliances' logos with compositions forming a center with emanating rays (sources: ENHANCE, 2023; ATHENA: European University, 2023)

Yet, this iconography allows an even wider scope of associations than the closed shape of a circle or a square. Rays beaming out of one central point resemble centrifugal movement influencing the environment around. The icotype of *ENHANCE* (Figure 2) consists of rays of the same shape that are arranged in the form of a star, though the rays are rendered in black. The monochrome palette emphasizes unity and simplicity, suggesting that all segments work harmoniously together as a cohesive whole. The symbol of *INGENIUM* (2023) employs a similar approach, with various colourful elements radiating around a blank central space, in contrast to the monochromatic design of the previous one. Such a choice may again refer to the notion of unity in diversity involving different yet highly compatible segments belonging together. The symbol of *INGENIUM* EUA utilizes a comparable strategy of similar colourful elements concentrated around one blank space centre. They may resemble tips of an arrow pointing to the same shared area. The subtle addition of two dots at the ends of some lines breaks the regular pattern, which can be interpreted in terms of possibilities for individuals separating and engaging in new challenges. The icotype of *Athena* has a symmetrically located centre with seven outgoing rays (for the seven initial universities), becoming thicker at the ends. The core association established here is that of the equal status and united character of the members "brought together". Such patterns include a stable centre from which something flows or radiates, so openness and dynamism are expressed better than through circles. Also in such a way the influence of EUAs over the academic and public sphere may be conveyed strategically to emphasize the transformational power of these new alliances for stronger European research and education.

Some EUAs involve agricultural universities or have strong life sciences profiles. The iconographic element used in the logos of such alliances is the leaf (11% in this sample), thus encapsulating a connection to nature and the efforts towards greener future.

Leaves also evoke concepts of interconnectedness, as they are part of larger ecosystems, similarly to EUAs that are to mobilize various social actors. The arrangements of the leaves (in the form of tinted circle, juxtaposed, or with an inscribed vector) indicate linkage to other core values, such as unity and progress. The colour green, inherently linked to leaves, performs the rhetorical role a visual rhyme in the cases of *UNIGreen* (2023) and *EU GREEN* Alliance (2023), and is intended to amplify and emphasize the textual dimension of the logo (Javaid Jamil & Imtiaz Asif, 2023). Additionally, the notion of sustainability, understood as "the continuous co-existence of human societies and nature" (Schunz, 2022, p. 2), is one of the key aims of the EU (European Commission: European Education Area, 2023). Hence, the elements sourced

from nature may be incorporated as important features upon which some of the alliances construct their mission, activities, and identity. After all, EU positions itself as a leader in green transition, thus channelling its scientific efforts to this end.

Other significant elements occurring in the logos involve flags or shield elements, and most notably, yellow stars, which index the flag of the EU (9%). Through the star symbol the direct bond between an alliance and EU is established visually, while star constellations may also be a good pictorial metaphor for groups of allied universities. According to multimodal critical discourse analysis, the use of universal icons enhances resonance and acceptance of promoted values, such as international collaboration in this case.

The European dimension and geographic balance of some EUAs are emphasized in the logos that use the silhouette of the European continent (in 2 cases) and place the locations of allied universities on the map, as in the case of *FORTHEM* (Figure 3). Moreover, this iconographic element has been often used in the design of the main pages (9%), embedding member universities in the geographical context. In essence, the logos and infographics representing Europe highlight alliances' commitments to fostering collaboration within the fragmented European academic landscape and constitute a visual symbol of their collective aspirations, and shared values, shown to be transcending geopolitical and historical divisions.

Colours, which carry a significant load of connotations, are strategically used both in icotypes and logotypes. Blue is a dominant component in a number of logos (75%). It is widely used in the corporate context as well as in international and institutional identifiers. Furthermore, it seems to be a natural choice in the visual language for any organization co-funded by EU. As far as the number of colours in logos is concerned, there are two most common trends: logos designed with the use of 1–2 colours (41%) and those where 5 and more hues are applied (25%). While the former choice may project connotations with a solid, monolithic body, the latter one might emphasize diversity of various components combined into one aesthetic composition. Another identified design choice is a colour gradient deployed to both icotypes and logotypes (18%) as in the case of *FORTHEM* (Figure 3). It creates a visual effect of transitioning from one colour to another, which can imply change and dynamism, serving as a tool for symbolic expression of such European values as innovation, and commitment to “thinking forward”.

Typography, or arrangement and design of letterforms, can be considered as another crucial semiotic resource applied in logotypes (Järlehed & Jaworski, 2015; Lelis et al., 2022). Specific visual choices regarding lettering add a layer of meaning to words, influencing how the message is perceived by the audience through connotations that accrue to specific printing traditions in every culture. In recent years, corporate-driven standardization of typefaces has been noticed in European print media (Kupferschmid, 2015). The process



Figure 3. Selected European University Alliances' logos with an iconographic element – European continent (source: FORTHEM, 2023)

of homogenization of digital typography is attributed to readability requirements, which is achieved through deleting additional decorative elements in the letterforms, as evidenced by the rise of sans-serif fonts. It is also the case with typography applied in EUAs where 93% of all logotypes use sans-serif typefaces. These fonts, according to multimodal critical discourse analysis (van Leeuwen, 2006), may connote innovation, accessibility and “moving forward” through their lighter minimalistic design.

Machin (2007) provides a complex inventory of meaning potentials realized through typographical features, including weight, height, and size. Weight refers to the salience of a font and is realized in the range from thin to bold. Bolding (in 43% of EUA logotypes), which is conventionally used to increase prominence in text, also underlines importance and authority of textual claims, making them assertive or substantial (Ledin & Machin, 2018, pp. 77–78). As far as height and size of letters is concerned, 50% of EUAs’ names are in capital letters only (Figure 2). These measures in multimodal critical discourse analysis are usually intended to project solidity and durability, despite the fact that alliances have been relatively loose coalitions of universities whose collaboration has not yet been institutionalized. The use of capital letters (especially when bolded) in this context may also be intended to underline the magnitude and significance of the endeavor, or its uniqueness. Meanwhile, 41% of logotypes apply both capitals and lowercase letters, or other mixed combinations, making them look more flexible, creative, or modern (cf. *FORTHEM* in Figure 3). These typographical choices help to communicate strategically the identities and values a given alliance wishes to foreground.

3.3. Analysis of accompanying imagery

As mentioned above, the sample also includes 120 photographs and graphics retrieved from alliances’ websites. Intangible concepts and values mentioned in the EUAs’ missions and statements, such as innovation, or transnational and interdisciplinary cooperation are diffuse and may be variously depicted visually. Hence, through the analysis of visual choices in institutional self-representation, one can uncover which symbolic and axiological meanings are to be projected (Wu & Yin Mei Cheong, 2022). The focus here is on photogenic choices for representative depictions of people or academic settings and on conceptual *versus* narrative imagery.

The photographs from the EUAs’ websites representing people can be divided into two categories: generic stock pictures and actual photographs of students, researchers or administrative staff. Stock photos are often “decontextualized” (Frosh, 2002), which means that the background is deleted or blurred to represent types of situations, not individual encounters, occasions or locations. The pictures are then more amenable to be fitting various contexts and fall into the “conceptual” category. They serve mainly to evoke positive sentiment by inserting human actors into a cultural category of academia on the website and presenting the ideal type of students, e.g., smiling or happy to be engaged in a joint activity. In addition, “collectivization”, according to multimodal critical discourse analysis research (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 58) catalyzes the transformation of a group of persons, backgrounding their individual characteristics and blending them into a generic type of constantly busy students.

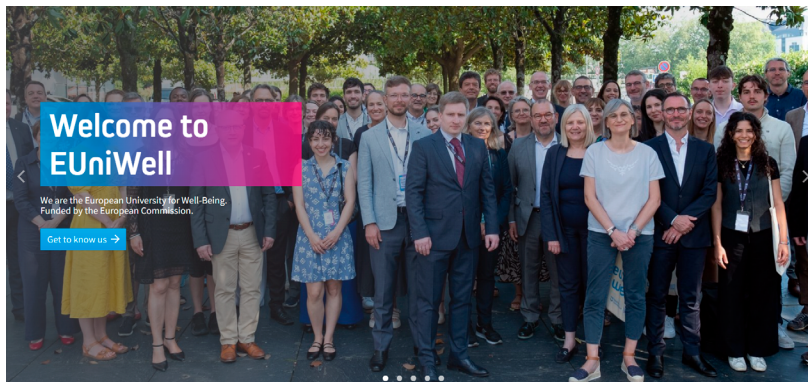


Figure 4. A typical example of a static image featuring collective human actors in long shot (source: EUniWell: European University for Well-Being, 2023)

Long shot photographs representing large groups of people also can be noticed on some websites (27%). Here, collectives responsible for collaborating within the EUA, made of various age and gender groups, are represented conceptually. This depiction effectively captures the essence of the initiative by portraying a united yet diverse group, with little hierarchy and specialization. Looking in the same direction emphasizes the shared goals that drive their cooperative efforts. The long-shot images may also serve to communicate visually the scale and inclusivity, illustrating the validation of European academic partnerships (Figure 4).

Another distinctive group of photographs consists of narrative images, which, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, p. 59), represents visual processes where the participants are shown to be engaging in actions and events, or undergoing change against the backdrop of spatial arrangement.

The sampled photographs (17%) show participants performing an action, often made dynamic through a “vector” of gaze, linking them in a recognizable and relatable activity in an academic setting. The majority of such photographs deploy close-ups, which serves as a tool for “individualization”, focusing on particular actors and rendering them more salient and representative. Again, various genders and ages are presented (though not race), indicating EUAs’ focus on diversity, which can be seen as a reference to chief European values – inclusion and equality of opportunities. This visual representation aligns with the broader objectives of the EUI to promote an inclusive and equitable academic environment. By depicting unfolding actions and interactions, these narrative photographs convey the dynamic nature of academic collaboration within the EUA. In a critical vein of multimodal critical discourse analysis, it must be admitted though, that some of the images represent stock photography (Frosh, 2002) and may reproduce some stereotypes of academia.

Yet another identified class of photographs represents landscapes and buildings (11%). They are frequently juxtaposed with photographs of people (both conceptual and narrative) in the form of cascading slides, serving as a complementary element representing the wide range of alliance functions and engagements. Such highly aestheticized photographs with low modality (Figure 5) help to present EUAs as impactful institutional agents acting in and for the surrounding environments (both urban and natural), which emphasizes their influence



Figure 5. A typical example of low modality images featuring settings (source: EUniWell: European University for Well-Being, 2023)

on social and natural spheres. Moreover, the classical buildings and modern infrastructures of particular partnering universities underline the academic tradition and excellence, which many alliances intend to be associated with.

3.4. Analysis of lexical patters and framing effects

The naming strategy is the fundamental factor for institutions to construct their identity and credibility, going beyond mere denotation and embedding them in the socio-cultural net of desirable associations. In this study, the 44 EUAs' naming patterns used in logos are typologized. In contrast to individual universities, which often use geographical location in their names, this is not an applicable strategy for geographically dispersed alliances. The two major patterns represent (1) acronyms and (2) proper names.

Acronyms seem to be a straightforward device for the alliances, which apply (1a) simple abbreviations of long and descriptive names (*e.g.*, ERUA for European Reform University Alliance; EC2U for European Campus of City-Universities). Another distinctive subtype of acronyms involves the original use of (1b) double meanings, with another layer of nuance to them (*e.g.*, FORTHEM for Fostering Outreach within European Regions, Transnational Higher Education and Mobility, but also "for them"; CHARM-EU for Challenge-Driven, Accessible, Research-Based, Mobile European University, but also "charm you"). The final subset of acronyms deploys (1c) homophony (*e.g.*, 4EU+, EU4DUAL). This measure draws on Internet-based communication, where the sound of a word is visually realized through a number or a letter (as for instance CU for "see you"). Such a device, when used in the EUA's logo, indicates the innovative, youth-oriented or technology-savvy character of the institution. Through acronyms, alliances' identities, which often inscribe their European character and promoted values of transnational collaboration in academia, are shortened to catchy, memorable phrases.

The second main naming pattern relies on the use of proper names. It can be illustrated by the names of (2a) Latin and Greek origin (*e.g.*, *Aurora*, *Athena*, *Ulysses*, *Epicur*). Such monikers draw on ancient mythology and culture, which both constitute the common roots and the basis of European academia. This is also foregrounded in the Latin words *CIVIS*, which can be translated as "citizen", and *CIVICA* ("civil") or *EU-CONEXUS* ("linked"). The other identified subtype consists of (2b) names that have their equivalents in English. However, in contrast to the previous subgroup of Latin nouns and modifiers, English words referenced here are mostly verbs in the imperative mood with positive sentiment (*e.g.*, *ENLIGHT*, *INVENT*,

Table 1. Frequency of keywords in self-descriptions (from “who we are”/“about us” webpages) (source: created by authors)

Rank	Word	Frequency (at least one occurrence in the alliance's website)	Percentage of websites where a word occurs (44 = 100%)
1.	Innovation/tive	18	40%
–	Research	18	40%
2.	Inclusive/sion	11	27.5%
3.	Academic	10	23%
4.	High/top quality	8	18%
–	Open/ness	8	18%
–	Social	8	18%
–	Inter/multi-disciplinary	8	18%
5.	Diverse/ity	6	13.5%
–	Inter/multi-cultural	6	13.5%
–	Integrated	6	13.5%
–	Responsible	6	13.5%
–	Sustainable/ility	6	13.5%
6.	International	5	11%
7.	Enhance	4	9%
–	Knowledge	4	9%
–	Human	4	9%

ENHANCE, ENGAGE.EU). These words denote actions through which a certain desirable goal is achieved and all of them directly point to the EHEA and its values (education, innovation, research and collaboration, respectively).

To better understand the interplay of visual and textual dimensions deployed in the process of EUAs' identity construction, the frequency list of keywords in self-descriptions is presented below (Table 1). The main point in analyzing the most common words in the self-descriptive sections is to see which European values are referenced the most.

Institutions partaking in the EUI self-describe with a specific set of lexical items, highlighting the integrative and yet competitive character of the project. This constitutes a few semantic fields which closely correspond to EU values. The most frequent keywords (“innovation/tive”, “research”) used in the self-descriptions show both the congruence with corporate language and the compliance with the core assumptions of EUI. The core mission of fostering academic progress is expressed by all EUAs, which relatively similarly frame their objectives, highlighting the values of “quality” and “openness”. The self-professed impact of EUAs' actions and their credibility is reinforced by modifiers (e.g., “responsible”, “sustainable”), while the sensitivity to social issues is reinforced via words to do with “inclusive/sion” and “diverse/ity”. Hence, the EUAs' mission is lexically framed as a drive towards solving social and environmental challenges that Europe faces. Needless to say, the textual dimension of the analysed websites is echoed through a wide range of semiotic choices in logos and photographs focused on evoking positive sentiments.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This analysis has found some salient patterns of visual and discursive self-representation of EUAs. A strategic use of colours and typography in logos has been confirmed, with the blue colour dominating, despite a significant number of multi-coloured logos, and the pre-eminence of sans-serif, bolded fonts and capitalization. As for iconicity, EUAs' logos draw on geometrical, circular shapes and mostly symmetrical compositions with recurring uses of such iconographic elements as leaves, stars, and maps. The main patterns of representation in photos include:

- human figures, rather diversely representing age groups and genders (though not races);
- long-shots of collectives of EUA representatives standing together (conceptual pictures);
- close-ups on individuals performing research/study-related actions and expressing positive emotions throughout (narrative pictures);
- classical buildings and modern infrastructure as a significant part of academic identity.

The typology of alliances' names reveals a propensity for acronyms and proper names derived from Latin and Greek (nouns or adjectives) and English (verbs in the imperative). The lexical analysis of keywords, in turn, highlights how the corresponding terminology in self-descriptions helps to frame EUAs missions and objectives as closely tied to the aims and rationale of the EU (Doğan, 2014). They are to be the beacons of "innovativeness", "inclusivity", "openness", "multidisciplinarity", and higher "quality" of academic outputs, even though European research and education sector has not always been traditionally associated with these qualities (Keeling, 2006), and EU-based universities often lag behind American, Asian, and British universities in world rankings.

The implications of this illustrative case for the awareness of ideological and creative inventories arise from applying multimodal critical discourse analysis even to relatively mundane visual input (Fairclough, 2003; Machin, 2007). The lexical framings of EUAs' collective identities in the mission statements endorse the EU's academic and educational ideologies (Dan & Arendt, 2021; Morrissey, 2013). In terms of this discursive practice, the studied multimodal ensembles offer insights as to the details of creative professional production and engineered reception of transnational academic identity and values in Europe (Fürst et al., 2022).

Regarding recommendations on the production side, the content, composition, and style of multimodal ensembles are likely to be chosen to induce a specific pro-European attitude. In self-promotional identification, the imagery is creatively used to engender desired positive response to EU. The alliances are shown championing apparent unity, seamless collaboration, harmony and balance, inclusion and commonality of purpose. As images can be selected and designed compositionally and aesthetically in advance (Messaris, 2012), well-known symbols, European colours, academic settings, research infrastructures, and professional poses of academic actors are shown not only to enhance ethos but also to produce connotations related to value, agency or competence. Individual and collective human-centered narratives of EUAs establishment and progress make use of visual representations of international academic communities transgressing political, historical and geographical boundaries to reach a higher level of academic excellence and European integration.

Regarding recommendations on the reception side, generating specific emotional responses and engagements can happen with relatively generic, conventionalized imagery

characterizing the values of academia and “Europeanness”. Abstract but positive connotations with academic innovativeness and internationalization can be invoked visually and can be made to resonate with mission statements (cf. Machin, 2007 on decontextualization, or Dan, Arendt 2021 on the ideological role of backdrop cues). European cultural symbols or professional cues, such as shields, emblems, professional outfits, objects and settings indexing academia, constitute pictorial schemas (both conceptual and narrative) that EUAs draw from and resemiotize through the accumulation and refinement of stock imaginaries (Iedema, 2001).

This study fills an important research gap in analyzing the actual emergence of EUAs with new – federated and aligned – academic institutional identities. The strategies employed by the EUAs clearly show the potential of resonant naming and logotype schemes that encapsulate the added value of “alliances” and “Europeanness” within academic visual identity. The values promoted by the EUAs in the description of their missions are reflected by the visual symbols. The tendency towards professionalization of academic marketing and branding practices of higher education institutions, including EUAs, seems to be a preferred choice for institutions having to compete in the globalized and marketized world (Erjansola et al., 2021). Professionally designed academic visual identity influences public perception and embeds the alliances within the socio-economic and educational landscape that serves to legitimize their presence and actions, while attracting a wide range of stakeholders. The trend of academic branding in European higher education is a potent instrument that offers numerous opportunities for research organizations to become visible in an increasingly complex and fragmented landscape. Yet, the corporate style of academic visual identity practices may become a threat for value-driven institutions such as EUAs, due to a homogenization of respective brand images and the compliant adoption of conventionalized visual elements and discursive strategies (Breeze, 2013; Borgerson & Schroeder, 2005). This risks turning academia into a standardized imaginary of semiotic and discursive products that are easily marketed, but that are not capable of redeeming their cultural value (Kupferschmid, 2015; Ledin & Machin, 2016). With over 60 alliances as of 2024 that involve almost a thousand institutions of higher education – from research intensive universities to provincial colleges, from top technological innovators to art schools, from city-based institutions to marine or medical faculties – Europe badly needs to overcome the fragmentation of its higher education and become a common European “knowledge market” (Molek-Kozakowska, 2024).

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