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Luxury Branding for MBA programmes: A Study of Executive Education in the United Kingdom

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Luxury Branding for MBA programmes: A Study of Executive Education in the United Kingdom

Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores the antecedents of luxury branding for Executive MBA programmes delivered at Business Schools in the United Kingdom. We detail the factors and precedents that are fundamental to designing luxury branded MBA programmes and present a mapping tool designed to assist MBA Programme Directors in leveraging these antecedents to transition their programmes into the luxury branding domain. The strategic insights provided can inform both academic leaders and marketers seeking to elevate their institutions’ standing in a competitive market.

Design/Methodology/Approach

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to examine the luxury branding of Executive MBA programmes. The methodology involved a review of theoretical frameworks relating to luxury branding within the higher education landscape. Additionally, a systematic content analysis was conducted on the official websites of the top 10 UK business schools, focusing on their branding strategies and programme offerings.

Findings

Our research provides a strategic application of luxury branding in Executive MBA programmes at elite UK business schools, highlighting a clear pathway to incorporating exclusivity, prestige, and heritage. Our research finds that there is a balance to be struck between luxury branding’s allure and the educational mission, emphasizing the importance of aligning luxury attributes with inclusivity and educational integrity. This balance is pivotal in attracting top-tier students and maintaining programme prestige. The paper contributes to the discourse on luxury branding in education, offering insights for academic leaders on leveraging luxury branding to enhance competitive positioning while navigating the challenges of integrating such strategies within the educational sector.

Originality/value

Our research is the first to explore the antecedents of luxury branding at elite Business Schools in the United Kingdom and the first to present a mapping tool for Executive MBA providers who seek to develop their current MBA programmes to compete with elite providers.

Keywords: Luxury branding, MBA, Business schools

1.0 Introduction

Luxury branding has traditionally been associated with high-end products and services in industries such as fashion, jewelry, cars, and hospitality (Wang, 2022). However, the principles and strategies of luxury branding can be applied to other domains, including education (Chapleo, 2011). In the highly competitive landscape of business schools, where institutions strive to attract top-tier students and cultivate a compelling reputation, luxury branding can offer a unique and effective approach to product differentiation and product positioning. The need to offer a unique Business School offering is particularly relevant in the context of post-pandemic higher education, where institutions face pressures to adapt and innovate to meet changing student expectations and market conditions. While this study focuses on the UK, similar trends are emerging in Asia, where markets such as China and India show a rising interest in luxury branding in executive education (Bhatt & Roy, 2022). These markets provide fertile ground for applying the findings of this study, as both regions share competitive pressures and aspirations for elite educational offerings. This paper examines the antecedents, opportunities and implications of luxury branding for business schools, with a specific focus on top-ranked Executive MBA programmes in the United Kingdom. Our research addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1) - How can the principles and strategies of luxury branding, be effectively applied to the domain of education, specifically in the context of Executive MBA programmes at top-ranked business schools in the United Kingdom?

Research Question 2 (RQ2) - What are the opportunities and challenges for business schools in the UK in adopting luxury branding strategies for their Executive MBA programmes?

We provide strategic insights to assist business schools in leveraging luxury branding to enhance their market position, balancing exclusivity with educational integrity.

2.0 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Recent studies have highlighted the growing application of luxury branding principles in the education sector. For instance, Nguyen and Luk (2023) propose a framework for applying luxury branding to global executive education, emphasizing the importance of exclusivity and prestige in attracting high-calibre students. Similarly, Bhatt and Roy (2022) explore how luxury branding strategies can be adapted to meet the expectations of affluent students in emerging markets such as India and China. These studies provide a strong foundation for understanding how luxury branding can enhance the competitive positioning of MBA programmes.

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of luxury branding, as articulated by Kapferer and Bastien (2012), who emphasize the importance of exclusivity, prestige, and heritage in creating a luxury brand identity. These principles are adapted to the context of Executive MBA programmes, where exclusivity is achieved through selective admissions, prestige is reinforced by high-quality faculty and alumni success, and heritage is reflected in the institution's long-standing reputation for academic excellence. This framework provides a lens through which to examine how luxury branding can be effectively applied to MBA programmes in the UK.

2.1 Characteristics of Luxury branding

Keller (2008) observed that Luxury branding involves establishing a brand image associated with opulence, rarity, and an elevated consumer experience. The author further observed that Luxury branding is characterized by meticulous attention to craftsmanship, high-quality materials, and a focus on creating a unique and aspirational identity that resonates with consumers seeking distinction and status. Similarly, Kapferer (2012) described Luxury branding as a strategic process of creating, developing, and maintaining a brand that conveys exclusivity, superior quality, and a premium status in the market. Vigneron and Johnson (2023) extend this understanding to the education sector, highlighting how luxury brands adapt their strategies to include intangible services, such as those offered by elite educational programmes. This adaptation is crucial in maintaining perceived brand value while addressing the evolving expectations of luxury consumers. This suggests that luxury branding must balance traditional markers of exclusivity with the need to offer premium experiences in service-based industries like education. Luxury brands often go beyond functional attributes to evoke emotions, aspirations, and a sense of prestige, targeting a select and discerning consumer segment.

For many, Luxury branding is often associated with tangible products and our understanding of the attributes of Luxury branding tends to be related to the physicality of a product. In their extensive review of the challenges associated with Luxury Branding, Kapferer and Bastien, (2009) included a definition by De Barnier et al. (2012) which consisted of seven factors - 1 Elitism (very few people can buy it; it is very expensive); 2 Creativity (it is magical, very creative; high craftsmanship); 3 Uniqueness (rare; unique); 4 Distinction (for refined people; it shows who one is); 5 Refinement (attractive, dazzling); 6 Quality (superior; top quality), and 7 Power (known, leading brand).

Furthermore, exclusivity is often another hallmark of tangible products, achieved through limited production or unique design elements, thereby creating a sense of rarity and desirability (Okonkwo, 2007). Hagtvedt and Patrick (2022) further argue that in the context of services, such as Executive MBA programmes, personalised experiences and high-quality service delivery are critical for maintaining a luxury positioning. This focus on delivering an exceptional service experience aligns well with the traditional elements of luxury, while also adapting to the demands of a service-dominated market. The aesthetic appeal and distinct design language of luxury products also play a key role in contributing to the brand's identity and consumer perception (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, luxury brands often imbue their products with a rich heritage and storytelling, offering a narrative that resonates with the consumers' desire for history and tradition (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008). These characteristics collectively foster an emotional connection, transcending the functional aspects and positioning luxury products in a realm of symbolic and experiential value (Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Siebels, 2009).

2.2 Luxury branding of Services

The notion of luxury branding extends beyond tangible products, with an increasing focus on intangible services that deliver exceptional experiences (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Academics claim that superior craftsmanship and attention to detail contribute to the perception of exclusivity in luxury services (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Xu & Sun (2023) emphasize that for executive education programmes, the strategic use of exclusivity and prestige in branding can significantly enhance perceived value. This is achieved through branding strategies that highlight premium service experiences and selective admissions, thereby reinforcing the differentiation of these programmes in competitive markets. The insights of Xu & Sun (ibid.) align with the traditional principles of luxury branding while adapting these principles to the unique characteristics of service-based brands like Executive MBA programmes. In addition, Founder & Mick (1999) found that Personalization of services is a key strategy to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Innovation plays a crucial role in luxury service branding, with innovative technology and collaborations enhancing brand credibility (Dubois & Paternault, 1995; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008). The pricing strategy in the luxury service sector often involves a premium to reflect the exclusivity and superior value associated with the brand (Solomon & Schewe, 1999), whilst consistency in branding across various touchpoints is essential for a seamless customer experience (Kapferer, 2012). After-sales service has emerged as a critical aspect of luxury branding for the service sector, contributing significantly to customer satisfaction and enduring brand loyalty (Fournier & Mick, 1999). As environmental and social responsibility gain prominence amongst consumers with high disposable income, luxury brands in the service sector recognize the need to address these concerns to maintain a positive brand image (Wiedmann et al., 2009).

2.3 Luxury branding in Education

MBA programmes are regarded as the flagship executive programme of Business Schools and are influential in determining the ranking of the school (Harland, 2023). Sun (2022) explored elite Universities as Luxury Brands in the USA and found that elite universities delivering executive education programmes achieve [brand] exclusivity through high quality teaching, ultra-competitive admissions processes (with less than 5% of all applications resulting in a place at an elite university), high rates of tuition, excellent facilities, access to highly compensated jobs upon graduation, and the acquisition of prestige and social status via conspicuous consumption. Nguyen and Luk (2023) build on this by proposing a framework that applies luxury branding principles to global executive education, suggesting that aligning brand prestige with exclusivity is key to maintaining a competitive advantage. Their research indicates that these elements are vital for attracting high-calibre students and differentiating programmes in a crowded marketplace.

The application of luxury branding principles to Executive MBA programmes is an emerging area of interest within academic research, blending the domains of higher education marketing and luxury brand management. In this regard, Nueno and Quelch (1998) were among the first researchers to recognize the potential of applying luxury marketing principles to educational services, observing that the allure of exclusivity and prestige could be leveraged by Business Schools. Bhatt and Roy (2022) further extend this perspective through a comparative study of luxury branding strategies across different regions, offering insights into how global competition shapes the branding of Executive MBA programmes in diverse cultural contexts. This regional comparison highlights how branding strategies can adapt to meet varying expectations of luxury education across markets.

Kapferer and Bastien (2012) underscoring the importance of creating a unique brand identity for MBA programmes, which involves cultivating an aura of exclusivity, where limited accessibility and a high price point are synonymous with desirability (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). In addition to exclusivity, the concept of heritage and tradition, often integral to luxury brands, has been identified as a key factor in branding MBA programmes (Okonkwo, 2007). The association with a long-standing history of academic excellence can enhance the perceived value of an MBA programme, akin to the heritage value in luxury goods (Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008). More recently, Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Siebels (2023) add that the evolving perceptions of luxury among premium consumers, including prospective MBA students, necessitate a focus on emotional engagement through storytelling. This approach not only maintains the aspirational appeal of luxury-branded educational experiences but also aligns with the contemporary expectations of discerning students. Furthermore, the role of storytelling and emotional connection, pivotal in luxury branding, is equally relevant in the context of MBA programmes. As Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Siebels (2009) observed, creating a compelling narrative around the programme can foster a deeper emotional engagement with potential students, thereby enhancing the perceived value and exclusivity of the educational experience.

However, the application of luxury branding principles in higher education, and, more specifically, in Business Schools, also presents challenges. As Vigneron and Johnson (2004) state, balancing the exclusivity inherent to luxury branding with the accessibility and inclusivity goals of educational institutions is complex. The challenge lies specifically in ensuring that the luxury branding of MBA programmes does not detract from their educational mission and remains aligned with the values of academia (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). In addition, Temple (2011) observed that the brand identity of a university, including its MBA programmes, must align with its core values and mission. This alignment, according to Jevons (2006) is crucial to maintaining authenticity, a key element in both luxury branding and university branding.

2.4 The service concept and Luxury Branding

A key tool in luxury education is the Service Concept, which Johnston and Clark (2008:97) define as 'a shared and articulated understanding of the essential nature of the service provided and received.' In exclusive education, it extends beyond teaching to personalized learning, faculty engagement, and a supportive environment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Lovelock and Gummesson (2004) argue that customer experience and perceived value are central in services like education, prompting elite institutions to focus on academic rigor and leadership skill development (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). This aligns with the service-dominant logic, emphasizing co-creation of value with students rather than simply delivering a service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Grönroos (2007) highlights the role of interactive relationships in creating value, while Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2006) advocate for a premium learning experience tailored to discerning students.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Luxury branding in executive education is shaped by theories on exclusivity, prestige, and service differentiation. This study integrates insights from luxury branding, service management, and strategic brand positioning to examine how business schools apply these principles. Luxury branding theory (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012) emphasizes exclusivity, superior quality, and strong brand identity, reinforcing prestige and consumer loyalty. In higher education, business schools achieve this through elite positioning, selective admissions, premium pricing, and global recognition to differentiate themselves in a competitive market. Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) shifts branding from a product-based approach to value co-creation between institutions and stakeholders. In executive education, alumni engagement, corporate partnerships, and networking enhance prestige. Similarly, service experience frameworks (Johnston & Clark, 2008) highlight personalization, exclusivity, and engagement, suggesting that EMBA value is shaped by tailored learning, faculty reputation, and global exposure. Luxury branding must also account for sustainability and corporate responsibility. While exclusivity is a defining feature, ethical leadership and transparency are increasingly vital (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Business schools must balance these elements to adapt luxury branding strategies to modern expectations. This framework provides a structured approach to understanding how EMBA

programmes establish brand positioning, maintain exclusivity, and navigate emerging challenges in executive education.

3.0 Methods

Our study examines the antecedents of luxury branding in Executive MBA programmes, analyzing factors that shape luxury brand identity in education. Focusing on the top 10 UK business schools, we derive insights relevant to both the UK and global luxury branding trends.

Research Questions:

How can luxury branding principles be applied to Executive MBA programmes?

What are the opportunities and challenges for UK business schools in adopting luxury branding?

To address these questions, we conduct a critical review of secondary data, capturing the strategic branding messages schools publicly communicate. Data sources include:

Business School Websites – Examining curriculum, admissions, faculty, and branding strategies (Smith & Jones, 2015).

Published Rankings – Reviewing external evaluations on reputation, alumni satisfaction, and performance metrics (Financial Times, 2022).

Marketing Materials – Analyzing brochures, prospectuses, and promotional content to understand branding strategies.

This method ensures a realistic assessment of how institutions position their Executive MBA programmes within the luxury branding domain.

3.1 Data Analysis

To identify the key themes associated with luxury branding in Executive MBA programmes, we conducted a systematic content analysis of the official websites of the top 10 UK business schools. This involved coding the content for recurring themes related to luxury branding, such as exclusivity, prestige, heritage, and personalized learning experiences. The coding process was guided by the theoretical framework of luxury branding, as outlined by Kapferer and Bastien (2012). The resulting themes were then cross-referenced with the literature to ensure alignment with existing research on luxury branding in education.

The analysis revealed ten major themes, as illustrated in Figure 1, which include exclusivity, prestige, heritage, personalized learning, and global networking opportunities. These themes were derived from a combination of textual analysis and visual branding elements present on the business school websites. The findings were further validated by cross-referencing them with the

Financial Times ranking criteria, which emphasize outcomes such as salary increases, career progression, and international diversity.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Our research follows ethical guidelines, ensuring the responsible use of publicly available secondary data while respecting data creators' intent (Brown & Miller, 2016). Secondary data offers efficiency and depth, with business school websites, rankings, and marketing materials providing valuable insights into UK Executive MBA programmes. However, limitations include potential biases, data constraints, and reliability concerns. Our methodology aims to mitigate these challenges while contributing meaningful insights.

4.0 Findings

This section brings together findings from an analysis of secondary data, detailing the blend of luxury branding principles applied to Executive MBA programs at leading UK business schools. These insights, drawing on the foundational works of scholars like Nicholls et al. (1995), Harland (2023), and Sun (2022), are used to illustrate how elite educational institutions embed luxury branding elements into their strategic frameworks and operational tactics.

For instance, the emphasis on exclusivity through competitive admissions aligns with findings by Xu and Sun (2023), who note that selective entry requirements can enhance the perceived prestige of educational programmes. This exploration aligns with key academic discourses in luxury branding as detailed by Nueno and Quelch (1998), Kapferer and Bastien (2012), and Vigneron and Johnson (2004), who between them, offer an insightful understanding of how exclusivity, prestige, and heritage underpin luxury branding in the Executive MBA market in the United Kingdom.

4.1 MBA Ranking

The Financial Times ranking factors, as detailed in Table 1, provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating the quality and prestige of Executive MBA programmes. These factors, such as alumni salary increases, career progression, and international diversity, are closely aligned with the principles of luxury branding. For instance, the emphasis on high alumni salaries and career advancement reflects the exclusivity and prestige associated with luxury brands.

Table 1 Financial Times Ranking factors of Executive MBA programmes

Ranking factor	Weighting of factor (%)	Description of ranking factor
Current salary	16	Average alumni salary three years after course completion
Salary increase	17	Average difference in alumni salaries pre-EMBA and current
Career progression	6	Changes in seniority and company size post-EMBA
Work experience	5	Pre-EMBA experience based on seniority, years, and more
Aims achieved	6	Extent to which alumni fulfilled their EMBA goals
Female faculty	5	Percentage of full-time female faculty
Female students	5	Percentage of female students in the program
Women on board members	1	Percentage of female advisory board members
International faculty	5	Diversity of faculty by citizenship and location
International students	6	Percentage of EMBA students with citizenship differing from location
International board	1	Percentage of board members with citizenship differing from location
International course experience	5	Percentage of classroom teaching hours conducted outside the school's location
Faculty with Doctorates	5	Percentage of full-time faculty with a doctoral degree
FT Research rank	10	Number of articles published by full-time faculty in recognized journals
ESG and Net Zero Teaching Rank	3	Proportion of teaching hours dedicated to ESG and net zero topics
Carbon Footprint Rank	4	Calculated using the university/school's net zero target year and availability
Overall Satisfaction	-	Average course evaluation by EMBA alumni (scored out of 10)
FT Ranking Tier	-	Schools divided into four groups (Tier I to Tier IV)

Reviewing the Financial Times ranking criteria sheds light on the complexity of evaluating MBA programmes, where academic quality, career improvement, and diversity are key. These criteria not only help rank the programmes but also guide business schools in adding luxury branding elements to their offerings. The emphasis on outcomes such as salary improvement and career progression, alongside the diversity and quality of the educational experience, mirrors the attributes valued in luxury brands: superior quality, exclusivity, and a rich history.

Following the Financial Times' ranking criteria, the top 10 Executive MBA programmes in the UK using the ranking criteria detailed in Table 1 are present below (Table 2).

Table 2 - FT Ranking of the Top 10 Executive MBA programmes in the UK

Rank	UK Business School
1	Saïd Business School, Oxford
2	London Business School
3	Warwick Business School
4	Imperial College Business School
5	Judge Business School, Cambridge
6	Henley Business School
7	Bayes Business School (formerly Cass)
8	Cranfield School of Management
9	Lancaster University Management School
10	University of Strathclyde Business School

Source: <https://rankings.ft.com/rankings/2963/executive-mba-2024>

The ranking of the top 10 Executive MBA programmes highlights how academic excellence merges with luxury branding. Schools like Saïd Business School, Oxford, and London Business School stand out as leaders in this area, offering programmes that blend rigorous academics with the exclusivity and heritage characteristic of luxury brands. This strategic positioning helps differentiate their programmes in a crowded market, aligning closely with the principles of luxury branding

4.2 Mission statement messaging of Luxury MBA programmes

Mission statements are a crucial element of how business schools communicate their values and objectives to potential students and stakeholders. They also reflect the school's commitment to luxury branding by highlighting aspects such as heritage, exclusivity, and a transformative educational experience. Table 3 details the mission statements from the leading UK business schools, revealing how they position themselves in the realm of luxury education.

Table 3 Mission statement messaging

Business School	Mission Statement
London Business School (LBS)	To profoundly impact the world by providing transformative education and producing influential research.
University of Oxford - Saïd Business School	To develop a new generation of business leaders and entrepreneurs who can create positive change in the world.
University of Cambridge - Judge Business School	To be a hub for innovative and forward-thinking business education, fostering leadership that makes a positive societal impact.
Imperial College Business School	To drive business advantage through the fusion of business and technology, producing leaders who can navigate the complexities of the modern world.
Cass Business School (City, University of London)	To empower and transform individuals and organizations through innovative, research-led business education
Warwick Business School	To produce global leaders who can make a positive impact on business and society through research-led, transformative education.
Manchester Business School (Alliance Manchester)	To create original thinkers and capable leaders who can drive change in business and society.
Cranfield School of Management	To transform knowledge into action, producing leaders who can address global challenges with practical, cutting-edge solutions.
Edinburgh Business School (Heriot-Watt University)	To provide accessible, high-quality education that transforms individuals and organizations globally.
University of Strathclyde Business School	To engage in research and education that prepares leaders to thrive in a fast-paced, ever-changing business environment.

The mission statements from the top ten UK business schools underline their ambition to not only provide luxury education but also provides insights to offer an experience that aligns with the exclusivity and prestige typical of luxury brands.

Phrases such as 'transformative education', 'positive change', and 'forward-thinking' underline a commitment to create a unique and aspirational environment. This emphasis on creating an impactful and exclusive educational journey mirrors the core principles of luxury branding.

4.3 Entry requirements for Luxury MBA programmes

Entry requirements serve as a gatekeeper for maintaining the exclusivity of executive education programmes, reflecting a key attribute of luxury brands (Wiedmann et al, 2009). By establishing exacting standards for admission, business schools ensure that their programmes remain desirable and exclusive. Table 4 details the entry requirements for the top 10 MBA programmes highlighting the balance they strike between accessibility and maintaining a high level of prestige.

Table 4 – Entry requirement for Luxury MBA programmes

Business School	Standardized Tests	English Proficiency	Academic requirement	Work experience	Fees*
London Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Strong academic record	2-5 years	£119,000
University of Cambridge: Judge Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Strong academic record	3-5 years	£88,900
University of Oxford: Saïd Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Strong academic record	3-5 years	£117,800
Imperial College Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good undergraduate degree	3-5 years	£63,400
Alliance Manchester Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good academic background	3-5 years	£44,000
Warwick Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good undergraduate degree	3-5 years	£50,900
Bayes Business School (Formerly Cass)	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good undergraduate degree	3-5 years	£55,700
Edinburgh Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Recognized first or second-class honors degree	2-5 years	£39,500
Cranfield Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good first degree	3-5 years	£27,000
University of Strathclyde Business School	GMAT or GRE	TOEFL or IELTS	Good undergraduate degree	2-5 years	£23,275

The entry requirements for these MBA programmes illustrate the schools' focus on attracting high-calibre candidates and maintaining the exclusivity that is synonymous with luxury branding. The requirements, including standardized tests, English proficiency, academic records, and work experience, set a high bar, ensuring that only the most qualified and committed students gain admission. This approach not only preserves the programme's prestige but also enhances the educational experience of students by fostering a community of high-achieving and highly motivated individuals.

4.4 Branding messages of Luxury MBA programmes

Branding messages are important when communicating the value proposition of an Executive MBA programme to prospective students. These messages often highlight the programme's exclusivity, innovative teaching methods, and the transformative impact on one's career, echoing luxury branding's focus on uniqueness and high value. The examination of branding messages detailed in Table 5 draws upon the insights of Fionda and Moore (2009) and Founder and Mick (1999), who highlighted the critical role of personalization, innovation, and premium pricing strategies in the luxury service sector.

Table 5 - EMBA Luxury Branding Messages

School	Luxury Branding messages
London Business School	Unleash your leadership potential with London Business School's (LBS) Executive MBA (EMBA). This transformative programme equips you with the business knowledge, leadership skills and networks to accelerate your career. Choose to take it in London or Dubai to suit your own plans.
University of Cambridge: Judge Business School	The Cambridge Executive MBA and Global Executive MBA – 20-month programmes for senior executives who want to apply their knowledge and skills as they learn
University of Oxford: Saïd Business School	An immersive learning experience enabling you to make immediate impact. The Oxford Executive MBA is a transformational programme, that will challenge you to explore the answers to complex business issues. Learn how to innovate, how to lead responsibly and how to navigate change to transform your own business practice.
Imperial College Business School	A first-class MBA preparing experienced professionals for executive leadership roles in a technology-driven world
Alliance Manchester Business School	Challenge yourself. Change direction. Transform your career.
Warwick Business School	Unlock powerful professional growth Gain the strategic leadership skills you need to make an immediate impact, maximize your board-level awareness, and step up to the C-suite with our Executive MBA. During your time with us and beyond, we will support and motivate you, as well as push, critique and challenge you to bring out your inner Change Maker.
Bayes Business School (Formerly Cass)	Prepare to progress Our Executive MBA is especially suitable if you are looking to progress in seniority, enhance your strategic leadership skills or prepare for c-suite level roles.
Durham University Business School	Your Pathway to advancing career and personal growth
Cranfield School of Management	The Cranfield Executive MBA in partnership with Grant Thornton combines the best of academic insight and commercial application. We will use this to help you develop your leadership and management skills with a specific focus on business growth and innovation.
Birmingham Business School	Get ready for the next step in your career. Whatever your sector, our Executive MBA will empower you to lead in the world of business. Flexible and practical, it is designed to fit perfectly around your life and work.

The branding messages from these luxury MBA programmes emphasize personalized growth, leadership potential, and strategic career transformation. By promising a bespoke educational journey that leverages innovation, leadership training, and global networking opportunities, these programmes echo the hallmarks of luxury branding—exclusivity, excellence, and transformative experiences.

Such messaging not only attracts individuals seeking to elevate their careers but also reinforces the programme's status as a luxury brand in the education sector.

5.0 Discussion

Our findings highlight both opportunities and challenges in attracting top-tier students while maintaining educational integrity. Our analysis extends Kapferer and Bastien’s (2012) framework, illustrating how business schools balance exclusivity and inclusivity to align with market demands and institutional missions. Luxury branding's relevance is also growing in Asian markets, where institutions in India and China could adapt UK strategies to appeal to affluent students (Wiedmann et al., 2023). This suggests cross-regional learning in the evolving global competition for prestige in executive education.

With regard to RQ1, our study confirms the role of exclusivity, prestige, and brand identity in Executive MBA branding, with selective admissions, premium pricing, and distinct programme positioning serving as key differentiators (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

In terms of RQ2, we identify both differentiation opportunities and access challenges. Business schools must balance exclusivity with accessibility, as Vigneron and Johnson (2004) emphasize. Risks include high tuition fees or restrictive admissions potentially deterring applicants. Our analysis of Financial Times rankings, mission statements, and branding strategies (Table 6) reveals alignment with core luxury branding elements, reinforcing the potential of this marketing approach.

Heritage and tradition also enhance perceived brand value (Okonkwo, 2007; Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008). Schools should leverage institutional legacy to strengthen brand prestige, akin to luxury goods. Additionally, personalization and emotional connection play a vital role in MBA branding, fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty (Fionda & Moore, 2009). This reflects innovative service provision, reinforcing value co-creation and student engagement (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2006). Luxury MBA programmes demand premium pricing, with the top seven averaging £77,000, reinforcing exclusivity and perceived value (Solomon & Schewe, 1999). Table 6 summarizes key luxury branding attributes in the Executive MBA market, serving as a strategic guide for business schools aiming to position themselves within this segment.

Table 6 The service concept for Luxury branded MBA programmes

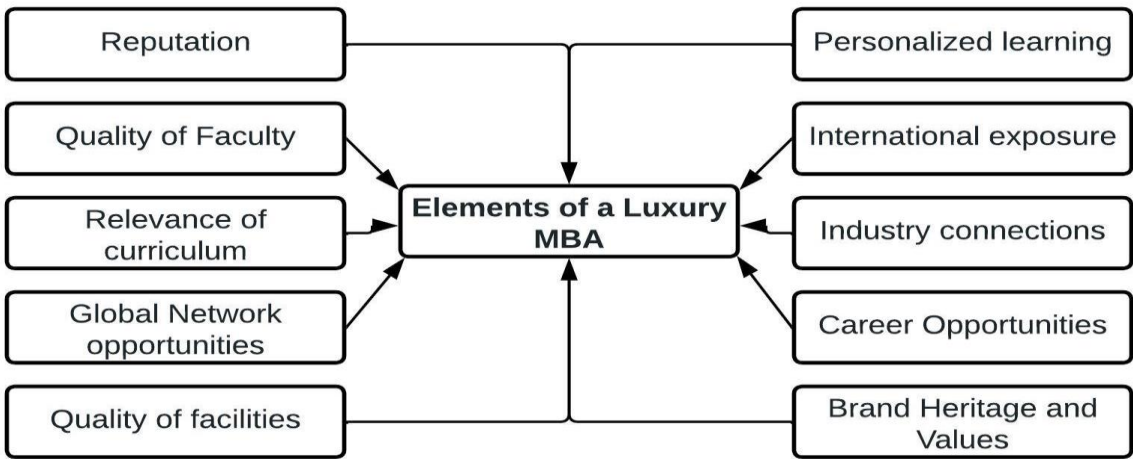
	Explanation	Example content
Programme title	Should reflect content and positioning of the MBA	Global Executive MBA
Organising idea	This should encapsulate the core purpose of the service and guide its overall direction. The organizing idea helps to align all aspects of the service with its strategic intent, ensuring consistency and clarity in how the service is perceived and delivered. It is about answering the "why" behind the service.	Cultivate world-class business leaders equipped to navigate and shape the future of global business, focusing on strategic thinking, leadership qualities, and understanding global market dynamics.
Service concept	The Service Concept details the nature of the service itself, outlining what the service is, who it is for, and how it differentiates from competitors. It is a comprehensive overview that includes the service's unique value proposition, target customer segments, and the key benefits it offers. This component serves as a bridge between the strategic vision of the service (organizing idea) and its operational execution (service provided and received).	A comprehensive, rigorous, and interactive learning experience designed to enhance business acumen, strategic leadership capabilities, and global perspective, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application.
Service provided	This outlines the specific elements of the service offering, including both the core and supplementary services. It describes what the service provider commits to deliver as part of the service experience. This can encompass tangible elements (like a physical product or a digital interface) and intangible elements (such as customer support or advisory services). The focus here is on the features and functionalities that constitute the service.	Curriculum blending core disciplines with elective courses for specialization, experiential learning opportunities, personalized career services, and access to a global alumni network.
Service to be received	This element focuses on the customer's perspective, detailing what customers experience and receive through their interaction with the service. It is about the outcomes and benefits for the customer, including how the service addresses their needs, solves their problems, or enhances their situation. Service received emphasizes the customer's perception of value and satisfaction derived from the service.	An immersive educational experience providing advanced business management and leadership knowledge, practical skills, personalized career guidance, and a lifelong professional network.
Customer experience	Customer Experience encompasses all aspects of a customer's interaction with the service, from initial awareness and engagement through to the ongoing relationship post-purchase. It includes the customer's emotional, physical, and psychological response to the service, influenced by the design of the service environment, the quality-of-service delivery, and the interaction with service personnel. This element aims to create a cohesive, positive experience that builds customer loyalty and advocacy.	A journey characterized by personalization, community, challenge, support, and engagement, from the application process to alumni status, fostering a sense of belonging and growth.
Service outcomes	Service Outcomes refer to the end results or benefits achieved from the service, both for the customer and the service provider. For customers, this might include improved performance, enhanced satisfaction, or achieved goals. For the service provider, outcomes can relate to business objectives like revenue growth, market share expansion, or improved customer retention. This element assesses the effectiveness and impact of the service, guiding future improvements and innovations.	Enhanced career prospects, increased salary potential, expanded professional network, personal growth as strategic leaders for students; highly skilled leaders for employers; and ethical, innovative leaders making a positive impact for society.

The application of luxury branding in Executive MBA programmes is best understood through a structured approach that integrates exclusive educational experiences, brand prestige, and student engagement. One way to conceptualize these elements is through the service concept for luxury-branded MBA programmes, which encapsulates several key components explored in luxury branding literature. For instance, the organizing idea and service provided emphasize delivering an exclusive educational experience, focusing on personalized learning and leadership development. This aligns with Kapferer and Bastien's (2012) strategic branding framework, which highlights the importance of creating and maintaining a luxury brand that conveys exclusivity and superior quality. Additionally, the service received—which ensures an immersive, high-value educational journey—resonates with Vigneron and Johnson's (2004) findings on luxury

perception and its implications for consumer behaviour. The emphasis on a holistic customer experience mirrors the luxury sector’s approach of creating aspirational identities and transformative experiences beyond mere functional value.

Table 6 outlines the multifaceted components of the service concept, from programme title to anticipated student and institutional outcomes, providing insight into how these elements converge to shape a luxury educational experience. Furthermore, Figure 1 visually synthesizes this concept, illustrating the interplay between programme identity, student experience, and ultimate outcomes, reinforcing the strategic alignment of luxury branding principles with Executive MBA programme operations.

Figure 1 – Key elements of a Luxury Branded Executive MBA

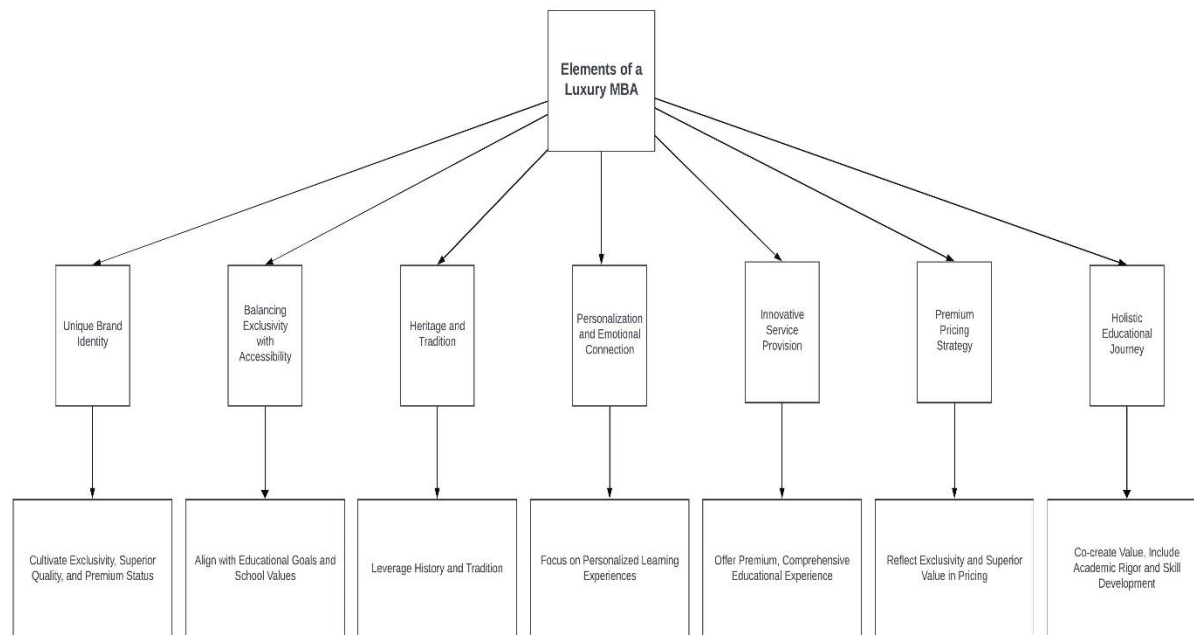


Building upon the Service concept detailed in Table 4 and visually synthesized in Figure 1, our exploration progresses to Figure 2, which serves as a strategic roadmap for implementing the principles of luxury branding within MBA programmes. Figure 2 is informed by the detailed components outlined in Table 6—from the programme's title reflecting its luxury positioning to the anticipated transformative outcomes for students—presents a template for establishing a luxury branded MBA programme. This template is not simply a theoretical construct but a practical guide that integrates the nuanced aspects of service provision and reception, as well as customer experience and outcomes. Furthermore, figure 2 expands on the visual representation of Figure 1 by delineating the steps and strategies necessary to operationalize the service concept into a tangible, luxury-branded educational experience.

It addresses the 'how'—the actionable pathways and initiatives that schools can undertake to align their MBA programmes with the hallmarks of luxury, such as exclusivity, prestige, and unparalleled student engagement.

This progression from the analytical to the visual, and ultimately to the strategic application, underscores the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in luxury branding within the context of executive education. In essence, the template for establishing a luxury Branded MBA programme bridges the conceptual insights and the holistic view provided in Figure 1 with practical application, offering business schools a blueprint for transforming their MBA offerings into distinguished luxury brands. By doing so, it encapsulates the journey from understanding the service concept's components and their visual integration to implementing these concepts in a way that resonates with the values and expectations of luxury-oriented students.

Figure 2 – Template for establishing a luxury Branded MBA programme



In synthesizing the discussion, our investigation addresses the gap in understanding how luxury branding principles can be adapted and applied within the context of Executive MBA programmes. Our findings elucidate the strategic alignment of luxury branding with educational services and highlight the critical balance schools must navigate between luxury and accessibility. This research also contributes to the broader discourse on branding in higher education, offering practical insights for business schools seeking to enhance their competitive edge through luxury branding. Recognizing the limitations of our study, we advocate for further empirical research to explore the long-term effects of luxury branding on business schools' reputations and students' career trajectories.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for both theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, our research extends the framework of luxury branding to the context of higher education, demonstrating how principles such as exclusivity, prestige, and heritage can be applied to MBA programmes. This contributes to the growing body of literature on luxury branding in education and provides a foundation for future research in this area.

From a practical perspective, our findings offer valuable insights for business schools seeking to enhance their competitive positioning through luxury branding. By incorporating elements such as selective admissions, high-quality faculty, and personalized learning experiences, schools can create a distinctive brand identity that attracts top-tier students and fosters long-term loyalty among alumni.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

Recognizing the limitations of our research, including its focus on elite institutions within the UK context, we advocate for further studies that explore the application of luxury branding in a broader range of educational settings, including international contexts. Future research could also examine the long-term impacts of luxury branding on student outcomes, alumni success, and institutional reputation, providing deeper insights into the efficacy of these strategies in the competitive landscape of higher education. Future research could build on these findings by conducting empirical studies that examine how luxury branding impacts student satisfaction and long-term alumni engagement. For instance, longitudinal studies could provide insights into whether the premium branding of MBA programmes translates into better career outcomes for graduates, thereby validating the theoretical models proposed here. While this study focuses on the UK context, future research should extend the examination of luxury branding in Executive MBA programmes to a global scale. As global competition among business schools intensifies, it becomes increasingly important to understand how institutions outside the UK apply luxury branding principles. For instance, exploring how schools in Asia, the US, and Europe approach branding strategies can provide a comparative perspective on how cultural and regional differences influence the implementation of exclusivity and prestige in educational offerings. Such comparative studies could reveal whether similar branding attributes resonate across

different markets or if adaptations are needed to align with local student preferences and expectations.

5.3 Management implications

For senior management teams responsible for the design and delivery of Executive MBA programmes, the implications of our findings are multifaceted. Firstly, the application of luxury branding principles requires a strategic reevaluation of programme elements to ensure they align with the hallmarks of luxury—meticulous attention to detail, an emphasis on exclusivity, and the cultivation of a distinctive programme identity. This may involve revisiting admission criteria to balance selectivity with diversity, enhancing the curriculum to include unique learning experiences that underscore the programme's prestige, and leveraging digital platforms to amplify a luxury brand narrative that resonates with prospective students. Moreover, senior management must consider the operational challenges of integrating luxury branding into their programmes. This includes ensuring that the luxury brand image is consistently reflected across all touchpoints—from marketing materials and alumni relations to student services and faculty engagement.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing, but limited, body of literature on branding in higher education by providing a comprehensive assessment of how luxury branding principles can be applied to Executive MBA programmes. By highlighting the antecedents, opportunities and challenges associated with luxury branding within the executive education landscape, our research offers valuable insights for academic leaders and marketers in the education sector. The mapping tool developed here serves as a strategic resource for institutions seeking to evaluate and enhance their branding strategies, offering a structured approach to aligning luxury attributes with educational goals. As business schools continue to navigate the complexities of market differentiation and student recruitment, the strategic application of luxury branding may serve as a key tool in enhancing institutional prestige and attracting a global cohort of aspiring leaders.

The key is to create a cohesive and immersive luxury experience that extends beyond the classroom, fostering a sense of belonging and pride among students and alumni. Additionally, management should be cognizant of the dynamic nature of luxury branding and the educational landscape, staying abreast of emerging trends and evolving student expectations. This requires a commitment to continuous innovation and improvement, leveraging feedback from students, alumni, and industry partners to refine and enhance the programme's luxury positioning.

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