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One of a Kind Like You

The University as a Personalized Generic

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What helps create a truly meaningful brand? A flawlessly articulated purpose? A killer logo? A leadership team that really understands the value of brand? Complete internal alignment? Oftentimes, the interplay of many different brand elements work together to create cohesive and lasting meaning. But one element that is gaining value in the world of branding is personalization.

Right now, personalization is "in" with brands. Mass consumption and mass production are becoming things of the past. These days, brands that matter and resonate with people are the ones that feel like they're authentically made and designed *just for you*. It's the age of personalization.[1]

Who knew there were so many hidden depths to "he," "she," "it," "they" and other pronouns? Interesting, right? Pronouns are multi-taskers, working busily to point us in different directions, freeing us from the catastrophe of repeated nouns.[2]

INTRODUCTION

The term MyUniversity is in relatively common use in the UK: many universities use it, or a variant, to describe the portal they require students and their staff to use in order to access information about their studies. Swansea University uses the name MyUni, with a heart replacing the dot above the "i," and a webpage describing MyUni as "The Home of Current Students," with the banner headings *Your University*, *Support and Wellbeing*, *MyUniHub*, and *Student news*. Kingston University has a My University log-in for students; my own institution has

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[1] Tracy Lloyd, Personalization Can Drive Meaning for Brands," *Emotive Brand* (blog), September 19, 2018, www.emotivebrand.com/personalization-can-drive-meaning-for-brands.

[2] *Your Dictionary*, "Types of Pronouns," https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/pronouns/types-of-pronouns.html.

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MyWarwick. Exeter University has MyExeter, Leicester University has a MyUoL app, while Bristol University has a My Students log-in for members of staff. Glasgow University has MyGlasgow Staff and MyGlasgow Students alongside MyGlasgow News, and at the time of the pandemic (as I write) it added Glasgow Anywhere, implying that "your" Glasgow can be found anywhere.[3] Edinburgh University has MyEd, which is described as "the University of Edinburgh's web portal. It is a gateway to web-based services within and beyond the University and offers a personalised set of content with single sign on to key University services such as Learn and Office365."[4] This phenomenon is not confined to the UK: Groningen University has a portal named My University while the University of Minnesota Twin Cities has a portal named MyU, which it describes as "the University's enterprise portal. The University community uses MyU to access a variety of personalized services and information."[5] There is also a Chinese computer game called My University 我的大学, which simulates university life, allowing the player to try out the effects of a series of decisions, including course choice.[6]

The joining of words (MyUniversity), the combination of upper and lower case letters (MyUniversity), the use of abbreviations (MyU and MyUni), and graphic symbols (such as the heart) are characteristic of both Internet language (McCulloch 2019) and brand names and logos (Holt 2004; Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2005). But the ubiquity of MyUniversity undercuts any claim to distinctiveness – a characteristic frequently described as essential for brands – while "my" (the first person possessive personal pronoun) appears to promise a more individualized experience than is typical of branding. If MyUniversity is not a brand, what is it? How can MyUniversity be both ubiquitous and "just for you"? The proposal this chapter makes is that MyUniversity is best understood as an example of personalization: that is, MyUniversity is a *personalized generic*.

What might this mean? The adjective "generic" is described in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* as originating in the 1670s, and its meaning is given as:

> "belonging to a large group of objects," formed in English from Latin *gener-*, stem of *genus* "race, kind" (from PIE root *gene-* "give birth, beget," with derivatives referring to procreation and familial and tribal groups) + -ic. Hence "of a general kind, not special." In reference to manufactured products, "not special; not brand-name; in plain, cheap packaging," is from 1953 of drugs; of groceries, etc., from 1977.[7]

In relation to this definition of generic, it might seem that a personalized generic is an oxymoron. But in what follows here, it will be suggested that while MyUniversity

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[3] www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/staff; www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/students; www.gla.ac.uk/myglas gow/news; www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/anywhere.

[4] www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/computing/comms-and-collab/myed-portal.

[5] https://twin-cities.umn.edu.

[6] https://store.steampowered.com/app/1070950/My_University.

[7] www.etymonline.com/search?q=generic.

is a response to "the proliferation and policing of similarity" (Hayden 2013: 615), "'parity situations' – the saturation of markets with sameness and similarity" (Hayden 2013: 617), and the prospect of an "increasingly generic future" (Greene 2014: 1) – and as such might appear to be an instance of unbranding (Greene 2014) – this reading alone risks misunderstanding the opportunities and dilemmas offered by personalization to universities seeking to generate value and difference.

SO, WHAT IS PERSONALIZATION?

While it might be a bit much to describe the current era as the age of personalization (a lot else is going on after all), personalization is an increasingly widespread phenomenon in the UK, the US, and elsewhere. Personalizing practices permeate everyday life – we are invited to participate in personalized medical, health, and care services, receive personalized customer experiences, and find our way with maps that are continuously updated with information about our movements. We are individuated in the rankings of Airbnb and Uber, and can travel on trains and planes at personalized prices. We pose for selfies, share personal data in networks with friends and strangers, and create multiple personae in social media (Vargha 2009; Turow 2011; Prainsack 2017; Prey 2017; Moor and Lury 2018). Indeed, Kris Cohen suggests that we are witnessing the emergence of a personalization industry, by which he means "the automation and financialization of personalization at industrial scales and speeds, although with decidedly postindustrial organizations of labor" (2019: 168).

In a study of recommendation algorithms, which we take to be a paradigmatic instance of contemporary forms of personalization,[8] Sophie Day and I (Lury and Day 2019[9]) propose that personalization is a form of atypical individuation. To do this, we draw on a Simondonian understanding of individuation in which the individual does not pre-exist the process of individuation, and the individual is not confined to natural persons; so, for example, a technology, a cancer, or a university may be individuated (Simondon 2017). We identify three noteworthy characteristics of personalization as a mode of individuation, captured in the familiar address: "people like you like things like this." First, the address can be reversed, that is, in

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[8]   Kris Cohen says, "We find recommender systems in search engines, in dating sites, in shopping, in social media feeds like Facebook's, in streaming music services, and, increasingly, at every point of networked interaction. In fact, unless one tries to turn off these personalization engines, which isn't always possible, it's now often harder to find a nonpersonalized environment online" (2019: 173). In contrast, Clause 18 of the People's Republic of China's first E-commerce Law (issued August 31, 2018, effective January 1, 2019) asserts: "When e-commerce operators provide search results of goods/services to consumers based on their consumption interests and habits, options not targeting their personal characteristics should also be provided so as to protect consumers' legitimate rights and interests" (www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=e0c468f6 d44d5b50bdfb&lib=law; Han Wen, personal communication, March 2020).

[9]   See https://peoplelikeyou.ac.uk.

practices of personalization, not only do "people like you like things like this," but "things like this like people like you," too. Second, the implementation of each form of address is interlinked with the other in recursively organized pathways[10] – a sequence of relations of "liking" and "likeness" – to specify a "you."[11] The sequencing may take the form of the spatiotemporal relations of gift and commodity exchange, including those of generation, but also, significantly, operates in the rerouting of social reproduction through the epistemic infrastructure and associated political and economic milieus that support datafication (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier, 2013; Kitchin 2014). The nature and organization of this sequencing – of relations of liking and likeness – qualifies the "you." Third, the "you" that is specified is simultaneously singular and plural, an individual and a collective,[12] that is, personalization organizes the relations between the individual and the collective as a kind of distributed (dispersed and stratified) reproduction (Murphy 2017). In doing so, it promises a new mode of togetherness: as Kris Cohen suggests, "[Personalization's] slogan could be the political is personal" (2019: 189).

MYUNIVERSITY: "ONE OF A KIND" AND "A KIND OF ONE"

MyUniversity displays all three characteristics which Day and I identify in our account of personalization. To start with the obvious: the use of an address in the form of "Students like you like universities like this" is commonplace. In their promotional practices, universities routinely deploy well-established forms of recommendation, including those forms associated with personification, in the literary sense of using personal qualities or a person to signify a thing or an abstraction. But rather than using imagined persons or celebrities as figures of personification, as is common in commercial advertising and branding, universities are typically personified – in the prospectus, advertising, and on the website, for example – by images of "ordinary," anonymous individuals who, the viewer is invited to assume, are already students: students who are "like" them. The implication of this form of address – if we continue to pursue the similarity with other forms of personalization – is that if you are "like" these individuals, have a resemblance to them, are similar in some

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[10] Recursion is understood here not just to mean repetition, but an action "relating to or involving a programme or routine of which a part requires the application of the whole, so that its explicit interpretation requires in general many successive executions" (*Oxford Languages Online Dictionary*). It thus involves a form of repetition in which the relation between the part and the whole is continually made anew.

[11] Cohen says, "What both generates and organizes the data that drives the personalization industry is often distilled into two things that are distinct but interrelated: preferences and likeness" (2019: 173).

[12] Cohen says, "Personalization purports to be about the individual, to be about nothing but the individual. It promises, in fact, to augment the individuality of the individual. But, at the same time, personalization necessitates a conversation about a particular form of grouping" (2019: 167).

way or other to them, you will also "like" – that is, prefer – the university (to other universities). And if the preference is reciprocated (that is, if a student's application is accepted), "you" as an individual come to be part of a collective – "(y)our" university becomes MyUniversity.

The reverse form of address – "Universities like this like students like you" – is not only what drives recruitment and acceptance procedures, but now also extends to what happens once students arrive. It, too, is implemented through a form of personification, but in the anthropological rather than literary sense of this concept. In his understanding of personification, Chris Gregory (1982), for example, builds on the established thesis that an objectification process predominates in a commodity economy, while a personification process predominates in a gift economy: that is, both things and people assume the social form of objects in a commodity economy while in a gift economy they assume the social form of persons. In other words, commodity exchanges objectify social relations between people, and in such exchanges persons appear in or as a quantitative relation – for example, a fee – between objects exchanged (successful completion of assessment for a university degree). Gift exchanges personify social relations and the gift appears as a qualitative relation – for example, as teaching and learning – between persons (students and academic staff). In such relations, Gregory argues, persons are placed in a state of reciprocal dependence as part of an exchange order. He says: "the distinction between value and rank epitomizes the difference between commodity exchange relations and gift exchange relations. The former emphasizes quantity, objects, and equivalence; the latter emphasizes quality, subjects, and superiority" (1982: 50–51). While the operation of circuits of both commodity and gift exchange have long characterized British and North American higher education, sometimes but not always as part of a brand identity, personification is being supplemented in new ways by the rise of the personalization industry. More specifically, it is enhanced by the ways in which the use of the portals described above – often introduced by universities to enable them to communicate with students in a more personal way – is exploited in practices of "customer relationship management," the history of which as described by Zsuzsanna Vargha (2019) is one of the most important back-stories to the emergence of personalization.

By looking at industry literature archives, and conducting interviews with business practitioners, Vargha (2019) identifies three overlapping trends – in marketing theory, enterprise technology firms, and accounting methods – contributing to the emergence of personalization. In the 1980s, she says, a new paradigm of relationship marketing emerged as a critique of transactional marketing. Emphasis was placed on the long-term value of customer retention and satisfaction rather than on sales transactions. The same period saw the development of a suite of new products by information systems providers. This facilitated the scaling up of integrated customer information and tracking in the mid-1990s, and fed the growth of customer data analytics that characterized the latter part of the decade. Third, there was an

innovation in management accounting called activity-based costing – in which the focus is not on product profitability but customer profitability, that is, the rating of customers in terms of the profitability of their personal profiles. These three trends, Vargha says, combined in customer relationship management (CRM), that is, a suite of techniques for the management of relations with potential as well as current actual customers, typically using data analysis about the history of customers' purchasing to drive sales growth, and often emphasizing customer retention.

CRM builds on established forms of market segmentation (Arvidsson 2005), which are integral to the growth of branding. However, what distinguishes CRM, as Vargha explains, is the assumption that it makes sense to differentiate individual customers based on their current or expected profitability, and then to maintain and build "personal" relationships with what are called profitable customers.[13] This has long been the work of the alumni or development offices in universities, even if the language of profit was not employed. However, CRM enables such "personal" relationships to be integrated into university provision at a more fundamental level, and not only with the wealthy or influential. Significantly, CRM is a step beyond traditional forms of market segmentation, which typically divides the market in relation to what are seen as the pre-existing (sociodemographic, lifestyle, or psychological) characteristics of natural persons. To identify individual customers, CRM software builds customer profiles and recommendations, and tracks interactions with those individuals through the collection and analysis of "personal" data.[14] What is new is not only the ability to identify all students (and academics) individually and (re) aggregate them into categories of various kinds (typically in relation to a variety of performance metrics), but that these categories emerge from the analysis of aggregated personal data (not a prespecified individual). In this analysis, "Students like you" are brought into relation with "Universities like this," and their (composite) qualities (such as, for example, the likelihood of completing a degree) emerge in that relation.

While there is little doubt that universities are becoming increasingly datafied (Williamson et al. 2020), it is hard to know exactly how widespread the use of CRM is in UK universities. However, it seems likely that most have some kind of system in place: there is a national network for CRM managers in higher education (HE) institutions,[15] and the company Tribal Dynamics claims to have worked with 80 percent of the UK higher education sector,[16] while another – Pythagoras – describes itself as having worked with 30 percent of UK universities. On their

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[13] Vargha (2017) has described the labour involved in the implementation of CRM in the finance industry.

[14] For example, some recent approaches to health care seek to segment patients in terms of cost (identifying the least expensive, the most expensive, and so on); some such initiatives in the US combine the provision of health care with insurance (https://hbr.org/2020/01/managing-the-most-expensive-patients).

[15] https://crmnetworkhe.org.

[16] www.tribalgroup.com/software-and-services/tribal-dynamics.

website they say: "Built on Microsoft Dynamics 365, Evolve HE maximizes existing investment in Microsoft technology. Our solution establishes a CRM foundation that enables universities to achieve a step change in their adoption and deployment of student relationship management solutions."[17] Pythagoras provides a variety of services, including "replacing and consolidating legacy solutions" to provide "a single view of each student," managing "end-to-end student recruitment and marketing activities through cross-channel campaigns," and maximizing "domestic and international student conversion through dedicated online accounts and student portals." Their "add-on modules" include Recruitment, Events and Marketing; Application Management; Applications Portal; On Course; Alumni, Fundraising and Sponsorship; and Research and Enterprise (see de Juan-Jordán et al. 2018 for a survey of the uses of CRM in higher education). All these services allow for the possibility that the personal data of students may be constantly recalibrated in relation to a variety of university aims and external demands, placing students in a constantly changing state of dependence with each other, as well as with academics.[18] In this regard, the personification practices of CRM function as a mechanism, not of exchange value but, as Gregory puts it, of exchange order.[19]

In such practices, there is a shift in how the (two-way) relation between individual and class or kind is established. On the one hand, the student is identified – personally – as "one of a kind." But this "one" is not an individual, unitary and independent; instead, this "one" is "one of a kind," reciprocally dependent on other "ones" in an exchange order. And the ordering of the "one" student's (or academic's) reciprocal dependence on others can be reconstituted at discrete intervals, with each recorded interaction (via the portals mentioned above) along multiple pathways of personalization. Indeed, the optimization of a university in relation to multiple (internally and externally generated) demands may have consequences for students before they are accepted as well as after they leave the university, potentially putting each "one of a kind" student in multiple timelines. As Adrian Mackenzie describes, "while individuals were once collected, grouped, ranked, and trained in populations characterized by disparate attributes (socio-economic variables, educational background and qualifications, nationality, and so on), today we might say that they are distributed across populations of different kinds that intersect through them. Individuals become more like populations or crowds" (2016: 116).

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[17] Webpage no longer available. Accessed February 2021. The company has since been acquired by EY in 2021 and is part of the EY – Microsoft Alliance.

[18] I have not discussed here the use of personalized or predictive learning analytics, as their use is still relatively limited, but their adoption is currently being discussed at a variety of levels and clearly has the potential to expand the capacities of MyUniversity considerably.

[19] The extent to which students are aware of such orderings is not clear, and current regulations relating to the use of personal data do little to support such awareness.

On the other hand, in the implementation of these analytics, the (generic) university is itself reconfigured.[20] No longer a kind comprised of independent or individual ones, MyUniversity is a "kind of one," the constantly shape-shifting outcome of the recursive implementation of what Mackenzie calls distributive numbers or joint probability distributions. And the reconciliation of priorities in MyUniversity is inevitably complex: "The particles, maps, images and populations figure in a baroque sensibility as curves that fold between outside and inside, creating partitions, relative interiorities and exteriorities" (Mackenzie 2016: 131). For example, the timelines mentioned above work backwards and forwards: they may inform whether an applicant's "liking" or preference for a university is reciprocated (and how that reciprocity is expressed – in terms of the conditions of the offer that is made, access to accommodation, a scholarship or not, and so on), a reciprocity which may, in fact, depend on the anticipation of the applicant's likely future once they leave the university.[21] And how the MyUniversity of students maps onto or is co-ordinated with the MyUniversity of academics is complex, as "measures of student performance, sentiment, engagement, and satisfaction are also treated as proxy measures of the performance of staff, courses, schools, and institutions as a whole" (Williamson et al. 2020: 354). The reconciliation of "(y)our" with "my" is hard to achieve. Nevertheless, however the priorities are reconciled (or kept in tense suspension), in the practices of personalization, MyUniversity is constantly individuated as the interrelationship of "one of a kind" with "a kind of one," as articulated so precisely in the UC Davis pennant illustrated below (Figure 2.1).[22]

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[20] Williamson et al. say, "the contemporary university is reassembling into a new set of forms and functions as it adapts to a plethora of social, political, economic, and technological forces" (2020: 356).

[21] So, for example, it can feed backwards, as it were, into recruitment practices (Bamberger et al. 2020), with the methods described above sometimes supplemented by platforms such as GeckoEngage, a "Higher Education chatbot and event management solution" (https://geckoengage.com). The services this company provides to clients such as the University of Cambridge, Goldsmiths, San Francisco State University, and the University of Toronto (according to their website) include communicating with potential applicants as members of groups as well as students "one-to-one, across multiple channels, with our chatbot enabled conversational marketing platform." Conversation is recognized by Vargha (2017) as a key element of CRM.

[22] This account emphasizes the significance of practices of personalization, and CRM in particular, but it needs to be acknowledged that, as Nigel Thrift makes clear, there is a variety of value systems in operation in any university and "Each value system has its own forms of specification, evaluation (including calculation), and means of acting out good and bad will." He further observes that "in universities these modes of existence and their respective means of justification are brought into contact on a daily basis rather more starkly than in many other arenas. They have to pass through representatives of other modes of existence in order to endure. Indeed, nowadays, each mode of existence depends on the other to survive to a much greater degree than ever before. The idea that one academic mode of existence can ride roughshod over the others is a fantasy. Indeed, very often, they are in resonance. Certainly, they are in constant negotiation" (2016: 404).

FIGURE 2.1 One of a kind like you (photo of UC Davis pennant by Celia Lury).

To add one further observation: the personalization processes described here are dependent on a process of computer-assisted data collection made possible by platformization (Gillespie 2010; Helmond 2015; Poell et al. 2019). In the case of Pythagoras the platform is Microsoft Dynamics 365, a Microsoft Power

Platform.[23] For some critics, what is important about platforms is their program-mability: "Definitionally, a 'platform' is a system that can be reprogrammed and therefore customized by outside developers – users – and in that way, adapted to countless needs and niches that the platform's original developers could not have possibly contemplated, much less had time to accommodate" (Andreesson 2007). What is perhaps significant for an understanding of the politics of MyUniversity as a personalized generic, however, is the general definition of platformization as "the process of constructing a somewhat lifted-out or well-bounded domain as a relational intersection for different groups" (Mackenzie 2018: 6). Indeed, the term platform is sometimes used to describe the rise of multisided markets (Langley and Leyshon 2017). Platformization is thus important to acknowledge here not only because of the significance of datafication for the emergence of MyUniversity, but because platforms have made possible "lower cost, more dynamic, and more competitive alternatives to governmental or quasi-governmental monopoly infrastructures, in exchange for a transfer of wealth and responsibility to private enterprises" (Plantin et al. 2018: 306).[24] In other words, platformization has enabled the intervention of new actors in higher education, including a variety of entities concerned with online learning,[25] permitting old and new actors to acquire new and varying capacities, transform-ing the ways in which the heterogeneous values of education are created, distributed, accumulated, and extracted in the conjoining of "one of a kind" with "a kind of a one."[26]

WHOSE UNIVERSITY IS MYUNIVERSITY?

In the account above, I have described the emergence of MyUniversity as the outcome of a process of personalization, supported by processes of personification and platformization. But the underlying context for the emergence of personaliza-tion in higher education is important for the argument that MyUniversity is a personalized generic: that is, the saturation of an increasingly marketized sector

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[23] The current market leader in CRM is Salesforce: www.salesforce.com/products/what-is-sales force/#.

[24] Williamson et al. note, "In parallel with political desires to subject HE to further datafication, a 'global HE industry' has emerged of 'data solutions' service providers and platform companies offering HE products, which have sought to open up and exploit new markets in HE data" (2020: 355).

[25] I do not discuss online learning here, but how it is folded in to MyUniversity is clearly going to be of considerable significance. MyLO is the name given to the main online learning environ-ment at the University of Tasmania.

[26] Poell et al. note that platformization is not only about data infrastructures but also about markets and governance. The definition of platforms they provide is: "(re-)programmable digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monet-isation, and circulation of data" (2019).

with "sameness." The most visible indicator of this in the UK was the abolition of the binary distinction between polytechnics and universities in 1992,[27] a growth in size of the sector further enabled by the increasing globalization of education.[28] Nigel Thrift observes:

> Whereas there were about 250,000 students in 1965 [in the UK], now there are near to two and a half million. This expansion has been mainly in domestically based students, but a significant additional element has been international students flocking from many parts of the world. Since these students pay more, they have become a crucial element in the makeup of the economy of most universities.

> (2016: 401)

The major role played by what are now called the post-1992 universities in the expansion of student numbers – including widening participation[29] at least to some degree – and then the decision by the sector as a whole to charge the same maximum fee allowed by the government in 2012,[30] have only complicated the ways in which sameness has become the basis of the search for distinction.[31] The increasingly intense regulatory environment (including most recently the establishment in the UK of a national Office for Students as the "single market regulator") is explicitly designed to enhance choice for students and increase competition between

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[27] A polytechnic was a tertiary higher education institution in England and Wales offering higher diplomas, undergraduate degrees, and postgraduate education that was governed and administered at the national level by the Council for National Academic Awards. They tended to be focused on professional vocational degrees. After the passage of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 they became independent universities which meant they could award their own degrees, and many extended the range and number of degrees they offered.

[28] Cohen says, "personalization is one kind of solution to the problem of market oversaturation" (2019: 174).

[29] In the UK context, widening participation refers to the component of government education policy that aims to increase the proportion of people from underrepresented groups entering higher education.

[30] The Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 introduced tuition fees in all the countries of the United Kingdom. Following devolution in 1999, the newly devolved governments in Scotland and Wales came forward with their own acts on tuition fees. In England, tuition fee caps rose with the Higher Education Act 2004. Under the Act, universities in England could begin to charge *variable fees* of up to £3,000 a year for students enrolling in courses during the academic year 2006–07 or later. This was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2006–07 and in Wales in 2007–08. Following the Browne Review of 2010, the cap was raised to £9,000 a year. In 2012, a judicial review against these raised fees failed, and the new fee system came into effect that September. It was reported that the government had expected universities to compete with each other in terms of price, and was frustrated that they did not do so.

[31] These moves increase both supply and demand; that is, they are moves from "scarcity" to "abundance" on both sides of "People like you like universities like this" and "Universities like this like people like you." Personalization can be seen as an attempt to use sameness and similarity to bring saturated supply and saturated demand into relations of (artificial) scarcity with each other.

Organization and the American Medical Association in the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the ways in which the anonymity of generic drugs was presented both as a risk ("Drugs Anonymous") and "a value (of consumer empowerment) to be optimized" (2014: 64). But here the parallel with universities breaks down: MyUniversity may be ubiquitous but it is not Universities Anonymous. Neither, however, is the prefix to MyUniversity a proper name: it is, instead, "my." And, so it will be argued here, it is the exercise of the personal possessive pronoun in the practices described above, rather than a name, that enables similarity to be constitutive of the value(s) of MyUniversity as a *personalized* generic.[35]

Used on its own, "my" is what in linguistics is called a shifter: its meaning is dependent on who uses it. As shifters, personal pronouns are deictic signs that have the capacity to "multitask," to "work busily to point us in different directions," appearing to free us from "the catastrophe of repeated nouns."[36] This liberation from a singular identity acquires a new potency in the redistribution of education through a transformed epistemic infrastructure. As I have argued elsewhere (Lury 2021), the role of linguistic shifters, including personal pronouns, has been significantly expanded with the changes in the activity of indexing associated with contemporary informational infrastructures.[37] And in the datafied university, the abductive agency of the personal pronoun acquires new significance, enabling the conjoining of "one of a kind" with "a kind of one" in a constantly changing, multidirectional moving ratio. And in this respect, the use of a variety of pronouns in the names and phrases associated with a whole range of products and services outside as well as inside education is suggestive, indicating some of the various ways in which personalized generics can be configured, and their diverse implications for the distribution of agency, accountability, and (intellectual and other) property. Alongside MyUniversity there are MySpace, MyGov, MyApp, MyInsurance, "I am train," and "We are MyProtein. We are ForeverFit." The vitamin products "WellMan" and "WellWoman" now have a competitor in "BetterYou," while Cohen suggests that in the context of a discussion of search engines, "anything" should be considered "the symbolic pronoun of twenty-first-century commodity culture's democratic claim" (2017: 112).[38] But how the abductive agency of pronouns

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[35] Brian Massumi describes a singular generic as the likeness of an object to itself; each singular encounter with an object "teem[s] with a belonging to others of its kind (the object of semblance)" (2011: 187). For Massumi, the concept is a way of considering an object as an event, an iteration in an event series.

[36] *Your Dictionary*, "Types of Pronouns," https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/pronouns/types-of-pronouns.html.

[37] Similarly, Amoore and Piotukh observe: "so-called unstructured data demands new forms of indexing that allow for analysis to be deterritorialized (conducted across jurisdictions, or via distributed or cloud computing, for example) and to be conducted across diverse data forms – images, video, text in chat rooms, audio files and so on" (2015: 345).

[38] In these and other uses it appears that personal pronouns afford the potential for what Rochelle Dreyfuss calls the expressive genericity of some words. She distinguishes expressive capacities from signaling capacities, and links expressiveness to the openness in meaning of some words

is put to work – and who might benefit from that work – in the platforms of personalized generics is a complex matter: as Jonathan Flatley suggests, the questions, "Can one simply decide to [be] like something? How might one exert agency in one's likes?" (2010: 72) seem to be the ones that matter.

Hayden proposes that one of the merits of the "exuberant proliferation" of kinds of generics is that they make it possible for ownership claims to be established through non-legal as well as legal means. She stresses the importance of idioms of sameness and what she calls vernacular reconfigurations, but also suggests that "generic kinds might now, counterintuitively, be considered an instance of what Mario Biagioli has called 'intellectual property without intellectual property'" (2013: 606). Certainly, the use of personal pronouns appears to allow for the possibility of "IP without IP," but non-legal claims to ownership of the intellectual property of the university are multiple, often layered together with legal claims, and are by no means easy to adjudicate (Dreyfuss 2010). In current uses, for example, personal pronouns are not only often "passive voice constructions" (Cohen 2019: 167), typified by indirect forms of address, but are frequently linked with proper, sometimes proprietary, names in a kind of mise-en-abyme. In such uses, the pronoun is subordinated to a name that can be repeated, branded, and may be owned as a trademark. This is the case with many of the examples of MyUniversity given at the beginning (although none, as far as I am aware, is registered as a trademark).[39]

Sometimes the pronoun is not personal but impersonal, as in the case of itslearning, a virtual learning environment for education which describes itself as "The learning platform designed for teaching," a phrase that neatly sums up the role of the platform in conjoining "People (teachers) like you" with "Things like this (content, curricula, resources)."[40] Sometimes the platform pronoun/suffix comes second to the proper name (Harvard.X, MITx, BerkeleyX, ANUx, ImperialX, HKUSTx), even as it implies ownership of the generic activity of "education," as in ed.X®:

related to "their history, derivation, and identification with users." She continues: "These peripheral meanings are often highly individualized to the speaker, the listener, and possibly to the method by which they interact or perceive one another. When such words are used, they become infused with the listener's own associations, and their message is incorporated into the listener's own frame of reference" (1990: 413).

39 Sometimes a pronoun does not even need to be subordinated to be owned: "We" was acquired as a trademark by the company now known as the We Company, previously WeWork. A day after the company name officially changed, the company filed a trademark for the phrases: "Elevating the World's Consciousness," "Creator," and "We Are One."

40 The company was first established as "it:solutions" (https://itslearning.com/us/about-us/our-story). According to its website, some of its most popular features are "Reporting Analytics (track everything and easily apply data to specific priorities and practices)," "Personalised Instruction (facilitate student voice and choice and help individual students towards mastery)," and "Integrate with Everything (connect us with your favorite tools and providers)."

the trusted platform for education and learning. Founded by Harvard and MIT, edX is home to more than 20 million learners, the majority of top-ranked universities in the world and industry-leading companies. As a global nonprofit, edX is transforming traditional education, removing the barriers of cost, location and access. Fulfilling the demand for people to learn on their own terms, edX is reimagining the possibilities of education, providing the highest-quality, stackable learning experiences including the groundbreaking MicroMasters® programs.[41]

Sometimes, the proper or "personal" name of individuals is explicitly identified as a problem; so, for example, the ORCID platform (Open Researcher and Contributor ID) is described as a response to name ambiguity in scholarly research.[42] The solution this platform provides is a sixteen-digit alphanumeric identity, similar to that created for content-related entities on digital networks by digital object identifiers (DOIs). It is the platform – not the state or the law – that assures the propriety of this "name" and enables it to be recognized as an owner of intellectual property; it is also what encourages an understanding of the value of content (that is, knowledge) in terms of its ability to incite platform relations.

And while the proliferation of generic kinds may invite multiple configurations of abductive agency, many kinds are subject to regulation of a variety of sorts, including being tested in measures of sameness and similarity. Both Hayden and Greene note that pharmaceutical generics have been subject to a range of equivalence tests, including tests of chemical equivalence and bioequivalence. So too the distinctiveness of the personalized generic MyUniversity depends, at least to a certain degree, on tests of equivalence – or sameness and similarity – to other (My)universities.[43] Traditionally, a significant guarantee of teaching quality in the UK was provided by the reports of external examiners of degree programs, but even though that role has been made (a little) more transparent,[44] it is still a process internal to the sector and

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[41] https://www.edx.org/about-us.

[42] https://web.archive.org/web/20100202055935/http://orcid.securesites.net/media/pdf/ORCID_Announcement.pdf. A report about ORCID in *Nature* starts, "In 2011, Y. Wang was the world's most prolific author of scientific publications, with 3,926 to their name – a rate of more than 10 per day. Never heard of them? That's because they are a mixture of many different Y. Wangs, each indistinguishable in the scholarly record" (Butler 2012). Hayden notes that the consulting firm Thomson CompuMark "advertises its naming services by alerting its prospective corporate customers to the challenges of a market saturated by similarity: 'With literally millions of pharmaceutical trademarks in use around the world, including marks not officially registered, finding a distinctive name or mark can be challenging'" (2013: 617). In this regard, I can't fail to mention the approval by the FDA for "10 generic drugmakers . . . to start making generic versions of [the brand name drug] Singulair," leading to headlines such as "Generic Singulair Approved." (https://www.webmd.com/asthma/news/20120803/generic-singulair-approved).

[43] In this regard, we might consider the rise of personalised generics in terms of a reformulation of Nike's "Just Do It" as "Just Be Like."

[44] In language similar to that adopted by other universities, Durham University advises external examiners that they "should feel free to make any comments they wish, including observations on teaching, module/programme structure and content, and degree schemes as well as

the comparative referent of quality is typically only loosely specified.[45] In a parity situation, it has come to be supplemented by external evaluations according to criteria linked to national policy, including most recently in England the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcome Framework (TEF), which assigns bronze, silver, and gold awards to universities and colleges. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a peer-review process of research evaluation, in which "Units of Assessment" are assessed in relation to the rigour, originality, and significance of their members' "output," the impact of their research, and the quality of the research environment. Both these processes of evaluation provide absolute results, that is, results in relation to fixed criteria defined by the national regulatory framework, so the score achieved by one institution or unit should not affect that of another. However, these measures of similarity or sameness – along with many others – have increasingly come to be tied to rankings, enabling them to act as a mark of relative distinction within a sector characterized by sameness.

In the now considerable literature on rankings in academia and elsewhere (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Guyer 2010; Musselin 2010; Gerlitz and Lury 2014; Esposito and Stark 2019), it has been pointed out that it's unusual for a single ranking to be accepted as the ultimate arbiter in any given arena; so, for example, there are numerous education rankings that order universities in relation to a wide range of academic and non-academic concerns, as well as competing rankings calculated in relation to ostensibly the same object. Importantly, however, such rankings are variously described as reactive (Espeland and Sauder 2007), performative (Esposito and Stark 2019), or participative (Gerlitz and Lury 2014).[46] In these analyses, contemporary ratings do not perform as observations of an independent world but acquire effectivity in a world in which observers include the observed, who have little choice but to take into account – and act on – the observations of others.

And to the extent that universities do act on rankings, the distinction of the personalized generic emerges in relations of similitude as described by Foucault, that is, in "small differences among small differences," differences in (recursive)

assessment procedures. As the reports of external examiners are discussed widely within the University, we should be most grateful if external examiners would ensure that individual staff members or students are not referred to by name in their reports. Reports will normally be available for discussion widely within the University (including with student representatives via staff-student consultative committees), and may also be requested by certain external bodies, including the Quality Assurance Agency. An additional separate and confidential report may be sent to the Vice-Chancellor if the examiner considers this to be appropriate." Durham University External Examiners Report Form, 2019–2020.

[45] Durham University asks external examiners: "Are the standards of the programme consistent with those required by the university qualification descriptors and so with the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications?" And, "Were the academic standards of student work comparable with similar programmes with which you are familiar?" Durham University External Examiners Report Form, 2019–2020.

[46] And are widely recognized to have led to gaming and forms of misconduct (Biagioli and Lippman 2020).

series that "obey no single hierarchy" and "are able to move in one direction as easily as another" (1982: 44). In this regard, a MyUniversity that is guided by rankings alone might be said to be undergoing a form of genericide, a slow death of forced self-classification, "up-dating to remain the same" (Chun 2017) for fear of falling down the gap between "the merely similar and the properly equivalent" (Hayden 2013: 619).[47] Even if a university has room for maneuver (with elite institutions having more room than others), having refused the market lure of "the same, but cheaper" – the claim of the Mexican pharmaceutical chain Farmacias Similares studied by Hayden – a MyUniversity has little choice, in the UK at least, but to embrace the never-ending one-upmanship of "the same, but better (or worse)."[48] Indeed, as competitors to universities emerge as part of a process of platformization and privatization, they may well become "like a(nother) university, but not quite."

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[47] As Esposito and Stark say, "users of rankings look at who's up and who's down, not at what . . . is" (2019: 5).

[48] Hayden reports on the existence of Biobetters, a name reportedly coined by the major Indian pharmaceutical company Dr. Reddy's. Biobetters, she notes, are sometimes distinguished from generics: they "'are not copies and will never be generics. Biobetters are new molecular entities that are related to existing biologics by target or action, but they are deliberately altered to improve disposition, safety, efficacy, or manufacturing attributes'" (2013: 628).

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