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# WKU's Brand Personality

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# WKU'S BRAND PERSONALITY

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Science  
with Honors College Graduate Distinction at  
Western Kentucky University

By

Nicole E. Childress

May 2019

\*\*\*\*\*

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Patricia Todd, Chair

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I dedicate this thesis to Ms. Lucinda Anderson, who has been a mentor and friend to me.  
Also, I also dedicate this work to my fellow Spirit Masters, who inspire me every day to  
cherish Western Kentucky University and go 'above the rim'.

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Finally, I would like to thank my parents who have always reminded me that stress is temporary and the Lord is faithful.

## ABSTRACT

The University Brand Personality Scale was introduced in the Journal of Business Research in 2016. It establishes six dimensions for evaluating a university's personality: prestige, sincerity, appeal, lively, conscientious, and cosmopolitan. The scale also illustrates how these dimensions relate to brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and students' intentions to support their university as alumni.

The goal of this project was to evaluate Western Kentucky University's brand personality on these six dimensions based on student surveys. Results showed that among the six dimensions, sincerity and appeal ranked the highest, followed by prestige, lively, and conscientious, then finally, cosmopolitan. However, on average, each dimension was rated between 5 and 5.5 out of 7, showing that while all traits lean positive, there are no traits which students strongly apply to WKU.

Results showed that on average students reported a positive but not strong amount of brand love and they sometimes to often engage in positive word-of-mouth activities. However, students were neutral on their intentions to support WKU as alumni.

This study illustrates students' perceptions of WKU and could be used as a tool to help the University make future branding decisions.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Purpose*

This research explores the effectiveness of the WKU brand by understanding how WKU students perceive it. As a university, an effective brand can result in many positive benefits including increased selectivity as a result of increased applications, growth in alumni and donor engagement, and improved campus atmosphere (Nguyen, Hemsley-Brown, & Melewar, 2016). Additionally, this information can be used as a tool for future university decisions as WKU continues to strive to be an effective brand. As a case study, the research has the potential to benefit other universities as they can apply these findings to make more effective decisions and build their brands. Finally, this project gives deeper insight into the role of branding in the context of higher education as a whole.

### *Background*

Over the course of the past few decades, universities around the world have put a strong emphasis on brand development (Nguyen, Hemsley-Brown, & Melewar, 2016, p. 407). A brand, in broad terms, is a promise. A brand communicates the idea of delivering a certain set of benefits to the consumer. Nguyen, Hemsley-Brown, & Melewar (2016) offer a more specific definition of branding as it relates to higher education, saying it is the “manifestation of the institution’s features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students’ needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrollment decisions” (p. 407). This definition introduces the idea that a university’s brand is made up of two parts: how the institution wants to be perceived and how it is actually perceived by students, staff, and the community.

Western Kentucky University (WKU) is among the many schools putting a greater emphasis on branding. WKU began as a normal school in 1906 and moved to its current location in 1911 (WKU History, 2018). The campus developed in its early stages by merging with other nearby schools. WKU experienced mass amounts of growth during the 50s and 60s. By 1966, the school had adopted its current name “Western Kentucky University”, and, by 1967 had over 10,000 students (WKU History, 2018). Growth remained steady for WKU over the next 40 years; it established satellite campuses and introduced Big Red (WKU History, 2018). But a major “growth spurt” has occurred just over the past 10 years. Some of the major changes include the transition to Division I-A football, the introduction of the Honors College, greater emphasis on study abroad, campus expansion, campus beautification efforts, the introduction of doctoral programs, and the establishment of Gatton Academy. In 2018, WKU also introduced a new strategic plan outlining the future for the University. The plan centers around “Climbing to Greater Heights”. The plan shows that over the next 10 years WKU intends to increase diversity, increase graduation and retention rates, and create a sustainable budget (Climbing to Greater Heights, 2018).

## OBJECTIVES

1. Assess student perception of WKU's prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitanism.
2. Understand students' level of brand love and positive word-of-mouth, and their intention to support WKU as alumni.
3. Determine how dimensions differ based on criteria such as demographics.
4. Determine if University Brand Personality Scale correlates with student brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and intention to support WKU as alumni.
5. Draw conclusions and make recommendations for WKU based on the gathered data.

## METHODOLOGY

### *The University Brand Personality Scale*

This research uses The University Brand Personality Scale (UBPS), created by Philipp A. Rauschnabel, Nina Krey, Barry J. Babin, and Bjoern S. Ivens in 2016, to evaluate student perception of WKU. The UBPS “comprises prestige, sincerity, appeal, lively, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan dimensions. Results suggest that the scale strongly relates to brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and students' intention to support their university as alumni” (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016). The scale builds on previous brand personality scales (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016). Primarily, the UBPS creates an industry-specific scale based on the brand attributes identified by social psychologist and Stanford marketing professor Jennifer L. Aaker whose research has been used as groundwork to create several brand personality assessments (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016). Like Aaker’s model, the UBPS uses a “brands-as-person” metaphor, meaning it evaluates the brand through human attributes (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016).

Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, and Ivens (2016) identified adjectives being used by institutions, through mission statements, goals, and marketing plans, and by students and alumni, through interviews and surveys. Through continuing surveys, they were able to narrow down the collective list of 327 adjectives and categorize them into the six dimensions mentioned above: prestige, sincerity, appeal, lively, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016). Each of these dimensions has three to five adjectives which correlate with that item. For instance, to evaluate the sincerity dimension, participants are asked to assess if the university is humane, helpful, friendly, trustworthy, and fair (Rauschnabel, P.A., et al, 2016).

The UBPS was replicated in both Germany and the United States to give it further validity. The UBPS was published in the Journal of Business Research in 2016.

### *Student Perception Survey*

The primary information used in this research was survey data from current WKU students and recent alumni. The surveys were distributed via email to students' topper email accounts. The email included a link to the survey on Qualtrics. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix II.

The survey used a seven-point Likert scale to ask students to what extent certain words applied to WKU. These words correlated with specific dimensions from the UBPS. The survey also used a rank order question to determine which dimensions students most desired in a university. The survey also used a five-point Likert scale to determine student brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and intentions to support WKU as alumni.

Seven hundred seventy-eight students opened the survey link, and 564 filled out the majority of or completed the survey. Between 464 and 564 surveys were used to run data analysis depending upon the question, as students had the option to leave answers incomplete.

Students were asked to identify all semesters they attended WKU. Of the 564 survey respondents, 5.1% attended in Fall 2013, 8.3% attended in Spring 2014, 10.5% attended in Fall 2014, 12.2% attended in Spring 2015, 28.2% attended in Fall 2015, 28.1% attended in Spring 2016, 41.5% attended in Fall 2016, 42.2% attended in Spring 2017, 62.2% attended in Fall 2017, 63.1% attended in Spring 2018, 85.9% attended in Fall 2018, and 88.6% attended in Spring 2019.

Demographic data was also collected. 24.6% of respondents were male, 66.3% were female, 1.2% preferred not to say and 7.8% did not answer (Table 1, Appendix I). 83.3% of respondents identified themselves as caucasian, 4.3% identified as African American, 4.3% identified as Hispanic, 1.8% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.7% identified as Native American, and 1.2% selected “other” (Table 2, Appendix I). Respondents were asked their age. Ages ranged from 18 to 70. Of 564 respondents 69.8% are between ages 18 and 23. All other ages had 12 or less respondents identifying as that age.

Respondents were also asked their annual household income where 1 = under \$24,999; 2 = \$25,000 – \$49,000; 3 = \$50,000 – \$74,999; 4 = \$75,000 – \$99,000; 5 = \$100,000 – \$124,999; and 6 = over \$125,000. The mean annual household income was 3.35 with a standard deviation of 1.59. This indicates the average annual household income among respondents was between \$50,000 and \$74,999.

Respondents were asked which college(s) their major belonged to. 25.6% had a major in the Potter College of Arts and Letters, 22.5% had a major in the College of Health and Human Services, 17.9% had a major in the College of Educational and Behavioral Sciences, 17.6% had a major in the Ogden College of Science and Engineering, 16.7% had a major in the Gordon Ford College of Business, and 2.3% were undecided or unsure (Table 3, Appendix I).

## SURVEY RESULTS

### *WKU's University Brand Personality Dimensions*

Students were asked to imagine Western Kentucky University as a person and to what extent several words applied to WKU with 1 being does not apply and 7 being completely applies.

The first cluster of words (accepted, leading, reputable, successful, and considerable) fall under the “prestige” dimension of the UPBS. The mean response for the word “accepted” was 5.61 with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicates that students believe the word “accepted” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “leading” was a 5.03 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “leading” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “reputable” was 5.28 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “reputable” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “successful” was 5.4 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students believe the word “successful” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “considerable” was 5.21 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “considerable” somewhat applies to WKU. The average response for the prestige dimension was 5.3, with the word “accepted” being the word that most applied and “leading” being the word that least applied to WKU in the prestige dimension. This indicates that WKU students perceive WKU as somewhat or mostly prestigious (Table 4, Appendix I).

The second cluster of words (humane, helpful, friendly, trustworthy, and fair) fall under the “sincerity” dimension. The mean response for the word “humane” was 5.57

with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “humane” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “helpful” was 5.47 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “helpful” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “friendly” was 5.91 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students believe the word “friendly” mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “trustworthy” was 5.26 with a standard deviation of 1.5. This indicates that students believe the word “trustworthy” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word fair was 5.23 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “fair” somewhat applies to WKU. The average response for the sincerity dimension was 5.49, with the word “friendly” being the word that most applied and “fair” being the word that least applied to WKU in the sincerity dimension. This indicates that WKU students perceive WKU as somewhat or mostly sincere (Table 5, Appendix I).

The third cluster of words (productive, special, attractive) fall under the “appeal” dimension. The mean response for the word “productive” was 5.38 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates students believe the word “productive” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “special” was 5.14 with a standard deviation of 1.7. This indicates students believe the word “special” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “attractive” was 5.8 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “attractive” mostly applies to WKU. The average response for the appeal dimension was 5.44, with the word “attractive” being the word that most applied and “special” being the word that least

applied to WKU in the appeal dimension. This indicates that students perceive WKU as somewhat or mostly appealing (Table 6, Appendix I).

The fourth cluster of words (athletic, dynamic, lively and creative) fall under the lively dimension. The mean response for the word “athletic” was 5.02 with a standard deviation of 1.5. This indicates that students believe the word “athletic” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “dynamic” was 5.24 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students believe the word “dynamic” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “lively” was 5.51 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “lively” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU students. The mean response for the word “creative” was 5.31 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “creative” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The average response for lively dimension was 5.27 with “lively” being the word that most applied and “athletic” being the word that least applied to WKU in the lively dimension. This indicates that students perceive WKU as somewhat or mostly lively (Table 7, Appendix I).

The fifth cluster of words (organized, competent, structured, and effective) fall under the conscientious dimension. The mean response for the word “organized” was 4.99 with a standard deviation of 1.6. This indicates that students think the word “organized” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “competent” was 5.28 with a standard deviation of 1.5. This indicates that students think the word “competent” somewhat applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “structured” was 5.43 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students believe the word “structured” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word

“effective” was 5.35 with a standard deviation of 1.5. This indicates that students believe the word “effective” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The average response for conscientious dimension was 5.27 with “structured” being the word that most applied and “organized” being the word that least applied to WKU in the conscientious dimension. This indicates that students perceive WKU as somewhat or mostly conscientious (Table 8, Appendix I).

The sixth cluster of words (international, cosmopolitan, and networked) fall under the cosmopolitan dimension. The mean response for the word “international” was 5.55 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “international” somewhat or mostly applies to WKU. The mean response for the word “cosmopolitan” was 4.28 with a standard deviation of 1.6. This indicates that students believe the word “cosmopolitan” neither applies nor does not apply to WKU. The mean response for the word “networked” was 5.23 with a standard deviation of 1.4. This indicates that students believe the word “networked” somewhat applies to WKU. The average response for the cosmopolitan dimension was 5.02 with “international” being the word that most applied and “cosmopolitan” being the word that least applied to WKU in the cosmopolitan dimension. This indicates that students perceive WKU as somewhat cosmopolitan (Table 9, Appendix I).

Students indicated the word that most applied to WKU was “friendly” (mean = 5.91). This was followed by “attractive” (mean = 5.8). This was followed by “accepted” (5.6), “humane” (5.57), “international” (5.55) and “lively” (5.51) which were not significantly different from one another ( $p > .05$ ). The word students believe least applied to WKU by was “cosmopolitan” (mean = 4.28). This was followed by “organized” (mean

= 4.99), “athletic” (mean = 5.02), “leading” (mean = 5.04), and “special” (mean = 5.14). The last four words were not significantly different from one another ( $p > .05$ ).

Students indicated “sincerity” (mean = 5.49) and “appeal” (mean = 5.44) were the dimensions that most applied to WKU. This was followed by “prestige” (mean = 5.306), “lively” (mean = 5.27), and “conscientious” (mean = 5.27). Students indicated “cosmopolitan” (mean = 5.02) was the dimension that least applied to WKU.

#### *Desirable Dimensions*

Students were also asked to rank the most desirable traits in a university with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important. The median response for prestige was 2 with a range of 5. The median response for sincerity was 2 with a range of 5. The median response for appeal was 4 with a range of 5. The median response for lively was 5 with a range of 5. The median response for conscientious was 3 with a range of 5. The median response for cosmopolitan was 5 with a range of 5. The dimensions which students most desired in a University were “prestige” (mean = 2.33) and “sincerity” (mean = 2.36), followed by “conscientious” (mean = 2.82), then “appeal” (mean = 3.94), then “lively” (mean = 4.6), and finally cosmopolitan (mean = 4.95). However, each dimension had a range of 5 indicating that each trait was the most important to some students and the least important to some students (Table 10, Appendix D).

#### *Dimensions by Class*

There was not a significant difference in any of the six dimensions based on what semesters students attended WKU ( $p > .05$ ). This shows that students who attended WKU

from Fall 2013 to present did not perceive WKU's prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, or cosmopolitanism significantly differently.

However, the semester attended did effect some specific descriptive words. Students were asked to what extent the word "international" applies to WKU with 1 being does not apply and 7 being completely applies. The results showed there was a significant difference in perception based on if students attended in Fall 2017 ( $p = .037$ ). Specifically, students who attended in Fall 2017 were more likely to apply the word "international" to WKU (mean = 5.65) than those who did not (mean = 5.38).

Students were also asked to what extent the word "athletic" applies to WKU with 1 being does not apply and 7 being completely applies. The results showed there was a significant difference in perception based on if students attend in Fall 2015 ( $p = .037$ ). Specifically, students who attended in Fall 2015 were more likely to apply the word "athletic" to WKU (mean = 5.23) than those who did not (mean = 4.94).

#### *Dimensions by Academic College*

As predicted, dimensions varied based on academic colleges (Table 11, Appendix I). Specifically, students who were undecided on their major were significantly ( $p = .011$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as prestigious (mean = 4.5) than those who had selected a major (5.32). Students in Ogden College of Science and Engineering were also significantly ( $p = .029$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as prestigious (mean = 5.08) than those who were not (mean = 5.35).

Students with a major in Potter College of Arts and Letters (PCAL) were significantly less likely to apply five out of six dimensions to WKU. PCAL students were significantly ( $p = .000$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as prestigious (mean = 4.99) than

those who were not PCAL students (mean = 5.4). They were also significantly ( $p = .004$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as sincere (mean = 5.24) than those who were not PCAL students (5.57). PCAL students were also significantly less likely to perceive WKU as appealing (mean = 5.23) than those who were not PCAL students (mean = 5.51), significantly ( $p = .025$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as lively (mean = 5.09) than those who were not PCAL students (mean = 5.34), and significantly ( $p = .000$ ) less likely to perceive WKU as conscientious (mean = 4.89) than those who were not PCAL students (mean = 5.39).

In contrast, students with a major in the College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) were significantly more likely to apply five out of the six dimensions to WKU. CHHS students were significantly ( $p = .000$ ) more likely to perceive WKU as prestigious (mean = 5.65) than those who were not CHHS students (mean = 5.2). They were also significantly ( $p = .005$ ) more likely to perceive WKU as sincere (mean = 5.73) than those who were not CHHS students (mean = 5.41). CHHS students were also significantly ( $p = .009$ ) more likely to perceive WKU as appealing (mean = 5.69) than those who were not CHHS students (mean = 5.37), significantly ( $p = .045$ ) more likely to perceive WKU as lively (mean = 5.45) than those who were not CHHS students (mean = 5.22), and significantly ( $p = .000$ ) more likely to perceive WKU as conscientious (mean = 5.19) than those who were not CHHS students (mean = 4.97).

There were no significant differences in any dimensions among Gordon Ford College students or College of Educational and Behavioral Science students.

#### *Positive Word-of-Mouth*

To gauge positive-word-of-mouth, students were asked how often they talk positively about WKU with 1 being never and 5 being always. The mean response to how often students talk positively about WKU to their friends was 3.4 with a standard deviation of 1.1. This indicates that students sometimes to often talk positively about WKU to their friends. Students were also asked how often they encourage their friends to enroll in WKU. The mean response was 3.28 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students sometimes encourage their friends to enroll at WKU. Students were also asked how often they talk to other people about positive features of WKU. The mean response was 3.52 with a standard deviation of 1.1. This indicates that students sometimes to often talk positively about WKU to others. Overall, students engaged in positive word-of-mouth sometimes to often with an average response of 3.4 across positive word-of-mouth activities (Table 12, Appendix I).

The results showed a significant difference in frequency of positive word-of-mouth activities based on gender ( $p = .006$ ). Specifically, females were more likely to often engage in positive word-of-mouth (mean = 3.49) than males (mean = 3.2).

Contrary to predictions, students' overall positive feelings towards WKU did not vary based on ethnicity. There was no significant ( $p > .05$ ) difference in overall positive feelings towards WKU between caucasian students and minority students.

A regression was used in effort to determine what factors made students engage in positive word-of-mouth activities. A significant regression ( $p = .000$ , adjusted r-squared = .489) indicated that the appeal dimension was the strongest predictor (std. B = .454,  $p = .000$ ) of engaging in positive word-of-mouth, followed by the conscientious dimension (std. B = .121,  $p = .022$ ), and then the prestige dimension (std. B = .111,  $p = .049$ ). The

sincerity, lively, and cosmopolitan dimensions were not significantly predictive of positive word-of-mouth activities.

### *Alumni Support*

To gauge alumni support, students were asked to what extent they agreed with multiple statements about WKU with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “After graduation, I could imagine donating money to WKU”. The mean response was 2.78 with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicates that students did not disagree nor agree that they could imagine themselves donating money as alumni. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “If I can support WKU in any way in the future, I am willing to do so.” The mean response was 3.18 with a standard deviation of 1.1. This indicates that students did not disagree nor agree that they were willing to support WKU in the future. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “As an alumni, I am planning to support future WKU students”. The mean response was 3.28 with a standard deviation of 1.1. This indicates that students did not disagree nor agree they they would support future WKU students. Overall, intentions to support WKU as alumni were neutral with a mean of 3.1 across alumni intention questions (Table 13, Appendix I).

A regression to examine what factors made students intend to support WKU as alumni. A significant regression ( $p = .000$ , adjusted  $r$ -squared = .417) indicated that the appeal dimension was the strongest predictor (std.  $B = .315$ ,  $p = .000$ ) of intending to

support WKU as alumni, followed by the prestige dimension (std. B = .135,  $p = .029$ ), and then by the conscientious dimension (std. B = .112,  $p = .049$ ). The sincerity, lively, and cosmopolitan dimensions were not significantly predictive of alumni support.

### *Brand Love*

To gauge brand love, students were asked to what extent they agreed with multiple statements about WKU with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “I expect that WKU will be a part of my life for a long time to come”. The mean response was 3.33 with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicates that students were mostly neutral or agreed they expect WKU will be a part of their lives in the future. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “If WKU would go out of existence, I would feel anxiety”. The mean response was 3.27 with a standard deviation of 1.3. This indicates that students were neutral about feeling anxiety if WKU were to go out of existence. Student were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “Being a student at WKU makes my life more meaningful”. The mean response was 3.61 with a standard deviation of 1.1. This indicates that students were neutral or agreed that WKU makes their life more meaningful. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “I feel myself desiring WKU”. The mean response was 3.16 with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicates that students were neutral toward desiring WKU. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “I feel emotionally connected to WKU”. The mean response was 3.49 with a standard deviation of 1.2. This indicates that

students were neutral or agreed that they feel emotionally connected to WKU. Students were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “Overall, my feelings towards WKU are positive”. The mean response was 3.99 with a standard deviation of 0.99. This indicates that students agreed that their feelings towards WKU were positive. Overall, students were between neutral and agree on brand love statements with a mean of 3.5 (Table 14, Appendix I).

The results showed there was a significant difference in brand love based on gender ( $p = .029$ ). Specifically, females were more likely to agree with brand love statements (mean = 3.57) than males (mean = 3.35).

A regression to determine what factors made individuals more likely to display brand love. A significant regression ( $p = .000$ , adjusted r-squared = .453) indicated that the appeal dimension was the strongest predictor (std. B = .498,  $p = .000$ ) of displaying brand love, followed by the conscientious dimension (std. B = .148,  $p = .008$ ). The prestige, sincerity, lively, and cosmopolitan dimensions were not significantly predictive of alumni support.

## CONCLUSIONS

Each dimension (prestige, sincerity, appeal, lively, conscientious, and lively) had a mean between 5 and 5.5 meaning students believed each dimension somewhat or mostly applied to WKU. So while students rated WKU highest on sincerity and appeal, no traits were rated unfavorably (a mean below 4). At the same time, no trait strongly applied to WKU (a mean equal or above 6). This could be due to the range of answers. Each individual word had a range of 6, meaning for every word there were students who thought the word completely did not apply and students who thought the word completely applied to WKU. This is a sign of inconsistent views of WKU among students.

WKU students rated sincerity as one of the most desirable traits in a university and also rated this as one of WKU's strongest personality traits. This indicates alignment between what students are looking for in a university and what WKU is providing.

Students also rated prestige as one of the most desirable traits in a university, while prestige was the third dimension they most applied to WKU. However, students did think prestige somewhat to mostly applied to WKU, it was just not one of the traits that most applied. This shows misalignment between what students are looking for in a university and what WKU is providing.

Students rated appeal as the fourth most desirable trait in a university, while it was one of the dimensions they most applied to WKU. This shows that while appeal is one of the dimensions students most closely associate with WKU, it is not necessarily one of their most desired traits in a university. This shows another misalignment between what students are looking for and what WKU is providing.

Significant differences in perception based on when students attended WKU, shows how student perception has changed in recent years. Students who attended WKU in Fall 2015 perceive WKU as more athletic than those who did not. Under the assumption that the majority of students who did not attend WKU in Fall 2015, enrolled in WKU after 2015, it can be assumed current seniors and recent alumni, who would've attended in 2015, see WKU as more athletic than current underclassmen who were freshman in Fall 2016, Fall 2017, and Fall 2018. This could be explained by WKU's successful 2015 football season where the team won the Miami Beach Bowl (Western Kentucky Hilltoppers, 2018). Contrastingly, in the 2017 and 2018 season, the WKU football team had losing records (Western Kentucky Hilltoppers, 2018). While current WKU seniors and recent alumni remember more successful football seasons, the current underclassmen do not and therefore, could perceive the University as less athletic.

Students who attended WKU in Fall 2017 perceive WKU as more international than those who did not. Under the same assumption that the majority of those who did not attend WKU in Fall 2017, enrolled after, those students are mostly current freshmen. Freshman perceive WKU as less international than upperclassmen. This could be explained by a decrease of study abroad and use of the word international in WKU's branding. Over the past five years there has been an 8% decline in study abroad (Student Profile, 2018). Additionally, current freshmen were not attending WKU when the university vision statement was "a leading American university with international reach", which was removed from the WKU website in 2018 (Zeige, 2018).

There are significant differences in how WKU is perceived within different academic colleges. Students who have a major in Ogden College of Science and

Engineering, Potter College of Arts and Letters (PCAL), or are undecided are less likely to perceive WKU as prestigious. For Ogden College students, this could be because of more developed programs at competing Kentucky schools. For instance, both the University of Louisville (About Speed, 2019) and the University of Kentucky (Degree Programs, 2019) offer advanced degrees in engineering and WKU does not.

Overall, because students within PCAL rated WKU lower on five of the six dimensions than non-PCAL students, it can be assumed that on average PCAL students see WKU less favorably than non-PCAL students. This could be due to recent recommended cuts to programs within PCAL (Austin, 2018). However, it should be noted that this survey was conducted before the Dean of PCAL resigned and was reinstated and that situation had no bearing on these results.

In contrast, the students in the College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) rated WKU higher on five of the six dimensions than non-CHHS students. This could be explained by the CHHS' success. It is home to WKU's most popular major, nursing, as well as two of WKU's four doctoral programs (College of Health and Human Services, 2018). The CHHS has also seen an 18% increase in credentials in five years (College of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Students sometimes to often engage in positive word-of-mouth activities and females are more likely to engage in these activities. Students indicated positive but not strong brand love. Females were also more likely to display brand love. On average, students were neutral on their intention to support as alumni. The strongest predictor of each of these factors was appeal.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *WKU should compare its current position with its ideal position and adjust marketing efforts accordingly.*

WKU should use this data and compare it to their ideal personality. WKU's current personality ranks highest in sincerity and appeal; however, none of the six dimensions are particularly strong. Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, and Ivens recommend tailoring branding efforts towards the traits the university is seeking to improve (2016). For instance, the UBPS ties conscientiousness to administrative processes, university employees' behavior, and teaching quality. So if WKU wanted to strengthen its conscientious dimension, it may consider where it can improve organization and structure in these areas. For example, assessing ease of registering for classes, structure of online classes, and clarity of communication from upper-level administration. Klemenčič and Chirikov stress the importance of qualitative data to assist quantitative data in pinpointing exactly where adjustments can be made (2015).

2. *WKU should implement regular evaluation of its brand personality.*

WKU cannot adjust its branding without understanding students' current perception. Klemenčič and Chirikov state that measuring the student experience is one of the most effective means of quality assurance (2015). One simple way to do this would be to implement entrance and exit surveys to be taken sometime during students' first semester and last semester at WKU. Research shows that it may be wise to offer some incentive to increase response rates (Porter, 2004). Porter states nonmonetary, prepaid incentives are very effective in raising response rates like a ballpoint pen (2004). Future surveys could include staff and faculty, donors, and prospective students as well.

3. *WKU should consider the appeal dimension as it relates to its differentiation strategy.*

The UBPS identifies the appeal factor as an opportunity for differentiation. Students are directly and consciously comparing universities when making their college decision, which emphasizes the need to clearly communicate what makes the university “unique” and “special”, concepts demonstrated in the appeal dimension. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka explain that a university’s positioning should directly support its mission and vision (2006). For instance, WKU’s mission statement mentions preparing students to be “citizen-leaders in a global society”. The sentiment of this statement relates to the cosmopolitan dimension which is about networking and internationalism. While the mission statement seems to emphasize the importance of cosmopolitanism, students ranked cosmopolitan the lowest of WKU’s dimensions. This could indicate a need to move marketing efforts to cosmopolitanism if that is how WKU intends to differentiate itself from its competitors.

The appeal dimension is also important because, in this instance, it was the strongest predictor of brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and students’ intention to support WKU as alumni. By creating a stronger differentiation strategy, WKU could potentially increase brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and alumni support. These factors are important for creating a positive reputation for the University, increasing the number of applicants – which can in turn increase selectivity – and growing private-funding which is increasingly important as state-funding continues to be cut.

## LIMITATIONS

The first limitation with this survey was that it was a voluntary sample. Distributing the survey via email was the best way to get a high response rate, and the survey was effective in this regard. It would have been difficult to achieve the goal of 500 responses any other way. However, this did mean that responses were not random. Often voluntary surveys draw in respondents with extreme views rather than a true representation of population. If WKU were to implement this as a mandatory entrance and exit survey, this problem could be solved.

Because this was a volunteer sample, it was not completely representative of the WKU population. First, respondents in this survey were disproportionately female. The WKU student population is 58.8% female, while 66.3% of survey respondents were female (Student Profile, 2018). Additionally, 83.3% of respondents identified as caucasian, while as of Fall 2017, 77.8% of the WKU population is caucasian (Student Profile, 2018). African American students were underrepresented in this survey as 4.3% identified as African American, while as of Fall 2017 8.6% of the WKU population is African American (Student Profile, 2018). Other minorities were slightly overrepresented but close to the WKU population. 4.3% of respondents identified as Hispanic compared to 3.2% of the WKU population, 1.8% of respondents identified as Asian or Pacific Islander compared to 1.6% of WKU's population, and 0.7% of respondents identified compared to Native American compared to 0.3% of WKU's population (Student Profile, 2018).

Another primary issue with this research was survey abandonment. While the majority of the data was based on about 564 responses which were mostly or totally

completed, the survey link was opened 798 times. This shows that approximately 234 participants completed none or very little of the survey, an abandonment rate of about 29%. To combat this in the future, WKU could consider making the survey mandatory for entering and exiting students or using incentive techniques. While the abandonment rate was not ideal, it was balanced by a large sample size.

If I were to conduct this project again, I would like to interview WKU marketing decision-makers and brand ambassadors to identify what WKU's desired brand personality is. I would interview President Caboni and representatives in the Admissions Office and Marketing and Communications. I would like to compare their responses with my results and provide tangible recommendations for how WKU can improve its branding efforts to progress towards its ideal personality.

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APPENDIX I

Table 1.  
*Gender of respondents.*

	Male	Female	Prefer not to say	Did not answer
Frequency	139	374	7	44
Percentage	24.6	66.3	1.2	7.8

Table 2.  
*Ethnicity of respondents.*

	White	Black	Hispanic / Latino	Asian or Pacific Islander	Native American or Alaskan Native	Other
Frequency	470	24	24	10	4	7
Percentage	83.3	4.3	4.3	1.8	.7	1.2

Table 3.  
*College(s) respondents' major(s) belong to.*

	Educational and Behavioral Sciences	Gordon Ford College of Business	College of Health and Human Services	Ogden College of Science and Engineering	Potter College of Arts and Letters	Not sure or Undecided
Frequency	101	94	127	99	146	13
Percentage	17.9	16.7	22.5	17.6	25.9	2.3

Table 4.

Students were asked to rate prestige words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	Accepted	Leading	Reputable	Successful	Considerable	Prestige Average
Mean	5.61	5.03	5.28	5.40	5.21	5.30
Standard deviation	1.220	1.428	1.375	1.278	1.441	--

Table 5.

Students were asked to rate sincerity words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	Humane	Helpful	Friendly	Trustworthy	Fair	Sincerity Average
Mean	5.57	5.47	5.91	5.26	5.23	5.49
Standard deviation	1.361	1.439	1.257	1.540	1.446	--

Table 6.

Students were asked to rate appeal words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	Productive	Special	Attractive	Appeal Average
Mean	5.38	5.14	5.80	5.44
Standard deviation	1.329	1.673	1.335	--

Table 7.

Students were asked to rate lively words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	Athletic	Dynamic	Lively	Creative	Lively Average
Mean	5.02	5.24	5.51	5.31	5.27
Standard deviation	1.462	1.335	1.385	1.426	--

Table 8.

Students were asked to rate conscientiousness words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	Organized	Competent	Structured	Effective	Conscientiousness Average
Mean	4.99	5.28	5.43	5.35	5.27
Standard deviation	1.550	1.505	1.37	1.454	--

Table 9.

Students were asked to rate cosmopolitan words where 1 = completely does not apply and 7 = completely applies to WKU.

	International	Cosmopolitan	Networked	Cosmopolitan Average
Mean	5.55	4.28	5.23	5.02
Standard deviation	1.426	1.607	1.426	--

Table 10.

Students were asked which traits were most desirable in a university with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important.

	Pretige	Sincerity	Appeal	Lively	Conscientious	Cosmopolitan
Median	2	2	4	5	3	5
Range	6	6	6	6	6	6

Table 11.

*Students were asked to rate to what extent words applied to WKU with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important. Each word correlated with a deminsion and deminsion averages varied by academic college.*

	Educational and Behavioral Sciences	Gordon Ford College of Business	College of Health and Human Services	Ogden College of Science and Engineering	Potter College of Arts and Letters	Not sure or Undecided
Prestige Mean	5.40	5.30	5.65	5.08	4.99	4.50
Sincerity Mean	5.67	5.47	5.73	5.34	5.24	4.15
Appeal Mean	5.60	5.41	5.69	5.22	5.25	4.47
Lively Mean	5.36	5.28	5.45	5.24	5.09	4.71
Conscientious Mean	5.39	5.29	5.61	5.12	4.89	4.66
Cosmopolitan Mean	5.18	5.05	5.19	4.84	4.85	4.72

Table 12.

*Students were asked how often they engage in positive word-of-mouth activies with 1 = never and 5 = always.*

	Talk to your friends about positive aspects of WKU	Encourage friends to enroll at WKU	Talk to other people about positive aspects of WKU	Overall POW activites
Mean	3.40	3.28	3.52	3.4
Standard deviation	1.073	1.287	1.118	--

Table 13.

*Students were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements regarding intentions to support WKU as alumni with 1 being completely do not agree and 5 being completely agree.*

	After graduation, I could imagine myself donating money to WKU	If I can support WKU in any way in the future, I am willing to do so.	As an alumni, I am planning to support future students.	Overall alumni support
Mean	2.78	3.18	3.28	3.1
Standard deviation	1.184	1.075	1.070	--

Table 14.

*Students were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements regarding brand love with 1 being completely do not agree and 5 being completely agree.*

	I expect that WKU will be a part of my life for a long time to come.	If WKU would go out of exisitence, I would feel anxiety.	Being a WKU student makes my life more meaningful.	I feel myself desiring WKU.	I feel emotionally connected to WKU.	Overall, my feelings toward WKU are positive.	Overall brand love
Mean	3.33	3.27	3.61	3.16	3.49	3.99	3.5
Standard deviation	1.241	1.343	1.122	1.190	1.226	.989	--

# WKU Student Perception

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As part of completing my Honors Capstone Thesis at WKU, I am collecting information on student perceptions of WKU's brand personality. I would appreciate if you would take a brief survey (5 minutes) to help me complete my research. No identifying information will be collected, thus responses are completely anonymous and confidential.

This research is supervised by Dr. Patricia Todd in the Department of Marketing at Western Kentucky University. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact her at [patricia.todd@wku.edu](mailto:patricia.todd@wku.edu).

This project is completely voluntary and you may refuse or withdraw at any time. Thank you for your time!

Sincerely, Nicole Childress

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Consent Check Project Title: The evolution of the WKU brand (2014 – present)

Investigator: Nicole Childress, Marketing Department, [nicole.childress811@topper.wku.edu](mailto:nicole.childress811@topper.wku.edu)

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study. The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and ask the researcher if you have any questions. If you then decide to participate in the project, please check the box below. You should keep a copy of this form.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: This is an Honors Capstone Thesis project conducting by Nicole Childress under the supervision of the WKU Marketing Department and Dr. Patricia Todd. The project's purpose is to better understand student perspective on WKU.
2. Explanation of Procedures: This is an online survey which will take approximately 5 – 10 minutes to complete.
3. Discomfort and Risks: There are no discomfort or risk associated with participation in this survey.
4. Benefits: There are no benefits to completing this application. Participation in this application will help me complete my Honors Capstone Thesis.
5. Confidentiality: No identifying information will be collected, thus responses are completely anonymous and confidential.
6. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. You understand also that it

is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3360

I understand that by checking this box I am consenting to participate in this survey.

Imagine Western Kentucky University as a person. To what extent do the following words apply to WKU as a person?

	Does not apply (1)	Mostly does not apply (2)	Somewhat does not apply (3)	Neutral (4)	Somewhat applies (5)	Mostly applies (6)	Completely applies (7)
Accepted	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leading	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reputable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Successful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Considerable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Humane	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Helpful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friendly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Trustworthy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Productive	<input type="radio"/>						
Special	<input type="radio"/>						
Attractive	<input type="radio"/>						
Athletic	<input type="radio"/>						
Dynamic	<input type="radio"/>						
Lively	<input type="radio"/>						
Creative	<input type="radio"/>						
Organized	<input type="radio"/>						
Competent	<input type="radio"/>						
Structured	<input type="radio"/>						
Effective	<input type="radio"/>						
International	<input type="radio"/>						
Cosmopolitan	<input type="radio"/>						
Networked	<input type="radio"/>						

Please rank the most desirable traits in a university with 1 being the most important trait, 2 being the second most important trait, and so on:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Prestige (accepted, leading, reputable, successful, considerable)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sincerity (humane, helpful, friendly, trustworthy, fair)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Appeal (attractive, productive, special)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lively (athletic, dynamic, creative)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Conscientiousness (organized, competent, structured, effective)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Cosmopolitan (networked, international)

How often do you do the following?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Talk to your friends about positive aspects of WKU.	<input type="radio"/>				
Encourage friends to enroll at WKU.	<input type="radio"/>				
Talk to other people about positive features of WKU.	<input type="radio"/>				

To what extent do you agree with the following?

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
After graduation, I could imagine donating money to WKU.	<input type="radio"/>				
If I can support WKU in any way in the future, I am willing to do so.	<input type="radio"/>				
As an alumni, I am planning to support future students.	<input type="radio"/>				
I expect that WKU will be apart of my life for a long time to come.	<input type="radio"/>				
If WKU would go out of existence, I would feel anxiety.	<input type="radio"/>				
Being a student at WKU makes my life more meaningful.	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel myself desiring WKU	<input type="radio"/>				
I feel emotionally connected to	<input type="radio"/>				

WKU  
Overall, my  
feelings  
towards WKU  
are positive.

---

Which semesters did you attend WKU? Check all that apply.

- Fall 2013
- Spring 2014
- Fall 2014
- Spring 2015
- Fall 2015
- Spring 2016
- Fall 2016
- Spring 2017
- Fall 2017
- Spring 2018
- Fall 2018
- Spring 2019

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Please tell us a little about yourself.

---

When did you graduate or when do you expect to graduate from WKU? (Semester, Year)

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Gender:

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Prefer not to say (3)

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Ethnicity: (Check all that apply)

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- Asian or Pacific Islander (4)
- Native American or Alaskan Native (5)
- Other (6)

---

Annual Household Income:

- Under \$24,999 (1)
  - \$25,000 - \$49,999 (2)
  - \$50,000 - \$74,999 (3)
  - \$75,000 - \$99,999 (4)
  - \$100,000 - \$124,999 (5)
  - Over \$125,000 (6)
- 

Age: (in years)

---

What college(s) does/did your major belong to? (Check all that apply if you had/have more than one major)

- Educational and Behavioral Sciences (1)
  - Gordon Ford College of Business (2)
  - Health and Human Services (3)
  - Ogden College of Science and Engineering (4)
  - Potter College of Arts and Letters (5)
  - Not sure or undecided (6)
-