The depersonalised consumer subjectivity and its effect on fostering meaningful relationships between undergraduates and academics in higher education

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ABSTRACT
Both the consumer subjectivity and partnership models are receiving increasing attention within higher education institutions. In this article, I explore the impersonality that characterises the social role of the consumer and its impact on the formation and implementation of meaningful relationships between undergraduates and academics. I draw from Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis to explore 32 interviews and 12 policy documents gathered from two post-1992 universities in England. Academics and undergraduates in this study recognised the conflict that arises between the consumer subjectivity and the partner subjectivity; this article explores how this conflict is created through the behaviours that constitute socially structured roles. I will discuss the divergence between the institutional positioning of undergraduates and the impact this positioning has on the relationships between undergraduates and academics. This article discusses the variation apparent in the verbal and written discourses across both institutions and questions the navigation of the impersonal consumer subjectivity for fostering meaningful relationships between undergraduates and academics.

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Introduction
The introduction of market models into higher education (HE) institutions, and the subsequent legal imperatives facing institutions (Legislation.gov.uk, 2017) has encouraged the positioning of undergraduates as consumers of their universities (Tomlinson, 2016; Williams, 2013). The positioning of undergraduates within the consumer subjectivity encourages characteristics that are constituted through the establishment of the consumer as a socially structured and recognisable role, characteristics that encourage a depersonalised and superficial position within their institutions.

Subjectivities are socially constructed; they constitute ‘a set of guide-lines which direct the behaviour of the role’ (Hargreaves, 1972, p. 71). Given that ‘consumerism is now taken to be at the heart of modern productive relations in late capitalism’ (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 3), the consumer subjectivity is an established role and the expectations that constitute the normative behaviour of the consumer role are familiar. This article takes
the position that agents’ behaviour can be explored through the dialectical relation between structure and agency. Subjectivities are encouraged at the structural level through the positioning of agents within particular social roles; these subjectivities are either perpetuated or challenged through adherence to, or rejection of, the associated behavioural expectations of the social roles by individuals at the agential level. The consumer role is encouraged at the structural level of universities and thus, undergraduates are involved in the process of negotiating the adherence to, or rejection of, its associated behavioural expectations at the agential level.

The imperatives of positioning undergraduates within the consumer subjectivity, though, are problematic for institutions that promote partnership models, in which undergraduates are encouraged to foster personal and collaborative relationships with academics. These models are becoming increasingly popular within universities across England and are framed as a means of engaging students in the learning process more effectively through enhanced involvement in the creation of knowledge (Little, 2010; Tong et al., 2018). Whilst the literature on student-staff partnership in HE is vast, much of it fails to acknowledge the ‘powerful structural constraint’ (Haugaard, 2015, p. 153) created by adherence to socially structured subjectivities. Moreover, the literature often assumes a naïve simplicity about the positivity of implementing partnership models within the current mass HE context, without scrutinising the various structural constraints. For instance, Macfarlane explores the naivety of assuming that students enjoy partnership models and highlights their actual preference for more passive methods of engagement (Macfarlane, 2015). The purpose of this article is to illuminate the impact of the impersonal consumer subjectivity on the possibility of building meaningful relationships between undergraduates and academics. The article highlights recognition that undergraduates are, as one participant phrased it, ‘just one in the masses’ (A, 2, Ben) as a result of the massification of HE in which students are positioned as nameless consumers. Moreover, it illuminates the conflict created by the opposing subjectivities and behavioural expectations of the consumer and partner subjectivities and the potential damage this has for fostering relational undergraduate-academic relationships.

This article draws from a research project conducted across two post-1992 universities in England, hereafter referred to as University A and University B (A or B), both of which have institutional policies for implementing student partnership. University A has a specific institutional strategy to configure a collaborative learning process at the structural level and was chosen to explore how this configuration worked at the micro level of interactions. University B was chosen to provide a comparative model within the same categorisation of institution; the intention being to explore the variation in perspectives and practices between a university with an institutional-wide partnership model and one with less cogency. The partnership model at University A is embedded in the learning and teaching throughout the institution and is at the centre of the institution’s decision-making processes in relation to student engagement. University B, conversely, has an explicit partnership document but the strategy is not embedded with the same consistency; it is presented as a guideline for engaging students in the learning process. This project engaged with 32 semi-structured interviews with undergraduates and academics (12 academics and 20 undergraduates); the interviews explored interpersonal relationships, the consumer model, the engagement of undergraduates, the impact of policy documents and the relationships between undergraduates and
academics, conceptualised in drawings produced by participants. The article also draws on institutional documents, including: student charter, learning and teaching strategy, complaints procedure, prospectus, terms and conditions and code of conduct. Participants were all voluntary and included academics within the humanities and undergraduates within the humanities, in different years of study (1–3). All participants have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality.

The study uses the Faircloughian three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA). All data were analysed as a text (analysis of vocabulary and grammar), a discursive practice (interpretation of situational context and intertextuality) and a social practice (explanation of the social determinants influencing the text) (Fairclough, 2015). The three-dimensional model was applied to key parts of the discourses from the datasets. The textual analysis including pulling out specific textual elements, including vocabulary and grammar; the data was then analysed as a discursive practice, which included interpreting the ways in which the text had used other discourses and how these had manifested, as well as any presuppositions and their origins; the analysis from these stages was then used to explain the text as a social practice, which involved analysing the social determinants influencing the text, from systems of knowledge and belief, to social identities and relations. Because discourse in CDA is defined broadly as ‘language use as [...] social practice’ (Fairclough, 1993, p. 3), the visual drawings produced by participants were analysed using the three-dimensional model, except vocabulary and grammar were replaced by image. CDA is a dialectical method and allows for a richer understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, and an exploration of the relationship between discourse and social processes; this aided the exploration of the conflict that arises between consumerist models perpetuated at the structural level and interpersonal relationships at the agential level. The study was approved by The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

The implications of a massified HE sector

The massive increase in student enrolments over the last few decades (HESA, 2019) has had a significant impact on undergraduate-academic relationships. A larger undergraduate population inevitably breeds impersonality; academics struggle to foster personal or meaningful relationships with every individual they teach. Naidoo and Jamieson note: ‘the pressures of greater student numbers as well as the fear of student complaints and litigation has led to a shift from individually tailored feedback […] to minimal and standardized feedback’ (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 274). The massification of HE, coupled with the introduction of the consumer model, has had a detrimental impact on pedagogical relationships. There is a wealth of literature that discusses the various negative implications of the introduction of market models into a massified HE system (Brown, 2013; Love, 2008; Tomlinson, 2013, 2016). Some authors note the instrumentality that stems from the consumer subjectivity and the passive expectation of provision (Bunce et al., 2017; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Others consider the employability agenda and performance indicators, noting their potential damage for collaborative and innovative learning (Molesworth et al., 2009; Nixon et al., 2011). The depersonalisation of the
undergraduate student body, though, is arguably the most toxic for pedagogical relationships based on collaboration or partnership, because they hinge on trust and relationality.

Both institutions in this study are subject to market influence, which means that their undergraduates are positioned within a massified consumer population. This creates a ‘powerful structural constraint’ (Haugaard, 2015, p. 153) for their behaviour and their interactions with academics. Wartenberg conceptualises this idea through the notion of an ‘agent’s action-environment’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 80), which is ‘the structure within which an agent exists as a social actor’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 80). Wartenberg argues that an individual’s assessment of their action-environment is a critical precursor for action and involves both understanding and evaluation of action-alternatives (Wartenberg, 1990, pp. 81–84). In other words, agents must first understand their situation, the contextual rules and norms that are in place, and then evaluate their possible actions. Because ‘consumer relations in higher education are enforced by various legal and policy frameworks’ (Raaper, 2018, p. 3), universities are legally obligated to position their undergraduates as consumers. Undergraduates understand and evaluate this context in relation to possible actions and appropriate behaviour. The characteristics that constitute the appropriate behaviour within consumer-provider relations are drawn on by undergraduates as part of their ‘action-environment’ (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 80). Unfortunately, the normative behaviours of the consumer subjectivity are diametrically opposed to those necessary for meaningful and personal relationships between undergraduates and academics.

The impersonal consumer subjectivity versus the reciprocal partner subjectivity

Williams argues that ‘there are many forces encouraging students to adopt consumer attitudes […] Such socialisation leads many students to believe that behaving as a consumer is what is expected’ (Williams, 2013, p. 8). National policy drivers are influencing the institutional approaches of both universities in this study, in relation to the consumer model and the partnership model. Tomlinson argues that ‘if indeed learning is earning, then the drive towards strengthening students’ future job prospects is a core guiding principle’ (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 125) and undergraduates are encouraged to see their university experience as an investment for employment. This focus encourages undergraduates to consider their learning in relation to the final degree, with an emphasis on performance indicators. This heightens instrumentality, whilst also hindering the potential to build collaborative relationships with academics because ‘students cannot trust that intellectual risk-taking will be rewarded when they constantly receive messages to work in a particular way to secure a certain grade’ (Tomlinson, 2013, p. 95). At the same time, the TEF and its influence on the reputation of institutions in the UK is impacting the potency of partnership models within institutions; constructing pedagogical relationships based on collaborative knowledge creation is one way in which universities can improve their TEF ratings and thus, attract more students. Whilst the literature on both the consumer subjectivity and the partner subjectivity within HE is seemingly extensive, both concepts are frequently treated in isolation and developments and discussions surrounding the interrelation of both roles has been sparse.
This article takes the position that subjectivities are socially constructed through the dialectical relation between the positioning of agents at the structural level and agents’ acceptance or rejection of the behaviours that constitute that positioning at the micro level. As Bevir notes, because people exist within different contexts, ‘we have to examine the ways in which a particular context influences, limits, or determines the forms of subjectivity people take on’ (Bevir, 1999, p. 357). The social construction of subjectivities constitutes how social agents behave; individuals ‘develop expectations about what it is that one does, and what it is that one ought to do, in particular contexts’ (Hayward & Lukes, 2008, p. 14). Solomon notes, ‘we tend to pattern our behaviour on the perceived expectations of others’ (Solomon, 2016, pp. 162–163); the findings of this study corroborate the notion that undergraduates behave according to the social role they feel they are expected to perform within. Because they are consistently told that they should consider themselves consumers of the institution and because the institution positions them as such at the structural level, undergraduates frequently adopt the associated behaviours within relationships at the micro level.

The adherence to the consumer subjectivity is damaging to relationships between undergraduates and academics: ‘the undercutting of professional knowledge and virtues by consumer demand and satisfaction may, perversely, also have the effect of undermining, rather than enhancing, pedagogical relationships’ (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 274). Moreover, the impersonality that characterises the consumer subjectivity breeds antagonism, which is emphasised by institutional documentation that exacerbates the opposing interests of undergraduates and academics and ‘creates a pervasive sense that lecturers and students have opposing interests which require external regulation’ (Naidoo & Williams, 2015, p. 217). When students are positioned as nameless consumers, it encourages a lack of personal care and decreases the emphasis on human connection, which is problematic for universities that encourage partnership relationships.

Partnership relationships are based on ‘reciprocity, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and complementary contributions’ (Marquis et al., 2017, p. 720). The partner subjectivity is often framed as being a counter to the consumer subjectivity, encouraged in order to prevent undergraduates from normalising consumer behaviour within universities. When undergraduates are positioned as partners, they are expected to take responsibility for learning, actively participate in the learning process and share authority within reciprocal relationships with academics (Little, 2010; Tong et al., 2018). All of these characteristics are incompatible with the depersonalised consumer subjectivity; one role is based on being external and passive, and the other is based on trust and relationality. The possibility of nurturing partnerships based on relationality is difficult in a context in which ‘consumerism is self-centered’ (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 9) and undergraduates are positioned as an impersonal and standardised body.

According to Naidoo and Jamieson, ‘since customers are generally external to an organization, students who internalise a consumer identity in effect place themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of education’ (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 272). Similarly, Maringe notes that ‘the metaphor [of student-as-consumer] distances students from the educational process […] by viewing students as consumers, their role as co-producers of knowledge and understanding is minimised’ (Maringe, 2011, p. 150). Within market contexts, consumers are often homogenised by their providers; the consumer-provider relationship is impersonal, and
consumers are treated as a standardised group. Positioning undergraduates as consumers has the potential to lead to a distancing from the pedagogical process; if undergraduates behave as consumers, they may perceive themselves as external to the institution. This stance prohibits collaboration because consumers generally have only temporary interaction with their providers. As such, undergraduates who adopt an external and distanced position will be less likely to engage in collaborative activities with academics.

Authors frequently comment on the negative behavioural characteristics of the consumer for HE contexts, such as the increased entitlement, the expectation of passive provision or the ability to threaten litigation (Brown, 2013; Love, 2008; McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Tomlinson, 2016; Williams, 2013). Whilst a report by Universities UK noted that ‘students want a more personal relationship with their university than the type of engagement they appear to associate with being a “customer”’ (Universities UK, 2017, p. 6), there still remains little research detailing the impact that the depersonalised consumer subjectivity has on the fostering of meaningful undergraduate-academic relationships. What is missing from the literature, and what was apparent in the data conducted in this study, was the toxicity that the characteristic of depersonalisation has for pedagogical relationships. The findings of this study illuminate the conflict between the impersonality of the consumer subjectivity and the reciprocity of the partner subjectivity in relation to fostering meaningful relationships with academics.

Discussion

**Positioning undergraduates as the ‘anonymous cog in a wheel’ at the structural level**

Encouraging the consumer position at the macro level entails the de-individualisation of the undergraduate body. The consumer subjectivity is an impersonal social role, characterised by distance and this was reflected in the interview discourses. One academic reflected on the necessity of building a relationship with undergraduates in order to make them feel as though ‘they’re more than just an anonymous cog in a wheel’ (A, Mary) and another felt its necessity was to emphasise ‘that the institution isn’t a machine’ (B, Lizzie). The discursive metaphor ‘cog in a wheel’ and the reference to ‘machine’ connotes a depersonalisation associated with consumer-provider relationships, dictated by a lack of emotion or humanity. One academic argued: ‘if I thought of students as consumers, then, I wouldn’t care about them in quite the same way’ (B, James). Taberner has noted that, within marketised institutions, ‘most staff feel there is a worrying, dumbing down of quality where student numbers and income are prioritised’ (Taberner, 2018, p. 146); the massification of HE and the imperative surrounding financial stability through recruitment makes the university seem like a ‘conveyor belt of students (A, 2, Ben), which encourages a ‘clone-mentality’ (B, 1, Max). As a discursive practice, the above participants are drawing on the intertextuality of discourse more readily associated with manufacturing; references to conveyor belts, machinery, cogs and clones emphasises a lack of humanity and individuality.

The undergraduate participants, generally, considered themselves positioned as nameless consumers by their institution: ‘I feel like a number, rather than an individual. Like
a statistic or something’ (B, 3, Charles). This de-individualisation was reflected in a number of the undergraduates’ drawings (Figures 1 and 2):

Interestingly, the undergraduates that drew a lack of personal relationship with their institution were from University A. The student who drew the first image said: ‘I’m just

Figure 1. Drawing of the relationship between undergraduate and the university (A, 2, Ben)

Figure 2. Drawing of the relationship between undergraduate and the university (A, 2, Daisy)
one in the masses […] we’re just the students, we pay the tuition and go there […] I think the university probably just sees me as another student’ (A, 2, Ben). This related to the way in which the institution engaged their undergraduates rather than academics, but this participant perceived that only some academics engaged undergraduates as individuals: ‘for other tutors, who I don’t really know, I’m just another student […] I don’t think they’d be able to distinguish me’ (A, 2, Ben). The student responsible for the second drawing said:

Lots and lots and lots of people, all blank faces, this one’s me. Just another face in the crowd. Again, I don’t see that as a negative thing, I’m quite happy for that anonymity […] I’m quite happy just being just another body filling a seat, and just another name on the register (A, 2, Daisy).

For this participant, the anonymity of the consumer subjectivity did not have the same negative connotations; she perceived this as inevitable because ‘there’s so many people going to university, so many people that they’re just churning them out’ (A, 2, Daisy). Although she was content to be anonymous at the institutional level, this participant was distressed at the thought of being engaged as an impersonal consumer in relationships with academics: ‘because I work in retail, I see customers as just blank faces. Oh God, is that how they see us? Oh no’ (A, 2, Daisy), which implies the negativity of impersonality for relationships with academics. This participant is drawing on the social practice of consumer-provider relationships, in which consumers are typically anonymous to providers. The structural positioning of undergraduates as consumers in a HE context, because of the familiarity of the consumer-provider relationship as a social practice, has the potential to reduce undergraduates to ‘blank faces’ (A, 2, Daisy), which negates the personal relationality necessary for successful partnerships.

The lack of emotion and personal connection that was recognised by undergraduates from University A was evident in the institutional documentation, where the discourse is clinical and underpinned by legality. Phrases such as ‘the student agrees to be bound by the University’s Regulations’ (University A, 2018b) and ‘the student will have 20 working days to respond’ (University A, 2018a) are devoid of personal connection. The institutional discourse makes explicit and repeated intertextual reference to ‘educational services’ (University A, 2018b), which is an appropriation of market discourse. The unemotive discourse used in the policy documents across University A is reflected back in the undergraduate’s perceptions of their positioning within the institution. At the structural level, undergraduates are an impersonal body, one with legal rights and entitlements, and the undergraduates in this study recognised that.

Similarly, there was a consistent recognition from participants at University B that the institutional positioning of undergraduates was based on homogenising the undergraduate body:

In the grand scheme of a university, me as an individual, probably isn’t valued […] the student body, that’s valued (B, 2, Henry).

I guess I’m just a percentage of all the other people here (B, 1, Bella).

I feel like you come to university and you pay but, you just end up feeling less, less than, and it might be because, obviously there’s so many people here (B, 3, Charles).
The majority of undergraduate interviewees at both institutions perceived themselves as anonymised or de-individualised by their institutions. The positioning of undergraduates as consumers at the structural level was acknowledged by the participants in this study, the consequences of which were apparent at the agential level, in the negotiation of interpersonal relationships.

However, the institutional discourse from University B was far less clinical and impersonal and the intertextuality of market and legal discourse was less cogent. Although specific policy documents outlined the legal contract between students and the university, other documents were far more personalised than the comparative documents from University A. University A employs discursive phrases such as ‘students making a complaint have the right’ (University A, 2018a), which positions undergraduates as external to the institution and reiterates the notion that each party is ‘pitted against each other with competing interests’ (Williams, 2013, p. 49). University B, on the other hand, positions their students as ‘partners’ (University B, 2018b) when resolving complaints, which emphasises the personal relationship between individual undergraduates and the institution. This difference between the institutions in the impersonal positioning of undergraduates at the macro level was reflected back in the participants’ perception of undergraduates’ positioning at the micro level.

‘You are not a number here’: negating the positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers at the agential level

As discussed, undergraduates are positioned as impersonal consumers at the structural level. The findings, though, suggest that whilst there is a general rejection of this subject position in relationships at the micro level, its cogency impacts how academics and undergraduates navigate their relationships with one another. The depersonalisation of the consumer subjectivity was considered problematic for relationships between undergraduates and academics:

If I didn’t worry about them and worry about how they’re doing and think about them as human beings rather than people who are buying a product from me, I don’t feel I would be a good teacher, let alone a good person (B, James).

Another argued: ‘I think engaging with them respectfully and personally is going to help them feel motivated about their learning I think, than if they feel that we’re impersonal and don’t, sort of, care’ (A, Grace). There was a considerable emphasis on the importance of personal relationships by both academics and undergraduates, which is in opposition to the positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers at the structural level. One said:

I was really conscious about not just being a number […] I really wanted to have that interaction where the lecturers actually knew who I was […] So, I really like the fact that the lecturers actually know us all by name (A, 1, Claire).

Another said, ‘that’s something I really like, if people remember your name and you as an individual, you feel a bit more involved’ (B, 2, Henry). There was a strong sense in which undergraduates reflected on the importance of academics engaging them as individuals, as opposed to impersonal consumers.
Generally, the discourses of the undergraduate interviews at University A reflected the impersonality constituted at the structural level in their relationships with academics at the agential level; one admitted that the academics ‘don’t bother learning names’ (A, 1, Chloe). Another talked about the impersonality of interacting with most academics: ‘if I had to email them, it would be, “Dear”, you know, rather than “Hi”’ (A, 3, Daniel). One participant felt that this impersonality makes it ‘quite difficult to have relationships with staff’ (A, 2, Lisa), which is problematic for University A’s institutional-wide partnership policy based on ‘mutual expectations and aspirations’ (University A, 2018c). There is a conflict in the behavioural expectations of undergraduates; whilst they are positioned as consumers by the institution, they are also positioned as partners. However, in general, the undergraduate participants from this study recognised the conflict in adhering to both the consumer and the partner roles. The inability for students to foster personal relationships with academics belies an ability to encourage relationality and trust. It is necessary for individuals to know and trust one another if they are to collaborate as partners.

Moreover, the impersonality associated with the consumer subjectivity has the potential to breed antagonistic relationships because undergraduates are reframed as demanding consumers and academics are the providers who are ‘exhausted or burnt out’ (A, Anna) in the endeavour to satisfy undergraduates’ needs. One academic argued that the structural positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers creates ‘an antagonistic relationship of entitlement through their legal right’ (A, Andrew), which impacts on the undergraduate-academic relationship. Another felt that there was ‘an anxiousness’ (A, Bernard) around dealing with undergraduates as consumers, because of the potential for conflict when expectations are not met. This is problematic in the attempt to establish reciprocal partnerships with academics because it creates a distinct separation based on the ‘constant threat of student litigation and complaints’ (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 275).

However, there was another participant who had a completely opposing perception of her individuality when interacting with academics. She said:

They do actually make the effort to get to know you, and I really like that with a lot of the staff, I feel comfortable enough to email them to know it’s me […] you don’t feel like you’re paying a fee to fund their research (A, 1, Claire).

This interviewee was firm in her belief that academics at University A did not encourage the positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers, but this was not the common response for undergraduates at University A. The majority felt anonymised, and this has perhaps been exacerbated by the increasing enrolments for humanities courses at University A since 2015; within the disciplines that the participants belonged to, undergraduate enrolment increased from 415 in 2015 to 485 in 2017 (HESA, 2020). The institution is also improving its reputation in the sector and, as one participant phrased it, they are ‘rising through the league tables at the moment, so I’m like, “If I join now, then I can benefit from the future reputation”’ (A, 3, Jane). The increased reputation is going to attract more undergraduate enrolments and larger course numbers inevitably means fewer personal dynamics.

The discourses of the undergraduate interviews at University B presented a more consistent perception of the difference between the positioning of undergraduates at the macro and micro level. There was a regularity in terms of the university being perceived
of as welcoming because of the emphasis that academics place on personal relationships. One academic said:

They really are well looked after here and […] a lot of them come here rather than other local universities, or other universities because they say that we’re small and friendly […] there is that slightly family-feel about us where they know that their lecturers will know them (B, Janice).

Although both universities have large undergraduate populations, those from University B perceived the institution as being more ‘homely’ (B, 2, Henry) and ‘more involved’ (B, 2, Henry) than those from University A. Another academic at University B argued that they place an emphasis on individuality at the micro level, in order to counteract the anonymity of the consumer subjectivity at the structural level: ‘we say that, “You are not a number here, you are a name” and we do get to know our students here’ (B, James).

This emphasis on individuality was recognised by the majority of undergraduates:

It’s just the way the relationships are more personal (B, 3, Phoebe).

I think that’s the one thing I’ve really benefitted from at this uni, I think they’re really good with the tutors helping you personally (B, 2, Vera).

They want you to do your best, especially as an individual because they try and get to know everyone on a first-person basis (B, 1, Bella).

I feel like, your tutors know if you’re there […] So, they’re not just talking to a faceless bunch of people, they know that you’re there, and I think that’s what makes you feel like part, and valued, of the uni (B, 2, Ellie).

Something that I really, really do appreciate with this uni […] is that there’s always been someone there here for me to rely on […] and I have been able to establish really good relationships with my tutors (B, 3, Charles).

The above perceptions suggest that academics at University B are striving to negate the depersonalised consumer positioning that is perpetuated at the institutional level; ‘they are very keen on everyone mattering’ (B, 3, Phoebe) to ensure that undergraduates feel as though they are valued members and to emphasise a positioning in which they are ‘co-producers of knowledge’ (University B, 2018a). One academic reflected on this divergence and argued that academics are

The people who are doing the coal-faced work, who care a lot about their students, who see their students and don’t think of them as numbers who are important to university income or numbers who are going to affect TEF results (B, James).

At the agential level, ‘there’s a human element’ (B, Michelle) because ‘it’s when it becomes personal that you’re more motivated’ (B, Vicky). Within University B, there was a coherency in the approach to building partnership models with undergraduates; despite the institutional-wide approach adopted by University A, the academic-undergraduate relationship in University B was perceived to be far more collaborative and personal. The ability to build personal relationships at the agential level is perhaps easier at University B because of the smaller course numbers. Whilst University A has seen its humanities enrolments steadily increase since 2015, University B has seen a decline; there were 660 enrolments in the associated
disciplines in 2015 compared to just 390 in 2017 (HESA, 2020). Whilst it is difficult to assume concrete conclusions, it is reasonable to infer that the combination of falling enrolments and the lack of a strict institutional strategy awards academics more space to negotiate personal relationships with undergraduates that both parties perceive as authentic.

Academics at University B reflected on the necessity of emphasising the personal relationships with undergraduates in order to help them succeed in their learning:

> When the system works, that’s how it works, as a self-perpetuating cycle where we actually get to know those students, get to know their stories a bit, genuinely care about them doing well and therefore we’re prepared to work hard with them to make that happen, which, again, is what’s threatened of course by the customer model (B, Janice).

The same academic reflected that ‘it’s nice that we still use the word relationship, because it’s a reminder of something very human, which I think is, precisely, what should be at the heart of relations between academics and students’ (B, Janice). There was recognition of the challenges that arise when undergraduates are positioned as impersonal consumers and the threat it poses for the ability to foster relationships based on trust, relationality and mutual respect:

> It really does destroy the relationship between students and lecturers because if they think they’re buying something then I sometimes remember how many hours I’m actually being paid for and what they have a right to expect and what they don’t (B, Janice).

The institutional positioning of undergraduates as consumers threatens the possibility of partnerships because ‘it’s very hard to sustain a feeling of relationship with somebody who is taking that approach’ (B, Janice) and belies the ‘human connection’ (B, 2, Henry) that is necessary for successful partnerships based on trust and relationality.

This study has highlighted the tension between the structural positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers because ‘the legal relationship […] undercuts everything’ (A, Andrew) and the agential positioning of undergraduates as ‘an individual’ (B, 2, Henry). There was a clear negation of the institutional consumer positioning at University B; both undergraduates and academics acknowledged the positioning of undergraduates within the impersonal consumer subjectivity at the structural level, but recognised the encouragement of a personal partner subjectivity in relationships based on relationality at the micro level. University A, on the other hand, reflected less difference in the perception of how undergraduates are positioned at the structural and agential levels; undergraduates, particularly, perceived their positioning within the impersonal consumer subjectivity at both the structural level and within interpersonal relationships with academics at the micro level. Whilst the perceptions of undergraduate positioning differed, discourses from interviews at both institutions reflected a strong recognition that the impersonality of the consumer subjectivity threatened the ability to foster meaningful and personal relationships between undergraduates and academics based on trust and relationality.
Concluding thoughts

The university is in danger of doing two contradictory things. One is allowing them to think that they’re customers [...] and the other is, rightly saying, “This is a partnership in which you have equal responsibility” and the trouble is that I think students are listening to one more than they do the other (B, Janice).

This study has demonstrated the damage that the impersonal consumer subjectivity has on the fostering of meaningful and personal relationships with academics. The institutional positioning of undergraduates as ‘blank faces’ (A, 2, Daisy) perpetuates the ‘very antagonistic, conflictual’ (A, Andrew) nature of consumer-provider relationships which is subsumed into undergraduate-academic relationships as academics are reframed as ‘service providers, instead of educators’ (B, Vicky). As the opening quotation demonstrates, undergraduates are encouraged to adhere to a consumer subjectivity through structural positioning, whilst being encouraged to engage in meaningful and reciprocal partnerships with academics. These two relationship dynamics are constituted through conflicting characteristics and behaviours.

This study provides conceptual novelty in its exploration of undergraduate-academic relationships in the current university climate. The dialectical relation between structure and agency provides greater clarity for understanding the conflict in the positioning of undergraduates and its impact on the relationship dynamics they negotiate with academics. This study has demonstrated that the conflicting characteristics encouraged by two opposing subjectivities leads to divergent behaviours and perceptions for undergraduates regarding their relationships with academics. The positioning of undergraduates is in flux; whilst the majority of participants recognised their institutional position as an impersonal one, there was less consistency in their positioning within relationships with academics. Some felt that they were positioned as impersonal and anonymous by their academics also, which was perceived negatively, and some felt that academics strongly encouraged collaboration and relationality. Nevertheless, being positioned within two conflicting roles, one of which is a legal necessity, inevitably creates difficulty in establishing appropriate behaviour because ‘individuals frequently have difficulty in deciding which behavior is appropriate’ (Kitchener, 1988, p. 218). This conflict was highly apparent in the discourses of the interviews; undergraduates struggle to establish relational and trusting relationships with academics when they perceive themselves as depersonalised and external to the institution. This negates the possibility of fostering relationships based on ‘shared responsibility and cooperative or collaborative action, in relation to shared purposes’ (Levy et al., 2010, p. 1).

The consumer subjectivity encourages undergraduates to adopt an impersonal and external stance toward institutions and academics, whilst partnership relationships entail that they be actively involved in all aspects of university life. Whilst the findings of this study demonstrate that not all undergraduates perceive the impersonality of the consumer subjectivity as having an impact on their relationships with academics, there was still recognition that this depersonalisation was apparent at the institutional level and for some, was apparent when interacting with academics too. This was more apparent at University A, despite the partnership model being more cogent in the sense of being embedded institutionally, which might suggest that a rigid institutional policy is preventing academics the
necessary space to negotiate personal and individual relationships in an authentic way. Both institutions can be described as teaching-oriented, which necessitates different pedagogical relationships from those found in more research-intensive institutions. Although it is only possible to surmise the outcomes had this study been situated within more research-intensive institutions, the findings of this study suggest that perhaps the depersonalisation would be stronger and more damaging to collaborative relationships because there is less focus on building and nurturing personal interactions between undergraduates and academics. It would be beneficial to undertake further research within different institutions to better understand how the depersonalisation of the consumer subjectivity is impacting on the possibility of building meaningful relationships in different HE contexts.

Moreover, according to a Universities UK report, ‘students at a post-1992 university are more likely than those who attend a highly selective institution to say they see themselves as customers (51 and 40% respectively)’ (Universities, 2017, p. 6). This is often explained as a result of post-1992 universities needing to be more vigorous in their competitive marketing strategies because ‘some institutions will be more successful at attracting students than others; this means that some institutions may be at risk of failing’ (Browne et al., 2010, p. 50). With the financial imperatives surrounding recruitment, post-1992 universities are characterised by ‘more aggressive marketing strategies than their pre-1992 university counterparts’ (Lomas, 2007, p. 41); they lack the wealth of prestige or reputation that other universities possess and are ‘forced to justify their status by engagement and compliance with the neo-liberal agenda’ (Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2011, p. 96). However, whilst there is a general awareness of consumerism and the encouragement to adopt certain consumer traits, the undergraduates from University B demonstrated an overall reluctance to adhere to a consumer role. So, whilst both universities in this study may have to adopt more aggressive marketing strategies, this does not necessarily lead to undergraduates behaving as consumers. However, the cogency of market models in both institutions does contribute to the ambiguity and conflict surrounding appropriate behaviours when interacting with academics.

Moreover, the institutional positioning of undergraduates as impersonal consumers, resulting from the introduction of market models, is toxic to the fostering of partnership dynamics based on trust and collaboration. In order for institutions to implement successful partnership dynamics, they must first acknowledge the impersonality that characterises the consumer subjectivity and the ‘powerful structural constraint’ (Haugaard, 2015, p. 153) it creates before attempting to build new dynamics that hinge on trust and relationality. Undergraduates and academics must mediate this new learning environment, in which they negotiate conflicting social roles and their expectations; there should be an emphasis on engaging undergraduates as individuals, fostering dynamics based on trust and encouragement for academics to get to know their students before they expect them to partake in collaborative endeavours. The authenticity created through personal relationships can aid institutions and academics in their attempts to foster genuine partnerships and create more appropriate learning processes for the current HE context.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, ES, upon reasonable request and subject to ethical limitations. https://dx.doi.org/10.17635/lancaster/researchdata/324

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Eloise Symonds holds a PhD in Educational Research from Lancaster University. Her research explores the transformation of power relationships between undergraduates and academics through the introduction of conflicting subjectivities and their associated behaviours in the current university climate. Guided by her background in the humanities, Eloise’s research utilises critical discourse analysis to explore these conflicting relationships and subjectivities through discursive formations. Prior to her PhD studies, Eloise studied for her Master of Arts in Modern and Contemporary Literature at Birkbeck College, London and her Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Leicester.

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