



Research Article

# Understanding the Crucial Role of Brand Image in the Students' Higher Education Institution Choice: A Review of the Literature of Higher Education Branding

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## Abstract

This article provides an extensive literature review on the topic of branding in Higher Education, along with an exploration of the numerous aspects that influence students' choice of a Higher Education Institution (HEI). Within the competitive higher education landscape, branding has evolved into a vital part of HEI identity, image, and competitiveness, with a considerable impact on student decision-making. This review investigates the main concepts associated with branding and brand image in the educational context, beginning with the general branding concept and progressing to branding applied in this particular field, while taking into account the applicability and challenges of its transposition, before delving into the various perspectives of brand image, notably, the rational and emotional dimensions. By bringing together the existing body of knowledge concerning branding in higher education institutions, this article provides a better understanding of the impact of branding on the educational sector while also offering some insight into the appealing nature of the brand image throughout the students' decision to enroll in a HEI.

**Keywords:** Higher Education Institutions, Brand image, Students' Perception, Decision-making Process.

## Introduction

Since the medieval era, academia was tremendously competitive as the different education entities doubtfully judged each other. Thereby, the Higher Education (HE) sector had to adopt policies to face the increasingly important competition and thrive a competitive advantage differentiating each institution from the others. This is when branding appeared as an asset to demarcate each of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Branding became a unique feature of the organization even though the product, which is the education offered, might be to some extent similar. The modern most widespread perspective on HE is being considered as a business; in fact, the current paradigm is transforming the “students - HEIs” relationship into a consumer and supplier association. The marketization of HE is criticized by authors who perceive it as the decay of the education’s integrity and independence since the customer satisfaction became its pre-eminent objective. Nonetheless, it’s praised by other writers as a strategic resource for enabling to create a competitive advantage through the emotional link formed between the customer and the HE sector. This dichotomy brings us to question the branding perceived value viewed by the stakeholders, notably the students as being to the fore of the branding line of sight.

Many if not all the HEIs are attempting to build strong brands for their institutions, with their brand image as the main facade projecting the image that the HEIs try to convey in the mind of students knowing that the first thing perceived about their institution will be this image projected. Yet, the concept of brand image transcends a mere impression experienced by the consumer, compelling them to select a particular brand. It is, unequivocally, a multifaceted notion intricately woven from various factors as much rational as emotional, the congruence of which culminates the perceived image discerned by the student.

This article aims to elucidate and overview the background and the main concepts of branding in Higher Education Institution, the specificities of the HEI brand image as well as the

intertwinement of the brand image with students’ choice of an HEI.

## Conceptualization of Branding

The understanding of a theme as complex as branding applied to the educational system must be based on a conceptual decomposition of the key word “branding”. In an attempt to trace branding back to its cradle, it dates to around 1500 BC when hot iron marks were the rudimentary form of branding as they allowed animals to be distinguished from each other, as well as to be identified (Alcott, Giampietro, Mayumi & Polimeni, 2012). Originally, the sole role of branding was displaying a product’s name and demonstrating its prestige. Yet, this conception progressed into the state-of-the-art paradigm based on the symbolization of the consumer’s ideal lifestyle and abstract desires’ satisfaction (Holt, 2002).

Branding is viewed as a vital organizational competency especially when HEIs are in the running for resources (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Veloutsou et al, 2004; Helmsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Admittedly, branding incorporates the pair of rational and emotional components (Le Pla & Parker, 2002); in fact, the brand definition is jointly built upon those two aspects: the emotional and the rational (De Chernatony and Mc William (1990); Caldwell and Freire (2004)). It is perceived as ‘a synthesis of all the physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements’ (Hart & Murphy, 1998).

In order to investigate the quintessence of branding, scholars need to question the branding success of some organizations more than others (Urde, 2003). For Kapferer (2001), when it comes to branding, no one is talking about the same thing seeing that it is a subjective notion; this idea was supported by De Chernatony (2010) who reveals that branding dwells in the consumer’s mind. Good brands are defined as strategic resources enabling to develop a competitive advantage; thus, organizations must put greater focus on the development of the brand management as a fundamental institutional ability (Aaker 1996; Louro and Cunha 2001). Caldwell and Coshall (2002) also view brands as being simultaneously a

strategic benefit and a source of the competitive advantage. A successful brand is described by De Chernatony and McDonalds (2005) as capable of delivering a sustainable competitive advantage along with superior profitability and market performance.

### Brand Image – A Dual Dimension Concept

According to Dobni & Zinkhan (1990), the term "brand image" has been diluted or misused over time leading to a concept that no longer holds its original meaning nor significance. Different researchers have given different definitions and meanings to the term "brand image".

**Table 1: Definitions of Brand Image**

Type	Author	Definitions
<b>Blanket definitions</b>	Herzog, 1963	Brand image is the global impression and general perception the consumer builds regarding a brand.
<b>Meanings and messages</b>	Levy and Glick, 1973	The sum of physical attributes of a good or service and the meanings and symbols connected to the brand.
<b>Emphasis on personification</b>	Hendon and Williams, 1985	The description of a product as a human being generates the consumers' interest when the brand matches the consumer's preferences.
<b>Emphasis on cognitive or psychological elements</b>	Bullmore, 1984	The brand image consists of the aggregation of the consumer's thoughts and feelings about a brand

*Adapted from 'In search of brand image: a foundation analysis.' (p.112), by Dobni, D. & Zinkhan, G. M. (1990).*

This has led to confusion and inconsistency in understanding what brand image actually means. The meaning and worth of "brand image" have been undermined as a result of its overuse or misapplication (Bullmore, 1984). Yet the perspective based on the emphasis on cognitive or psychological elements reflects a most complete and multidimensional definition. In this regard, brand image as explained by Levy (1978) is made up of both the actual physical product and the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions associated with it. Research has shown that people often buy things

based on how they look and what they represent, rather than just how well they work (Dolich 1969). For example, people choose products that make them feel good about themselves or show off their status.

So as to apprehend the impact of the brand image on the student choice of an HEI, it's imperative to identify the factors involved in the two different perspectives of the brand image, namely, the rational and emotional perspectives as it was synthesized by Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp (2010).

**Table 2: Emotional and rational factors impacting the choice of an HEI**

<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Factors</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>Rational</b>	Academic and career opportunities	Mai (2005) Willis and Kennedy (2004) Gray and al. (2003) Young (2002) Aycan and Fikret-Pasa (2003) Briggs (2006) Marginson (2006) Menon (1998) Yogev (2007)
	Quality and high standard	Mai (2005) Willis and Kennedy (2004) Gray and al. (2003) Chapman and Pyvis (2006) Hoverstad and al. (1989) Conrad and Conrad (2001) Epple, Romano and Sieg (2006) Drewes and Michael (2006)
	Image	Mai (2005) Willis and Kennedy (2004) Hoverstad and al. (1989) Yogev (2007)
	Infrastructure and physical facilities	Mai (2005) Gray and al. (2003)
	Costs and tuition fees	Hoverstad and al. (1989) Langa and David (2006)
	Scholarships	Drewes and Michael (2006)
	Selectivity	Conrad and Conrad (2001)
	Distance from home	Drewes and Michael (2006) Briggs (2006)
<b>Emotional</b>	Romantic or exotic quality to the sights, sounds, and smells of traditional institutions Romantic or exotic quality to the sights, sounds, and smells of traditional institutions Romantic or exotic quality to the sights, sounds and smells of traditional institutions	Baker and Brown (2007)
	Sociocultural influence (family, friends; barriers and supports)	Young (2002) Cunningham et al. (2005) Avrahami and Dar (2004)
	Intrinsic (identity construction, personal values, wishes and expectations, psychological, relaxation and leisure)	Chapman and Pyvis (2006) Aycan and Fikret-Pasa (2003) Menon (1998) Langa and David (2006)

*Adapted from Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp (2010)*

### **Emotional Factors (Emotional Appeal)**

It was believed that emotions are thought to make people weak in their thinking and actions (Evans, 2001) or can be influenced and manipulated by the “dark arts” of marketing and mass communication (Packard, 1991). According to Harris and De Chernatony (2001), obtaining a long-lasting competitive advantage is more feasible through distinctive emotional attributes rather than mere functional characteristics.

Emotional appeal pertains to our emotional and sentimental experiences, encompassing feelings like excitement, fear, love, and self-perception (Cutler and Javalgi, 1993). Emotional appeal strives to generate either positive (e.g., joy, love) or negative emotions (e.g., sorrow, fear) so as to incite individuals’ desire to acquire a product. Feelings greatly influence the reactions and behaviors of customers when it comes to love and preference (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Richins, 1997). Emotional responses, as proposed by Bagozzi (1992), arbitrated the link between cognitive assessments and behavioral intents in a contemporary consumer attitude model. Emotions have consequences for behaviour and goal achievement. Positive emotions are related to the achievement of a (sub)goal that typically results in the decision to stick with the plan. On the other hand, negative emotions are associated with problems with ongoing plans and failures in reaching the objectives set forth.

### **Rational Factors**

The emphasis of rational appeal, as mentioned by Johar and Sirgy (1991), is usually on the practical and utilitarian benefits of a product. Examples of messages could highlight the product’s superiority, money-saving attributes, worthiness, effectiveness, and trustworthiness. The brand’s high quality and distinctiveness capture customers’ attention especially when compared to other brands. In this respect, this measure poses difficulty in constraining the core goal of an effective branding, which revolves around crafting a distinctive brand in comparison to competitors (Keller, 2003). In fact, the distinguishing factor of a brand lies in its ability to outshine others. By possessing its own distinctive and unique qualities, a brand gains substantial sway over the

consumers’ mind and significantly contributes to its overall reputation (Boshoff, 2014).

### **The Acute Competition in the HE Sector and the Advent of Branding**

The Higher Education sector is challenged by an increasingly important competition coupled by the heightening financial pressure, amongst others, caused by the central fluctuations that occurred during the last decades (Becher and Trowler, 2001); subsequently, the HEIs are converging into a corporatization model (Brookes 2003; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007) by resorting to aggressive marketing practices, notably, branding (Naude and Ivy 1999; Ruch 2001). These constraints are predicted to downgrade the enrollment number; ergo, HEIs are stretching the scope of their target-directed offers by encompassing the international student as a vital component in their new marketing and promotional strategies (Naidoo 2006; Naidoo and Wu 2011).

Other factors such as the quest for differentiation and the students’ fees reinforced the idea of the Higher Education sector marketization; many HEIs are already managed as corporate brands (Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006). According to Stamp (2004), branding in Higher Education is growingly comprehended by universities. The HEIs’ competition has stimulated and fueled the pursuance of differentiation in the context of the adoption of the market-based model (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Albeit, the products and programs offered by universities lean to congruence (Chris Chapple, 2015).

Several factors have motivated HEI branding, notably, preventing the enrolment and the retention decline, the exacerbated competition, strengthening the image and reputation, expanding the financial resources, being in alignment with the mission (Cobb 2001; Williams 2012; Williams, Osei, and Omar 2012; Williams and Omar 2014).

For Jevons (2006), branding is a shorthand action that gives a rapid representation and communication for all the criteria that constitute the quality of the HEIs, although Bennett et al. (2007) state that HEIs need strong brands to develop the awareness of their existence while differentiating themselves from the competitors.

Besides, branding is decisive in assisting the students' choice in a more effective way since it offers something of substance upon which the consumers base their choice (Blumenthal and Bergstrom, 2003). Indeed, the success of the HE branding reside in the capacity of the institutions to prevail in the consumer's mind as a strong educational brand. Dibb and Simkin (1993) present Harvard Business School as a thriving illustration of a strong brand seeing that it succeeded to build and preserve a unequivocal stance in the consumer's mind. Oxbridge and the Red bricks are shown as having uniquely distinguished positions compared with other universities which depict the efficiency of their branding, concede Dibb and Simkin (1993), albeit, they acknowledge that usually the positioning just happens in an impromptu way throughout the time.

### **Applicability and Challenges of Branding in the Educational Sector**

Admittedly, the preservation of a strong brand is challenging regardless of the sector, although the HE sector presents unique struggles which Bodoh and Mighall (2003) explained from the British vision to the effect that the challenge resides in the sector's belated aptitude to adopt the branding approaches. Johnston (2001) agreed that in the HE sector much remains to be done before perfectly embodying the branding notion.

The difficulty facing the HE sector is the deficiency of an effective marketing application that isn't sufficiently developed to be transposed to this industry (Hankinson, 2004). Jevons (2006) believes that the natural convolution of the education sector impedes the transposition of the common branding procedure. While Bulotaite (2003) acknowledges the complex nature of the HE sector but trusts branding to untangle it and support the university's attraction process. Nevertheless, Sargeant (2005) has a cautioning view about branding in universities insofar as it generates unhealthy competitive attitudes and undertaken expenses that are of uncertain benefits. According to a US study conducted by Brewer et al (2002) discussed by Dill (2003), HEIs lean toward investing in their prestige, notably the consumption services intended for students as the dormitories and facilities. Yet, these investments are a zero-sum game since they have a hypothetically slight impact on the students'

choice (Brewer and al, 2002). An idea that was confirmed in the Norwegian study where the data showed that a greater student's satisfaction was based on factors associated to the learning and teaching process rather than the university's prestige and its accommodations (Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002).

The complexity of the development of a brand principle in HEIs is occasioned by various factors, namely, the different stakeholders and parties involved, the sub-branding by universities, the large variety of programs and majors, the information chasm between the students' choice considerations and the universities' publications and the change resistance in the HEI (Birnbbaum 1983; Chapleo 2007; Hankinson 2001; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006).

Brooke (2003) states that branding, as a commercially focused activity, is problematic in the HE perspective seeing that the nature of the sector in which the needs the institution is being mindful to are not exclusively commercial goals. Various brand models amongst which "The Brand Box Model" (De Chernatony and McWilliam, 1990), "The brand Identity Prism" (Kapferer, 1992), "The Integrated Brand Model" (Le Pla and Parker, 2002) and Keller's model (2003) recognize the significance of a well-defined brand principle, nonetheless, it seems hard to apply for the universities' brand (Hankinson, 2001) notably due to the diversity of the stakeholders and the products offered as well as the internal organization.

### **The Subjectivity of the Brand Perception**

The concept of perception means how we choose, arrange, and understand information to make sense of the world. A person's perception greatly impacts their behavior as a consumer. This means that the way an individual sees things is more important to marketers than what is typically seen as reality (Kotler et al. 2019). Our perception of things is shaped not only by our sensory experiences, but also by their interconnectedness with other elements and our individual circumstances.

Brand Perception is a fundamental psychological factor that plays a pivotal role in influencing the consumer behavior through its involvement in the decision-making process. The perception of

brands is controlled by consumers, not the brands themselves. What people say or think about your brand is your brand, regardless of your message. Strong brands conquer the prefrontal cortex. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of thinking about the entire customer experience (Bian and Moutinho, 2011). Customers form opinions about brands based on several built-in factors. As per Aaker (1991), customers evaluate a product based on its performance, features, adherence to specifications, reliability, durability, possibility of service and finish quality. In the case of a service, Aaker (1991) noted that customers determine its quality based on tangibles, reliability, expertise, responsiveness, and empathy.

It is crucial for today's marketers to comprehend the concept of perception, as it significantly impacts a customer's decision to purchase a product based on their perceived product quality. People's perceptions of reality fluctuate depending on their individual experiences, life histories, and personal situations when perceiving people, products, or brands, as explained by Antonides & Van Raaij (1998). Given this contrast, each person has a subjective perception of reality. This "subjectivity of reality or perception" has a crucial relevance in this field of study since it implies that each consumer has his or her own unique brand mental map (or consumer brand representation).

### **Student's Choice and Decision-making Behaviour**

The process of the student's choice of an HEI remains quite complex due to the multitude of factors that are involved, as well as their interrelationships. Krone, Gilly, Zeithaml and Lamb (1981) point out that students refer to multi-attribute models and conceptions when evaluating and choosing an HEI. This allows them to rank options and prioritize the most important and crucial criteria in their decision-making process. We understand that students nowadays want more information in order to make better-informed decisions. This implies that prospective students evaluate a greater number of factors in considerably more complicated ways than in the past (Moogan & Baron, 2003). Chapman (1981) categorized these interfering factors in the student choice into internal and external factors, which are not distinctly separate but impact

simultaneously the student decision-making behaviour. This latter concept was addressed by Punj and Staelin (1978) by arguing that 'little is known about the underlying student buyer behaviour and how they select a college'.

Berry (2000) emphasizes the significance of branding for service companies as it fosters trust among customers who are unable to visually assess the products they are purchasing. A robust brand enables customers to visualize and make sense of things that may be intangible or invisible to them. They help customers feel safer and more comfortable when buying services that are hard to judge before purchasing. Strong brands act as substitutes when the company does not have physical products that can be felt, examined, or tested. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) support the importance of understanding how decisions about choosing an HEI are made, including the variables involved in the student's choice as an informed consumer looking for the option that best suits their needs. Thus, the main concerns during this process are the career prospects and reaching higher positions (Krone, Gilly, Zeithaml and Lamb, 1981), the courses available and the skills and learning that will be gained (Erdmann, 1983; Saunders, Hamilton and Lancaster 1978), the parents' influence, the financial support and the cost of the education (Welki and Navratil, 1987), the proximity from the HEI (Kohn, Manski & Mundel, 1976). As stated above, there are two perspectives enabling to classify the factors exerting an influence on the HEI choice, rational and emotional dimensions, yet they must be used in tandem for the sake of grasping the bedrock of the student's choice.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the exploration of branding in Higher Education institutions and its role in influencing students' choices has shown how complex and multidimensional this phenomenon is. We started by investigating the broader concepts of branding, gradually narrowing our focus to the particular use of branding within the educational sector. The context for branding in HE was set in an intense competition, prompting institutions to adopt brand strategies as a means of differentiation.

Our research yielded several important conclusions, one of which being the subjectivity of brand perception. We recognized that students

had very personal perceptions of Higher Education brands that are shaped by their own experiences and expectations. The student's mental image of an HEI brand is a dynamic and constantly evolving construct that differs from one student to another. The investigation then concentrated on the crucial idea of brand image, underlining its two aspects: emotional and rational. The review of existing literature

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underscored the factors that contribute to each dimension and explained how these components come together to mold an institution's overall brand image which, in turn, shapes students' choices. Not only has this thorough analysis clarified these nuances, but it has also laid the groundwork for additional studies.



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