THE POWER OF BRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A REVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES AND CASES

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Abstract

The aim of this literature review study is to investigate marketing and branding strategies and techniques used by higher education institutions across different regions of the world. The paper starts with illustration of branding and its importance to higher education. Study explores the strategies adopted by HE institutions for branding and marketing and how such strategies impact on intake number and the funding gained, in addition to the perception of the public towards the institutions. Furthermore, we explore some cases from different regions across the globe which might shed the light on the most successful and effective strategies and practices in HE. Findings suggest that HE institutions should stand out adopting effecting and distinctive branding and marketing strategies. The paper provides information about how important higher education branding is and offers some guidance towards brand identity strengthening for HE institutions. This study adds value to the literature on branding in higher education, in addition to demonstrating successful cases from different regions of the world. It might add value to higher institutions' endeavors on the track of marketing and branding their educational programs.

Keywords: Higher Education, Branding, Marketing Best Practices, HE Identity, HE Branding, Bahrain

INTRODUCTION

Higher education branding could impact a wide range of students. Higher education institutions could stand out among their peers and attract potential applicants through employing strong branding and marketing strategies, which means that they could invest in branding strategies that match their cultures and values to attract the desired target market.

One tool that could be sued is the HE institutes graduates engagement to induce a positive attitude towards the HE institutes relying on the good memories when they possess a strong brand. This helps in maintaining the rapports with their alma mater and this could result in stronger opportunities of networking and advocating on behalf of the HE institutions.

It needs a substantial hard work to build and maintain such strong brand. HE institutions should constantly assess the effectiveness of their branding endeavors to assure achievement of desired objectives and outreach to their desired audience (Al Samman and Zitouni, 2017). They may display how important branding is to their stakeholders through allocating their resources efficiently, in addition to strategy improvement.

Higher institutions strategic objectives could be supported by branding. The HE institutions brand reflects its overall vision, and here we not talking about just slogan or a logo. Brand identity could be used effectively to promote the HE institution's success throughout the board through the alignment of its branding efforts along with its overall goals. Higher education institutions should align their branding efforts with their broader strategic goals, such as enhancing academic quality, improving student outcomes, and increasing institutional reputation. By doing so, institutions can ensure that their branding efforts contribute to their overall success and sustainability.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Branding in Higher Education

Higher Education Branding is the process of developing a distinctive identity for a college or institution is known as higher education branding. Branding entails creating a logo, catchphrase, and other visual components that will aid in setting the institution apart from its rivals (Alam et al., 2018). Additionally, it entails developing messaging that highlights the mission and core principles of the institution as well as its special features and benefits (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). Ultimately, it entails creating marketing and communication strategies that will support the school's brand promotion in order to draw in potential students and other stakeholders (Widarni, & Bawono, 2023).

Brand building process in higher education institutions is closely related to the competitive environment, so these institutions tended to apply multiple strategies to distinguish

their brand in the environment in which they operate, whether if it is local or international environment.

You might be wondering what branding has to do with education, since we usually associate the term with businesses and their products. Branding has been a longstanding practice in the business world, but it's a relatively new idea in the realm of education (Al Shorafa, 2017).

Branding in higher education gives institutions an identity that locates them in the social world. Although branding goes beyond recognition, students may like to see themselves in that institution and to associate themselves with a history of excellence (Lamboy, 2011).

According to (Bernarto, et al., 2020) and (Kotler, and Keller, (2016) The American Marketing Association defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." A brand is a product or service that stands out from others that aim to fulfill the same need (Al Samman and Fakhro, 2017). These differences could be practical or concrete, like how well the product works. Or they could be more abstract and emotional, like what the brand symbolizes or means to people.

Higher education branding demands a complete approach that combines traditional and digital marketing techniques (Findlay et al., 2017). The objective is to establish a brand that appeals to prospective students, professors, and staff.

In the world of higher education marketing, branding strategies present a polished image of universities and shape the way we talk about them. These branding efforts reflect the growing complexity of the education sector, which has historically been seen as a place for intellectual and moral growth and socialization.

Higher Education Branding Strategies

Black and Walsh (2020) stated that the initial thing to create HE institution's brand is to generate a differentiating sign, logo, and other visual identity elements. This should be done in coordination with the school's marketing team and should reflect the school's mission, values, and goals.

Produce Content: Write for the audience that the school is trying to reach. These might include articles, podcasts, infographics, films, and other media that can be shared on social media and other online platforms.

Use Social Media: To connect with prospective students and faculty members, use social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Write frequently about

forthcoming activities or school-related news, and interact with followers by answering any questions or comments they may have (Tian and Liu, 2020).

Build an Online Presence: Create a website for the school with information about its services and activities as well as contact details for staff or admissions officers who may respond to queries from prospective students or parents. Moreover, create profiles on prominent review sites such as Yelp or Google Reviews so prospective students may read evaluations from existing students or alumni about their experiences at the institution (Prasad et al, 2022).

Organize Events: To give prospective students the chance to experience what it would be like to attend the school in person before deciding where to enroll, host events like open houses or campus tours.

Networking: Network with local businesses and groups in order to create relationships with possible employers who may be interested in recruiting graduates from your university once they complete their studies. Moreover, make connections with former students who may share insightful information about what it was like to attend your institution as well as suggestions for how current students can achieve there.

In higher education, brand awareness is crucial. It may have an impact on prospective students' choices as well as a college's or university's reputation (James and Derrick, 2019). By a variety of marketing techniques, including advertising, public relations, and social media, brand recognition can be raised. These tactics can aid in fostering a positive perception of the institution and its offerings, which may boost enrolment and improve student results. Brand recognition can also help the institution draw in potential donors and other financing sources (Grimm, 2019). Students may be more likely to financially support the school and make larger donations in the future if they identify with its brand.

The success of a university depends on its standing (Stephenson, 2016). It influences the institution's funding levels, enrollment numbers, and the caliber of the faculty and staff. An institution can distinguish itself from rivals and draw in more faculty, students, and donors by building a strong brand image. This could enhance the institution's standing and increase its visibility in the neighborhood. Loyalty among current students, alumni, and other stakeholders can be increased by developing a strong brand image (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009).

Digital marketing can be used by higher education institutions to draw in new students, retain current ones, and promote their presence (Vetrova et al., 2019). It may involve strategies like paid advertising, content marketing, social media marketing, SEO, and email campaigns. Targeting particular audiences with specialized messaging and offers is possible with digital marketing. Additionally, it can be utilized to foster relationships with prospective students and raise brand recognition (Rogach et al., 2017). Digital marketing can also be utilized to highlight

the institution's advantages and exhibit its special products. Finally, ROI tracking and campaign success measurement are both possible with digital marketing.

Have a Complete Digital Strategy: To reach current and potential students, alumni, and other stakeholders, higher education institutions must use digital marketing (Abbas, 2019). Creating an appealing website, optimizing content for search engines, utilizing social media channels, and developing targeted campaigns to reach particular demographics are all important components of developing a comprehensive digital strategy.

Use influencer marketing. Brand awareness may be increased and potential students can be reached by using influencer marketing. Promoting your institution and its services might be made easier by working with influencers who are well-known in the higher education community.

Use Content Marketing: Engaging with potential students and other stakeholders through content marketing is effective (Manea, Purcaru, 2017). Building trust and establishing your institution as an authority in the subject of higher education can be accomplished by producing content that is pertinent to your target audience.

Put an emphasis on mobile optimization: Since more individuals use their mobile devices to obtain online information, mobile optimization is crucial for every higher education institution's marketing plan

Invest in Paid Advertising: Paid advertising is an excellent approach to connect with prospective students who may not be familiar with your university or its programs. You may target particular audiences and raise brand awareness quickly and affordably by making an investment in paid advertising on websites like Google Ads or Facebook Ads.

The process of creating a university's identity is intricate and incorporates a variety of elements, such as the institution's mission, beliefs, and goals, as well as its history, traditions, physical environment, faculty, and student body, as well as its relationship with the surrounding community (Donovan and Henley, 2010). Universities work hard to develop a brand that embodies their distinctive qualities and distinguishes them from other institutions. By branding activities like logos, slogans, websites, and social media campaigns, this identity is frequently communicated. Additionally, it is demonstrated through the university's academic initiatives, extracurricular activities, and efforts to engage alumni.

In Pakistan, universities are putting effort into making their logos stand out by using different shapes, colors, and mottos that are memorable and unique. These logos frequently offer a sense of purpose and a sense of hope for change. The Quran and Hadith are frequently used as inspiration for public university mottos in Pakistan, which is interesting because many

private universities either come up with their own slogans or don't have any at all. 2020 (Shahnaz & Qadir).

HE BRANDING SAMPLE CASES

UK Case

Creating a distinctive identity and creating a successful marketing strategy are just two of the complex tasks that go into branding higher education institutions in the UK (Lomer et al., 2018). According to Belcher (1987), universities must create a strong brand that captures both their academic excellence and their values and mission. By using institution-specific logos, slogans, and other visual elements, this can be achieved. Universities should also put their efforts into cultivating a positive reputation with prospective students and employers by taking part in activities like alumni relations, student recruitment drives, and public relations initiatives (Bolsmann, and Miller, 2008). In order to convey a unified narrative about the institution, universities should lastly make sure that their branding efforts are consistent throughout all channels, from print materials to digital media.

A study was conducted to compare ten UK higher education institutions with varying reputations. Researchers looked at five institutions that were highly respected and five that were less respected. They studied how and why institutional leaders use branding in their welcome addresses. The researchers found that there were some similarities in how the institutions used branding, but they also identified differences in branding between highly and less respected institutions. This study supports the idea that branding is a competitive tool used by higher education institutions.

In Europe, the way universities are run has changed to be more market-driven, which has made it important for higher education institutions to differentiate their brand to stand out from their competitors and attract long-term resources. However, previous research in the field only looked at the content or style of branding, so we suggested a more comprehensive approach to examining the branding process.

In some studies, researchers found that highly reputed and lowly reputed higher education institutions have different ways of presenting their brand. One of the noticeable differences is that lowly reputed institutions focus more on their national, local, and institutional brand while highly reputed ones aim to build an international brand that conveys excellence.

Highly reputed institutions cater to a wider range of services for the international market, while lowly reputed ones focus more on the national and local market. In the UK, there are various groups of universities, such as the highly reputed Russell Group, that formed lobby groups to protect their goals and objectives. In the UK higher education system, there are

patterns of homogenization or differentiation, which institutions use as complementary strategies to promote and defend their missions and objectives through branding activities.

India Case

The branding of higher education in India has mainly been successful. In recent years, the Indian government has invested heavily in higher education, this has led to an increased emphasis on these institutions' branding and marketing (Begum, 2017). Universities are now spending money on marketing initiatives to draw students as well as developing brand identities that highlight their distinct advantages and services. In order to offer joint degrees and programs and increase their brand recognition, numerous colleges have also formed collaborations with universities abroad (Patil, 2018). As a result, higher education institutions in India are competing harder on the international stage (India Today, 2013).

Indian Institute of Technology (IIT): One of India's most distinguished institutes of higher learning, IIT is renowned for its top-notch instruction and research. The IIT brand has grown over the years thanks to its productive research, extensive alumni network, and international partnerships.

The Indian Institute of Management (IIM): This esteemed organization also provides postgraduate management studies in India. The IIM brand has been developed thanks to its stringent selection procedure, top-notch professors, and robust alumni network.

Symbiosis International University: Located in Pune, Maharashtra, Symbiosis International University is a private university. It provides an extensive selection of undergraduate and graduate courses in several academic fields, including engineering, business, law, and media & communication. The institution has created its identity via its strong focus on industry-relevant curriculum and worldwide relationships with renowned universities across the world.

Amity University: Amity University is a private institution based in Noida, Uttar Pradesh that offers undergraduate and postgraduate studies in many fields such as engineering, management, law, design & architecture etc. By its emphasis on curriculum that is applicable to the workplace and worldwide partnerships with top colleges throughout the world, the university has developed its reputation.

UAE Case

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a long history of funding research and branding initiatives. The nation has made significant investments in its institutions, giving them access to top-notch facilities and resources (Wilkins, 2020). Due to the presence of numerous renowned

universities there, the UAE has been able to establish itself as a major destination for international students.

The UAE has also made significant branding investments in its colleges, giving them powerful, globally recognised brands (Nasir, 2017). This involves building marketing campaigns to advertise each university's programs and services as well as developing logos and slogans that reflect each institution's mission and core values. The UAE has also established alliances with other nations to expand student exchange and mobility programs.

Many international conferences and events pertaining to higher education are also held in the UAE, including the World Education Forum (WEF). Universities from all around the world can present their programs and services at these events while networking with potential business partners (Swan, 2017). Many research facilities that concentrate on subjects relevant to higher education, such as technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship, are also located in the UAE. The universities in the area benefit from sharing information thanks to these research centers.

Overall, the UAE's investment in higher education branding has been successful in drawing students from all over the world and portraying the country as a global leader in higher education (Wilkins, 2010).

The University of Sharjah: By emphasizing academic achievement, research, and community participation, the University of Sharjah has created a strong brand identity. The university has become a leader in higher education in the UAE by offering advanced programs and exciting activities that attract students from different parts of the world.

Offering various cutting-edge programs and initiatives, Abu Dhabi University, a prestigious institution in the United Arab Emirates, has emerged as a leader in the field of higher education. The fact that all students, no matter what background they come from, have access to quality education and research opportunities as a result of the university's commitment has provided it with a robust reputation as an international learning center. Abu Dhabi University is known for its inclusive and global approach to education and has a diverse student body from over 80 different countries.

Similar to other renowned institutions, the American University in Dubai is renowned for its outstanding teaching and research programs. It has developed a strong brand identity thanks to its commitment to giving students from all over the world an enriching international education experience. The American University in Dubai, one of the most prestigious universities in the United Arab Emirates, is committed to advancing high standards in higher education and drawing bright students from all over the world.

Bahrain Case

Bahrain's government has been putting a lot of effort into growing the higher education sector in recent years. They have been putting various strategies into place to raise educational standards, draw in foreign students, and improve Bahrain's higher education system's reputation. This has been done to aid students in fulfilling their educational ambitions and enhance the nation's educational system (Mahmood and Mang'unyi, 2018).

A significant project to promote and oversee higher education in Bahrain was launched in 2012 under the name Higher Education Council (HEC). It is accountable for ensuring that Bahrain's universities and colleges adhere to its standards and guidelines as well as for promoting the nation's higher education system abroad (Mahmood and Mang'unyi, 2018).

For the purpose of promoting Bahrain's higher education system abroad, the HEC has launched a number of initiatives, including "Learn in Bahrain" and "Choose Bahrain." These initiatives have drawn students from all over the world and assisted in promoting Bahrain's high standard of education. The university of Bahrain, is one of the HE institutions in which the government made substantial investments, and now is one of the top universities in the region and it is exerting meaningful endeavors to be established as a major international higher education center. State of the art resources and tools, such as modern labs, high speed internet, state of the art facilities and amenities, are provided to colleges to ensure that students are well supported to achieve educational excellence.

Bahrain university, which was established more than thirty-five years ago, is an example of college branding pioneer and has established its identity via multiple means and tools like a unique website, a remarkable logo and serious activities on social media. Moreover, it provides students with a big spectrum of services to include research chances to study out of Bahrain and career development.

Another example HE branding in Bahrain is Bahrain Polytechnic, one of the best technical HE institutions in the region, which was established in 2008. It offers students from across the world a wide variety of programs. It has established a strong existence online via social media and website platforms, in addition to other marketing initiatives that are executed both online and real environment.

Furthermore, we have Arabian Gulf University, a famous HE institution that was established in 1992, and which provides progressive educational activities to its students. It has developed a strong brand identity through its logo, website, social media presence, and other marketing initiatives. The university strives to give each of its students a top-notch educational experience, and its academic programs are designed to meet the needs of both domestic and foreign students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, branding is an essential component of higher education that aids institutions in developing their distinct identities and reputations. Institutions can set themselves apart from the competition, draw in prospective employees and students, and cultivate a strong network of donors and alumni by implementing strong branding strategies. There are many branding strategies and tactics available, including visual identity, messaging, storytelling, and social media, as was discussed in the literature review. To ensure authenticity and relevance, branding initiatives must, however, be in line with the institution's mission, values, and target audience. In order to continuously improve and optimize, it's crucial to measure the influence and effectiveness of branding initiatives on a regular basis. Future research could examine how branding functions in various higher education institutions and how it affects outcomes for students like enrollment, retention, and academic performance. Overall, higher education branding is a dynamic field that calls for careful planning, implementation, and evaluation to be successful over the long term.

From revising the related literature, we found that private institutions are not distinguished from public and governmental ones in marketing activities except in pricing policies, which means that both sectors need to pay more attention to marketing policies. It is of absolute importance to convince HE top management of how vital higher education marketing and branding are and significant active marketing departments and centres need to be established to ensure greater application of the whole concept of marketing orientation. Furthermore, we recommend to Involve and motivate the HE staff of different categories of educational institutions in internal marketing as if they were internal customers (Al Samman and Mohammed, 2020) to ensure their loyalty and to make each individual a partial market for the services of the educational institution. HE programmes that meet the needs of students and society in all disciplines should be developed; programmes that are no longer necessary in accordance with the requirements of the Labour market should be eliminated on the basis of market information; and higher education institutions should be given greater flexibility in all areas, from admission and types of programmes to the establishment of fees and evaluation policies for the award of degrees.

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