

ROLE OF BRAND IMAGE ON BRAND EQUITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid expansion of higher education institutions (both private and public) and globalized competitive world, particularly in the Pakistani context, marketing a HEI brand turns out to be exceptionally essential. Strong brands are a source of crafting and augmenting a brand's perceptions amongst stakeholders. These perceptions are crucial in persuading behaviors and enactment of an institution. Hence, brand image which is defined as the perceptions of consumers about a brand is strategically important in persuading consumers' decision making. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of brand image on brand equity in higher education institutions from the current student's standpoint and compare the brand equity of public and private sector HEIs in the emerging market of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Province of Pakistan. A substantial similarity exists in the respective students' contemplation measures for private and public HEIs; nevertheless, earlier research submits that there are certain conditions which seem to be evaluated differently by students for public and private sectors. The suggested framework highlights how brand image can be used to assess HEIs' brand equity and whether students perceive public sector HEIs differently from private sector and vice versa. This study will pave way towards extending the existing knowledge in gauging the brand equity of HEIs and build quality education brands. A quantitative research approach was used in collecting data with the help of a survey questionnaire from a large sample of n=765 students currently enrolled in the various public and private sector universities of KP. According to the findings of this research there is a wide-ranging support for the conceptual model showing a significant and positive relationship between brand image and brand equity of higher education institutions. It is thus established that the integral consequence of the study offers ample evidence of differences in branding between public and private sector higher education institutions.

Keywords: Brand, Brand Equity, Brand Image, Higher Education Institutions, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

INTRODUCTION

Seeking higher education is a rare commodity and those who decide to pursue higher education tend to be quite genuinely concerned about the quality of education they receive as their future is at stake. Lepak, Smith and Taylor (2007) argue that students

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students after experiencing the brand develop perceptions about the quality of their learning experience. Hence, Noor Hasni and Alliah (2009) contend that it becomes a moral compulsion on behalf of the HEI to establish a strong and vibrant brand. According to Berry (2000) a strong brand is an assurance by the HEI for service satisfaction. Although, realized by many, the key marketing decision makers appear to be not so successful in delivering on the satisfaction promise (Kay, 2006).

Developing empathy of consumer's perceptions is crucial for organizations looking to design a branding approach (Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010 & Iuliana & Mihai, 2011). The process sanctions organizations to exactly define consumers and offers them the capacity to mold submissions to better ensemble their target audience. Thus, identifying students based on their requirements, perceptions, and expectations better appraises higher education decision makers. A sizable amount of agreement exists in the prospective students' thoughts about private and public HEIs, yet there are certain areas which are apparently evaluated inversely by students for public and private sectors. Theory and research advocate that the better the understanding of consumer choices and decisions, the more prosperous the institution is expected to be (Angulo et al., 2010, Rogers, Finley, & Patterson, 2006). Yet, in spite of its academic importance very little is done in highlighting current student's perceptions about a university brand viz a viz private and public sector HEIs especially in the empirical context of higher education of Pakistan.

Pakistan's HE is a market full of potential and challenges which has a blend of public and private HEIs. In the recent past, Pakistan has experienced some amazing developments in the HE sector. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) is a custodian for regulating the universities in Pakistan and is responsible to help universities develop into the hubs of excellence in higher education and research. Since the year 2003, higher education in Pakistan has witnessed a staggering growth in university enrolment from 135,000 to 400,000 in the year 2008 alone. Likewise, there has been a substantial progress in research publications rising from 600 per annum in 2003 to 4300 in 2008 (Atta-ur-Rehman, 2012).

Contrary to United States where public sector universities were established many years after private sector universities (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014), in Pakistan, public sector universities dominated the higher education market and enjoyed full support from the government sector. However, with a great surge in students seeking HE private sector HEIs emerged in great numbers as an alternate solution (Atta-ur-Rehman, 2012). Recently, with the auspices of the provincial government and patronage from HEC several universities in public and private sectors were established in the KP. A good number of public sector HEIs were established in almost every district capital of the province. Similarly, there has been a mushrooming growth of private and affiliate institutes as well. According to Atta-ur-Rehman (2012) fifty one universities and degree awarding institutions were newly formed and eighteen new campuses of existing universities were established during 2003 to 2008 alone.

The public sector universities are run as non-profit organizations mostly funded through the HEC. Whereas, the private sector universities are mostly maintained and funded through their indigenous resources. The private sector universities are usually indulged in aggressive marketing campaigns in order to boost up their enrolments. At times, this gives way to a negative perception about private HEIs believed to be more concerned with their profitability by charging higher fee and less emphasis on education quality.

In such a competitive scenario, HEIs have realized that in order to survive they need to market themselves more effectively. As per Keller (1993) there are times when old-fashioned marketing techniques might not quite do the job in delivering satisfaction, hence, room for more creative marketing practices. This clearly indicates that educational decision makers are quite at loss in dealing with HE market.

Higher education is a market that is in a persistent change especially in Pakistan where HE does not have a strong base. Thus, in order to cope with competitive pressures and to avoid treating HE at par with other commodities which aim at merely making profits (Noor Hasni and Alliah, 2009) marketing decision makers in HEIs ought to develop better understanding of their services. This means delivering on the promise of good quality education.

Branding and particularly brand equity is one of the most prudent areas where marketers can focus in order to improve the service quality. According to Heding, Knudtzen & Bjerre (2009) the value creation emanates through building brand equity. Notwithstanding the significance of brand equity, researchers are yet to present rich brand management judgments especially in the HE sector (Kay 2006). Moreover, with different conditions there are signs that public and private sector HEIs operate in different set of considerations and hence evaluated differently by the students. Hence, the author of this study feels that there has to be a different set of branding strategies for private sector HEIs as opposed to the public sector HEIs. Likewise, the introduction of newly established universities especially in the public sector has given a new dimension to HE in the province.

The current research explores the current student's perceptions of public and private HEIs and embracing marketing and more precisely a branding approach. The research is intended to discourse a void recognized by Chapleo (2010) who described that an appraisal of the literature appears to propose an "apparent deficiency of knowledge underpinning the exact aims of HEIs branding programs". Thus, this research aims to fill the gap through its contribution to the marketing notion by examining the impact of brand image on brand equity of public and private sector HEIs in KP, Pakistan.

Branding In Higher Education

Branding HEIs has remained an argumentative matter as some of the researchers doubt the importance of branding to HE sector (Jevons, 2006). Opoku et al (2006) contend that the concept of branding applies to HE as well as any other sectors. Others, however, reason that branding HEIs is relatively more complex and therefore, conventional branding techniques are inadequate for HE sector. The argument is that branding techniques have been copied from the business sector and are therefore, not applicable to HE (Maringe, 2005; Jevons, 2006). Consequently, despite of a number of empirical studies the idea of branding HEIs has hardly made a mark on HE literature (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Yet, there seems to be a consensus on the need to manage HEIs like corporate firms which pretty much settles the contention (Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006).

In reviewing higher education market, a number of authors have doled out their theories regarding the notion of brand equity in HE. Considerable amount of the texts in this purview concentrate on issues that impact university-brand preferences. Some of them dealt with segmentation feasibility within universities (Bock, D.E., Poole, S.M., & Joseph, M., 2014). Others deal with individual characteristics such as ethnicity, religion,

age, sexual category, and educational aptitude (Dawes & Brown, 2002, & Menon, Saiti, & Socratous, 2006). Few have targeted institutional characteristics (Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012, Judson, James, & Aurand, 2004).

While, others have focused on students experiences (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003, Lockwood & Hadd, 2007) and institutions' academic repute (Conard & Conard, 2000). Whereas, all of aforementioned scholarships deliberate on demands side dynamics they are also understood to have bearing on supply side factors (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In a series of studies several authors have proposed classifications of brand image. For instance, Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) have identified Functional brand benefits as a defining construct of brand image. Keller (1998) and Chang (2006) have suggested product-related attributes and non-product-related attributes as dramatic characteristics of brand image. Whereas, Chen (2008); Temple (2006) have termed symbolic brand benefits as a useful component of brand image. To differentiate it further Keller (2001) has operationalized brand image as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing four variables and are adopted for measuring responses for the current research are product-related attributes, non-product-related attributes, functional brand benefits, and symbolic brand benefits.

However, to the finest of our understanding, there is only one study that come close to the current study which has empirically examined the impact of brand meaning on brand equity in the public and private sector universities in the Malaysian market (Goi & Saleh, 2011). The paper focused on the role of brand meaning on brand equity of HEIs. Hence, the author of this study has identified a gap to study the role of brand image on brand equity in public and private sector HEIs in Pakistan. The research will further go on to suggest that there are certain conditions that seem to be diversely significant in students perspective in view of the kind of institution (public or private).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on Keller's (1993) model, according to which brand equity is determined by a dualistic framework of brand awareness and brand image. Berry (2000) contends that brand equity is influenced by both brand awareness and brand image. However, brand image is a reasonably stronger determinant of brand equity than brand awareness. According to the empirical findings of Mourad et al (2010) brand image along with brand loyalty and perceived quality is more important in defining brand equity as compared to brand awareness. In particular, brand image plays an instrumental role in determining brand equity as it reduces the risk that is associated with service consumption since the quality cannot be assessed until the service is consumed (Chen, 2008). Aaker (1991a) has defined brand image as associations that customers build with a brand. Whereas, brand association is something about a brand that is tied with memory and may include a number of attributes such as brand name, perceived quality, product attributes and benefits. The conceptual model is based on a number of factors discussed next.

Product-Related Attributes:

Keller (1993) in his famous study has defined product-related attributes as "characteristics deemed essential for a product's performance". They are primarily concerned with the physical formation of a product deemed necessary to perform a

function. Quality of education and physical infrastructure are some of the important product-related features (Chen, 2008); (Kurz et al., 2008). However, Booth (1999); Chen (2008) have suggested tuition fee and after sales service as other noteworthy features. Admission criteria, graduate employment rate, and breadth and depth of courses offered are some of the additional product-related attributes mentioned by several researchers.

Non-Product-Related Attributes:

Characteristics that are related externally to a product's purchase are regarded as non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1993). They are directly related with the different features of the service provider. Booth (1999); Chen (2008); Cheng and Tam (1997); Kent et al. (1993); Kurz et al. (2008); Scott (2000) & Smith and Ennew (2000) have proposed student-faculty interaction, location, size, and history of the service provider as some of the notable non-product-related features.

Symbolic Brand Benefits:

The symbolic attributes as maintained by Chen (2008); Scott (2000); Temple (2006) depict the overall standing of a university and relate to brand identity and brand personality. The brand personality according to Plummer (1985) is the personal character of a brand. It reflects emotions reflected by a brand and pertains to the extrinsic benefits of a service such as social approval. Personality traits such as sincerity, competence, sophistication, excitement, and ruggedness proposed by Aaker (1997) in the famous study of big five forces model are used to determine symbolic brand benefits for the proposed research.

Functional Brand Benefits:

According to Keller (1993) the functional benefits relate to the intrinsic features of product or service consumption such as physiological and safety needs associated with the product-related attributes.

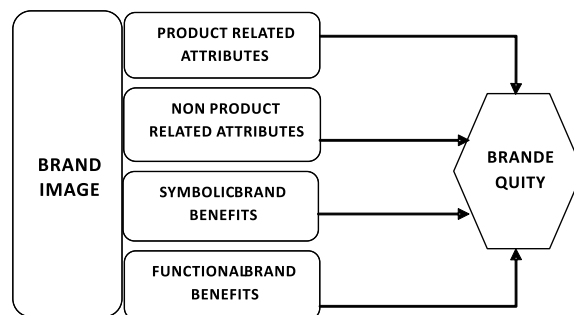


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram

Materials and Method:

This study is concerned with the service sector in general and HE in particular. Despite its huge potential there is little empirical evidence linking student's brand image to brand equity in HE (Palacio et al., 2002) especially in the context of HEIs in Pakistan.

Hence, the empirical setting chosen for this study is Pakistan HE market in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkwa Province. This a potentially good setting with a blend of public and private sector universities located at almost every district capital of the province.

The population of the study included 24 HEIs issued charter by the provincial government of KP or federal government. Due to non-accessibility of author to some areas owing to time and logistics constraints and prevailing law and order situation only 12 HEIs were selected in the sample frame from both public and private sectors of the HE market of the KP province. Exactly seven of the HEIs were selected from public sector and five from private sector.

After having collected the list of all enrolled students from the university admissions department eleven hundred students (respondents) were selected in the sample frame. The respondents were selected on the basis of having been enrolled in the university for at least one year with the concerned HEI. This was done so in order to ensure the validity of their responses. Thus, only those students registered in the second, third and final year of undergraduate and final year of graduate programs were approached for data assemblage. Hence, simple random probability sampling was deemed a relevant technique for data collection, allowing all elements of the population equal chance of being selected. A standard rule of $8n + 50$ proposed by Guar & Guar (2006) was used for sample size determination.

Overall, eleven hundred (1100) questionnaires were distributed, out of which seven hundred and sixty five (765) responses were estimated as useable yielding a response rate of 70%. The 500 questionnaires strewn in the private sector 365 responses were judged as valid. Only 400 out of 600 distributed in the public sector were valid.

Data collection method included a structured questionnaire administered to the respondents on the respective campuses. The data were collected within a span of seven weeks beginning from January 15, 2014 to March 07, 2014. The measurement scale used in the study is based on five-point Likert Scale where 1 is anchored as strongly disagree and 5 as strongly agree.

Measurement and Instrumentation:

The instrument was adopted from some of the earlier studies which demonstrated high validity and reliability values. The main variables used for the current study were brand image as predictor variable and brand equity as criterion variable. The brand image facet was further explained through product and non-product related attributes, symbolic and functional brand benefits.

The five items developed to measure brand equity have been adapted from Yoo and Danthu (2001)'s fourteen point scale which were deemed reliable and valid by Washburn and Plank (2002). The twenty items developed to measure brand image were adapted from Mourad, Ennew, and Kortam (2010).

Validity of Scale:

Construct validity is a good measure of calculating the abstract nature of the instrument. In order to calculate the construct validity of the instrument an inter-item consistency test was applied. With the aid of inter-item correlation matrix, correlation of every item was assessed against the aggregate of the other items.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of All Variables (N=765)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>
<i>I</i> Brand Image	---					
<i>II</i> Product Attributes	.795**	---				
<i>III</i> Non-Product Attributes	.882**	.606**	---			
<i>IV</i> Functional Benefits	.795**	.552**	.815**	---		
<i>V</i> Symbolic Benefits	.808**	.521**	.846**	.428**	---	
<i>VI</i> Brand Equity	.711**	.526**	.716**	.383**	.497**	---

Reliability of Scale:

A Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to test the reliability of the scale. Results demonstrated an overall Cronbach's alpha value of above 0.7 which is a satisfactory level (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability of Measurement Scale (N=765)

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Product Related Attributes	0.76
Non-Product Related Attributes	0.81
Functional Brand Benefits	0.82
Symbolic Brand Benefits	0.81
Brand Equity	0.78

A sample profile of HEI respondents (Table 3) was conducted that revealed the following facts: the overall male respondents were approximately 75% (78.4% private sector and 72.3% public sector) and female approximately 25% (21.6% private sector and 27.7% public sector). Almost 97% of the respondents were in the age bracket of 18 to 30 years (98.8% private sector and 95.4% public sector). Similarly, the education level of the respondents revealed that overall 71% were at the graduate level program and 23% at postgraduate program.

Table 3. Sample profile of HEIs respondents (N=765)

	Profile	Private Sector HEIs (n=365)	Public Sector HEIs (n=400)	Total
Gender	Male	78.4	72.3	75.35
	Female	21.6	27.7	24.65
Age	18 to 30	98.8	95.4	97.10
	31 to 40	0.8	3.6	2.20
	41 to 50	0.1	0.8	0.45
	50 & above	0.3	0.2	0.25
Education Level	Undergraduate	4.0	2.0	3.00
	Graduate	73.0	70.2	71.60
	Postgraduate	23.0	27.8	25.40

Results:

With the help of T-test differences between the brand image of public sector HEIs and private sector HEIs were computed based on mean change in brand image and brand equity. The test results are depicted in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Results of Regression model (N=765)

	Full Sample (n=765)			Public HEIs (n=400)			Private HEIs (n=365)				
	F	R ²	P	F	R ²	β	P	F	R ²	β	T
Outcome:											
Predictor	269.8**	0.67		65.7**	0.51			188.8**	0.74		
Product related attributes			0.29	0.00		0.30	0.001			0.43	0.00
Non-Product related attributes			0.41	0.00		0.31	0.026			0.44	0.00
Symbolic Benefits			0.39	0.00		0.33	0.001			0.43	0.00
Functional Benefits			0.31	0.00		0.18	0.001			0.22	0.00

**p<0.0001

The test is significant $t(289.9) = -2.59$, $p < 0.01$ for brands image and $t(309.8) = -3.01$, $p < 0.01$ for brand equity (Table 4). The mean of public sector HEIs is 3.54 whereas the private sector HEIs is 3.91. This shows that there is a significant difference between the brand image and brand equity of public and private sector HEIs. The results indicate that the acceptability level of students for private sector HEIs exceeds that of public sector.

The hypotheses were also tested for role of brand image on brand equity with the help of multiple regression analysis. As depicted in Table 4 all the hypotheses were substantiated. As a whole, the individual contribution of non-product related attributes ($\beta=0.41$), and symbolic brand benefits ($\beta=0.39$) have a higher impact on brand equity as compared to product related attributes ($\beta=0.29$) and functional brand benefits ($\beta=0.31$). The model exhibited an overall variance of 67% in brand equity. The variance of public sector HEIs ($r^2 = .51$) is significantly less as compared to private sector ($r^2 = .74$). This can be explained due to the relatively less individual influence of product related attributes for HEIs of public sector ($\beta=0.30$) whereas, for HEIs of private sector ($\beta=0.43$). Similarly, the influence of functional brand benefits on brand equity is relatively low for HEIs in public sector ($\beta=0.18$) as compared to HEIs of private sector ($\beta=0.22$). The impact of non-product related product related attributes on brand equity is higher ($\beta=0.31$) for public sector HEIs, and ($\beta=0.44$) for private sector HEIs, similarly, impact of symbolic brand benefits on brand equity is higher ($\beta=0.33$ for public sector HEIs and $\beta=0.43$ for private sector HEIs).

DISCUSSION

In the light of the findings for testing the relationship between brand image and brand equity of HEIs, the non-product related attributes and symbolic brand benefits are identified to be the strong predictors of brand equity. Further, the results showed that functional brand benefits are strongly predicted for brand equity of public sector HEIs. This indicated that public and private sector HEIs should not be considered as similar in all respects and therefore, different strategies should be adopted for different services (Lampo, 2001; McDonald et al., 2001). Results also confirm the earlier findings of (Chapleo, 2006) that public sector HEIs in so many respects are similar to non-profit

brands. The results confirm that private sector HEIs have different set of circumstances and therefore, demand a separate set of considerations. This study fully supports the contentions put forth by Yussof (2003) that students have different perceptions for private and public sector HEIs.

In a more academic sense, the results suggest that unlike other services branding where generalization is the norm, it is hardly the case in HE field since the public and private sector institutions have different operational requirements. Hence, suggested that because of the unique nature of HE researchers and practitioners should focus on the specific characteristics of the HE services. It is also confirmed through this research that one must refrain from the assumption that the services have a generic nature and that the theories could be generalized for all services.

From an applied point of view, the research findings propose that the educational managers should set different priorities in setting branding goals and strategies. Non-product attributes and symbolic brand benefits are deemed to play a vital role in building brand equity in private HEIs and functional brand benefits are more useful in public sector HEIs.

Managers in the private sector HEIs seems to have got the joke already as they over the past few years strived to enhance their brand equity and in doing so they have dramatically increased student enrollment. Managers in the public sector HEIs could learn from the research findings to extend greater efforts in enhancing their image and improve their ratings. This is clear from the fact that students do not foresee public sector HEIs as doing a great job in performing their services. The public sector HEIs may need to work towards enhancing their brand image by leveraging the mass media and participating in community programs. By doing so they may attract more foreign students in addition to the locals as the public sector HEIs may be better suited for this job having the direct support of government. Yet, this study points out that the students are the primary customers and it is them who determine the brand equity against the value proposition by the HEIs. Therefore, brand managers should focus on their service and value and not make the mistake of treating education as a mere commodity (Gummerson, Lusch & Vargo 2010, p.8).

This study is subject to a number of limitations. For instance, students were selected from the faculty of management sciences only contrary to all departments as originally planned. This was due to the fact the HEIs in particular have a vast number of departments and it was practically not possible to make the representation of students from all departments. Furthermore, HEIs from some parts of the province could not be included in the study due to security concerns.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Additional studies may be undertaken to suggest further implications for marketing strategies and tactics in the HE industry. Undoubtedly, previous research could come handy in this endeavor. A better choice criterion can be established for brand identities such as brand name considerations as it pertains to brand image. Moreover, a separate study can be conducted on the role of brand awareness dimension of HEIs since it plays a major role along with brand image in determining brand equity. Role of various other brand identities such as logos, symbols, trademarks, and slogans can be identified to see how their differential effects brand equity. Elements prompting the favorability,

strength, and uniqueness of brand associations should be explored along several different lines. For example, which categories of associations are produced with ease by marketing mix components that are likely to affect customer brand choice? Similarly, the tradeoffs between cost and benefits involved in leveraging brand associations can be explored to see their viability. Finally, in addition to the customer-based perspective, researchers could develop a firm-based perspective and even financially-based perspective of brand equity.

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