COMPONENTS OF BRAND OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract: *Branding is a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in higher education over the last few years. It entails defining the essence of what a higher education institution (HEI) "is", what it "stands for", and what it is going to be known for. Terms such as branding, identity, brand image, reputation have emerged in academia, making HEIs more aware of the link between what they "stand for" in terms of values and characteristics, and how they are perceived. The paper presents and analyzes components of a brand based on the example of the Academy of Business in Poland. The paper includes the findings of the empirical research done by means of a direct survey conducted in one group of the Academy's stakeholders, 212 graduates from second-cycle studies and their views on perceiving the brand of the Academy have been presented.*

Keywords: *branding in higher education, brand identity, image*

JEL Classification: *M14, M31*

1. INTERPRETATION OF BRAND

Brand is a multidimensional term. It includes both visible elements such as a name and logo, but also invisible processes creating value added inside the organization, which give brands competitive advantage. Brand encompasses "rational" and "emotional" elements [1]. "Brand" is defined as:

- a product (service), line or family of products, or the whole range of products offered by a company, having its fundamental market identity, i.e. at least brand name [2]; a concept of brand understood in such a way does not reflect the concept of "strong brand";
- a trademark (a graphic or textual-graphic logo identifying a product; logo, logotype) - created to mark a product and distinguish it from competing products [3, 4];
- the market image of the product; in this meaning, brands are distinctive, original and unique products, of consistent quality, providing functional benefits and value added [5].

In fact, brand makes a promise to continuously provide a buyer with a specific set of features and benefits, gives a signal to consumers about the service that will be provided, thus mitigating some of the problems associated with experience and credence qualities [6]. Branding and a role of brands, as traditionally understood, have been subject to constant review and redefinition. Both practitioners and academics have devised models of the elements constituting a brand (Table 1).

The concept of brand is related to the concepts of brand identity and image [8]. Clear, original, unambiguous and attractive brand image is important to achieve market success. However, brand identity is a source of consumer perception of brand. Actual identity is how entities see their brand, its features, its benefits, values it represents and culture. On the other hand, desired identity is a state they want to achieve. These are all brand-related plans, goals and aspirations. Image is a picture in the minds of consumers. Universities aim to evoke very specific brand-related associations (desired image). However, they may differ, to a greater or lesser extent, from assumptions originally made – then stakeholders perceive the offer differently than planned (actual image). Image is the result of the synthesis of how the market perceives all brand elements (names, visual symbols, products, advertisements, etc.).

Table 1 Models of the brand

AUTHORS	TANGIBLE AND VISUAL ELEMENTS	INTANGIBLE ELEMENTS
Aaker (1992)	Symbols and slogans	Identity, corporate brand, integrated communications, customer relationships
Bailey and Schechter (1994)	Name, logo, colours, brand-mark, plus advertising slogan	
Biggar and Selame (1992)	Name, trademark	Positioning, brand communications
DMB & B (1993)	Product delivery	User identification; opportunity to share a dream
De Chernatony (1993a and 1993b)	Functional capability, distinctive name, legal protection	Symbolic feature, service, sign of ownership, shorthand notation
De Chernatony and McWilliam (1989)	Functionality	Representative value
Dyson et al. (1996)	Presence and performance	Relevance, advantage, bond
Grossman (1994)	Distinctive name, logotype, graphics and physical design	
Kapferer (1992)	Physique	Personality, relationship, culture, reflection, self-image
O'Malley (1991)	Functional values	Social and personal values
Young and Rubicam (1994)	Differentiation	Relevance, esteem and familiarity

Source: [7]

2. THE CONCEPT OF BRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION. BRAND COMPONENTS

The concept of brand considered as a meaningful factor of university management was introduced with promotion of both manager and marketing management concepts in the sector of academic education [9]. Branding is dominated by a focus on external aspects of branding rather than in-depth studies in specific organizations. The theoretical papers discuss the emergence of brand identities in moments of articulation [10], identify important elements of brand building based on a literature review [11]. The empirical studies focus on branding policies including identity or brand architecture [12-15], building relationships of brand community [16], identify whether universities can have successful brands[17]. Thus, the research on higher education branding is still very much at a pioneer stage.

University brand, in the meaning of product market image, is a result of the perception of its quality. It reflects the quality of the following areas: programmes of study, academic staff, the level of research, the physical infrastructure of schools and the level of their organization and international agreements [18].

According to Bennett and Ali-Choudhury [19], university brand reflects the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflects its ability to deliver a certain type, level and quality of higher education and its capacity to satisfy students' needs, and it also helps potential candidates to make enrolment decisions. According to these authors, brand mainly consists of:

a) a collection of promises presented to the outside world concerning the brand's physical and emotional benefits to buyers (a university brand as a covenant): social environment, learning environment, graduation prospects, mission and vision,

b) a set of distinctive features that define the brand's inherent nature and reality (the essence of HEI brand) is substantially determined by: the composition of its student body (e.g. the proportions of ethnic minority and nontraditional students), internal values relating to whether the university is elite and exclusive rather than inclusive and comprehensive), institution's physical actuality (e.g. architecture and campus layout, safety and security, the facilities of the city in which the HEI is located),

c) an assortment of aesthetic designations and external communications that describe the brand (name, logo, typefaces, color schemes, stationery, forms, receptionists' uniforms, vehicles).

Part of university brand could be location, heritage and reputation of the institution [17].

Very often the concept of brand is synonymous with university prestige, and the two terms are used interchangeably. A HEI should look for what makes it unique, and create brand on this basis (tradition, history, international prestige, modern learning solutions, academic staff, graduates).

Communicating appropriate information about brand attributes results in creating brand image and its specific value in the mind of a customer. Higher education represents a context in which brand image potentially plays a major role in reducing the risk associated with such a service, largely because quality is assessed after consumption [20]. It was noted that many universities adopt a brand management strategy to improve their ranking in the higher education market and for students recruitment [21].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The goal of the study was to determine empirically if the brand is relevant to higher education, to investigate factors influencing the creation of strong brand, to learn the opinion of students about the Academy's brand (to identify actual image) and to discover how the collective influence of those factors would impact loyalty outcomes like current behavioral intentions.

Brand image created by universities is verified by various groups of stakeholders. Harvey [22] identified students as one of four groups who benefit from higher education (in addition to candidates, parents, institution authorities, employers and society at large). Educators measure elements of branding by assessing how students and alumni perceive the quality of their education and satisfaction with the educational experience [16]. All graduate students in the faculty were invited to take part in the survey. A total number of 212 usable questionnaires were received (60.5% return rate). The survey was anonymous. Of the 212 respondents, 143 (67.5%) are students of Management and 69 (32.0%) study Pedagogy. The general composition of the sample adequately reflected that of the graduate (master's level) student population.

A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions with a mixture of Likert-scale, multiple choice and closed-ended questions with one answer was developed. The survey was divided into four sections. In addition to demographic data, information about the students' opinion, factors influencing the creation of strong brand, identity and brand image, rankings and their impact on the Academy's brand was collected. 18 attributes of a very good higher education institution (factors influencing the creation of strong brand) were listed, and a five-point Likert scale was employed to gather responses, 5 indicating "maximum agreement" and 1 "no agreement". The 18 attributes have been developed by deconstructing the Bennett and Ali-Choudhury [23] components of university brand. In another part of the survey about identity and brand image multiple choice and closed-ended question with one answer were used.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Factors influencing the creation of strong brand

The construct to measure the students' opinion about factors influencing the creation of strong brand comprises 18 items. This item gained the highest mean score: 4.66 on a 5 point scale. According to the respondents, the most important factors influencing the creation of strong brand include: professional research and teaching staff, the atmosphere of the institution and education programmes which are compatible with the needs of the labour market. The prestige of a HEI is built by its employees - a good HEI is one that has professional staff - experts in the field, it has academics who have good contact with students. Moreover, a good higher education institution provides a good atmosphere (to study, to stay in this institution, to identify

with it), it respects students and teaches skills useful in their future work.

The respondents assessed the Academy on the basis of these answers. Most respondents assessed the professional staff - experts in the field and their rapport with students, atmosphere of the institution, and respect for students. Evaluation and expectations of Pedagogy students differed significantly (they were higher) from evaluations of Management students. Therefore, perception of brand and expectations of it may depend on the specific character of a target group. Table 2 presents the results for a model HEI and results for the Academy. They are the mean score (also in the division into the field of study the respondents represented: Management or Pedagogy), the mean rank and the percentage of the respondents who agreed/strongly agreed with the listed attributes.

University brand helps potential candidates to make enrolment decisions. The respondents chose factors which were important to them when choosing a university of their second-cycle studies: location (75.9%), programmes of studies (high quality, modern and flexible programme of studies, a wide choice of fields of studies and specialities, the offer of additional courses) - 61.9%, positive image the other students have about the Academy, prestige and reputation in the environment (56.7%), educational and sport equipment (30.2%). The following were of smaller importance: the cost of studies (16.5%), a high position of the Academy in rankings (16.0%), attractive career prospects after graduation (6.6%).

4.2 Identity and brand image

The HEI's goal is to arise certain connotations associated with the brand (the desired image). However, they may differ, to a greater or lesser extent, from the assumptions originally made - then stakeholders perceive the university differently than it was expected (actual image). The respondents were asked what creates the image of the Academy. Sixty nine percent of the respondents believe that it is image of a modern HEI, which is growing rapidly, 53.0% noted that this is the image of a private HEI that reaches a high position in the rankings, of a HEI which promotes spreading knowledge for people in all age categories (34.8%), of a HEI which makes the best possible effort to meet the needs of its students (28.0%). One in four respondents saw the image in the activities of a modern HEI (26.6%). Moreover, the respondents stated that the Academy emphasizes partnerships with the students (24.6%) and is a reliable HEI (24.6%). It is also significant that evaluation of actions taken by the Academy is usually consistent with its actual actions, whereas unnoticed actions present a challenge for the Academy for the near future. The vast majority of the respondents (86.3%) believed that the image created by the Academy is the reflection of the actual identity of the institution.

When asked to evaluate the brand and prestige of the Academy and compare it to other HEIs (using a five-point Likert scale), the respondents paid attention to the fact that the Academy is distinguished by innovative education programmes (score 2.60), is a rapidly growing HEI (2.62), distinguishes itself from all the prestigious private HEIs in the region (2.66), is distinguished as prestigious one among HEIs in Poland (2.73). Every third respondent believes that studying in the Academy gives greater prestige than in other HEIs in the region.

The determinants of visual identification play also a crucial role in communicating with the environment [24, 25]. They give a possibility of standing out from other organizations. The respondents asked about color(s) which they associate with the Academy pointed (correctly) at: beige/ecru (30.3%), brown (36.1%) and gold (22.3%).

Table 2 Factors influencing the creation of brand (n=212)

| Attribute | Respondent expectations (what should be) | | | | | The Academy of Business | | | | |
| | Total | | | Management | Pedagogy | Total | | | Management | Pedagogy |
	Mean	Rank	Agree/ St agree (%)			Mean	Rank	Agree/ St agree (%)		
Professional research and teaching staff	4.66	1	93.4	4.55	4.88	4.07	1	76.9	3.94	4.33
Lecturers having good contact with students	4.53	2	91.5	4.41	4.78	3.94	3	74.0	3.85	4.14
Demanding teaching staff	4.39	7	89.1	4.22	4.74	3.86	7	72.7	3.68	4.25
The good atmosphere	4.51	3	90.1	4.38	4.77	4.04	2	74.5	3.97	4.19
Respect for students	4.50	4	89.7	4.35	4.81	3.90	5	73.1	3.85	4.01
Satisfaction with studying	4.46	5	90.1	4.29	4.81	3.89	6	71.7	3.78	4.13
Developing interests	4.37	9	85.9	4.24	4.65	3.59	12	59.5	3.45	3.88
Generates ambitions	4.37	9	88.2	4.19	4.74	3.56	15	57.6	3.43	3.83
Provision of general knowledge	4.43	6	85.9	4.26	4.80	3.92	4	70.1	3.80	4.14
Developing skills necessary for the future job	4.43	6	85.9	4.34	4.62	3.56	15	57.0	3.51	3.65
Teaches creativity	4.36	10	88.7	4.17	4.74	3.70	9	63.2	3.64	3.83
A programme of study	4.33	12	87.3	4.14	4.74	3.67	10	61.8	3.61	3.81
It has educational and sport equipment	4.38	8	85.4	4.22	4.71	3.83	8	65.1	3.72	4.06
Conducting scientific research	4.34	11	85.8	4.17	4.70	3.58	14	57.1	3.32	4.12
Good career prospects	4.31	13	81.2	4.21	4.51	3.09	17	42.0	3.04	3.20
The possibility of involvement in student organizations	4.30	14	84.5	4.11	4.68	3.63	11	59.5	3.53	3.84
Cooperation with the environment	4.25	15	83.0	4.01	4.75	3.57	13	57.5	3.45	3.80
Contacts with foreign countries	4.11	16	79.2	3.87	4.61	3.38	16	51.4	3.17	3.81

According to the respondents, the ideas which are evoked by such coloring include: dignity (17.3%), reliability (16.8%), prestige (16.5%), and elegance (16.3%). The students also correctly recognize the logo of the Academy - among 7 different logos 95% pointed to the right one.

4.3 Impact of rankings on the Academy's brand

Rankings of HEIs and of educational programmes are a source of information about higher education, which can be easily interpreted. Therefore, rankings are also a tool used to build the brand image of each HEI. However, so far, there has been no conclusive research that would reveal that ranking is a very important criterion for selecting a HEI. This theory is also not supported by the survey conducted among the Academy students. Fifty two percent of the respondents do not read the rankings published in media, 34.4 percent of the respondents read them sometimes, only 12.8% read them regularly. Only 16% of the respondents pointed at the fact that a high position of the Academy in rankings published in media was the one of the main criteria for choosing this institution.

When asked to rate the importance of rankings, the respondents agreed that the participation and the location of the Academy is important because it builds its image among other HEIs in Poland (the opinion of 67.8% of the respondents, however, 46% of them did not pay attention to rankings). Moreover, they become helpful in making a decision about the place of studying (43.4% agree, but 44% of them did not pay attention to rankings) and promote its brand among employers, which, consequently, increases the value of the diploma from the Academy (46.1% agree). It also shows strengths and weaknesses of the Academy (26.8%). It may be inferred that a university position in rankings is not a key factor influencing a choice of university, however, when a university chosen by a student ranks highly, it has a positive impact on university image in the eyes of students.

5. CONCLUSION

Like in the study conducted by Benett and Ali-Choudhury, factors influencing the creation of strong brand have been identified. These are both visible, "rational" elements such as professional staff, education programmes, the physical infrastructure and location, as well as "emotional" elements creating value added inside the organization, which give brands competitive advantage, such as the atmosphere of the institution and satisfaction with studying. However, it can be noted that "rational" elements of university image are of greater importance at the stage of university selection, whereas being students, the respondents also paid their attention to "emotional" elements of university brand. Students assessed these features of the Academy compared to expected (model, ideal) attributes of a HEI. It is important knowledge for the Academy's authorities. This makes it possible to compare actions taken by the Academy with their effects perceived by students. Perception of brand and expectations of it may depend on the specific character of a target group - opinions of all important groups of clients (target groups) should be discovered so that actual image is identical with expected image. As the study has shown, one factor only is rarely decisive when choosing a university. Therefore, one should not restrict oneself to developing only selected elements creating the university and its brand.

Image created by the Academy (desired image), although to a large extent, it is not fully reflected in actual image. Unnoticed elements should be emphasized in marketing communications intended to develop the Academy's brand. Students compare the university they choose with other HEIs. They compare various elements related to the university functioning. Students rarely use the information about various universities presented in rankings.

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