



Projecting corporate brand image and behavioral response in business schools: Cognitive or affective brand attributes? [☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper considers corporate brand image, focusing on cognitive and affective brand attributes in the context of business schools. While previous research on university or institutional branding has studied these elements separately via cognitive (e.g., service or educational quality attributes) or affective criteria (personality traits of the corporate brand), this study investigates them jointly through behavioral responses (leading to positive recommendations about the corporate brand). This is important because brand equity such as positive word-of-mouth (or mouse) is derived from both attitudinal components, rather than being based on only one component. Drawing on an empirical survey of postgraduate (MBA) students from four business schools, the findings reveal that both cognitive and affective attitudinal components appear equally important in shaping corporate brand image. Further, when the mediating effect is investigated, interestingly, students' positive recommendations to schools depended largely on the affective (prestigious, adventurous, empathy and competence) rather than upon the cognitive brand attributes. This paper contributes theoretically to the corporate brand and consumer behavior literature by investigating both attitudinal components at a corporate brand level and investigates their effects on behavioral/conative response. The practical contribution of the paper and its managerial implications lie in the context of defining strategy in relation to positioning business schools in an increasingly competitive higher education market.

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1. Introduction

The increased demand for business education worldwide (Hawawini, 2005) has led the business school industry to become one of the fastest-growing segments in higher education and it continues to grow steadily around the globe (Antunes & Thomas, 2007; Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009; Davies & Chun, 2008). However, such growth underpins competitive pressures among schools to be seen as prestigious locally as well as globally. This has resulted in the burgeoning importance of branding within educational institutions and business schools (Hemsley-Brown &

Goonawardana, 2007). By having a reputable image a business school will benefit in many ways including rank, increased enrollment of excellent students, attracting funding opportunities, top employer recruitment, and alumni donations (Curtis et al., 2009; Davies & Chun, 2008; Gioia & Corley, 2002). In addition, several researchers have proposed that business schools or higher educational institutions (HEIs) can effectively position their corporate or institutional brands by using corporate brand image (Balmer & Liao, 2007; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Curtis et al., 2009; Davies & Chun, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Melewar & Akel, 2005).

However, despite the above, to-date, only few scholars focus upon the corporate brand image in the business school context when modeling consumer behavioral response (e.g., Curtis et al., 2009; Davies & Chun, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Melewar & Akel, 2005). Most extant works in this context either tend to be theoretical in nature (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007) or focus on the services aspect of HEIs by incorporating a singular component of attitude such as service, product or educational quality. For example, past studies have attempted to understand how HEIs or business schools position themselves by understanding choice factors of student–consumers using elements such as service and

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product or educational quality (school facilities, program quality and course choice, learning environment, university accommodation, teaching methods, and the 'people' element – academics or administration) (see C-L-Ng & Forbes, 2009; Holdford & Reinders, 2001; Maringe, 2006; Petruzzellis, D'Uggento, & Romanazzi, 2006; Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003; Voss, Gruber, & Szmigin, 2007).

While the above studies provide useful initial understanding of how corporate brand image could be perceived in this sector, they represent only a single attitude component of the corporate brand image such as cognitive or functional attributes (Balmer & Gray, 2003) and thus can only partially explain the impact of the corporate brand (Anisimova, 2007). Perceived service quality is only a form of cognitive evaluation (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Chiu, 2002) and researchers should go beyond this in identifying the emotional or intangible brand aspect of a service (Edvardsson, 2005). Since attitude is not only about cognitive but also about affective evaluation and behavioral/conative responses (Chiu, 2002; Edwards, 1990), incorporating both attitude components might be more useful and provide a more comprehensive meaning when trying to understand corporate brand image particularly in the business school context. This is because new students rely on corporate brand image built not only through service or product quality but also through more symbolic or affective and emotional type of brand attributes (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001) such as the personality of the corporate brand (or corporate brand character) (Davies & Chun, 2008). Furthermore, previous studies indicate that in the service-related setting, customer purchase decisions relied upon external cues of the corporate brand such as image and positive word-of-mouth (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Grönroos, 1984).

This paper considers attitudinal components associated with business schools namely cognitive and affective attributes when analyzing business schools' corporate brand images and students' behavioral responses (providing positive recommendations about the schools based on their experiences). This research thus extends the corporate brand theoretical framework by integrating both attitudinal components (cognitive and affective) and investigates their effects jointly on business school corporate brand image and consumer behavioral response. Incorporating both affective and cognitive brand attributes in an attempt to understand the business school's corporate brand image may shed light upon clearer strategic corporate brand positioning in this competitive market (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Opoku, Abratt, & Pitt, 2006) and subsequently lead to better explanations of consumers' behavioral responses (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Oliver, 1997). The objective here is to develop a student–consumer behavioral response model based on their experiences with business schools. This leads to three overarching research questions:

- (1) What drives the business schools' corporate brand image (cognitive or/and affective brand attributes)?
- (2) Given the nature of the service process – outcome relationship discussed in the past as well as the debate surrounding cognition/affect hierarchical relationship, do cognitive brand attributes (educational quality here) precede affective brand attributes (the school's character or personality)?
- (3) Do the two attitude components (cognitive and affective) have a direct or mediating effect on behavioral response (via corporate brand image and satisfaction)?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: First, a brief review of cognitive and affective brand attributes with regards to HEIs in general and in particular within business schools is carried out. A systematic review of past studies on what forms business schools' corporate brand images and their effect on behavioral responses is then discussed. This is followed by the research methodology. Third, the results of the study are presented and analyzed, followed by discussion, conclusions and research implications. Finally, limitations and suggestions for further research are highlighted.

2. Literature review

This study investigates what drives corporate brand image of business schools through the cognitive and affective brand attributes jointly and explores their direct and indirect effects on satisfaction and loyalty. The following defines the study constructs and develops the research hypotheses.

2.1. Corporate brand image – An attitude overall evaluation

The terms 'image about a brand' (brand image) and 'image about the corporation' (corporate brand image) have received great attention from as early as 1955 (Gardner & Levy, 1955; Martineau, 1958; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986; Patterson, 1999; Spector, 1961; Stern, Zinkhan, & Jaju, 2001). A review of previous studies reveals that understanding of corporate brand image remains a challenge due to terminology having been used inconsistently in the past resulting in the confusion and difficulties in definition (Davies, 2013; Franzen & Bouwman, 2001; Patterson, 1999; Stern et al., 2001). For example, brand, image, association, attributes and personality that, while different conceptually, have been used to describe the same thing (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). In an attempt to clarify corporate brand image and its drivers, this study has sought meaning from three different literatures namely psychology, consumer behavior (consumer psychology) and corporate branding (when the corporation is viewed as brand). The next paragraph deals with the first issue, definition of corporate brand image while the following paragraph discusses its drivers.

In consumer psychology, understanding of how consumers respond to a brand (positive, favorable perception and willing to commit to positive word-of-mouth) begins from attitudes (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). Image is about an attitude to a given brand (Reynolds, 1965). A classic but very useful attitude model – tri-component – implies that attitudes consist of the interaction between three components, namely, cognitive, affective and conative (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2007). Cognitive concerns 'what' we know about an object; affective refers to 'how' we feel, and conative is 'how likely' we are to act on it upon our knowledge and feelings (Chiu, 2002), also known as behavioral response. The previous debate among psychologists has concerned whether an attitude should have one, two or three components (Chiu, 2002; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). For example, (1) attitude can refer to the overall judgments of an object, (2) attitude consists of cognitive and affective responses to an object and (3) attitude is viewed as more effective if it is based on cognition (Chiu, 2002; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The most common approach adopted in consumer brand research was the three component model (Zanna & Rempel, 1988). In line with this, the current study approaches corporate brand image as an overall attitude judgment of an object (the business school or corporate brand) and this overall attitude judgment is based/formed through dual attitudinal components (cognitive and affective brand attributes).

Similarly, in a corporation, institution or company, Stern et al. (2001) explain that image about a corporation refers to (1) external world perceptions (or impressions that reside in stakeholder minds), which represent 'gestalt' or overall impressions of a brand. Although brand image can mean many different things: brand association, brand attitude, global total impression of memory and symbolic meaning of a brand (such as using human/personality traits), it has been commonly associated with the global total impression related to the brand is stored in memory and which is shared by members of a culture or subculture (Franzen & Bouwman, 2001). Therefore, construing an overall image of an organization is a result of a process which entails understanding of a mental map (MacInnis & Price, 1987) and such a map is shaped in several ways via ideas, feelings, and previous experience with an organization that are retrieved from memory and transformed into an overall mental map (Yuille & Catchpole, 1977). Institutional refers to the overall impression in the minds of the public, stakeholders and

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