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## The role of brand attachment strength in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of brand attachment and its antecedents on commitment, satisfaction, trust, and brand equity in the context of higher education institutions. The findings from an online survey with students and recent graduates ( $n = 605$ ) in the United States indicate that brand meaning is the main antecedent of brand attachment strength that affects satisfaction, trust, and commitment as well as brand equity. The effect of the brand attachment antecedents on satisfaction is stronger for current students whereas the effect of brand attachment antecedents on commitment is stronger for recent graduates. The effect of attachment strength on brand equity is also stronger for recent graduates. The paper also highlights practical implications for higher education managers and policy makers.

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## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive higher education sector, universities face significant challenges when it comes to recruiting new students (Bock, Poole, & Joseph, 2014; Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012). Recruitment is only the beginning of a long-term relationship that higher education institutions (HEI) need to cultivate, not only while students attend the programs but also beyond graduation. How universities manage the relationship with the students and how students perceive their institution's brand can have an impact on the attachment with the institution and in turn on students' intentions to engage with the university in the future. Previous studies highlight the need for research in relation to the power that comes from successful branding and the implications for HEIs (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). This paper aims to contribute to an underdeveloped area in the literature related to brand attributes and their importance in the context of the higher education sector (Chapleo, 2010). Specifically, the research objective is to examine the influence of HEIs' brand identity, brand meaning, and brand image on brand equity as a result of forming strong attachment, commitment, trust, and overall satisfaction from the vantage point of students and graduates, representing major research gaps identified in contemporary literature. The work develops and tests a unique model in the context of higher education. Therefore, the review of the literature incorporates previous

research in the branding field (see work by Alwi & Da Silva, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2002; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Goi, Goi, & Wong, 2014; Jillapalli & Jillapalli, 2014; Keller, 1993, 2001; Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000) to conceptualize the proposed model. It is worth noting that the use of appropriate, holistic branding models in relation to student and graduate perceptions in higher education is scarce (see Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014), highlighting a lack of research on the effect of university branding on students'/graduates' commitment, satisfaction, trust, and brand equity (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006). By examining these issues, the authors of the paper also respond to Goi et al.'s (2014) call for further empirical evidence of brand identity work in relation to HEIs. Managers employed in HEIs will benefit from this research too, considering the major marketing (and branding) initiatives undertaken in this sector nowadays and the major need to formulate appropriate strategies in order to connect and engage better with students and graduates.

In the next section, the paper discusses the theoretical underpinning and conceptual model before outlining the methodology adopted. The following section presents the results and findings, before concluding with implications and potential future research avenues.

## 2. Literature review

The conceptual framework builds upon the work of Jillapalli and Jillapalli (2014), who proposed a customer-based brand equity and relationship marketing framework in order to enhance an understanding of the brand equity of professors. Beyond testing the ecological validity of the model, this study extends and makes the framework relevant to the context of HEIs. In the first step, the perceived quality and reputation of

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a higher education institution can affect one's perceptions of an institution's brand characteristics, namely HEI's image, identity, and meaning. These constructs can influence the strength of the attachment the student and graduates have with the institution, which in turn affects relationship factors such as commitment, trust, and satisfaction. Finally, the relationship factors can have an impact on an institution's brand equity. This argument forms the basis of the conceptual model and hypotheses introduced below.

### 2.1. The impact of perceived quality and reputation

Perceived quality refers to students' and graduates' judgments about a higher education institution's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988), while reputation is the overall value, esteem, and character of a brand as seen or judged by people in general (Chaudhuri, 2002). Put differently, reputation signals how a firm's products, jobs, strategies, and prospects compare to those of competing organizations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Not surprisingly, perceived quality (primarily as manifested by the courses offered) and reputation of an institution are among the strongest influences on student choice of institution (Chen & Hsiao, 2009; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

In HE, reputation describes the image (of quality, influence, trustworthiness) that the institution has in the eyes of others (van Vught, 2008). The term others can describe many different constituents who have their own view of the institution (Alessandri et al., 2006). As a consequence, reputation management is extremely challenging, as different groups assess an institution's quality and reputation on the basis of how the university has met their particular expectations (Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, & Kangaslahti, 2014). A brand needs to develop a positive reputation in order to become successful and in turn profitable (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995). Having a positive institutional reputation can be of critical importance for crowded and competitive markets as prospective students may attend a leading university because of the overall reputation, even though a school or department may not be perceived as strong (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The reputation and the quality of an institution may be related, but they do not need to be identical, which is why institutions may try to influence their external images in many ways, and not only by maximizing their quality (van Vught, 2008). Perceived quality and reputation act as a first step towards selecting and enrolling at a HEI before someone can start developing an internal, closer, and personal view of the brand. On the other hand, as assessing quality before enrolling is impossible, and judging reputation is becoming increasingly difficult, branding can act as a shorthand measure of the whole range of criteria that inform student decision making (Jevons, 2006).

**H1.** Perceived quality has a positive effect on HEI (a) brand image, (b) brand meaning, and (c) brand identity.

**H2.** Reputation has a direct effect on HEI (a) brand image, (b) brand meaning, and (c) brand identity.

### 2.2. Brand image, identity, and meaning and their impact on attachment strength

Students form their perceptions of brand image, identity, and meaning before enrolling at a university and they continue evolving during their study and even after graduation. For instance, given that brand meaning will transfer from the HEI service to the life of the consumer by the efforts of the consumer herself (McCracken, 1989), one would expect that the different stages a student will find herself in will potentially result in the construction of different meanings. Similarly, brand identity may not remain constant. To be enduring within a changing HE environment, brand identity needs to be dynamic and flexible to meet consumers' expectations (da Silveira, Lages, & Simões, 2013). This requirement does not necessarily imply a process of

total reinvention. Rather, the core identity can act as a timeless essence of the brand that remains unchanged as the brand moves to new markets and new products, while the extended identity elements (organized into cohesive and meaningful groups) can provide brand texture and completeness, and focus on brand personality, relationship, and strong symbol association (Bhimrao, 2008). For HEIs, such an approach can be very useful when operating within a global environment that sees universities often venture beyond their traditional geographical base, but also into providing services to enhance student experience. Melewar and colleagues (Melewar & Akel, 2005; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002) identify four corporate identity sub-constructs (namely communication and visual identity, behavior, corporate culture, and market conditions) for a corporate identity that they have applied to HEIs, which, if managed effectively, can become a source of competitive advantage. Bosch, Venter, Han, and Boshoff (2006) extend the above, arguing that, for HEIs, brand identity should include not only visual expressions but also verbal ones. Brand image, which is the consumer's perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in their memories (Keller, 2003), will depend on the type of institution that will command a different approach to marketing the university to potential students (Ivy, 2001). Still, such differentiations may not be clear. For instance, Toma (2008), p.10, studying why HEIs in the United States (US) pursue positioning strategies for greater prestige, found that "universities and colleges that are vastly different in orientation, markets served, and available resources are using roughly parallel strategies in positioning for prestige, having framed their aspirations in a similar manner". Establishing an effective HEI brand can underpin relationship building, forming an attachment between the institution and the student. Park et al. (2010) define brand attachment as the strength of the bond connecting the brand with the self. Students can form and maintain such an attachment while studying for a degree, but also after graduating. The higher the brand relationship quality, that is, the consumer views of the brand as a satisfactory partner in an ongoing relationship (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005), the stronger the attachment will be. Such an attachment could have a significant role in explaining consumer attitude and even intention under certain conditions (Ilicic & Webster, 2011). This information leads to the following hypotheses:

**H3.** HEI (a) brand identity, (b) brand meaning, and (c) brand image have a positive significant effect on attachment strength between a student or graduate and the institution.

### 2.3. The impact of brand characteristics and attachment strength on relationship factors

The second part of the model examines the impact of brand characteristics and attachment strength on satisfaction, trust, and commitment and then in turn their impact on brand equity. The number of universities that invest in their brand management is growing (Melewar & Akel, 2005); however, research on the effect on commitment, satisfaction, trust, and brand equity is sparse (Alessandri et al., 2006).

Student satisfaction, which is the short-term attitude emanating from an evaluation of a student's educational experience, results when actual performance meets or exceeds the student's expectations (Elliott & Healy, 2001). In their study, Elliott and Healy (2001) found that student centeredness, campus climate, and instructional effectiveness have a strong impact on how satisfied a student is overall. Given that satisfaction is the most significant determinant of alumni giving (Monks, 2003; Pearson, 1999), HEIs need to put great emphasis on satisfaction while students attend the programs.

Mourad, Ennew, and Kortam (2011) suggest that universities should focus on activities that enhance their brand image rather than simply create awareness, as brand image has a more significant effect on brand equity compared to brand awareness. Previous research also suggests that brand image has a stronger affective rather

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