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Brand meaning in higher education: Leaving the shallows via deep metaphors[☆]Elizabeth J. Wilson^{*}, Esi A. Elliot

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ABSTRACT

This research explores brand meaning for a focal higher education institution (HEI) using metaphor analysis for deep insight. Two contributions come-to-light. First, the research addresses the call by Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) to advance theory development in the area of branding in higher education. Findings for a focal HEI are consistent with findings for private sector firms; brand meanings differed somewhat across stakeholder groups. However, differences were harmonious and did not have a negative effect on the HEI brand overall. Second, the study applies metaphor analysis (Zaltman & Zaltman 2008) for the first time to the domain of higher-education branding. Four deep metaphors, varying in predominance across stakeholders, emerge to reflect brand meaning for a focal HEI. The most pervasive deep metaphor for students and administrators is transformation while journey is most pervasive for faculty. The findings confirm that brand meanings are consistent with the mission of the focal HEI and current brand positioning strategies are in alignment around discovered deep metaphors. HEI brand owners may consider a reflexive process of deep metaphor discovery and extraction in future brand building efforts. The study concludes with acknowledgement of limitations and suggestions for future research.

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...for wisdom first speaks through images. (Yeats, 1961, p. 65).

1. Introduction

Though well established in the private sector, strategic thinking about branding in higher education is relatively new—"in its infancy" according to Idris and Whitfield (2014, p. 41)—and growing. A search of the literature yields studies on a variety of topics such as corporate identity (Melewar & Akel 2005; Lowrie 2007), brand building (Dholakia & Acciardo 2014), and brand image (Alwi & Kitchen 2014). Data from these and other branding studies for higher education institutions (HEIs) came from diverse qualitative and quantitative methodologies including ethnography, case studies, and large scale surveys for descriptive and modeling analyses. Theoretical frameworks for HEI branding, while few in number, offer interesting perspectives. Notable are works by Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) regarding brand architecture, Melewar and Akel (2005) in applying a corporate identity model to the context of higher education, and the Brand Flux model proposed by Williams and Omar (2014). Thus, the field is evolving as stakeholders such as university administrators and faculty realize the value of strategic branding to alleviate competitive pressures.

The study here offers an approach to understand brand meaning, in particular, for HEIs. Brand meaning, the mental links between names, images, associations, and cognitions in memory, is a foundational element in brand building (Keller 2013). Brand meaning evolves from brand knowledge; the factual, objective essence of what a brand represents and the basis for brand equity and competitive advantage. Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2009) offer a conceptual framework to reflect the possibility that brand knowledge and resulting brand meaning may vary between senders and receivers of brand communications. Such variation results in brand meaning gaps between internal stakeholders (e.g., brand owners, typically the senders) and external stakeholders (e.g., target groups receiving the communication).

In an empirical examination of the Berthon et al. (2009) brand meaning gaps framework, Wilson, Bengtsson, and Curran (2014) found multiple meanings for a commercial retailer across stakeholder groups. Although brand meaning gaps between owners and external stakeholders existed, the overall brand meaning architecture was strong. The various meanings about the retail brand were positively valenced and harmonious. "The findings regarding the polysemic nature of brand meaning are useful to brand managers seeking to leverage offerings to multiple target markets" (Wilson et al. 2014, p. 128).

Similar findings exist in the domain of higher education. Alwi and Kitchen (2014) examine cognitive (beliefs) and affective (attitudinal) components of HEI brand image/meaning in a business school context to understand effects on student satisfaction, and loyalty. They conclude that establishment of a positive brand meaning leads to distinct positioning of the HEI relative to competitors. Communication consistency between sender and receiver is important, though, to establish mutual

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knowledge about the HEI, as found by Melewar and Ake (2005) in a case study of corporate identity (the outward manifestation of brand meaning). Communication consistency, however, does not imply that an HEI have only one identity, rather a plurality of meanings and identities may exist (Lowrie 2007). The careful brand owner must manage communications, however, to manage gaps between intended and received meaning.

The purpose in this research is to extend the brand gap framework to the domain of non-profit organizations, specifically higher education institutions (HEIs). Like commercial firms, HEIs are often in competitive markets facing similar pressures (e.g., need to operate efficiently due to lower levels of funding and rising costs, and need for strong brand building to establish competitive advantage). This study of brand meaning gaps addresses calls from researchers such as Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) who maintain that harmony within brand architecture, in general, is important for brand strategy. Similarly, Melewar and Nguyen (2014) call for additional studies in the higher education context to further knowledge development regarding a range of branding topics. Specifically, we want to understand the nature of brand meanings in the HEI context and the extent to which brand meanings among different stakeholder groups are harmonious or discordant. The focus on brand meaning as an element of overall brand strategy will offer middle range theoretical and empirical information to the HEI branding knowledge base.

2. Conceptual framework of brand meaning gaps

Using the theory of mutual knowledge (Clark & Marshall 1981), Berthon et al. (2009) suggest that brand meaning gaps are minimized when senders and receivers establish common ground. Mutual knowledge is established by crafting and delivering brand communications in such a way that the information transmitted is consistent from sender to receiver. The extent to which knowledge is shared between sender and receiver minimizes the chances for meaning gaps to develop about the brand. Wilson et al. (2014, p. 132) describe the iterative process in the commercial firm context as follows, “The brand owner/organization sends a communication, consumers receive it, perception of the information is integrated into the consumer’s existing knowledge base. The consumer’s knowledge base develops over time from communications (e.g. exposure to advertisements and/or catalogs, news stories,

word-of-mouth) and experience (shopping in-store and/or online, buying, using the brand, seeing others use the brand).”

Fig. 1 offers an adaptation of the conceptual framework for the context of higher education. Some differences are evident. For example, Berthon et al. and Wilson et al. recognize the brand owner as a single internal stakeholder, reflective of the hierarchical nature of organizational structure and decision-making in most commercial firms. However, in HEIs, administration and faculty often work collaboratively in shared governance to establish mission and supporting programs. Thus, HEIs may experience multiple internal stakeholders. Another difference is in the nature of the external stakeholders. In HEIs, external stakeholders are not customers, per se, rather they are students, the beneficiaries of the education process. Other external stakeholders in the higher education context include alumni, employers, and the community.

Since brand knowledge (BK) underlies the cognitive structures that form brand meaning (BM), the gap between the two internal stakeholder groups (G1) may be small. Administration and faculty usually work closely and collaboratively together, leading to significant overlap in brand knowledge and brand meaning. The brand meaning gaps (G2) between internal and external stakeholders may be larger. For example, external stakeholders are less likely to be knowledgeable about nuances of mission and curriculum development (lower brand knowledge) compared to internal stakeholders. External stakeholders also view the HEI through the lens of personal goals and experiences for development of self for students and alumni.

Brand meaning between external stakeholder groups is also likely to vary (G3). Students and alumni will experience the higher education process at different points in time. HEI mission and curricula may change due new vision from upper administration or a new focus desired by the marketplace. A new Dean may establish new programs, centers, etc. to supplement existing offerings. Advances in technology are leading HEIs to put more emphasis on developing student skills in information generation, handling, and management (i.e., big data). Students in one generation may ascribe a very different brand meaning to their alma mater compared to alumni from a previous generation.

The employers hiring students may have an altogether different brand meaning for a focal HEI. Employers are looking for talented students who bring skills and knowledge to the workplace. As programs

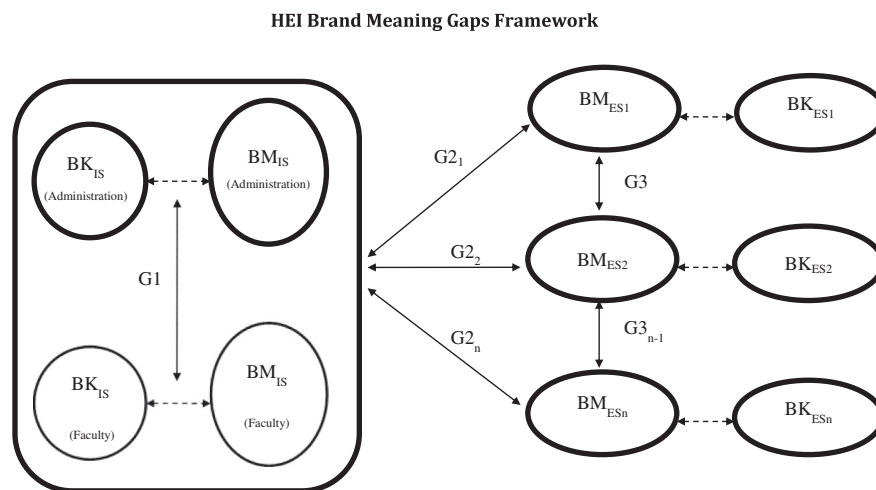


Fig. 1. HEI brand meaning gaps framework. BK = brand knowledge BM = brand meaning IS = internal stakeholder group ES = external stakeholder group G1 = brand meaning gap between internal stakeholder groups G2 = brand meaning gap between collective internal and external stakeholder groups Adapted from Berthon et al. (2009) and Wilson et al. (2014).

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