Brand management in higher education: The University Brand Personality Scale

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ABSTRACT

Many universities leverage symbolic qualities with the potential of creating a brand personality useful in competitive differentiation. Drawing on a series of qualitative and quantitative studies consistent with psychometric scale development procedures, this study develops and validates a six-dimension University Brand Personality Scale (UBPS). The UBPS comprises prestige, sincerity, appeal, lively, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan dimensions. Results suggest that the scale strongly relates to brand love, positive word-of-mouth, and students' intention to support their university as alumni. Theoretical implications and recommendations for university managers follow from study results.

1. Introduction

Increasing competition between universities heightens the need for institutions to understand, manage, and leverage a strong brand position (Celly & Knepper, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Consequently, more and more universities apply common marketing techniques including brand management to compete effectively (Chapleo, 2011, Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). A university brand represents the totality of perceptions and feelings that stakeholders associate with that particular university (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, & Savani, 2009; Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). Tangible perceptions like tuition fees and teaching quality (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012) as well as symbolic and affective qualities like fun, excitement, and passion (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009) encompass university brand.

For any organization, a brand constitutes a valuable asset when managed in a holistic, integrative manner that builds long-term brand health (Mirzaei, Gray, Baumann, Johnson, & Winzar, 2015). Brand personality captures "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Based on Aaker's conceptualization, various studies suggest the influence of brand personality on consumer preference, behavior, and experience (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013). However, the applicability of Aaker's scale across different

industrial or cultural contexts remains limited. In response, researchers offer a variety of industry- and culture-specific brand personality models ranging from regional (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Rojas-Méndez, Murphy, & Papadopoulos, 2013), to media (Valette-Florence & De Barnier, 2013), to corporate (Davies, Chun, Da Silva, & Roper, 2004), to retail (d'Astous & Lévesque, 2003), to non-profit brands (Venable, Rose, Bush, & Gilbert, 2005).

Given numerous context-specific conceptualizations, traditional corporate brand personality scales may not capture university personality precisely (Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Other studies claim that educational marketing research lacks sufficient theoretical grounding (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006). Furthermore, applications of traditional brand personality measures in higher education settings face challenges in replicating the theorized measurement results (e.g., Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). In practice, universities commonly employ personality attributes in their marketing efforts (Opoku, Hultman, & Saheli-Sangari, 2008). For instance, the University of South Carolina (USC) explicitly defines and integrates its brand personality in marketing communications (http://www.sc.edu/toolbox/brandPersonality.php). USC, and other universities, may benefit significantly from a more generalizable approach to measuring university brand personality.

The current research addresses the special issue topic by developing a theoretically based measurement model to assess brand personality in a higher education context. Specifically, qualitative and quantitative research studies conducted in Germany and in the U.S.A. provide data to operationalize university brand personality. The primary theoretical contribution is the development of the University Brand Personality

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Scale (UBPS) consisting of six dimensions: 1) prestige, 2) sincerity, 3) appeal, 4) lively, 5) conscientiousness, and 6) cosmopolitan. Considering the global nature of the higher education market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), the research intends to develop a widely applicable scale capable of capturing UBPS for universities in multiple countries. Further, correlational evidence relates UBPS to university-related behavioral, intentional, and emotional outcomes relevant to theoretical models explaining student decision-making processes. Managerial implications include the provision of a measure to assess university brand personality to assist in constructing a desirable brand helping universities to attract students, faculty, sponsorships, and alumni support, while working to improve the overall image of the institution (Melewar & Akel, 2005).

2. Theory and literature review

2.1. Branding in higher education

Given that universities find themselves operating within dynamic and challenging environments, marketing strategy becomes a priority in assuring strong student and faculty recruitment and retention (Asaad, Melewar, Cohen, & Balmer, 2013). Consensus exists that understanding institutional branding (Duesterhaus & Duesterhaus, 2014) and clearly developing and communicating that brand is of great value to universities (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Yet, research on university brand image, identity, reputation, and meaning remains underdeveloped (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003; Melewar & Akel, 2005).

Prior research shows that higher education branding creates greater awareness and recognition among multiple constituencies (Chapleo, 2011), including employees (Judson, Aurand, Gorchels, & Gordo, 2009), when implemented successfully with modern communication tools (Chapleo, 2010). In addition, Joseph et al. (2012) identify the preference of students to select a modern university featuring an attractive campus with up-to-date technology. The literature also reflects numerous challenges associated with branding activities in university settings, for instance complex brand architectures (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007), internal challenges (Chapleo, 2010), and diverse needs of various stakeholder groups (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). As a result, Chapleo (2010) advices against simply applying commercial branding approaches without accommodating the specific nature of higher education contexts.

Another unique challenge within higher education research is the external stakeholders' influence on the success of the institution (Watkins & Gonzenbach, 2013). Therefore, understanding and managing brand perceptions of all stakeholders is essential to attain differentiation among competitors. While institutions can utilize tools such as university rankings to portray assurance of quality (Davies & Chun, 2008), students might not view these criteria as meaningful in selecting a suitable college (Duesterhaus & Duesterhaus, 2014). Indeed, Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus (2014) discuss the importance of emotional attributes students rely on when evaluating a potential university. These findings validate the necessity to not only develop measures from a student's perspective, but also to apply models that consider emotional or relational connections students seek.

Brand personality represents a measure capable of capturing the stakeholders bond to the university (Blackston, 1993). According to Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013), applying brand personality to higher education literature enables institutions to create brand distinctiveness and differentiation. Sung and Yang (2008) assess university personality as part of overall university image and identify a positive influence of university image on students' supportive attitude towards the institution. In contrast, Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) ask students to determine brand personality of institutions by evaluating corresponding logos. However, results do not clearly support the hypothesized five-factor structure (Aaker, 1997) based on low-factor loadings and cross-loadings from exploratory factor analysis.

Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) also distinguish between academic and athletic identity of universities. Within the U.S.A., intercollegiate athletics is a major economic source and an effective recruitment tool (Harris, 2009; Southall, Southall, & Dwyer, 2009; Toma & Cross, 1998). However, beyond the American higher education market, intercollegiate athletics does not drive a university's overall image. As such, while a university brand personality measure should encompass various aspects of team spirit, such as liveliness and cosmopolitanism, the overall focus should remain on the academic personality to enhance generalizability across countries.

2.2. Brand personality

Prior research uses the brands-as-person metaphor to describe how, why, and when consumers relate to brands (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015; Fournier, 1998). Consumer–brand relationship theories often build on the assumption that consumers ascribe human attributes to brands (Rauschnabel & Ahuvia, 2014) in a process called anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Brand personality researchers put emphasis on identifying and describing underlying dimensions of these human brand attributes (e.g. Aaker, 1997; D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007; Valette-Florence & De Barnier, 2013).

In her seminal article, Aaker (1997) identifies five distinct brand personality dimensions: 1) sincerity, 2) excitement, 3) competence, 4) sophistication, and 5) ruggedness. In a recent meta-analytic study, Eisend and Stokburger-Sauer (2013) provide empirical generalizations about antecedents and consequences of brand personality. The authors uncover support for brand personality's influence on a variety of outcomes, including brand attitudes, brand relationships strength, and purchase intention. In addition, brand personality is more effective in influencing outcome variables for more mature brands. This finding is especially relevant for the purpose of this study as many universities have long-standing histories.

2.2.1. Overview of prior brand personality scales

Prior research reveals criticisms of the Aaker (1997) scale. For example, Geuens, Weijters, and De Wulf (2009) discuss conceptual and empirical issues in an aggregated analysis of Aaker's scale, including relatively little observed within-brand variance. Moreover, replications of Aaker's scale in different cultures or product categories failed, motivating researchers to develop context-specific scales (Bosnjak, Bochmann, & Hufschmidt, 2007; Milas & Mlačić, 2007; Sung, Choi, Ahn, & Song, 2015). Table 1 provides an overview of these scales.

As reflected in Table 1, most scales are based on Aaker's (1997) groundwork and subsume human attributes, like gender, appearance-focused, or age-specific traits, as "brand personality" or "corporate character" (Davies, et al., 2004). A few studies focus exclusively on attributes derived from human personality research (Geuens et al., 2009).

Researchers then continue with item generation using mostly qualitative techniques, such as consumer/experts in-depth interviews and analyses of communication materials. Most of these studies use limited sources to identify items, which can lead to a loss of content validity (Rossiter, 2002). As these procedures often reveal a large quantity of items, reduction techniques are commonly applied. Typically, a survey using a reduced set of items among stakeholders serves as a calibration study. After employing exploratory factor analyses techniques to identify underlying dimensions and delete problematic items, confirmatory factor analyses typically follow (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). As Table 1 shows, most studies follow these guidelines and conduct at least one confirmatory factor analysis on an additional sample.