

Communicating and aligning brand identity and brand image in a UK University: a multi-stakeholder approach

Conference Track – Branding and Marketing Communication

Abstract

Corporate brands are a strategic issue for universities as the global Higher Education (HE) marketplace is becoming increasingly competitive and there is pressure to differentiate. Communicating a consistent university brand and connecting extensive and diverse multiple stakeholders can be difficult not least because studies suggest that stakeholders can lack an emotional connection to a university. Thus, it is unclear how universities develop and manage brand strategies, and whether they draw upon any meaningful connections with multiple stakeholders and sub-cultures engaged with a university's brand. Qualitative data was collected across a business school in an established UK university. The findings are currently being analysed but early observations are competing brand identities and images between the business school and the university brand. This study contributes to the brand architecture literature by applying branding concepts to the under-research HE context and more accurately reflects the management and both sub-brands and corporate HE brands.

Key words: Corporate brands and sub-brands, corporate identity and image, corporate communications, brand architecture, education

Introduction and Objectives

Despite the fact that ‘higher education and branding go back a long way’ (Temple, 2006: 15) a variety of factors have intensified competitive pressure in the university sector. These include highly demanding students (Díaz-Méndez & Gummesson, 2012), escalation of market-based pressures (Asaad et al, 2013), expansion of the UK university sector and substantial cuts in public spending (Schlesinger et al, 2017). Therefore, it is strategically important for universities to manage their corporate brands with the purpose of leveraging a strong position in the marketplace (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Research therefore highlights the need for an established branding strategy within HEIs (Chapleo, 2015). How organisations position themselves and how they are perceived by stakeholders is a strategic issue, particularly for practitioners, as the corporate brand is underpinned by core values encompassing shared patterns of beliefs and expectations (Balmer and Podnar, 2021). Universities, like other public sector organisations, have complex and intangible product offerings and understanding how these organisations manage their brands is therefore key (Leijerholt, Chapleo & O’Sullivan, 2019:278) particularly as ‘a sense of conformance’ may be necessary. Complexities arise when trying to develop consistencies between brand image and identity in universities particularly when there are employees that associate themselves with their faculty rather than the university (Chapleo, 2015). This suggests that an institution’s identity is shaped by a mix of sub-cultures (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Sujchaphong *et al*, 2015). These different specialisms may be the very source of competitive advantage that can ensure success of a HE corporate brand but, understanding how multiple stakeholders perceive a faculty, with separate departments, remains largely uninformed (Palmer et al, 2016).

The authors are unaware of any research that has been conducted on collective perceptions of multiple stakeholders in terms of the perspective of a brand identity and brand image for a school and its separate departments within a university corporate brand. Indeed, Spry et al (2020) recommend that further research with multiple stakeholders, including external partners, would provide a more holistic representation of these different concepts. The following research questions will be addressed:

- 1) How is the business school’s corporate brand identity and values perceived by internal stakeholders (current employees)?
- 2) How is the business school’s corporate brand image perceived by external stakeholders (current students, potential students and external employees)?
- 3) To develop a framework of key factors influencing identity and image, and to explore to what extent this supports the development of an appropriate brand strategy within the university and the university business school.

Literature review

Lomer, et al (2018: 137) maintain the ‘brand has become a new tool for positional advantage’ capable of competing between national HE systems. Further, a brand can bring together HE attributes and values so as to create brand awareness and distinction (Asaad, 2014). However, as well as staff, students and alumni, external academics, potential employees and students, funders and professional bodies, universities are a network of many different sub-brands such

as faculty's, departments, courses and job roles (Chapleo, 2015, Spry et al, 2020). This suggests that more meaningful points of contacts need to be established (Missaghian and Milian, 2019). Further, communication difficulties can occur if internal and external stakeholders identify a stronger brand identity and brand image with their individual faculty/department in comparison to the university corporate brand (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009; Spry et al, 2020). University sub-brands could therefore be facilitated utilising the concept of brand architecture. This strategic approach manages and supports multiple brands within a corporate brand (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2008) and therefore could offer new insights into how university brands are developed, managed and implemented (Melewar & Nguyen, 2015) and how brand identity and image interact in these distinct areas. A key part of brand architecture is understanding how elements such as brand identity and image are developed and managed at the corporate and sub-brand levels. Ideally, both elements should be aligned so that staff become 'walking representatives of the brand' (Kotler *et al*, 2009:452).

Method

The study utilised a single revelatory case (Yin, 2009) as little is known about brand architecture and brand strategy in the context of HEIs (Chapleo, 2015; Yin, 2009). The case will gain insight into an established UK university business school within the Global and UK HE marketplace with its own accreditations. The business school was selected as it has 5 related departments (marketing, management, human resources management, economics and accounting & finance) thus many internal and external stakeholders. The data collection techniques include semi-structured interviews and focus groups which were enhanced with the method of projective techniques (Hofstede et al, (2007). Documentation was also accessed alongside the participant data, and included informal public reviews, the business schools' vision and values, the university business school website and the business school campus (Yin, 2009). The varied data collection methods and participant groups are important in case study research, as this allows for triangulation of the findings which in turn allows for an in-depth and broader analysis of the business school from all stakeholder perspectives.

As perceptions were sought from different groups of individuals, a case study is a useful means of exploring multiple perspectives 'rooted in a particular context' (Lewis and McNaughton-Nichols, 2014: 66). The project was divided into two key stages. Stage one related to our first objective, which involved exploring the brand identity of the business school from an internal [employee] perspective with the aid of semi-structured interviews. The sample for stage one covered participants from five departments [Marketing, Management, HRM, Economics and Accounting and Finance]. Two semi-structured interviews per department were conducted [10 interviews in total]. Stage two related to our second objective, which focused on investigating the brand image of the business school from an external perspective. This involved two approaches including semi-structured interviews [alumni] and focus group discussions [current undergraduate and postgraduate students and potential students]. A thematic analytical approach is currently being adopted to inductively interpret the findings generated from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to reveal key themes and capture associations-perceptions linked to the business school and university. Once we have reached theoretical saturation, we aim to develop the themes into an empirical framework, which will address the third objective and allow us to demonstrate theoretical and managerial implications within and beyond the context of education.

Findings

This study will uncover a greater understanding of the internal brand identity and external brand image of the business school brand, highlighting coherency or a disconnect between how the brand is communicated and its interpretation from a multi-stakeholder perspective. This study will also reveal how to develop strategies and campaigns for different stakeholder groups to address any misalignments. For example, if we were to uncover that internal stakeholders are unfamiliar with the business school mission then focused workshops and events should be employed to remind internal stakeholders of this important positioning. Furthermore, this study will reveal how to communicate a desired identity which highlights a vision of 'personalised experiential learning' in order to develop a dedicated external campaign which enhances the overall brand image.

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