

Exploring The Perceived Effectiveness Of Brand Awareness Strategies Of A Selected Private Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in the education of a nation with its capacity to create and transfer contemporary knowledge. The sustainability of HEIs depends to a large extent on its brand and ability to deliver quality education. Branding is of particular value to a distance school in an already overcrowded and complicated market place. Schools use branding as a tool, in the sense that it simplifies and steers the customer's choice of an institution. The main objective of this research was to explore the perceived effectiveness of the brand awareness strategies of a selected private higher education institution.

The study was quantitative in nature. Data was collected from various stakeholders of the selected private higher education institution (N=150). The researchers developed a questionnaire to assess the perceived effectiveness of the brand of the selected private higher education institutions. The data was analysed using SPSS.

The results of this study showed that most of the participants would consider distance-based education, which highlighted the relevance of the selected private higher education institution. Billboards were the preferred advert medium identified by the respondents, which are used to a limited extent by the selected higher education institution. The majority of the respondents indicated they have no knowledge of the institution and unaware of its brand. However, they would consider enrolling for studies if they are made more aware of the institution.

The study was able to generate knowledge and information that can serve as practical guidelines for the management of the institution. The findings of the study encourage management to develop strategic marketing plans that will allow for the implementation of appropriate advertising and marketing strategies to improve the attrition rates of current and potential students.

Keywords: Customer relationships, Marketing strategies, Organisational branding, Private higher education

INTRODUCTION

The importance of branding in private higher education institutions has grown over the few years as a measure for sustainability and competitive advantage.¹ Branding is of particular value to a distance education university in an already overcrowded and complicated market

1 Spry, L., Foster, C., Pich, C. and Peart, S. "Managing higher education brands with an emerging brand architecture: the role of shared values and competing brand identities." *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 1-14. 2018

place.² Branding is a tool for any university in the sense that it simplifies and steers the customer's choice of an institution.³ It is further postulated that institutions should endeavour to measure and understand their brand value and always consider the sustainability of the resources on which a brand is based to maintain a competitive edge.⁴ When the brand value of the education institution is created, it enhances the value of institutional marketing programmes, brand loyalty, finances, brand extensions, and competitive advantage.⁵

The question, however, remains: “How can the potential customer best be made aware of an institutional brand? The main objective of this research was to explore the perceived brand awareness of a selected private higher education institution. More specifically, this research compared the brand awareness of three distance-based higher education institutions in South Africa. The first place (referred to as HEI1) is the largest public distance-based higher education in Southern Africa. The second (referred to as HEI2) and the third higher education institution (referred to as HEI3) are private higher education institutions specialising in distance-based education. This research will specifically focus on how HEI3 compares to HEI1 and HEI2 in terms of its brand.

This research, is motivated by the fact that private higher education institutions, many times, underestimate the benefits of effective marketing and branding strategies. A well-assembled institutional brand can assist institutions in repositioning their marketing position and result in higher growth prospects. Higher education institutions need to work on market differentiation in order to know the need of their target audience and differentiate themselves in the competitive marketplace.⁶ Innovative branding strategies will not only renew the trust and confidence of customers towards the brand but will also enable forming new relationships with the target market.⁷

² Bangari, M. and Chaubey, D.S. (2017). Exploring indicators for branding higher educational institutions in India. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, 20, 2, 1-9.

³ J., Du Plessis P., J. W. Strydom, and C. J. Jooste. *Marketing Management*. Cape Town: Juta, 2012.

⁴ Ashton, Ann Suwaree. “Tourist Destination Brand Image Development—an Analysis Based on Stakeholders’ Perception.” *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 20, no. 3 (March 2014): 279–92.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766713518061>.

⁵ Jooste, C. J., Strydom, J. W., Berndt, A., & du Plessis, P. J. “Applied Strategic Marketing. (3rd Ed.). Johannesburg: Heinemann. 2009

⁶ Wanjiku, G. K. “The role of branding in attracting prospective students to institutions of higher learning: A Case study of St. Paul’s University.” Unpublished Masters Dissertation, University of Nairobi. 2015

⁷ Gambetti, R. C. “Ambient Communication: How to engage consumers in urban touch-points.”

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Branding

Brands are used to highlight the core values of the institution and promote the concept of the brand, which would enable the institution to ‘generate value and meaning via its brand.’⁸ Brand image is the unique functional and emotional attributes that customers associate with the brand, their interaction with the brand and the impression that is left in the customer’s mind that will at a later stage be brought up in the customer’s mind when a decision needs to be made. Studies show that the branding of organisations could be reflected in its vision, slogan, offerings, vision and mission.⁹ Brand recognition is the customers’ ability to confirm prior exposure to the brand when the brand is given as a cue. Brand recall refers to the ability of the customer to retrieve the brand from memory when a cue about the brand is given.

Branding Methods

Factors such as university brands, acquisition, and retention of qualified staff and students, university alumni and the positioning of the university play a role in the choice of students to study at a private higher education institution.¹⁰ The eleven (11) identified P’s are taken into consideration if organisations are to gain a prominent place in the market through its branding.¹¹ The 11 P’s are - product, price, place, promotion, people, processes, physical evidence, personal relationships, packaging, positioning and performance. More emphasis could be made here on the perception of people, one of the 11 P’s which in this case would include registered students, the government policy makers, lecturers, employers, parents, leaders of other educational institutions, senior administration, accrediting bodies and the general public. Perception is the process by which people select, organise and interpret information to form a

California Management Review. 52 (3): p. 34-51. 2010

⁸ Muzellec, Laurent, and Mary C. Lambkin. “Corporate Branding and Brand Architecture: a Conceptual Framework.” *Marketing Theory* 9, no. 1 (2009): 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593108100060>.

⁹ Kotler, P. & Armstrong G. (2010). *Global and Southern African Perspective. Principles of Marketing*. (1st ed.) Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa.

¹⁰ Oluwasanmi, O. Koyejo. “Determinants of Students Choice of Private Universities in Nigeria: A Corporate Branding Perspective.” *Alhikmah University Entrepreneurial Journal of Management Sciences*, 5, 1-19. 2014

¹¹ Conradie, Elizabeth, S., Roberts-Lombard, M., and Klopper, H. B. “The influence of eleven Ps: An internal marketing and brand awareness perspective in a service environment.” *Southern African Business Review*, 18 (1), 100-121. 2014

meaningful picture of the world. In the end, perceptions form experiences, which in turn influence perceptions and opinions and a word of mouth message.¹²

The values of the brand should relate to the values of the customer. Therefore, the branding of organisations should be communicated through a variety of mechanisms such as billboards, branded stationery/sports teams, TV advertisements, social media, newspapers, magazines, subject-specific journals, and the internet.¹³ Through these communication channels, marketers can embed their brand name in the minds of customers to increase their motivation and intention to buy.

Marketing Communication

A link exists between brands and the relationship with the customer. Brands create perceptions and feelings for customers about a product and its performance.¹⁴ The creation of this link is largely dependent on three qualities, namely the ability to communicate, the costs entailed, and the control maintained by each individual marketing tool, for example, the internet. The different drivers and communication channels used as tools to build relationships and communication information keep changing as the relationship between the customer and the institution over time.

Word of mouth is also important to communicate the product or service offering. Word of mouth (or WoM) communication between customers about a particular product or service offering, involves verbal and informal person to person communication.¹⁵ However, the scope of word of mouth communication also includes communication by electronic means such as e-mail, blogs, and message boards on the internet. Such text may emphasize users' experiences with products or services, opinions of them, recommendations, or it may consist

¹² Kotler, P. and Armstrong G. "Global and Southern African Perspective. Principles of Marketing". (1st ed.) Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa. 2010

¹³ Du Plessis, P. J., Strydom J. W., and Jooste C. J. "Marketing Management. 6th ed." (Claremont: Juta, 2012).

¹⁴ Saikat, B. "Marketing Communication through Brand Placement: A Strategic Roadmap. Journal of Marketing & Communication. (2009): 5 (2): p4-22.

¹⁵ Dacko, Scott, G. "The Advanced Dictionary of Marketing: Putting Theory to Use." (EBook. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008).

solely of unbiased information. Word of mouth plays a vital role in enhancing brand loyalty.

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Branding and Generational Preferences

Generation Y (millennials) are now the largest market segment and influenced by the technology revolution and digitisation.¹⁷ As such, they are more attracted by online branding methods such as Facebook and the internet. Generation Y is less loyal than Generation X and can change brands in an instant. Generation X is a lot more sceptical and prefer word of mouth and straight forward facts.¹⁸ This generation is much more challenging to reach in terms of communicating brand information.¹⁹

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Approach

A quantitative descriptive research approach was followed using a survey to collect the data from the participants. The research was cross-sectional in nature, whereby data was collected at one point in time.²⁰

Sampling

The participants in this sample included students and stakeholders (i.e., support staff, academics, alumni, and clients) of the selected higher education institution (N=150). The participants were selected on a purposive convenience basis. The majority of the participants in this sample was of the ages between 35 to 55 (41,6%) and were from the West Rand area of Gauteng (69,8%).

Data collection methods

The researchers developed a questionnaire to assess the perceptions of students and

¹⁶ Chen, Chin-Tsu. The investigation of Brand Image of University Education and Student's Word-of-Mouth Behaviour. *Higher Education Studies*, (2016): 6, 4, 23-33.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=220966&site=ehost-live>

¹⁷ Naumovska, Ljupka. "Marketing Communication Strategies for Generation Y – Millennials." *Business Management and Strategy*, (2017): 8, 1, 123-133.

¹⁸ Reisenwitz, T. and Iyer, R., 2009. "Differences in Generation X and Generation Y: Implications for the organization and marketers." *Marketing management journal*, (2019): 10(2), pp. 91-103.

¹⁹ Williams, K. C., and Page, R. A. "Marketing to Generations." *Journal of Behavioural Studies in Business*, (2011): 3. 37-52.

²⁰ Field, A. "Discovering statistics using SPSS." (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications.

stakeholders about the branding of the selected higher education institution. The literature on branding and customer relationship marketing was used to compile the question on well-known brands, and the medium that participants use to gather information. Various closed-ended questions were used. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to subject matter experts to ensure the content and face validity.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using SPSS.²¹ Descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, frequencies) were used to analyse the data. Univariate analysis of variance was used to test for the significance of differences between demographic groups and perceptions of marketing. Effect sizes were used to interpret the results. Following the guidelines for the interpretation of results showed: 0 – 0,59, small effect; 0,60 – 0,13, moderate effect; 0,14 and higher is large effect.²²

RESULTS

The results of the study are reported in the section below. The first set of analyses focuses on perceptions of the sample based on preferred study-related aspects and institutional aspects.

Table 1 Frequency analysis of study related preferences

	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Consideration for part-time studies	Yes	114	76,5
	No	22	14,8
	Maybe	13	8,7
Google search	Distance Education	77	51,7
	Business School	29	19,5
	Distance learning education	43	28,9
Distance Education Institutions	HEI1	121	81,2
	HEI2	1	0,7
	HEI3	27	18,1
Advert medium for studies	Billboards	56	37,6
	Internet Websites	48	32,2
	TV Advertisements	45	30,2

²¹ SPSS Inc. 2013. SPSS 21 for Windows. Chicago, IL: Author.

²² Field, A. (2018). Discovering statistics using SPSS. (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications

The results in Table 1 show that the majority of participants consider part-time studies (76,5%), and mostly search for distance education on Google (51,7%). From the results, it is clear that those interested in part-time studies will mainly consider distance education in this sample. The large majority of the participants are aware of HEI1 as a distance education higher institution of learning and, to a lesser extent HEI2 and the current institution. The participants appear to be mostly interested in billboards as a preferred advert medium for their studies, followed by websites and TV advertisements.

Results of the brand awareness aspects of HEI3 are reported in Table 2. Results in table 2 show that the majority of participants (53,0%) do not have knowledge of the current HEI, and the results also indicated that if they had, they would most likely (65,8%) register at the current HEI. The result as to brand effectiveness indicated a (56,4%) of the participants that are not aware of the brand and (23,5%) of the participants think that the current HEI branding is less effective than that of the competitors and thus show that if the branding is more visible, it will create a better and more favourable opinion of the current HEI.

Table 2 Frequency analysis of brand awareness aspects of HEI3

	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Knowledge about HEI3	Yes	58	38,9
	No	79	53,0
	Unsure	12	8,1
Registration with HEI3	Very likely	98	65,8
	Somewhat likely	31	20,8
	Unlikely	20	13,4
Brand effectiveness	Not aware of this brand	84	56,4
	More effective	30	20,1
	Less effective	35	23,5
Opinion of HEI3 brand	Very favourable	48	32,2
	Not so favourable	19	12,8
	Not aware of this brand	82	55,0

The next section focused on a comparative analysis of the different age groups based on their preferred study-related aspects. Univariate Analysis of Variance was used to test for the significance of differences between the age groups and study-related aspects. Preferred

distance education institutions were omitted from this analysis as only one respondent was aware of “HEI2”.

The results in Table 3 show that all age groups mostly preferred part-time studies. Age group 25 to 35 years (also known as Generation Z) indicated a significantly higher inclination for part-time studies compared to the other two age groups, and this effect was small.

Age group 18 to 25 years (also known as Generation Y) had a significantly higher search for Distance Education compared to the rest of the age groups, and the effect was medium. Age group, 35 to 55 years, appeared to search equally for Distance Education and Distance Learning Education. All three age groups were less likely to search for Business Schools, and this could be ascribed to the fact that they are not aware of the current HEI as a Distance Higher Education Institution.

Lastly, the preferred advertising medium for education yielded different results for the three age groups. Generation Z preferred Billboard, whereas Generation Y preferred Internet websites. The group aged between 35 and 55 years old, seemed to rely more on TV Advertisements and Billboards. No significant differences were observed between the age groups based on their preferred advertising medium.

Table 3 Comparative analyses between age groups based on the preferred study-related aspects

	18-25	25-35	35-55	p	eta
Part-time Studies					
Yes	74,1	81,7	72,6	0,038	0,044
No	25,9	11,7	12,9		
Maybe		6,7	14,5		
Google					
Distance Education	70,4	55,0	40,3	0,012	0,058
Business School	14,8	21,7	19,4		
Distance learning education	14,8	23,3	40,3		
Preferred Advertising Medium					
Billboards	48,1	31,7	38,7	0,178	0,023
Internet Websites	25,9	46,7	21,0		
TV Advertisements	25,9	21,7	40,3		

The results of the comparative analyses between age groups and brand-related aspects of the current HEI are reported in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Comparison between different age groups on their brand-related aspects of current HEIs

	18-25	25-35	35-55	p	eta
Knowledge about HEI3					
Yes	29,6	40,0	41,9	0,535	0,009
No	51,9	58,3	48,4		
Unsure	18,5	1,7	9,7		
Willingness to register with HEI3					
Very likely	55,6	60,0	75,8	0,085	0,033
Somewhat likely	29,6	25,0	12,9		
Unlikely	14,8	15,0	11,3		
HEI3 branding in comparison to competitors					
Not aware of this brand	59,3	71,7	40,3	0,044	0,042
More effective	25,9	3,3	33,9		
Less effective	14,8	25,0	25,8		
Opinion of the HEI3 Brand					
Very favourable	33,3	31,7	32,3	0,983	0,000
Not so favourable	11,1	15,0	11,3		
Not aware of this brand	55,6	53,3	56,5		

The results showed that significant differences existed between the age groups in the branding of the current HEI in comparison to others. The results showed that those aged between 25 and 35 years were less aware of the current HEI brand compared to other institutions, and the effect was small.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to explore the perceived brand awareness of a selected private higher education institution specialising in distance-based education. The results showed that the majority of participants indicated that they are interested in distance-based education. This event is a clear indication that the need for alternative types of education is increasing and that private higher education institutions should capitalise on this opportunity.

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The results further showed that the participants were less aware of the current higher education institution (HEI3) compared to others. Given the competitive higher education market and the ongoing preference of students to enrol in part-time and distance-based studies,

²³ Bangari, M and Chaubey, D.S. “Exploring indicators for branding higher educational institutions in India.” *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*, (2017): 20, 2, 1-9.

the current higher education institutions should focus on increasing its brand awareness to attract all generations of students. The results confirm suggestions that emphases should be on the perceptions of people in order to create greater brand awareness.²⁴

The results of the study also showed the participants have an equal preference for branding materials in this study regardless of age. Participants were in agreement that more contemporary methods of branding such as Billboards, Internet Sources will be more appealing to them and influence their decisions to study at a specific higher education institution.²⁵ Effective communication of the brand is thus crucial as it builds a relationship with the customer.²⁶

This research makes significant theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical point of view, this research contributes to the scarcity of empirical knowledge that currently exists in branding and marketing processes and platforms in distance-based education. From a practical point of view, this research highlights some trends in terms of future educational preferences that distance-based education should take note of. As emphasised in this study, the majority of participants were interested in distance-based and part-time education regardless of age generation. As such, the current private higher education institution should use this opportunity and rapidly increase its brand awareness to attract students.

This research also had some limitations. The study was cross-sectional in nature, which means that the data was only collected at one point in time. People's perceptions vary over time. As such, it is recommended that future studies should focus on collecting data over more extended periods of time to detect trends. This research primarily used quantitative research, which limited the study in terms of a more in-depth interpretation of findings and trends. For future research, it is recommended that a mixed-method research approach be followed to allow for a more detailed perspective on branding trends in higher education.

²⁴ Conradie, Elizabeth, S., Roberts-Lombard, M., and Klopper, H. B. "The influence of eleven Ps: An internal marketing and brand awareness perspective in a service environment." *Southern African Business Review*, (2014): 18 (1), 100-121.

²⁵ Kotler, P. and Armstrong, G. "Global and Southern African Perspective. Principles of Marketing." (1st ed.) (Cape Town: Pearson Education South Africa, 2010).

²⁶ Saikat, B. "Marketing Communication through Brand Placement: A Strategic Roadmap." *Journal of Marketing & Communication*. (2009): 5 (2): p4-22.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlighted the strategic importance of a higher educational institutional brand awareness for the sustainability and competitiveness of any institution. From the results, it was clear that the participants would consider studying at the selected higher education institution if they are made more aware of the brand. Higher education managers are encouraged to take cognisance of the strategic importance and value of a compelling student brand and implement measures to ensure a higher brand awareness for prospective students.

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